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A God Worth Worshiping: Toward a Critical Race Theology

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A GOD WORTH WORSHIPING:
TOWARD A CRITICAL
RACE THEOLOGY

by

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ABSTRACT
A GOD WORTH WORSHIPING:
TOWARD A CRITICAL
RACE THEOLOGY

Duane Terrence Loynes Sr., B.A., M.A., M.A.

Marquette University, 2017

Theologian James Cone has declared that White supremacy is the American Church's greatest, original, and most persistent sin. Although the Church has engaged in numerous attempts to remedy racism, theology still seems to witness to a God that stands relatively unopposed to the status quo of racial injustice and marginalization. This dissertation begins with the claim that Christian theology still operates from the normativity of whiteness. I will argue that, although the Church has made admirable progress with regard to racial justice, the attempts have been at the surface: the underlying structural logic of White supremacy remains intact. My thesis will be that the systemic problem in North American Christianity of a persistent "White privileged theology" or "normalized whiteness" can best be eliminated by constructing a theological response in classical categories—theodicy, anthropology, and epistemology. A black existential phenomenological approach—perhaps best illustrated in the work of Lewis R. Gordon—and the intersectional analysis exemplified in critical race studies, offer significant promise for exposing and correcting the existing methodological privilege of White theology.

First, this project begins with the challenge presented in William. R. Jones' *Is God a White Racist? A Preamble to Black Theology*. In this provocative work, Jones contends that Black suffering vis-à-vis God's divine justice should form the methodological core of any theology that purports to support economic, social, and political justice. In taking up Jones' challenge, I argue that the theodical question can be foregrounded without the humanist conclusions that Jones draws. Second, I look at the anthropological question of who counts as human before God. Focusing on how scholars of color have always prioritized an anthropological structuring of humanity that does not traffic in universal notions of value, I argue for a theological anthropology that specifically opposes the dehumanizing axiological systems that denigrate those who deviate from the normativity of whiteness. Thirdly, this dissertation looks at epistemology as a framing device for how some people are seen, mis-seen, or not seen at all. In particular, I evaluate how the Church has been complicit in the rendering of some as invisible or less worthy of concern.

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Duane Terrence Loynes Sr., B.A., M.A., M.A.

To my wife, Ericka, who gives me more love than I deserve.

To my son, Duane Jr., who gives me more joy than I can imagine.

To my mother, Susie Mae Teal, who worked so hard for this dream to come true.

To my dissertation committee: Dr. Duane Stephen Long, Dr. Robert L. Masson, Rev. Bryan N. Massingale, and Dr. Michael J. Monahan. Thanks for your wisdom and your commitment to this project.

And, to the Church, may we be faithful witnesses to a God worth worshiping.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. Introduction: Black Suffering and Theological Method

> *"Black people have met with as great injustices from American scholarship*
> *as they have from American life."*
> Sterling Stuckey

In a penetrating article in the journal *Black Theology*, Stephen G. Ray, Jr. poses a question regarding the symbolic usage of the Christian cross:

> What was/is it about the American practice of Christianity that made/makes the cross available for symbolic use by such groups as the Ku Klux Klan or the Church of the Identity?[1]

Ray clarifies that he is not primarily concerned with *why* groups may choose to adopt the cross, but rather:

> how the symbolic mediation of the cross in the American context creates the conditions under which "hate groups," to use the contemporary language, can sensibly utilize what the Christian faith has, from its earliest period, deemed the ultimate symbol of divine love, as their symbolic representation in our culture?[2]

Ray is looking at the necessary conditions that make possible the appropriation of the cross by groups whose aim is explicitly racist. Ray cites similar attempts at symbolic reappropriation that have not succeeded, such as the effort to redefine the Confederate flag to appeal to a broader range of American life by altering the colors of the original to red, black, and green (colors traditionally associated with Black liberation and/or African nationalism).[3] The attempt to merge the Confederacy with Black liberation/nationalism

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1   Stephen G. Ray, Jr., "Contending for the Cross: Black Theology and the Ghosts of Modernity," *Black Theology: An International Journal* 8.1 (2010): 53–54. Less familiar than the Ku Klux Klan (KKK), the Church of the Identity (or, the "Christian Identity"/"Identity Christian" movement) is an explicitly White supremacist interpretation of Christianity that identifies northern Europeans as the descendants of the ancient Israelites and hence, God's chosen people.

2   Ray, "Contending for the Cross," 54.

3   In *Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism* (Humanities Press International, 1995), Lewis R. Gordon provides three reasons why he prefers using 'Black' over the more "politically acceptable" (1) expression 'African American.' First, although 'African American' caters to the concerns

has consistently been a failure, one Ray attributes to the fact that there was not already a cultural milieu that made the pairing sensible. That is, trying to make an historically racist symbol amenable to Black liberation was "nonsensical."[4] But, this leads him to ask: "Why has the cross not been similarly nonsensical when it has been/is used as a symbol by the Ku Klux Klan in the context of the United States?"[5] Focusing specifically on theological and ecclesial issues pertaining to the reception of the cross as symbol, Ray finds an idolatrous and perverted representation of Christianity embedded within the advances of modernity at fault. Even in a postmodern (or, *post*-postmodern, as some have argued) world, we are still formed by the discursive and ideational frameworks of modernity, the most notable of which is how the meaning of "Western Christianity" has shifted from a geographical reality to a concept that traffics in racial-ethnic-theological concepts. Christianity was reduced to a closed religious system that found its natural expression in people and productions originating in European culture.[6]

Building on Ray's project that assessed the symbolic meaning of the cross within modernity, this project will take a step back and look at the theological methodology that made such an idolization of Europeanness possible. Phrased differently: in a culture already predisposed to equate divinity with whiteness, what is it about certain

of the "black pseudo-bourgeoisie" (1) and may be more acceptable in public discourse, it serves to distinguish one class of Blacks from the universal situation of Blacks worldwide. Second, following Fanon, Gordon doesn't think that 'African American' effectively grapples with the problem of blackness since blackness transcends the limited scope of those of African descent. Third, using 'Black' foregrounds the scandalous element of antiblack racism and prohibits hiding behind the ethnic marker of African identity when the problematic feature of racial identity is blackness.

4   Ray, "Contending for the Cross," 55.
5   Ray, "Contending for the Cross," 55.
6   A brazen example of this viewpoint can be found in the ideology of Richard Spencer, president of the National Policy Institute, a think tank "dedicated to the heritage, identity, and future of people of European descent in the United States, and around the world" (http://www.npiamerica.org/).

interpretations of Christianity that made/make it susceptible to such attempts? In what ways has the North American Church normalized whiteness? Or, more importantly, in what ways are White scholars and institutions of religion *continuing* to normalize whiteness? These questions are important to understand, for my project will offer theoretical guideposts that will assist theologians in ensuring that White privilege is eradicated from the area where it should never appear at all—in our discourse about God. This project will attend to the theodical, anthropological, and epistemological issues involved in White normativity within Christian theology.

At this juncture, an immediate objection could be raised: "Yes, this is a sad part of our tragic history. Christianity has been complicit in the degradation and brutal mistreatment of people of color. However, we've moved past that. The Church has acknowledged its racist deeds, and we now live in a world in which Christianity is at the forefront in promoting anti-racist practices." There is an element of truth to this—today there are a variety of movements and individuals within Christianity championing racial justice, from the evangelical Promise Keepers movement in the 1990s that made racial justice one of their main pillars; to Pax Christi, a Catholic organization devoted to peace and racial justice; to the variety of groups among Reformed Churches that are devoted to anti-racism work (e.g., Congregations Organizing for Racial Reconciliation). North American culture and its Christianity have made great strides with regard to racism. Evangelical theologian David K. Clark, in a work on theological method, highlights six theological themes that should "fuel in Christian believers a delight in cultural diversity": the diverse creation of God, the image of God in all of humanity, the universal connectedness of all humanity, the universal offer of salvation to all of humanity, God's

desire for unity in covenant communities, and the command to love God and others.[7] Clark believes that the Christian worldview, rightly understood, "grounds in a variety of significant ways the ethical command that the church be the diverse and reconciled body of those in union with Christ" and affirms "all people in their cultural identity."[8] And yet, I contend, *something* is still wrong. Articulating, clarifying, and dismantling that something is what this project is all about. The central claim that this dissertation will make is that Christian theology still operates from the normativity of whiteness. I will argue that, although the Church has made admirable progress with regard to racial justice, the attempts have been at the surface: the underlying structural logic of White supremacy remains intact. My thesis will be that the systemic problem in North American Christianity of a persistent "White privileged theology" or "normalized whiteness" can best be eliminated by constructing a theological response in classical categories— theodicy, anthropology, and epistemology. A black existential phenomenological approach—perhaps best illustrated in the work of Lewis R. Gordon—and the intersectional analysis exemplified in critical race studies, offer significant promise for exposing and correcting the existing methodological privilege of White theology.

This dissertation is motivated by a consideration of the high stakes involved in failing to attend to the ways in which a cowardly silence permeates our theology. First, because theologians fail to name the pervasive ways in which White supremacy has shaped and sustained the Christian theological tradition, they are unaware of and unable to halt the theological perpetuation of a racially hierarchicalized culture. Secondly,

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7   David K. Clark, *To Know and Love God: Method for Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2003), 126–128.
8   Clark, *To Know and Love God*, 128.

because they are inattentive to the problem, they do not (indeed, cannot) engage in the liberating project of systemically reimagining theology in a manner that includes those who were formerly marginalized. In such a state, issues pertaining to racial injustice are still considered peripheral to the "real" work of theology and are often relegated—if considered at all—to a sub-category of ethics or to the frustratingly pervasive category of "contextual theology."

<div align="center">The Perils of Theological Method: Method as a Site of Critique and Liberation</div>

Although my project will focus on methodology, it acknowledges the suspicions held by many about a preoccupation with theological method, concerned that methodology can eclipse the actual practice of theology or the attempt at social change. As Theodore Jennings says, "There is a growing danger that the work of theology is being replaced by the work of *preparing* to do theology."[9] Similarly, those who focus on method/methodology are often accused (as was Bernard Lonergan) of endlessly developing tools without attending to their actual employment.[10] As well-founded as these concerns may be, they are superseded by the realization that the *framing* of an issue is often more important than the particular assertions that the theologian wants to advance. With respect to methodology, the game is often lost from the beginning. The presuppositions, values, and loci that one brings to the task of theology inevitably delimit the possible results that can come from their application. As J. J. Mueller writes:

9   Theodore W. Jennings, Jr., ed., *The Vocation of the Theologian* (Philadelphia: Augsburg Fortress, 1985), 2–3. Emphasis added.

10   Patrick H. Byrne writes: "A prominent American theologian once complained that "Lonergan is always sharpening his knife, but never cutting anything with it." This has always struck me a little like blaming the developers of CAT Scan devices for not curing epilepsy surgically" ("The Fabric of Lonergan's Thought," in *Lonergan Workshop: Volume 6*, ed. Fred Lawrence [Atlanta: Scholar's Press, 1986], 69).

> A method is a tool. Like a good multi-purpose screwdriver, a method improves upon what weak fingers and fragile fingernails cannot do. A method extends our abilities, improves upon our limitations, reminds us of forgotten procedures, and allows others to see how we arrived at our conclusions.
>
> Method is not something that we reflect on as such; usually we concern ourselves with finding solutions to immediate problems. But whenever we ask ourselves how we arrived at the answer, then we are raising the method question. Method is done best by reflecting upon how we actually arrived at an answer. Method then reflects upon reflecting.[11]

Conceptual tools are never neutral, but are imbued with the same subjective limitations that afflict all forms of human knowledge. This critique, in various forms, has been raised by feminist theologians for decades. For example, in *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation*, Mary Daly depicts methodology as a form of idolatry ("methodolatry") that subjects liberating thought to an "invisible tyranny."[12] She writes:

> It should be noted that the god Method is in fact a subordinate deity, serving Higher Powers. These are social and cultural institutions whose survival depends upon the classification of disruptive and disturbing information as nondata. . . . This book is an effort to begin asking nonquestions and to start discovering, reporting, and analyzing nondata. It is therefore an exercise in Methodicide, a form of deicide.[13]

Daly's challenge highlights the pernicious influence that methodological considerations can have on theology, where the exclusion of certain considerations (see the later discussion on "epistemology of ignorance") can have deleterious results. This is also the contention, for example, of Sallie McFague, whose emphasis upon metaphors and models in theology involves a recovery of agency since those who have had the power to foreground particular symbols and methods of theologizing often choose those that are laden with self-serving images, for example, those of patriarchalism.

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11 J. J. Mueller, *What Are They Saying About Theological Method?* (Ramsey, NJ: Paulist Press, 1984), 1.

12 Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston: Beacon, 1985), 11.

13 Daly, *Beyond God the Father*, 11–12.

Though agreeing with Daly regarding the subtle yet destructive influences that

methodology can permit, not all feminist scholars have rejected methodology *in toto*.

Some have responded by constructing feminist methodologies that emphasize a

commitment to the ending of patriarchy at all stages of the theological process. This

project is attempting to do something analogous—envisioning what a theological

methodology committed to liberation (racial and otherwise) would look like using

resources indigenous to and allied with the Black experience in America. To this end, the

conception of methodology employed in this project will closely align with that put

forward by Theresa W. Tobin.[14] For Tobin, feminism is a methodology (and not a method)

in that it is "critical reflection on the theoretical goals of philosophy, the methods of

inquiry philosophers use to achieve those goals, and *how* they use those methods."[15] As

such, feminism-as-methodology embraces as axiomatic the claim that gender injustice

exists and should be a relevant factor in our intellectual pursuits as scholars.[16] In addition,

and perhaps more controversially, feminism-as-methodology is explicit in its declaration

that the eradication of gender injustice should be a goal of our intellectual pursuits. This

goes against the grain of theorists who would argue that such explicit political

commitments are inappropriate; that our intellectual pursuits should be "neutral" or

"apolitical." Focusing on gender inequality, Tobin responds:

> Instead, feminist methodology contends that when philosophers do not pay
> attention to the social reality of gender inequality they very often generate skewed
> philosophical results—results that are not true *and* that can reinforce gender
> injustice. That is, philosophical inquiry that is inattentive to considerations of

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14   The author is grateful to Dr. Tobin for permission to reference unpublished notes from her
     session on "Feminism as Philosophical Methodology" as part of a workshop on "Methods in
     Philosophy" sponsored by the Department of Philosophy at Marquette University on
     November 4, 2011.
15   Tobin, "Feminism as Philosophical Methodology," 1.
16   Tobin, "Feminism as Philosophical Methodology," 1.

gender often leads us away from truth, *and* can generate results that are politically regressive, despite the philosopher's intentions. Another way of putting this: paradoxical as it may sound, is that *inattention* to gender very often generates, or is at risk of generating, philosophical results that are ideological.[17]

Critical race theology contends that any theology that seeks to speak to the marginalization of people and systems of inequity—especially when these conditions are interwoven with particular narratives of Christianity—*must* be avowedly and unapologetically political. In fact, as Tobin notes, the one who proceeds in an ostensibly apolitical fashion actually ends up "reinforcing the political status quo and so ends up being political."[18] Critical race theology, like all theology should, is concerned with a faithful explication of the Christian Scriptures that is accountable to the Christian tradition. However, it does not see its prophetic task in challenging racism to be in any conflict with its alethic aims. In fact, given the historical exclusion that has characterized much of Christian history and theology, an approach that welcomed and foregrounded diverse and marginalized voices is more likely to reflect a broader range of experiences and better approximate reality.

Drawing upon Tobin's conception of feminist methodology, my understanding of methodology is also analogous to George Lakoff's notion of *framing*. Lakoff, a linguist whose popular works apply cognitive science to political theory, considers framing to be critical to understanding how we understand concepts and bring about change. He writes:

> Frames are mental structures that shape the way we see the world. As a result, they shape the goals we seek, the plans we make, the way we act, and what counts as a good or bad outcome of our actions. In politics our frames shape our social policies and the institutions we form to carry out policies. To change our frames is to change all of this. Reframing is social change.[19]

17 Tobin, "Feminism as Philosophical Methodology," 2. Emphasis in original.
18 Tobin, "Feminism as Philosophical Methodology," 5 n. 5.
19 George Lakoff, *The All New Don't Think of An Elephant! Know Your Values and Frame the Debate* (White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2014), xi–xii.

Attending to methodology in this project is an attempt to frame future theological discussions in a way that will enable theologians to be cognizant of (1) the ways that theology has co-constructed and perpetuated racially unjust dynamics in the US and (2) the ways that theology fails to act as a healing agent because of its silence. What then, *is* methodology? Pierre Hadot, in *Philosophy As a Way of Life*, attempts to recover a conception of philosophy that mirrors my understanding of methodology. For Hadot, ancient philosophy was a way of life, a "mode of existing-in-the-world," the goal of which was transformation of individual and social realities.[20] As such, philosophy brings about peace of mind, inner freedom, and a cosmic consciousness,[21] but ultimately, philosophy was a community's attempt to "act in the service of the human community; that is, to act in accordance with justice."[22] Hadot writes:

> Such is the lesson of ancient philosophy: an invitation to each human being to transform himself. Philosophy is a conversion, a transformation of one's way of being and living, and a quest for wisdom. This is not an easy matter.[23]

In recovering this notion, Hado draws upon a distinction within Stoic thought between philosophical *discourse* and philosophy *itself* (i.e., as a way of life, as a practice). The former would consist of the various sub-disciplines of philosophy (e.g., logic, ethics, metaphysics) that must be utilized in order to intelligibly teach philosophy. However, the practice of philosophy itself would consist of actually speaking/thinking logically and living ethically and contemplating the world correctly—these are done as a "unitary act" apart from theories of logic, ethics, and metaphysics.[24] These theories are in service to

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20   Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy As a Way of Life* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1995), 265.
21   Hadot, *Philosophy As a Way of Life*, 265–266.
22   Hadot, *Philosophy As a Way of Life*, 274.
23   Hadot, *Philosophy As a Way of Life*, 275.
24   Hadot, *Philosophy As a Way of Life*, 266–267.

living a truly philosophical life in which one pursues justice, peace, transformation, etc. Although rational discourse about God is important, I would nevertheless contend that it is subsidiary to a particular way of life that should characterize the Christian faith.[25] In that regard, I see the sub-disciplines of theology in a light similar to Hadot—as theoretical discourses that aid us in the overall goal of human flourishing construed from the Christian worldview. Methodology, then, is the framing logic that situates each sub-discipline of Christian theology toward the goal of faithful practice, a true explication of the Christian Scriptures and tradition, and a Christian-specific *eudaimonia*. In particular, a critical race theology would articulate a methodology in which each sub-discipline was oriented toward fashioning an intelligible understanding of the Christian faith with the goal of doing so in a manner that undermined implicit assumptions about race and generated informed dialogue about true racial equality as the fruit of genuine Christianity. To borrow from Tobin, therefore, methodology would be a critical reflection on the theoretical goals of theology, the methods that theologians use to attain those goals, and how those methods are implemented. However, for a critical race theology, in addition to the standard goals of theological discourse (e.g., a contemporary understanding of the foundations of the Christian faith, Scriptural interpretation in light of the latest scholarship), racial equality would also be prioritized as a goal. Focusing on the sub-

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25 In G. W. H. Lampe's *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*, which interprets the "theological and ecclesiastical vocabulary of the Greek Christian authors from Clement of Rome to Theodore of Studium" (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961: vii), "rational discourse about God" is the *fifth* meaning listed under the heading of theology, preceded by: God in trinity, vision/experience of God, upper liturgy (angels in heaven) and lower liturgy (on Earth), and Scripture.

disciplines of theodicy, anthropology, and epistemology, this project is one attempt to

initiate such a discussion.[26]

Crisis: White Normativity in Modern Christianity

The relationship between Christianity and people of color in the United States has

been characterized by injustice. In his classic *Narrative of the Life of Frederick

Douglass, an American Slave*, Frederick Douglass described the Christianity of his day as

a "corrupt, slaveholding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical

Christianity."[27] Writing about the way that Christianity has been deployed in North

America, Douglass reflects:

> The man who wields the blood-clotted cowskin during the week fills the pulpit on
> Sunday, and claims to be a minister of the meek and lowly Jesus. The man who
> robs me of my earnings at the end of each week meets me as a class-leader on
> Sunday morning, to show me the way of life, and the path of salvation. He who
> sells my sister, for purposes of prostitution, stands forth as the pious advocate of
> purity. He who proclaims it a religious duty to read the Bible denies me the right
> of learning to read the name of the God who made me. He who is the religious
> advocate of marriage robs whole millions of its sacred influence, and leaves them
> to the ravages of wholesale pollution. The warm defender of the sacredness of the
> family relation is the same that scatters whole families, — sundering husbands
> and wives, parents and children, sisters and brothers, — leaving the hut vacant,
> and the hearth desolate. We see the thief preaching against theft, and the adulterer
> against adultery. We have men sold to build churches, women sold to support the
> gospel, and babes sold to purchase Bibles for the *poor heathen! all for the glory
> of God and the good of souls!* The slave auctioneer's bell and the church-going
> bell chime in with each other, and the bitter cries of the heart-broken slave are
> drowned in the religious shouts of his pious master. Revivals of religion and
> revivals in the slave-trade go hand in hand together. The slave prison and the
> church stand near each other. The clanking of fetters and the rattling of chains in
> the prison, and the pious psalm and solemn prayer in the church, may be heard at
> the same time. The dealers in the bodies and souls of men erect their stand in the
> presence of the pulpit, and they mutually help each other. The dealer gives his

26 Certainly, other sub-disciplines could and should be considered, such as aesthetics or
theological hermeneutics.

27 Frederick Douglasss, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (New
York: Barnes & Noble Books, 2003), 100. Emphasis in original.

> blood-stained gold to support the pulpit, and the pulpit, in return, covers his infernal business with the garb of Christianity. Here we have religion and robbery the allies of each other—devils dressed in angels' robes, and hell presenting the semblance of paradise.[28]

Douglass' words, though tragic, do not come as a surprise, written more than a decade before the start of the Civil War, more than a century before the end of Jim Crow segregation, and more than a century-and-a-half before this nation elected its first Black president. There have been numerous studies detailing the intimate connections between American Christianity and the subordination of non-White communities.[29] Kelly Brown Douglas argues that a radically altered version of Christianity was required in order to harmonize the imperialistic European notion of Black inferiority with the dominant Christian theme of freedom.[30] That is, how could one retain their Christian faith but still own other human beings? The result, a theological outlook Douglas terms "slaveholding Christianity," allowed the broader ideology of White supremacy to operate with the full support—conceptually and practically—of the Church. She writes:

> They developed a religious apology for the chattle [*sic*] system—that of slaveholding Christianity. The White Christ was the center of this religion. The White Christ characteristically allowed for (1) the justification of slavery, (2) Christians to be slaves, and (3) the compatibility of Christianity with the extreme cruelty of slavery.[31]

Douglas' conception of the White Christ, central to her understanding of Christianity as it has operated throughout much of the history of the United States, refers to the overemphasis given to the incarnation of Christ—God made flesh in the person of Jesus.

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28   Douglass, *Narrative*, 100–101.
29   For example: *Christianity and Race in the American South* by Paul Harvey, *The Arrogance of Faith: Christianity and Race in America* by Forrest G. Wood, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* by Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, *Race: A Theological Account* by J. Kameron Carter, and *Noah's Curse: The Biblical Justification of American Slavery* by Stephen R. Haynes.
30   Kelly Brown Douglas, *The Black Christ* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994), 11–12.
31   Douglas, *The Black Christ*, 12.

What makes this emphasis problematic is the lack of attention given to the work of Jesus while on Earth: "His ministry to the poor and oppressed is virtually inconsequential to this interpretation of Christianity."[32] This results in a soteriology that requires that one *affirm* a truth about Jesus, but negates the requirement to *practice* or *emulate* the life of Jesus. An example of the fruit of this theology was the Myth of Ham that flourished in the nineteenth century:

> The myth identifies the Negro as a descendant of Ham, who was a son of the biblical figure Noah. In the biblical legend (Genesis 9:18–28), Noah curses the posterity of Ham and specifically indicates that they will be slaves to other peoples. American slavery apologists made frequent recourse to this story in order to justify the institution.[33]

A divinely sanctioned hierarchy also permitted slaveholding Christians to inflict enormous amounts of abuse upon the bodies of those they deemed to be ontologically inferior. Slaveowners, intoxicated by the national self-identification of the United States with the Hebrews of the Old Testament, took their cue from Old Testament narratives about God's wrathful treatment of the non-elect and used it as the basis for exacting torture upon Black bodies. In fact, there is a profound connection between the mythical narratives and ideals that America claims in its origins and subsequent generations of mistreatment of non-Whites. In *Myths America Lives By*, Richard T. Hughes writes:

> Among the most powerful and persistent of all myths that Americans invoke about themselves is the myth that America is a chosen nation and that its citizens constitute a chosen people. Scholars and statesmen often refer to this myth as the myth of American exceptionalism. The label "American exceptionalism," however, obscures the profoundly religious origins of the chosenness vision. It is one thing to claim that America is exceptional in its own eyes. It is something else

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32   Douglas, *The Black Christ*, 13.

33   Sylvester A. Johnson, *The Myth of Ham in Nineteenth-Century American Christianity: Race, Heathens, and the People of God* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 4.

to claim that America is exceptional because God chose America and its people for a special mission in the world.[34]

Hughes finds this myth rooted in the Hebrew Bible (e.g., Deuteronomy 7:6–8) and clarifies that, in and of itself, it is not bad. Connected to Old Testament covenantal responsibilities to care for other beings created in the image of God, this myth could "serve good and constructive purposes."[35] However, when 'America' is merged with notions of racial/ethnic purity and fused to conceptions of embodiment that fashion White bodies as "cherished property"[36] and Black bodies as commodities to be purchased or abused, we end up with a national legacy in which:

> the principal conception of the black body is as chattel. This is the foundation on which all other racially stereotypical perceptions of the black body are grafted. The black body as chattel is the core element in the construction of the inherently guilty black body. Its classification as chattel is also that which substantiates the fundamental distinction between the white body and the black body.[37]

Thus, the violence afflicted upon Blacks that characterized slavery was theological at its core. In his masterful study of the theological significance of lynching vis–à–vis the Christian symbol of faith, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, James H. Cone writes:

> During nearly two-and-half [*sic*] centuries of slavery, blacks were considered valuable property. Their owners usually protected their investment as they would their cows, horses, and other articles of value. Slaveholders whipped and raped slaves, violating them in any way they thought necessary . . .

> Lynching as primarily mob violence and torture directed against blacks began to increase after the Civil War and the end of slavery, when the 1867 Congress passed the Reconstruction Act granting black men the franchise and citizenship rights of participation in the affairs of government. Most southern whites were furious at the very idea of granting ex-slaves social, political, and economic freedom. The Ku Klux Klan, initially organized as a social club in Pulaski,

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34 Richard T. Hughes, *Myths America Lives By* (Chicago: The University of Illinois Press, 2003), 19.

35 Hughes, *Myths*, 41.

36 Kelly Brown Douglas, *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2015), 40.

37 Douglas, *Stand Your Ground*, 52–53.

Tennessee (1866), soon transformed itself into a vigilante group whose primary purpose was to redeem the South and thereby ensure that America remained a white man's country.[38]

Furthermore, against the naive hope that Christians would be more "humane" in their treatment of slaves, the opposite proved to be the case. Testimonies abound from slaves pointing to the common tendency of Christian slaveowners, perhaps motivated by their belief that their superior status was God-ordained, to be exceptionally cruel. Douglas writes:

> In addition to permitting a justification for slavery, and a means for evangelizing slaves without disrupting the slaveocracy, the White Christ is implicated in the slaveholders' unwillingness to acknowledge the contradiction between Christianity and the cruelty of slavery. Although some antebellum evangelists argued that the Christian slaveholder was more "benevolent" toward slaves than the non-Christian slaveholder, from many slaves' points of view this claim was more rhetoric than reality. To be sure, there were some "converted" slaveholders who occasionally reduced their slaves' workloads so that the slaves could attend religion instruction. The slavholders' conversions, however, rarely meant more humane treatment of their human chattel.[39]

On January 1, 1834, Douglass was transferred from the ownership of Edward Covey to William Freeland.[40] In comparing the two, Douglass regards Freeland as "an educated southern gentleman," possessing "some regard for honor, some reverence for justice, and some respect for humanity."[41] Coming as no surprise to a student of Douglass, Covey is regarded as possessing a number of "degrading vices," "a most artful deceiver," who

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38   James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011), 4.
39   Douglas, *The Black Christ*, 17.
40   Much of Douglass' personal reflections regarding the horrors of slavery and his personal trials revolved around his engagement with Edward Covey, whom he normally referred to as "Mr. Covey."
41   Frederick Douglass, "Slaveholding Religion and the Christianity of Christ," in *Afro-American Religious History: A Documentary Witness*, ed. Milton C. Sernett (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1985), 100–101. Douglass is clear that these positive traits are to be understood contextually, writing that he admired Freeland, "slaveholder though he was" (100).

engaged in "cunningly-devised frauds."[42] However, the factor to which Douglass ascribes

his increase in fortune to the most is Freeland's lack of religion:

> Another advantage I gained in my new master was, he made no pretensions to, or profession of, religion; and this, in my opinion, was truly a great advantage. I assert most unhesitatingly, that the religion of the south is a mere covering for the most horrid crimes,—a justifier of the most appalling barbarity,—a sanctifier of the most hateful frauds,—and a dark shelter under, which the darkest, foulest, grossest, and most infernal deeds of slaveholders find the strongest protection. Were I to be again reduced to the chains of slavery, next to that enslavement, I should regard being the slave of a religious master the greatest calamity that could befall me. For of all slaveholders with whom I have ever met, religious slaveholders are the worst. I have ever found them the meanest and basest, the most cruel and cowardly, of all others. It was my unhappy lot not only to belong to a religious slaveholder, but to live in a community of such religionists.[43]

The claim regarding the normativity of whiteness within disciplines (e.g.,

Christian theology) advanced by critical race studies is a bold one that needs exposition.

White supremacy, often misunderstood as hateful actions performed by extremist groups

like the Ku Klux Klan, is, at its core, "domination of whites over non-whites."[44] Often

discussed in contexts that focus on its more formal, *de jure* aspects (slavery, Jim Crow,

legal segregation), White supremacy has an informal, *de facto* dimension that must be

accounted for as well. Thus, a helpful definition of White supremacy is:

> a political, economic, and cultural system in which whites overwhelmingly control power and material resources, conscious and unconscious ideas of white superiority and entitlement are widespread, and relations of white dominance and non-white subordination are daily reenacted across a broad array of institutions and social settings.[45]

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42 Douglass, "Slaveholding Religion," 101.
43 Douglass, "Slaveholding Religion," 101.
44 Charles W. Mills, "White Supremacy," in *A Companion to African-American Philosophy*, eds. Tommy L. Lott and John P. Pittman (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003), 269.
45 Frances Lee Ansley from "Stirring the Ashes. Race, Class and the Future of Civil Rights Scholarship," *Cornell Law Review* 74, 1989

Articulating White supremacy as a system of White domination that extends to ideas and

values in addition to power, one sadly sees this paradigm throughout the Church's history.

Kyle Haselden notes:

> So far as the major denominations are concerned, it is the story of indifference, vacillation, and duplicity, with occasional interludes in which the church came alive to its duty only to sink after a time into renewed difference. It is a history in which the church not only compromised its ethic to the mood and practice of the times but was itself actively unethical, sanctioning the enslavement of human beings, producing the patterns of segregation, urging upon the oppressed Negro the extracted sedatives of the Gospel, and promulgating a doctrine of interracial morality which is itself immoral.[46]

Whiteness, then, is not an ontological descriptor of particular individuals. Rather, it is a

trajectory; a movement toward a telos that aims to deprive some and enrich others. It is,

as J. Kameron Carter argues, "the conclusion of a history, the history of an

achievement."[47] Within critical theory, the term 'whiteness' has come to denote the

"system of hegemonic power that operates to benefit people perceived to be White and to

disadvantage people perceived to be of color."[48] Thus, the earlier claim regarding the

normativity of whiteness within Christianity can be recast as a challenge to the

conceptual or theoretical whiteness of theology—the myriad ways in which theology

presumes the normativity of whiteness as the primary locus of reflection upon, and

expression of, divinity. Phrased differently, many Christians articulate their understanding

and experience of God through a lens that privileges White culture, White authors and

White institutions.

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46 Kyle Haselden, *The Racial Problem in Christian Perspective* (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), 63.
47 J. Kameron Carter, *Race: A Theological Account* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 285.
48 Karen Teel, "What Jesus Wouldn't Do: A White Theologian Engages Whiteness," in *Christology and Whiteness: What Would Jesus Do?*, ed. George Yancy (New York: Routledge, 2012), 20.

This vagueness about White privilege is helped by a distinction made by Tim Wise in *Between Barack and a Hard Place: Racism and White Denial in the Age of Obama*. Wise distinguishes between "Racism 1.0" and "Racism 2.0." The former indicates the common conception of racism which involves blatant acts of discrimination and harm leveled at those who are deemed inferior because of their racial characteristics. This "old-fashioned bigotry," Wise argues, has subsided over time (with the election of Barack Obama in 2008 serving as a prime example). However, the far more malignant form of racism is Racism 2.0, a form that:

> allows for and even celebrates the achievements of individual persons of color, but only because those individuals generally are seen as different from a less appealing, even pathological black or brown rule. If whites come to like, respect, and even vote for persons of color like Barack Obama, but only because they view them as having "transcended" their blackness in some way, to claim that the success of such candidates proves the demise of racism makes no sense at all. If anything, success on these terms confirms the salience of race and the machinations of white hegemony.[49]

Bryan Massingale makes a similar distinction in *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church*, where he distinguishes between a "commonsense" understanding of racism that is intentional and interpersonal (that is, Racism 1.0) and racism qua White privilege, the unconscious normalization of whiteness indicated by the bestowal of privileges upon Whites (that is, Racism 2.0).[50] Theologians Miguel A. De La Torre and Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas, after celebrating the observation that "most whites, especially the young, seem to earnestly reject the belief of racial superiority,"[51] still contend that "[e]very aspect of

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49   Tim Wise, *Between Barack and a Hard Place: Racism and White Denial in the Age of Obama* (San Francisco, CA: City Lights Books, 2009), 9.

50   Bryan N. Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2010), 13–33.

51   Miguel A. De La Torre and Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas, foreword to *Race and Theology*, by Elaine A. Robinson (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2012) 4.

US life, including religious life, is undergirded with principles that promote, protect, and privilege whiteness."[52]

Another mode which could be discussed is the aesthetic. That is, conceiving of representation broadly, what representations of Christ and/or God (whether material, mental or descriptive) are deemed more authentic or normative than others? And how is this racialized symbolism rooted in Christianity? Two incidents from the fall of 2013 illustrate this. The first occurred during an undergraduate Introduction to Theology course I taught at Marquette University. Marquette, a Jesuit Catholic institution, is located in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, a city that is 40% Black and just under 20% Hispanic/Latino. Nevertheless, about 72–78% of incoming students in recent years are White (most of whom come from middle to upper-middle class families in Wisconsin and suburban Illinois).[53] During one class session, at the end of a week that focused on racism and Christianity, I discussed popular portrayals of Jesus within Christianity. I showed the students common images of Jesus among Catholic and Protestant communities of faith, and then contrasted it with historiographical data regarding the probable appearance of a first-century Palestinian Jew. I then explained the rationale as to *why* White Christians created European depictions of Jesus, and then talked about the subversive maneuver by some Black churches starting in the middle of the twentieth century to reject the image of the "White Jesus" in favor of an Afrocentric one, clarifying that the depiction of Jesus as Black had inclusive intentions that contrasted with the biased and exclusionary intentions behind the White Jesus. In the case of Blacks, they were doing it to fight a world and

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52 De La Torre/Floyd-Thomas, foreword to *Race and Theology*, 4–5.
53 See "Headcount Enrollment & Percent Headcount Enrollment of First-Time, Full-Time Freshmen by Varied Categories: Fall Semester Census 2011 through 2015," accessed November 10, 2015, http://marquette.edu/oira/documents/f_fre_prof_web.pdf.

Church that considered them inferior. So, this was their way of seeing Jesus as concerned

about all people. It was at this point that a White female student from an affluent suburb

of Chicago raised her hand and shared her disagreement with that approach. Black

churches, she argued, were wrong to change the image of Jesus from a White one, since it

was the "original" image of Jesus. Her point was that Blacks were racializing the

portrayal of Jesus; it was better to leave things as they were.[54] This calls to mind Cone's

defense of the blackness of Jesus:

> [T]he same white theologians who laughingly dismiss Albert Cleage's "Black
> Messiah" say almost nothing about the European (white) images of Christ
> plastered all over American homes and churches. I perhaps would respect the
> integrity of their objections to the Black Christ on scholarly grounds, if they
> applied the same vigorous logic to Christ's whiteness, especially in contexts
> where his blackness is not advocated.[55]

The second incident occurred about three weeks later. On December 11, 2013,

Fox News host Megyn Kelly was leading a discussion on her show regarding a recent

article at Slate.com entitled "Santa Claus Should Not Be a White Man Anymore."[56] The

author, Aisha Harris, discussed her upbringing and the confusion she felt when viewing

the dark-skinned images of Santa that populated her home. Santa, her father told her, was

"every color . . . magically turn[ing] into the likeness of the family that lived" at the

homes he visited on Christmas Eve.[57] Despite these comforting and inclusive words,

Harris still felt shame at the idea that the black Santa was somehow inauthentic, a notion

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54   The student's comments, though disappointing and indicative of a full understanding of race,
     were not surprising. Many Black churches faced a similar backlash when they rejected
     White images of Jesus.
55   James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997), 123.
56   Aisha Harris, "Santa Claus Should Not Be a White Man Anymore," *Slate*, December 10,
     2013, accessed November 11, 2015,
     http://www.slate.com/articles/life/holidays/2013/12/santa_claus_an_old_white_man_not_an
     ymore_meet_santa_the_penguin_a_new_christmas.html.
57   Harris, "Santa Claus."

reinforced by popular media portrayals of Santa that always depicted him as a White

male. Therefore, in an effort to combat the cultural normativity of whiteness, especially

among children, Harris suggested that we discard the Santa-as-jolly-White-male motif

and embrace a penguin Santa Claus. Harris writes:

> Of course, since we created Santa, we can certainly change him however we'd like—and we have, many times over. Like the holiday itself, Santa has long since been extracted from his religious roots, even if the name St. Nicholas still gets thrown around. Our current design takes inspiration from multiple sources, including Washington Irving's 1809 description of St. Nick "riding jollily among the tree tops, or over the roofs of the houses, now and then drawing forth magnificent presents from his breeches pockets, and dropping them down the chimnies of his favourites." When Clement Clarke Moore published "A Visit from St. Nicholas" in 1823, the old man was described and illustrated as a "plump" but elfin figure. Since then, Santa has been redesigned and re-appropriated to push everything from soda to war.
>
> So let's ditch Santa the old white man altogether, and embrace Penguin Claus—who will join the Easter Bunny in the pantheon of friendly, secular visitors from the animal kingdom who come to us as the representatives of ostensibly religious holidays. It's time to hand over the reins to those deer and let the universally beloved waddling mammal warm the hearts of children everywhere, regardless of the color of their skin.[58]

Kelly began the discussion by sharing that her reaction to reading the headline was to

laugh, finding it ridiculous. And then (lest children watching be harmed by the possibility

of a non-white Santa), Kelly reassured her young viewers:

> And by the way, for all you kids watching at home: Santa just is white. But this person is just arguing that maybe we should also have a black Santa. But, you know, Santa is what he is. And, just so you know, we're just debating this because someone wrote about it, kids.[59]

What is initially disconcerting (though informative) about Kelly's assertion is that Harris

did *not* advocate making Santa black. In fact, she explicitly and clearly advocated that we

move to a non-human (and, presumably, non-racial) Santa that could be embraced by all

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58   Harris, "Santa Claus."
59   Megyn Kelly, "The Kelly File," aired December 11, 2013 on Fox News, 9:00–10:00pm EST.

races and ethnicities without the negative consequence of a beloved, quasi-religious figure (inextricably associated with the birth of Christ) inhabiting and therefore endorsing one epidermal reality. After one of Kelly's guests expressed some measure of sympathy and agreement with Harris, Kelly then stated:

> Just because it makes you feel uncomfortable doesn't mean it has to change. You know . . . I mean . . . Jesus was a white man, too. He was a historical figure, I mean, that's verifiable fact, as is Santa . . . I just want the kids watching to know that. But my point is, how do you just revise it, you know, in the middle of the legacy, of the story, and change Santa from white to black?[60]

Again, Kelly falsely asserts that Harris is advocating that we upend the legacy of Santa Claus by making him black. More to the point, however, is the manner in which Kelly states the whiteness of Jesus as a historical reality that is beyond debate.[61]

What must be asked is the following: in both of these incidents, what is at stake? What is it about whiteness in general and the whiteness of Christ/Christianity in particular that is so vital that even the very hint of a challenge engenders such stern opposition? And (with allusions to Kelly's fear of a black Santa), why does any challenge to White hegemony invoke the specter of Black rebellion? Part of the answer lies in the way that Western Christianity has been framed in the New World, a framing that identifies Christianity "with human beings who draw their lineage to the European continent, particularly the Western portions, in a way that it is not available to other human beings."[62] These two incidents, though emanating from a conservative community and conservative news network, cannot be dismissed as mere anecdotes from a position

60 Kelly, "The Kelly File."
61 Kelly was absent the following night, only to return on December 13, 2013 and defend her statements. She characterized Slate's refusal to have the author on her show as, essentially, cowardice; she denied that her comments stemmed from racism; she reaffirmed her belief that Santa was White (showing scenes from the holiday classic "Miracle on 34th Street" to bolster her claim); and said that Jesus' whiteness was "far from settled."
62 Ray, "Contending for the Cross," 60.

on the ideological spectrum that is hostile toward racial inclusion. In a 2016 article for

Christianity Today, Christena Cleveland, a Black woman, shares her response to a student

who asked her if Blacks were uncomfortable with the "fact" that Jesus is White. Though

challenging that assumption, Cleveland nevertheless admits:

> I wasn't shocked by this student's assumption that Jesus was of European descent, or the certitude with which she stated it. When I am in US Christian spaces, I encounter this assumption so often that I've come to believe it is the default assumption about Jesus' appearance. Indeed, white Jesus is everywhere: a 30-foot-tall white Savior stands at the center of Biola University's campus; white Jesus is featured on most Christmas cards; and the recent History Channel mini-series The Bible dramatically introduced a white Jesus to more than 100 million viewers. In most of the Western world, Jesus is white.[63]

What is tragic and disturbing about these incidents is that they are the result of the way in

which Christianity—explicitly and implicitly—has been framed from the pulpit and the

lectern. The silence of the Church and the Academy regarding racism (see below) and

their failure to acknowledge the interconnections that modern-day concerns about race

have with our theology have led to a problematic Christology that essentializes whiteness

upon Christ.

The anxiety provoked by both of the aforementioned illustrations concerning

figural representations of Jesus is not surprising. Western culture has often used images

as proxies for theories of Black inferiority. Symbols reinforce anti-Black and/or pro-

European claims and removes them from the domain of the historically-conditioned, the

socially-constructed, and the temporal, to the realm of the abstract, the universal, and the

timeless, rendering them immune to critique. Cynthia Willett submits the Western

philosophical tradition to scrutiny because of its perpetuation of regressive dichotomies

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63 Christena Cleveland, "Why Jesus' Skin Color Matters," *Christianity Today*, March 18, 2016, accessed June 7, 2017, http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2016/april/why-jesus-skin-color-matters.html.

that "sustain a nondiscursive pattern of images that associate blackness with irrational violence and whiteness with moral purity."[64] In his study of Western culture's usage of Black and African images, Jan Nederveen Pieterse notes:

> Past fears and antagonisms are encoded in images and symbols, in sayings and rationalizations, which set self and other apart, in ways which may no longer be part of our mentality, but which do form part of our ambience and cultural baggage.[65]

One is reminded here of Frantz Fanon's critique of Mayotte Capécia's work, *I Am a Martinican Woman*, where she reflects upon *The Green Pastures*, a 1936 Hollywood film that presented Old Testament stories and featured an all-Black cast. Capécia, a mixed-race woman herself, is scandalized by the film, stating, "How can God be conceived with Negro features? That's not my idea of Paradise. But, after all, it's only an American film."[66] Fanon, whose disregard for Capécia's work as representative of her self-hating colonialist mindset is well-known, comments sarcastically:

> How could the good and merciful Lord be black? He's a white man with bright pink cheeks. From black to white—that is the way to go. One is white, so one is rich, so one is handsome, so one is intelligent.[67]

On April 16, 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr., in jail in Birmingham, Alabama for participating in demonstrations, wrote a letter in which he explained his frustration with White clergymen for their lack of understanding of and participation in the civil rights movement. The "Letter From Birmingham City Jail" provides an insightful view into King's understanding of the synthesis between Christian discipleship and social activism. King attempted to demonstrate that the prominent themes of Scripture and the life of

64 Cynthia Willett, *Maternal Ethics and Other Slave Moralities* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 131.
65 Jan Nederveen Pieterse, *White on Black: Images of Africa and Blacks in Western Popular Culture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), 9.
66 Mayotte Capécia, *I Am a Martinican Woman*, 66.
67 Frantz Fanon*, Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 2008), 34.

Jesus both cohered in the struggle for Blacks to attain justice. King, in expressing his hope that White ministers would come to his aid, found himself struggling to deal with two different reactions: complicity and complacency. He writes:

> I had the strange feeling when I was suddenly catapulted into the leadership of the bus protest in Montgomery several years ago that we would have the support of the white church. I felt that the white ministers, priests and rabbis of the South would be some of our strongest allies. Instead, some have been outright opponents, refusing to understand the freedom movement and misrepresenting its leaders; all too many others have been more cautious than courageous and have remained silent behind the anesthetizing security of the stained-glass windows.[68]

Cone mirrored King's initial optimism, writing:

> When I began writing about racism in American theology, the churches and the society more than thirty years ago, I really thought that, after being confronted with the sin of their silence, White theologians would repent and then proceed to incorporate a radical 'race' critique in their theological and religious reflections.[69]

For Cone, the silence of the Church at the point where Blacks began to agitate for their rights was unconscionable. Racism is, in Cone's words,

> particularly alive and well in America. It is America's original sin and it is institutionalized at all levels of society. It is its most persistent and intractable evil. Though racism inflicts massive suffering, few American theologians have even bothered to address White supremacy as a moral evil and as a radical contradiction of our humanity and religious identities. . . . Why do White theologians ignore racism? This is a haunting question—especially since a few White scholars in other disciplines (such as sociology, literature, history and anthropology) do engage with the phenomenon of racism. Why not theologians? Shouldn't they be the first to attack this evil?[70]

If, as Cone contends, racism is America's and the North American Church's greatest sin, then why is the topic marginalized as opposed to being a significant locus of theological

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68 Martin Luther King, Jr., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington (New York: HarperCollins, 1986), 298–299.

69 James H. Cone, "Theology's Great Sin: Silence in the Face of White Supremacy," *Black Theology: An International Journal* 2.2 (2004): 142.

70 Cone, "Theology's Great Sin," 142.

discourse? Why are theologians who focus their attention on racism sidelined within religious institutions?

The main response presented by the Church (anticipated by King and articulated by Cone) has been *silence*. The Church in North America has been silent about its complicity in racism, content with its token gestures toward the elimination of blatant discrimination (that is, Racism 1.0). The result, however, is that the normalization of whiteness in which this nation and its churches were baptized continues on unnamed, unchallenged, and unresolved. This normalization explains the experiences endured by non-White individuals studying religion. For example, Elaine Robinson, in *Race and Theology*, provides a brief survey of introductory theology textbooks with regard to their treatment of race and racism.[71] Robinson concludes that, with rare exceptions, White theologians were unwilling to submit the White theological tradition to substantive critique. Those who did discuss the alignment between racism and theology still demonstrated a preference for engaging with White scholars on the matter, providing obligatory references to scholars like James Cone. As another example, one could look at *Systematic Theology: Roman Catholic Perspectives* edited by Francis Schüssler Fiorenza and John P. Galvin.[72] This 661-page tome provides an exhaustive treatment of theology by various luminaries within the Roman Catholic world. And yet, racism receives a scant four mentions (of which three are generic inclusions in lists of oppression). Even in the brief sections on liberation theology, a clear preference is shown for Latin American and feminist theologies, with no Black authors cited in these sections. Remarkably, neither

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71   Elaine A. Robinson, *Race and Theology* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2012), 42–53. Among the textbooks evaluated is Alister McGrath's *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, one of the textbooks used in Marquette University's THEO 1001 ("Introduction to Theology") course.

72   See Francis Schüssler Fiorenza and John P. Galvin, eds., *Systematic Theology: Roman Catholic Perspectives* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2011).

King nor Cone are cited in the text (although other Protestant and non-Christian scholars are referenced throughout). What does such a significant exclusion say about the authors' view of race in America? Furthermore, what does this say concerning the credibility of a theological community which will not address its most heinous sin? This point is a major motivation for my project. I will contend that a renewed focus on liberative themes in our theology will not just benefit those who have suffered oppression. Instead, it will present an opportunity for everyone to recover a fuller sense of who they are in relation to other humans and to God.

The foregoing analysis does not come as a surprise to many scholars of color who have labored in religious institutions. De La Torre and Floyd-Thomas write:

> Social structures that protect the white supremacist ideal, privileging those who are closest to whiteness (even within racial and ethic communities) are woven into the very tapestry of life within these United States. . . . Yet, not surprisingly, a decade into the new millennium we still find that the Sunday church hour remains the most segregated hour of the week. Not only is the church segregated, but so are our seminaries, theological centers, and religious discourses.[73]

It should be expected that institutions that refuse to acknowledge the interplay between their theology and racism would not see (or acknowledge) the manifestations thereof. Some examples:

- It is possible to get a PhD in religion or theology without having to read or seriously engage a scholar of color.
- You can pass M.A. or doctoral qualifying exams without having to engage non-White scholars.
- Most syllabi in theological institutions do not require publications by Black scholars, and may only give passing mention of Black scholars in recommended reading lists.

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73   De La Torre/Floyd-Thomas, foreword to *Race and Theology*, 4–5.

- 81% of faculty at theological institutions are White.[74] Black scholars who focus on issues such as race, power, and liberation often have to wait until specific openings are available For example, given an opening in systematic theology, a Black scholar who focused on the methodology of Black theology or the works of James Cone would be at a disadvantage to a Barth scholar even though the latter scholar's work might be equally specialized. In fact, as Willie James Jennings pointed out at the 2012 American Academy of Religion Conference, Black scholars often have to be "theologically bilingual," fluent in the texts and theories of White scholarship as well as in those of scholars ignored by the academy.

- Those with an interest in projects that challenge institutionalized racial narratives often have to fight harder to get their projects approved and risk having them deemed as inferior when compared to projects dealing with figures and topics that are a part of the Europeanized canon.

One could misinterpret the aforementioned challenge as one focused exclusively on the lack of action by the Church. However, I am pointing toward a more fundamental problem: not the Church, but the Church's *theology*. In perhaps the most well-known passage from King's "Letter From Birmingham City Jail," he writes:

> I have traveled the length and breadth of Alabama, Mississippi and all the other southern states. On sweltering summer days and crisp autumn mornings I have looked at her beautiful churches with their lofty spires pointing heavenward. I have beheld the impressive outlay of her massive religious education buildings. Over and over again I have found myself asking: "What kind of people worship here? *Who is their God?*"[75]

By questioning the nature of God, King is asking, "What kind of theology permits individuals to be indifferent to the unjust suffering of millions of their neighbors?" Thus, the question is not just "Who is their God?" but "What is their anthropology? What is their conception of epistemology that allows them to pursue knowledge but ignore the existential reality of entire groups of people?"

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74   This comes from the institutional database provided by the Commission on Accrediting—the accreditation component of the Association of Theological Schools (ATS). ATS approves and supports the programs of over 270 graduate schools in the United States and Canada. In 1991, approximately 92% of faculty at ATS institutions were White.

75   King, Jr., *A Testament of Hope*, 299. Emphasis added.

Not only was—as mentioned earlier—the violence of slavery based upon a theological misunderstanding; the very concept of race itself is rooted in a theological origin of difference. In the late fifteenth century, King Ferdinand II and Queen Isabella I conquered the last Muslim outpost on the Iberian Peninsula and inaugurated the Spanish Inquisition. Jews and Moors (North African Muslims) were forced to convert under threat of tribunal or expulsion. Many conversions occurred, but in the eyes of Spanish Christians, the new converts were still different. Though Christian in allegiance, converts from Judaism and Islam "represented a deviation from Christian normativity."[76] This deviation traded upon the idea of Spanish Christians possessing pure blood; the "standard was individuals whose origins were "purely" Christian."[77] Gordon writes:

> The notion of purity here emerged from theological naturalism, where the natural was determined by its alignment with theological dogma. Since all that was natural emanated from the theological center, Moors and Jews stood as prototypical instances of the anthropology of damnation that took a path to the modern term race.[78]

Soon, the concept of an "heritable and essential human difference, deeper than culture and belief," was reified in language.[79] Linguistically, Spanish residents drew upon ideas already used in culture to make distinctions among breeds of dogs and horses. Paul Taylor writes:

> By the time of the first Spanish dictionary, the 1611 *Tesoro de la Lengua Castellano o Espanola*, a single term—"raza"—refers both to breeds of horses and, derisively, to Moorish or Jewish human ancestry.[80]

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76   Lewis R. Gordon, *What Fanon Said: A Philosophical Introduction to His Life and Thought* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 136.
77   Gordon, *What Fanon Said*, 136.
78   Gordon, *What Fanon Said*, 136.
79   Paul C. Taylor, *Race: A Philosophical Introduction* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2013), 39.
80   Taylor, *Race*, 39.

Over time, *raza* (race) departed from its connection to distinctions among animals and became a designating term for human difference that went beyond mere social variance. To be a different *raza* meant that you were, almost genetically or biologically, impure. After traversing through English and French, the term "race" came to be known as a way of distinguishing human people groups. However, these distinctions were not due to national origins, but—in line with the idea that difference was a departure from pure blood lines—were considered to be reflected in distinct morphological features that were thought to be epiphenomenal on an underlying biology. Thus, the eventual construction of whiteness and of blackness (as an outgrowth of colonial expansion, slavery, and the need for cheap labor) was the attempt to render race as a purely biological distinction, when in fact it's a distinction rooted in a theological necessity (i.e., a way to allow discrimination even against those deemed Christian).

Carter, in his critique of Black theology in *Race: A Theological Account*, conceives of the normativity of whiteness as a problem that goes untouched in most treatments by Black theologians. Carter, aware of the doctrine of racial purity at the heart of blackness/whiteness, is concerned that the attempt by Black theology to redemptively reappropriate the concept of blackness (i.e., "black liberation theology's attempt philosophically and theologically to salvage the blackness that modernity has constructed by converting it into a site of culture power"[81]) avoids the reality that the category of blackness *itself* is problematic. Framing the problem, he writes:

> As a theological problem, whiteness names the refusal to trade against race. It names the refusal to enter into dependent, promiscuous, and in short, "contaminated" relations that resist an idolatrously false purity. . . . What is needed is a vision of Christian identity, then, that calls us to holy "impurity" and

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81   Carter, *Race*, 192.

"promiscuity," a vision that calls for race trading against the benefits of whiteness so as to enter into the miscegenized or mulattic existence of divinization (*theôsis*).[82]

What Carter is getting at in his critique (elements of which can be found in William R. Jones' *Is God a White Racist?*, to be discussed later) is that, because racial categories themselves are implicitly loaded with notions of Black inferiority, the attempt to "redeem" them—especially in the setting that, I would argue, made them possible (i.e., the theological)—will be an exercise in futility. It's for this very reason that Black scholars like Gordon advocate for a complete methodological overhaul in constructing liberative paradigms.

<p align="center">Black Religious Critique</p>

Blacks in America have been both extremely critical of and enthusiastically committed to religion.[83] This duality is due, in no small measure, to the unique experiences of Blacks in North America. Slaves brought to North America came from a variety of regions in Africa, each thoroughly suffused with a particularly religious/spiritual sensibility. In addition to religions and practices that had deep roots on the African continent, Islam had been a major influence throughout Africa, along with pockets of Christian missionary work (e.g., the Portuguese and French Capuchin missionary movement in West Africa during the seventeenth century).[84] Upon arriving in the New World as slaves, many aspects of the slave's homeland and culture were ripped from her. However, "One of the most durable and adaptable constituents of the slave's

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82 Carter, *Race*, 192.
83 This is not to ignore or discount the increasing contribution by "Black atheists" or "Black humanists" to the struggle against injustice. This issue will be taken up in Chapter II.
84 Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 5–7.

culture, linking African past with American present, was his religion."[85] Valuing religion, and yet experiencing firsthand the manner in which their own degradation and oppression had theological roots, Blacks throughout America's history have faithfully executed a continual critique of the inherent racism found in both the practice and the theory of religion. In this section, I will briefly examine the salient themes found in the critique of religion advanced by two seminal thinkers: Douglass and Nat Turner. My goal in selecting these figures will be to demonstrate that a concern about the normativity of whiteness has always been at the core of Black religious critique, whether that critique is explicit (e.g., Malcolm X's attack on the "white God of Christianity") or implicit (e.g., Turner's theological inversion in which *blackness* becomes normative). This is important for two reasons. First, there is a misunderstanding that the core critique from the Black religious community has been moral. That is, the notion that Blacks believe that Christianity is being misused by powerful individuals and systems in order to advance hegemonic structures that benefit the interests of some. This is true, but incomplete. Black religious critique has continually pushed religious theorists and adherents to interrogate the ways in which religion (especially Christianity) isn't just complacent amidst injustice, complicit with injustice, or co-opted by injustice, instead focusing on the way that religion/Christianity have constructed an imaginary that makes an oppressive racial hierarchy possible. Second, focusing on the role of methodological normativity in religion provides us with a way of organizing the disparate themes that have been sounded by Black thinkers in their critique of America and its religion, emphasizing the oft-ignored intellectual assessment that has characterized the Black experience and

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85   Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 4.

perhaps opening up a new vista of dialogue regarding race, ethnicity, class, and gender. For, what else is Malcolm X talking about when he advocates that Blacks have to construct "a new *system* of reason and logic devised by us who are at the bottom"[86] Or, when noted Black historian Lerone Bennett, Jr. states:

> In our opinion, the question of concepts is decisive. The overriding need of the moment is for us to think with our own mind and to see with our own eyes. We cannot see now because our eyes are clouded by the concepts of white supremacy. We cannot think now because we have no intellectual instruments, save those which were designed expressly to keep us from *seeing*.
>
> It is necessary for us to develop a new frame of reference which transcends the limits of white concepts. . . . White concepts have created the conditions that make it easy to dominate a people. The initial step towards liberation is to abandon the partial frame of reference of our oppressor and to create new concepts which release our reality.[87]

It is my hope that seeing Christianity through the eyes of Douglass and Turner will also demonstrate that there are resources indigenous to the Black experience in America that can inform a more sophisticated methodology, one that is rooted not only in superficial corrections, but in a pervasive and extensive critique of White normativity accomplished by an intentional de-centering of European culture.

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86 Archie Epps, ed., *The Speeches of Malcolm X at Harvard* (New York: Morrow, 1968), 133. Emphasis added.

87 Lerone Bennett, Jr., *The Challenge of Blackness* (Chicago: Johnson Publishing Company, 1972), 35.

Nat Turner[88]

Turner, who comes to us in history famous for leading a massive slave rebellion in 1831 and his subsequent part-autobiography/part-manifesto *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, was born October 2, 1800, the slave of farmer Benjamin Turner, in Southampton County, Virginia.[89] Due to the deaths of subsequent owners, at the time of the rebellion, Turner was legally the slave of 12-year old Putnam Moore, but was essentially the slave of Moore's step-father, Joseph Travis (the first victim of the rebellion). From childhood, Turner was set apart and perceived by both the Black and White communities as being special. Turner, in *Confessions*, recalls playing with children around the age of three or four and sharing firsthand information with them that his mother, overhearing him, later told him had occurred before he was born.[90] Turner writes:

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88   Unfortunately, previous generations are mostly aware of Turner through *The Confessions of Nat Turner* by William Styron (1967). Styron's work, which won the 1968 Pulitzer Prize for fiction and was lauded by *TIME Magazine* as one of the 100 best English-language novels from 1923 to 2005, is a heavily fictionalized narrative that misrepresents Turner's character and competence. In Styron's work, Turner is a bumbling and fanatical figure who hates his fellow Blacks and is sexually attracted to White women. Styron's work is *not* the *Confessions* that will be referenced here. A more accurate account of Turner's life and rebellion can be found in the 2016 Fox Searchlight Pictures film *The Birth of a Nation*.

89   Kenneth S. Greenberg, ed., *The Confessions of Nat Turner and Related Documents* (New York: Bedford Books/St. Martin's Press, 1996), 2. There is considerable disagreement regarding the authorial voice of Turner's *Confession*. Greenberg notes the work of historian Henry Irving who points out the similarities between Turner's work and an article in the *Constitutional Whig* of Richmond that appeared weeks before Turner was captured and allegedly recited his narrative (Greenberg, 9). Tragle posits that Turner's amanuensis, lawyer Thomas Ruffin Gray, may have been the dominant voice and the author of the earlier article. Gray was not Turner's lawyer, but was representing other slaves who participated in the rebellion. "Whether or not Gray actually wrote this letter, it seems likely that he intended the *Confessions* to bolster a position already articulated by other white Southerners—the belief that Nat Turner was insane. The *Confessions* would never have been circulated had it overtly suggested that the rebellion had its roots in the nature of slavery rather than in the madness of a single slave" (Greenberg, 10). Gray probably made a fortune off of the work—he copyrighted it the day before Turner was executed for the rebellion and by the end of the month it had sold "perhaps as many as 40,000 to 50,000 copies" (Greenberg, 8).

90   Greenberg, *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, 44.

> I surely would be a prophet, as the Lord had shewn me things that had happened before my birth. And my father and mother strengthened me in this my first impression, saying in my presence, I was intended for some great purpose, which they had always thought from certain marks on my head and breast.[91]

Turner had an uncommon intelligence as a child, easily mastering spelling, writing, and reading. Unique among other Blacks in slave-era Virginia, Turner engaged the world with a sense of divine destiny, living up to excessively high moral standards and demonstrating discernment about those that he would associate with (in his words, he "studiously avoided mixing in society").[92] Believing that the Old Testament Spirit of God that spoke to the Hebrew prophets was also speaking to him, Turner saw visions and experienced miracles that culminated in a "sign" (a solar eclipse in February of 1821) that he interpreted as being God's divine permission to execute judgment on his enemies. Turner hesitated, but when "another signal came in the guise of a green-tinted sun on August 13,"[93] Turner knew he had to act. Eight days later, on the afternoon of August 21, Turner attended a strategy dinner with six other slaves and, hours later, they began the rebellion, eventually killing almost five dozen White men, women, and children over the next 24 hours. Turner eluded authorities for two months before being captured on October 30. He was tried the next week, and executed shortly thereafter.[94]

Turner's self-appropriation of a messianic role is central to his rebellion. Turner was steeped in a context that identified the Christian God with the White slaveowner and God's will with slavery. In the first half of the nineteenth century, Christian denominations—especially the Methodists and Baptists (the two Christian groups most formative for Turner, as well as the most representative groups among Protestants in the

91   Greenberg, *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, 44.
92   Greenberg, *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, 45.
93   Greenberg, *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, 3.
94   Greenberg, *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, 3.

South)—felt "a heavy responsibility to evangelize the slaves as a means of realizing

God's redemptive purpose."[95] However, this evangelizing effort was still subsumed under

a "proslavery theology."[96] H. Shelton Smith writes:

> But along with this increasing white effort to Christianize the Negro was also increasing vigilance to safeguard the institution of domestic bondage. This becomes indisputable if one examines the catechetical manuals that were used during this period to instruct the slave population. The most highly esteemed catechisms were those prepared by Charles Colcock Jones of the old school Presbyterian Church, one of Georgia's largest slaveholders, and the founder of his denomination's most successful mission to plantation slaves in his state.[97]

Smith provides an example of an early catechism as illustrative of the way that

slaveowners "employ[ed] the resources of religion to strengthen Negro servitude"[98]:

> Q. What command has God given to Servants concerning the obedience to their Masters?
> A. "Servants be obedient to them that are your Masters, according to the flesh."—Eph. 6:5.
>
> Q. If the Servant professes to be a Christian, ought he not to *set an example* to all the other Servants of love and obedience to his Master?
> A. Yes.
>
> Q. And if his Master is a Christian, ought he not especially love and obey him?
> A. Yes.—I Tim. 6:1—2.
>
> Q. Is it right for the Servant to run away; or is it right to harbor a *runaway*?
> A. No.[99]

What is informative about this catechetical excerpt is the way that Turner's interpretation

of Christianity and his concomitant actions subvert it at every point: Turner's rebellion

was the most extreme act of disobedience, he felt called to lead other slaves in their

rebellion (as opposed to setting an example of docility), and his willingness to engage in

95 H. Shelton Smith, *In His Image, But . . . Racism in Southern Religion, 1780–1910* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1972), 153.
96 Smith, *In His Image*, 153.
97 Smith, *In His Image*, 153–154.
98 Smith, *In His Image*, 154.
99 Smith, *In His Image*, 154. Emphasis in original.

brutal acts of murder and resistance unravel any notion of submission. Turner, in his

Confession, notes the prominence of a particular Scriptural passage (Luke 12:31) as being

formative:

> By this time, having arrived to man's estate, and hearing the scriptures
> commented on at meetings, I was struck with that particular passage which says:
> "Seek ye the kingdom of Heaven and all things shall be added unto you." I
> reflected much on this passage, and prayed daily for light on this subject—As I
> was praying one day at my plough, the spirit spoke to me, saying, "Seek ye the
> kingdom of Heaven and all things shall be added unto you."[100]

Gayraud S. Wilmore, noting the context of Luke 12, wonders about the possible

Christological appropriation that Turner might have made. Subsequent verses in Luke 12

talk about the "good man of the house" not knowing when the thief would come, the call

to be ready because "the Son of Man cometh at an hour when ye think not"; the sending

of fire to the earth; the assertion that God's will is to be accomplished not by peace, but

by division.[101] Turner, in a remarkable inversion of the Christology of the era, sees

himself—a Black slave—as the Christ figure, executing divine judgment on sinners (i.e.,

Whites). Not only was Turner's recasting of slave justice as the paradigm of divine justice

unique, but so was the larger framework by which he understood the mission of Jesus.

More than a century before Cone talked about Christ as liberator, "Turner's theology

foreshadowed liberation theology and its commitment to the total liberation of the poor

and oppressed."[102] In this regard, Turner's Christology was conceived in different terms

that his contemporaries. Wilmore notes:

> For [white missionaries] Jesus was the meek and mild exemplar of the faith—the
> lamb of God slain from the foundation of the world whose obedience to *his*

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100 Greenberg, *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, 45–46.
101 Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of African Americans* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1998), 65.
102 Karl Lampley, *A Theological Account of Nat Turner: Christianity, Violence, and Theology* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 42.

> Master, God the Father, was the model for the slave. . . . Nat Turner's appropriation of another kind of Lord, his recognition of the meaning of Jesus and the kingdom in relation to the prophets of God's justice on behalf of the oppressed, adumbrated the black theology which developed among black preachers from Henry Highland Garnet to Martin Luther King Jr.—Jesus as the protagonist of radical social change.[103]

Even while in jail, awaiting his fate, Turner embraced his messianic role. When asked by Gray whether or not his impending sentencing and almost certain execution caused him to feel that his interpretation of the Spirit of God's voice was mistaken, Turner replied, "Was not Christ crucified."[104] In life and in death, Turner appropriated the role of the Suffering Servant. Gray notes that, during their interactions, Turner made no attempt to prove his innocence, but truthfully acknowledged "his full participation in all the guilt of the transaction."[105]

One final occurrence brings a sense of closure to Turner's life. A report in the November 14, 1831 edition of *The Norfolk Herald* reported that Turner, while in prison, had sold his body to someone to be dissected post-mortem, and used the proceeds to purchase ginger cakes.[106] Greenberg finds little evidence to support the account of a transaction taking place, but it does seem that Turner's corpse was dissected. An interview with a local historian several years later revealed that doctors skinned Turner's body and made grease from his flesh, and that several residents claimed to have seen the remains of Turner's skull. [107] One individual apparently claimed to have owned "a money purse made of his hide."[108] The theological significance of the consumption of Turner's body is not lost on Greenberg. He writes:

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103 Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, 65–66. Emphasis in original.
104 Greenberg, *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, 48.
105 Greenberg, *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, 41.
106 Greenberg, *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, 90.
107 Greenberg, *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, 19–20.
108 Greenberg, *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, 20.

Apparently unaware of the bizarre mixture of horror and irony in their actions, Southampton whites consumed the body and the blood of the black rebel who likened himself to Christ.[109]

Frederick Douglass

In Douglass, we see a similar re-reading of the Gospels in light of Douglass' reflections on his own life. Douglass was born into slavery around 1817 or 1818 in Talbot County, Maryland. Separated from his mother, Harriet Bailey, at birth, Douglass recalls seeing her only four or five times in his life, always at night, always in secret. She died from an illness when Douglass was around seven years old. As a consequence of the custom of separating slave children from their mothers, which Douglass took to be an attempt to "hinder the development of the child's affection toward its mother, and to blunt and destroy the natural affection of the mother for the child,"[110] he says he received news of her death as one might receive news of "the death of a stranger."[111] His father, Douglass believed, was his slavemaster.

Douglass was first taught to read by Sophia Auld, the wife of Hugh Auld, a relative of a former master. Douglass went to live with the Auld family in Baltimore around the age of seven or eight. Douglass describes his initial encounter with Sophia in almost angelic terms, "a woman of the kindest heart and finest feelings."[112] Having never owned slaves and having been an industrious woman prior to marriage, Douglass felt that she had been "preserved from the blighting and dehumanizing effects of slavery"[113] and

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109 Greenberg, *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, 20.
110 Douglass, *Narrative*, 18.
111 Douglass, *Narrative*, 18.
112 Douglass, *Narrative*, 40.
113 Douglass, *Narrative*, 40.

treated him "as she supposed one human being ought to treat another."[114] "Her face,"

Douglass writes, "was made of heavenly smiles, and her voice of tranquil music."[115]

Under her careful tutelage, Douglass learned the alphabet and the spelling of simple

words. However, his education was put on hold when Hugh found out about her

endeavors and lectured Sophia about the dangers of educating slaves:

> "If you give a nigger an inch, he will take an ell. A nigger should know nothing
> but to obey his master—to do as he is told to do. Learning would *spoil* the best
> nigger in the world. Now," said he, "if you teach that nigger (speaking of myself)
> how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a
> slave. He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master. As
> to himself, it could do him no good, but a great deal of harm. It would make him
> discontented and unhappy."[116]

Douglass received these harsh words painfully, and yet, as a revelation. In addition to the

demeaning characterization of Douglass' status just when he felt most hopeful, Hugh's

words also inaugurated a change in Sophia's disposition. Where she had once been the

epitome of compassion and generosity, slavery "soon proved its ability to divest her of

these heavenly qualities."[117] Sophia became obsessed with prohibiting Douglass' efforts at

reading, becoming enraged if he was seen with a newspaper, her fervency rising to a

degree greater than her husband's. However, in Hugh's words, Douglass also saw that the

key to rising out of his debased condition was to continue on in his pursuit of knowledge.

Sophia, he writes, "in teaching me the alphabet, had given me the *inch*, and no precaution

could prevent me from taking the *ell*."[118] Douglass befriended poor White boys he would

meet and turned them into his teachers, exchanging bread for quick lessons during

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114 Douglass, *Narrative*, 43.
115 Douglass, *Narrative*, 40.
116 Douglass, *Narrative*, 40–41. According to Merriam-Webster, an *ell* is an antiquated measure
     of length in the textile industry, equal to approximately 45 inches. Emphasis in original.
117 Douglass, *Narrative*, 43.
118 Douglass, *Narrative*, 44. Emphasis in original.

errands. On September 3, 1838, Douglass escaped from slavery and boarded a train, eventually ending up in New York City the next day. A few days later, he sent for Anna Murray, a free Black woman he had met the year earlier, to come and join him in New York despite his "homeless, houseless, and helpless condition."[119] Upon her arrival, they were quickly married, eventually settling down in New Bedford, Massachusetts.

Douglass was the author of three books, including *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855) and *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1891). However, it's in his seminal work, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845) that we encounter Douglass' understanding of the contradictions inherent within Christianity and his narrative reinterpretation of the Christian Gospel. Douglass rejects a particular eschatological trajectory of Christianity, one that relegated slaves to laborious servitude in this life in anticipation of a possible reprieve in the next. For Douglass, liberation was always imminent, even if resisted. Salvation was not for the hereafter, but was to be realized now. I read Douglass' narrative as challenging the myth of White superiority by constantly demonstrating the ways in which White behavior transgressed the moral norms of Christianity. Douglass, like Turner, presents an inversion, but of a different nature. Here, Douglass presents the Black free and slave community as the true people of God in contradistinction to those who professed to be the pure bearers of the image of God. Douglass does more than demonstrate the moral capacity of Blacks; he reorients the very "criteria of a moral person."[120] This is all the more impressive given the fact that Douglass, like most slaves who attended Christian services in the antebellum South, was probably inundated with messages that reinforced the ideal of Black inferiority. For

119 Douglass, *Narrative*, 94.
120 Willett, *Maternal Ethics*, 132.

example, Douglass references "the argument . . . that God cursed Ham, and therefore American slavery is right."[121]

Douglass' *Narrative*, even apart from his explicit discursive intentions, is itself an embodiment of Douglass' abolitionist vocation: it represents a former slave articulating his *own* condition in compelling prose, making an impassioned plea for a transformed society. It's tempting to interpret Douglass' prose according to nineteenth-century European norms and Enlightenment-era conceptions of liberty, but even in the *Narrative*, "Douglass does not appropriate elements from the dominant discourses except to transform them."[122] Carter sees the *Narrative* as Douglass' version of an Augustine-like confession in which Douglass provides a "counter-narrative of identity,"[123] an account of agency in which Douglass resists and demythologizes the myth of Black inferiority and perpetual servitude. For Carter, the *Narrative* contradicts the notion that Blacks had "assumed a religious posture whereby they acquiesce in their oppression."[124]

Several themes emerge in Douglass' account. The first is his firm belief in the ideal of Christianity. Whereas some Black thinkers challenge the normativity of whiteness in Christianity by challenging Christianity itself, Douglass affirms the essence of orthodox Christianity and finds it to be incommensurable with American religion. In the appendix to his *Narrative*, Douglass contends that American Christianity ("the slaveholding religion of this land"[125]) was diametrically opposed to the pure Christianity of Christ. Douglass found the former to be corrupt, partial, and hypocritical. He writes:

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121 Douglass, *Narrative*, 19.
122 Willett, *Maternal Ethics*, 100.
123 Carter, *Race*, 287.
124 Carter, *Race*, 289.
125 Douglass, *Narrative*, 100.

> Indeed, I can see no reason, but the most deceitful one, for calling the religion of this land Christianity. I look upon it as the climax of all misnomers, the boldest of all frauds, and the grossest of all libels. Never was there a clearer case of "stealing the livery of the court of heaven to serve the devil in."[126]

In light of his contention that American Christianity departs, at several points, from pure Christianity, a second theme in the *Narrative* is hypocrisy. Often, after relating a particular account of mistreatment or injustice, Douglass will conclude—one can safely assume, sarcastically—by referencing that this took place in a "Christian" land. For example, he laments that he is not able to publicly name and therefore honor two or three particular boys that taught him to read, fearing that to do so would bring them harm, since "it is almost an unpardonable offence to teach slaves to read in this Christian country."[127] Or, after being brutally beaten by a White mob and finding that no one, even those who sympathized with him, would testify on his behalf, Douglass writes, "Such was, and such remains, the state of things in the Christian city of Baltimore."[128] The notion of hypocrisy enters into the *Narratives* at several other points: the prayers of wealthy slaveowners for more provision while their slaves suffered[129]; the "humble followers of the Lord Jesus Christ"[130] who, though themselves teachers in their White churches, violently disrupted slave gatherings on Sundays when they found out that the slaves were learning to read the Bible instead of playing sports or drinking whiskey (activities that would have met with their approval); Douglass' general portrait of Christians in America as being scandalized at the thought of "fellowshipping a sheep-stealer; and at the same time they hug to their

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126 Douglass, *Narrative*, 100.
127 Douglass, *Narrative*, 44.
128 Douglass, *Narrative*, 86.
129 Douglass, *Narrative*, 55.
130 Douglass, *Narrative*, 75.

communion a man-stealer" and praying for and donating to the "heathen on the other side of the globe" while ignoring the heathen at their own doors.[131]

Similar to Turner, Douglass casts himself as the Christ-figure, mapping Christological themes to seminal events in his life. By far, the most important and theologically-rich event in Douglass' life was his fight with Covey. Douglass ascribed such significance to this event that it is repeated, with additional reflections over time, in all three of Douglass' books. The fight with Covey, or rather, his interpretation of it, appears as a strange interlude at this stage of Douglass' life. As Bernard R. Boxill notes, Douglass advocated pacifism and argued against violent slave resistance until the 1850s. Upon obtaining his freedom and resettling in the North, Douglass befriended and was a devoted disciple of William Lloyd Garrison, an abolitionist who propagated his pacifist teachings as editor of the newspaper *The Liberator*. Garrison had convinced Douglass that "nonviolent moral suasion was *morally* preferable to slave resistance as a means to freeing the slaves."[132] Given that the *Narrative* (wherein Douglass celebrates the virtues associated with his struggle with Covey) was published in 1845, Boxill queries why Douglass dedicated significant space to the fight, and why his account was so positive. Or, why did it take Douglass a few more years to embrace the possible role of violent resistance as part of the broader trek toward abolition?

Douglass relates the circumstances of his fight with Covey as follows: Douglass had been living with Auld for nine months when Thomas decided to send him to Covey. Covey had "acquired a very high reputation for breaking young slaves, and this

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131 Douglass, *Narrative*, 103.
132 Bernard R. Boxill, "The Fight with Covey," in *Existence in Black: An Anthology of Black Existential Philosophy*, ed. Lewis R. Gordon (New York: Routledge, 1997), 275. Emphasis in original.

reputation was of immense value to him."[133] Covey would bring slaves into an

environment that seemed orderly, request them to perform deeds that would (by his

design) result in failure, and punish the slave in the most inhumane of fashions. Douglass

notes (again, with apparent sarcasm) that Covey's reputation was aided by the fact that he

was "a professor of religion—a pious soul—a member and a class-leader in the

Methodist church."[134] Douglass came to stay with Covey on January 1, 1833, at the age of

sixteen or seventeen years old.[135] Douglass relates that, during the first half of the year,

Covey would beat him regularly, leading to such misery that he fell into a pit of

depression to the point of contemplating suicide, feeling himself mad. Douglass laments:

> If at any one time of my life more than another, I was made to drink the bitterest dregs of slavery, that time was during the first six months of my stay with Mr. Covey. We were worked in all weathers. It was never too hot or too cold; it could never rain, blow, hail, or snow, too hard for us to work in the field. Work, work, work, was scarcely more the order of the day than of the night. The longest days were too short for him, and the shortest nights too long for him. I was somewhat unmanageable when I first went there, but a few months of this discipline tamed me. Mr. Covey succeeded in breaking me. I was broken in body, soul, and spirit. My natural elasticity was crushed, my intellect languished, the disposition to read departed, the cheerful spark that lingered about my eye died; the dark night of slavery closed in upon me; and behold a man transformed into a brute![136]

But then, something changed. Douglass, establishing the context for his conversion,

writes, "You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made

a man."[137] One hot August day, Douglass collapsed from exhaustion while fanning wheat

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133 Douglass, *Narrative*, 58.
134 Douglass, *Narrative*, 58.
135 Douglass, *Narrative*, 59. Douglass claims that he was sixteen at the time of this incident, but this should be read in light of his admission in the opening pages of the *Narrative* that he had no "no accurate knowledge of [his] age, never having seen any authentic record containing it" (17). Slaves were intentionally denied access to such information, and Douglass' approximation of his own year of birth is based off of a comment made by a slaveowner in 1835 that he was "about seventeen years old" (17).
136 Douglass, *Narrative*, 62–63.
137 Douglass, *Narrative*, 64.

with three other workers. Covey, angry at the delay in work, kicked Douglass and delivered a devastating blow to his head with a piece of wood. Bloodied and dazed, Douglass trekked seven miles to his old master's house and begged for mercy, only to find that his master had no sympathy for his condition and ordered him to return to Covey. On his return, he encounters a slave named Sandy. Sandy invites Douglass into his home to spend the night and advises him to return to Covey, giving him a root (a plant believed to have spiritual powers) that would prohibit any White person from defeating him in a struggle. Douglass returns home and, it being a Sunday, encounters Covey on his way to church. Covey appears kind and peaceful. However, the next morning, Covey catches Douglass by surprise, and attempts to tie him up in order to beat him. Douglass, resisting, falls to the floor, leading Covey to think he has the upper hand. Douglass writes:

> Mr. Covey seemed now to think he had me, and could do what he pleased; but at this moment—from whence came the spirit I don't know—I resolved to fight; and, suiting my action to the resolution, I seized Covey hard by the throat; and, as I did so, I rose. He held onto me, and I to him. My resistance was so entirely unexpected, that Covey seemed taken all aback. He trembled like a leaf. This gave me assurance, and I held him uneasy, causing the blood to run where I touched him with the ends of my fingers.[138]

Covey calls for help from two workers; one refused to aid Covey and the other one attempted to do so but received a kick from Douglass that rendered him useless. The battle waged on for two more hours before Covey gave up. Douglass notes that, though Covey talked as if he had won the battle, this was doubtful since only Douglass had drawn blood. Douglass' reflection about the larger import of the fight is worth noting:

> This battle with Mr. Covey was the turning-point in my career as a slave. It rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom, and revived within me a sense of

138 Douglass, *Narrative*, 68.

> my own manhood. It recalled the departed self-confidence, and inspired me again with a determination to be free. The gratification afforded by the triumph was a full compensation for whatever else might follow, even death itself. He only can understand the deep satisfaction which I experienced, who has himself repelled by force the bloody arm of slavery. I felt as I never felt before. *It was a glorious resurrection, from the tomb of slavery, to the heaven of freedom.* My long-crushed spirit rose, cowardice departed, bold defiance took its place; and I now resolved that, however long I might remain a slave in form, the day had passed forever when I could be a slave in fact. I did not hesitate to let it be known of me, that the white man who expected to succeed in whipping, must also succeed in killing me.[139]

Douglass would be a slave for a few more years, but claimed that he was never whipped in a fight again, noting also that Covey himself never laid a hand on him again until he left on January 1, 1834—exactly one year after he arrived.

Willett centers Douglass' inversion of White moral normativity on the two major events in Douglass' *Narrative*: his fight with Covey and his attainment of literacy. For Willett, these were direct rebuttals to the two prominent moral justifications for slavery of the era: the seeming lack of desire for freedom exhibited by Blacks (evidenced, it was argued, by their docility in the face of slavery) and the failure of Blacks to master the intellectual standards of European-American culture.[140]

Douglass' observation that his fight with Covey was a "glorious resurrection"[141] leads Carter to interpret Douglass in terms of the Easter event. The precipitating encounter with Covey occurred on a Friday, with Douglass specifically mentioning three o'clock as the time. Covey, Douglass writes, "left me to my fate" after delivering the blow to his head.[142] While traveling back to his master to beg for mercy, Douglass recounts that he fell down, thinking that he would bleed to death. Carter sees Douglass

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139 Douglass, *Narrative*, 69. Emphasis added.
140 Willett, *Maternal Ethics*, 132.
141 Douglass, *Narrative*, 69.
142 Douglass, *Narrative*, 65.

inserting himself into the Easter death of Christ as a means of reclaiming the dignity and value of Black life. The suffering of Christ is inextricably connected to Black suffering. Carter continues:

> Stated differently, in bringing attention to the time of his own quasi-death at three o'clock, Douglass unites his death with the death of the Jesus on Good Friday. The move makes the literary suggestion that God is manifest in black suffering and in the black struggle for dignity and selfhood.[143]

What is interesting about the fight with Covey is how he locates it within its immediate context of his life in 1833 and within the broad themes of his narrative. Even though Douglass chronologically places the event in August, which would be approximately two-thirds into his tenure with Covey, he goes to great lengths to alter the timeline to enhance the existential significance of the fight. No less than six times, Douglass states that the fight with Covey occurred six months into his stay, therefore changing his status for the final six months.[144] There are allusions here to the literary structure in Mark. Mark, like Douglass, posits Peter's confession in Mark 8:27–30 as a literary device that serves as the fulcrum for the ministry of Jesus. In the same way that Mark sees Peter's dialogue with Jesus as the transitional point in His ministry (e.g., the turn to teaching about suffering, the descent to Jerusalem), so Douglass narratively centers this event in 1833 to indicate its pivotal role in his formation.

In many respects, Douglass' theological reflection evinces a proto-liberation theology. In his study *Frederick Douglass: A Precursor to Liberation Theology,* Reginald F. Davis contends that Douglass evolved from a more "traditional" Christianity that

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143 Carter, *Race*, 298.
144 For example, prior to writing about his fight with Covey, he notes: "I have already intimated that my condition was much worse, during the first six months of my stay at Mr. Covey's, than in the last six. The circumstances leading to the change in Mr. Covey's course toward me form an epoch in my humble history" (*Narrative*, 64).

pacified the oppressed by emphasizing rewards in the afterlife and non-resistance in the

present, to one that emphasized the role of human agency in eradicating social injustice.

Harmonizing Christianity and liberation involved a systemic reimagining of the faith—

one that required Douglass to methodologically reappraise the foundations of the faith.

Davis writes:

> In the process of developing his theological perspective, Douglass had to painstakingly examine the theological tradition of Christianity that was being practiced in America. He found it flawed and polluted in many respects. There were beliefs and values that stifled the movement toward liberation. But that which worked at cross-purposes with liberation, Douglass dumped in order to keep in line with the ever-present demands of the gospel, a call for deliverance from the economic, social, and political structures of oppression.[145]

For Douglass, "the black church had not done the necessary theological reconstruction

that would free them from the stronghold of their psychological enslavement."[146] In

particular, Douglass challenged the Church's eschatological stance that encouraged

quietism, its refusal to affirm the full equality of women, its failure to incorporate

political liberation into its theology, and its failure to deal with evil vis-à-vis the Black

experience of suffering. Instead, he advocated for a "humanistic self-reliance"[147] that

emphasized human agency in the present to combat injustice and articulated a doctrine of

God's preferential treatment for the oppressed.

Black Methodological Approaches

In evaluating the work of contemporary Black scholars of religion, one sees an

interesting shift in the way in which they engage the whiteness of theology at the level of

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145 Reginald F. Davis, *Frederick Douglass: A Precursor to Liberation Theology* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2005), 64–65.
146 Davis, *Frederick Douglass*, 49.
147 Davis, *Frederick Douglass*, 49.

theory. In their own way, they are interrogating the conceptual foundations of Christian

theology in light of a commitment to the flourishing of the Black diaspora and humanity

as a whole. This is a welcome turn in Black theology. Black theologians typically have

not concerned themselves with theological methodology for a variety of reasons, seeing it

as a secondary context in which to discuss a more liberative theology. For many

liberation theologians, especially those of the first generation, the exigencies of their

immersion in liberation did not allow for the luxury of methodological reflection. Thus,

they opted to do theology intuitively. Cone, in reflecting upon this matter, defended his

inattention to method, since "[b]lack men, women, and children were being shot and

imprisoned for asserting their right to a dignified existence."[148] One potential problem

with this approach, as Massingale notes, is a "tendency to exploit, rather than

encounter . . . sources."[149] Massingale critiques Cone in this regard, writing that

> Cone is extremely vulnerable to those who would charge him with
> misappropriating the Christian theological tradition and the Scriptures in order to
> serve his own private causes and points of view. Also, legitimate questions can be
> raised as to whether he has produced an authentic systematic theology or merely a
> series of more or less informed personal commentaries.[150]

Adolphe Gesché, writing in the foreword to Clodovis Boff's *Theology and Praxis:*

Epistemological Foundations, a thorough and sophisticated explication of the

methodology of liberation theology, argues that if theology is to be legitimated as a

"scientific discipline," it must realize that "there comes a moment when a scientific

discipline must either validate its rules of procedure or else admit that it is not scientific

148 James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2010), xiv.
149 Bryan N. Massingale, "The Social Dimensions of Sin and Reconciliation in the Theologies of James H. Cone and Gustavo Gutiérrez: A Critical Comparative Examination" (PhD diss., Academia Alfonsiana, 1991), 511.
150 Massingale, "The Social Dimensions of Sin and Reconciliation," 512–513.

discourse at all. Theology is no exception, whatever its subject and theme."[151]

The turn toward methodology as a site of discourse for Black theologians can be justified in a variety of ways. First, theologies interested in liberation (whether focused on race, class, gender, etc.) do not purport to merely be "genitive" theologies whose theme happens to be liberation. Rather, as Gustavo Gutiérrez has pointed out, liberation theology offers "not so much a new theme for reflection as a *new way* to do theology,"[152] one that incorporates an innovation in sources, tasks, perspective, and ultimately, method. Second, though societal problems with justice are often rooted in deeper issues of identity and privilege, a distinctive methodology is often adduced to justify injustice. When antebellum Christian slaveowners wanted to justify slavery, for example, they invoked a particular interpretation of Scripture that was made possible by a set of presuppositions that they brought to the text.

In this section, I want to briefly evaluate three representative methodologies that have emerged from Black scholarship in the latter half of the twentieth century: prophetic pragmatism (primarily, Cornel West's *Prophesy Deliverance! An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity*), womanism, and black existential phenomenological thought. Each of these methodologies exemplify the best of what Julian Kinnie takes to be essential to a social analysis methodology: a utilization of the social sciences in analyzing and connecting faith to Black suffering, a grounding in the Black community in search of

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151 Adolphe Gesché, foreword to *Theology and Praxis: Epistemological Foundations*, by Clodovis Boff, trans. Robert R. Barr (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1987), xiii. By "scientific" here, Gesché undoubtedly means the same thing as Karl Barth's description of theology as a "science": (1) a human concern with a definite object of knowledge, (2) a definite path to knowledge, and (3) an account of this path for itself and for others who wish to tread it. See *Church Dogmatics* I/1, 7–8.

152 Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988), 12. Emphasis in original.

indigenous resources that can be used to resist oppression, an analysis that situates black

experience within a more global framework, an intellectual framework that deepens

spirituality in pursuit of transforming the material reality of those who are suffering, and

a focus on a discursive power that allows the oppressed to articulate their own reality.[153]

Cornel West's Prophetic Pragmatism

"What does it mean—indeed, on what terms is it even possible—to be black and

Christian?"[154] This question, grounded in a concern for the religious implications of Black

existence in the United States (an issue that will be explored later), has been a central

concern for much of Black liberation theology. Although early Black theology attempted

to harmonize blackness and Christianity in ways that obviated the troubled racial history

of Christianity in North America, scholars such as West have:

> sought to disengage black theology from its moorings in traditional Christian
> categories and sources, arguing that a thorough grounding in the black religious
> experience can yield a more authentic account of the Christianity appropriated
> and maintained by persons of African descent in North America.[155]

Published in 1982, *Prophesy Deliverance! An Afro-American Revolutionary*

Christianity was West's attempt to craft an historical interpretation of Christianity that

fused Black religious experience with philosophical pragmatism and Marxist theory in a

world in which Christianity and capitalism were both viewed as detrimental to Black

flourishing. In constructing this methodology, West's first source is what he terms

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153 Julian Kunnie, *Models of Black Theology: Issues in Class, Culture and Gender* (Valley
     Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1994), 2.
154 J. Kameron Carter, "Contemporary Black Theology: A Review Essay," *Modern Theology*
     19:1 (Jan 2003): 117.
155 Michael Joseph Brown, "Black Theology and the Bible," in *The Cambridge Companion to
     Black Theology*, eds. Dwight N. Hopkins and Edward P. Antonio (New York: Cambridge
     University Press, 2012), 179.

"prophetic Christianity," the stream of Afro-American religious thought that emphasizes the "radical egalitarian idea"[156] that all humans are equal before God and therefore deserving of the right to pursue their aspirations without hindrance. There is a strong teleological emphasis in West's Christianity, one that brings it into dialogue with Marxism based upon their similar concerns regarding social and political transformation. Though eschewing the brutality of actual Marxist regimes, West affirms Marxism's notion of community that stresses the common good and the capacity of that community to bring about change.

Along with this theological telos, West notes that prophetic Christianity is situated at the nexus of human dignity and human depravity: the recognition that humans have the ability to contradict the wrong they see and change it for the better, but also the recognition that humans have a tendency to maintain the status quo and deny transformation. West notes:

> This dialectic of imperfect products and transformative practice, of prevailing realities and negation, of human depravity and human dignity, of what is and the not-yet constitutes the Christian dialectic of human nature and human history.[157]

Again, West sees the Christian dialectic of dignity and depravity, contradiction and transformation, to be the essence of Marxism:

> What is must be overcome; prevailing realities must be changed. Instead of a dialectic of human nature and human history, Marxism posits a dialectic of human practice and human history; human nature is nothing other than human practice under specific historical conditions, conditions which themselves are both results of past human practice and preconditions for it in the present.[158]

West's attraction to Marxist thought as a primary resource for Black liberation is rooted

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156 Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance! An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 16.
157 West, *Prophesy Deliverance*, 17.
158 West, *Prophesy Deliverance*, 19.

in the "convergence between black theology and Marxist thought in their mutual concern for the poor and their use of a dialectical methodology."[159] Despite this convergence, West acknowledges the weaknesses of engaging Marxism in Black religious thought. Primarily, he finds that the deployment of a dialectical methodology is "implicit, underdeveloped and often goes unnoticed in Black Theology,"[160] whereas a dialectical methodology is appealed to consciously in Marxist thought.[161]

A second source for West is American pragmatism. In his sweeping study of pragmatism, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism*, West makes a case for pragmatism's importance due to it "evading epistemology-centered philosophy, accenting human powers, and transforming antiquated modes of social hierarchies in light of religious and/or ethical ideals."[162] Although most clearly associated with Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, George Mead, and John Dewey (who West takes to be the "greatest of the American pragmatists"[163]), West finds Ralph Waldo Emerson to be the principal innovator of the seminal themes of American pragmatist thought. In fact, West's admiration of Dewey is rooted in Dewey's fusion of Emersonian

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159 Edward P. Antonio, "Black Theology and Liberation Theologies," in *The Cambridge Companion to Black Theology*, eds. Dwight N. Hopkins and Edward P. Antonio (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 40.

160 Cornel West, "Black Theology and Marxist Thought," in *African American Religious Thought: An Anthology*, eds. Cornel West and Eddie S. Glaude, Jr. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 878.

161 West has since moved away from some of the Marxist foundations of his theory. In more recent writings, West has embraced "a form of radical democratic liberalism" (Lewis R. Gordon, *Existentia Africana: Understanding Africana Existential Thought*, 5), seeing it as more indigenous to the very American society that he seeks to transform. Even in *Prophesy Deliverance*, West acknowledges the Christian critique of Marxism that it is "naive" (in its boundless optimism in humanity and science), "narrow" (in its exclusion of the "existential and cultural dimensions of human life") and "nearsighted" (regarding the possible configurations that societies may take in the future) (see *Prophesy Deliverance*, 99–101).

162 Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 4.

163 West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy*, 69.

themes with an historical consciousness that acknowledges the capricious and contingent nature of human reality.[164] Emerson, West contends, was a cultural critic who weaved "novel notions of power, provocation, and personality into a potent and emerging American ideology of voluntaristic invulnerability and utopian possibility."[165] By urging liberals to free themselves from a "slavish dependence on Europe" (i.e., by encouraging them to radically deviate from continental rationalism and British empiricism),[166] Emerson created intellectual space that made possible a philosophy that would articulate an "inseparable link between thought and action, theory and practice," taking seriously the centrality of human agency in the maintenance of human structures.[167]

For West, pragmatism's greatest value to a methodology of Afro-American Christianity is its dismissal of a foundationalist epistemology in which knowledge is "a private affair where one begins with uninterpreted givens, theory-free entities, self-authenticating episodes, or intrinsically credible beliefs . . . build[ing] all other knowledge upon them."[168] He writes:

> For American pragmatists, the myth of the given must be demythologized. Knowledge should not be a rummaging for foundations but a matter of public testing and open evaluation of consequences. Knowledge claims are secured by the social practices of a community of inquirers, rather than the purely mental activity of an individual subject.[169]

Evading this form of epistemology results in "a conception of philosophy as a form of cultural criticism in which the meaning of America is put forward by intellectuals in response to distinct social and cultural crises."[170] Herein lies West's focus on pragmatism.

164 West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy*, 69–70.
165 West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy*, 10.
166 West*, Prophesy Deliverance*, 34.
167 West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy*, 10.
168 West, *Prophesy Deliverance*, 20.
169 West, *Prophesy*, 20–21.
170 West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy*, 5.

He sees pragmatism as uniquely situated to foster a critical examination of culture and an openness to discarding older realities in light of newer interpretations of the world that promote wider human flourishing. Mirroring the best of the liberal tradition, West sees a telos that is always progressive in its orientation.

In summary, West's methodology of prophetic, pragmatist Christian thought provides a novel way of interpreting Black history and Black faith in dialogue with concrete political phenomena that have determined the course of Black life in America. Clarence Sholé Johnson writes:

> West, like Dewey in nineteenth-century America, is concerned with the social, economic, cultural (in the broadest sense) and spiritual afflictions of the powerless in modern day society. And like the biblical prophets, West sees himself bringing urgency to the conditions of the powerless, advocating their amelioration, with honesty and integrity. With this in mind, prophetic pragmatism may be characterized effectively as a philosophical position concerned with cultural criticism, imbued with a moral content and anchored in West's Christian background.[171]

There is much to commend regarding West's method. First, he accurately highlights the dialectical methodology inherent in Black religious thought, what he takes to be a three-step process of "negation, preservation, and transformation."[172] The negation is of White theology; the preservation is of interpretations of text and culture that are indigenous to the Black experience; and the transformation is of antiquated truths in favor of new ones.[173] This represents a rejection of passivity in the reception of White interpretations of God and humanity. Second, West's methodology is an innovative approach to theology that captures the hallmark of classical liberation theology: the

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171 Clarence Sholé Johnson, "Cornel West as Pragmatist and Existentialist," in *Existence in Black: An Anthology of Black Existential Philosophy*, ed. Lewis R. Gordon (New York: Routledge, 1997), 248.
172 West, "Black Theology and Marxist Thought," 876.
173 West, "Black Theology and Marxist Thought," 876.

rereading of Christianity from the perspective of the oppressed and the construction of a new world.

Nevertheless, I have some concerns about West's approach. First, West's penchant for American pragmatism rests on a somewhat romantic notion of the discipline. I would certainly concede that the repudiation of a Cartesian epistemology was central to pragmatism. Peirce, for example, was adamant that the locus of truth was to be located in a community of inquirers and not in an individual. Therefore, he (and other pragmatists) was brutal in attacking Descartes' methodology of universal skepticism and in deconstructing modern philosophy's overemphasis on individual consciousness and objectivity. However, West characterizes pragmatism in such a way that social reconstruction was essential to the discipline. In fact, this does not seem to be essential to pragmatism. Peirce was a scientist and logician whose writings, far from being concerned about material deprivation, could be very abstract and disconnected from social realities. Royce depended quite heavily on metaphysics and Peirce, James, and Dewey all wanted to purify metaphysics (i.e., construct a metaphysics that would be consonant with the developments of modern science). Gordon notes:

> An objection could be raised here that West presents a rather distorted image of Deweyan pragmatism, for Dewey wrote on as many abstract themes as he did concrete and social historical ones. He wrote books on logical thinking, for instance, and his work on experience and science could rival his "abstract" contemporaries.[174]

Dewey, of course, did see a synthesis between his revised notion of philosophy and the amelioration of human impoverishment, as evidenced by his laboratory school at the University of Chicago, his advocacy on behalf of the working class, his involvement with

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174 Lewis R. Gordon, *An Introduction to Africana Philosophy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 94.

Jane Addams' Hull House, etc. However, it could still be argued that West's optimism for the utilization of pragmatism as a significant methodological source for Black flourishing may be a bit misplaced.

Second, and most importantly, West doesn't foreground the significant presence of existentialist themes that permeate his approach. West, who acknowledges the formative role played by Søren Kierkegaard's writings in his intellectual formation,[175] acknowledges the "existential issues of death, dread, despair, and disappointment" as critical to his revolutionary theory.[176] However, West does not extend this acknowledgment to a substantive discussion regarding the role that a form of existentialist thought might have within Black religious reflection. In *Prophesy Deliverance!* and in other writings, West turns to the humanist tradition in Afro-American culture, exemplified best in its musical and literary production, to discern "what it is like to be human under black skin in America."[177] The existentialist query of the meaning of Black life in America is prominent in the background of West's discussion, but he doesn't explicitly name or encounter it as such. It is, as Gordon notes, an "unacknowledged" source for West.[178] However, as I shall argue later, any methodology that purports to interrogate Black life must engage the clearly existential themes that are regnant in the Black intellectual and folk tradition.

Lastly, West's approach, though termed an "Afro-American Revolutionary

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175 See "Cornel West," in *African-American Philosophers: 17 Conversations*, ed. George Yancy (New York: Routledge, 1998), 31–48.

176 West, *Prophesy Deliverance*, 8.

177 West, *Prophesy Deliverance*, 86.

178 Gordon, *An Introduction to Africana Philosophy*, 95. See also "The Unacknowledged Fourth Tradition: An Essay on Nihilism, Decadence, and the Black Intellectual Tradition in the Existential Pragmatic Thought of Cornel West," in *Cornel West: A Critical Reader*, ed. George Yancy (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2001), 38–58.

Christianity," seems to instrumentalize Christianity. West locates his prophetic

pragmatism within Christianity for two reasons. First, Christianity holds the absurdity of

suffering in tension with its Gospel in such a way that both are honored without eliding

either. Second—and this hints at the exploitation that is the basis for my concern—West

realizes that the "wretched of the earth" tend to be people of deep faith. Therefore, one

who would seek to assist them in their liberation has a practical advantage if they share or

can relate to their religious worldview. However, West also hints that his perspective is, at

its core, not essentially tied to Christianity:

> Like James, Niebuhr, and to some extent Du Bois, I hold a religious conception of pragmatism. I have dubbed it "prophetic" in that it harks back to the Jewish and Christian tradition of prophets who brought urgent and compassionate critique to bear on the evils of their day. The mark of the prophet is to speak the truth in love with courage—come what may. Prophetic pragmatism proceeds from this impulse. It neither requires a religious foundation nor entails a religious perspective, yet prophet pragmatism is compatible with certain religious outlooks.[179]

Thus, Christianity is somewhat incidental to West's project. Given the large percentage of

Blacks who are connected to some form of Christianity (even more so in the past than

now), it is reasonable for West to connect Marxist and liberative themes to a particular

interpretation of Christianity. However, his project does not emerge as an essentially

Christian project.

In his 2007 work, *In a Shade of Blue: Pragmatism and the Politics of Black

America*, Eddie Glaude, a protégé of West's and chair of the Center for African-American

Studies at Princeton University, extends West's project into the twenty-first century by

articulating pragmatist thought in light of the sociopolitical realities that confront Blacks

challenged by White supremacy. Acknowledging that Peirce, James, and Dewey rarely

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179 West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy*, 233.

dealt with White supremacy in their work, seeing race and racism as "marginal intellectual categories despite the long, looming shadow of slavery that framed their extraordinary lives,"[180] Glaude concedes that American pragmatism reflects a troubling duality that permeates the American experiment: "a simultaneous commitment to democratic ideals and undemocratic practices."[181] Nevertheless, Glaude finds pragmatism to be rife with potential for assisting African American thinkers in "tackling the complex problems of American racism,"[182] citing W. E. B. Du Bois, Alain Locke, Anna Julia Cooper, Charles Johnson, Ralph Ellison, and, of course, West, as standing (broadly or solidly) within the tradition of pragmatism. Glaude wants to invoke pragmatism to address the contemporary political dimensions of African Americans. However, the pragmatism that Glaude invokes is one that has been reconstructed to "sing the blues" (i.e., reconfigured to address the racial lacuna that have characterized the pragmatist tradition since its inception).

African American Christianity, because of its role in the formation of identity and agency, looms large in Glaude's thought. Glaude begins his treatment of religion and pragmatism by lamenting the essentializing appeal to history that too often fixes our identities in ways that are restrictive and deforming. Black religion brings "a sense of the sacred to the construction of identities and the idea of a black community."[183] Although he commends Black liberation theology for its "historicist turn," he finds it problematic that Black theology operates from the "presumption of a continuous history of African-

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180 Eddie S. Glaude, Jr., *In a Shade of Blue: Pragmatism and the Politics of Black America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 1.
181 Glaude, *In a Shade of Blue*, 2.
182 Glaude, *In a Shade of Blue*, 3.
183 Glaude, *In a Shade of Blue*, 67.

Americans."[184] Glaude sees three trends that have characterized Black theology[185]: the

classical stage exemplified by James Cone in which Black scholars reinterpreted

Christianity "into an idiom of black power"[186]; the narrativist turn to social contexts and

the explication of Black cultural artifacts exemplified by Dwight Hopkins and Peter

Paris; and the womanist challenge to patriarchal expressions of Christianity by the

foregrounding of Black *female* religious and cultural experience in America.[187] The

common feature of these three trends is the claim that the God of history has been and is

on the side of the oppressed, a notion that motivates and justifies a rearticulation of

Christianity that challenges White supremacy and aligns itself with what Ivan Petrella

refers to as "historical projects" (i.e., "models of political and economic organization that

would replace an unjust status quo").[188]

At this juncture, Glaude invokes a criticism of Black theology made by Victor

Anderson in his important work, *Beyond Ontological Blackness*. Glaude and Anderson

are concerned that Black scholars of religion (most notably Black liberation theologians)

have appropriated a system of knowledge in which Black identity—which should be open

—is essentialized and closed. That is, Black liberation theologians assume a particular

history of blackness that they attempt to redeem using the categories of theology. But,

what hope is there for any project, even one that is intentionally emancipatory, when its

categories are formulated by White supremacy and it trades on a relational identity that is

essentially oppositional to whiteness? In contrast to Glaude's pragmatist leanings in

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184 Glaude, *In a Shade of Blue*, 68.
185 Rather than "trends," I think a better word would be "stages" since each movement seems to build upon the previous one.
186 Glaude, *In a Shade of Blue*, 70.
187 Glaude, *In a Shade of Blue*, 70–71.
188 Ivan Petrella, *The Future of Liberation Theology: An Argument and Manifesto* (London: SCM Press, 2006), vii.

which the present and future are prioritized, Black theology emphasizes a given historical

rendering of Black identity which forecloses any possibility of radical identity self-

formation and creates a dialect in which blackness and whiteness are always oppositional.

Anderson writes:

> Ontological blackness is a philosophy of racial consciousness. It is governed by dialectical matrices that existentially structure African Americans' self-conscious perceptions of black life. Under ontological blackness, the conscious lives of blacks are experienced as bound by unresolved binary dialectics of slavery and freedom, negro and citizen, insider and outsider, black and white, struggle and survival. However, such binary polarities admit no possibility of transcendence or mediation.[189]

At issue here is a restrictive ontology. Gordon, though arguing against some maneuvers

that Anderson makes in his argument, does agree that because humans are "incomplete,

open possibilities," that any theory or theology that "appeals to completeness, closure,

and necessity appeals to something that is not human."[190] Glaude also raises the

possibility of Black theology "needing" White supremacy as a foil:

> [I]f we understand the experiences of African Americans only in terms of their suffering and their struggles for freedom, then once that suffering is no more black theology no longer seems relevant or viable. In both cases, the ideology of white supremacy—the reason for the suffering *and* the struggle—circumscribes black existence and theological reflection.[191]

Glaude dismisses this latter argument, contending that Black theology is not rooted in an

oppositional stance to whiteness *per se*, but is rooted in a particular conception of God's

justice that generates liberative reflection and action.

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189 Victor Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness: An Essay on African American Religious and Cultural Criticism* (New York: Continuum, 1995), 14. This resembles the aforementioned concerned expressed by Carter in *Race: A Theological Account*.
190 Lewis R. Gordon, *Existentia Africana: Understanding Africana Existential Thought* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 147.
191 Glaude, *In a Shade of Blue*, 71.

Nevertheless, Glaude does find Black theology guilty of appealing to history in a problematic way that reifies blackness. Rather than see blackness as an open category, it is closed off as a history of struggle that is supposed to serve as the basis of cultural unity, even to the point of mitigating intra-racial fissures and reducing the diverse richness of the Black experience to suffering and resistance. At its worst, Glaude is concerned that Black theology serves as an apologetic tool, justifying continuing obeisance and "sanctify[ing] a particular political orientation."[192]

How does pragmatism resolve this? By providing a conception of history that allows Black theologians to escape a "historiography of black power"[193] that weighs their project down with an orientation to the past that diminishes critical intellectual activity with the goal of erecting a better future. Glaude writes:

> Our character and capacity to act freely result not only from a past which shapes and informs who we are but also from the kinds of stories we tell ourselves about that past. In responding to the demands of life we situate ourselves by telling stories—stories not of abstracted concepts (race or nation) but of people, situated in circumstances, struggling to respond to those circumstances with the tools at hand. By doing so, we make possible informed moral action. The stories we tell ourselves about the past make up the background of things that matter and form a part of what Alasdair MacIntyre refers to as a stage we did not design, upon which we find ourselves involved in actions not necessarily of our making.
>
> Tradition and history do not settle matters in advance. We do not stand before them with nothing left for us to do, with our character already decisively shaped.[194]

What I think Glaude is getting at is the tendency for liberative movements to enshrine seminal revolutionary figures in such a way that we are constantly in a process of retrieval that undermines our capacity to challenge the concretizing seductions of the

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192 Glaude, *In a Shade of Blue*, 78.
193 Glaude, *In a Shade of Blue*, 83.
194 Glaude, *In a Shade of Blue*, 79.

past. It is in consideration of existential questions that Glaude sees pragmatism as being

most salient. History, in classical Black theology, has already settled the definitive

questions regarding existence (e.g., Who am I? What am I to do?).[195] Dewey's

pragmatism, on Glaude's account, has four essential features: antifoundationalism,

experimentalism, contextualism, and solidarity. He notes:

> A good pragmatist, then, encourages a view of philosophy as social and cultural criticism, where the neat conundrums of the scholar's professional practice give way to a certain kind of responsibility in our intellectual lives, where we take the tools of our training and work to offer some insight into specific conditions of value and into specific consequences of ideas. . . .
>
> Pragmatists express a profound faith in the capacity of everyday, ordinary people to transform their world. There are certainly constraints, but it is through our various practical transactions that we work to make a substantive difference in our conditions of living.[196]

In this understanding of pragmatism, history informs us prospectively but not

retrospectively[197]; it challenges us to recognize the historically-conditioned character of

our present state while freeing us to embrace our agency in an "open, malleable, and

pluralistic universe," one in which "change is a central feature of our living."[198] Glaude's

conception of pragmatism, therefore, provide theology with a foundation for tackling the

torrid racial experiences of the Black community without becoming bound by them.

Womanist Theology

Womanist theology[199] emerged at the crossroads of a feminist theology that

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195 Glaude, *In a Shade of Blue*, 79.
196 Glaude, *In a Shade of Blue*, 7.
197 Glaude, *In a Shade of Blue*, 80.
198 Glaude, *In a Shade of Blue*, 7.
199 The cumbersome expression "womanist theology" will be used throughout this section, since "womanism" is a broader field that, in addition to a theological dimension, also includes a secular component (anthologies of Black women, philosophy, cultural criticism, and postmodern analyses).

ignored the lived reality of Blacks and a Black theology that ignored the contributions of

women, a world where "all the women are white and all the blacks are men."[200] Womanist

theology, from its inception, was intentionally a "corrective for the distortions of white

hegemony and black inferiority."[201] Cone, starting in the 1960s, had broken ground in his

attempt to connect the struggle for Black liberation in the United States to the pervasive

theological concept of freedom found in the Exodus account and in the Gospels.

However, Cone's work did not adequately deal with gender oppression as a theological

locus, and the work on Black theology done in that first generation was done by males.

This led Jacquelyn Grant to submit two ideas as explanantia: "(1) either Black women

have no place in the enterprise, or (2) Black men are capable of speaking for us."[202] Grant

dismissed both ideas as viable options, rooting the invisibility of Black women in Black

theology in a male-dominated culture that restricts women, the ascription of the

intellectual capacities required to do theology to men, and the allowance of Black men to

have some share in the power structures previously granted to White men only. The few

Black women who did attain a level of influence in the Church "were constantly

challenged by both men and women as to the propriety of their roles, their ability to

fulfill them, and the validity of their calling."[203] In this regard, she indicts the theological

production of Black theology, charging Cone and others with being obtuse in developing

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200 See *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave*, eds. Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith (New York: The Feminist Press, 1982).

201 Cheryl A. Kirk-Duggan, "Womanist Theology As a Corrective to African American Theology," in *The Oxford Handbook of African American Theology*, eds. Katie G. Cannon and Anthony B. Pinn (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 270.

202 Jacquelyn Grant, "Black Theology and the Black Woman," in *African American Religious Thought: An Anthology*, eds. Cornel West and Eddie S. Glaude, Jr. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 833.

203 Diana L. Hayes, *And Still We Rise: An Introduction to Black Liberation Theology* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1996), 135.

a significantly more holistic approach to Black liberation. She asks:

> What are the forces of liberation in the Black community and the Black Church? Are they to be exclusively defined by the struggle against racism? My answer to that question is No. There are oppressive realities in the Black community which are related to, but independent of, the fact of racism. Sexism is one such reality. Black men seek to liberate themselves from racial stereotypes and the conditions of oppression without giving due attention to the stereotypes and oppressions against women which parallel those against Blacks.[204]

Patricia Hill Collins highlights one methodological move that is central to womanist theology: the placing of Black women's concerns at the center, not the margins, of discussion. She writes:

> Oppressed groups are frequently placed in the situation of being listened to only if we frame our ideas in the language that is familiar to and comfortable for a dominant group. This requirement often changes the meaning of our ideas and works to elevate the ideas of dominant groups. . . . [B]y placing African-American women's ideas in the center of analysis, I not only privilege those ideas but encourage White feminists, African-American men, and all others to investigate the similarities and differences among their own standpoints and those of African-American women.[205]

Cone's theology was a principle source and interlocutor for womanist theology. A second significant source were the writings of Alice Walker. Walker first used the term "womanist" in 1979 in a short story entitled "Coming Apart" where she writes: "The wife has never considered herself a feminist—though she is, of course, a 'womanist.' A 'womanist' is a feminist, only more common."[206] However, the seminal definition of the term came in her 1983 collection of essays *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (here quoted at length):

> 1. From *womanish*. (Opp. of "girlish," i.e. frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, "You acting womanish," i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to

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204 Grant, "Black Theology and the Black Woman," 835.
205 Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* (New York: Routledge Classics, 2009), ix.
206 Alice Walker, "Coming Apart," in *The Womanist Reader*, ed. Layli Phillips (New York: Routledge, 2006), 7.

outrageous, audacious, courageous or *willful* behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered "good" for one. Interested in grown-up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: "You trying to be grown." Responsible. In charge. *Serious*.

2. *Also:* A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally universalist, as in: "Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige and black?" Ans.: "Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented." Traditionally capable, as in: "Mama, I'm walking to Canada and I'm taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me." Reply: "It wouldn't be the first time."

3. Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. *Loves* the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. *Loves* the Folk. Loves herself. *Regardless*.

4. Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender.[207]

Walker's words represented an uncompromising stance of self-love and solidarity by and with women of color. For Cheryl Kirk-Duggan, this definition:

examines relationality steeped in love; qualifies womanist strength, maturity, willfulness, and audacious spirit; explores the sexual and nonsexual experiences of committed womanist love; reflects on the aesthetics and politics of womanist love; and ends with a comparative view of womanism, in conjunction with black feminism.[208]

Monique Moultrie states:

Black female religious scholars found in the term womanist a way to highlight their feminist concerns without the negative feedback that feminists were anti-men. As black feminist scholars of religion, they were also interested in the empowerment [of] black men, they just wanted to be able to speak from the authenticity of black women's lives.[209]

Catholic womanist theologian Diana L. Hayes describes her encounter with this new

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207 Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), xi–xii. Emphasis in original.
208 Kirk-Duggan, "Womanist Theology as a Corrective to African American Theology," 267.
209 Monique N. Moultrie, "Between the Holy and the Horny: Womanist Sexual Ethics and the Cultural Production of *No More Sheets*" (PhD diss., Vanderbilt University, 2010), 62.

concept in Walker's work:

> My entire world shifted. As did other black women, I recognized in Walker's definition a voice like my own, which spoke of my particular experiences as a black woman. Walker's definition fit me! It described my experience and the journey I had been on for most of my life, one of naming and claiming myself as a black woman, boldly, proudly, and loudly.[210]

Walker's canon of work and her indebtedness to writers such as Zora Neale Hurston have been influential in the subsequent emphasis that womanist scholars place on literary analysis, biography, and historiography as rich sources for theology.[211]

In a chapter entitled "Hagar's Story: A Route to Black Women's Issues,"[212] Delores S. Williams, who Hayes argues was the "first to clearly articulate a womanist perspective in Christian theology,"[213] attempts a re-reading of the Genesis accounts of Hagar (Genesis 16:1–16 and Genesis 21:9–21) as an illustration of "what the history of many African-American women taught them long ago: that is, the slave woman's story is and unavoidably has been shaped by the problems and desires of her owners."[214] Williams notes four features of Hagar's life vis-à-vis Sarai/Abraham that indicate the salience of her story for Black women: the forced condition of motherhood, the struggle for survival, the imposition of a surrogate role, and the harsh reality of homelessness/poverty. Hagar represents the struggle to survive in a world in which the most base elements of agency are circumscribed by an oppressive system and oppositional actors. Hagar is paradigmatic of womanist approaches to theology in that she exemplifies the Black female experience

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210 Diana L. Hayes, *Standing in the Shoes My Mother Made: A Womanist Theology* (Nashville, TN: Fortress, 2011), 9.

211 For example, Katie G. Cannon's *Black Womanist Ethics* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988) explicitly appeals to the literary tradition of Black women as essential to her methodology of Christian ethics.

212 Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2013), 15–31.

213 Hayes, *And Still We Rise*, 144.

214 Williams, *Sisters*, 15.

characterized by "their exploitation, by their faith in God, by positive and negative human relationships and reactions, by motherhood, by fierce survival struggles and by resistance strategies."[215]

An important methodological maneuver that Williams notes is womanism's challenge about the Scriptural witness of God as liberator (this anticipates a challenge by Jones discussed in the next chapter). Williams argues that if the Bible is read from the standpoint of the marginalized (e.g., non-Hebrews, slaves, females), then there is a "non-liberative thread running through the Bible."[216] Hagar is not liberated from Sarah, but is compelled to return and submit to her. The Hebrew Scriptures, Williams argues, provide no basis whatsoever for the non-Jew trusting in God to deliver them from slavery. Williams, like other womanist theologians and like Jones, challenges Cone's assertion that Black scholars can utilize the Biblical account of the Hebrew Exodus as a paradigm for their own pursuit of freedom. Williams is making a point about hermeneutics here: Black (male) liberation theologians have inherited and perpetuated textual analyses that erase the experience of Black women. She writes:

> Have they, in the use of the Bible, identified so thoroughly with the theme of Israel's election that they have not seen the oppressed of the oppressed in scripture? Have they identified so completely with Israel's liberation that they have been blind to the awful reality of victims making victims in the Bible? Does this kind of blindness with regard to non-Hebrew victims in the scripture also make it easy for black male theologians and biblical scholars to ignore the figures in the Bible whose experience is analogous to that of black women?[217]

Williams posits a womanist hermeneutic of identification-ascertainment as a means of making the concerns of the invisible visible. This entails a recognition of the themes and

215 Williams, *Sisters*, 127.
216 Williams, *Sisters*, 128.
217 Williams, *Sisters*, 132.

persons in Scripture that one individually and corporately connects with (bias identification), followed by a determination of the themes and persons in Scripture that the Biblical writers identify and ignore (ascertainment). This approach allows for a critical reading of one's interpretation of Scripture, even to the point of being skeptical of the text itself.[218]

Black Existential Phenomenology

Black existential phenomenology (hereafter BEP) emerged formally in the twentieth century at the nexus of concerns about racism, the meaning of race, Black existence, and Black objectivity over Black subjectivity. However, the themes that characterize the existential concerns of BEP (e.g., the capacity of Blacks to rationalize, human freedom) have been present in Black philosophical and literary works since the eighteenth century.

Theoretically, black existentialism and black phenomenology are distinct philosophical positions. However, Gordon, a central figure whose work occurs across both domains, contends that the latter has always been submerged under the former. This aligns with the idea among many philosophers that "the most significant versions of twentieth-century existentialism are developments, welcome or perverse, from phenomenology."[219] In this section, we will: briefly look at phenomenology and existentialism and then look at how BEP applies the central concerns of both to the problem of blackness. We will conclude with remarks on how BEP might be utilized as a

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218 Williams, *Sisters*, 132–133.
219 David E. Cooper, *Existentialism: A Reconstruction* (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 5.

methodology for a project in theology.

Phenomenology

The origin of phenomenology is most often associated with Moravian (Czech German) philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859–1938). Husserl was heavily influenced by Franz Brentano (1838–1917), his teacher in Vienna. In his seminal work, *Psychology From An Empirical Standpoint*, Brentano emphasized the concept of intentionality (though with less precision than subsequent explorations of the topic). Brentano saw his work as the recovery of the medieval-scholastic idea that our mental life has a particular directedness to it.

Phenomenology, as it developed in the work of Husserl, was never a clearly-defined philosophical school, "if one understands by that a group of philosophers committed to identical, or very similar, sets of doctrines."[220] David R. Cerbone sees *intentionality* (the thesis that our experience is *of* something), *perspectivalism* (the limited nature of our experience), and *transcendentalism* (there are particular conditions that make our experience possible) as the hallmark features of phenomenology.[221] Of these three, the concept of intentionality is perhaps the central attribute of phenomenology. Although understood in diverse ways by different practitioners, it is essentially a framing "correlation between first-person experience and its content,"[222] one that allows philosophers to make better sense of the nature of human experience, as well as the

220 Sebastian Luft and Søren Overgaard, "Introduction," in *The Routledge Companion to Phenomenology*, eds. Sebastian Luft and Søren Overgaard (New York: Routledge, 2012), 1. In fact, Husserl traced his work back to Descartes, seeing his approach as a form of Cartesianism.
221 David R. Cerbone, *Understanding Phenomenology* (Buckinghamshire, England: Acumen, 2006), 4–5.
222 Luft/Overgaard, "Introduction," 12

problem faced by representational epistemology (i.e., how are mental representations of external, physical realities possible?).

Following Thomas Nagel's explication of first- and third-person perspectives in *The View From Nowhere* (1989), Sebastian Luft and Søren Overgaard define phenomenology as a report of experiences from the perspective of the first-person *I* who is experiencing them. As such, objects/experiences are always limited by the capacity of our sense perception to make them available to us, eschewing an empirical account common to the natural sciences. Against this, phenomenologists would contend that their account *is* objective "once it is *articulated* and *intersubjectively confirmed*."[223] After the experience occurs, the next step is the articulation or description of it. This has both negative and positive elements. On the negative side, care must be given to minimize the presuppositional commitments that would cloud our ability to provide as pure of a description of our experience as possible. On the positive side, our articulation of our experience entails "a commitment to paying close attention to phenomena and their complexity, their richness, which is never completely exhausted."[224] Luft/Overgaard write:

> To phenomenology, the world as it is experienced is an endless field of riddles, enigmas and questions that demand to be made intelligible by a faithful description of their manner of being, their functioning, their appearing, or their *meaningfulness* to experiencing agents.[225]

Husserl, in his important two-volume work *Logical Investigations* (1900/1901), wanted to reject psychologism, the idea that the laws of logic were reducible to "empirical laws

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223 Luft/Overgaard, "Introduction," 10. The confirmation is a reference to the fact that, when we share our experiences, we more often than not find that they align with the experiences of others. Emphasis in original.
224 Luft/Overgaard, "Introduction," 11.
225 Luft/Overgaard, "Introduction," 11.

of human consciousness."[226] Intentionality was put forward as a solution to this problem

because it allowed Husserl to make a distinction between the "actual carrying out of a

mental act and its (in this case) ideal content, which is irreducible to the mental act."[227]

Husserl's limited publication record meant that it was left up to his students in

Göttingen, along with Max Scheler's students in Munich, to popularize phenomenology.

Their influence refashioned phenomenology as a commitment to (what we might call

today) realism—the investigation of reality without bias.[228] Husserl's student, Martin

Heidegger, succeeded Husserl at Freiburg in 1928. As a supporter of Nazi ideology,

Heidegger's career flourished until the end of World War II when Allied forces prohibited

him from teaching.[229]

Scholars from around the world came to Germany to study with Husserl and

Heidegger, taking the central insights back to be integrated into their native philosophies

In France, the first generation of phenomenologists (including Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice

Merleau-Ponty, and Simone de Beauvoir) fused phenomenology with the French tradition

of being an "engaged, public intellectual."[230] After World War II, the exodus of scholars

from Europe caused phenomenology to flourish in other regions of the world, especially

in North America.

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226 Luft/Overgaard, "Introduction," 3.
227 Luft/Overgaard, "Introduction," 3.
228 Luft/Overgaard, "Introduction," 3.
229 The question of how Heidegger's philosophy was influenced by his enthusiastic embrace of Nazism has been the subject of intense scholarship in recent years, dating back to the publication of *Heidegger et le nazisme* by Victor Farías in 1987 (English version, Temple University Press, 1989). More recently, Peter Trawny, director of the Martin Heidegger Institute at the University of Wuppertal, specifically addressed the contamination of Heidegger's thought by Nazism in *Heidegger and the Myth of a Jewish World Conspiracy* (University of Chicago Press, 2015). Also see *Martin Heidegger: A Political Life* by Hugo Ott and *Heidegger: The Introduction of Nazism into Philosophy* by Emmanuel Faye.
230 Luft/Overgaard, "Introduction," 5,

Existentialism

Existentialism, as a philosophy, is particularly difficult to define due to the wide variance of those who are noted as existentialists. For example, for some existentialism is an atheistic philosophy (e.g., Nietzsche, Sartre), but some of its luminaries (e.g., Kierkegaard, Martin Buber) were very religious.

The term "existentialism" itself is generally believed to have been coined by French writer Gabriel Marcel at the end of World War II. Marcel, perhaps inspired by Karl Jaspers' "*Existenzphilosophie*," applied the expression to the work being done by Sartre and de Beauvoir—both of whom initially rejected it. In 1946, however, Sartre adopted the term for the first time in an essay (re-worked from a previous lecture) that he entitled *The Humanism of Existentialism*. Cerbone writes:

> For Sartre, the defining commitments of existentialism are first that, in the case of human beings, "existence precedes essence", and secondly, that "subjectivity must be the starting point". What these two statements indicate is existentialism's concern with the special character of human existence, as something irreducibly subjective and so incapable of being fully appreciated or explained from an objective point of view. For the existentialist, this concern is not merely of theoretical importance, but carries practical significance as well. A genuinely human life can only be lived in the recognition of this insight about human existence; at the same time, the existentialist worries that we all too often lose or efface our freedom, and live out our lives afflicted instead with "despair" (Kierkegaard), as members of "the herd" (Nietzsche), as mired in "inauthenticity" (Heidegger), or in "bad faith" (Sartre).[231]

The term, afterward, was then retroactively applied in reference to a number of earlier scholars whose works seemed to resonate with existentialism's themes. This was not always well-received—Sartre's definition was taken to be foundational and therefore alienating to those who did not want to be associated with Sartre (e.g., Jaspers) or to

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231 Cerbone, *Understanding Phenomenology*, 85.

those who conceived of their work differently.

As noted above, Husserl's phenomenological method is picked up by early Heidegger as his primary method. However, Heidegger's primary (though unfinished) work, *Being and Time* (1927), is principally a work of philosophical existentialism. Unlike the concerns of Husserl, whose mathematical background led him to examine the structure of the transcendental ego, Heidegger's religious background (though non-traditional) led him to question the meaning of life.

In the same way that *intentionality* may be the defining feature of phenomenology, for existentialism the primary concept may be *freedom*. Existentialism, focusing on the meaning of existence, starts with the brute contingency of human life: we are, to use Heidegger's concept of *Geworfenheit* ("thrownness"), thrust into the world with no agency regarding the circumstances of our birth (e.g., region, time, influences). Nevertheless, *human* experience is unique in that we have (1) the capacity to reflect upon our circumstances and employ a particular agency that allows us to refine our reality, and we have (2) a unique sense of aspiration that transcends our physical development in service to a more sublime evolution.[232] In Sartre's work, this contingency and our relative agency is subsumed under the idea that we make ourselves into whatever we want; as individuals, we make choices that affect the outcome of the world that we are thrust into. This is the basis for Sartre's oft-cited "existence precedes essence" maxim: human experience is a state of affairs in which we forge meaning, as opposed to living out a particular meaning that inheres in our given essence. Essence, in this regard, is always what we have decided to become at any moment.

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232 Cooper, *Existentialism*, 3.

Black Existential Phenomenology

It's here that we turn to Gordon as our guide and interlocutor regarding the methodology that shall be employed in this project.[233] Gordon situates himself broadly within what might be called *critical philosophy of race*, the "philosophical examination of issues raised by the concept of race and by the persistence of various forms of racism across the world."[234] In addition to employing philosophical categories and methods in the analysis of race, this philosophical approach to race also interrogates philosophy itself as a discipline that has been used to perpetuate racist concepts. More specifically, Gordon can be located as a major figure within *Africana philosophy*, what Lucius Outlaw defines as:

> a "gathering" notion under which to situate the articulations (writings, speeches, etc.), and traditions of African and peoples of African descent collectively, as well as the subdiscipline- or field-forming, tradition-defining or tradition-organizing reconstructive efforts, which are (to be) regarded as philosophy.[235]

Gordon makes a formal distinction between *existentialism*—what he takes to be an umbrella concept referring to an almost exclusively European trajectory of ideas in literature—and a *philosophy of existence* (or, "existential philosophy"), the philosophical pursuit of issues surrounding life, being, agency, etc., relating to the agent engaged in

233 Gordon is a professor of philosophy and African-American studies at the University of Connecticut, as well as a visiting professor of political and international studies at Rhodes University in South Africa. He is the author or editor of over a dozen books and is a noted scholar on the work and life of Frantz Fanon. For more information about Lewis R. Gordon, see http://www.lewisrgordon.com.

234 Robert Bernasconi, "Critical Philosophy of Race," in *The Routledge Companion to Phenomenology*, eds. Sebastian Luft and Søren Overgaard (New York: Routledge, 2012), 551.

235 Lewis R. Gordon, "Introduction: Black Existential Philosophy," in *Existence in Black: An Anthology of Black Existential Philosophy*, ed. Lewis R. Gordon (New York: Routledge, 1997), 2. Also, see Outlaw's "African, African American, Africana Philosophy" in *The Philosophical Forum* 24, no. 103, page 64.

reflection. Gordon refers to his method, articulated in his first book, *Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism* (to be discussed later), as a "descriptive ontology" or an "existential phenomenology." Influenced by Gordon's assessment of Sartre's methodological stance, Gordon articulates five core assumptions that shape his metatheoretical approach:

- humans are aware of their freedom in different situations (no matter how fleeting that awareness may be)
- humans have agency in various aspects of their situation
- humans, therefore, are responsible for their condition to a certain extent
- humans have the freedom to at least change themselves by accepting their situation(s)
- there are elements of our condition that provide "rich areas of interpretive investigation for the analyst or interpreter."[236]

The "situation" that serves as the context for Gordon's approach is the historical struggle for meaning and liberation that has characterized Black existence in the world from the modern era of colonization until the present. Throughout much of history, Black thought has been dismissed because of the objectification of Black thinkers and scholars. For, how can Black self-reflection on their condition be taken seriously when blackness *itself* is questioned? Reason, Fanon would say, tends to exit whenever he enters the room. This is in contrast to the perceived superiority of whiteness, where White intellectual products are *assumed* credible. Given this state of affairs, why continue? How is progress possible when rationality is used to irrationally exclude others and justify their non-being? This is why the issue of suicide, apart from its existential implications, was a serious object of study regarding Blacks in the first half of the twentieth century, even taken up by Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks*.[237] Given their destitute situation, the "rational" being would

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236 Lewis R. Gordon, *Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1995), 5.
237 Gordon, "Introduction: Black Existential Philosophy," 5–6.

recognize the futility of such an existence—the persistence of Black life, paradoxically, was taken as further indication of their cognitive deficiencies. Thus, Gordon's existential phenomenology is a recovery of Black meaning, Black humanity and Black agency in a world that denies or limits all of them, linked to pervasive questions of identity (e.g., "Who are we?") and teleology (e.g., "What ought we to be?").[238] This is why agency looms large in Gordon's conceptual toolkit: the ability to make choices, even ones that have been severely delimited, reflects the capacity of Blacks to engage in the very human process of meaning-making for themselves.

One major reason why existential phenomenology is so appealing to critical philosophers of race is the attention given to matters of race and ethnicity (or, at least, to substantive concepts useful in such analyses) by major figures within the European guild of existential philosophers, perhaps best illustrated by the canon of Sartre himself.[239] Reflecting upon the meaning of blackness was certainly not initiated by Sartre, but Sartre connected such considerations to broader existentialist concerns in an innovative way, in turn influencing a generation of Black scholars who saw substantial potential in Sartre's thought. In an essay entitled "Sartre on Racism: From Existential Phenomenology to Globalization and 'the New Racism'," Jonathan Judaken traces four "overlapping phases"[240] that constitute Sartre's engagement with racism: (1) Sartre's "anti-antisemitism" phase (1930s–1945), where Sartre began to construct a metaphysics of race that focused primarily on Jewish identity and politics; (2) Sartre's "anticolonialist

238 Gordon, *Existentia Africana*, 4.
239 By this I mean that the salience of discussions on race within the work of Sartre and others was appealingly different when compared to other philosophical approaches for which race and racism were non-issues.
240 Jonathan Judaken, "Introduction," in *Race After Sartre: Antiracism, Africana Existentialism, Postcolonialism*, ed. Jonathan Judaken (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2008), 12.

existential humanism" phase (1945–late 1950s), where Sartre turned his focus to the

condition of Blacks in the United States amid institutional and ideological oppression; (3)

Sartre's "Third World radicalism" phase (late 1950s–mid-1960s), in which Sartre

explored the role of racism as a mechanism within the broad system of European

colonialism, argued most ardently in Sartre's preface to Fanon's *The Wretched of the

Earth* (1961); and (4) Sartre's "antiracist alter-globalization" phase (mid-1960s–1970s),

where Sartre expanded his interrogation of race and colonialism, but now as a function of

global capitalism and labor demands.[241] Sartre's expansive contributions to racism also

helped usher in an era where philosophical studies of race and racism were deemed more

legitimate within academia.

In addition to the explicit engagement with racism, many of the concepts

discussed by Sartre have been utilized and applied to contemporary problems with race

by Black philosophers, such as Sartre's notion of "the gaze" (see George Yancy's *Black

Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race*). Gordon's seminal work on

Sartre and racism, *Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism*, was significant in that it explored a

connection between racism and the Sartrean concept of "bad faith" that had hitherto not

been explored among the many resources for consideration that Sartre had produced (e.g.,

Anti-Semite and Jew, *Notebooks for an Ethics*, *The Respectful Prostitute*, "Black

Orpheus," and "Black Presence").[242] Sartrean bad faith involves the contradictions

inherent in how we locate ourselves socially (i.e., in how we construct our identities).

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241 Jonathan Judaken, "Sartre on Racism: From Existential Phenomenology to Globalization and 'the New Racism'," in *Race After Sartre: Antiracism, Africana Existentialism, Postcolonialism*, ed. Jonathan Judaken (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2008), 23–53. Judaken is clear that this arrangement is a heuristic device for organizing both the major themes in Sartre's writings and his activism against racism. See his comments on page 12, as well as footnote 6 on page 46.

242 Gordon, *Bad Faith*, 3.

Human existence is comprised of two paradoxical components: facticity and transcendence. Facticity concerns the fixed and objective aspects of who we are based upon our unique history and factors that are somewhat external to us. Transcendence concerns the reality that who we are is not always fully determined; it references our capacity to go beyond our apparently objective status. Human existence, again, is comprised of both; bad faith is our attempt to deny either our facticity or our transcendence (i.e., seeing ourselves as either pure transcendence or pure facticity). We attempt to evade responsibility for our freedom. For Sartre, this is not intentional, but is a unique act of self-deception that arises out of the habits of a relatively unstable consciousness. Humans "lapse into bad faith whenever they are tempted to assert identity claims with any finality (this is who I am or what I am all about) or to deny that anything serves to identify them."[243] The best path forward in not acting in bad faith is an understanding that our existence is always dynamic; we always have some freedom to negotiate who we are and how we will respond. The implications for the construction of racial identity should be obvious. We tend to "overidentify" ourselves by calcifying the identity of the other and our relation to them as an act of negation. Thus, I am *this* (positively/full) and I am not *what they are* (which, it follows, must be negative/lacking). However, this process then expands to group associations and the aforementioned traits of identity formation then become inscribed in racial form. In this sense, bad faith "can hence also be shown to be an effort to deny the blackness within by way of asserting the supremacy of whiteness."[244] The concept of bad faith allows us to deal with important questions about the construction of race in light of faith, including: How are people able

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243 Cerbone, *Understanding Phenomenology*, 92.
244 Gordon, *Bad Faith*, 6.

to hide from themselves? How is it possible that human beings are able to regard some members of their species as fundamentally nonhuman? Why is it bad faith to demand others to justify their existence?[245]

Nevertheless, Sartre is not blameless in his analysis of race. Gordon, following Fanon, takes issue with Sartre's embrace of negritude, the idea emanating from Francophone Black leaders in the 1930s that Blacks are in unique possession of a particular consciousness or soul that provides them with a mysterious and yet, ultimately, liberating epistemic lens through which they view the world.[246] This affirmation of negritude by Sartre, Gordon contends, essentializes blackness in a way that ignores the contingent character of social categories. Sartre's good intention—to present "blackness as the negation of white supremacy" in order to "destabilize white, European, bourgeois hegemony" (e.g., Blacks as closer to Nature, more primitive)[247]—had the unfortunate consequence of reasserting stereotypes that reinforced Black inferiority.

It's here that we briefly acknowledge two seminal figures in critical race studies: Du Bois (1868–1963) and Fanon (1925–1961). Two of Du Bois' important essays in the late nineteenth century—"The Conservation of Races" (1897) and "The Study of the Negro Problems" (1898)—looked at questions of identity, teleology, liberation, and methodology through the lenses of "race (identity), policy (emancipation), and a humanistic sociology."[248] The latter, humanistic sociology, was Du Bois' way of "studying oppressed people without denying their humanity."[249] Du Bois' work is penetrating in that he tackles the existential dilemma involved in the contradiction

245 Gordon, *Bad Faith*, 6.
246 Gordon, *Bad Faith*, 3–4.
247 Judaken, "Sartre on Racism," 33.
248 Gordon, *Existentia Africana*, 4.
249 Gordon, *Existentia Africana*, 4.

between being Black *and* American in an anti-black world, articulated most clearly in his conception of a "double consciousness."[250] Similarly, Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, written in 1952, provides us with a compelling phenomenological account of race that has influenced a generation of scholars looking to apply the theoretical work of existential phenomenology to their analysis of Black life in America. In fact, Gordon considers Fanon's essay "The Lived Experience of the Black" (published in 1951 and reworked into a chapter in *Black Skin, White Masks*) to be the "canonical text for the phenomenological account of the experience of racism." Much of *Black Skin, White Masks* was Fanon's attempt at a psychoanalysis of the effects of racism on Blacks. However, likely influenced by Fanon's attendance at lectures given by Merleau-Ponty in the 1940s, it may be best interpreted in light of Merleau-Ponty's emphasis upon embodiment as a study on the "lived experience of blacks in the face of sociogenic sedimentations of their identity and political possibilities."[251]

In the next chapter, I will begin with theodicy, asking how the Christian Church addresses systemic injustice, especially racial injustice. The primary dialogue partner will be Jones' methodological challenge to Black theology in particular and Christianity in general. In Chapter III, I will consider the issue of who gets to count as human, looking at how our anthropological commitments shape every aspect of our lives. Scholars of color have always foregrounded a redeeming anthropology as central to their work, often around the concept of "image of God," since being fully human has typically entailed a status that requires a particular ethical and religious concern. Finally, in Chapter IV, we will look at epistemology as a framing logic for how we conceive of the world and "see"

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250 See W. E. B. Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 2003).
251 Gordon, *Existentia Africana*, 4.

the Other. Discussing the ways in which Blacks have been seen and mis-seen, I will evaluate Christianity's complicity in our cultural tendency to dismiss the marginalized.

In constructing my argument, I will incorporate interludes of personal experience, cultural events, and vignettes that allow me to more deeply engage the lives and work of thinkers whose contributions to the themes in this project are significant and helpful, especially since many of these figures are not often considered in theological projects.

II. Toward a Critical Race Theodicy

"Does a righteous God govern the universe?"
Frederick Douglass

In a project that seeks to evaluate the methodological implications of a black existential phenomenological engagement with religion and race, perhaps no figure looms larger than Jones. His seminal work, *Is God a White Racist?*, issued a provocative challenge to standard treatments of theodicy by North American theologians.[1] However, Jones' primary focus was on Black theologians and the nascent "Black theology" that had just formally come into existence (e.g., Cone's *Black Theology and Black Power* had been published only four years prior). Jones was concerned that Black theologians, in their attempt to craft a theology that specifically brought Black life and Christian theology into dialogue, had unwittingly and uncritically assumed a particular conception of God that did not center on Black suffering. As a result, these theologians were embracing a methodology that would produce a theology that, far from dismantling theological racism, was only a "teasing mirage that gives the *appearance* of dismantling old master-servant theologies while actually preserving and perpetuating them in a new and disguised form."[2]

This chapter will begin with two case studies. In the first, an analysis of evangelical theology and of Jonathan Edwards' justification of slavery will highlight a particular trajectory of Christian theology that justifies evil or, at the very least, can easily

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1   Jones, William R. *Is God a White Racist? A Preamble to Black Theology*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1973. A second edition (with a new preface and afterword) was published in 1998 by Beacon Press. References to this text will focus on the revised 1998 edition.
2   Jones, *Is God a White Racist?*, ix–x. Emphasis in original.

be co-opted by the status quo (e.g., the evangelical treatment of sin would leave systemic injustices untouched). In the second case study, I will evaluate the ways in which theodicy is dealt with in North American philosophical and theological scholarship. Specifically, I will interrogate why the suffering of Blacks—the most egregious example of suffering and evil in the US—is routinely ignored in considerations of theodicy. Both of these case studies provide the background context for the argument that Jones will make in his denunciation of Christian theologies and theodicies. Next, I will analyze the argument and claims made in Jones' book, focusing on the innovation it brought about in Black religious scholarship. Jones' text also exemplifies both the humanist and the existentialist/phenomenological trajectory in Black religious thought. Finally, I will engage the humanist response to Black suffering proposed by Jones and picked up more recently by Anthony Pinn, challenging their claim that humanism best incentivizes social activism against racial injustice.

Case Study in Justifying Evil: The Theology of Jonathan Edwards and Evangelicalism

Born in 1703, Edwards was one of the most influential theologians and pastors that emerged from the Reformed tradition in North America. Evangelical historian Mark Noll, while acknowledging that Edwards "promoted with all his heart as the essence of evangelical Christianity a program that led to the eclipse of the evangelical mind in America,"[3] considered Edwards to be "the greatest evangelical mind in American history and one of the truly seminal thinkers in Christian history of the last few centuries,"[4] the

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3   Mark A. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 60.

4   Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, 24.

"most powerful intellectual in American evangelical history,"[5] and the "greatest evangelical mind in America in large measure because his thought was driven by the profoundest truths of evangelical Protestantism."[6]

Edwards was educated for ministry at Yale, completing his training in 1726, the same year he replaced his grandfather as pastor of a Congregational church in Northampton, Massachusetts. Edwards, along with George Whitefield, was at the forefront of the first "Great Awakening," the waves of religious revival that swept the colonies in the 1730s, 40s, and 50s. With the deleterious winds of the Enlightenment looming, Edwards was an ardent opponent of the deism that was highly influential at the time, as well as Arminianist tendencies in Protestant thought. After arguing in *Treatise Concerning Religious Affections* that only those individuals who exhibited the signs of saving faith should be allowed to be voting members of the congregation and have the privilege of taking the Lord's Supper, Edwards was removed from the leadership of the church. Edwards then pastored two congregations in Stockbridge, Massachusetts from 1751–1757 while also running a boarding school for Native American boys, writing prolifically during this period. In 1758, Edwards somewhat reluctantly became the president of the College of New Jersey (present-day Princeton University), but his life was cut short a little over a month later when Edwards succumbed to an experimental smallpox vaccination that was being tested due to the prevalence of smallpox in the colonies at the time.

According to evangelical John Piper, an ardent admirer and interpreter of Edwards, "One of the reasons that the world and the church need Jonathan Edwards 300

5   Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, 76.
6   Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, 60.

years after his birth is that his God-entranced vision of all things is so rare and yet so necessary."[7] Piper continues:

> What Edwards saw in God and in the universe because of God, through the lens of Scripture, was breathtaking. To read him, after you catch your breath, is to breathe the uncommon air of the Himalayas of revelation. And the refreshment that you get from this high, clear, God-entranced air does not take out the valleys of suffering in this world, but fits you to spend your life there for the sake of love with invincible and worshipful joy.[8]

And yet, "Edwards was also a slave owner."[9] Kenneth P. Minkema, the editor of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, has thoroughly chronicled this aspect of Edwards' life.

Minkema reconstructs one account of Edwards' purchase of a female slave in 1731:

> To see this fourth man, with all the distinguishing marks of a clergyman, in such company must have struck onlookers as odd, and perhaps the other three men covertly shared bemused looks over the serious, thinlipped minister as he watched one of his companions take up a quill, dip it into a well, and fill out a bill of sale —a receipt for a slave, "a Negro Girle named Venus," whom this man of God was buying.[10]

Minkema explains part of the social conditioning that caused Edwards to view slaveholding as a normal part of life for a man of his stature:

> In his childhood and youth, Edwards must have met with many men of rank who owned slaves . . . Following these leads, Edwards must have deemed it right and proper for a person of his station to acquire a slave. Besides, he now had a growing family, and the presence of a house servant to work under the direction of his wife, Sarah Pierpont Edwards, would help ease her burden and mark her social status. Through his life, in fact, Edwards owned a succession of slaves, beginning with Venus.[11]

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7   John Piper and Justin Taylor, eds., *A God Entranced Vision of All Things: The Legacy of Jonathan Edwards* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), 21.
8   Piper/Taylor, *A God Entranced Vision of all Things*, 22.
9   Kenneth P. Minkema, "Jonathan Edwards's Defense of Slavery," *Masssachusetts Historical Review* 4 (2002): 23.
10   Minkama, "Jonathan Edwards's Defense of Slavery," 23.
11   Minkema, "Jonathan Edwards's Defense of Slavery," 24.

In framing Edwards' worldview, historian George Marsden contends that Edwards

operated according to standards that were more "pre-Revolutionary British"[12] than

American:

> New England, having been shaped by seventeenth-century Puritanism, had its own version of [social] hierarchism. Edwards was an aristocrat by New England standards. Clergymen in New England wielded more authority and could expect more deference to their opinions than in most other parts of the British World. Further, Edwards belonged to an elite extended family that was part of the ruling class of clergy, magistrates, judges, military leaders, village squires, and merchants. The Stoddards and Williamses, along with a few other families with whom they intermarried, ruled the Connecticut River Valley, or western Massachusetts (Hampshire County) and parts of Connecticut.[13]

Given this worldview in which subordination was a common feature of society, Marsden

argues, it should come as no surprise that Edwards would consider a system like slavery

to be uncontroversial:

> Eighteenth century Britons viewed their world as monarchical and controlled by hierarchies of personal relationships. On both these counts, their assumptions were almost opposite of those of most Westerners today, who tend to think of society as in principle egalitarian and in fact controlled by impersonal forces. Eighteenth-century British-American society depended on patriarchy. One's most significant relationships were likely to be vertical rather than horizontal. Fathers had authority over families and households, the cornerstones of good order. Women, children, hired servants, indentures, and African slaves were all dependent on persons directly above them. Society was conceived of as an extended household. In this arrangement paternalism was a virtue, not a term of opprobrium. Although British people spoke much of "liberty," few had personal freedom in a modern sense. Gentlemen ruled largely through a hierarchical system of patronage extending from the king down. Good order, especially for the lower ranks of society, was enforced by strict surveillance and stern punishments. Ordinary life under any circumstances was often cruel, plagued by epidemics, unrelieved pain, and constant uncertainties about life itself. Many essential tasks were painfully difficulty and time-consuming. Personal dependency was one way of dealing with a harsh and insecure world and was often taken as a matter of course.[14]

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12 George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 2.
13 Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards*, 3.
14 Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards*, 3.

Edwards' personal perspective and participation in slavery might have gone unnoticed by history if not for a scandal that arose just thirty miles north of Edwards, in the town of Northfield, just south of the border separating Massachusetts from New Hampshire. In 1718, Reverend Benjamin Doolittle had settled into Northfield as a pastor, becoming popular with the people and leading their resistance against attacks from "the French and their Indian allies."[15] At first, the concern over Doolittle was theological. Doolittle's parishioners detected an Arminianist aroma in Doolittle that was incongruent with the strong Calvinism generating the Great Awakening in general and the preaching of Edwards in particular. This scandal was to blow over, as Doolittle denied the allegation, claiming that he had no allegiance to either Calvin or Arminius.[16] However, the second charge would prove to be more problematic, as Doolittle was accused of owning a slave named Abijah Prince. This charge, in addition to the extreme wealth Doolittle generated by virtue of being a minister as well as a physician and proprietor's clerk, led ministers in the region to view Doolittle as a greedy and lustful individual. Feeling that their vocation and economic aspirations were being attacked, the ministerial association tried first to broker some sort of deal. When that failed, it became incumbent upon Edwards to draft an official statement against the antislavery coalition. Minkema notes the irony of Edwards coming to the aid of Doolittle:

> To say the least, Edwards found himself in an awkward situation, a situation that wonderfully illustrates how slave owning made for strange bedfellows. Here he was, placed in the position of defending an alleged advocate of Arminianism, the very disease he was so actively fighting to root out, against fellow evangelicals, some of whom were Northampton transplants who espoused Edwards's Calvinist

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15   Minkema, "Jonathan Edwards's Defense of Slavery," 31.
16   Minkema, "Jonathan Edwards's Defense of Slavery," 32.

doctrine and method of revivalism. Nevertheless, a range of issues, ecclesiastical, political, and military, took precedence.[17]

In his letter in defense of Doolittle, Edwards accused his detractors of hypocrisy for "directly or indirectly profit[ing] from slavery and slave trading or consum[ing] slave-made products. They were, as he said, 'partakers' of slavery: 'They may have their slaves at next step.'"[18] Rather, Edwards believed that the truly immoral act was ignoring the overseas slave trade itself, since he considered the incursion into Africa far more evil than the institution of slavery itself. And, as a theologian, "Edwards gathered Scripture texts from both the Old and New Testaments to support his view."[19]

If Edwards' theological justification of slavery is surprising, also surprising is the understanding of theology betrayed by those who seek to retain Edwards as a theological hero. In the collection of essays *A God-Entranced Vision of All Things: The Legacy of Jonathan Edwards*, Piper includes a chapter entitled "Trusting the Theology of a Slave Owner" written by Sherard Burns—the only Black contributor to the volume—which attempts to make sense of Edwards, simultaneously condemning his assessment and practice of slavery while commending his theology. The problem, Burns contends, is the tension captured in a comment made by a friend: "the challenge of the African American within the Reformed context is that we are called to embrace the theology of our oppressors and to reject the theology of our liberators."[20] By this, Burns means that, although a theologian like King was radical in his denunciation of racism and activism to bring about social transformation, because King either denied or questioned doctrines

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17 Minkema, "Jonathan Edwards's Defense of Slavery," 35–36.
18 Minkema, "Jonathan Edwards's Defense of Slavery," 36.
19 Minkema, "Jonathan Edwards's Defense of Slavery," 38.
20 Sherard Burns, "Trusting the Theology of a Slave Owner," in *A God Entranced Vision of All Things: The Legacy of Jonathan Edwards*, eds. John Piper and Justin Taylor (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), 170.

essential to the Reformed tradition (e.g., the historical, bodily resurrection of Jesus; the virgin birth of Jesus Christ; the deity of Jesus Christ), his theology must be repudiated, whereas the inverse is true of Edwards. That is, while King "will not offer much help in theological precision," Edwards' theology will "saturate a man in orthodoxy."[21]

For Edwards, the "ethics" of slaveholding concerned two premises: the "humane" treatment of slaves and the "Christianizing" of slaves.[22] In regards to the first premise, Burns makes the unbelievable observation that "On the assumption of humane treatment Edwards could not be found at fault. There is in fact no record of any abuse or ill treatment by Edwards toward his slaves."[23] Burns acknowledges that this argument (i.e., the humane treatment of slaves by Christians versus their brutal treatment by non-Christians) was used by the dominant White church to justify slavery, and also that the "issue is not how slaves were treated, but the fact that they were slaves in the first place."[24] Regarding the second premise, the Christianization of slaves as God's ordained vehicle to reach the peoples of Africa with the "Gospel," Burns again unbelievably states, "To his credit, Edwards not only preached to the Africans but included them in the membership of his church,"[25] while acknowledging that "[t]here is an inherent contradiction in offering Christ to men and women whom you hold in bondage, against their own will, and on the basis of man-stealing."[26] Burns acknowledges his cognitive dissonance:

> As an African American who loves Reformed theology and Jonathan Edwards and
> who desires to see these truths embraced by all, especially those within the

21   Burns, "Trusting the Theology of a Slave Owner," 170.
22   Burns, "Trusting the Theology of a Slave Owner," 157.
23   Burns, "Trusting the Theology of a Slave Owner," 157.
24   Burns, "Trusting the Theology of a Slave Owner," 158.
25   Burns, "Trusting the Theology of a Slave Owner," 159.
26   Burns, "Trusting the Theology of a Slave Owner," 159.

> African-American context, I have to make sense of this hypocrisy. Edwards was only a small part of a much larger picture of Reformed thinkers and preachers. The theology I love so much is tainted with stains of slavery, and my heroes—one of which is Jonathan Edwards—owned my ancestors and cared not to destroy the institution of slavery."[27]

So, Burns asks, "Why should I care about a theology that, on the surface, seems to devalue every cultural expression of Christianity indigenous to African Americans?"[28] His answer, surprisingly, is that it was Edwards' theology that formed the basis of American abolitionism. Some of Edwards' followers were active abolitionists and credited aspects of Edwards' theology as the basis of their efforts. Burns offers two reasons for such an attribution. First, Edwards' allowance for slaves to attend and be "full" members of his church (though there were obvious restrictions). Second, in his missionary outreach to Native Americans, Edwards experienced a conversion of sorts when he witnessed firsthand the cruel treatment of the indigenous peoples, leading him to advocate on their behalf, though an unpopular move. Burns contends that had Edwards seen the inhumane treatment of slaves and the hypocrisy of the American Revolution (i.e., the pursuit of freedom from tyranny by men who tyrannically withheld freedom from others), he would have changed his position.

Burns observes that, for Edwards, slavery was not 'sin,' but "a necessary evil that served some positive good in the natural order that God had decreed."[29] He then affirms a curious insight that he attributes to Piper: "Yet if Edwards was wrong, it is not his God or his theology that is to blame—only his sin. Reformed theology did not produce a heart to own slavery."[30] Burns concludes: "Whatever we may think of Edwards, one thing is for

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27 Burns, "Trusting the Theology of a Slave Owner," 162.
28 Burns, "Trusting the Theology of a Slave Owner," 163.
29 Burns, "Trusting the Theology of a Slave Owner," 156.
30 Burns, "Trusting the Theology of a Slave Owner," 156.

certain: He left the American church with the necessary theological truths to kill racism in our hearts and to be conquerors of it in the church."[31]

The question that must be posed (again) is the following: what makes such moral failures possible? Undoubtedly, the basis for oppression is the pre-theoretical determination that the Other is inferior, justifying subsequent evil. However, theories are often either brought in illicitly to serve as a conceptual ballast to validate the aforementioned anthropological moves, or they develop organically as a way of explaining/justifying social inequities that allows unjust structures to remain intact.[32] In this regard, an analysis of a theological system indebted to Edwards, evangelical theology, may provide insight into the methodological/structural moves that allow theology to progress without proper attention being paid to a hurting world.

One of the pervasive errors in evangelical theology is what Robert McAfee Brown calls "The Great Fallacy." The fallacy is the tendency among Christians to divorce "spiritual" from "earthly/liberative" matters, such that to pursue one is seen as ignoring or undermining the other. Put simply, it is the application to theology of the idea that "Life is divided into two areas, two spheres, two compartments."[33] Brown finds it ironic that Christianity developed this fallacious strategy for articulating a worldview of reality since:

31   Burns, "Trusting the Theology of a Slave Owner," 171.
32   This is not to imply that all ideas/theories are inherently "good" or "evil." Some, undoubtedly, are. However, most ideas probably are relatively neutral regarding the material outcomes of their employment (e.g., consider the way that the concept of *personhood* can be utilized toward opposite ends by liberals and conservatives in political and ethical debates). The point is to highlight the way various ideas are deployed (consciously or not) to obtain desirable political ends. An example of this will be seen in Chapter III, where I briefly look at Aristotle's "natural slavery" argument that he advances as a way to justify the superiority of Greek culture.
33   Robert McAfee Brown, *Spirituality and Liberation: Overcoming the Great Fallacy* (Louisville, KY: Westminster, 1988), 25.

> Judaism has always had a positive view of the importance and sacredness of the created order and all who inhabit it. Indeed, one of the most robust resources for Christianity in combating the Great Fallacy is deeper immersion in its Jewish roots.[34]

Although the Incarnation should serve as an explicit and powerful repudiation of such a dualism, it remains surprisingly embedded in some Christian discourse regarding political involvement.

The primacy of the Great Fallacy within evangelical theology results in at least three particular problems. First, it offers a theological justification for an inattentiveness towards problems in the world. Thus, the preaching of the "Gospel" is seen as almost mutually exclusive to works of justice. Consider the following illuminating statement from Wayne Grudem, a leading evangelical theologian:

> In areas where there is systematic injustice manifested in the treatment of the poor and/or ethnic or religious minorities, the church should also pray and—as it has opportunity—speak against such injustice. All of these are ways in which the church can supplement its evangelistic ministry to the world and indeed adorn the gospel that it professes. *But such ministries of mercy to the world should never become a substitute for genuine evangelism or for the other areas of ministry to God and to believers mentioned above.*[35]

Note two things. One, activity is limited to prayer and merely *speaking* out against injustice. Two, the eradication of social injustice is seen as merely a supplement to (or interruption of) the "genuine" work of the Church. Although this will be discussed more fully later, at this juncture it can be asked: what is 'good' about the 'good news' brought to people living in destitute poverty and dying? Why must acts that reflect God's love and justice be deemed as supplemental to salvation? This is especially seen as an inconsistency in the theology of Grudem, an ardent defender of charismatic ministries. In

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34 Brown, *Spirituality and Liberation*, 27.
35 Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 868. Emphasis added.

examining the accounts of healings performed by Jesus in the Gospels, it should be obvious that they embody the union of spirituality and liberation. They are never juxtaposed as if one is opposed to the other. In fact, we sometimes find Jesus engaging solely in the work of 'liberation'—healing people, freeing them from physical, earthly burdens—without preaching a 'spiritual' Gospel. Or, could the meaning of Luke 4:18 be that the proclamation of the "good news" is synonymous with the proclamation of freeing captives, healing the blind, and setting free the oppressed?

Waldron Scott recounts an informal survey given to two dozen evangelical mission executives in Latin America. The survey queried their opinion concerning the relationship between social justice and evangelism. Most of the respondents insisted that the efforts of their ministries should take the form of evangelism and discipleship, and not acts of social justice. Some of the representative responses were:

> The church exists for the purpose of worship, communion, spiritual growth, and evangelistic witness. The more the church agitates for land reform, liberation from imperialism, etc., the more it dissipates the purpose for which it was founded.

> The growing churches in Latin America are those which minister most to the soul and least to the body. When the decision is left to the national brethren they stress evangelism. Preach the gospel, win the lost, and social ills will gradually vanish as the number of believers in society increases.

> Society is made up of individuals. The purpose of proclaiming the gospel is to spiritually transform the individual. Church members should fulfill their responsibilities and opportunities as citizens, but not corporately in the name of the church.[36]

Note the statements regarding society as a conglomeration of individuals. This frequently used argument claims that, if we just change society one person at a time, the corporate hue will increasingly resemble the Kingdom of God and social ills will be reduced. Thus,

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36   Waldron Scott, *Bring Forth Justice* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980), 157. The responses are paraphrased.

the natural outflow of the Gospel (as traditionally preached) will result in the social transformation sought after. This reasoning ignores several important facts. First, this approach has not worked throughout history. Even today, there are several nations in South America and Africa with large (and growing) Christian populations that co-exist with rampant social injustice. Secondly, this ignores the "Gospel" message preached by some that is itself supportive of injustice and social inequality. Thirdly, it ignores the fact that many "Christian" individuals continue to promote injustice either willingly or unwillingly as part of larger systems of oppression. Fourthly, though acknowledging that humans are social beings, it ignores the social conditioning that plays a role in human morality. Scott observes:

> This kind of thinking would seem to indicate that evangelicals, faced with competing claims of evangelism and spiritual growth on one hand, and development and liberation on the other, feel compelled to opt for the former. *But must we choose?*[37]

A second problematic consequence of the Great Fallacy is an improper appeal to scientific method as the basis for a propositional theology. The reigning empiricism and positivism of the early twentieth century resulted in a theological legacy that unwisely appropriated the methods of science, believing that such an approach would enhance the intellectual respectability of theology:

> Convinced that theology and science shared a common empirical and inductive method, Hodge patterned his work after that of the scientist. Just as the natural scientist uncovers the facts pertaining to the natural world, he asserted, so the theologian brings to light the theological facts found within the Bible. And these facts are uncovered through the application of the inductive method to the Scriptures.[38]

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37 Scott, *Bring Forth Justice*, 158. Emphasis in original.
38 Stanley J. Grenz, *Renewing the Center: Evangelical Theology in a Post-Theological Era* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000), 71. Charles Hodge was an influential nineteenth-century Reformed (Presbyterian) theologian and minister, known for his leadership at Princeton Theological Seminary and its strongly Calvinist theology.

Thus, theology—as practiced by many evangelical theologians even today—consists of compiling universal doctrines via a scientific methodology. This approach very often instills the false sense of objectivity. Theologians, seeing in Scripture certain principles which they take to be unassailable, are unwilling to recognize the presuppositions that are present even in such an antiseptic process as locating and systematically arranging theological propositions.[39]

A third consequence of the Great Fallacy is the tendency to sever the intimate relationship between theology proper and ethics, leading to a wholesale rejection of any notion of praxis as a parameter for doctrine. Consider the distinction that Grudem makes:

> The emphasis of systematic theology is on what God wants us to *believe* and to *know*, while the emphasis in Christian ethics is on what God wants us to *do* and what *attitude* he wants us to have. Such a distinction is reflected in the following definition: *Christian ethics is any study that answers the question, "What does God require us to do and what attitude does he require us to have today?" with regard to any given situation.* Thus theology focuses on ideas while ethics focuses on situations in life. Theology tells us how we should think while ethics tells us how we should live.[40]

The importance of dialectical praxis is a key element within theologies concerned with liberation. For evangelical theologians, however, this maneuver is akin to subsuming theology under ethics, or reducing Scripture to an anthropological norm. However, this is not what is meant by praxis in liberation theology, where it conveys the idea of a dialectical relationship between action and reflection (i.e., an engaged reflection). The question that troubles liberation theologians is: what is the praxiological standard for our theology and the practice that results from it? Liberation theologians, for example, contend that in order to avoid the development of a theology which is immune to an

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39   Grenz critiques Grudem for this very practice. See Grenz, *Renewing the Center*, 158.
40   Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 26. Emphasis in original.

ethical critique, theological reflection and theological practice—i.e., orthodoxy and

orthopraxy—must remain in conversation. The evangelical rejoinder is that you can't

have an orthopraxy without *first* having an orthodoxy. Evangelical theologians argue as if

they want to study Scripture first, and then emerge out of their study with an accurate,

theological understanding of what's moral and what's immoral. However, this reveals a

poorly-framed theological anthropology. In experience, we understand that some things

are "wrong" or "unjust" even prior to the theological moment where Scripture is

consulted. A child that is hit by another for no apparent reason understands that this is not

right, whether she directly attaches this act of injustice to explicit condemnation in

Scripture or never does. In fact, the child would more than likely understand at a basic,

intuitive level that this action was wrong even *against* interpretations of Scripture that

condoned it. Patricia McAuliffe's work with Edward Schillebeeckx's "negative contrast

experience" is helpful in this regard.[41] This experience is the tensive conflict between our

experiences of suffering and of salvation that compels us to resist the former and attain

the latter, and is an anthropological constant (i.e., it is a universal tendency).

Theologically, although one could argue that the negative contrast experience has an

ontological priority, this does not require that it has the same priority in our moral

reflection. The fact that all of humanity possesses the *imago Dei* seems to bear witness

that there is a possible understanding of morality apart from explicit sanction in

Scripture.[42] Again, the evangelical concern is that, starting from a particular moral

viewpoint, the theologian will read Scripture from that perspective, skewing her

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41   Patricia McAuliffe, *Fundamental Ethics: A Liberationist Approach* (Washington, D.C.:
     Georgetown University Press, 1993), 3–33.
42   In Chapter III, I will briefly discuss how the *imago Dei* impacts our understanding of race.

understanding. However, the liberationist response is two-fold. First, this very move is often committed by evangelicals, who start with internal biases (e.g., the racial inferiority of Blacks) and approach Scripture with these uncritical presuppositions, resulting in a theology that conforms to their subjective prejudices. Second, liberation theologians attempt to avoid these very problems by not viewing the interaction between action and reflection as linear, but by making it circular/dynamic. The ideal is a constant back-and-forth between Scripture and concrete moral action, continually refining and perfecting both. This is not to undermine the evangelical concern for the normative role played by Scripture. If there were individuals who perfectly interpreted and applied Scripture, there'd be no need for ethical parameters. In lieu of such individuals, the anthropological constant of humanity's resistance against threats to humanity seems to furnish an adequate account of how action and reflection can converge in our theology.[43]

In addition to the Great Fallacy, another problematic theme within evangelical theology is its anti-social conception of the Christian faith. That is, the evangelical understanding of a "personal" relationship with Jesus is often taken to be individualistic and insulated. Christians are viewed as participating in community, but do not deem the community as an integral part of their relationship with Christ. Here, a problem/solution hermeneutic can be brought to bear upon the notion of 'Gospel' so critical to evangelical thought, practice, and identity. The Gospel is good news because, faced with a pervasive and damaging problem (sin), the Gospel introduces the only solution (salvation). Thus, the theological conceptualization of sin and salvation will be fundamental to

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43 Another fruitful line of discussion in this regard could be the occasions where Jesus seemed to suspend the moral law if those who interpreted/applied it did so in a way that harmed humanity. "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath" (Mark 2:27 NRSV).

understanding evangelical theology. Furthermore, the constructions of these terms will be shown as critical to the *formation* of evangelical theology.[44]

Standard evangelical texts define *sin* and *salvation* as attributes of individuals disconnected from community. Grudem writes:

> We may define sin as follows: *Sin is any failure to conform to the moral law of God in act, attitude, or nature*. Sin is here defined in relation to God and his moral law. Sin includes not only individual *acts* such as stealing or lying or committing murder, but also *attitudes* that are contrary to the attitudes God requires of us. . . .
>
> The definition of sin given above specifies that sin is a failure to conform to God's moral law not only in *action* and in *attitude*, but also in our *moral nature*. . . . It is far better to define sin in the way Scripture does, in relationship to God's law and his moral character.[45]

Grudem acknowledges the corporate effects of evil, but those are seen as the natural consequences of human involvement in institutions.[46] Similar to this, the massive third volume of Norman Geisler's systematic theology is dedicated exclusively to the topics of sin and salvation, and he likewise defines sin without any reference to corporate or systemic evil. Sin, for Geisler, is the exercise of free will in disobedience to God.

Concerning salvation, this topic is covered by Grudem in almost two hundred pages (one-sixth of the volume), spanning thirteen chapters. Yet, at no point does Grudem discuss community as the medium in which we are saved. The question remains: how is this good news to the poor? For the community in Darfur that has experienced years of devastation and genocide due to war, how is a private salvation good news? If slaves are "converted" to such a Christianity, then besides the possible personal satisfaction of a life

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44   Richard McBrien (Notre Dame), lists three principles that distinguish Protestants from Catholics. The third principle is that Catholicism views salvation corporately. Thus, this tendency is not specifically an evangelical one, but a Protestant distinction.

45   Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 490–491. Emphasis in original.

46   The social-moralilty-as-the-aggregate-of-individual-morality discussed earlier. See Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 661.

dedicated to God, what is the good news? The concept of salvation, though rightly

oriented around relationship to God, must incorporate the activity of God on behalf of the

oppressed and downtrodden on Earth. Scott excellently points out:

> When considering God's attitude toward the contemporary world order, we ought to begin by recognizing that God does not make the same convenient distinctions between personal and structural evil that we habitually make. He makes a distinction, of course, but does not attach the same qualitative significance to it. On the other hand, we evangelicals with our pietistic background tend to define sin almost exclusively in personal terms and concentrate on private sins, overlooking institutional evil.[47]

Brown adds:

> To be concerned about human salvation in a biblical sense, therefore, means to be concerned not only about what is usually called "the state of the soul" but also whether or not the persons involved have soles on their shoes. The other misunderstanding of salvation is just as much in need of correction. This is the assumption that we are "saved" when we have worked out a private relationship with God.[48]

Rather than viewing community as something that comes with making a meaningful

personal decision (analogous to enrolling at a college and thereby becoming part of their

community), Brown is arguing that perhaps it's by virtue of our participation in the

community that our lives have meaning and our relationship with God is lived out.[49]

At this point, we encounter a remarkable exception to standard evangelical

treatments. Although his definition of salvation is similar to the ones discussed above,

prominent evangelical theologian Millard Erickson articulates a remarkable

understanding of sin and corporate responsibility not often seen within evangelicalism.

Erickson writes:

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47   Scott, *Bring Forth Justice*, 145–147.
48   Brown, *Spirituality and Liberation*, 66.
49   Brown, *Spirituality and Liberation*, 66.

> For the most part, the sin of which we have been speaking to this point is individual sin—actions, thoughts, and dispositions which characterize individual human being. Individual sin has often been the major object of the attention of evangelical Christians. Sin and salvation are considered matters pertaining strictly to the individual human being. Scripture, however, also makes frequent reference to group or collective sin.[50]

Erickson's analysis is helpful. He self-consciously challenges the evangelical tradition and resembles liberation theology at this point. Erickson points out the paradox that arises when we sense "God's displeasure with our individual sins"[51] and yet we are considerably less aware of the sins of our social group, thus leading to the ethical quagmire of disapproving things in our personal lives that we assent to as members of a corporate entity. Erickson considers five different reasons for failing to recognize these social sins, ranging from our inability to empathize with other groups to our distance from the actual occurrence of evil.[52]

Erickson expands his insight by considering the Biblical concept of corporate personality, rooting it in God's often-punitive dealings with Israel in the Old Testament (e.g., Joshua 7). Erickson concludes:

> It should be clear by now that we are conditioned and severely limited by social realities. The particular social situation in which we involuntarily find ourselves—including the political and economic system, our intellectual and family background, even the geographical location in which we were born—inevitably contributes to evil conditions and in some instances makes sin unavoidable. Sin is an element of the present social structure from which the individual cannot escape.[53]

Erickson then considers three strategies for overcoming social sin: *regeneration*, the preferred method of evangelicals and the one, Erickson writes, that represents the most rapidly-growing segment of Christianity in the world; *reform*, what Erickson takes as

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50   Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998), 658.
51   Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 658.
52   Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 659.
53   Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 670–671.

comprising political, economic, and non-violent approaches; and *revolution*, what Erickson considers as representing liberationist and Marxist groups. Here, Erickson follows a familiar path in conflating liberation theology with Marxism. In conclusion, Erickson argues for a balanced approach between regeneration and reform, excluding revolution because he sees it as contradicting Christ's teachings regarding violence. Thus, an effective approach to eradicating social sin "would call for emphasis upon evangelism, personal ethics, and social ethics."[54]

While Erickson is to be commended for an analysis that—unlike many other evangelical treatments—accounts for systematic injustices and our complicity in them, his analysis is deficient at two points. One, although Erickson considers five unintentional failures to recognize our complicity in social evils, he does not adequately treat our *willing* complicity in social evil. For Erickson, our failures to recognize social sins are essentially *epistemological* failures rather than moral ones (e.g., our complicity is less obvious because of our disposition or conditioning or the unrecognizableness of our selfishness or our mob-behavior or our existential distance from the evil). Attention should have been given to our failure to note social sin because of privilege and the realization that to eliminate it would require radical social dislocation and the yielding of material and other resources. Secondly, though Erickson attempts to be balanced in his analysis, he does not account for the historical trajectory in the evangelical community that has privileged the regeneration approach almost exclusively. Thus, his solution does not take seriously the radical inequity that has been practiced in this regard.

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54   Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 674.

In conclusion, Edwards' slaveholding theology and particular evangelical conceptions of sin and salvation point toward theological practices that find their origin in discursive spaces that grapple with neither the concrete reality of systemic sin nor the unique experiences of people of color in the United States. As a result, both are useless in sustaining projects that attempt to seriously integrate Christian faith and suffering.

Case Study in Ignoring Evil: The Theodicy of North American Philosophy and Theology

Theodicy, as a field of inquiry in both theology and philosophy, finds its origin in the Greek words for God (*theos*) and justice (*dikê*). The term, coined by the brilliant German scholar Leibniz,[55] traditionally refers to *one* way of addressing the apparent incompatibility of a benevolent, all-knowing, all-powerful, and just God with the presence of evil and suffering in the world. This incompatibility, in its various iterations, tends to be subsumed under the conceptual umbrella of the "Problem of Evil." Formally speaking, a *defense* offered in response to the Problem of Evil is the attempt to provide a logically possible reason why the existence of a just God and unjust suffering *could* be compatible. As such:

> a successful defense does not have to prove theism true and atheism false. Nor does it have to establish that the evils cited in a given antitheistic argument are logically consistent with God, or that their occurrence is probable if God exists. Furthermore, it does not have to explain the existence of any or all evil in a supposedly God-made world. To do any of these things would constitute a substantive, and, in the first case, a maximal defense of theism, whereas a nonsubstantive and considerably more minimal defense, if successful, is sufficient. Thus, against a prosecuting argument whose aim is to show that certain facts of evil are inconsistent with God, a defense succeeds if it shows that the prosecuting argument fails to establish its conclusion.[56]

55 See Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Theodicy: Essays on the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man, and the Origin of Evil*, trans. E. M. Huggard (LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1998).

56 David O'Connor, *God and Inscrutable Evil: In Defense of Theism and Atheism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), 2.

A defense, therefore, need only proffer a minimal possibility. The prime example is Alvin

Plantinga's "free will defense."[57] In response to philosopher J. L. Mackie's formulation of

the problem of evil in the middle of the twentieth century,[58] Plantinga argued that a

benevolent God—because freedom is intrinsically good—would bring about a world

where human agents made free choices. However, the only way to bring about this

desirable state of affairs (a world where humans made free choices) was to create free

agents. And, since the creation of *free* agents necessarily means that God could not

control them in such a manner as to prevent evil, the existence of a benevolent God is *not*

incompatible with evil. Gordon explains:

> God has granted humanity freedom, which means He must not interfere with
> human choices. Evil and injustice are functions of human agency. In other words,
> God remains good. Human beings, however, are a mixed affair.[59]

Mackie, in his 1982 *The Miracle of Theism: Arguments For and Against the Existence of*

God, admitted that the Problem of Evil does not demonstrate that "central doctrines of

theism are logically inconsistent with one another,"[60] though he still maintained that evil

and suffering were problems for Christian theism.

57   See Plantinga's *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974).
58   Mackie's formulation of the Problem of Evil (MPE) as a logical argument is as follows:

(A) God is omnipotent [Theistic conception of God]
(B) God is omnibenevolent [Theistic conception of God]
(C) Evil exists [Fact]
(D) Good is opposed to evil, such that a good thing always eliminates evil as far as it can [Definition of 'good']
(E) There are no limits to what an omnipotent being can do [Definition of 'omnipotent']
(F) ∴ An omnibenevolent and omnipotent being eliminates evil completely [D,E]

(G) ∴ That an omnibenevolent, omnipotent being exists is incompatible with the existence of evil [C,F]

59   Gordon, *An Introduction to Africana Philosophy*, 43.
60   J. L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism: Arguments For and Against the Existence of God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 154.

A *theodicy*, by contrast, goes beyond a defense and provides a specific argument as to why God allows evil. Thus, it moves from the possible to the plausible. A theodicy, David O'Connor states, is:

> an attempt to answer, in a systematic and comprehensive way, the question, "what is the source of the evil we find, and why does God permit it?" So understood, a theodicy tries to explain the ways of God to human beings, whereas a defense need not.[61]

Constructing theodicies, therefore, has both a significant disadvantage and advantage. The disadvantage is that it is the harder task to marshal evidence that demonstrates the clear purpose of a divine being in tolerating evil. The advantage, however, is that if a well-designed defense is in place, then:

> while the need to solve the theodical problems remains, their solution could plausibly be understood as a work in progress and its completion not urgent, or, at least, less urgent than the need for a defense.[62]

One of the prime examples of a theodicy is John Hick's "soul-making theodicy."[63] Hick argues that the traditional, "majority" theodicy that we find in the Church, heavily influenced by St. Paul and St. Augustine, finds its justification in a Christian mythology now largely rejected by modern culture. This mythology, what Hicks terms a "cosmic drama,"[64] is the traditional Creation account in the book of Genesis: God created spiritual beings, some of whom revolted against Him; God creates the world as we know it, initially populated by a human couple who, tempted by Satan, engage in an act of rebellion against God, bringing about a fallen state of humanity whereby all humans are born with deformed natures; however, the work of Christ atones for that initial act of rebellion, thus allowing all humans who commit to Christ to share the benefits of His

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61 O'Connor, *God and Inscrutable Evil*, 2.
62 O'Connor, *God and Inscrutable Evil*, 3.
63 See Hick's *Evil and the God of Love* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978).
64 Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 247.

work.[65] Theodicies in this mold tend to be mostly backward-looking; they explain the presence of evil by pointing to its origins and the work of God to overcome it, along with the promise of a future paradise where evil will no longer be present. Against this, Hick posits a "minority" theodicy more indebted to Irenaeus than Augustine. Instead of an anthropological account in which humanity is created perfect and then subjected to various levels of moral decay, Hick contends that humanity is "still in process of creation."[66] As such, humanity's creation in the image of God is "only the raw material for a further and more difficult stage of God's creative work."[67] A theodicy of this sort is "developmental and teleological."[68] Humanity is increasingly being perfected through the trials of life, freely making choices in a world which forms our souls toward an eschatological fulfillment. Hick writes:

> But if we are right in supposing that God's purpose for man is to lead him from human *Bios*, or the biological life of man, to that quality of *Zoe*, or the personal life of eternal worth, which we see in Christ, then . . . [t]he question that we have to ask is . . . Is this the kind of world that God might make as an environment in which moral beings may be fashioned, through their own free insights and responses, into 'children of God'?[69]

Hick's theodicy occasions a concern for theodicean projects in general. Hick's approach is part of a general tendency to treat the experience of moral evil as "redemptive" in some fashion, forming us to be better Christians or allowing us to participate in the eschatological drama of Isaiah's Suffering Servant.[70] A similar critique was made of King's theodicy:

> Into the late twentieth century the most widely recognized articulations of

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65   Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 247.
66   Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 254.
67   Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 254.
68   Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 256.
69   Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 257.
70   Isaiah 52:13–53:12.

redemptive suffering theodicy tied to the notion of the "suffering servant" is found in the writings of Martin Luther King, Jr. In numerous texts he argues that the acceptance of unmerited suffering by African-Americans has redemptive consequences tied to the formulation of the Beloved Community (or kingdom of God).[71]

The concern with this approach is that it valorizes some or all forms of evil, failing to account for the way that evil, generally, *de*forms humanity, pushing victims and abusers alike *away* from God and distorting genuine experiences of community. What is missing from theodicies of this sort is a concomitant liberative component, one that recognizes that, although suffering may retrospectively produce some positive fruit, evil is still to be resisted conceptually and practically. In *Reclaiming Theodicy: Reflections on Suffering, Compassion and Spiritual Transformation*, Michael Stoeber reflects upon his initial reaction to a friend's disclosure that she had been brutally attacked as a young girl by a trusted acquaintance:

> Since she knew I had written a book on God and the problem of evil, my friend expected helpful answers. Putting on my professor's hat, I moved into my head, and began to respond in abstract terms of spiritual transformation, how we can learn by and through our suffering, how suffering can be conducive to emotional and spiritual growth. But the shock from my intimate psychic connection to my friend's childhood horror quickly brought me back into my body. I began to stumble and stutter, realizing as I was speaking that I was dangerously close to denying the evil that was done to her as a child, suggesting that it might be somehow good for her, that she would become 'better' through its overcoming, that perhaps, for example, she would now be able to help heal people who had undergone similar horrors.[72]

Stoeber, subsequently, would develop a distinction between transformative suffering (the possibility for spiritual growth that some victims and empathetic observers can attain through suffering) and destructive suffering (suffering that is wholly negative with no

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71   Anthony B. Pinn, ed., *Moral Evil and Redemptive Suffering: A History of Theodicy in African-American Thought* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2002), 12.

72   Michael Stoeber, *Reclaiming Theodicy: Reflections on Suffering, Compassion and Spiritual Transformation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 3.

redeeming value), emphasizing the Christian notion of the afterlife as a possible state where "healing and continued spiritual growth"[73] can occur.

The problem that Stoeber acknowledges is made possible by the fact that treatments of theodicy within North American religion are most often done in the abstract, with hypothetical considerations of tsunamis, famines, and other horrors, and with the occasional reference to actual evils (9/11 being the illustration of choice for the past decade and a half). However, rarely do the authors engage the most prolific example of suffering in North America: the brutal treatment of people of color. Jones argues:

> The classical theodicies are deficient because they primarily treat the issue of human suffering in general; the issue of ethnic suffering is not investigated. When a theodicy is transferred from the arena of general human suffering to ethnic suffering, its utility vanishes.[74]

James B. Haile III adds:

> The problem inherent with white theology and the white church—a problem to which black liberation theology indirectly responds—is its failure to engage the troubles of human existence—oppression, disappointment, fear, uncertainty, doubt—concretely and critically; rather, the white church favors a more abstract, intellectual, one might say, philosophically formalistic manner in their understanding of human existence and the nature of God. In the white church the Jesus of scripture becomes a transcendental figure more than a transcendent figure, a canonical archetype, but certainly not a figure of terrestrial importance.[75]

Cone writes:

> White theologians and philosophers write numerous articles and books on theodicy, asking why God permits massive suffering, but they hardly ever mention the horrendous crimes Whites have committed against people of color in the modern world.[76]

Cone goes on to list four reasons why White theologians don't talk about racism, reasons

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73 Stoeber, *Reclaiming Theodicy*, 12.
74 Jones, 197–198. The concept of *ethnic suffering* will be explained later.
75 James B. Haile III, "Dr. King as Liberation Theologian and Existential Philosopher," in *The Liberatory Thought of Martin Luther King, Jr.: Critical Essays on the Philosopher King*, ed. Robert E. Birt (New York: Lexington Books, 2012), 78.
76 Cone, "Theology's Great Sin," 142.

that similarly apply to the absence of racism in discussions on theodicy: Whites don't have to because of the inequity of power relations in the US, discussions on racism arouse White guilt, a desire to avoid black rage, and a reluctance to pursue a "radical redistribution of wealth and power."[77] One example of this unconscionable omission is John S. Feinberg's *The Many Faces of Evil: Theological Systems and the Problems of Evil*.[78] This is a comprehensive project that evaluates several facets regarding theological and philosophical approaches to the problem of evil. Feinberg, in more than 500 pages, considers theonomy, Leibniz, Hume, atheism, arguments for and against God's existence, hell, and a multiplicity of forms of evil and the problems that each form presents to traditional theism. And yet, Feinberg fails to mention slavery, racism, genocide, African-Americans, Native Americans, liberation theology, Cone, King, the Civil Rights Movement, or the American Church's tragic history of injustice. Feinberg is not alone in this regard—the same could be said regarding other popular works that articulate responses at the nexus of faith and suffering (e.g., N. T. Wright's *Evil and the Justice of God*, where Wright provides passing references to the horror of Hurricane Katrina as an inspiration for his text, but doesn't acknowledge the fact that *Black* bodies were the ones who suffered the most).

What accounts for this indifference, this incapacity to acknowledge the most egregious accounts of suffering that present themselves not as distant artifacts of history but as immanent realities that still afflict our national conscience? Massingale, in recounting a similar trajectory within Catholic ethical thought, discusses the "systemic

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77   Cone, "Theology's Great Sin," 149.
78   See John S. Feinberg, *The Many Faces of Evil: Theological Systems and the Problems of Evil* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004).

erasure" of blackness as a legitimate site for theological reflection.[79] Lamenting the

"racially selective sympathy and indifference"[80] that has characterized Catholic

theological ethics with regard to US racism, Massingale critiques a refusal to

acknowledge the unjust impoverishment of some as well as the unjust enrichment of

others.[81] He writes:

> Marking white theologians as "white" means naming and facing the deforming effects of culture on the consciousness of North American and European theological ethicists. It means facing not only the possibility but indeed the probability that Catholic ethicists of the past (and too often in the present), being (de)formed by the systemic distortion of Western racism, did not and could not have regarded persons of African descent as numbered among the "subjects" to whom they should "turn."[82]

Massingale notes that this erasure results not only in the silencing of important voices,

but also a "deformed ethical reflection," one that does not benefit from the resources (and

challenges) that considerations of Black suffering would bring to ethical and theodical

reflection. He adds:

> Because of this silencing and invisibility, there are not only voices that have not been heard, there are moral questions that have not been asked by Catholic theological ethicists of previous generations, such as the following: "What does it mean to be a disciple of Jesus in a racist society?"; "In a world where 'black' is an illegitimate or inferior mode of being human, what are the social implications of believing that Black Americans are made in the image of God?"; "How are persons of African descent to live ethically in a society that denies, questions, or attacks our humanity?"; "How do we tell those whom society ignores, fears, and disdains that they are sons and daughters of God?" Not averting to such questions in a society of endemic racism makes one's ethical project not only inadequate and incomplete, it also strains credibility.[83]

Massingale is considering not only the ethical failure of such an approach, but also the

79 Bryan Massingale, "The Systemic Erasure of the Black/Dark-Skinned Body in Catholic Ethics," in *Catholic Theological Ethics Past, Present, and Future: The Trento Conference*, ed. James F. Keenan (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011), 116–124.
80 Massingale, "Systemic Erasure," 119.
81 The notion of Black invisibility will be discussed in Chapter IV.
82 Massingale, "Systemic Erasure," 119.
83 Massingale, "Systemic Erasure," 120.

counterproductive nature of it. In addition to ignoring historic injustices, one should ask:

why *would* scholars fail to avail themselves of the vast theodicean resources that can be

mined by evaluating the ways Blacks have harmonized their own tragic social intercourse

with the Church, even to the point of largely identifying themselves with Christianity?[84]

Black religious experience, especially within the Christian Church, contains implicit and

explicit theodicies that transcend mere intellectual reflection and are the result of the deep

struggle borne by individuals trying to make sense of faith amidst struggle. Black

theologian Anthony G. Reddie, summarizing his research into how Black Christians in

the United Kingdom perceived God's role vis-à-vis the African slave trade, developed a

"four-pronged typology for Black accounts of theodicy" based upon his research with

participants.[85] The first perspective, "It is God's will and can be redemptive," argues that

an all-powerful being must hold *some* (direct or indirect) responsibility for any suffering

that occurs within the ambit of divine sovereignty. Therefore, though we suffer, we can

rest assured that some good may come out of our ordeals. Reddie observed that

individuals articulating this position tended to be older and from the Pentecostal

tradition.[86] Reddie finds this position "least acceptable to the substantial hinterland of

Black theology,"[87] finding himself appalled that "this theological account is prepared to

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84   According to the 2007 U.S. Religious Landscape Survey conducted by the Pew Forum, 83% of Black Americans identify as either Protestant or Catholic. This does not include those who identify with the Orthodox Church or with related denominations that are considered outside of mainstream Christianity (e.g., Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses).

85   Anthony G. Reddie, *Working Against the Grain: Re-imaging Black Theology in the 21ˢᵗ Century* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 180. Much of Reddie's research into this issue was conducted during Britain's 2007 bicentennial commemoration of Britain's abolition of slavery.

86   Reddie, *Working Against the Grain*, 180–181. Reddie also refers to this perspective as the "Joseph Paradigm," a reference to the account of Joseph in Genesis 37–50 in which Joseph forgives the brothers who have conspired against him for much of his life by stating, "Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good" (Genesis 50:20 NRSV).

87   Reddie, *Working Against the Grain*, 181.

countenance God as a Divine sadist in order to preserve the sanctity of our inherited

theological systems."[88]

The third perspective, "We cannot know where and what God is doing, but we

know that God is love," is similar to beyond-our-ken maneuvers ("BOK-maneuvers") in

analytic philosophy of religion. These maneuvers are a response to the argument that

atheism is more probable than theism given the significant amount of gratuitous suffering

that occurs in the world (the "evidential problem of evil"). BOK-maneuvers extricate the

theist from this compelling challenge by contending that, just as someone looking down

from the top of a skyscraper to the ground has no right to infer that there are no ants in a

patch of grass just because they can't see them, so human beings are not in an epistemic

position to determine that there are no legitimate reasons for the suffering that we take to

be gratuitous. An example of this can be found in Stephen J. Wykstra's "The Humean

Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Suffering: On Avoiding the Evils of

'Appearance'."[89] In this influential article, Wykstra articulates an epistemic principle

governing human access to the truth that he terms "CORNEA" (the Condition Of

ReasoNable Epistemic Access):

> On the basis of cognized situation *s*, human *H* is entitled to claim 'It appears that
> *p*' only if it is reasonable for *H* to believe that, given her cognitive faculties and
> the use she has made of them, if *p* were not the case, *s* would likely be different
> than it is in some way discernible by her.[90]

In other words, the absence of evidence for a God-justifying reason for evil is inadequate

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88 Reddie, *Working Against the Grain*, 175. This is, perhaps, an unnecessarily harsh
    interpretation of the connection that this demographic makes between divine sovereignty and
    human suffering. Later on, we will see how the concept of "redemptive suffering" can take
    on a different hue than what Reddie suggests.

89 Stephen J. Wykstra, "The Humean Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Suffering: On
    Avoiding the Evils of 'Appearance'," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 16
    (1984): 73–93.

90 Wykstra, "Humean Obstacle," 85.

proof for the assertion that God does not exist since, *even if there were such reasons*, humans could not discern them. Similarly, Reddie finds that womanist theology evinces a Moltmannian "theology of hope," with Moltmann's framework "given historical and contextual agency by the embodied life stories and experiences of Black women."[91] Womanist theology, along with Black theology, emphasizes an identification with the undeserved suffering of Christ and the eschatological promise offered to those who suffer with Christ. Reddie notes:

> This radical identification with the undeserved suffering of an innocent individual has exerted a powerful hold on the imagination of many Black people and other marginalized and oppressed groups in the world.[92]

The belief in an eschatological, future, victorious consummation makes the bearing of suffering in the present possible, even when reasons for it are unknown. We are not, this view contends, in a position to understand God's ways,[93] but the experience of Jesus on the Cross assures us of God's love for humanity and His solidarity with the broken.

The fourth view, "Looking to God is to look in the wrong place, as countering evil is our (human) responsibility," foregrounds human freedom and agency, since the "existence of such evils as slavery tells us more about the human capacity towards horrid acts of selfishness than it does about the nature of God."[94] This position, though still affirming an "'eschatological hope' in which God will decisively enter into human history and ensure the completion of God's purposes for righteousness and justice,"[95] nevertheless avers that humanity should vigorously campaign for justice, accepting

91 Reddie, *Working Against the Grain*, 183.
92 Reddie, *Working Against the Grain*, 183.
93 "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Isaiah 55:8–9 NRSV).
94 Reddie, *Working Against the Grain*, 184.
95 Reddie, *Working Against the Grain*, 184.

responsibility for history's missteps that are wrongly attributed to divinity. This position, with its difficult harmonization of human responsibility and divine non-intervention, contains hints of a semi-deistic viewpoint.

However, it is Reddie's second perspective, "Brings God into question and can never be redemptive," that will form the basis for the next two parts of this chapter. This view contends that some evils are such that no redemptive qualities can be found, and that any system of belief that asserts an omnibenevolent God must be challenged. Similar to position 4, this viewpoint will assert the responsibility of humans to correct the ills of the world. Unlike position 4, however, it does not advocate such work to be done in light of a divine being whose love is assured and who will lead Christians to victory at the Eschaton. The example *par excellence* of this approach is Jones' *Is God a White Racist?* (hereafter *IGWR*), which will now be discussed.

William R. Jones and the Inadequacy of Early Black Liberation Theologies

Jones (1933–2012) earned a PhD in religious studies from Brown University in 1969. His dissertation, "On Sartre's Critical Methodology," written during the politically-turbulent 1960s, expressed Jones' conviction that "oppression must be overcome, but no such overcoming can emerge without a critical understanding of human reality."[96] During his career, Jones fused his personal, activist, and intellectual lives, influencing generations of Black philosophers who would follow Jones' example in seeing their professional scholarship as a form of activism. In doing so, Jones was "instrumental in building the infrastructure for African-American philosophy in the wider academy."[97]

96   Gordon, *Existentia Africana*, x.
97   Gordon, *An Introduction to Africana Philosophy*, 137.

After having taught at Yale, Jones settled at Florida State University where he taught

religion and was also the founder and director of their Afro-American Studies Program.

Gordon recounts his first "encounter" with Jones in a course on Black theology at Yale

Divinity School taught by M. Shawn Copeland:

> I came across Jones's work when I was a graduate student at Yale University in the early 1990s. In his work, I found a kindred spirit. Some years later, when I had organized a conference in honor of Frantz Fanon, perhaps the greatest Africana existential thinker, Jones contacted me to see if he could participate. The modesty of this giant is an aspect of the man that never ceases to surprise his admirers.[98]

The significance of Jones' text for Black liberation theology, theological

methodology, and a black existential phenomenological approach to religion cannot be

overstated. For this project, however, *IGWR* will serve four primary purposes. First, it

will demonstrate an analysis of religion that takes race seriously from a methodological

perspective. Jones utilized the tools of critical philosophical analysis to critique Black

theology and Christianity in general, posing a "*methodological challenge* to all

theologies."[99] Second, by centering his analysis around the question of theodicy, Jones

foregrounds the existential themes of life, suffering, hope, and death (from the

perspective of blackness) in his assessment of Christianity. Third, *IGWR* represents an

important milestone in the history of black existential phenomenology, especially given

Jones' role in "inaugurat[ing] [black existential phenomenology] in the American

academy."[100] And fourth, Jones' conclusion sets up an important discussion on Black

humanism.

Jones begins the 1998 edition of *IGWR* by discussing his initial participation in a

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98   Gordon, *Existentia Africana*, xi.
99   Gordon, *Existentia Africana*, 39. Emphasis in original.
100 Gordon, *An Introduction to Africana Philosophy*, 136.

fundamentalist form of Christianity that he terms *Whiteanity*, his "shorthand for the religious ideology of white supremacy."[101] Considering this form of Christianity to be representative of Christianity as a whole, his inclination toward justice and liberation created an existential crisis: does the eradication of oppression necessitate the rejection of Christianity? Agonizing between the Scylla of Whiteanity and the Charybdis of an atheistic humanism, Jones eventually realizes his error in assuming that "to get rid of oppression you had to put religion out of business."[102] He writes:

> It was erroneous because it assumed that there was *one and only one* species of religion or theology, a guardian religion that conserves and preserves the status-quo. Further reflection and research, however, uncovered a different option, one that drew on Carter G. Woodson's binary system of education and mis-education that I understood also as the distinction between religion and mis-religion. Based on this new insight, the remedy for oppression was not to eradicate religion—my earlier mission and motivation—but to construct an apparatus, a theological litmus test, that unerringly predicts into which of these two slots any particular religion or moral category fits.[103]

Thus, *IGWR* is Jones' way of organizing a variety of issues regarding the "culpability of the black church and black theology in keeping oppression alive"[104] and the sophisticated cover for religion provided by Black theology that might allow Christians to engage in racial oppression more covertly. Jones, therefore, had three objectives for *IGWR*: deconstructive ("isolating the theological categories that maintained oppression"),[105] reconstructive (developing new theological categories that were not opposed to liberation, primarily by engaging Black liberation *theologians* [i.e., those in the Church] with Black liberation *philosophers* [i.e., those outside of the Church])—a pursuit that resonates with this dissertation, and existential (embracing the minority tradition of Black

101 Jones, *Is God a White Racist?*, 215 n. 1.
102 Jones, *Is God a White Racist?*, ix.
103 Jones, *Is God a White Racist?*, ix.
104 Jones, *Is God a White Racist?*, ix.
105 Jones, *Is God a White Racist?*, x–xi.

religious humanism as a partner in the debate).[106] Regarding his existential objective,

Jones' work was controversial because of two presuppositions that he explicitly denied:

the reduction of Black religion to the Black (Christian) Church and the assumption that

traditional theism could strategically be leveraged to provide Black liberation.[107]

At the heart of Jones' approach is a diagnosis-cure paradigm utilized to address

the fact that the Black condition is "constantly treated, never cured":[108] Black theology is

unable to "detect the Trojan horse of mis-religion and Whiteanity lurking in its

theological bowels, nor the malignant and mutant virus of neo-oppression"[109] because it

consistently errs in its assessment of the root cause of the problem. At the heart of his

assessment is an analysis into the cause and contours of Black suffering. As such,

theodicy is foregrounded as the controlling methodology of the text, with the following

concepts central to his argument: "theodicy as the central theological category, the

possibility of a demonic God, and the intimate connection between theodicy and

oppression."[110] Cornel West affirms the centrality of theodicy in Black religious

experience:

> Christianity also is first and foremost a theodicy, a triumphant account of good
> over evil. The intellectual life of the African slaves in the United States—like that
> of all oppressed peoples—consisted primarily of reckoning with the dominant
> forms of evil in their lives. The Christian emphasis on against-the-evidence hope
> for triumph over evil struck deep among many of them.[111]

In setting up his project, Jones considers a challenge that a colleague issued

regarding the centrality of theodicy, summarizing it as follows:

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106 Jones, *Is God a White Racist?*, xi.
107 Jones, *Is God a White Racist?*, xv.
108 Jones, *Is God a White Racist?*, xiv.
109 Jones, *Is God a White Racist?*, xiii.
110 Jones, *Is God a White Racist?*, xxi–xxii.
111 West, *Prophecy Deliverance*, 35.

> My concern to make theodicy the essential nucleus of black theology is illegitimate, for it means that I am forcing the formal question of theodicy. That is to say, I am comprehending black theology in the tradition of Western religious philosophy and its conventional problems. In sum, he concluded, I do not sufficiently honor the black perspective.[112]

Jones conceives of *IGWR* as a thorough response to this challenge, summarizing his approach before expanding each idea. First, he notes, he is making explicit what is already implicitly true about Black theology: theodicy is *already* central. Second, he contends that everyone already has a *functional* theodicy (i.e., people already categorize suffering, speculate about its cause, determine how to respond to it, and connect suffering to larger issues about life and humanity). Third, we are unaware of the universal nature of theodicy because we tend to focus only on theodicies framed by an apologetic purpose, namely, the attempt to exonerate God in the face of evil and justify possible purposes of God that allow evil. Fourth, we see theodicy as a subject dealt with by philosophers in abstract terms, but isn't Isaiah's Suffering Servant an example of a theodicy grounded in the concrete realities of suffering? Fifth, theodicy is the necessary ground for soteriology since God's saving action presupposes God's benevolence. In fact, Jones contends that theodicy should act as the norm for all aspects of theology. Sixth, if Black theology sees itself as liberative, it must attend to the question of suffering. Lastly, the unique character of Black suffering (e.g., its excessive amount when compared to non-Blacks, its uniquely ethnic character) demands that attention be given to God's role with regard to Black suffering.

At the heart of Jones' provocative title is the notion of *divine racism*, the possibility that God is not for the liberation of all humans, but may in fact be

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112 Jones, *Is God a White Racist?*, xxiii.

diametrically opposed to the flourishing of some. "God's delay or inaction works in the interests of whites, not blacks."[113] Here, Jones provides a direct challenge to the aforementioned claim by Sherard Burns that "if [Jonathan] Edwards was wrong, it is not his God or his theology that is to blame."[114] Jones, by contrast, will challenge both. Divine racism, thus, is the conjunction of ethnic suffering and a particular conception of God's sovereignty. Jones summarizes the concept of divine racism in five points. First, traditional theism seems to appeal to a "two-category system"[115] ordained by God comprised of an "in" group (i.e., those favored by God) and an "out" group (i.e., those whom God is indifferent or hostile toward). Second, the "out" group receives an imbalance of suffering. Third, God is ultimately responsible for the inordinate suffering of the "out" group, even if humans or angelic beings are the "actual instrument and executioners of the divine plan."[116] Fourth, God's favor or disfavor toward particular groups falls along ethnic/racial lines. And lastly, God is a member of (or, at least, identifies with) the "in" group. Thus, for Jones' purposes, God must be White. Here, he cites Reverend Buchner Payne:

> Now as Adam was white, Abraham white and our Savior white, did he enter heaven when he arose from the dead as a white man or as a negro? If as a white man, then the negro is left out; if as a negro then the white man is left out. As Adam was the Son of God and as God is light (white) and in Him is no darkness (black) at all, how could God then be the father of the negro, as like begets like? And if God could not be the father of the blacks because He was white, how could our Savior, "being the express image of God's person," as asserted by St. Paul, carry such a damned color into heaven, where all are white, much less to the throne?[117]

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113 Frederick L. Ware, *African American Theology: An Introduction* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2016), 99.

114 Burns, "Trusting the Theology of a Slave Owner," 156

115 Jones, *Is God a White Racist?*, 3.

116 Jones, *Is God a White Racist?*, 4.

117 Thomas F. Gossett, *Race: The History of an Idea in America* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1963), 3–4, quoted in Jones, *Is God a White Racist?*, 5.

The connection between this two-tiered system, methodology, and theodicy is powerfully

captured by Gordon (quoted at length):

> We thus see here the persistent grammar of theodicy even in an avowedly secular
> age. In the context of modern attitudes toward and political treatment of black
> people, a special kind of theodicean grammar has, however, asserted itself. The
> appeal to blacks as problem-people is an assertion of their ultimate location
> outside the systems of order and rationality. . . . Blacks become rationalized as the
> extraneous evil of a just system.
>
> The formation of such systems and their theodicean rationalizations leads to the
> construction of insiders and outsiders. The "outside" is an invisible reality
> generated, in its invisibility, as nonexistent. The effect, then, is that a new link
> with theodicy emerges and the result is the rationalization of people who are
> inherently justified versus those who are not necessarily people and thus could
> never be justified under the principles of the systems that form both. The result is,
> as Du Bois famously observed, the splitting of worlds and consciousness itself
> according to the norms of US society and its contradictions. He first addresses this
> conflict as one of "twoness" in which the Negro, as blacks were characterized
> then, struggled with being part of a Negro nation while trying to become part of
> the American nations; is, in other words, a Negro American possible? The
> problem was that "American" was persistently defined as "white" in North
> America and the rest of the Americas.[118]

Much of Jones' argument hinges on his conception of suffering: is it possible for

suffering to be redemptive? Don't *all* ethnicities/races suffer? What evidence can provide

warrant for Jones' claim that suffering is racial in its scope? Here, Jones appeals to

existentialist Albert Camus in articulating his unique approach. Jones contends that

events can be multievidential in their interpretation, meaning that "the materials and

events that have traditionally been interpreted as evidence of divine benevolence can just

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118 Gordon, *An Introduction to Africana Philosophy*, 76–77. Gordon's assessment also helps us
to frame contemporary politics. The cultural indignation (in some quarters) that the Black
Lives Matter movement has received is no doubt in large part owed to the fact that the Black
community is positing their experiences with US law enforcement and judicial systems as
evidence that these systems are flawed, challenging our mythical perception of the justice
system. In the same way that Jones resisted the idea that Christians must embrace untenable
consequences in order to preserve a perfect system of Christianity, so many Americans
would rather ignore these experiences in order to maintain a belief that our justice system is
not racially-biased.

as easily support the opposite conclusion, of divine malevolence."[119] Camus interpreted

the suffering of Jesus as both a way to keep the marginalized docile (by identifying with

Jesus' suffering and, especially, His *passive* acceptance of it) and as a way to evade

divine culpability for human suffering (i.e., God also suffered). Camus insisted that

events are inherently ambiguous; our assessment regarding their redemptive or

destructive nature rests largely in our perspective on the agent's motives. Jones clearly

sees this principle as being confirmed in the Biblical texts. Suffering can be an indication

of poor choices with their concomitant punishment (e.g., Adam and Eve), divine favor

(e.g., 2 Corinthians 4:17–18, where Paul talks about the preparatory role that our

afflictions perform in our lives), or neither (i.e., suffering is "simply an inherent feature

of the human condition; to be human is to suffer, regardless of one's status relative to the

divine").[120] With regard to God, the very events that traditional monotheism signifies as

God's work of redemption could also be seen as evidence of divine hostility. And, this is

especially true when considering general situations as opposed to events.[121] For Camus,

"[t]he decisive factor appears to be his refusal to presuppose the intrinsic goodness of

God because he adopts a different interpretive principle: God is the sum of his acts."[122]

The notion that we should not approach God with preconceived notions regarding

His goodness is rooted in Sartre's contention that humans err when they evade

responsibility for their actions, choosing to take comfort in "dreams, expectations and

hopes" that only serve as "deceptive dreams, abortive hopes, expectations unfulfilled."[123]

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119 Jones, *Is God a White Racist?*, 7.
120 Jones, *Is God a White Racist?*, 17.
121 Jones, *Is God a White Racist?*, 8.
122 Jones, *Is God a White Racist?*, 9.
123 Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism is a Humanism," in *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre: Existentialism by Sartre, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Kafka, Heidegger, and Others*, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Plume, 1975), 359.

Against those who narcotize themselves with false ideas in order to "sustain them in their misery,"[124] Sartre argues, "Man is nothing else but what he purposes, he exists only in so far as he realises himself, he is therefore nothing else but the sum of his actions, nothing else but what his life is."[125] Jones takes this idea and applies it to God: God's character and motives are a function of His past and present performance in human history. Jones writes:

> This principle obviously presents apparently insurmountable difficulties for the black theologian, for it forces him to identify the actual events in which he sees the benevolent and liberating hand of God at work not for man in general, but for blacks. This is not easily accomplished in light of the long history of oppression that is presupposed by each black theologian.[126]

Regarding Jones' insistence upon God's character reflecting God's actions, Gordon reflects:

> This assertion specifies a new method for doing theology. God is not what blacks have been programmed to believe that he is. God is only that which his historical acts on our behalf reveal him to be. We have been taught that God has all knowledge, all power, that he is absolutely righteous, and that he loves all human beings equally. In Jones' theological method, one would not assign such lofty attributes to God a priori, or on faith; rather, one would assign these characteristics to God only insofar as they are merited by God's actual behavior toward black people. God would not receive gratitude and praise for the things that he has not yet done.[127]

Jones expresses dissatisfaction with the eschatological route that many Black theologians take in evading the consequences of this challenge. Christian hope, they say, grounds an expectation that there will be a "corrective development in the course of human history,"[128] whether it is the fulfillment of something only experienced in germinal form

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124 Sartre, "Existentialism is a Humanism," 358.
125 Sartre, "Existentialism is a Humanism," 358.
126 Jones, *Is God a White Racist?*, 11.
127 Gordon, *Existence in Black*, 46.
128 Jones, *Is God a White Racist?*, 11–12.

now, or a "radical and qualitative break with present conditions."[129] Jones finds the logic

of this maneuver puzzling. God can be expected to act justly and liberate Blacks from an

unjust future because of our trust that He is omnibenevolent. However, in making this

move, Black theologians are assuming the very thing that is in question, namely, the

goodness of God. Jones does not contest that God may, in a final evaluation, turn out to

be good—*if* that goodness is rooted in God's character qua His activity. Anthony Pinn

writes:

> Such an assertion of God's intent requires, however, signs that God is actually
> involved in a process of progressive struggle, and these signs must be drawn from
> the ongoing history of the oppressed group.[130]

> Though Jones explicitly roots this principle in Sartre's work, he contends that it's

also a Biblical one:

> I contend that the biblical writers establish Who God is by reference to what He
> has done or is now doing. Their conviction about the nature of God's future acts is
> grounded in the character of His past and present acts.[131]

Suffering as an indicator of God's divine disfavor can be dismissed as an option only if

there is a clear transformation in the status of the one who has endured suffering. Thus,

the only way to escape the charge of divine racism is the presence of a liberating event

(i.e., the conclusion of suffering that ends in blessing) in addition to the humiliation event

(i.e., suffering itself).

Up to this point, Jones has made the argument that suffering is multievidential for

all of humanity. The final component of Jones' notion of divine racism is the reality of a

race-specific form of adversity that he terms *ethnic suffering*. The suffering that has

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129 Jones, *Is God a White Racist?*, 12.
130 Pinn, *Moral Evil and Redemptive Suffering*, 14.
131 Jones, *Is God a White Racist?*, 13.

characterized the lives of the non-White population in the United States possesses four features that lend credence to the charge of divine racism: its maldistribution, its negative quality, its enormity, and its non-catastrophic character.[132] By maldistribution, Jones is observing the fact that suffering does not appear to be a random phenomena among humanity, but seems to be concentrated in the experiences of particular racial/ethnic groups, a fact balanced by "white non-suffering."[133] He cites John Bowker, who writes: "The problem in Scripture is not why suffering exists, but why it afflicts some people and not others. The problem is not the *fact* of suffering, but its *distribution*."[134] The negative quality of ethnic suffering resonates with Stoeber's category of destructive suffering. This category "describes a suffering without essential value for man's salvation or well-being. It leads away from, rather than toward, one's highest good."[135] Enormity is an umbrella category referring to the statistical reality of suffering, the disproportionate scope of suffering, and the extremity of suffering that renders any eschatological/pedagogical theodicy ridiculous (i.e., how can suffering be beneficial if the very act of suffering destroys the victim?). Finally, the non-catastrophic nature of ethnic suffering indicates its transgenerational character—the suffering is of a sort that it is passed down and foisted upon successive generations. The specificity of Black suffering does not seem to indicate a divine being that is indifferent to matters of race or ethnicity. In reflecting upon these characteristics in light of Black suffering, Jones notes:

> It is my contention that the peculiarities of black suffering make the *question* of divine racism imperative; it is not my position that the special character of black suffering *answers* the question. What I do affirm is that black theology, precisely

132 Jones, *Is God a White Racist?*, 20–23.
133 Jones, *Is God a White Racist?*, 21.
134 John Bowker, *Problems of Suffering in Religions of the World* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 5, quoted in Jones, *Is God a White Racist?*, 21.
135 Jones, *Is God a White Racist?*, 21.

because of the prominence of ethnic suffering in the black experience, cannot operate as if the goodness of God for all mankind were a theological axiom.[136]

Before moving on to how centering Black suffering can be exemplified in a particular methodology, Jones rejects a trajectory characterizing the response that the Black church has often posited in response to its unique suffering. Drawing upon Benjamin Mays' *The Negro's God*, where Mays argues that Blacks resist oppression in accordance with their conception of theism such that their "social philosophy and [their] idea of God go hand in hand,"[137] Jones laments the "compensatory beliefs" (a category deployed by Mays) that have taken hold of the Black consciousness with regard to adversity. Compensatory beliefs are those theological beliefs held by Blacks that enable them to endure oppression without necessarily motivating them to eliminate the source of their suffering. Examples of this tendency toward escapism and pacifism abound in Christian sermons and hymnody: "The harder the Cross, the brighter the crown," "This World is Not My Home," "Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus" (with the phrase "And the things of earth will grow strangely dim"), "I'll Fly Away," "Take the World, But Give Me Jesus," and "(I'd rather have Jesus than) Silver and Gold," to name a few.[138] Drawing

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136 Jones, *Is God a White Racist?*, 22. Emphasis in original.
137 Benjamin Mays, *The Negro's God* (New York: Atheneum, 1968), 155.
138 James H. Cone, in *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation* (Orbis, 1991), contends that some of the allegedly other-worldly or heaven-oriented elements found in songs (in his case, Negro spirituals) are misunderstood. He writes: "Most observers have defined the black religious experience exclusively in terms of slaves longing for heaven, as if that desire was unrelated to their earthly liberation" (78). Heaven, for slaves, did not always refer to "a transcendent reality beyond time and space," rather, it often "designated the earthly places that blacks regarded as lands of freedom" (79). Thus, *Heaven* or *Canaan* or the *Promised Land* served as proxies for the northern US or Canada (Cone, 79). Even beyond this, Cone sees the language of escape as an act of agency by slaves, determined to enact liberation in whatever manner they could, even if limited to a desire for ultimate respite in Heaven. However, with regard to the points made by Jones and Mays, the issue is not the genealogy of escapist language in songs, but the sad reality that, all too often, the people who sing them *today* engage in a performative act whereby they emphasize an otherworldly salvation in Heaven over existential flourishing in the here and now.

upon Camus' *The Plague* and *The Rebel*, Jones confronts this approach to theodicy that

serves as a prop for oppression. For Jones, if a theodicy only serves to exonerate God's

"purpose and governance in the face of some questionable and embarrassing features of

the human condition,"[139] then it will lead to the cardinal sin of quietism. Quietism is a

way of dealing with suffering that allows it to continue unabated, a "posture of

conformity," a refusal to undertake "corrective action," especially versus "cultural

practices and institutional structures."[140] Quietism is the logical outcome of particular

presuppositions concerning God and evil (e.g., the status quo is the ideal, corrective

action is improper, God alone is responsible for the ending of suffering). Jones' appeal to

Camus largely serves to critique quietist tendencies within human responses to suffering.

However, ethnic suffering inevitably opens the door to the question of whether *God* is

quietist.

What, therefore, is the shape of a methodology that brings existential questions of

suffering and death into dialogue with Christian affirmations? First, Jones highlights the

issue of threshold questions, the controlling issues that frame a discussion, committing a

theologian to "a certain methodology, a particular set of categories, or a specific position

on the theological spectrum."[141] Jones considers his prefatory comments about divine

racism, ethnic suffering, quietism, etc., to be the threshold issues that should govern

Black theology.

Second, Jones affirms the method of counterevidence. That is, evidence that

challenges the position that the theologian wants to affirm must be carefully considered.

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139 Jones, *Is God a White Racist?*, 43.
140 Jones, *Is God a White Racist?*, 44.
141 Jones, *Is God a White Racist?*, 63.

In fact, theological systems must be able to account for such counterevidence. Failing to do this ignores competing claims about suffering/evil and competing theories that attempt to resolve evil in the human experience.

Finally, Jones argues that Black theologians must bring about a "gnosiological conversion of the black psyche"[142] in order to combat the prevalence of ideas that would frustrate true liberation. Conversion, for Jones, refers to the "fundamental reconstruction and reorientation of the individual's present world view and life style."[143] "Gnosiological" refers to the conceptual/epistemological shift this involves. Black theologians must first of all confront what Blacks think about themselves and their situation and society and the world (because knowledge regulates action).[144] Jones wants to bring about this gnosiological conversion in a manner similar to the works of Camus and Sartre, namely, a form of the *reductio ad absurdum* argument. That is, rather than directly demonstrating divine racism, Jones' project intends to demonstrate that the standard conceptualizations of Black theologians are inadequate to responsibly handle the charge of divine racism utilizing their cherished theological moves.[145]

Before considering the role that humanism plays in Jones' ultimate resolution and in the subsequent scholarship he influenced, I want to challenge Jones' project up to this point. First, how is this still related to *theology*? Is Jones still engaging in a theological task when the upshot is to eliminate God from the equation? What does this serve? If the goal is to refute divine racism, will Jones merely erect an impenetrable barrier between 'divine' and 'racism' such that God is immune from the charge because humanity has

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142 Jones, *Is God a White Racist?*, 67.
143 Jones, *Is God a White Racist?*, 67.
144 Jones, *Is God a White Racist?*, 67.
145 Jones, *Is God a White Racist?*, 68.

now agreed to accept responsibility? Is this merely a way of saying, "God's not racist—

we are!"? No, in fact, it seems to be saying that if one posits a God who is sovereign and

active in the world, then one has no choice *but* to charge God with divine racism. So,

Jones seems to be saying that if we get rid of a particular conception of religion, we can

accomplish two goals with one maneuver: we dispense with a narcotizing faith

commitment, and we can finally start to own up to the pernicious role of humanity in

crafting and perpetuating injustice. I'm sympathetic to this view: when everything is

placed on God's shoulders, we tend to lose sight of the responsibility that *we* have in

bringing about justice. In this regard, it mirrors the conclusion Massingale draws in

Racial Justice and the Catholic Church:

> In other words, social life is made by human beings. The society we live in is the outcome of human choices and decisions. This means that human beings can change things. There is nothing necessary or fated about racial hierarchies or white racial privilege. They are the result of human agency; it does not have to be so. What humans break, divide, and separate, we can—with God's help—also heal, unite, and restore.
>
> What is now does not have to be. Therein lies the hope. And the challenge.[146]

Second, Jones seems to have inserted an absolute principle in place of a partial

one. Yes, God is *partly* the sum of His acts. However, Christians also contend that God's

character can be discerned from Scripture. Hence, the notion of divine revelation has a

particular import for this discussion. Jones seems to deny any notion of revelation or

divine disclosure in favor of appealing to the enhanced capacity of human discernment

about the divine (i.e., he proceeds as if we are adequate arbiters of God's actions and can

make dependable inferences to His character). However, is this feasible? Doesn't this

anticipate—in fact, demand—Jones' later claim regarding a humanocentric theism or

146 Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church*, 180.

secular humanism (again, that humanity is the ultimate agent or valuator in human affairs)? Is Jones begging the question? Furthermore, don't we often misinterpret God's actions? Don't we often look back at calamitous events that we initially took to be indications of God's disfavor (or, of God's non-existence), and retrospectively discern that they were positive and, perhaps, more favorable than disfavorable? Jones' response can be anticipated: we can affirm the goodness of these events only from the vantage point of having been liberated from them. But, with regard to the general situation of Black life in America, this opens up another path of discussion: what, for Jones, would constitute a liberation event for Blacks? What indicators would satisfy this requirement? Jones' work was not written in the nineteenth century, but toward the end of the twentieth century and well after the Civil Rights Movement. Recent events (e.g., the mainstream attention finally given to police overaggression and brutality in communities of color) and statistics (e.g., the disproportionate rate of incarceration of Black men) certainly indicate that there is ongoing race-specific suffering among Blacks. However, would Jones consider the election and reelection of a Black president to be a liberative event? If Jones, writing in the post-slavery, post-Jim Crow era, does not consider the gains of the Civil Rights Movement and the (relative) formal equality of Blacks in America as liberative, then it's hard to imagine what could constitute such an event.[147]

Humanism in Black Religious Thought

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147 In *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997), James Cone specifically responds to Jones' request for a liberation event, writing: "Therefore, to William Jones's question, What is the decisive event of liberation? we respond: the event of Jesus Christ! He is our Alpha and Omega, the one who died on the cross and was resurrected that we might be free to struggle for the affirmation of black humanity" (177). Cone acknowledges that Jones and others will find this answer unsatisfying.

Does a serious engagement between Black suffering and Christianity inexorably lead to humanism? In this section, I want to briefly look at the stream of African-American humanism that has been presented (partially due to Jones' influence) as a legitimate option for Blacks seeking liberation. Humanism is characterized by an emphasis on the positive potential of humanity, and a minimization (or outright rejection) of the need for divine aid. Recall that, in the introduction to *IGWR*, Jones stated that his existential objective for the book was to acknowledge and engage the "minority tradition of religious *humanism*" in the Black religious tradition, guaranteeing it a place "as a coequal participant at the conference table where *oppression* matters frame the agenda."[148] Initially, Jones wondered if the only way to avoid Whiteanity was to embrace humanism, naively thinking that the traditional Christian theism he had been taught was the only option. Later, Jones would come to appreciate the Black humanist trajectory, especially the willingness of its proponents in challenging or even rejecting critical tenets of Christianity. Part of his aim was to defend this stream of thought from Black liberation theologians, many of whom dismissed these thinkers as either secular or non-religious—a dismissal that derives from the error of conflating religion and theism (i.e., the assumption that only systems of thought properly situated within traditional Christian theism could or should count as religion).[149]

In the conclusion to *IGWR*, Jones situates his project as a "prolegomenon to black theology"[150] comprised of three factors: a critical/polemical feature, a normative factor, and a corrective/constructive objective. The critical/polemical feature contends that a

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148 Jones, *Is God a White Racist?*, xi. Emphasis in original.
149 Jones, *Is God a White Racist?*, xxi. In *An Introduction to African Philosophy*, Lewis Gordon discusses African conceptions of humanism. See pages 186–195.
150 Jones, *Is God a White Racist?*, 169.

discipline possesses a serious structural error that needs to be resolved if the discipline is to survive. Therefore, a prolegomenon should problematize a discipline and point toward "an inescapable correction and reconstruction."[151] The normative factor acknowledges the deficiencies expressed by the critical/polemical feature and proposes a standard or framework (e.g., a methodological rule, a general conclusion about reality, a logical rule)[152] that can be explicitly utilized. Jones identifies this normative factor as "the isolation of the threshold issue for black theology: the demonstration of the centrality of theodicy and the refutation of the charge of divine racism."[153] Finally, the corrective/constructive objective will be the articulation of a system according to the normative standard that has been established to avoid the errors identified by the critical/polemical move. For Jones, this maneuver largely involves expanding the "theological circle"[154] in order to conceptually accommodate non-theistic models for future Black theologies of liberation.

For Jones, there are only two possible options for Black theology: secular humanism or a "humanocentric theism."[155] Jones identifies himself as a secular humanist, but doesn't advocate for this particular position in this work since it would require a significant argument that theism itself is a hindrance to liberation. Furthermore, most Black theologians would probably want to embrace a "theistic framework for theodicy."[156] Nevertheless, Jones does identify one advantage to delaying a full defense of secular humanism:

151 Jones, *Is God a White Racist?*, 170.
152 Jones, *Is God a White Racist?*, 170.
153 Jones, *Is God a White Racist?*, 170.
154 Jones, *Is God a White Racist?*, 171.
155 Jones, *Is God a White Racist?*, 172.
156 Jones, *Is God a White Racist?*, 172.

> I wish to identify which theistic options provide a viable framework for a theology of liberation. Humanocentric theism is such an option, and it is also the last point on the theistic spectrum before one jumps to the position of humanism. If I can demonstrate the value of humanocentric theism for a black theodicy, I have also succeeded at the same time in providing an entree for its immediate neighbor, secular humanism, into the theological arena. In this way, the discussion of humanocentric theism helps to pave the way for secular humanism as an appropriate complement for contemporary black religion.[157]

Nevertheless, Jones finds that humanocentric theism still retains the relevant principle of humanism necessary for his project: the "functional ultimacy of man."[158] Here, Sartre's influence is clearly felt, reflecting Sartre's concern in "Existentialism is a Humanism" that humanity is the ultimate valuator.[159] In an extended endnote, Jones articulates this critical concept:

> This principle is another way of stating Protagoras' dictum, "Man is the measure of all things." I interpret this to mean that man can only act as if he were the ultimate in the realm of values or history or both. It may well be the case that, ontologically speaking, he is not ultimate, but nonetheless it is necessary for him to choose, to valuate, regardless of the character of the rest of reality. This situation of man does not change, whether God exists or not. My own approach universalizes this principle and interprets it as the consequence of man's freedom.[160]

Building upon the preceding chapters of *IGWR*, Jones articulates a set of conditions that are necessary for a "viable black theodicy."[161] For Jones, the essential feature of humanocentric theism as a framework for Black projects in theodicy is the "exalted status it assigns to man and his activity."[162] At issue are competing relations between divine and human freedom, with the opposite of humanocentric theism being a

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157 Jones, *Is God a White Racist?*, 172.
158 Jones, *Is God a White Racist?*, 172.
159 Sartre, "Existentialism is a Humanism," 369.
160 Jones, *Is God a White Racist?*, 243 n. 2. This principle, Jones' description of it, and Jones' subsequent articulation of humanocentric theism, unfortunately, traffic in gender-insensitive language.
161 Jones, *Is God a White Racist?*, 173–175
162 Jones, *Is God a White Racist?*, 187.

"theocentric theism," one in which God's sovereignty is emphasized over humanity's freedom.[163] Jones sees humanocentric theism as being completely consistent with the Biblical depiction of humanity as partner with God. In the same manner that God, in the Incarnation, joined with humanity to accomplish His purposes on Earth, so humanity honors God when it takes its responsibility as free agents seriously.

Furthermore, Jones sees benefits that a humanocentric theism provides for constructing a Black theodicy. First, it accommodates human freedom in a consistent manner because it dispenses with a notion of God's hyper-sovereignty that obliterates any true notion of human agency. Second, it handles the charge of divine racism by "removing God's overruling sovereignty from human history."[164] Racism, for example, is clearly a function of human failure, not divine. Jones states:

> There is a decided plus for making racism the consequence of human activities alone. Any analysis of racism that fails to recognize it as the consequence of a gross imbalance of power is unacceptable. Racism, like all oppression, is an exercise in power in which one group can pursue its priorities unchecked by a coequal force.[165]

Third, a humanocentric theism also prohibits religious escape routes put forward by Whites as justification for racism. Whether it's Christianity or the Bible or God's will— none of them can any longer be considered the basis for the preservation of systems of oppression. Jones notes that this also liberates those who are oppressed; they, too, are no longer victims to the belief that their condition is condoned by God, and they are now freed to take their flourishing into their own hands. *God is no longer on anyone's side*.[166] Finally, Jones considers humanocentric theism to be a resource for Black theologies as

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163 Jones, *Is God a White Racist?*, 187.
164 Jones, *Is God a White Racist?*, 195.
165 Jones, *Is God a White Racist?*, 195.
166 Jones, *Is God a White Racist?*, 196.

they confront the "emergent secularism of our time."[167]

The obvious heir apparent to Jones' advocacy of humanism is Pinn. A PhD graduate from Harvard (where he also earned M.Div and M.A. degrees), Pinn's scholarship has always been engaged at the nexus of Black religion and humanism. In his first work, *Why, Lord? Suffering and Evil in Black Theology* (a revision of his doctoral dissertation), Pinn traces the history of the themes of suffering and religion in Black thought from the spirituals of slaves in the New World to the relatively recent strand of humanism found at the end of the twentieth century.[168] Much of Pinn's subsequent scholarship is based upon the ideas presented in this early work. Pinn, who spent much of his childhood and young adulthood as an active member of his African Methodist Episcopal church, notes the dissonance he began to acknowledge when he reflected upon the "existential hardship faced by African-Americans"[169] in light of the Christian doctrines he was teaching. Concerned to pursue true liberation and the flourishing of his community at all costs, Pinn embraced Black humanism, a tradition dating back to slavery that "denies the existence of God and holds humans fully accountable for the existence and removal of moral evil in the world."[170] Pinn distinguishes between two forms of humanism: weak and strong. Weak humanism is consistent with the Black church tradition and advocates that, although God's nature and sovereignty should be challenged, humans work in conjunction with God to achieve human liberation as opposed to relying wholly upon God.[171] Pinn classifies Jones' humanocentric theism as a

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167 Jones, *Is God a White Racist?*, 197.
168 Anthony B. Pinn, *Why, Lord? Suffering and Evil in Black Theology* (New York: Continuum, 1995).
169 Pinn, *Why, Lord?*, 10.
170 Pinn, *Why, Lord?*, 11.
171 Pinn, *Why, Lord?*, 18.

form of the weak variety of humanism. Frederick Ware, due to the emphasis upon

egalitarianism in West's prophetic Christian pragmatism, considers it to also be

compatible with a form of weak humanism, since West finds Black humanism to possess

"norms that are congenial to his preferred mode of expression in the prophetic tradition of

Christianity."[172] Strong humanism, by contrast, places the eradication of Black suffering

above theological concerns, even to the point of completely rejecting God. Thus, there is

no space for any notion of redemptive suffering because there is no Redeemer to appeal

to. Pinn also advocates that humanism, even the strong variety, is a form of religion and

should therefore be included in discussions concerning the Black religious tradition.

Using Charles Long's conception of religion in Long's groundbreaking text,

Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion, Pinn

characterizes the religious as anything that can provide an overarching framework for

reality and a center for basing morality. Pinn states:

> That is, strong humanism is a religious system because it provides a framework
> that guides human conduct and connects this conduct to the larger reality of Black
> community. Strong humanism fulfills a fundamental requirement of any religious
> system in that it defines, explains, and provides functional guidelines for reality.
> In this way, strong humanism, like other religious systems, keeps humanity from
> collapsing into a state of chaos. By providing a functional worldview, explaining
> "reality," and clarifying proper human conduct, strong humanism meets the basic
> definition of a religion.[173]

In *Moral Evil and Redemptive Suffering: A History of Theodicy in African-*

American Religious Thought, Pinn has collected a diverse set of readings from African-

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172 Frederick L. Ware, *Methodologies of Black Theology* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press,
2002), 98.

173 Pinn, *Why, Lord?*, 19. Michael Lackey, in *African American Atheists and Political
Liberation: A Study of the Sociocultural Dynamics of Faith* (Gainesville, FL: University
Press of Florida, 2007) argues against the classification of humanism as a religion, though
his concern is primarily with the claim that people of African descent are naturally religious.
See pages 142–150.

American history concerning a multiplicity of opinions on redemptive suffering in Black religious thought. Whereas early writings on Black religious humanism "centered on [a] critique of and challenge to [the] doctrine of God (and the characteristics and intent of the divine),"[174] Pinn is leading the charge down a more constructive path. His relatively recent *The End of God-Talk: An African American Humanist Theology* is the "first presentation of an African American humanist theology," one constructed according to non-traditional discursive categories.[175]

The arguments made by Jones, Pinn, and others, provide a necessary corrective to traditional Christian doctrines, particularly for Black theology, but also for the Christian community in general. Suffering, although not the only characteristic of the Black experience in the United States, is nonetheless an important reality that informs all facets of Black reflection, especially with regard to religion. Jones' contention that the theodical question is already at the center of Black religious thought seems warranted, since it interfaces (with difficulty) with notions of God's sovereignty and benevolence. Pinn extends Jones' work and contends that true concern for Black flourishing necessitates a departure from traditional Black theodicies since, mired as they are in the language of redemptive suffering, they "counteract efforts at liberation by finding something of value in Black suffering."[176]

However, there seems to be a fatal flaw in the Jones/Pinn argument that traditional theism is antithetical to Black liberation, namely: there are numerous examples of Black liberation movements throughout history that have been led by individuals who rooted

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174 Anthony B. Pinn, "Humanism in African American Theology," in *The Oxford Handbook of African American Theology*, eds. Katie G. Cannon and Anthony B. Pinn (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 287.
175 Pinn, "Humanism in African American Theology," 287.
176 Pinn, *Why, Lord?*, 17.

their activism in a faith position that was situated in traditional theism. The charge by

Jones/Pinn against Christian theism seems analogous to the charge that Christians are

anti-science because their faith depicts God as a *deus ex machina* that invites a laziness

toward pursuing empirically-testable truth claims (i.e., the "God"-assertion serves as a

replacement for serious scholarly research). However, this flies in the face of a history of

science in which many of the most significant scientists have been Christians and have

pursued their chosen paths not *in spite of* their faith, but *because of it*. Similarly, King did

not find his faith to be a stumbling block to a radical activism, but considered the former

to provide the basis for the latter. In *Toward a Theology of Radical Involvement: The

Theological Legacy of Martin Luther King Jr.*, Luther D. Ivory makes the case that

King's transformative social activity was firmly rooted in a theology that depicted a God

who (1) was firmly on the side of justice and (2) empowered humans to bring about

justice. Ivory writes:

> Claims that King lacked theological grounding for his speech and actions are, in
> the final analysis, both unsubstantiated and unwarranted. Evidence . . . clearly
> demonstrates that a distinctive theological perspective and program did, in fact,
> undergird and inform King's public witness. . . . As he struggled to resolve the
> crisis of vocational identity, King's nurture in the black faith tradition, formal
> academic training, existentialist bent, and experiences of black American life
> gradually coalesced. By the time of the Montgomery bus boycott, his search for
> clarity in matters of identity, faith, and intellectual focus had become inseparably
> interwoven with both his search to know God and his desire to imitate the life of
> Jesus Christ.[177]

Ivory continues:

> Every aspect of King's public ministry of proactive social and political
> engagement on behalf of justice and community was undergirded by a cluster of
> core theological beliefs, values, and principles that provided the basis for both
> King's personal self-presentation and his radical social action. King's theological

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177 Luther D. Ivory, *Toward a Theology of Radical Involvement: The Theological Legacy of
Martin Luther King Jr.* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1997), 107.

perspective emerged from the context of liberative praxis in a racially oppressive, economically exploitative, and politically unjust human community. It is contextually situated, and utilizes an anthropocentric point of departure.[178]

A significant concept in King's arsenal was his notion of "cosmic companionship," the idea that the pursuer of justice can be encouraged even in discouraging situations because she is engaging in the work of God and can be assured of both God's assistance and ultimate victory (even if they are not around to experience this victory; cf. King's final "I See the Promised Land" speech on April 3, 1968—the evening before his death). King, in an early speech on his religious philosophy of nonviolence, wrote:

> Finally, the method of nonviolence is based on the conviction that the universe is on the side of justice. It is this deep faith in the future that causes the nonviolent resister to accept suffering without retaliation. He knows that in his struggle for justice he has cosmic companionship. This belief that God is on the side of truth and justice comes down to us from the long tradition of our Christian faith. There is something at the very center of our faith which reminds us that Good Friday may reign for a day, but ultimately it must give way to the triumphant beat of the Easter drums. Evil may so shape events that Caesar will occupy a palace and Christ a cross, but one day that same Christ will rise up and split history into A.D. and B.C., so that even the life of Caesar must be dated by his name. So in Montgomery we can walk and never get weary, because we know that there will be a great camp meeting in the promised land of freedom and justice.[179]

Jones anticipates this argument in *IGWR*, specifically the possible rebuttal against his thesis that would charge humanocentric theism with a defeatist mentality. That is, if you introduce a neutral God, wouldn't that undermine "the motivation of blacks to move against the powerful white majority"?[180] Jones responds by stating that, again, without any definitive evidence for God's goodness on behalf of Blacks (i.e., without a substantive refutation of divine racism), Blacks don't have any real reason for the hope

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178 Ivory, *Toward a Theology of Radical Involvement*, 108.
179 Martin Luther King, Jr., "Nonviolence and Racial Justice," in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington (New York: Harper, 1986), 9.
180 Jones, *Is God a White Racist?*, 196–197.

they profess. However, this takes us back to my concern about Jones' uncertain standard

for a liberation event. Though there are still significant problems with racism in the

American context, the fact remains that significant progress has been made. Thus, Black

Christians would seem to have *some* warrant for not investing the charge of divine racism

with the weight that Jones and his ilk think it deserves.

Finally, a significant impetus to Black religious humanism is that it negates the

allegedly corrosive effects of theologies of redemptive suffering. This is Pinn's argument,

one he makes without apology:

> Traceable from the early African presence to the present, redemptive suffering
> responses to moral evil, my argument continues, pose a serious challenge to the
> sustaining of social transformation activities and agendas. The reason for this is
> simple: how does one maintain a commitment to destroying oppression if
> suffering is seen as having secondary benefit? If suffering is redemptive because
> God uses it as an imperfect tool for the construction of a better future, why should
> it be fought? And if there is a distinction between "good" suffering and "bad"
> suffering, how is it made, and of what functional value is such an abstract
> distinction?[181]

Is this an indictment of King? After all, in his "I Have a Dream" speech, doesn't King

directly address the "veterans of creative suffering" who have "come fresh from narrow

jail cells" and "areas where your quest for freedom left you battered by the storms of

persecution and staggered by the winds of police brutality"?[182] Doesn't King encourage

these very listeners with the admonition that "unearned suffering is redemptive"?[183] Yet,

King's notion of redemptive suffering is not the passive quietism that is constructed as a

straw man in the arguments of Jones/Pinn. King demonstrates a theory of redemptive

suffering that holds in creative tension the possible merits that can be derived from

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181 Pinn, *Moral Evil and Redemptive Suffering*, 16.
182 Martin Luther King, Jr., "I Have a Dream," in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings
     and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington (New York: Harper,
     1986), 219.
183 King, Jr., "I Have a Dream," 219.

suffering as well as the relentless quest to eradicate oppression. Ware avers:

> [King's] concept of redemptive suffering is associated with nonviolence, a form of social action signifying that the oppressed are not passive but are asserting themselves, albeit peacefully, to achieve social change. King believed that suffering is altered and overcome by higher divine purposes, especially when persons channel their energies into constructive action to resist injustice.[184]

King himself writes:

> Recognizing the necessity for suffering I have tried to make of it a virtue. If only to save myself from bitterness, I have attempted to see my personal ordeals as an opportunity to transform myself and heal the people involved in the tragic situation which now obtains. I have lived these last few years with the conviction that unearned suffering is redemptive.[185]

Whether one agrees with Jones/Pinn or not, the fact remains that suffering will be, for the time being, an unalterable fact of human existence. Humanists sometimes argue as if there would be less suffering if the category (and attendant action) of redemptive suffering was obliterated. However, King provides an inversion of this theory, contending that redemptive suffering provides just as much basis for social action as humanists claim for themselves. So, in response to the question, "Does a serious engagement between black suffering and Christianity inexorably lead to humanism?," there is significant evidence that the answer is "No."

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184 Ware, *African American Theology*, 135–136.

185 Martin Luther King, Jr., "Suffering and Faith," in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington (New York: Harper, 1986), 41.

III. Toward a Critical Theological Anthropology

"The White cop in the ghetto is as ignorant as he is frightened, and his entire concept of police work is to cow the natives. He is not compelled to answer to these natives for anything he does; whatever he does, he knows that he will be protected by his brothers, who will allow nothing to stain the honor of the force. When his working day is over, he goes home and sleeps soundly in a bed miles away—miles away from the niggers, for that is the way he really thinks of black people."
James Baldwin

On Sunday, February 26, 2012, Trayvon Martin, a 17-year-old Black high school student, was walking home through a housing community, having just returned from a store where he had purchased candy and a drink. At the same time, George Zimmerman, a resident of the community, surveilled Martin, calling a 911 dispatcher to report Martin's "suspicious" activity.[1] At some point, the two individuals engaged in a scuffle, ending with Zimmerman shooting Martin with a single shot to the chest from close range, resulting in Martin's death. 45 days later, Zimmerman was arrested. 15 months later, a jury declared Zimmerman "Not Guilty" on the charge of second-degree murder.

This case polarized much of the nation. On one hand, some Americans agreed with the verdict, emphasizing Zimmerman's right to defend himself against Martin, despite the fact that Martin was a minor and weighed at least 40 pounds less than Zimmerman. Martin, Zimmerman's defense lawyers maintained, had gotten the upper hand over Zimmerman and Zimmerman legitimately feared for his life, making the shooting unfortunate but well within the confines of the law.

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1   Lizette Alvarez and Michael Cooper, "Prosecutor Files Charge of 2nd-Degree Murder in Shooting of Martin," *The New York Times*, April 11, 2012, accessed February 4, 2017, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/12/us/zimmerman-to-be-charged-in-trayvon-martin-shooting.html.

On the other hand, many wondered why an adult could instigate an encounter with a minor (by profiling Martin and following him against the advice of the 911 dispatcher) and somehow be justified in engaging in lethal action. Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor writes:

> [Zimmerman's] exoneration crystallized the burden of Black people: even in death, Martin would be vilified as a "thug" and an aggressor, Zimmerman portrayed as his victim. The judge even instructed both parties that the phrase "racial profiling" could not be mentioned in the courtroom, let alone used to explain why Zimmerman had targeted Martin.[2]

One individual, Alicia Garza, was dining with her husband and friends in Oakland, California when the news broke about Zimmerman's acquittal. Disheartened by the verdict, the subsequent blaming of Martin for his own demise, and the despair expressed by many who did not expect justice, Garza constructed an encouraging post on her Facebook page, writing what she considered a "love letter to black folks,"[3] ending it with the phrase "Black people. I love you. I love us. Our lives matter."[4] Hundreds of miles away, Garza's close friend, Patrisse Cullors, was in a similar state of shock and dismay. Seeing Garza's post, Cullors added a hashtag symbol: #BlackLivesMatter. Not long after, they brought in a mutual friend, Opal Tometi, to begin brainstorming ideas about how this idea could become a movement.[5]

The controversy generated by these three simple and yet profound words is a testament to the continuing negotiations that this nation is having with regard to the value of Black life. What should have been a celebratory affirmation of Black personhood has engendered endless debate. Part of this can be attributed to a willful misunderstanding

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2   Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation* (Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2016), 149.

3   Jamilah King, "How three friends turned a spontaneous Facebook post into a global phenomenon," *The California Sunday Magazine*, accessed February 4, 2017, https://stories.californiasunday.com/2015-03-01/black-lives-matter.

4   King, "How three friends turned a spontaneous Facebook post into a global phenomenon."

5   King, "How three friends turned a spontaneous Facebook post into a global phenomenon."

concerning what is being affirmed by the phrase "Black Lives Matter." It is not the

assessment that *only* the lives of Blacks in America matter, nor is it the claim that Black

lives matter *more* than others, nor is it a call to a reductive analysis of problems within

the Black community (e.g., that the *only* problem within Black communities is police

overaggression and brutality where Whites are the offenders and Blacks are the victims).

Rather, according to Garza:

> Black Lives Matter is an ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise. It is an affirmation of Black folks' contributions to this society, our humanity, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression.[6]

Taylor adds:

> It was a powerful rejoinder that spoke directly to the dehumanization and criminalization that made Martin seem suspicious in the first place and allowed the police to make no effort to find out to whom this boy belonged. It was a response to the oppression, inequality, and discrimination that devalue Black life every day. It was everything, in three simple words.[7]

Given the above, the question must be asked: What is at stake for America with regard to

a simple claim about Black life? Why would anyone find it offensive or threatening when

an individual or a community asserts their dignity? I contend that #BlackLivesMatter is

only controversial because it is being deployed in an antiblack world, a world designed

such that it would, among other things, "ultimately be better off without blacks."[8] The

claim this chapter will explore is that America in general and Christianity in particular

were founded upon and still (to some extent) operate according to an anthropological

norm of Black non-personhood. This has particular salience with regard to theological

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6   Alicia Garza, "A Herstory of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement," *The Feminist Wire*, October 7, 2014, accessed February 4, 2017, http://www.thefeministwire.com/2014/10/blacklivesmatter-2.
7   Taylor, *From #BlackLivesMatter,* 151.
8   Gordon, *Existentia Africana*, 15.

anthropology, the branch of theology that "defines and regulates what it means to be a human being in a religious system" and asks "What does a god require of human beings in order for them to be human?"[9] A liberative theological anthropology in an antiblack world will take on a different contour, since it will seek to overturn traditional anthropologies in Christian discourse that *assume* (or, claim to assume) the putative equality and inherent value of all human beings. Against this, a critical theological anthropology will challenge this assumption, stating that a necessary component of theological anthropology should be the *explicit* affirmation of Black (and other non-European) lives as valuable to God. However, a challenge could be posited: Why must a consideration of anthropology target racial/ethnic groups? Shouldn't we appeal to a universal sense of humanity, one that, although it may have been diminished by centuries of antiblack thought and practice, should certainly be resuscitated now? The problem with this is that appealing to the universal is futile (toward the goal of eradicating racist concepts) since the universal has already been co-opted. Drawing upon Sartre, Gordon notes:

> Since the "racially neutral" in antiblack societies is *white*, all efforts toward purely human significations—that is, "universality"—appear to be problematic: "A man," "a woman," "a child," "one," all of these often signify "a white man," "a white woman," "a white child," "a white person." In short, absolute antiracism seems to entail discrimination *against* blacks in the form of an opaque reference to a presumed homogeneous human race with white pigmentation.[10]

This recognition challenges the meaningfulness of standard maneuvers that theologians make in their anthropological work. For example, a significant foundation for grounding the value of humanity is the *imago Dei* (Latin, "image of God"), the affirmation that

9   Dwight N. Hopkins, *Heart and Head: Black Theology—Past, Present, and Future* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 133.
10   Gordon, *Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism*, 4.

humans are somehow created in or possess the very likeness of divinity and, therefore (by

extension), are considered to be intrinsically valuable. This concept finds explicit

reference in the Genesis account:

> Then God said, "Let us make humankind *in our image*, according to *our likeness*;
> and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air,
> and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every
> creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." So God created humankind *in his
> image*, *in the image of God* he created them; male and female he created them.[11]

Copeland articulates three implications for theological anthropology stemming from a

reading of this text: humans have a unique capacity for relationship with God, humans

are honored with a special status compared to other creatures, and humans are created to

be in relationship with other living beings.[12] In *Faith Seeking Understanding: An

Introduction to Christian Theology*, Daniel L. Migliore evaluates some of the more

dominant interpretations of the expression "image of God," each of which becomes

problematic given the tortured racial history of the United States. For example, Migliore

begins with the quaint notion that "image of God" refers to humanity's physical

resemblance to God.[13] Citing a lack of data supporting this interpretation in Scripture, as

well as John Calvin's concern about the "excessive anthropomorphism"[14] represented by

this view, Migliore rejects this as a possible option. Nevertheless, consider what this view

meant given the historical understanding of Jesus/God as being White (e.g., Payne's

words from the previous chapter claiming that Adam, Abraham, Jesus, God, and all of the

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11 Genesis 1:26–27 NRSV. Emphasis added.
12 M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 24.
13 Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 144. Migliore's text, now in its third edition, is a popular textbook at Bible colleges and seminaries.
14 Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 144.

assembled saints of heaven are White).[15] Despite the absurdity of this first interpretation

of *imago Dei*, its deployment in a world where God was White[16] would have served to

forever sunder Black lives from a central theological tenet that would have provided

support for their humanity and value.

Migliore then considers other interpretations of *imago Dei* that emphasize,

respectively, dominion, freedom, and rationality as the decisive factors that determine the

location or meaning of the image of God, taking the latter (rationality) as the "dominant

Western interpretation."[17] However, again, what happens when these claims are asserted

in an antiblack world where: (1) Blacks have not been dominant, but for the

overwhelming majority of US history, have been *dominated* by practices, laws, and

customs; (2) Black life has been characterized by a restriction of freedom, most notably

during the era of slavery, but also the *de jure* and *de facto* policies of Jim Crow and the

subtle bigotries that continue to marginalize people of color today; and (3) Blacks have

been encumbered by the overwhelming presumption of Black intellectual inferiority and

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15 Gossett, *Race*, 3–4, quoted in Jones, 5.
16 By "White" I do not mean whiteness as an essential property of God's being. Rather, I'm thinking of the association of God *with* whiteness. Recall the brief discussion regarding the aesthetics and representation of God in Chapter I, as well as the anecdotes regarding the backlash to a non-White Jesus/God. Even beyond the aesthetic, the Christian God has consistently been interpreted as being in alignment with White supremacy (aspects of this alignment will be explored in the rest of this chapter). I recall being in the east African country of Kenya several years ago when a Christian group broadcast the Campus Crusade for Christ-financed movie, *The Jesus Film*, on a huge screen in a neighborhood in Nairobi. This all-Black community was shown a film about Jesus in which the titular character was portrayed by Brian Deacon, an English actor born in Oxford (I joke with my students that Deacon resembles Barry Gibb of the Bee Gees far more than he does a first-century Palestinian Jew!). The upshot is that if God is *conceived* by Christians (even Black ones) as being White in some associative or aesthetic or theoretical sense, the vacuity of God's essential whiteness is irrelevant.
17 Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 144–145.

irrationality?[18] Migliore advocates the symbol "image of God" as a description of "human life in relationship with God and with the other creatures."[19] He writes:

> To be human is to live freely and gladly in relationships of mutual respect and love. The existence of human creatures in relationship—a paradigmatic form of which is the coexistence of male and female—reflects the life of God who eternally lives not in solitary existence but in communion. Thus the image of God is not to be construed primarily as a set of human faculties, possession, or endowments. It expresses self-transcending life in relationship with others—with the "wholly other" we call God, and with all those different "others" who need our help and whose help we also need in order to be the human creatures God intends us to be.[20]

Migliore grounds his theological anthropology in the humanity of Jesus Christ, contending that Jesus *is* the image of God,[21] while humans should strive to be *conformed* to the image of God.[22] Ultimately, this is not a debate about the meaning of *imago Dei*. In fact, I would contend that Migliore's position is largely correct (though, perhaps, irrelevant, since some individuals, like Robert Lewis Dabney, continued to resist the equality of Black Presbyterians "on the claim that they were an inferior type of man, *even though created in the image of God*").[23] Rather, the issue concerns the value of Black lives and the affirmation of their humanity in a religious context that has enlisted theological concepts to subordinate a significant portion of the world.

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18 To be clear, I am not advocating any particular position among the *imago Dei* options as being better suited to racial justice. In fact, the discussion about the *imago Dei* only serves as an entry point to get at some of the problems that can arise within theological anthropology. Primarily, I'm critiquing the anti-black environment within which such ideas are being deployed. The point of this dissertation is that theologians need to consider the racial implications of their theological work. Thus, *if* one holds to a particular conception of the *imago Dei*, I would challenge them to craft it in such a way that it can be suitably deployed in an anti-black world in a manner that does not implicitly deny the possibility of God's image to non-Whites.

19 Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 145.

20 Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 145.

21 See 2 Corinthians 4:4 and Colossians 1:15.

22 Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 146. See Romans 8:29.

23 Smith, *In His Image*, 266. Emphasis added.

Phrased differently, standard treatments of theological anthropology start with particular assumptions about humanity that demonstrate a significant evasion from the operable assumptions that have actually governed this nation and, to a large extent, the Church. An example of this is Aristotle's "natural slavery" and "climate theory" arguments for the superiority of Greek culture. In Book I of *Politics*, Aristotle, speaking on political authority, diverts to the topic of natural relations among humans, asking if some are naturally slaves, or if the institution of slavery is against nature. His answer: "Authority and subordination are conditions not only inevitable but also expedient; in some cases things are marked out from the moment of birth to rule or to be ruled."[24] Aristotle explains:

> Again, as between the sexes, the male is by nature superior and the female inferior, the male ruler and the female subject. And the same must also necessarily apply in the case of mankind as a whole; therefore all men that differ as widely as the soul does from the body and the human being from the lower animal (and this is the condition of those whose function is the use of the body and from whom this is the best that is forthcoming) these are by nature slaves, for whom to be governed by this kind of authority is advantageous, inasmuch as it is advantageous to the subject things already mentioned. For he is by nature a slave who is capable of belonging to another (and that is why he does so belong), and who participates in reason so far as to apprehend it but not to possess it; for the animals other than man are subservient not to reason, by apprehending it, but to feelings. And also the usefulness of slaves diverges little from that of animals; bodily service for the necessities of life is forthcoming from both, from slaves and from domestic animals alike. The intention of nature therefore is to make the bodies also of freemen and of slaves different—the latter strong for necessary service, the former erect and unserviceable for such occupations, but serviceable for a life of citizenship.[25]

In Book 7, Aristotle attributes the different outcomes of people groups to climate distinctions. Europeans, living in colder climates, are spirit-filled but deficient in intelligence and skill. Thus, they are free but lack political organization and the capacity

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24   Aristotle, *Politics*, 1.1254a.
25   Aristotle, *Politics*, 1.1254b.

to rule over others.[26] Asians, on the other hand, lived in warmer climates and therefore had the capacity for political organization and imperialism, but were continuously slaves because they lacked spirit. However, the Greeks—because they lived in a climatic region between these two extremes—had the capacity for political organization and empire, as well as the spirit to resist subjugation and were therefore always free. Aristotle, brilliant as he was, adduced theories that were incoherent in order to justify and normalize "Greek slaveholding practices and Greece's rule over the western Mediterranean."[27] However, owing to Aristotle's significant influence over Western thought, his perspective on natural slavery extended even to the Americas:

> In studying Aristotle's philosophy, Puritans learned rationales for human hierarchy, and they began to believe that some groups were superior to other groups. In Aristotle's case, ancient Greeks were superior to all non-Greeks. But Puritans believed that they were superior to Native Americans, the African people, and even Anglicans—that is, all non-Puritans. . . .
>
> By the birth of Christ or the start of the Common Era, Romans were justifying their slaveholding practices using Aristotle's climate theory, and soon the new Christianity began to contribute to these arguments.[28]

Thus, rather than recognize the inadequate anthropological assumptions and lust for power that were the real motivations for Greek superiority, Aristotle engaged in an evasion that intellectualized global inequalities. This is a tactic that is often repeated in any setting where rampant injustice exists: culpability is returned to the victim (i.e., it's *your* fault or, at least, *no one's* fault that you were born in a debilitating climate; or it's God's will; or your inferiority is natural).

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26 Aristotle, *Politics*, 7.1327b.
27 Ibram X. Kendi, *Stamped From The Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America* (New York: Nation Books, 2016), 17.
28 Kendi, *Stamped From The Beginning*, 17.

Another example of such an evasion can be found in *The Racial Contract* where

Charles W. Mills argues that the dominant social/political contract that has regulated the

modern Western world is White supremacy. He writes:

> But though it covers more than two thousand years of Western political thought
> and runs the ostensible gamut of political systems, there will be no mention of the
> basic political system that has shaped the world for the past several hundred years.
> And this omission is not accidental.[29]

By "racial contract," Mills does not mean a literal or historical agreement drawn up by

Whites.[30] Rather, Mills is making an attempt to elicit the unstated premises that reveal

"the real character of the world we are living in, and the corresponding historical

deficiencies of its normative theories and practices."[31] As such, anthropological norms are

prevalent in his assessment. For example:

> Europeans, or at least full Europeans, were "civilized," and this condition was
> manifested in the character of the spaces they inhabited. Non-Europeans were
> "savages," and this condition was manifested in the character of the spaces they
> inhabited. In fact, as has been pointed out, this habitation is captured in the
> etymology of "savage" itself, which derives from the Latin *silva*, "wood," so that
> the savage is the wild man of the wood, *silvaticus*, *homo sylvestris*, the man into
> whose being wildness, wilderness, has so deeply penetrated that the door to
> civilization, to the political, is barred.[32]

This chapter will bring together several strands of thought already presented in

this project as it addresses the anthropological norm of Black non-personhood. In a sense,

it will pick up where the previous chapter left off. Jones' challenge was to foreground

Black suffering in our theologies/theodicies. In this chapter, we will explore the

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29 Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 1.
30 In 2001, Jorge Garcia issued a significant challenge to Mills' argument (Jorge Garcia, "The
    Racial Contract Hypothesis," in *Philosophia Africana* 4, no. 1 [March 2001]: 27–42). Mills'
    reply, where he contends that Garcia grossly misunderstood key points, can be found in
    From Race to Class: Essays in White Marxism and Black Radicalism (Lanham, MD:
    Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 219–249.
31 Mills, *The Racial Contract*, 7.
32 Mills, *The Racial Contract*, 42–43.

background (but sometimes explicit) disregard for Black life that motivates his category of "ethnic suffering." In the first section, we will begin with Du Bois' significant challenge in *The Souls of Black Folk* to the equation of blackness with problems. I will examine the ways in which the humanity of Blacks has been challenged, resulting in particularly brutal treatment by the larger White culture. At issue will not be the treatment itself, but the anthropology that permits it. In the second section, I will demonstrate how, in contrast to the almost total exclusion of racism in many discussions of theological anthropology, the racial-anthropological issue has always been a necessary and important element of liberative theologies. Finally, the concluding section will evaluate three works by scholars representing a non-Western position that place the issue of racial/ethnic value at the center of their anthropology and overall theology. In doing this, I will illumine a tentative way forward for how theologians should proceed in integrating the issues of race and embodiment into their theology.

Subpersonhood and the Black Experience

In an article on *The Huffington Post* website, Raha Jorjani, a defense lawyer who handles immigration cases for the Alameda County (California) Public Defender's Office, envisions the following scenario:

> Suppose a client walked into my office and told me that police officers in his country had choked a man to death over a petty crime. Suppose he said police fatally shot another man in the back as he ran away. That they arrested a woman during a traffic stop and placed her in jail, where she died three days later. That a 12-year-old boy in his country was shot and killed by the police as he played in the park.
>
> Suppose he told me that all of those victims were from the same ethnic community—a community whose members fear being harmed, tortured or killed by police or prison guards. And that this is true in cities and towns across his

nation. At that point, as an immigration lawyer, I'd tell him he had a strong claim for asylum protection under U.S. law.

What if, next, he told me he was from America? Black people in the United States face such racial violence that they could qualify as refugees if they didn't already live here.[33]

Jorjani's provocative assessment of Black life vis-à-vis their status in America is a

common refrain that sounds all the more haunting given claims about a "post-racial"

America and the culture of liberal optimism.[34] These twin concepts—post-raciality and

progressivism—were never more pronounced than with the election of America's first

Black president. Michelle Alexander notes the momentary euphoria she felt on election

night in 2008:

As an African American woman, with three young children who will never know a world in which a black man could not be president of the United States, I was beyond thrilled on election night. Yet when I walked out of the election night party, full of hope and enthusiasm, I was immediately reminded of the harsh realities of the New Jim Crow. A black man was on his knees in the gutter, hands cuffed behind his back, as several police officers stood around him talking, joking, and ignoring his human existence. People poured out of the building; many stared for a moment at the black man cowering in the street, and then averted their gaze. What did the election of Barack Obama mean for him?[35]

What is salient for this discussion is the ontological orientation of the victims: they are

not persecuted for their actions, but for their very *being*. Taylor reflects upon what West

has called "the sheer capriciousness of our situation":

The killing of Mike Brown, along with an ever-growing list of other unarmed Black people, drove holes in the logic that Black people simply doing the "right

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33 Raha Jorjani, "Could black people in the U.S. qualify as refugees?," *The Huffington Post*, August 14, 2015, accessed February 4, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/could-black-people-in-the-us-qualify-as-refugees/2015/08/14/b97a628a-406c-11e5-bfe3-ff1d8549bfd2_story.html?utm_term=.57edc4bcce7c.

34 See, for example, Tim Wise's *Between Barack and a Hard Place: Racism and White Denial in the Age of Obama* (San Francisco, CA: City Lights Books, 2009).

35 Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2012), 2–3.

things," whatever those things might be, could overcome the perennial crisis within Black America. After all, Mike Brown was only walking down the street. Eric Garner was standing on the corner. Rekia Boyd was in a park with friends. Trayvon Martin was walking with a bag of Skittles and a can of iced tea. Sean Bell was leaving a bachelor party, anticipating his marriage the following day. Amadou Diallo was getting off from work. Their deaths, and the killings of so many others like them, prove that sometimes *simply being Black* can make you a suspect—or get you killed. Especially when the police are involved, looking Black is more likely to get you killed than any other factor.[36]

Similarly, Claudia Rankine relays an incident when she asked a friend about her experience as the mother of a Black son. Her friend replied "The condition of black life is one of mourning."[37] Rankine writes:

For her, mourning lived in real time inside her and her son's reality: At any moment she might lose her reason for living. Though the white liberal imagination likes to feel temporarily bad about black suffering, there really is no mode of empathy that can replicate the daily strain of knowing that as a black person you can be killed for *simply being black*: no hands in your pockets, no playing music, no sudden movements, no driving your car, no walking at night, no walking in the day, no turning onto this street, no entering this building, no standing your ground, no standing here, no standing there, no talking back, no playing with toy guns, no living while black.[38]

Note the common phrasing used in the previous two passages: "simply being Black." This is the recognition that there is an ontology at work that permits this mistreatment, a stigmatizing identity that breeds, permits, and justifies unjust actions but remains subterfuged behind false notions of criminality and mythologies of divine racism. The locus of this dehumanizing ontology is traditionally targeted at the Black body. A nation that has been nourished by the milk of Cartesian dualism (in which the essence of our being—the soul—is merely housed in a physical, accidental body) has been remarkably adept at fusing Black interior inferiority to its epidermal realities. Yancy observes:

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36 Taylor, *From #BlackLivesMatter*, 13. Emphasis added.
37 Claudia Rankine, "The Condition of Black Life is One of Mourning," in *The Fire This Time: A New Generation Speaks About Race*, ed. Jesmyn Ward (New York: Scribner, 2016), 145.
38 Rankine, "The Condition of Black Life is One of Mourning," 145–146. Emphasis added.

The history of the Black body in North America is fundamentally linked to the history of whiteness, primarily as whiteness is expressed in the form of fear, sadism, hatred, brutality, terror, avoidance, desire, denial, solipsism, madness, policing, politics, and the production and projection of white fantasies. From the perspective of whiteness, the Black body *is* criminality itself. It *is* the monstrous; it is that which is to be feared and yet desired, sought out in forbidden white sexual adventures and fantasies; it is constructed as a source of white despair and anguish, an anomaly of nature, the essence of vulgarity and immorality. . . . Indeed, whiteness is deemed the transcendental norm, the good, the innocent, and the pure, while Blackness is the diametrical opposite. This is the twisted fate of the Black body vis-à-vis white forms of disciplinary control, processes of white racist embodied habituation, and epistemic white world-making.[39]

Du Bois was one of the first and most creative thinkers to evaluate the existential implications of Black life. In *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois writes:

Between me and the other world there is ever an unasked question: unasked by some through feelings of delicacy; by others through the difficulty of rightly framing it. All, nevertheless, flutter round it. They approach me in a half-hesitant sort of way, eye me curiously or compassionately, and then, instead of saying directly, How does it feel to be a problem? they say, I know an excellent colored man in my town; or, I fought at Mechanicsville; or, Do not these Southern outrages make your blood boil? At these I smile, or am interested, or reduce the boiling to a simmer, as the occasion may require. To the real question, How does it feel to be a problem? I answer seldom a word.[40]

Du Bois' rendering of the existential state of blackness at the dawn of the twentieth century is still, sadly, relevant for twenty-first-century reflections upon race in America. Notable in this passage is Du Bois' recognition of Blacks-*as*-problems, as opposed to existing with problems—note the parallel to Yancy's depiction of the Black-body-*as*-evil. Du Bois is transcending the plight of evil and suffering that is common to all. That is, he's getting at the ontological-anthropological paradox that emerges when a form of humanity is itself problematized. In other words, the presence of Blacks in America has always created problems for political systems that stressed the value of humanity and

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39   George Yancy, *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008), xvi. Emphasis in original.
40   Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 7–8.

equality while simultaneously engaging in slavery and the brutal treatment of Black

humans. Similarly, the presence of Blacks in theological discourse poses problems for

religious traditions as well, given the historical partnership between certain conceptions

of God and racial injustice. Gordon explains the problem this way:

> The logic is straightforward. A perfect system cannot have imperfections. Since blacks claim to be contradictions of a perfect system, the imperfection must either be an error in reasoning (mere "appearance") or lie in black folks themselves.[41]

Gordon, at several points, situates Du Bois' claim as the inauguration of a particular

methodological and research trajectory:

> Du Bois recognized that the question of black people was of philosophical importance. He formulated it at first subjectively, in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), by asking how it feels to be a problem and, since addressed to a black person, to be black. Though seemingly banal, the question was of great importance since in one sweep it brought an ontological and a methodological problem to the fore. To admit that black people can feel anything was to acknowledge the presence of an inner life with a point of view. Such acknowledgment is crucial for the building of communication, public exchange, and, as one climbs the list of ascriptions, humanity. The question, then, signals the being of blacks as a human mode of being. But this question of being required explanation or, as Du Bois eventually formulated it, meaning. This question of the relationship of meaning to being enabled Du Bois to pose the classic social-theoretical problem of explanation in the face of freedom: how can one explain (that is, utilize a discourse premised upon determined criteria) a free being (who, in other words, challenges and often transcends determined criteria)?[42]

Apart from this methodological insight, I am interested in the way that Du Bois' question

centers my claim about an anthropological norm of non-personhood. That is, what

happens in a society when Blacks have, historically, *not* been seen as thinking Subjects,

capable of reflection and endued with the capacity to bear the image of God, but are seen

as problems? This poses numerous difficulties, for it means that, in this state, Blacks

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41 Lewis R. Gordon and Jane Anna Gordon, eds., *Not Only the Master's Tools: African American Studies in Theory and Practice* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2006), 7.

42 Gordon, *An Introduction to Africana Philosophy*, 75.

cannot ameliorate their situation and their claim to unjust mistreatment falls on deaf ears.

Gordon explains:

> In other words, there is such an isomorphic relation between values and objects of value that they become one. Thus, the object fails any longer to signify or suggest a particular value or meaning; instead, it *becomes* that value or meaning. In cases of a problematic people, the result is straightforward: They cease to be people who might face, signify, or be associated with a set of problems; they *become* those problems. Thus, a problematic people do not signify crime, licentiousness, and other social pathologies; they, under such a view, *are* crime licentiousness, and other social pathologies.[43]

This issue is made all the more acerbic when we consider the theological

foundations of this flawed anthropological norm. The role that Christianity has played in

the perpetuation of racism has already been thoroughly evaluated, in this study and in

numerous others. What's relevant for this discussion is the way that Christianity intersects

with whiteness to castigate non-Whites as non-persons. Yancy argues for a particular

Christian hermeneutic that would render Christian theology and whiteness incompatible,

defining whiteness as:

> a historical process that continues to express its hegemony and privilege through various culture, political, interpersonal, and institutional practices, and that forces bodies of color to the margins and politically and ontologically positions them as sub-persons.[44]

What stands out when one considers the historical legacy of Christian theology is the

prominence given to the anthropological norm of Black non-personhood, even to the

point of denying or modifying important tenets of the Christian faith. In *The Baptism of*

Early Virginia: How Christianity Created Race, Rebecca Anne Goetz looks at the notion

of baptism in the colony of Virginia and the way it was transfigured in order to allay

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43   Gordon, *Existentia Africana*, 69.
44   George Yancy, "Introduction: Framing the Problem," in *Christology and Whiteness: What Would Jesus Do?,* ed. George Yancy (New York: Routledge, 2012), 5.

concerns about the imputation of a higher status or freedom to Blacks. Goetz notes how

Virginia was innovative in its articulation of a "hereditary heathenism," the idea that

"Indians and Africans could never become Christian."[45] Goetz adds:

> In deciding that Indians and Africans could not truly become Christian and that their heathenism was hereditary, Anglo-Virginians asserted a new definition of human difference that was written both on the body and in the soul. . . . The tropes developed in the seventeenth century, including the full embrace of hereditary heathenism, helped create the idea of white Christianity that undergirded planter identity and power in the eighteenth century.[46]

Goetz also highlights the ways in which the slavery/race issue fostered the overturning of

centuries of theological tradition concerning baptism, marriage, conversion, and church

membership. Again, what's operative here? An allegiance to Scripture and tradition? Or, a

predominant concern to maintain a particular social hierarchy? Another episode in

Christian history where allegiance to the non-personhood of Blacks was explicitly

sanctioned was conservative Christianity in the southern United States in the nineteenth

century. Apparently, there was significant concern that some pastors and theologians were

not "orthodox" enough, though this orthodoxy had nothing to do with theology. Smith

notes:

> During this period, white religious leaders in the South seemed increasingly desirous of being soundly orthodox in their racial faith. Evidently racial heresy was becoming more damaging to clerical reputation than theological heterodoxy.[47]

In an 1883 editorial written by Henry Holcombe Tucker entitled, "Are We Orthodox on

the Race Question?," Tucker—a well-regarded leader in the Southern Baptist

denomination—seemed anxious to demonstrate his theological *bona fides* regarding his

stance on race:

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45   Rebecca Anne Goetz, *The Baptism of Early Virginia: How Christianity Created Race* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), 3.
46   Goetz, *The Baptism of Early Virginia*, 9–10.
47   Smith, *In His Image*, 264.

> We do not believe that "all men are created equal," as the Declaration of Independence declares them to be; nor that they will ever become equal in this world. . . . We think that our own race is incomparably superior to any other. . . . As to the Negro, we do not know where to place him; perhaps not at the bottom of the list, but certainly not near the top. We believe that fusion of two or more of these races would be an injury to all, and a still greater injury to posterity. We think that the race-line is providential, and that . . . any . . . great intermingling [of races] must have its origin in sin.[48]

Smith notes that Tucker's statement contained four elements that would have been affirmed by almost every White Southerner: the perpetual subordination of Blacks, the essential inferiority of Blacks, the idea that racial integration would be harmful, and the idea that racial integration would be sinful (i.e., against the will of God).[49] This comports with Copeland's assertion that "No Christian teaching has been more desecrated by slavery than the doctrine of . . . theological anthropology."[50] At work here, and still residual in contemporary theology, is a belief about the innate superiority of the White Christian, and the essential inferiority or non-personhood of Blacks, such that Whites better approximate the divine. This is a provocative claim, but one that is justified when it is recognized that most contemporary White theologians engage in their work without attending to the damage that has been done by the sad legacy of the North American Church with regard to the value of Black life. Regarding this absence among White theologians, Robinson observes:

> They have little to say on the idea that, in the context of the United States, human categorizations of persons of color embedded in theological constructions and ecclesial practices have diminished countless human lives and contravened the gospel's message of life abundant for those who profess faith in Jesus Christ.[51]

It is for this reason that Black scholars have always prioritized the value and dignity of

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48   Henry Holcombe Tucker, "Are We Orthodox on the Race Question?," *Christian Index*, March 22, 1883, quoted in Smith, *In His Image*, 265.
49   Smith, *In His Image*, 265.
50   Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 23.
51   Robinson, *Race and Theology*, 42.

Black life in their reflection, a subject which we'll look at briefly.

<p style="text-align:center">Anthropology in Black Thought and Making Value in a Racialized World</p>

The insistence by Black scholars of religion to present an affirming anthropological base in their work is due to two reasons. One, they are combating a trajectory of religious scholarship and practice that has been detrimental or indifferent to the inferior status accorded Black life. For Cone, an important question at the outset of *Black Theology and Black Power*, the first explicit text of Black theology, is: "How should I respond to a world which defines me as a nonperson?"[52] He continues:

> That he is a person is beyond question, not debatable. But when he attempts to relate as a person, the world demands that he respond as a thing. In this existential absurdity, what should he do? Should he respond as he knows himself to be, or as the world defines him?[53]

Two, explicitly articulating that Blacks are the objects of divine favor is an act of self-affirmation, one that allows their faith to be a part of "transforming the conditions that adversely affect black people's lives."[54]

Cone begins *Black Theology and Black Power* by appealing to existential philosophers and themes to ground Black personhood, even before moving on to the traditional loci of theology. He does this by explicating his usage of the expression "Black Power," noting the multiplicity of meanings it can have in a racially polarized society. Starting with Stokely Carmichael's militant utilization of "Black Power" in 1966, Cone brings the expression into the domain of theology by way of Camus and Paul

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52 James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997), 11.
53 Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 11.
54 Frederick L. Ware, "Methodologies in African American Theology," in *The Oxford Handbook of African American Theology*, eds. Katie G. Cannon and Anthony B. Pinn (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 125.

Tillich. Referencing Camus' *The Rebel* (1951), Cone contends that Black Power is the act

of rejecting intolerable situations and embracing states of affairs that cause one's

humanity to flourish.[55] Drawing on Tillich's *The Courage to Be* (1952) where Tillich talks

about the ethical stance one takes when they affirm their own existence in the face of

resistance, Cone articulates Black Power as "a humanizing force because it is the black

man's attempt to affirm his being, his attempt to be recognized as "Thou," in spite of the

"other," the white power which dehumanizes him."[56] Thus, for Cone:

> Black Power, in short, is an *attitude*, an inward affirmation of the essential worth
> of blackness. It means that the black man will not be poisoned by the stereotypes
> that others have of him, but will affirm from the depth of his soul: "Get used to
> me, I am not getting used to anyone."[57]

This is the burden of Black scholars in an antiblack world: combating the underlying

devaluing of Black life is not an option, but a necessity. Cone discusses the "existential

absurdity" involved in being Black and feeling a sharp "contradiction between *what is*

and *what ought to be*."[58] Cone continues:

> It is not that the black man is absurd or that the white society as such is absurd.
> Absurdity arises as the black man seeks to understand his place in the white
> world. The black man does not view himself as absurd; he views himself as
> human. But as he meets the white world and its values, he is confronted with an
> almighty No and *is defined as a thing*. This produces the absurdity.[59]

For Cone, Black Power is also consistent with the gospel of Jesus presented in Scripture.

The reason that the preceding statement is met with resistance is strictly due to a

deformed ontology that afflicts our reading of Scripture:

> Our chief difficulty in coping with the relationship between Black Power and
> Christian love arises from the theological failure to interpret the New Testament

55 Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 6.
56 Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 7.
57 Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 8. Emphasis in original.
58 Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 8–9. Emphasis in original.
59 Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 11. Emphasis added.

message of salvation in such a way that it will have meaning for oppressed blacks in America. We still use, for the most part, traditional religious language which really was created for a different age and, to a large degree, for the Western white society. The New Testament message of God's love to man is still embedded in thought-forms totally alien to blacks whose life experiences are unique to themselves. The message is presented to blacks as if they shared the white cultural tradition. We still talk of salvation in white terms, love with a Western perspective, and thus never ask the question, What are the theological implications of God's love for the black man in America? Therefore when we are confronted with blacks with a new sense of themselves, alien to the Western definition of the black man and, to some degree, even alien to the Western view of humanity, our language seems to fail us as an attempt is made to "fit him in."[60]

Ware, without naming it as such, picks up on this notion of absurdity in his treatment of theological anthropology. For Ware, anthropology in African-American theology is associated with (but not defined by) the "tragic experience of Africans entering the New World as slaves."[61] America, for Blacks, represents a "crisis" situation, one in which Blacks coexist in a "plural[istic] but unequal society" that espouses a system of values that it never intended to apply to Blacks.[62] Audre Lorde expresses this ontological insight well:

> Even within the women's movement, we have had to fight, and still do, for that very visibility which also renders us most vulnerable, our Blackness. For to survive in the mouth of this dragon we call america, we have had to learn this first and most vital lesson—that we were never meant to survive. Not as human beings.[63]

Ware, like Cone, zeroes in on the anthropological norm of Black non-personhood as something that must be addressed:

> One's humanity, which was often questioned or denied, was of no consequence in deciding one's status before the law. Not only was the African's identity as an African in crisis, but the African's essential humanity also was and is in crisis. The slave system, designed for the exploitation of black labor, placed black people at the level of property, like livestock bartered, sold, and passed from one

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60   Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 49.
61   Ware, *African American Theology*, 107.
62   Ware, *African American Theology*, 107–108.
63   Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (New York: Crossing Press, 2007), 42.

generation of owners to the next. Chattel slavery was an anomaly in human history. Before the Atlantic Slave Trade, slavery was never a lifelong condition and never deprived persons of fundamental respect as human beings.[64]

Ware's comment about the historically unique dehumanization of Blacks is worth noting, and highlights the depth of disdain for blackness that perdures in various strains until today. Ware's discussion includes dualism, the image of God, "blackness" as a symbol, and freedom, before ending his section on anthropology with a discussion on personhood, emphasizing that true humanity entails the right to self-transcendence, the capacity to define oneself. This ability, which occurs in an encounter with "the supremely perfect Other," allows one to "transcend limiting or false conceptions of their identity," resulting in a new construction of identity.

The theme of embodiment performs a vital role in Black theology since Black bodies serve as the literal site of hostility for antiblack hatred in America. In this regard, the perspective of womanist theologians is important, given the fact that their embodiment as Black females situates them at the nexus of antiblack discrimination and gender oppression. For Copeland, the foregrounding of poor women of color in theological anthropology opens up a new horizon: "What might it mean for poor women of color to grasp themselves as human subjects, to grapple with the meaning of liberation and freedom?"[65] Thus, womanist theologians provide a helpful and informative intersectional analysis of theological anthropology. Kimberlé Crenshaw defines intersectionality as a concept that recognizes that:

> many of the experiences Black women face are not subsumed within the traditional boundaries of race or gender discrimination as these boundaries are currently understood, and that the intersection of racism and sexism factors into

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64   Ware, *African American Theology*, 108.
65   Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 88.

Black women's lives in ways that cannot be captured wholly by looking at the race or gender dimensions of those experiences separately.[66]

In her work, *Black Womanist Ethics*, influential womanist theologian Katie G. Cannon begins by discussing her attempts as a child to harmonize the seemingly incommensurable "affirmations of Christianity within the context of a racially segregated society."[67] Immediately, the heart of her analysis goes to a troublesome anthropology: "How could Christians who were white, flatly and openly, refuse to treat as fellow human beings Christians who had African ancestry?"[68] Cannon's project attempts to recover a significant sense of Black female agency, rejecting the male bias that has characterized the theological and ethical reflection representative of the Black community.[69] After presenting a study on the moral situation of Black women from the early seventeenth century until the late twentieth century, she inaugurates a unique methodology in womanist theology by treating the Black female literary tradition as a source of theology. In particular, the life and work of Zora Neale Hurston loom large. Hurston, by most accounts, would seem to be an odd choice for someone seeking to develop a particularly Christian theological ethic. Though her father, John Hurston, was a Baptist preacher and regional leader of the Baptist churches in South Florida,[70] Hurston herself was not particularly religious. Although there was an element of spirituality in some of her work, her essay "Religion" is noted for its unflinchingly honest portrayal of someone grappling with a skepticism toward the Christian faith of their upbringing; humanist undertones are

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66   Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43 (July 1991): 1244.
67   Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics*, 1.
68   Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics*, 1.
69   Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics*, 6.
70   Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics*, 100.

apparent.[71] Nevertheless, I would contend that what makes Hurston a valuable source for womanist ethics is the way in which her literary production and biography articulate a unique attempt to negotiate identity and value in a world of intersectional oppression. Hurston, Cannon notes, was "twice stigmatized—once for race and once for gender."[72] Notwithstanding the fact that Hurston had an aptitude for (and some training in) anthropology, a skill she credited with granting her a particular insight,[73] her struggles to retain an "invisible dignity" in the face of poverty, gender discrimination from Black men, and racism from Whites, make her an ideal subject for Cannon.[74] Cannon, seeking a redemptive anthropological norm as the ground for her project, notes the "matrix of virtues which emerge from the real-lived texture of the Black community" and the "positive sense of self" that Hurston observed among Blacks who were most marginalized.[75]

This section has attempted to demonstrate that the anthropological issue is critical to Black religious scholars as they develop their thought in an antiblack world. However, the foregoing analysis could be extended to other domains (i.e., the centrality of an

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71 Hurston is often cited as an example of a prominent Black humanist. See her chapter "Religion" in *Dust Tracks on a Road: An Autobiography* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1996), 215–226. This chapter is also anthologized in *African-American Humanism* edited by Norm R. Allen, Jr. (Prometheus Books, 1991).

72 Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics*, 108.

73 Hurston worked as an apprentice with Columbia University professor Franz Boas, the "Father of Modern Anthropology," after impressing Gladys Reichard, a former student of Boas' and professor of anthropology at Barnard College (Cannon, 103). Hurston was later offered a Rosenwald Fellowship to study anthropology and folklore at Columbia, but it was withdrawn less than a month later (Cannon, 10).

74 Cannon uses the concept of "invisible dignity" as an organizing principle in her study of Hurston's life in Part IV of *Black Womanist Ethics*. She borrows this concept from Mary Burgher's study of the autobiographical tradition of Black women. See "Images of Self and Race in the Autobiographies of Black Women" in *Sturdy Black Bridges: Visions of Black Women in Literature*, eds. Roseann P. Bell, Bettye J. Parker, and Beverly Guy-Sheftall (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1979).

75 Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics*, 8.

affirmation of Black dignity in non-Western/European thought is not isolated to theological reflection). For example, Gordon notes that philosophical anthropology, the study of "problems raised by the human being as a subject of study,"[76] has become central in Africana philosophy. He explains:

> [P]hilosophical anthropology is central in an area of thought that is dedicated to the understanding of beings whose humanity has been called into question or challenged in the modern era. The consequences of lost peoplehood, of denied humanness, are severe in that they lead to groups or kinds of peoples being treated as property (slavery), as waste to be eliminated (genocides, holocausts), as subhuman or animals (racism).[77]

In fact, in analyzing the forms of philosophy that have emerged from the continent of Africa, Gordon finds philosophical anthropology to be their *philosophia prima*, given the fact that their indigenous African identities made them less than human in Europe and Asia.[78] Ultimately, Gordon finds philosophical anthropology to be foregrounded in *all* Black philosophy:

> Yet there is no black philosophical text . . . that lacks an appeal to some kind of humanism or to the humanity of black people, often defended in the form of a philosophical anthropology. The obvious reason for this is that these texts are being written by people whose domination is marked by their dehumanization; it would be contradictory for them to fight for a humanity that they must reject.[79]

In other words, European writers can afford to assume the anthropology of the ambient intellectual culture since it tacitly promotes a system of European superiority. No such option is available for Black scholars; this debilitating value system must be named, deconstructed, and replaced.

The temptation in a project like this, where theodical concerns and deforming anthropologies are considered, is to view the Black experience in America as one solely

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76   Gordon, *An Introduction to Africana Philosophy*, 13.
77   Gordon, *An Introduction to Africana Philosophy*, 13.
78   Gordon, *An Introduction to Africana Philosophy*, 196.
79   Gordon, *An Introduction to Africana Philosophy*, 123.

defined by deprivation and oppression.[80] These are critical themes that do need attention,

especially given the relative lack of importance they have played in the formation of

concepts and meaning in Western thought. And, in this section, I have attempted to

demonstrate that a recovery of an affirming ontology has never been ancillary to Black

life. Nevertheless, it may be helpful to note at this point that Black life has also been

characterized by family, resilience, triumph, and joy. In *God of the Oppressed*, Cone

describes his experience in joining the Black church during his childhood:

> It was a natural response, a response consistent with the beauty and joy of black
> life and an expression of my deep yearning for human definitions not bound by
> this earthly sphere. The black Church taught me how to deal with the
> contradictions of life and provided a way to create meaning in a society not of my
> own making.[81]

Emerging Models of Humanity

Robinson devotes an entire chapter to the recovery of humanity in the work of

theologians of color. Finding theological anthropology to be an obvious focus when

racism is discussed in a religious context, she writes:

> What does it mean to be created in the image of God? What does it mean to be
> fully human as revealed in Jesus of Nazareth who is the Christ? What does it
> mean to be sinful yet graced creatures with the potential to become fully as God
> created us to be? Persons of color readily recognize the significance of theological
> anthropology and the struggle for fully human existence, even as racialized
> expressions of this doctrine escape the consciousness of many, perhaps most,
> white theologians.[82]

Up to this point, I have looked at the deformed ontological status accorded to Blacks and

have highlighted the oppositional stance this ontology has engendered in the works of

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80   Recall the concerns expressed by Eddie Glaude and Victor Anderson in Chapter I about a
     calcified ontology of blackness.
81   Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 2.
82   Robinson, *Race and Theology*, 29.

Black theologians and philosophers. At this juncture, I want to probe three scholars of

color representing different cultural backgrounds and engage their reconstruction of

theological anthropology. That is, how do they define humanity and its relation to God in

a world which has commodified persons? Hopkins sees this commodification as the

inauguration of a new religion, one in which personhood is connected to product

ownership and consumption. Hopkins writes:

> Prior to globalization, especially in the Third World indigenous communities,
> human beings were valued for who they were as members of the human race
> created by some divine power. Now globalization rebaptizes them into a new man
> and woman, where the measure of worth becomes what one consumes.
> Globalization's religion forges new tastes and sensibilities throughout the world
> while it attempts to manufacture one transcendent culture—the culture of market
> consumption. A true human being becomes one who actually possesses
> commodities or one whose goal in life is to do so.[83]

Hopkins' primary foray into theological anthropology is *Being Human: Race,*

Culture, and Religion (Fortress Press, 2005). Hopkins, a Black professor of theology at

the University of Chicago Divinity School, acknowledges that a theological anthropology

emerging from a Black liberationist perspective would be "quite layered," given the

complex ways that "transcendence and materiality" interact.[84] Hopkins' explicit goal is to

engage African-American folktales as a theological source and starting point in

constructing a "*liberating* theological anthropology," one that responds to the "practical

urgency of creating an alternative vision of what humans in the United States and, indeed,

the world human community, can become."[85] For Hopkins, three essential components

are necessary in order to construct a theological anthropology on firm foundations:

83   Hopkins, *Heart and Head*, 134.
84   Dwight N. Hopkins, *Being Human: Race, Culture, and Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 1.
85   Hopkins, *Being Human*, 4. Emphasis added.

culture, self, and race.[86] An attention to culture provides four important benefits for

Hopkins' project. First, "unraveling . . . the contours of culture"[87] is required to attain

clarity regarding the nature of human experience that is assumed in human-divine

engagement. Second, Hopkins' centering of African-American folktales in his project

presupposes a certain understanding of how that particular culture "organizes itself

through rituals, symbols, language, functions, structures, and primordial beliefs."[88] Third,

Hopkins' intentionally Christian stance already assumes an understanding of divinity

"descending vertically into the horizontal cultural plane."[89] The notion of culture, thus,

appears to be the best organizing principle with which one can understand the various

ways that the Christian community, particularly, has explained the nature of its religious

experience. Fourth, the Incarnation and God's specific decision to enter the world in

solidarity with "people in dire predicament"[90] means that "Christian revelation is a

cultural dynamic colored by the social conditions and collective experiences of peripheral

communities in the biblical witness."[91]

For Hopkins, an analysis of the *self* must be balanced with a consideration of

selves—who we are in and as community. Copeland affirms this communal aspect as

central to a theological anthropology rooted in the experiences of Black (female) life.

This, ultimately, was the gift of emancipation: freedom *from* enslavement permitted the

freedom *to* be human, to love, and to be in solidarity with others (i.e., to be "human

together").[92] For Hopkins, forging a healthy collectivism is crucial since an Africana

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86 Hopkins, *Being Human*, 3.
87 Hopkins, *Being Human*, 54.
88 Hopkins, *Being Human*, 54.
89 Hopkins, *Being Human*, 55.
90 Hopkins, *Being Human*, 56.
91 Hopkins, *Being Human*, 56.
92 Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 49.

account of the self presupposes the interdependence of the self with others: those living

and those who came before (ancestors). This interdependence is pragmatic, transcendent,

and spiritual,[93] and is driven by an overarching vision that is organized around a

community (as opposed to a "random gathering of individual selves")[94] with common

values and the pursuit of a common good.[95] The concept of *solidarity* is important here.

Copeland sees solidarity as an integral component of a new anthropology, one in which

true personhood is characterized by our willingness to embrace the Other without

obliterating particularities.[96] Massingale sees solidarity as "a constant effort to build a

human community where every social group participates equitably in social life and

contributes its genius for the good of all."[97] Solidarity is most meaningful as a partnership

with those whose humanity has been questioned the most. Massingale notes:

> Since the poor, racial outcasts, and the culturally marginalized are those whose personhood is most often attacked, questioned, or reviled, the acid test of solidarity is our sense of connection with and commitment to the poor and excluded.[98]

In his chapter on race, Hopkins mines the disciplines of philosophy and

anthropology, evaluating the ideas that provided the foundation for a racist missiology in

Christianity. Drawing upon Jesus imperative in Matthew 28:18–20 ("The Great

Commission"), Hopkins comments:

> [W]ith these political orders of making the entire world Christian, European and North American white men set sail to turn blacks (that is, dark-skinned peoples) into good Christians. The infectious spread of Jesus' gospel of absorbing the Other called for dominating the earth with one truth and one belief.[99]

93   Hopkins, *Being Human*, 82–83.
94   Hopkins, *Being Human*, 85.
95   Hopkins, *Being Human*, 85–86.
96   Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 89–90.
97   Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church*, 117.
98   Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church*, 117.
99   Hopkins, *Being Human*, 148.

An anthropological norm of Black non-personhood was a significant influence in early

Christian missions. "White Christian men looked at the black bodies of Africans and

wondered whether or not they were actually human beings. Were they really created in

God's image, thereby allowing them a God-human connection?"[100] This notion of Black

inferiority, as discussed earlier, was a theological solution to an economic problem: what

should be done with a labor pool that must be severely exploited (in order to make a

profit) in the face of a Christian zeal for missions? Ibram X. Kendi writes:

> The marriage of Christian slavery seemed destined. But enslaved Africans balked. The vast majority of Africans in early America firmly resisted the religion of their masters. And their masters balked, too. Enslavers would not, or could not, listen to sermons to convert their slaves. Saving their crops each year was more important to them than saving souls. But of course they could not say that, and risk angering their ministers. Enslavers routinely defended their inaction by claiming that enslaved Africans were too barbaric to be converted.[101]

In concluding his work, Hopkins formulates a nonnegotiable anthropological principle

that should govern any attempt at a liberative theology:

> all human beings are created with a spiritual purpose (or transcendent or ultimate vision) to share in the material resources of the earth. Therefore the earth and human relationships do not belong to any one group or community.[102]

Hopkins sees this principle as encapsulating his turn toward community, solidarity, our

conception of the *self* (reconstructed as *self*-in-community), and notions of culture—all

augmented by his appeal to Black folktales as "cultural indices of the positive encounter

between the black poor and the sacred vision."[103] Hopkins' anthropological principle is

similar to Peter J. Paris' principle of nonracism that he takes to be the essence of Black

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100 Hopkins, *Being Human*, 150.
101 Kendi, *Stamped From The Beginning*, 46.
102 Hopkins, *Being Human*, 168.
103 Hopkins, *Being Human*, 169.

religious thought: "the parenthood of God and the kinship of all peoples."[104] For Paris,

this principle summarizes the Black Christian tradition's affirmation of a "biblical

anthropology which they believe strongly affirms the equality of all persons under God

regardless of race or any other natural quality."[105]

In *The Wounded Heart of God: The Asian Concept of Han and the Christian

Doctrine of Sin* (Abingdon Press, 1993), Andrew Sung Park, a Korean-American

professor of theology and ethics at United Theological Seminary (United Methodist

Church), explores the Asian (especially, Korean) concept of *han* as the organizing

principle around which he develops a robust theology of sin and justification. Park

attempts to articulate the notion of *han* to a Western audience, an exacting task given the

multiplicity of meanings it denotes. *Han*, Park states, is "essentially untranslatable," a

difficult term to grasp even in the Korean language.[106] In attempting to communicate the

meaning of *han*, Park appeals to a wide range of metaphors and concepts. *Han* is "the

pain of the *victims* of sin,"[107] "the ineffable experience of deep bitterness and

helplessness,"[108] "the depths of human suffering,"[109] "the abysmal experience of pain,"[110]

the accumulated "frustrated hope" that occurs when "goals are blocked,"[111] "the collapsed

pain of the heart due to . . . oppression and repression,"[112] "pain rooted in the anguish of

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104 Peter J. Paris, *The Social Teaching of the Black Churches* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 10.
105 Paris, *The Social Teaching of the Black Churches*, 11.
106 Andrew Sung Park, *The Wounded Heart of God: The Asian Concept of Han and the Christian Doctrine of Sin* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1993), 15.
107 Park, *The Wounded Heart of God*, 10. Emphasis in original.
108 Park, *The Wounded Heart of God*, 10.
109 Park, *The Wounded Heart of God*, 15.
110 Park, *The Wounded Heart of God*, 15.
111 Park, *The Wounded Heart of God*, 16.
112 Park, *The Wounded Heart of God*, 16.

the victim,"[113] "the collapsed feeling of sadness, despair, and bitterness,"[114] a "negative letting go which is desolate, barren, bitter, and meaningless,"[115] the "inimical letting go produced by destructive forces,"[116] "resentment plus bitterness,"[117] and "the wound produced by . . . repeated abuse and injustice," just to name some of the many expressions Park utilizes. All of the above can be summarized in the following definition:

> 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. Han reverberates in the souls of survivors of the Holocaust, Palestinians in the occupied territories, victims of racial discrimination, battered wives, children involved in divorces, the victims of child-molestation, laid-off workers, the unemployed, and exploited workers.[118]

Han affects individuals and groups and can be unconscious or conscious, as well as active or passive.

Although his primary emphasis is on the human manifestations of *han*, a critical part of Park's argument is that God Himself experiences *han*. Drawing upon the work of Anselm, Martin Luther, Moltmann, a Japanese pastor and theologian named Kazoh Kitamori, as well as Scriptural images of God's intense connectedness to His creation, Park contends that God, in the Christ-event, experiences *han*. God, in His decision to be in relation to humanity, suffers the wounds of sin because His "love for humanity is too ardent to be apathetic toward suffering humanity."[119] Similar to Cone's appropriation of the death of Jesus as God's identification with Black suffering,[120] Park situates the

113 Park, *The Wounded Heart of God*, 17.
114 Park, *The Wounded Heart of God*, 17.
115 Park, *The Wounded Heart of God*, 18.
116 Park, *The Wounded Heart of God*, 18.
117 Park, *The Wounded Heart of God*, 19.
118 Park, *The Wounded Heart of God*, 10.
119 Park, *The Wounded Heart of God*, 121.
120 Cone, *God of the Oppressed*. See chapters 6 and 7.

Crucifixion as the primary example of "God's han erupted in the middle of history," God's powerful challenge to oppressors "to make their choice between repentance and eternal death."[121]

Park's project informs a liberative theological anthropology in two ways. First, *han* allows Park to interrogate the implications of dehumanizing, group-based oppression that deforms a class of individuals by generational and continual injustice. *Han*, in this regard, permits Park to trace the healthy and unhealthy ways that communities respond when their personhood is denied. In this regard, Park appeals to concrete cases in world history, from the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, to the Armenian genocide, to the melancholic nature of African-American blues and Jewish songs.

Second, and more importantly, Park informs a critical theological anthropology by his assessment of how the global community can resolve *han*. Recognizing that, since the time of Constantine, the Church has been led by oppressors—"elite groups whose theology has dominated the church"[122]—Park puts forward four steps for a positive resolution of *han*: awakening, understanding, envisagement/envisionment, and enactment/engagement. *Awakening* refers to the dual recognition of the reality of suffering as well as the causes of suffering. The latter element resembles the concept of *kairos* in liberation theology, the recognition that the oppression one is experiencing is not destined or divine or natural (contra Aristotle), but contingent and human-caused, and therefore *now* is always an opportune time to fight for justice. *Understanding* is the deeply empathic attempt to understand the *han* that others experience, one that goes beyond a rational apprehension to the full participation of life with the Other. In this

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121 Park, *The Wounded Heart of God*, 124.
122 Park, *The Wounded Heart of God*, 137.

attempt, the recognition of the humanity and the suffering of the other, we are participants in the dissolution of their *han*: "Pain that is shared is pain no more. The han that is understood is han no more."[123] *Enactment/Engagement* refers to compassionately confronting *han*, empowering victims to "take action in dismantling han-causing elements in the world."[124] Although this confrontation is primarily geared toward eradicating injustice, it's also a call to confront the pain that is experienced in the world and confront oppressors with a call to repentance and the invitation to participate in the construction of a better world.[125]

Park devotes the most space to the third step, *envisagement/envisionment*. Park writes that, in order to resolve *han*, "we need a new worldview, one which will reform the systems that have produced han in the world."[126] Here, as with Hopkins, the notion of community takes center stage. The "new worldview" that Park envisions revolves around interconnectedness, a term that Park infuses with Biblical as well as scientific significance. Park discusses a "Cosmic Eucharist," the idea that all of humanity is related to each other and to God in such a manner that we realize that "others' han is our han and vice versa . . . In fact, we know little of our han unless we know the han of others."[127] The Christian sacrament of holy communion, for example, serves as a significant rite that, if properly understood, reorients our understanding of not just the Church, but our place in the world. Park notes:

> Holy Communion is the rite which reaffirms this indivisible unity of the human family. By sharing the consecrated bread and wine, we recognize the interpenetration of our individual beings. The Johannine writer describes this

123 Park, *The Wounded Heart of God*, 138.
124 Park, *The Wounded Heart of God*, 171.
125 Park, *The Wounded Heart of God*, 171, 175.
126 Park, *The Wounded Heart of God*, 147.
127 Park, *The Wounded Heart of God*, 151.

interpenetration between God and Christ: "That they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that thou hast sent me" (Jn. 17:21).[128]

For Park, this opens us up to a newer (and better) conception of human nature. Park even creatively imagines what this notion of community would look like if implemented at various levels of society, such as the economy, politics, and ecology.

Finally, in *Racism and God-Talk: A Latino/a Perspective* (New York University Press, 2008), Rubén Rosario Rodríguez, a Puerto Rican professor of systematic theology at Saint Louis University, probes North American racism in dialogue with Latin American theology. Rodríguez, consonant with the other subaltern voices that we have discussed, sees the discussion of racism as inseparable from a recovery of an affirming theological anthropology:

> Theological anthropology—the Christian understanding of what it means to be human in light of our relationship to the Creator—is central to any discussion of the church's response to the problematic of race. A Christian doctrine of humanity draws upon various aspects of traditional church teaching—especially the doctrines of Creation, Christ, and the Trinity—in order to present an understanding of humankind grounded in the knowledge of God.[129]

Rodríguez acknowledges that this discussion is difficult due to a suspicion regarding "the very possibility of reliable knowledge of God as evidenced by Christianity's troubled relationship with such dehumanizing institutions as slavery and apartheid."[130] Thus, Rodríguez begins his analysis by looking at the relationship of Christianity to culture, defining culture as:

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128 Park, *The Wounded Heart of God*, 150.
129 Rubén Rosario Rodríguez, *Racism and God-Talk: A Latino/a Perspective* (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 4.
130 Rodríguez, *Racism and God-Talk*, 4.

> those attitudes, ideas, languages, practices, and institutions that differentiate specific populations from one another while recognizing that the very factors that constitute cultural identity are socially constructed and continually negotiated.[131]

Rodríguez's goal in this text is to provide a theological response grounded in a Latin American religious sensibility that can effectively recover a Christian response to racism that he takes to be more faithful to Scripture and tradition than the history of the North American Church has indicated. However, before he begins this reconstruction, he addresses what he terms the "Fundamental Contradiction," namely, Christianity's complicity in both racist practices and the perpetuation of racist ideologies. Rodríguez, I would argue, makes two important moves in this section. First, after a thorough discussion of the roots of racism founded upon Biblical interpretations, texts from antiquity, and flawed biological theories, Rodríguez looks to critical race theory (CRT) as a methodological resource for a theological response. In particular, Rodríguez sees CRT's notion of *racialism* as fruitful for discussions about racism in public discourse. In contradistinction to a trajectory emerging from the Civil Rights Movement that favored "color-blindness"[132] as the primary way to resolve race-based inequalities, CRT contends that color-blindness actually perpetuates the problem by ignoring the prevailing ethos of America. CRT identifies "white supremacy as the defining ideology of North American society."[133] Racialism, then, is CRT's way of recognizing the structures and ideologies—in lockstep with liberal progressivist notions of racial equality—that dangerously render

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131 Rodríguez, *Racism and God-Talk*, 7.

132 The increasing prevalence of work on ableism has been informative in critiquing the metaphors that find currency in our public discourse, causing us to reconsider the ways that we associate the language of particular cognitive or physical disabilities with negative or undesirable qualities. The phrase "color-*blind*ness" certainly falls in this camp. It is used here only because of its presence in Rodríguez's work and its common usage in discussions regarding this topic.

133 Rodríguez, *Racism and God-Talk*, 60. Note the similarity to Mills' "racial contract."

continuing race-based discrimination invisible under the guise of a world where race

allegedly no longer matters as much as it used to. One hears such an appeal to color

blindness in the majority written decision in the 2007 *Parents Involved in Community*

Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1 case where Supreme Court Chief Justice John

Roberts opined, "The way to stop discrimination on the basis of race is to stop

discriminating on the basis of race."[134] One also hears this expressed in the well-meaning

but misguided Christian sentiment that "we are all one." In response, CRT advocates a

race-consciousness approach. Rodríguez writes:

> The civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s fought primarily for expanded
> legal representation for minorities and was characterized by faith in the legal
> system and a belief in social progress. CRT is distinguished by its dissatisfaction
> with liberalism and civil rights litigation. Specifically, CRT is an effort to expose
> white cultural domination in all its forms—legal, economic, religion, and so on—
> since matters of justice and socioeconomic well-being are inextricably linked to
> the cultural milieu.[135]

Because racism is endemic to America, even the best-intentioned efforts at anti-racism

will still benefit the dominant population. However, because we do theology within a

culture, and because theologies are all equally impacted by the situatedness of its

practitioners, "it is important to develop an interpretive methodology that enables the

theologian to properly describe and critique the effects of racial and ethnic particularity in

theological construction."[136] Ultimately, Rodríguez wants to construct a theological

response to racism that does not offer a false rapprochement based upon an

assimilationist framework in which the experiences and stances of the marginalized are

suppressed in pursuit of a false harmony. Rodríguez seems to indicate that, in addition to

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134 Chief Justice John Roberts, "*Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School
    District No. 1*," 551 U.S. 701 (U.S. 2007), 40–41.
135 Rodríguez, *Racism and God-Talk*, 61.
136 Rodríguez, *Racism and God-Talk*, 64.

lacking authenticity, such an approach has also proven to be futile. This leads to the second maneuver that Rodríguez makes that I find valuable.

In the same way that Hopkins appealed to African-American folktales, and Park found resources in the Korean conception of *han*, Rodríguez looks to resources indigenous to his own Hispanic identity as a guide toward constructing an affirming theological anthropology. For Rodríguez, this concept is *mestizaje*—a Spanish term referring to the cultural and religious mixing of peoples (a *mestizo* is someone who has both European and Amerindian heritage).[137] Given the tendency in many previously-colonized cultures to classify Europeans at the top of the social hierarchy and Amerindians at or near the bottom, *mestizaje* represents a repudiation of that hierarchical classification by recognizing the diverse legacies of communities and a rejection of any notion of racial or ethnic purity. *Mestizaje*, then, serves as a gathering term, one that unites U.S. Hispanics under a banner of pride based upon shared experiences in America, while still recognizing and affirming the diversity of cultures and the miscegenation that characterizes many of the people groups ineffectively categorized as "Hispanic" or "Latino/a." For Rodríguez, *mestizaje* serves as "a living reminder that God loves all of humanity in its great diversity and does not condone social stratification and relations of domination."[138]

While retaining the importance of *mestizaje* as an important metaphor within Latin American theology, Rodríguez acknowledges the extremely complicated history

137 Rodríguez defines *mestizaje* as a metaphor for "mutual cultural exchange" (4). In a footnote from the introduction, Rodríguez notes: "While in North America racial stratification resulted in the practice of identifying all mixed-race black/white persons as black, Latin American *mestizaje* often recognized the European ancestry of persons of mixed (*mestizo*/mulatto) background, thereby allowing them a place in the dominant society at the expense of their ethnicity" (251 n.1).

138 Rodríguez, *Racism and God-Talk*, 66.

that the concept has had in Latino/a thought. In this regard, Rodríguez is appreciative of and yet critical of Virgilio Elizondo's exposition of the concept in his theological work.[139] Elizondo, Rodríguez contends, wants to employ *mestizaje* as an emancipatory concept, however his appeal to the metaphor has an unnecessarily essentialist character, perhaps due to at least three senses of the term that Rodríguez sees in Elizondo's work: *mestizaje* as biology, *mestizaje* as cultural identity, and *mestizaje* as a universal Christian identity.[140] For example, Elizondo connects a Hispanic cultural identity so tightly to a Roman Catholic ecclesial identity, that he claims that when a Hispanic ceases to participate in the religious practices common to a Hispanic Catholic sensibility, "he or she ceases to be a Hispanic."[141]

In doing the reconstructive work in Part II of his text, Rodríguez examines the "doctrine of *imago Dei* through the lens of *mestizaje* in order to articulate a more inclusive theological anthropology that embraces the racially and ethnically "other,"" utilizing "*mestizaje* as a Christological metaphor" that provides a new perspective on the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation.[142] Jesus Christ is a *mestizo* because, like many Hispanics, He embodies two cultures (Galilean and divine). Drawing upon the work of Latino theologian Luis Pedraja, Rodríguez embraces a Hispanic reading of Christology that enhances the notion of Christ as incarnate by affirming that Christ is enfleshed *presently* through human acts of love.[143] Hearkening back to the discussion in Chapter II

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139 See Elizondo's *Galilean Journey: The Mexican-American Promise* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000) and *The Future is Mestizo: Life Where Cultures Meet* (Boulder, CO: University Press of Colorado, 2000).

140 Rodríguez, *Racism and God-Talk*, 90.

141 Virgilio P. Elizondo, foreword to *Mañana: Christian Theology from a Hispanic Perspective*, by Justo L. González (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1990), 17.

142 Rodríguez, *Racism and God-Talk*, 176. Emphasis in original.

143 Rodríguez, *Racism and God-Talk*, 201.

of this project regarding the dangers of redemptive suffering, Rodríguez wants to rearticulate the doctrine of the Atonement in such a way that Christ's work remains salvific and a source of hope without a "fetishizing" of suffering that leads to a this-worldly fatalism.[144] Against this, Rodríguez emphasizes the political realities of the work of Christ, foregrounding His Galilean identity as a choice to identify with a "marginalized minority population organized to resist imperial domination."[145] The work of Christ was not finished on the cross, but is present whenever the hungry are fed, the thirsty are nourished, the stranger welcomed (Matthew 25). Thus, similar to Douglas' work in *The Black Christ*, our Christology is corrupt when we ignore the liberative, cross-cultural, decorum-trangressing, and empowering ministry of Christ in order to focus on the spiritual-salvific work that leaves concrete inequities untouched.

The purpose of these three anthropological excursions is to see how different scholars of color representing distinct faith and ethnic backgrounds navigate the problem that Du Bois referred to in his prophetic work, *The Souls of Black Folk*, as "the problem of the color-line."[146] The work of Hopkins, Park, and Rodríguez is notable against the backdrop of a field of theological anthropology that proceeds as if a theology that articulates the meaning of being human without due attention paid to the tragic legacy of material and theoretical dehumanization could be complete. In her brief survey of introductory theology textbooks, Robinson finds White authors severely lacking both in their willingness to engage scholars of color regarding the meaning of human being and in their capacity to see theological anthropology outside the lens of a normative

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144 Rodríguez, *Racism and God-Talk*, 201.
145 Rodríguez, *Racism and God-Talk*, 202.
146 Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folks*, 3.

whiteness.[147] What is interesting to note is the inverse importance given to this topic by the three authors just discussed; whereas White theologians often traffic in universals in constructing theological anthropologies, scholars of color begin with the "profound recognition and identification of the dehumanizing conditions experienced by countless peoples and often in the name of God."[148] Robinson expands on this insight:

> Theologians of color, across the landscape of the last forty years, have interrogated in virtual unanimity racist discourse and practice and articulated theological anthropologies that decenter the normativity of white Western assumptions and epistemology. Given the experience of dehumanization and often the internalization of the logic of oppression, they construct the meaning of human being by deconstructing racist discourse and practice centered in whiteness and reconstructing the humanity of all peoples as created in the image of God.[149]

In evaluating the theological anthropologies of these three scholars, a few common themes stand out. First, in recognition of the fact that mainstream theological anthropology has ignored the dehumanizing historical position that Christianity has taken with regard to people of non-European descent, theologians of color find solace and resources in themes, values, and ideas indigenous to their own cultural location. That is, they find the Western Christian and intellectual tradition woefully deficient as a source for life-giving themes that promote a divinely-ordained notion of flourishing for all. This was, in fact, part of the revolution in thought of Cone's innovative approach. Reflecting upon *Black Theology & Black Power* two decades after its publication, Cone notes the critique he received from Black scholars regarding the sources he appealed to (mostly a Barthian Christology) in erecting a theological framework for Black liberation:

> "How can you call what you have written 'black theology,'" African-American theologians pointedly asked me, "when most of the theological sources you use to

147 Robinson, *Race and Theology*, 42–53.
148 Robinson, *Race and Theology*, 42.
149 Robinson, *Race and Theology*, 41–42.

articulate your position are derived from the white theology you claim to be heretical?" "Your theology," they continued, "is black in name only and not in reality. To be black in the latter sense, you must derive the sources and the norm *from the community in whose name you speak.*"[150]

This idea, the need to construct theories using the materials of one's own community, is common in critical and postcolonial studies, captured elegantly in Lorde's assertion that "*[T]he 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.*"[151] For Hopkins, this appeal to indigenous resources allows him to approach theological anthropology from a radically different starting point. He writes:

> We examine theological anthropology from a black theology vantage-point not only because conceptual clarity demands such a move. The practical urgency of creating an alternative vision of what humans in the United States and, indeed, the world human community can become also compels us to attempt a liberating theological anthropology. Can we say a word about a healthy God-human encounter, in which each person enjoys self-love and a healthy ego; in which human beings come together to found positive and harmonious communities; in which women and men support and live in balance with plants, animals, and the natural elements; and in which people reflect intentionally about their high calling (which they receive from some greater force or being other than themselves) to anchor their human being with the poor and the working class?[152]

For Hopkins, the "reigning theological anthropology in the United States" is marked by a "demonic individualism" that manifests itself in "(1) historical amnesia, (2) instantaneous fulfillment of desire, and (3) [a] 'we're number one' mythology."[153] Hopkins, as do many non-White scholars challenging the status quo, expands his analysis to include not only US failures on race, but also its failures regarding gender, ecology, and class. How, Hopkins wonders, can we understand ourselves as a national community if we do not understand the salient facts of our cultural formation and the ways in which we have

150 Cone, *Black Theology & Black Power*, xi–xii. Emphasis added.
151 Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 112. Emphasis in original.
152 Hopkins, *Being Human*, 4.
153 Hopkins, *Being Human*, 4–5.

violated the putatively inviolable rights of our own communities? Furthermore, a nation

that is satiated with technologies that instantaneously fulfill our every whim cannot (and

does not want to) find time to invest in uplifting the status of all of its citizens. Finally,

the hyper-patriotism of the US inculcates within its citizens a lack of empathy for the

Other and a concern only for victory and domination. In contrast to this, Hopkins avers

that notions such as community, mutuality, relationality, nurturing, uplift, compassion,

etc., are more reflective of authentic humanity. For Park, appealing to *han* as the basis for

his anthropology was based upon his own personal family history. His parents were born

during the Japanese occupation of Korea, sharing in the sufferings of Koreans at the

hands of the Japanese. Even though Japan was defeated in World War II and Korea

declared its independence in 1945, the North Korean government then confiscated all of

their possessions, including heirlooms that had been in their family for generations. They

escaped to South Korean and then became refugees, losing their grandfather along the

way. Eventually, they came to the United States in 1973, but less than a year later, Park

lost both of his parents in an automobile accident.[154] This, he writes, was "the darkest

time of my life."[155] Reflecting upon the centrality of *han* in his theological work, Park

observes:

> The deep pain of human agony has been a primary concern for my theological
> reflection. The issue of han has been more significant in my life than the problem
> of sin. Accordingly, my theological theme has been how to resolve the human
> suffering which wounds the heart of God. This book is an attempt to grapple with
> the problem of han in relation to sin.[156]

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154 Park, *The Wounded Heart of God*, 7.
155 Park, *The Wounded Heart of God*, 7.
156 Park, *The Wounded Heart of God*, 8.

Rodríguez finds significance in *mestizaje* because of the unique political and cultural affiliation he sees among Hispanics in the US. Most Latinos/as describe themselves in reference to their country of origin (e.g., "I am Mexican") even if they were born and raised in the US. Thus, to "self-identify as "Latino/a" or "Hispanic" is an act of political solidarity."[157] Rodríguez thus thought that the concept of *mestizaje* could become a "paradigm for Christian ethics" in the way that it both "respects difference and offers resistance to all forms of domination."[158]

Second, these models are a forceful repudiation of a "color-blind" approach. Any project that aims to recover the personhood of the marginalized but refuses to intentionally consider the ways in which race, gender, identity, etc., are critical factors in the construction of theory will be a project of futility. This is because "when it comes to developing theological anthropology, the majority of white intellectuals fail to specify that they are fashioning a *white* theological anthropology."[159] Karen Teel, a White Roman Catholic theologian, extends Du Bois' racial reflections into the twenty-first century, contending that the problem of race has always been and continues to be whiteness. Therefore, a failure to name this problem—that is, a failure to acknowledge how whiteness serves as a deep symbol to culture and religion—inevitably results in the status quo. Regarding the myriad ways that whiteness operates as a "system of social or structural injustice,"[160] she writes:

> When a white person gets a job interview before an equally well-qualified black person, whiteness may be working. When a white felon finds employment before a person of color without a criminal record, whiteness may be working. When people in communities of color are more likely than people in white communities

157 Rodríguez, *Racism and God-Talk*, 221.
158 Rodríguez, *Racism and God-Talk*, 221.
159 Hopkins, *Being Human*, 38.
160 Teel, "What Jesus Wouldn't Do," 20.

to fall victim to high-cost mortgage lending practices, whiteness may be working. When a non-African American child finds an adoptive home before an African American child, whiteness may be working. Whiteness operates to benefit white people, regardless of our individual wishes. This makes us a problem. So, guided by Du Bois, let us ask ourselves: how does it feel?[161]

Teel engages Cone's notion of the blackness of Jesus to argue that, if the Son of God's incarnation as a member of a marginalized group was intentional, then perhaps the true spirit of Jesus would best be found today in "African American or other marginalized communities."[162] Race matters.

Although Park does not focus on explicitly naming and contesting White supremacy in his work (although he acknowledges racism as a significant reality leading to *han*), it is an explicit consideration for Hopkins and Rodríguez. For Hopkins, his anthropological project is, in part, a repudiation of the racist origins and explicitly denigrating ends of anthropology in the United States. Because of the alleged "historical mandate on Europe to bring its freedom and civilization to the rest of the world," anthropology as a science was brought into existence to assist the "speculation of philosophy in the attitude toward and conquering of darker-skinned peoples globally."[163] This comports with Carter's Foucault-inspired assessment that anthropology was a nineteenth-century invention of "man." Carter notes:

> Anthropology, as a discipline formed in the nineteenth century and in the wake of Immanuel Kant's Enlightenment question, *Was ist der Mensch?* (What is man?), came into being as a field just as the European imperial powers were consolidating their grip on the colonies, their transformation of the planted into zones spatially structured between metropolitan centers and colonized peripheries, and temporally structured between the now of modernity, the then of those locked inside past savagery (Hegel designated Africa in this category), and the not yet of those who will eventually become fully human and civilized (Hegel put America

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161 Teel, "What Jesus Wouldn't Do," 20. Parenthetical citations in the original have been removed.
162 Teel, "What Jesus Wouldn't Do," 27.
163 Hopkins, *Being Human*, 144.

in this one).[164]

Similarly, Rodríguez devotes an entire section of his work ("Beyond Black and White") to a significant assessment of race in North America, reading Foucault and West in comprehending "how the idea of white supremacy has become an integral part of the fabric of modern science."[165] Ultimately, his employment of *mestizaje* is utilized to "resist racism and positively transform racial discourse."[166]

Finally, these scholars—in ways that we have already discussed—remind us of the importance of community. The assertion of value by these scholars is not work done in a vacuum, nor is it a mere attempt to get a "seat at the table." Rather, each scholar, paradoxically perhaps, affirms the value of their group only by its relation of solidarity with others. It would seem, then, that the essence of dehumanization is an over-emphasis on the *I*, necessitating a solution grounded in a vigorous affirmation of the *we*. One possible reason for this in the Western tradition points to Descartes as the progenitor of a tradition in which the I is regnant. With regard to the distinctive anthropology that challenges this primacy-of-the-I, Hopkins quotes Patrick Kalilombe, a Roman Catholic Bishop in Malawi: "It has often been said that where Descartes said, 'I think, therefore, I am' (*cogito ergo sum*), the African would rather say, 'I am related, therefore, we are' (*cognatus ergo sum*)."[167]

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164 J. Kameron Carter, "Humanity in African American Theology," in *The Oxford Handbook of African American Theology*, eds. Katie G. Cannon and Anthony B. Pinn (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 174–175.

165 Rodríguez, *Racism and God-Talk*, 55.

166 Rodríguez, *Racism and God-Talk*, 68.

167 Patrick A. Kalilombe, "Spirituality in the African Perspective," in *Paths of African Theology*, ed. Rosino Gibellini (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994), 115, quoted in Hopkins, *Being Human*, 74. Kalilombe is quoting John Pobee's *Toward an African Theology* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1979), 49.

IV. Toward a Critical Theological Epistemology

"Until the lions have their own historians,
the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter."
Chinua Achebe

In the summer of 2015, I arrived at the campus Western Theological Seminary (WTS) in Holland, Michigan on a dissertation-completion fellowship. Affiliated with the Reformed Church in America (a mainline denomination derived from the Calvinist wing of the Reformation), WTS recognized that, while the world was becoming increasingly diverse, the makeup of their students, staff, and faculty was remaining stubbornly homogeneous. Thus, they implemented a faculty diversity program, the impetus for my arrival.

My first year was not easy. In addition to moving from Milwaukee, a city with a 40% Black population, to Holland, a city with a 3% Black population, I had a number of negative experiences that were, unfortunately, not uncommon to other non-Whites at WTS and in Holland, including being falsely accused of stealing $72 and a depressing dearth of Black faces in the classes I taught. Nevertheless, at the final faculty meeting of the year, the faculty overwhelmingly voted to initiate the process of extending an offer for a tenure-track position to me, with interviews and a public lecture to take place early in the fall of the next academic year. In fact, when I re-entered the meeting after they had discussed the motion, I was greeted by a standing ovation. Willing to give them a chance, I declined an informal offer of employment at another institution, ignored open positions that were posted on job sites, and waited to hear about the tenure-track process and what would be required of me. And I waited. That fall semester came and went, and not one

word was said about the faculty vote, my candidacy, or my future at WTS. Eventually, word reached administrators that they had erred, and I was told that they would "make it right" the following semester, promising to bring it to the Board of Trustees for a discussion in February. Again, February came and went, and I was informed that not only was my candidacy not discussed at the board meeting, it was never even on the agenda.

I bring this personal experience up to highlight the notion of invisibility that will form the core of this chapter. Even though I was an extremely active member at WTS (teaching core courses, heading up their Doctor of Ministry program, working on diversity initiatives, etc.), I was still, in one sense, invisible. At every meeting, my non-tenured status was evident because I was prohibited from voting. In addition, the faculty should have been aware that WTS had never undertaken the very public process of considering me for a tenure-track position. However, when this issue reached a boiling point, several faculty approached me and apologized, stating that although they *should have* known something was wrong, for some reason my predicament never registered on their radar.

Many, if not most, Blacks in America could provide similar stories of their experience of simultaneously being seen and not being seen, of concomitant presence and erasure. King, in the latter phase of his public ministry in which he expanded his attention to incorporate economic and military considerations into his racial analysis, recognized the psychic weight of racial injustice, writing: "Being a Negro in America means being herded in ghettoes, or reservations, being constantly ignored and made to feel invisible."[1] George Yancy, who has written significantly on racial invisibility, observes:

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[1] Martin Luther King, Jr., *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2010), 97.

> The Black problem, as King makes clear, is not only about being rendered invisible, but also about having the power to enforce that invisibility through the material and structural arrangement of how bodies occupy lived space.[2]

The aforementioned notion of racial invisibility (to be explored later) can be subsumed under the larger category of epistemology. At this juncture, a crucial difference between this chapter and the previous one must be discussed. Anthropology, whether in its theological or non-theological form, still deals with the question of who gets to count as human. With epistemology, however, the conceptual terrain is vastly different with regard to theological and non-theological treatments. Theological epistemology has typically concerned itself with the nature of our discourse about the divine, related mostly to truth-claims and language issues.[3] In an article entitled "How Epistemology Matters to Theology," Paul J. Griffiths attempts to articulate the proper relation between theology (which deals with the question "What is God like?") and epistemology (which deals with the question "What is knowledge?").[4] Although Griffiths eschews a theological epistemology primarily concerned with a "universal epistemic principle" that norms Christian truth-claims, he nonetheless finds epistemology (rightly-construed) to be invaluable to theology, as long as epistemology is "the servant of theology, not its master."[5] He writes:

> I take [epistemology] to have essential elucidatory and apologetic functions. One of the intellectual needs of the Church has always been to elucidate to herself and to her cultured despisers . . . what it is that she takes herself to know and how she takes herself to know it. Any theology that failed to essay this task would fail by

2   George Yancy, "Dr. King's Philosophy of Religion: Theology of Somebodiness," in *The Liberatory Thought of Martin Luther King Jr.: Critical Essays on the Philosopher King*, ed. Robert E. Birt (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012), 52.

3   See D. Stephen Long's *Speaking of God: Theology, Language, and Truth* (Eerdmans, 2009) for an excellent discussion of these issues.

4   Paul J. Griffiths, "How Epistemology Matters to Theology," *The Journal of Religion* 79, no. 1 (1999): 2.

5   Griffiths, "How Epistemology Matters to Theology," 17.

misunderstanding its proper scope; any that judged itself to have completed the task would fail by hubris.[6]

Theological epistemology takes its cues, in this regard, from traditional (analytic) philosophy where the study of epistemology concerns relatively innocuous topics like the nature of human knowledge, the requisite conditions for knowledge justification, the scope and limits of human knowledge, rationality, skepticism, etc.[7] As such, epistemology (theological or otherwise) can become mired in relatively abstract debates: internalism vs. externalism, fallibilism vs. infallibilism, contextualism vs. invariantism, second-order knowledge vs. metaepistemological skepticism, and so forth. As a prime example, consider the recently-published book, *Theology's Epistemological Dilemma: How Karl Barth and Alvin Plantinga Provide a Unified Response* by Kevin Diller, a professor of philosophy and religion at Taylor University.[8] Diller acknowledges that, in many ways, epistemology is the "chief stumbling block" for Christianity (or for *any* religion that emphasizes revelation) due to the demand for justification of its core beliefs. "Epistemological issues are difficult within any discipline," Diller writes, "but the issues become seemingly impenetrable for theology, where the very claims in question affect how those claims ought properly to be evaluated."[9] By this I take Diller to be more or less in agreement with Griffiths' aversion to universal epistemic norms which, he insists, place the Church in a difficult position, forcing her to deviate from her unique nature. Griffiths argues:

6   Griffiths, "How Epistemology Matters to Theology," 16.
7   Epistemology plays a central role in continental philosophy as well, but it tends to focus less on the individual epistemic agent and more on a social epistemology concerned with the relations between knowing and power.
8   Kevin Diller, *Theology's Epistemological Dilemma: How Karl Barth and Alvin Plantinga Provide a Unified Response* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2014).
9   Diller, *Theology's Epistemological Dilemma*, 18.

> When appeal to universal epistemic principle is taken to be basic to theology, the effects upon theology are always and inevitably destructive. This is because theology . . . cannot permit controls upon her activity drawn from elsewhere than that which brought her into being, which is the response of a community of faith to the gifts of grace. Allowing appeal to universal epistemic principle to control what the Church is permitted to say when she does theology will always result in allowing her to say much less than she wants and ought to say: it will always place her in bondage.[10]

Nevertheless, like Griffiths, Diller conceives of epistemology as still serving a critical role for theology, made obvious by the fact that the "greatest figures in contemporary Christian theology and philosophy have made wrestling with these [epistemological] problems a key feature of their work."[11] So, what for Diller is *the* epistemological issue facing Christianity today, one that he enlists Barth and Plantinga's aid to resolve? It is the impassable circularity involved in how our own noetic faculties can self-justify their own epistemic artifacts. Diller writes:

> The epistemic problem for contemporary Christian theology is that it cannot follow either of the paths we have treated here generally as skepticism and postmodernism. It is forced to sit uncomfortably with a high view of knowledge and a low view of the unaided capacities of the human knower to self-secure such knowledge. This is the dilemma that generates particular difficulties for its task.[12]

Diller adds:

> To reiterate, the epistemic problem for Christian theology identified in this chapter is the seemingly unavoidable tension between a properly high view of theological knowledge and yet a low view of the independent capacities of human theologians.[13]

In contrast to Diller, whose project—though interesting—focuses on the epistemic problems of individual epistemic agents abstracted from social realities and on how the Christian community can justify their unique religious beliefs, this chapter aims to

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10   Griffiths, "How Epistemology Matters to Theology," 7–8.
11   Diller, *Theology's Epistemological Dilemma*, 20.
12   Diller, *Theology's Epistemological Dilemma*, 39.
13   Diller, *Theology's Epistemological Dilemma*, 42.

enhance theological epistemology by attending to the issue of racial perception (i.e., the ways in which Blacks are mis-seen and the ways in which they are not seen). In doing so, it should be stated that it is the anthropology of the previous chapter that permits a social epistemology that renders some individuals invisible. Gordon makes this connection explicit:

> Racism, properly understood, is a denial of the humanity of a group of human beings either on the basis of race or color. This denial, properly executed, requires denying the presence of other human beings in such relations. It makes such beings a form of presence that is an absence, paradoxically, an absence of human presence. That being so, such beings fall below the category of Otherness, for *an Other* is *another* human being. With a being erased to a realm of property, even linguistic appeals—cries for recognition—are muffled, unheard; waving hands, gestures for acknowledgment, are invisible. It is not that they do not trigger impulses between the eye and the brain; it is that there has been a carefully crafted discipline of unseeing. The black slave is, thus, a paradoxically seen invisibility in this regard; seeing him *as a black slave* triggers not seeing him as a human being.[14]

Diller's project (and the multitude of similar ones) is important. However, as he notes, it is one that has been done in some form or another throughout the course of Christianity. What is interesting is the privilege that one must have if the greatest epistemological dilemma facing them concerns their noetic faculties and the justification of their faith claims. These issues have, perhaps, more salience in European countries where Christianity is, statistically, dying. This stands in stark contrast to Third World countries where the reality of faith is taken as a given. In these settings, the existential threat to people of faith is not an intellectual justification of their beliefs, but a social reality that threatens their very existence and flourishing.

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14   Gordon, *Existentia Africana*, 60–61.

Epistemology, Descartes, and Race

Proponents of what Mills calls "alternative epistemologies" do not see themselves as providing "within the conventional framework, alternative analyses of . . . traditional epistemological topics."[15] Nor is their standpoint the "familiar Cartesian figure, the abstract, disembodied individual knower, beset by skeptical and solipsistic hazards, trying to establish a reliable cognitive relationship with the basic furniture of the Universe."[16] Rather, they contend that this regnant epistemic framework itself should be transcended and that the "standard, hallowed array of "problems" in the field should itself be seen as problematic."[17] By contrast, epistemology in critical race studies and in Black religious discourse generally concerns the framing logics that have been employed to oppress Blacks, as well as the construction of new forms of discourse that challenge racism. Thus, an essential task involved in this approach is the employment of life-giving symbols and concepts that assist scholars in understanding hierarchical systems and in resisting systems/logics that operate to provide rational support for oppression. For example, Terrence L. Johnson cites Williams' "identification-ascertainment" hermeneutic (see Chapter I) as one example of a methodology that "expand[s] black theology's epistemic frameworks," especially given the concern by some (e.g., Jones) that the scope of the Biblical narrative does not affirm the claim that God stands on the side of the oppressed.[18] He also cites Josiah Ulysses Young's call for an "African-centered religious" discourse in

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15   Charles W. Mills, *Blackness Visible: Essays on Philosophy and Race* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 21.
16   Mills, *Blackness Visible*, 21–22.
17   Mills, *Blackness Visible*, 22.
18   Terrence L. Johnson, "Reason in African American Theology," in *The Oxford Handbook of African American Theology*, eds. Katie G. Cannon and Anthony B. Pinn (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 104.

which African traditions are valued as resources that challenge the "assumed disjuncture between reason and knowledge of the divine in Western theology."[19] He contends:

> In African-centered accounts of black religion, especially slave religion, the religious rhetoric is examined differently. The signs and symbols are imagined as extensions of the slave's memory and reconfiguration of West African religious and philosophical traditions. This characterization of slave religion takes seriously epistemic resources such as funeral rites and ritual dances as legitimating the ongoing and expanding role of African-derived religious traditions in the Americas. These epistemic resources reflect the fragments of a countertradition of epistemology and reason in African American religions and philosophy that frame the conceptual schemes within the politico-ethical dimension of emancipatory reason.[20]

Ultimately, epistemology in Black religious and philosophical discourse functions to assist society in developing this emancipatory reason that allows for a reimagining of human agency and the creation of "epistemic conditions in which human agents may transgress the boundaries of traditions and narratives."[21] This comports with bell hooks' assertion that a "fundamental task of black critical thinkers has been the struggle to break with the hegemonic modes of seeing, thinking, and being that block our capacity to see ourselves oppositionally, to imagine, describe, and invent ourselves in ways that are liberatory."[22]

Epistemology performs a unique function in a culture that is still grappling with racism. Every day in the news, incidents occur that the general public writes off as mundane, but the Black community interprets as racist in nature. This has been the pattern with, for example, high-profile incidents regarding police overaggression and brutality that have been challenged by groups like Black Lives Matter.[23] Yancy contends

19 Johnson, "Reason in African American Theology," 104.
20 Johnson, "Reason in African American Theology," 105.
21 Johnson, "Reason in African American Theology," 107.
22 bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 2.
23 I consider the notion "Black Lives Matter" to have at least two meanings in public discourse. On one hand, it refers to a general consciousness, a broad activist movement governed by the

that Blacks, due to their unique and ubiquitous experiences with racism in America, have

a privileged epistemic position from which they are able to more accurately discern racial

injustice:

> My judgment is fundamentally a social epistemological one, one that is rendered reasonable within the context of a shared history of Black people noting, critically discussing, suffering, and sharing with each other the traumatic experiential content and repeated acts of white racism. Within this context, one might say that Black people constitute a kind of "epistemological community" (a community of knowers). What justifiably allows me to maintain that a particular action is racist, what allows me to develop a coherent narrative of [certain events], one that cements a powerful level of coherence in my knowledge base, are the background histories of oppression that Blacks have experienced vis-à-vis whites.[24]

Similar to other philosophies (especially those of an existentialist,

phenomenological, or pragmatist bent), Black religion and philosophical discourse find

the philosophical (and, especially, epistemological) tradition emanating from Descartes to

be problematic in the establishment of worldviews that attend philosophically to Black

flourishing. Descartes inaugurates modern philosophy, a moment where "the turn to

theory of knowledge, epistemology-centered philosophy, as *Philosophica Prima* led to a

focus on the inner life of "man" and suspicion toward the world that these men shared."[25]

West takes Descartes to task, especially the Cartesian tradition's ahistorical character, one

he finds to be antipathetic to the philosophies advocated by Heidegger, the latter

Wittgenstein, and Dewey,[26] philosophies that recognize that knowing does not occur "by

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ideal that Black lives are just as valuable as any other life and that our public policies and practices should reflect that reality. On the other hand, "Black Lives Matter" can refer to a specific set of groups that operate under that banner. My usage of the phrase tends toward the former meaning unless otherwise indicated.

24 Yancy, *Black Bodies*, 7.

25 Gordon, *Existentia Africana*, 25.

26 Cornel West, "Philosophy and the Afro-American Experience," in *A Companion to African-American Philosophy*, eds. Tommy L. Lott and John P. Pittman (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003), 7.

rational thought alone"[27] and that "the process of knowing has a social dimension."[28] West writes:

> Cartesians postulate the absolute autonomy of philosophy. They presuppose that there is a distinct set of philosophical problems independent of culture, society and history. For them, philosophy stands outside the various conventions on which people base their social practices and transcends the cultural heritages and political struggles of people. If the Cartesian viewpoint is the only valid philosophical stance, then the idea of an Afro-American philosophy would be ludicrous.[29]

Descartes' emphasis upon humans as disembodied entities that cognize (*res cogitans*) stands in stark contrast to the ways in which Black bodies are perceived. Reflecting upon Du Bois' challenge regarding Blacks-as-problems, Yancy notes that "Far from a *disembodied* thing that thinks . . . Du Bois is cursed precisely in terms of his racially epidermalized embodiment."[30] Du Bois' thought is especially relevant to a discussion on racial invisibility and epistemology. Du Bois bequeaths to us the idea of a "double consciousness," first presented in two 1897 essays ("The Strivings of the Negro People" and "The Conservation of the Races").[31] Du Bois writes:

> One ever feels his two-ness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.[32]

The literature on Du Boisian double-consciousness is significant. Ernest Allen, Jr., for example, sees two nuanced versions of double-consciousness in Du Bois, both rife with epistemological implications. In "The Strivings of the Negro People"/*The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois writes:

27 Ware, *African American Theology*, 85.
28 Ware, *African American Theology*, 85.
29 West, "Philosophy and the Afro-American Experience," 8.
30 Yancy, *Black Bodies*, 86. Emphasis in original.
31 "Strivings of the Negro People" would eventually become the first chapter of Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk*.
32 Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 9.

> 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.[33]

For Allen, Du Bois is musing here upon the tragedy of the Black acceptance of a White framework of meaning that devalues Blacks. That is, the tragedy of having to view oneself through a lens that is by its very nature alienating. Allen sees this notion of double-consciousness as one of negation, the "*absence* of true self-consciousness on the part of black Americans, the inability to recognize one's black self other than through the mediated veil of the unacknowledging white gaze."[34] In "The Conservation of Races," however, Du Bois writes:

> Here, then, is the dilemma, and it is a puzzling one, I admit. No Negro who has given earnest thought to the situation of his people in America has failed, at some time in life, to find himself at these cross-roads; has failed to ask himself at some time: What, after all, am I? Am I an American or am I a Negro? Can I be both? Or is it my duty to cease to be a Negro as soon as possible and be an American? If I strive as a Negro, am I not perpetuating the very cleft that threatens and separates Black and White America? Is not my only possible practical aim the subduction of all that is Negro in me to the American? Does my black blood place upon me any more obligation to assert my nationality than German, or Irish or Italian blood would?[35]

Here, Allen asserts, Du Bois is struggling with "an erupting of fractious interplay between competing social identities within a given individual."[36] That is, what is one to do when they are being urged to honor a national identity that negates their racial identity? What, then, is the framework by which they are able to understand themselves? If "American" equals "White," then what meaning could "Black *and* American" possibly

33   Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 9.

34   Ernest Allen, Jr., "On the Reading of Riddles: Rethinking Du Boisian "Double Consciousness"," in *Existence in Black: An Anthology of Black Existential Philosophy*, ed. Lewis R. Gordon (New York: Routledge, 1997), 52. Emphasis in original.

35   W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Conservation of the Races," in *Black Nationalism in America*, eds. J. H. Bracey, Jr., A. Meier, and E. Rudwick (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1970), 256–257.

36   Allen, Jr., "On the Reading of Riddles," 54.

convey? This, Gordon contends, is a problem with identity-formation in the New World:

> One can "feel" class in Europe as one can the air that one breathes. In the US, however, the effort to escape (yet retain) Europe took the form of homogenizing European identities into a whiteness framed on the premise of racially fallen beings. Race, then, became an endemic motif of New World consciousness, and that is why one can "feel" race here as one can the air that one breathes.

Gordon sees these dual versions of double-consciousness as two sides of the same epistemological-phenomenological coin. As noted in the previous chapter, when whiteness is asserted as the standard or the "universal," Blacks who encounter this logic (and acknowledge themselves as fully human) encounter it as a "false universal."[37] By this, I take Gordon to be asserting another form of the aforementioned claim about the epistemically-privileged position of Blacks since they are "more linked to truth than the white world because the black world realizes that the domain over which truth claims can appeal is much larger than the white world, as universal, is willing to allow, admit, or see."[38]

With a focus on social epistemology, how has epistemology been weaponized as a political tool of racism? Michael Monahan, with explicit allusions to Gordon's connection between bad faith and racism (see Chapter I), makes a connection between racism and epistemology in his discussion of a "politics of purity"—a racial ontology that normatively prescribes "clearly bounded categories of being admitting of necessary and sufficient conditions for membership such that each individual is unambiguously a member of one and only one racial category."[39] Racism, he contends, operates as two forms of closure: a normative closure that conceives of racial categories (and members of

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37   Gordon, *Introduction to Africana Philosophy*, 79.
38   Gordon, *Introduction to Africana Philosophy*, 79.
39   Michael J. Monahan, *The Creolizing Subject: Race, Reason, and the Politics of Purity* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011), 136.

them) as "fixed and given," and an epistemic closure that sees this racial caste system as closed, "already possessing all of the relevant answers."[40] For Gordon, epistemic closure is the deployment of knowledge as a "colonizing force," one that requires the "closing off of . . . options available for meaningful ways of life."[41] Gordon, an astute interpreter on Fanon, sees *Black Skin, White Masks* and its critique of Octave Mannoni's *Prospero and Caliban: The Psychology of Colonization* (1950) as raising this very issue of how epistemology serves the ends of colonization.[42] Monahan adds:

> I have already discussed the sense in which the politics of purity is in part an epistemic project presenting a norm of closure and completeness in our understanding of knowledge that cannot tolerate ambiguity and indeterminacy. In the context of race, this means that races must be understood as discrete categories offering necessary and sufficient conditions that one can *know* as a complete and closed set of properties or conditions. Should this knowledge prove untenable, one can then *know* in the same complete and closed way that race is illusory.[43]

Reflecting upon Fanon, Gordon sees epistemic closure leading to what he calls "perverse anonymity."[44] This is when a relatively mundane feature of the world—identifying others partly due to their social roles (e.g., a mother, a teacher, an officer)—is taken to the extreme and limited information is presumed to be complete. The individual remains invisible, cloaked behind our illicit overdetermination. We don't see them because we think we see all there is to know. In contrast to an "epistemological openness," the idea that "there is always more to be known,"[45] Gordon says of epistemic closure:

> To see someone this way is to close off possibilities. It takes the form of the command and the declaration instead of the interrogative; one does not, in other

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40   Monahan, *The Creolizing Subject*, 150.
41   Gordon, *Introduction to Africana Philosophy*, 143.
42   Gordon, *Introduction to Africana Philosophy*, 167.
43   Monahan, *The Creolizing Subject*, 216. Emphasis in original.
44   Gordon, *What Fanon Said*, 49.
45   Gordon, *Existentia Africana*, 88.

words, ask questions because one presumes that one already knows all there is that needs to be known.[46]

What makes these epistemological categories of purity (and their concomitant political commitments) especially treacherous are the myriad ways they have been instantiated within US culture beyond the merely discursive. Kendi notes how the 1916 publication of Madison Grant's *The Passing of the Great Race* had a significant impact on the eugenics movement, arguing as it did for a "racial-ethnic ladder" that placed Whites ("Nordics") at the top and Blacks at the bottom.[47] Kendi writes:

> Grant revised and reissued his book three times in five years and it was translated into several foreign languages. Publishers were barely able to supply the voracious demand for segregationist ideas and for the dashing eugenicist movement as White theorists attempted to normalize the social inequities of the day.[48]

Kendi connects Grant's text directly to Adolf Hitler, who studied Grant's book as he prepared *Mein Kampf* while in jail. Eugenicist ideas also led to the standardized testing industry, motivating the quest for a way to objectively quantify intelligence such that it would reflect the racial differences that many already believed in.[49] One of the primary creators of the IQ test was a eugenicist named Lewis Terman, who predicted that the IQ test would reveal intellectual distinctions between the races. These IQ tests (and the underlying racist assumptions that generated them) eventually led to the creation of the Standardized Aptitude Test (SAT) by Carl C. Brigham, again under the assumption that Whites would fare better. Brigham even made intra-racial distinctions, contending that

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46   Gordon, *What Fanon Said*, 49.
47   Kendi, *Stamped From the Beginning*, 310.
48   Kendi, *Stamped From the Beginning*, 311.
49   Kendi, *Stamped From the Beginning*, 311.

Blacks in the North would perform better because they had a "higher concentration of White blood," as demonstrated by the intelligent decision to go North for a better life.[50]

Such notions of purity become even more prevalent with regard to biraciality or mixed race identities.[51] A Black-White oppositional binary sometimes masks the hierarchical schema that has governed our nation. To be Black has meant, historically, to be the most extreme form of *not-being-White*. There is a sense in which the categories, despicable as they are, are clear. However, mixed race individuals face the difficult reality of simultaneously being and yet not-being. Linda Martín Alcoff, identifying as a mixed-race Latina, recalls the conflicting messages she received growing up. In Panama, she was prized for her "exceptionally light" skin and "auburn hair," with her father naming her Linda (Spanish for "pretty") as a result of her valuable phenotypic traits.[52] However, when her parents were divorced and she moved to Florida to live with her (White) mother's relatives, "the social meanings of our racial identity were wholly transformed."[53] In her new context (1950s central Florida), she was not *closer* to the purity of whiteness than the rest of the population (as in Panama), but now her Hispanic heritage meant that she was farther away from purity. This, she contends, was the result of the reigning logic of hypodescent (popularly known as the "one-drop rule") which relegated children of mixed heritage to the lower of the two castes. If she and her sibling

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50   Kendi, *Stamped From the Beginning*, 312.
51   The concept of biracial or mulatto identity is a complicated matter whose foundations are still being explored (see, for example, Brian Bantum's *Redeeming Mulatto: A Theology of Race and Christian Hybridity*). For the purposes of this project, it will refer to someone whose parents identify (or, are identified) as belonging to different racial or ethnic groups. This substitutes the easier question of parental identification for the more difficult ontological question about what it *means* to be biracial, but it will suffice for now.
52   Linda Martín Alcoff, *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 266.
53   Alcoff, *Visible Identities*, 266.

assimilated, they could attain the status of "almost White," but that was the highest level one could hope to achieve.[54] Alcoff reflects on the implications of the politics of purity:

> In cultures defined by racialized identities, infected with the illusion of purity, and divided by racial hierarchies, mixed white/nonwhite persons face an irresolvable status ambiguity. They are rejected by the dominant race as impure and therefore inferior, but they are also sometimes disliked and distrusted by the oppressed race for their privileges of closer association with domination.[55]

This is the inevitable consequence of the epistemic closure discussed by Monahan and Gordon: the foreclosing of options in identity formation, the assumption and ascription of identity from the outside, forcing human beings to reside within ill-fitting categories.

From the outside, it would seem that a politics of purity would have outlived its usefulness, especially given the ways in which it has circumscribed and negated millions of lives. However, what is interesting is the way that a politics of purity requires a particular misinterpretation of the world in order to be maintained. That is, there has to be a tacit agreement among those in power to actually see the world in a way that unjustly enriches them while unjustly impoverishing others. In this next section, I will explore the contours of this particularly harmful epistemology.

Epistemology of Ignorance

One of the hallmarks of our culture is a thirst for knowledge and information. As of the writing of this chapter, the world is celebrating the 10-year anniversary of the iPhone, the world's first smartphone that brought a universe of information to our fingertips. And, with AI assistive technology (e.g., "Siri" on the iPhone, or Google

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54   Alcoff, *Visible Identities*, 266.
55   Alcoff, *Visible Identities*, 267.

Assistant on Android devices), answers to complex questions that once required a trip to the library are now provided with a voice command.

Within the Western tradition, reflective discussions on knowledge *simpliciter* can be seen as far back as Plato's dialogue *Theaetetus* (4th century BCE). In this dialogue, Socrates challenges young Theaetetus with the question, "What do you think knowledge is?"[56] Theaetetus responds by citing examples of knowledge such as geometry or the art of cobbling. Socrates responds that Theaetetus is generous for providing him with "a variety of things instead of a simple answer"; not examples of knowledge, but "what knowledge itself really is."[57] Theaetetus attempts to mollify Socrates' request with two possibilities (knowledge as perception and knowledge as true judgment) before Theaetetus stumbles upon the conception of knowledge that has taken root in the Western philosophical tradition: knowledge as true judgment with an account.[58]

Owing to Plato's shadow over Western philosophy, it's no surprise that epistemology reigns as a significant category in philosophy.[59] Robert N. Proctor writes:

> *Epistemology* is serious business, taught in academies the world over: there is "moral" and "social" epistemology, epistemology of the sacred, the closet, and the family. There is a Computational Epistemology Laboratory at the University of Waterloo, and a Center for Epistemology at the Free University in Amsterdam. A Google Search turns up separate websites for "constructivist," "feminist," and "evolutionary" epistemology, of course, but also "libidinal," "android," Quaker," "Internet," and (my favorite) "erotometaphysical" epistemology. Harvard offers a course in the field (without the erotometaphysical part), which (if we are to

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56 Plato, *Theaetetus,* 146c.
57 Plato, *Theaetetus,* 146d–e.
58 Perception as knowledge is rejected because knowledge should be a function of judgment by the soul (which is the way you have true knowledge of something's essence), as opposed to perception which is accomplished through the body's sensory organs. True judgment without an account (justification?) is rejected because someone can wrongly draw a true conclusion (this is referred to in contemporary philosophy as "epistemic luck").
59 This is not to deny Plato's writings in other areas of philosophy (e.g., ethics, ontology), but to recognize that knowledge is an important theme (e.g., his claim that virtue requires knowledge).

believe its website) explores the epistemic status of weighty claims like "the standard meter is 1 meter long" and "I am not a brain in a vat." We seem to know a lot about knowledge.[60]

Nevertheless, inspired by Carole Pateman's *The Sexual Contract* (Stanford University Press, 1988), theorists began to turn an eye not to what we know (or, claim to know), but to all of the ways that our social and political lives are structured and governed by unstated assumptions that are operable but hidden. In this regard, ignorance is viewed not as an undesirable deficiency or a deviation from an ideal cognitive state, but as an intentional, conscious, strategic mechanism that operates to maintain a particular state of affairs. Phrased differently, this approach looks at ignorance not as "a feature of *neglectful* epistemic practice but as a *substantive* epistemic practice in itself."[61] The collective term under which research in this nascent field has been gathered is the intentionally-ironic phrase, "epistemology of ignorance." In *Agnotology: The Making & Unmaking of Ignorance*, Proctor and Londa Schiebinger attempt to do two things. First, to create and assign a new term (*agnotology*, literally "the study of not knowing") to this still-emerging field, and second, to study the wide variety of ways in which ignorance has and continues to play a role in cultures around the world in diverse disciplines and industries.

An interesting application of the epistemology of ignorance has to do with the ways in which such ignorance intersects with racism. Mills explicitly followed in the footsteps of Pateman's analysis of ignorance and gender where she foregrounded the

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60   Robert N. Proctor, "Agnotology: A Missing Term to Describe the Cultural Production of Ignorance (and Its Study)," in *Agnotology: The Making & Unmaking of Ignorance*, eds. Robert N. Proctor and Londa Schiebinger (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008), 1.

61   Linda Martín Alcoff, "Epistemologies of Ignorance: Three Types," in *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, eds. Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2007), 39. Emphasis in original.

hidden, male-dominated contract that actually explains modern society. In her work, Pateman exposed the "normative logic"[62] that makes sense of the "inconsistencies, circumlocutions, and evasions of the classic contract theorists and, correspondingly, the world of patriarchal domination their work has helped to rationalize."[63] Mills' stated aim was "to adopt a nonideal contract as a rhetorical trope and theoretical method for understanding the inner logic of *racial* domination and how it structures the polities of the West and elsewhere."[64] The racial contract, as it supports White supremacy, has three features: it is significant ("white supremacy, both local and global, exists and has existed for many years"), it is a political concept ("white supremacy should be thought of as itself a political system"), and it is substantive ("as a political system, white supremacy can illuminatingly be theorized as based on a "contract" between whites, a Racial Contract").[65] And, significantly, it is epistemological. In contradistinction to most social contract theories that focus on the distinction between political and moral dimensions, Mills argues that the Racial Contract (as a social theory) also presupposes a particular epistemology in that it it "prescribes norms for cognition to which its signatories must adhere."[66] In the Racial Contract, the major change is the "preliminary conceptual partitioning and corresponding transformation of human populations into "white" and "nonwhite" men."[67] In order to attain the complicated social arrangement prescribed by the Racial Contract, adherence to an understanding of the world that diverges from reality will be required. Mills notes:

62   Mills, *The Racial Contract*, 6.
63   Mills, *The Racial Contract*, 6.
64   Mills, *The Racial Contract*, 6. Emphasis in original.
65   Mills, *The Racial Contract*, 7.
66   Mills, *The Racial Contract*, 11.
67   Mills, *The Racial Contract*, 13.

So here, it could be said, one has an agreement to *mis*interpret the world. One has to learn to see the world wrongly, but with the assurance that this set of mistaken perceptions will be validated by white epistemic authority, whether religious or secular.[68]

Mills continues:

> *Thus in effect, on matters related to race, the Racial Contract prescribes for its signatories an inverted epistemology, an epistemology of ignorance, a particular pattern of localized and global cognitive dysfunctions (which are psychologically and socially functional), producing the ironic outcome that whites will in general be unable to understand the world they themselves have made.*[69]

Thus, the very foundation of whiteness (i.e., what it means to be "White") requires a framing logic that prohibits both self-critical habits and an honest appraisal of reality. So, proponents of the Racial Contract will live in an "invented delusional world, a racial fantasyland, a "consensual hallucination,""[70] one based more on invented mythologies than a clear allegiance to a truth that corresponds to reality.[71] Mills concludes:

> One could say then, as a general rule, that *white misunderstanding, misrepresentation, evasion, and self-deception on matters related to race* are among the most pervasive mental phenomena of the past few hundred years, a cognitive and moral economy psychically required for conquest, colonization, and enslavement. And these phenomena are in no way *accidental*, but *prescribed* by the terms of the Racial Contract, which requires a certain schedule of structured blindness and opacities in order to establish and maintain the white polity.[72]

Thus, with regard to theological issues, many of the concerns addressed in this dissertation project could be recast as epistemic projects designed to buttress existing social inequalities by solidifying a particular cognitive framework in which whiteness is

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68   Mills, *The Racial Contract*, 18. Emphasis in original.
69   Mills, *The Racial Contract*, 18. Emphasis in original.
70   Mills, *The Racial Contract*, 18.
71   This is not to say that beneficiaries of the Racial Contract could not *formally* endorse a correspondence theory of truth. Rather, it is an indictment of a framework of understanding which, at its core (and, probably unknown to its adherents), represents a commitment *not* to reality, but to a perverted and self-serving ideology. This is what makes it so difficult: the beneficiaries of the Racial Contract think that their beliefs are true and that they are faithfully believing what is true, when they are not.
72   Mills, *The Racial Contract*, 19. Emphasis in original.

associated with divinity, thereby ensuring Whites' placement at the top of the social order.

For example, the aesthetic claims about the whiteness of God could be seen as an attempt

to provide justification for the maintenance of a particular hierarchical arrangement of

society rooted in the whiteness of divinity. That is, against all historiographical evidence,

the Racial Contract (applied to Christianity) requires that Whites must agree to view

God/Jesus as White as a powerful marker of identity. Or, the divisions marked out by the

category of race, although they are socially constructed and have no basis in biological

fact, must be seen as divinely sanctioned (e.g., the "Curse of Ham"). So, the myths of

Black inferiority and perpetual servitude are reinforced by a Biblical myth that allows the

beneficiaries of the Racial Contract to normalize the plight of African descendants in the

New World. There is a seeing and a non-seeing at work here. That slaves, for example,

were subjugated to Whites is an obvious fact, but it's so obvious (recall Monahan's

comment on epistemic closure) that it's unremarkable. The problem that this

epistemically-derived normalization breeds is an indifference to the plight of the racial

other.

One modern-day example of the way that we refuse to "see" the racial disparities

right before us can be found in Alexander's penetrating research on mass incarceration,

where she warns would-be activists against a strict equating of contemporary mass

incarceration with the *old* system of Jim Crow:

> All racial caste systems, not just mass incarceration, have been supported by
> racial indifference. As noted earlier, many whites during the Jim Crow era
> sincerely believed that African Americans were intellectually and morally inferior.
> They meant blacks no harm but believed segregation was a sensible system for
> managing a society comprised of fundamentally different and unequal people. The
> sincerity of many people's racial beliefs is what led Martin Luther King Jr. to

declare, "Nothing in all the world is more dangerous than sincere ignorance and conscientious stupidity."[73]

Note the role of epistemology here: Whites *believed* in the innate inferiority of Blacks, and this epistemic framework created space for systems of oppression. What is fascinating is the way in which colorblindness (discussed in Chapter III) has been proposed as a solution to racial problems in the United States: a system held up by an insidious not-knowing or un-knowing or false-knowing is supposed to be resolved by an epistemic approach centered on an evasion. In underscoring the role that an appeal to colorblindness has had in generating the crisis of Black mass incarceration, Alexander traffics in epistemological concepts:

> The deeply flawed nature of colorblindness, as a governing principle, is evidenced by the fact that the public consensus supporting mass incarceration is officially colorblind. It purports to see black and brown men not as black and brown, but simply as men—raceless men—who have failed miserably to play by the rules the rest of us follow quite naturally. That fact that so many black and brown men are rounded up for drug crimes that go largely ignored when committed by whites is unseen. Our collective colorblindness prevents us from seeing this basic fact. Our blindness also prevents us from seeing the racial and structural divisions that persist in society.[74]

The Church, at times, has succumbed to an affinity for colorblindness in its approach to racism. I have noted elsewhere, for example, the promise that Pentecostalism had in establishing an egalitarian community of faith at the dawn of the twentieth century.[75] I write:

> At its outset, Pentecostalism seemed like it would provide a counterargument to the racial politics of the Jim Crow society from which it emerged. Seminal leaders of the Pentecostal movement (William Seymour, Charles Harrison Mason, and

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73 Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*, 203.
74 Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*, 241.
75 See Duane T. Loynes, Sr., "Pentecostal Hermeneutics and Race in the Early Twentieth Century: Towards a Pentecostal Hermeneutics of Culture," in *Constructive Pneumatological Hermeneutics in Pentecostal Christianity*, eds. Kenneth J. Archer and L. William Oliverio, Jr. (New York: CHARIS/Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

Garfield Thomas Haywood, among others) were black, and the inaugural, defining event of North American Pentecostalism (the Azusa Street Revival) was characterized by its racial, gender, social, and economic diversity.[76]

However, before long, Pentecostalism "as a whole would soon mirror the larger culture in its advocacy of segregation, its discrimination against blacks (as fellow members and as leaders), and its theological justification for white superiority."[77] What happened? I contend that part of the problem was an unwillingness to explicitly see (and therefore, respond to) the harrowing racial dynamics of the ambient culture under the guise of seeing all humans as equal before God. This approach was encapsulated in the words of Frank Bartleman, a participant in the inaugural revivals that precipitated American Pentecostalism, when he observed, "The color line was washed away in the blood."[78] This sentiment, though laudable, becomes dangerous when it fails to acknowledge the pervasive cultural frameworks that afflicted *all* participants of early Pentecostal meetings. One would hope that if religion has any utility, it can assist its adherents in overcoming deformed notions of humanity that mark the Other as inferior. However, this more than likely comes about as part of an honest confrontation with the interior and exterior racial dynamics that affect us irrespective of our willing complicity.

Alcoff, in a typology of epistemologies of ignorance, expands upon Mills' work in elucidating the third and most pernicious type, one that focuses on the "*specific* knowing practices inculcated in a socially dominant group."[79] In contrast to the first two types of ignorance—ignorance qua our limited and diverse situatedness across an epistemic spectrum and ignorance qua the motivation of particular group identities (where, for

76   Loynes, Sr., "Pentecostal Hermeneutics and Race in the Early Twentieth Century," 229.
77   Loynes, Sr., "Pentecostal Hermeneutics and Race in the Early Twentieth Century," 230.
78   Vinson Synan, *The Century of the Holy Spirit: 100 Years of Pentecostal and Charismatic Renewal, 1901–2001* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2001), 54.
79   Alcoff, "Epistemologies of Ignorance," 47. Emphasis in original.

example, men may be less motivated than women in challenging patriarchal

assumptions)[80]—this third type focuses on the way that "whites have a *positive* interest"[81]

in misinterpreting the world. The first two types revolve around a possibly-innocent

(though still harmful in its effects) lack; for example, one may not understand a particular

injustice because one lacks the experiences of a marginalized community, or one lacks

the motivation to even evaluate the injustice because it has been normalized in their

worldview and benefits them. In contrast, Alcoff writes:

> [T]he structural argument suggests that as a member of a dominant social group, I
> also may have inculcated a pattern of belief-forming practices that created the
> effect of systematic ignorance. I may be actively pursuing or supporting a
> distorted or an otherwise inaccurate account.[82]

Alcoff notes three critical features of this third type. First, communities that are

oppressive or exclusive do not see themselves as such. Rather, they have interiorized and

codified views about the world that make the oppression/exclusion seem normal and just.

Second, there is more than likely evidence that is readily accessible to the public that

contravenes the oppressive state of affairs. Third, this contravening evidence must be

erased or mitigated so that the system of inequality remains intact.

In a later work, Mills noted a particular mechanism that allowed the

aforementioned epistemic maneuvers to work, namely the "management of memory,"[83]

the collective amnesia that extracts particular facts and interpretations from history and

reifies them in monuments, textbooks, ceremonies, and holidays.[84] Because Christian

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80   Alcoff, "Epistemologies of Ignorance," 40–47.
81   Alcoff, "Epistemologies of Ignorance," 47. Emphasis in original.
82   Alcoff, "Epistemologies of Ignorance," 48.
83   Charles W. Mills, "White Ignorance," in *Agnotology: The Making & Unmaking of
     Ignorance*, eds. Robert N. Proctor and Londa Schiebinger (Stanford, CA: Stanford
     University Press, 2008), 240.
84   Mills, "White Ignorance," 240–245.

theology as practiced and taught in the academy is still a very "White" discipline, there is

a privileging of White agents and artifacts. Recall, for example, the statistics regarding

the study of religion/theology in the academy (e.g., most professors in ATS schools are

White; studies that explicitly focus on Black topics are cordoned off as "contextual"

theology, while research projects that implicitly focus on White culture are presumed as

mainstream). This management of memory, within Christianity, largely deals with power

dynamics (i.e., who has the power to determine which products of history will be reified).

Consider Ninian Smart's seven dimensions of religion: the Practical and Ritual

Dimension (rites and behaviors that deepen spiritual and ethical awareness), the

Experiential and Emotional Dimension (sacred accounts of connection to the divine), the

Narrative and Mythic Dimension (stories that channel the beliefs and experiences of

believers), the Doctrinal and Philosophical Dimension (formulations that intellectually

connect religious beliefs to social reality), the Ethical and Legal Dimension (behavioral

prescriptions), the Social and Institutional Dimension (the human and organizational

embodiment of religion), and the Material/Artistic Dimension (the physical expression of

religious beliefs).[85] With all of these dimensions, we could ask: who gets to determine

what represents Christianity? Which community's rituals are taken to be sacred and

normative? Whose experiences and stories count as formative (or, whose experiences and

stories are excluded from Christian history)?[86] Who are the main determinants of not only

doctrines, but doctrinal categories and loci themselves? Who are considered ethical

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85 Ninian Smart, *The World's Religions* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1989), 10–21. Smart's taxonomy initially only included the first six dimensions (*The Religious Experience of Mankind*, 1969). Smart uses the term "artistic" later in *The World's Religions* as a synonym for the Material Dimension (25).

86 A professor of mine, Philip Rossi, used to say that appealing to experience in the development of theology was complicated and required clarification on three issues: What *counts* as experience? *Whose* experience counts? What does experience *count for*?

agents and exemplars (and who are excluded from ethical consideration)? Who are the leaders of Christian institutions? And, what cultural aesthetic gets to image the divine?

Literary Excursus: Wright, Ellison, Baldwin, and Invisibility in Black Culture

What does the concept of invisibility mean within Black thought? Before turning to three principal figures—Richard Wright, Ellison, and James Baldwin—I will first articulate how this concept functions in Black philosophical discourse as a significant theme in the experience of Blacks in North America.

It should be noted at the outset that racial invisibility does not function as complete absence, but as a particular form of absence rooted in a pernicious duplicity. This has already been hinted at earlier in the chapter; the idea that blackness "often veers between two poles in the public eye: opaqueness and invisibility."[87] Garnette Cadogan shares his phenomenological experience of race by comparing his sojourns walking through the streets of New York City with his experience of walking in his native Kingston, Jamaica. For Cadogan, walking in New York as a Black male is always an experience fraught with tension. Although he loves the city, an initial incident set the tone for subsequent experiences:

> One night in the East Village, I was running to dinner when a white man in front of me turned and punched me in the chest with such force that I thought my ribs had braided around my spine. I assumed he was drunk or had mistaken me for an old enemy, but found out soon enough that he'd merely assumed I was a criminal because of my race. When he discovered that I wasn't what he imagined, he went on to tell me that his assault was my own fault for running up behind him.[88]

This incident was relatively minor compared to other accounts involving police

87 Kevin Young, "Blacker Than Thou," in *The Fire This Time: A New Generation Speaks About Race*, ed. Jesmyn Ward (New York: Scribner, 2016), 112.
88 Garnette Cadogan, "Black and Blue," in *The Fire This Time: A New Generation Speaks About Race*, ed. Jesmyn Ward (New York: Scribner, 2016), 138–139.

overaggression. By comparison, Cadogan notes the relative freedom he experiences in

Jamaica, where he is invisible, but "invisible . . . in a way I can't be invisible in the

United States."[89] By this I take Cadogan to mean that he blends in and is therefore part of

the normal fabric of his native environment, not drawing attention as an ontological

problem like he does in America. In New York, by contrast, he walks the streets,

"alternatively invisible and too prominent."[90] What is the nature of this *too-prominence*?

Yancy helps us significantly in *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing*

Significance of Race. Citing "personal testimony, Black autobiography . . . fiction . . .

critical whiteness studies, white antiracist forms of disarticulating and struggling against

whiteness, and Black embodied sites of resistance,"[91] Yancy focuses his study on the

objectification of Black bodies against the backdrop of a White epistemic framework that

disfigures the meaning of blackness, where whiteness is the transcendental norm that

"remains the *same* across a field of difference."[92] Yancy begins his study by referencing

Obama's "Philadelphia Speech on Race" during the 2008 US Presidential election.[93]

Responding to the considerable consternation surrounding Obama's connection to his

former pastor, Jeremiah Wright, Obama's speech was meant to quell the controversy and

provide his perspective on the racial dynamics of America, using his own experience

having an African father and White American mother as context. Recalling with fondness

his experiences with Wright, Obama articulated why he was hesitant to distance himself

from his former mentor:

89 Cadogan, "Black and Blue," 136.
90 Cadogan, "Black and Blue," 144.
91 Yancy, *Black Bodies*, xvi.
92 Yancy, *Black Bodies*, xxii. Emphasis in original.
93 Barack Obama, "A More Perfect Union," delivered March 18, 2008 at the National
    Constitution Center in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

> I can no more disown him than I can disown the black community. I can no more disown him than I can my white grandmother—a woman who helped raise me, a woman who sacrificed again and again for me, a woman who loves me as much as she loves anything in this world, but a woman who once confessed her fear of black men who passed by her on the street, and who on more than one occasion has uttered racial or ethnic stereotypes that made me cringe.[94]

Yancy contextualizes Obama's reflective observation about his grandmother and extends it to make a point about Obama's political success in particular and racial invisibility in general. His grandmother harbored significant racial animus toward Black males, but was still able to act lovingly toward Obama himself. This paradox is rationalized by an act of erasure in which his grandmother was able to see/receive/reconfigure Obama without acknowledging his blackness; even, with the need to *not* acknowledge his blackness. Obama received significant nurture from his grandmother, but along with her love, his body was returned to him de-raced. Yancy observes:

> Obama's white grandmother's loving gaze was weighted down by, riddled with, contradictions and tensions that reveal the insidious nature of whiteness and subtextually speak to the pain and suffering of black bodies that have been stereotyped, criminalized, and rendered invisible by the white gaze. Social scientists will be long preoccupied with the fact that so many whites actually voted for Obama. After all, it is *not* incompatible for those whites who voted for him to be afraid of Black male bodies they see walking in their direction, who they prejudge as criminals. Given the historically distorted white gaze vis-à-vis Black male bodies, one can only wonder what it is that whites force themselves to see or not to see when they gaze upon the dark body of Obama.[95]

Thus, invisibility serves as a point of erasure where blackness itself is deemed to be problematic and deviant (from the White transcendental norm) and therefore, when these bodies cannot be destroyed or controlled, they must be returned as raceless (e.g., the common and perhaps well-intentioned refrain, "But I don't see you as Black"). While acknowledging that it is "our common humanity [that] anchors our existence together,"

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94 Obama, "A More Perfect Union."
95 Yancy, *Black Bodies*, xv. Emphasis in original.

Bruce Reyes-Chow nevertheless resists this maneuver, unconvinced that the "true person" that is returned "will not simply be an ambiguous White European-American norm that continues to define the overarching culture."[96]

Similarly, hypervisibility is another form of erasure in which the Black body is returned as inferior. The individual is not seen because their blackness merely serves as a proxy for centuries of negative racial judgment. The Black subject is "invisible by virtue of being much too visible, is not seen by virtue of being seen." For example, Tamir Rice and Trayvon Martin could not be seen as children doing childhood things because their bodies had already declared them to be criminals and not children. Yancy recounts his own experience at the age of 17 or 18 when his White math teacher contradicted Yancy's expressed desire to be a pilot by suggesting a more realistic occupation such as a carpenter or bricklayer.[97] Yancy notes:

> This moment was indeed a time when I felt ontologically locked into my body. My body was indelibly marked with this stain of darkness. After all, he was the white mind, the mathematical mind, calculating my future by factoring in my Blackness. He did not "see" me, though. Like Ralph Ellison's invisible man, I occupied that paradoxical status of "visible invisibility." Within this dyadic space, my Black body phenomenologically returned to me as inferior.[98]

Yancy is clear: the offense was not merely that the teacher offered a helpful suggestion based upon his wise judgment regarding Yancy's abilities. Rather, Yancy's epidermal reality (i.e., blackness) made him a fixed entity. The teacher had no need to truly assess Yancy's abilities because his blackness was the most significant element.

96 Bruce Reyes-Chow, *"But I Don't See You As Asian": Curating Conversations About Race* (BRC Publishing, 2013), 75.
97 One is struck by the similarity between Yancy's experience here and Malcolm X's similar experience in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* when Malcolm's eighth-grade teacher, Mr. Ostrowski, told Malcolm that his stated intention of being a lawyer was "no realistic goal for a nigger," positing carpentry (!) instead.
98 Yancy, *Black Bodies*, 68.

Black existentialist themes are "evident in the work of some of the most influential writers in African-American literature."[99] One of the major topics found in this Black literary tradition has been the notion of racial invisibility. This theme, however, never stayed within the confines of African-American literature. Many, if not not most, of the Black scholars of religion and philosophy that I consulted referenced the Black literary tradition—especially the theme of invisibility—as critical sources for their work. For example, recall that one of the innovations that James Cone brought about in his formal establishment of Black theology was an argument for appealing to the Black artistic tradition as a legitimate source for theological reflection in contradistinction to the privileging of philosophy that he encountered in his graduate studies. Cone defended this move on the grounds that any theology that purported to emphasize Black flourishing has to be drawn from the indigenous wells of Black experience:

> This means that there can be no Black Theology which does not take the black experience as a source for its starting point. Black Theology is a theology of and for black people, an examination of their stories, tales, and sayings. It is an investigation of the mind into the raw materials of our pilgrimage, telling the story of "how we got over." For theology to be black, it must reflect upon what it means to be black. Black Theology must uncover the structures and forms of the black experience, because the categories of interpretation must arise out of the thought forms of the black experience itself.[100]

This trajectory is also seen in the womanist philosophical and theological tradition, with its emphasis upon Black *female* literary works. However, Gordon notes that "although the literary figures explore these existential themes with evocative force, the questions they have raised take on added dimensions when considered through theoretical reflection."[101]

99   Gordon, *An Introduction to Africana Philosophy*, 133.
100 Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 16–17.
101 Gordon, *An Introduction to Africana Philosophy*, 135.

Richard Wright

Born in 1908 on a Mississippi plantation, Wright was the son of parents born free

after the Civil War and the grandson of grandparents born as slaves before it. Although he

never attended school the first 12 years of his life and never graduated high school,

Wright excelled during his brief stint of education in middle school (graduating as

valedictorian) and eventually became one of the most celebrated authors of the twentieth

century. In Wright's novels, we see the Black existential tradition in full display,

especially his "articulations of dread and existential paradoxes in race contexts."[102] In

fact, existential themes (e.g., freedom, what it means to be human) come "most explicitly

to the fore in the writings of Richard Wright . . . who articulated the situation of the black

subject in antiblack society."[103] Cornel West writes:

> The Afro-American existentialist tradition reaches its zenith in the works and life
> of Richard Wright. The chief motif that pervades his writings is personal
> rebellion, against who he is, the culture that nurtures him, the society which
> rejects him and the cosmos which seems indifferent to his plight. Uprooted from
> the rural life of Mississippi, disgusted with the black bourgeoisie and
> predominately Jewish Communists in Chicago and New York, alienated with the
> cosmopolitan world of Paris and distrustful of emerging African countries, Wright
> is the marginal man *par excellence*.[104]

In *Native Son* (1940), Wright tells the story of Bigger Thomas, a young Black

man living on the South Side of Chicago in the 1930s struggling to be seen in a world

that had already overdetermined his subordinate status. In "How "Bigger" Was Born," the

introduction to the US edition of *Native Son*, Wright provides readers with an account of

the experiences that led to him crafting the novel. Wright begins with the admission that

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102 Gordon, *Existentia Africana*, 38.
103 Gordon, *Introduction to Africana Philosophy*, 133.
104 West, "Philosophy and the Afro-American Experience," 21. Emphasis in original.

Bigger was a composite sketch of several Bigger Thomases that he'd known throughout his life, stating, "There was not just one Bigger, but many of them, more than I could count and more than you suspect."[105] Bigger, symbolically, represented the defiance of Black life in the face of Jim Crow, a world in which there were "white schools and black schools, white churches and black churches, white businesses and black businesses, white graveyards and black graveyards, and, for all I know, a white God and a black God."[106] What was common to all of these real-life Bigger Thomases was the transient nature of their defiance: "Eventually, the whites who restricted their lives made them pay a terrible price. They were shot, hanged, maimed, lynched, and generally hounded until they were either dead or their spirits broken."[107] What is provocative about Wright's recollection is the culpability he ascribes to American society for creating Bigger Thomases as he laments the futility of social programs that fail in their attempts to obviate "the centuries-long chasm of emptiness which American civilization had created in these Biggers."[108]

The turning point of *Native Son* occurs one night when Bigger, working for Mr. and Mrs. Dalton, chauffeurs their daughter Mary and her boyfriend Jan around Chicago. Arriving home, Mary is intoxicated to the point that Bigger has to help her to her room. Bigger's intentions are, initially, pure, but he is gripped with the fear of being discovered being in such close proximity to Mary. He gets her to her bedroom, briefly kisses and fondles Mary in her incapacitated state, and is then startled when Mary's mother enters the room to check on her. Mrs. Dalton is blind and cannot see Bigger, but he is nevertheless afraid of being discovered since the worst will be assumed. Afraid that Mary

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105 Richard Wright, "How "Bigger Was Born," in *Native Son* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2005), 434.
106 Wright, "How "Bigger" Was Born," 437.
107 Wright, "How "Bigger" Was Born," 437.
108 Wright, "How "Bigger" Was Born," 454.

will awake from her alcohol-induced slumber and reveal Bigger's presence, Bigger

places a pillow over her head to keep her silent while Mrs. Dalton investigates,

accidentally killing Mary in the process. This sets in motion a string of events that

ultimately lead to Bigger's conviction for Mary's murder (though it is assumed that he

also raped Mary). Wright uses Mrs. Dalton's blindness to symbolically represent Bigger's

state of affairs: he is not seen for who he is and for the (relatively) good intentions he had

in trying to help Mary, but he is hopelessly subsumed under the static "role" he is

expected to play. In doing so, "Wright articulates the relationship between choice and

options for those who are denied normality, those who find themselves constantly thrown

into situations they would prefer to have avoided."[109] This is the lot of the Bigger

Thomases of the world, who defy Jim Crow but ultimately are made to pay for it. Bigger,

like the real-life Bigger Thomases in Wright's experiences, is angry, but it is an anger that

"functions as a conduit through which some level of recognition is gained."[110] Our culture

creates Bigger Thomases, "people who, in attempting to assert their humanity, become its

troublemakers as society attempts to force them back into "their place" while holding

them responsible for their actions."[111]

Ralph Ellison

Where Wright hints at the invisibility of Black life in the United States, Ralph

Ellison yells it from rooftops. Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) won the National Book

Award in 1953 and is hailed as one of the best novels of the era. Narrated by an unnamed

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109 Gordon, *Introduction to Africana Philosophy*, 134.
110 Yancy, *Black Bodies*, 187.
111 Gordon, *Introduction to Africana Philosophy*, 134.

Black man living in New York City, the novel is a first-person retrospective account of

the narrator's life and struggle in a world where he is simultaneously ignored, despised,

and demeaned. The opening paragraph in the prologue sets the stage for the theme of the

book:

> I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan
> Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance,
> of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids—and I might even be said to possess a mind. I
> am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. Like the
> bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been
> surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see
> only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed,
> everything and anything except me.[112]

In contrast to the epistemological "Cartesian plight" where a totalizing methodological

skepticism is asserted as the solution to the uncertainty of individual knowledge

(resulting in endless concerns about skepticism and solipsism), Ellison's narrator in

Invisible Man embodies a different set of philosophical problems.[113] Contending that

Descartes' problem of global doubt is a luxury that oppressed people cannot afford,[114]

Mills writes:

> The dilemmas of Ellison's black narrator, the philosophical predicament, are
> therefore quite different. His problem is his "invisibility," the fact that whites do
> not see him, take no notice of him, not because of physiological deficiency but
> because of the psychological "construction of their *inner* eyes," which
> conceptually erases his existence. He is not a full person in their eyes, and so he
> either is not taken into account at all in their moral calculations or is accorded
> only diminished standing.[115]

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112 Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Vintage/Random House, 1952), 3.
113 Mills, *Blackness Visible*, 8.
114 Liberation theologians make a similar point. In a world of immense suffering, it would be
     foolish to invest mental resources considering the non-existence of those who oppress you.
115 Mills, *Blackness Visible*, 8–9. Emphasis in original. See Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 3.

In fact, whereas Descartes' philosophical progeny have engaged in serious intellectual reflection regarding the existence of others (e.g., the "problem of other minds"),[116] Ellison contends that Blacks in America have the opposite question: do *I* exist? Ellison writes:

> Or again, you often doubt if you really exist. You wonder whether you aren't simply a phantom in other people's minds. Say, a figure in a nightmare which the sleeper tries with all his strength to destroy. It's when you feel like this that, out of resentment, you begin to bump people back. And, let me confess, you feel that way most of the time. You ache with the need to convince yourself that you do exist in the real world, that you're a part of all the sound and anguish, and you strike out with your fists, you curse and you swear to make them recognize you. And, alas, it's seldom successful.[117]

This hearkens back to Yancy's assertion about anger as a conduit through which some measure of recognition is attained. Anger, almost, seems to be a natural response in a world where one is systematically ignored and systemically abused. Yet, Ellison is giving us more than a lament about the incommodious state of Black life vis-à-vis the racial politics of the twentieth century. Rather, in *Invisible Man*, Ellison demonstrates his cognizance of "the various ways Blacks enacted agency through processes of ironic signification."[118] That is, despite the epistemic status accorded them, Blacks exhibited creative agency through surreptitiously subversive actions that took advantage of their hiddenness. One thinks about slave songs that, to the White gaze, indicated a docile submission to the passive and quietistic Christianity that had been drilled into them when, in fact, the songs secretly communicated messages to other slaves regarding liberatory and insurrectionist activity.[119] Ellison's narrator indicates this by the pride he exhibits in

116 The problem of other minds has a long pedigree, including Descartes, John Locke, and Thomas Reid. See Alvin Plantinga's *God and Other Minds* (1967).
117 Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 4.
118 Yancy, *Black Bodies*, 120.
119 Alison Bailey refers to such maneuvers as "strategic ignorance." In this case, Blacks took advantage of the assumption that they were ignorant (i.e., "expediently working with a dominant group's tendency to see wrongly") to openly broadcast instructions for rebellion (Sullivan/Tuana, 88)! See Bailey's chapter, "Strategic Ignorance" in *Race and*

illicitly draining electricity from Monopolated Light & Power in order to power his basement apartment that no one knew existed.[120] Looking with amusement upon his previously-held "fallacious assumption that . . . [he] was visible," Ellison's narrator now lived rent-free in a Whites-only building. The ploy is an exploitation of the false logic that had circumscribed his life; if I do not exist (i.e., if I am not accorded the rights, privileges, and dignity of other human beings), why should I engage in the basic activities that allegedly constitute a civilized society? If civil laws do not acknowledge me, why should I submit to them?

Yancy takes this entire experience to be a form of "ontological and epistemological violence,"[121] a reference to the interpretive schema (the "white racist, epistemic perspectives, interlocked with various social and material forces")[122] that engages in a false reconstruction of Black bodies. These forms of violence (i.e., the ontological and epistemological) are often concomitant with and reinforced by acts of physical brutality. A significant event in *Invisible Man* that highlights this epistemological and physical violence is the battle royal in the first chapter. At his high school graduation, the narrator delivered a laudatory oration that led to an invitation to speak at a gathering of the "town's leading white citizens."[123] Arriving at the event, the narrator is incorporated into a ruthless battle with several of his schoolmates, all to entertain the men in attendance representing the elite sectors of society. The narrator and nine others were blindfolded and forced into a ring where they fought violently, "grop[ing] about like

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Epistemologies of Ignorance, eds. Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2007), 77–94.
120 Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 5–8.
121 Yancy, *Black Bodies*, 76.
122 Yancy, *Black Bodies*, 76.
123 Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 17.

blind, cautious crabs crouching to protect their mid-sections."[124] The boys are blindfolded

to make the gladiatorial exhibition more amusing to the crowd, but their sight doesn't

matter; they are to be seen, not to see. What matters is their performance without regard

for their physical well-being. Yancy notes:

> Symbolically, the blindfolds replicate the larger socioeconomic powerlessness of Blacks in relation to whites. The Black body is *looked at*. The Black body does not return the gaze. The white body *looks at*. The battle royal is a spectacle, a visual (or ocular) power zone within which Black male bodies are mere surfaces.[125]

Ultimately, Ellison's novel communicates to us the dialectical relationship between

blackness and whiteness, where the former is necessary for the latter, but is (ontologically

and visually) disposed of once it has accomplished its purpose.[126] It is for this reason that

Mills considers *Invisible Man*, "while a multidimensional and multi-layered work of great

depth and complexity," to be an "*epistemological* novel," due to the fact that Ellison

raises, "in context after context, the question of how one can demarcate what is genuine

from only apparent insight, real from only apparent truth, even in the worldview of those

whose historical materialist "science" supposedly gave them "super vision.""[127]

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124 Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 23.
125 Yancy, *Black Bodies*, 77.
126 See, for example, Ellison's fascinating account of the narrator's tenure working for Mr. Kimbro at the paint plant in Long Island. The narrator is shown a process where the incredibly white paint is only made possible by adding and stirring in ten drops of "dead black" liquid (Ellison, 199–200). This "Optic White" (Ellison, 217) paint represents the need for blackness to be present in order to establish the superiority of whiteness. However, the drops of black liquid aid in this task only by their erasure. See Monahan (*The Creolizing Subject*, 164) and Yancy (*Black Bodies, White Gazes*, 79).
127 Mills, "White Ignorance," 18.

James Baldwin

James Baldwin was born in the summer of 1924 in Harlem, New York as a Black, poor, and gay male in a racist, classist, and homophobic culture. Reflecting upon this potentially-impairing threefold classification, Baldwin later quipped, "I thought I'd hit the jackpot. It was so outrageous you could not go any further . . . so you had to find a way to use it."[128] Often relegated to studies in African-American literature, the twenty-first century has seen a renaissance in Baldwin scholarship due, in part, to a renewed appreciation of his incisive analysis of American racial politics, the most recent example being the new documentary, "I Am Not Your Negro," a film that details Baldwin's reflections on the civil rights movement and its icons.

Baldwin, though associated with a number of leaders, entertainers, and projects advocating for civil rights in the middle of the twentieth century, was engaged in a different task regarding Black liberation. Blessed with a keen insight into human nature and culture, Baldwin sought to uncover the underlying values that make a racist society like America possible. In doing so, Baldwin sought to transcend standard categorizations (e.g., Black, White, victim, perpetrator) while still acknowledging ways in which America uniquely harmed people of color. West observes:

> A race-transcending prophet is someone who never forgets about the significance of race but refuses to be confined to race. James Baldwin is in many ways a good example. Why? Because James Baldwin was fundamentally a moralist. And what I mean by that is that he was concerned about the development of each human being regardless of race, creed, gender, and nationality. He felt that racism was a poison that impeded the development of both the racist and the victim of racism.[129]

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128 1987 Baldwin interview.
129 bell hooks and Cornel West, *Breaking Bread: Insurgent Black Intellectual Life* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1991), 49.

One aspect relevant to this project regarding the recovery of studies on Baldwin has been the epistemological themes that pervade Baldwin's work. Baldwin, with his prescient eye, bequeaths to his readers an evaluation of American culture that revels in its not-seeing, in its alleged "innocence" regarding one of the greatest crimes in world history. In *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin's powerful diatribe against racial injustice, Baldwin opens with a letter to his namesake and nephew James. Reflecting on the suffering that his nephew's father (Baldwin's brother) has endured, Baldwin writes:

> I know what the world has done to my brother and how narrowly he has survived it. And I know, which is much worse, and this is the crime of which I accuse my country and my countrymen, and for which neither I nor time nor history will ever forgive them, that they have destroyed and are destroying hundreds of thousands of lives and *do not know it and do not want to know it*.[130]

It is this not-wanting-to-know that is intriguing. Elizabeth V. Spelman, in a chapter on race and epistemology, argues that Baldwin's indictment of White Americans is not that they are ignorant, but that they *desire* ignorance so that they can—with a clear conscience—enjoy the fruits of a worldview that affirms their placement at the top of the social/ontological order. Reflecting on Baldwin's writings, Spelman avers:

> In short, depending on the context, ignorance can count in one's favor or as a mark against one. People are rewarded or punished for what they know or do not know, want to know or do not want to know, and because of that they may well have an interest in the management of their own and others' ignorance. Management of such ignorance is both an individual and a social labor.[131]

Thus, Spelman argues, racism in America is a case of managing ignorance to maintain the status quo and erase the tortured history that got us there. Baldwin, unlike others, was not

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130 James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Vintage International/Random House, 1993), 5. Emphasis added.
131 Elizabeth V. Spelman, "Managing Ignorance," in *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, eds. Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2007), 126.

interested in the nuts and bolts of political theory and process—his interests were more

fundamental. To be certain, Baldwin understood that there was little hope of any

improvement in race relations without "the most radical and far-reaching changes in the

American political and social structure,"[132] but he was not interested in participating in

the process of constructing laws. Rather, Baldwin gives us a master class on the

epistemological maneuvers that make racism possible, that prohibit the fabrication of the

society that civil rights leaders and politicians envisioned. He states:

> What is most terrible is that American white men are not prepared to believe my version of the story, to believe that it happened. In order to avoid believing that, they have set up in themselves a fantastic system of evasions, denials, and justifications, which system is about to destroy their grasp of reality, which is another way of saying their moral sense.
>
> What I am trying to say is that the crime is not the most important thing here. What makes our situation serious is that we have spent so many generations pretending that it did not happen.[133]

In his book, *The Nature of Prejudice*, psychologist Gordon Allport articulates five

"degrees of negative action" that people engage in with relation to groups that they don't

like.[134] The third negative action, discrimination, is the active process of making

"detrimental distinctions," becomes segregation when institutionalized as exclusion from

housing, churches, hospitals, etc.[135] The obvious, surface goal was the active exclusion of

members of a particularly undesirable group. However, Baldwin sees another dimension:

segregation was a brilliant strategy because it "allowed white people, with scarcely any

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132 Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 85.
133 James Baldwin, "The White Problem," in *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*, ed. Randall Kenan (New York: Vintage International, 2010), 95.
134 Gordon W. Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice* (New York: Addison-Wesley, 1979), 14.
135 Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice*, 14–15.

pangs of conscience whatever, to *create*, in every generation, only the Negro they wished to see."[136]

<div align="center">Making the Invisible Visible</div>

In significant ways, this chapter cannot be considered apart from anthropological and aesthetic factors. Our anthropological standard as to who gets to count as human (or, who is "closer to" or "made in the image of" God) affects who we will see and not see. If God is White ("light"), then whiteness is closer to (or, equivalent to) divinity. So, the question that must be asked is: how can Christian theology disable an epistemic framework that makes a racially-harmful epistemology of ignorance possible?

One way forward may be Christianity's complicity in the construction of exclusive binaries in which "we" are always superior/rational/moral/human and "they" (the Other) are inferior/irrational/immoral/less-than-fully-human (or, not human). As discussed in Chapter I, Christianity's identification schema was the precursor to race as the "formal marker of . . . differentiated status, replacing the religious divide (whose disadvantage, after all, was that it could always be overcome through conversion)."[137] Thus, a "humanoid" category (human-like but not fully human) had to be invented in order to identify non-White races, similar to the ancient Roman designation of the civilized (inside the Empire) and the barbarians (outside the Empire), "the distinction between full and question-mark humans."[138]

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136 James Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name: More Notes of a Native Son* (New York: Vintage International, 1961), 69. Emphasis in original.
137 Mills, *The Racial Contract*, 23.
138 Mills, *The Racial Contract*, 23.

This was an important element in Fanon's critique of Christianity. Focusing on *The Wretched of the Earth*, Michael Lackey discerns a particular form of atheism that Fanon falls under, one generated by a critique of a "theology of colonization."[139] Lackey does not classify Fanon along with "epistemological" atheists such as Darwin or Huxley (or, one might add, the "New Atheists" such as Richard Dawkins and his ilk), those for whom the concept of the Christian God is so incoherent that humans *cannot* believe in God. Rather, Lackey sees Fanon in league with other "socio-cultural" critics of Christianity such as Feuerbach, Nietzsche, and Virginia Woolf, those for whom the "devastating consequences of legitimizing a faith epistemology" render Christianity something that humans *should not* believe in.[140] For this latter group, the "epistemological and psychological system of belief" make oppression "not only possible but probable."[141] The key question under consideration in their assessment of religion is: "what are the epistemological and psychological conditions of faith that make believers feel justified in violating the rights and dignity of others with impunity?"[142] Here is Fanon's unique contribution to this discussion: for Fanon, Christianity is the fundamental principle—its sophisticated structures enable colonization to exist. That is, Christianity is not a neutral entity that is co-opted by evil regimes toward nefarious ends. Rather, Christianity, per Feuerbach, contains *within it* a "malignant principle"[143] and therefore instantiates and authenticates a logic of violence.

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139 Michael Lackey, "Frantz Fanon on the Theology of Colonization," *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 3, no. 2 (Fall 2002).
140 Lackey, "Frantz Fanon on the Theology of Colonization," 2.
141 Lackey, "Frantz Fanon on the Theology of Colonization," 2.
142 Lackey, "Frantz Fanon on the Theology of Colonization," 3.
143 Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. George Eliot (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 1989), 252.

For Fanon (and Feuerbach), the problem with Christianity is how it forces us to misperceive the Other. According to Perry Schmidt-Leukel, Feuerbach's primary concern with religion was that it "inevitably creates a judgemental chasm between believers and non-believers."[144] Schmidt-Leukel continues:

> If faith is seen as the right attitude towards life, towards God or towards whatever religion sees as ultimate, then—by implication—not having faith must be wrong, or bad, or missing the true purpose of life. Therefore faith, says Feuerbach, is only good to the believer, but inevitably pernicious towards the non-believer.[145]

This "judgemental chasm" does not necessarily lead to violence, but it "creates the hostile attitude towards the other from which violent actions against the other can easily emerge."[146] Fanon charges Christianity with a creation myth in which hierarchies are created along racial/ethnic/national lines based upon divine justification. Decolonization, then, is the repudiation of this false creation and the supplanting of it with a new one that is non-religious and yet liberatory. Fanon writes:

> Decolonization is truly the creation of new men. But such a creation cannot be attributed to a supernatural power: The "thing" colonized becomes a man through the very process of liberation.[147]

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144 Perry Schmidt-Leukel, *Transformation by Integration: How Inter-faith Encounter Changes Christianity* (London: SCM Press, 2009), 18.

145 Schmidt-Leukel, *Transformation by Integration*, 18.

146 Schmidt-Leukel, *Transformation by Integration*, 18. William T. Cavanaugh's *The Myth of Religious Violence* (Oxford University Press, 2009) would seem to contradict this claim. Cavanaugh challenges the myth that "religion is a transhistorical and transcultural feature of human life, essentially distinct from "secular" features such as politics and economics, which has a peculiarly dangerous inclination to promote violence" (3). As a result, it would be better if religion was "tamed by restricting its access to public power" (3). However, it seems that Fanon's concern is less about Christianity qua religion than the feature of it that he *does* think has the potential to induce violence. That is, Cavanaugh is attacking a myth that states that *all* religions are violent-prone due to a particular essential feature of religion. In this case, the concern is about a contingent feature of Christianity (as interpreted by Fanon and others). I would imagine that there could be a version of Christianity that would evade Fanon's concerns, and the possibility of such a religious system seems to place Fanon's critique outside of Cavanaugh's purview.

147 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 2.

Thus, Christianity divinizes hierarchies in which "believers" are epistemically-privileged and "non-believers" are epistemically-disadvantaged. The world, on this account, is logical, but "only believers have epistemological access to this system."[148] This reality has severe material consequences for non-believers. As part of the "out" group, they are the recipients of apparently contradictory measures (e.g., the slaughter of entire communities at the command of a God who is characterized as love and frowns upon killing) and see these measures deployed by members of the "in" group who operate with impunity. There is a vicious cycle at work here: the "chosen" are axiomatically positioned such that they are granted a unique capacity to "see" spiritual" things based upon their belief in the *true* God (what Lackey calls "the God of those in power")[149] and this superior status consequently grants them the authority to taxonomize everyone else. Infidels cannot challenge this system and are the objects of God's wrath.

At the heart of this theology of colonization is a two-tiered hierarchical structure of theology/colonization. "God" functions to create "two types of humans, one superior and one inferior, master and slave."[150] Fanon writes:

> This compartmentalized world, this world divided in two, is inhabited by different species. . . . Looking at the immediacies of the colonial context, it is clear that what divides this world is first and foremost what species, what race one belongs to. . . . The serf is essentially different from the knight, but a reference to divine right is needed to justify this difference in status.[151]

A significant material consequence of this hierarchy, of course, is that the "In" group is similarly authorized to ignore the Other. In the end, for Fanon, "God must be banished, quickly and completely,"[152] if decolonization is to create a true humanity.

148 Lackey, "Frantz Fanon on the Theology of Colonization," 8.
149 Lackey, "Frantz Fanon on the Theology of Colonization," 13.
150 Lackey, "Frantz Fanon on the Theology of Colonization," 15.
151 Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 5.
152 Lackey, "Frantz Fanon on the Theology of Colonization," 23.

Theologian Stephen W. Sykes makes a similar case in which he acknowledges that there has been a significant strand of Christian tradition/practice in which the Church has acted with hostility towards others "in its encounters with what is strange or threatening."[153] Sykes roots this in the "content of Christian teaching itself,"[154] most notably (1) distinctions between "old and new, untransformed and transformed behavior"[155] and ultimately between groups; (2) the usage of battle and conflict metaphors to depict the pursuit of holiness and the struggle against sin, a radical goal that could be maliciously deployed against people thought to "embody a threat to holiness," including "groups or even races whose customs were unfamiliar, or misunderstood, or easily misrepresented";[156] and (3) a troublesome ambiguity regarding the extent to which the Fall erased God's image from "whole groups or races" (here, Sykes cites the "Curse of Ham" and the horrific treatment of mentally disabled communities to demonstrate the "dangers of speculative interpretation fuelled by ignorance or anxiety").[157]

The presence of an "Other" is an unfortunately necessary corollary of human identity formation. As long as there are ways of marking races, there will be a racial Other; as long as there are nations, there will be a national Other; as long as there are genders, there will be a gender Other. Even Fanon traffics in binaries (e.g., colonization/decolonization). Furthermore, this problem—though admittedly most egregious within Christianity—is not an exclusively Christian problem. Many of us engage in identity formation in such a way that "we" are not "them." Again, this is an

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153 Stephen W. Sykes, "Making Room for the Other: Hostility and Hospitality from a Christian Perspective," in *The Religious Other: Hostility, Hospitality, and the Hope of Human Flourishing*, ed. Alon Goshen-Gottstein (New York: Lexington Books, 2014), 53.
154 Sykes, "Making Room for the Other," 54.
155 Sykes, "Making Room for the Other," 55.
156 Sykes, "Making Room for the Other," 55.
157 Sykes, "Making Room for the Other," 56.

ostensibly innocent and natural feature of our social locatedness. The problem enters in when "they" (whether stated implicitly or explicitly) are "less" than we are. This latter distinction is not an essential feature of humanity, but the historical record sadly demonstrates that it is an unfortunately common one. One has to look no further than recent US presidential elections to observe the widening chasm and demonization between groups that identify as "Democrat" or "Republican." The problem is not the binaries themselves, but the self-righteous hierarchy that we attach to them, in part animated by religious categories.

In conceiving of theological epistemology not primarily as concerns about truth claims within Christianity, but as the establishment of frameworks that aid us in understanding and "reading" the world, how can Christianity resist this tendency toward the erasure of the Other?[158] What is a tentative framework for how Christian theology can be done in a manner that is more charitable toward the Other? I contend that what is needed is a reconceptualization of fundamental categories of Christianity, in particular our grammar regarding righteousness and salvation. Liberation theologians have taken a first step in this direction by articulating the doctrine of the preferential option for the poor as the methodological point of departure in doing theology. Liberation theology contends that the locus of theology should be the locus of God's concern in Scripture: the poor, who cry out for justice and are heard by their Father in Heaven. Traditionally referred to as the "option for the poor," this concept prioritizes a solidarity with the poor.

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158 Several recent studies have attempted to defend difficult Biblical passages—especially in the Hebrew Scriptures/Old Testament—from the critical (and, sometimes, caricaturized) interpretations that Lackey, Fanon, and others have proffered. For example, see Paul Copan's *Is God a Moral Monster? Making Sense of the Old Testament God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2011) and (with Matthew Flannagan) *Did God Really Command Genocide? Coming to Terms with the Justice of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2014).

This privileging of the unprivileged is three-fold. First, there is the existential immersion of the theologian in their commitment to the oppressed. This moment is, to use the expression of Juan Luis Segundo, "pre-theological."[159] This commitment to the poor is grounded in an intuitive, pre-theoretical, determined, and life-altering realization that the status quo is enormously unjust and cannot continue on. Boff clarifies:

> The radical originality of liberation theology lies not in the topics it treats . . . nor in its method . . . not even in its language . . . not in its addressees . . . nor even in its final cause. . . . The radical originality of the theology of liberation lies in the *insertion of the theologian in the real life of the poor*.[160]

For liberation theologians, the impoverishment of most of the world is a scandal and an offense. In speaking of the grammar of the Bible as it pertains to the poor, Gutiérrez writes:

> *Indigent*, *weak*, *bent over*, *wretched* are terms which well express a degrading human situation. These terms already insinuate a protest. They are not limited to description; they take a stand. This stand is made explicit in the vigorous rejection of poverty. The climate in which poverty is described is one of indignation. And it is with the same indignation that the cause of the poverty is indicated: the injustice of the oppressors.[161]

A second aspect of the privileging of the poor is its Biblical justification. Liberation theologians focus on a preferential option for the poor because they interpret God as having one. Elsa Tamez writes:

> Someone has said that if all the texts in the Bible that speak of the poor were cut out, very few pages would be left. I believe if theologians strained the Bible with a sieve to remove all historical material and keep only what they held to be "purely" spiritual and theological, the result would be a limited and insipid text, inapplicable to the real struggles of human life.[162]

159 Robert McAfee Brown, *Theology in a New Key: Responding to Liberation Themes* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1978), 62.
160 Clodovis Boff, "Epistemology and Method of the Theology of Liberation," in *Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology*, eds. Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993), 66. Emphasis in original.
161 Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 165. Emphasis in original.

Throughout Scripture, God is depicted as siding with the poor and downtrodden, whether it was attending to the cries of the Hebrews toiling at the hands of the Egyptians, God's continual mercy upon barren women in a culture where childbearing is important, or the entire life of Jesus who was born to modest means and continually identified with the downtrodden throughout His ministry. Taking Scripture seriously requires reassessing traditional theological loci in terms of the Biblical data.

Third, the option for the poor is closer to a "universal" theology. Since the overwhelming majority of the world lives in states of existence that are impoverished and deficient, a theological methodology that takes its starting point from their perspective will capture the essence of humanity and speak of the good news of the Gospel more effectively than one that is oriented toward the rich and powerful. This concept is captured in Hugo Assmann's concept of the "epistemological privilege of the poor."[163] Brown writes that this concept highlights the fact that:

> the way the poor view the world is closer to the reality of the world than the way the rich view it. Their "epistemology," i.e., their way of knowing, is accurate to a degree that is impossible for those who see the world only from the vantage point of privileges they want to retain.[164]

Although "doing" theology from the perspective of the marginalized and engaging in solidarity with victims of injustice is a step in the right direction, I wonder if such an approach gets to the heart of Fanon's criticism (i.e., the implicit superior/inferior binaries that enable us to ignore the invisible). Privileging the epistemic perspective of the oppressed, though helpful, seem to be an act of reinverting the "inverted epistemology of

162 Elsa Tamez, "Poverty, the Poor, and the Option for the Poor: A Biblical Perspective," in *The Option for the Poor in Christian Theology*, ed. Daniel G. Groody (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 42.
163 See Hugo Assman's *Theology for a Nomad Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1976).
164 Brown, *Theology in a New Key*, 61.

the privileged into an epistemology of the oppressed."[165] That is, the basic "logic of

purity"[166] that claims that some viewpoints are epistemically-privileged remains intact;

we've just changed which community gets to be asserted as privileged. In such cases,

"*inverted epistemologies can only be reinverted and not shattered.*"[167]

In order to get a better understanding of the thoroughgoing work necessary for

Christianity to adopt such a framework, one model would be the disruptive

methodological change brought about in jurisprudence by critical race studies. Critical

race studies, as a distinct legal field, emerged within legal studies as a response to the

perception that many of the legal victories attained during the civil rights era were being

undermined.

> It became apparent to many who were active in the civil rights movement that
> dominant conceptions of race, racism, and equality were increasingly incapable of
> providing any meaningful quantum of racial justice.[168]

Initially, legal scholars of color found some comfort in critical *legal* studies, the reigning

progressive movement within law, but still felt isolated and excluded, concerned about a

residual racism even within a progressive movement that claimed to radically assess more

conservative treatments of the law.

> Even within this enclave on the left we sometimes experienced alienation,
> marginalization, and inattention to the agendas and a misunderstanding of the
> issues we considered central to the work of combating racism. Scholars of color
> within the left began to ask their white colleagues to examine their own racism
> and to develop oppositional critiques not just to dominant conceptions of race and
> racism but to the treatment of race within the left as well.[169]

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165 José Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic
    Injustice, and Resistant Imaginations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 296.
166 Bailey, "Strategic Ignorance," 87.
167 Bailey, "Strategic Ignorance," 87. Emphasis in original.
168 Mari J. Matsuda et al., *Words That Wound: Critical Race Theory, Assaultive Speech, and the
    First Amendment* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993), 3.
169 Matsuda et al., *Words That Wound*, 5.

As scholars of color within jurisprudence began to band together, a shared identity, agenda, and presuppositional stance began to develop, especially in light of a number of incidents in the 1980s on college campuses that brought racial issues and legal doctrines into a frightening clash of grievances and principles largely centered around the role of the First Amendment vis-à-vis hate speech. As new "themes, methodologies, and voices" emerged, critical race studies began to be recognized as a distinct field of legal studies, one that assessed racism "not as isolated incidents of conscious bigoted decisionmaking or prejudiced practice, but as larger, systemic, structural, and cultural, as deeply psychologically and socially ingrained."[170] In particular, several key elements came to the foreground as one way of defining critical race studies in light of more mainstream approaches to the law (quoted at length):

> 1. Critical race theory recognizes that racism is endemic to American life. Thus, the question for us is not so much whether or how racial discrimination can be eliminated while maintaining the integrity of other interest implicated in the status quo such as federalism, privacy, traditional values, or established property interests. Instead, we ask how these traditional interests and values serve as vessels of racial subordination.

> 2. Critical race theory expresses skepticism toward dominant legal claims of neutrality, objectivity, color blindness, and meritocracy. These claims are central to an ideology of equal opportunity that presents race as an immutable characteristic devoid of social meaning and tells an ahistorical, abstracted story of racial inequality as a series of randomly occurring, intentional, and individualized acts.

> 3. Critical race theory challenges ahistoricism and insists on a contextual/historical analysis of the law. Current inequalities and social/institutional practices are linked to earlier periods in which the intent and cultural meaning of such practices were clear. More important, as critical race theorists we adopt a stance that presumes that racism has contributed to all contemporary manifestations of group advantage and disadvantage along racial lines, including differences in income, imprisonment, health, housing, education,

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170 Matsuda et al., *Words That Wound*, 5.

political representation, and military service. Our history calls for this presumption.

4. Critical race theory insists on recognition of the experiential knowledge of people of color and our communities of origin in analyzing law and society. This knowledge is gained from critical reflection on the lived experience of racism and from critical reflection upon active political practice toward the elimination of racism.

5. Critical race theory is interdisciplinary and eclectic. It borrows from several traditions, including liberalism, law and society, feminism, Marxism, poststructuralism, critical legal theory, pragmatism, and nationalism. This eclecticism allows critical race theory to examine and incorporate those aspects of a methodology or theory that effectively enable our voice and advance the cause of racial justice even as we maintain a critical posture.

6. Critical race theory works toward the end of eliminating racial oppression as part of the broader goal of ending all forms of oppression. Racial oppression is experienced by many in tandem with oppression on grounds of gender, class, or sexual orientation. Critical race theory measures progress by a yardstick that looks to fundamental social transformation. The interests of all people of color necessarily require not just adjustments within the established hierarchies, but a challenge to hierarchy itself. This recognition of intersecting forms of subordination requires multiple consciousness and political practices that address the varied ways in which people experience subordination.[171]

I contend that this framework, adopted by Christian theology, would be helpful in engaging a pluralistic world. More importantly, it would enable the Church to participate in the cognitive act of resistance José Medina refers to as "epistemic friction," an intentional resistance to hegemonic constructions of knowledge and an attempt to seek out subjugated knowledges.[172] What is impressive about Medina's notion of epistemic friction is the space it creates to embrace a variety of viewpoints without discounting the tension that may be present among them. There is a radical pluralism within Christianity (e.g., the diversity of theories on Scripture, debates about the efficacy of the sacraments, the different portrayals of Jesus in the four Gospels); to be a Christian is to inhabit a

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171 Matsuda et al., *Words That Wound*, 6–7.
172 Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance*, 281–289.

discursive community with a multiplicity of views on most doctrines, even ones that are deemed essential. Nevertheless, the regnant Christian epistemic framework has functioned so as to create intellectual sub-communities where we "demonize" other perspectives (e.g., the "liberal" vs. "fundamentalist" divide that continues to this day).

A critical race theological epistemology in dialogue with critical race studies would affirm the following:

Endemic Racism: A critical race epistemology would openly acknowledge that Christian theology has been implicit in the construction of racial categories and the perpetuation of racism since its inception in North America. Goetz argues that "From the start of the English colonial adventure in North America, Christian baptism was a tool of conquest."[173] In fact, Goetz's assessment of seventeenth-century Virginia reveals that Christians of the era were willing to redefine both Christianity and the sacrament of baptism to mean something that it had never meant before in order to elude the crisis presented when claims were made that Blacks and Native Americans were somehow heirs to freedom upon their conversion/baptism. And, the chief tool used to achieve these ends was the creation of a concept of human difference—race—that enabled them to invent classes of human beings who were "incapable of Christian conversion"[174] and undeserving of any potential ecclesiological/social benefits that might accrue upon receiving the rite of baptism. It is thus clear that the politics of race were more important in early North American Christianity than any notion of fidelity to Scripture.

Skepticism: Critical race (legal) theory, in the pursuit of an analysis of law that places marginalized voices at the center, resists claims of neutrality putatively in service

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173 Goetz, *The Baptism of Early Virginia*, 89.
174 Goetz, *The Baptism of Early Virginia*, 3.

to the construction of universal legal principles. However, because religion claims to point toward truths that are even *more* universal, absolute, and binding than those of law, it has the potential to be even more deleterious to the pursuit of justice. As such, a critical race epistemology would reject claims of universality within Christian theology without attending to the ways in which these claims unjustly oppress particular people and unfairly enrich other particular groups.

Contextualism: A critical race epistemology would presume that Christianity, though it wasn't the only factor in the modern building of the racial imaginary, nevertheless:

> played an important role in the formation, revision, and reconstruction of racial categories in the modern world. Christianity necessarily was central to the process of *racializing* peoples—to imposing categories of racial hierarchies upon groups of humanity or other societies.[175]

Christianity in North America was developed in tandem with a worldview that sought a variety of justifications for ontological distinctions among humanity. Thus, an "ideological suspicion"[176] would be affirmed in seeking out the ways in which existing political inequalities find explicit and implicit justification in Christian theology.

Pluralism: Similar to liberation theology, a critical race epistemology would contend that Christian theology must not only reflect upon the *experiences* of theorists, pastors, and laypersons who represent the "underside of modernity," but it must also incorporate their insights and voices.

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175 Paul Harvey, ""A Servant of Servants Shall He Be": The Construction of Race in American Religious Mythologies," in Prentiss, Craig R., ed. *Religion and the Creation of Race and Ethnicity: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 14. Emphasis in original.
176 See *Black Theology and Ideology: Deideological Dimensions in the Theology of James H. Cone* by Harry H. Singleton, III (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2002).

Eclecticism: A critical race epistemology would also affirm the "socioanalytical mediation" within liberation theology that appeals to sources beyond Scripture and the Christian tradition in order to articulate a theology that is responsive to human oppression. This has primarily included the social sciences in understanding social and interpersonal dynamics, but can and should also include a wide range of disciplines.

Intersectionality: Finally, a critical race epistemology would recognize the multiple modes of exclusion that have sought—and found—some form of justification from the Christian tradition, and see the pursuit of racial justice to be just one activity that attempts to dislodge the multiple and varied ways in which humanity fails to experience the Kingdom of God. It would also recognize that Christianity is growing fastest in those areas where the populations continue to experience oppression at the juncture of class, race, and gender—not to mention the vestigial effects of colonialism.

By foregrounding race at the center of analysis, the Church is able to engage in what Medina calls "guerrilla pluralism,"[177] an encounter with a world constructed by radical exclusion that (1) starts from the presumption that voices, memories, knowledge, etc., have been suppressed and (2) actively seeks to bring them to the surface. This "particularly radical subversive force" is necessary when:

> equitable and fair melioration for all is not yet possible, that is, when in a fractured society the conditions are not given for beneficial epistemic friction that results in mutual corrections and a collective process of learning in which all social groups can participate.[178]

This radical seeking out of the invisible Other has Scriptural precedent. In the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37), Jesus reconfigures the standard Jewish concept of

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177 Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance*, 283ff.
178 Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance*, 283.

"neighbor." Drawing from a long history within Mosaic law of the moral expectations toward neighbors, Jesus tells a parable about a man (presumably Jewish) traveling down the road from Jerusalem to Jericho who was robbed, beaten, and left for dead. The first to encounter him was a priest who "saw" him, but ignored him. Secondly, a Levite comes along, again "sees" the destitute man, but ignored him. Speaking to Jews who saw themselves as the privileged "in" group, Jesus criticizes those who saw the man but engaged in a heartless act of erasure (i.e., an intentional un-seeing). However, the hero of the story turns out to be someone from the despised "out" group—a Samaritan!—who truly saw this individual and, moved with pity, generously attended to his present and future needs. The true neighbor was not constituted by the individual's group, gender, racial, ethnic, or national identity, but by the one who saw the man and had mercy on him.

V. CONCLUSION

The title of this dissertation comes from Terrence Tilley's *Evils of Theodicy*. The Church, after the violence enacted in the name of God during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, had lost credibility. The Western conscience had become "deeply scandalized and disgusted by confessional religions."[1] Churches had "ceased being effective witnesses to a god worth worshipping."[2] The once authoritative Church now had to vie for a place at the table, competing with other forces in the public square.

It is often stated among those who are engaged in social justice work that racial progress is often followed by a backlash. The tremendous gains made by formerly-enslaved Blacks were undercut by the establishment of Jim Crow. The revolutionary legal victories won by the brave women and men of the twentieth-century Civil Rights Movement were undermined by the harsh, racial politics of Nixon and Reagan (especially their "War on Drugs"). And, the first Black president of the United States was succeeded by a man who denied for years that he was even qualified to be president. Racism and xenophobia of immense proportions are being flaunted without care, with individuals emboldened by tacit support from the highest levels of US society.

Amidst all of this, the Church needs to ask, like King: What kind of God are we worshipping? Is God, like Jones wonders, a White racist? Or is God, per Cone, on the side of the oppressed? Du Bois analyzed the possible role that the Christian Church might play in resolving the perennially intractable problem of racism in America. After offering

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1   Terrence W. Tilley, *Evils of Theodicy* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2000), 221.
2   Tilley, *Evils of Theodicy*, 223.

a brief history of the intersection between Christianity and the relegation of Blacks to an

inferior social caste in the United States, Du Bois concluded:

> Thus, the record of the church, so far as the Negro is concerned, has been almost
> complete acquiescence in caste, until today there is in the United States no
> organization that is so completely split along the color line as the Christian church
> —the very organization that according to its tenets and beliefs should be no
> respecter of persons and should draw no line between white and black, "Jew or
> Gentile, barbarian, Scythian, bond or free."

> Thus, judging from the past, I see no reason to think that the attitude of the
> Christian church toward problems of race and caste is going to be anything
> different from its attitude in the past. It is mainly a social organization,
> pathetically timid and human; it is going to stand on the side of wealth and power;
> it is going to espouse any cause which is sufficiently popular, with eagerness; it is,
> on the other hand, often going to transgress its own fine ethical statements and be
> deaf to its own Christ in unpopular and weak causes.[3]

This dissertation is an attempt to start a conversation regarding Christian

theological methodology and race. My thesis is that the normativity of whiteness in the

theology (not just the practice) of Christianity can only be eliminated if our methodology

is framed in such a way that it is sensitive to the implicit and explicit ways that this

normalization occurs. In exploring this thesis, I appealed to critical race studies (broadly-

construed) as the guiding theoretical framework, given the ways in which philosophy of

race and critical race studies in the field of law have challenged their own disciplines

regarding their complicity in racial injustice.

In doing so, I had two audiences in mind. First, the general audience I wanted to

address were theologians in North America. It was my hope that seeing how theology as a

whole is still largely silent about race and seeing how non-White theologians approach

their craft from a vastly differing starting point would inspire them to rethink their

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3   W. E. B. Du Bois, "Will the Church Remove the Color Line?," in *A W. E. B. Du Bois Reader*,
     ed. Andrew G. Paschal (New York: Macmillan, 1971), 271–272.

disciplinary commitments. It was my hope that the Church would begin to address the difficulty that some of its children have in reconciling their faith with their racial or ethnic identity by naming and dismantling the theological barriers to such a reconciliation. Second, I also thought about the audience of liberation theologians. For years, they have been laboring, in diverse ways, to witness to a God they thought was worthy of worship; a God that was on the side of the marginalized, the downtrodden, and the ignored. Yet, it was my contention that they were doing this in a disciplinary silo, isolated from similar efforts in other disciplines. Thus, I wanted these theologians to see the rich and creative resources residing in other fields, so that they could begin to appropriate these insights into their theological work.

In Chapter I, I set the stage by problematizing the issue of methodology, drawing attention to the framing logics and telos that motivate our work. I wanted to realign the discussion to focus on the core of Christianity: not just the sins of its members, but the sins of its theories. In this regard, my approach resembled the distinction Bernard Lonergan made between minor and major authenticity. The former (minor authenticity) concerns the "unauthenticity of the subject with respect to the tradition that nourishes him," while the latter (major authenticity) "justifies or condemns the tradition itself."[4] Major authenticity, thus, is when "history and, ultimately, divine providence pass judgment on traditions."[5] After articulating the Black religious response as one largely crafted toward challenging the methodological commitments of the entire Christian

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4   Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971), 80.

5   Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 80.

tradition, I highlighted black existential phenomonology as a primary interlocutor for this task.

In Chapter II, I began with theodicy in response to Jones' contention that any theology that took racial injustice seriously must place theodical concerns at the center of their work. Looking at Jonathan Edwards and evangelical theology, I challenged a trajectory in Christianity that provided theological cover to racial injustice either by directly justifying it or by providing the conceptual space for injustice to be ignored or minimized. I then explored Jones' work, *Is God a White Racist?*, and discussed the challenge posed to Christianity by Jones in particular and humanism in general.

Engaging Jones' work and tackling the theodical question was helpful to my overall project in three ways. First, Jones' work is critical, but not constructive. That is, rather than clarify the content of a liberative theology, he establishes a framework that could be used to adjudicate the liberative capacity of our theological constructs. Thus, as I looked at theological anthropology and epistemology, I kept coming back to Jones as a guide, querying whether or not, for example, a system/individual adequately dealt with the unique suffering endured by people of color in their theology. Thus, I was able to take one step forward and begin to apply his framework to particular theological loci. However, this movement was predicated upon a second helpful aspect of engaging Jones, and that was challenging his claim that humanism was better suited to the ends of liberation. By acknowledging the role that the Christian tradition has played in "mak[ing] prejudice and unmak[ing] prejudice,"[6] with the latter exemplified by King and the Civil Rights Movement, I was able to accept Jones' methodological program but deploy it

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6   Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice*, 444.

toward a more positive end for Christianity.[7] Third, Jones also "freed" me up to center my theological program around my racial situatedness. At the beginning of his work, Jones talked about "Whiteanity" as a trope for the form of Christianity that he found problematic, essentially the "religious ideology of white supremacy."[8] Nevertheless, his basis for dismissing this inferior form of Christianity was his insistence that marginalized communites must do the hard work of forming their own theology, taking his inspiration from the words of Carter G. Woodson: "It is very clear, then, that if Negroes got their conception of religion from slaveholders, libertines, and murderers, there may be something wrong about it, and it would not hurt to investigate it."[9]

In Chapter III, I looked at the ways in which US culture (including the Church) have been formed by an anthropological norm of Black non-personhood. By this I mean that our culture has conceived of humanity and blackness in such a way that Blacks have been deemed to be inferior and therefore deserving of inhumane treatment and relative dismissal. Given this anthropological norm, a central concern in Black religion has been the discussion of redemptive anthropologies that embrace *all* humans as sacred. Significantly, I looked at models of this from non-White scholars to explore the common features that constitute these models of humanity. It was this final component that highlighted my thesis. Each scholar of color highlighted in Chapter III approached the construction of theological anthropology by positing core axiomatic principles regarding

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7   I will extend this analysis in a forthcoming chapter of the *T&T Clark Companion to African American Theology* (2018) entitled "Black Humanism and Black Theology." In that essay, I will look at the question of what constitutes tenable belief in God as liberator, taking into account the atheism and secularism that grounds past and current Black activism and politics.

8   Jones, *Is God a White Racist?*, 215 n. 1.

9   Carter Godwin Woodson, *The Mis-Education of the Negro* (New York: Tribeca Books, 2013), 51.

the relationship between God and those typically excluded from such analyses. In looking at the common themes that characterized their approaches (an appeal to indigenous resources, a recognition of the explicit markers of cultural identity that inform our theoretical constructions, and a valuing of community), the failure of mainstream theologies was evident: by not attending to the ways in which Blacks have been configured as non-persons, they were providing tacit cover for the normativity of whiteness in Christian anthropology. These indigenous anthropologies did not merely add a chapter to a standard set of issues and concepts; rather, their projects focused on methodology (i.e., allowing the question of God in relation to the oppressed to serve as the central basis for their work).

Finally, in Chapter IV, I used epistemology as a way to highlight racial invisibility, the ways in which people of color are systemically, intentionally, and strategically ignored. Appealing to the relatively new field of epistemology of ignorance, I articulated the nature of this ignorance and its concrete implications in the lives of Blacks. I also pointed to the ubiquity of this topic in Black culture in general by looking at its presence in the work of Baldwin, Ellison, and James. I concluded by evaluating Fanon's challenge that Christianity encourages a violent logic, gesturing toward ways in which the Church could better embrace the Other.

In her book *Revealing Whiteness: The Unconscious Habits of Racial Privilege*, Shannon Sullivan reflects upon Du Bois' evolution in understanding White bias. She writes:

> Du Bois came to realize that the ignorance manifested by white people was much more complex and sinister that he earlier had thought. Rather than an innocuous oversight, it was an active, deliberate achievement that was carefully (though not necessarily consciously) constructed, maintained, and protected. Du Bois

eventually saw that to understand the white ignorance of non-white people, one has to hear the active verb "to ignore" at the root of the noun. What had initially seemed to him like an innocent lack of knowledge on white people's part revealed itself to be a malicious production that masked the ugly Terrible of white exploitative ownership of non-white people and cultures.[10]

The bias that must be confronted as a theological community, therefore, is not an "innocuous oversight," but—as Robert Bernasconi phrases it—*the needing not to know and the forgetting what one never knew*.[11] Thus, Chapter IV highlights the ways that Christianity has been negligient in attending to the subaltern voices in both its texts and its communities.

This project is by no means exhaustive in its reconceptualization of theological sub-disciplines toward the aim of racial justice. For example, although ontological issues were hinted at, an extensive treatment of this topic with regard to Christianity would be a fruitful area of discussion. In *Blackness Visible*, Mills devotes considerable space to racial ontologies, putting Black and Jewish experience in dialogue and therefore touching on the role that Christianity has played in constructuing identities.

Thomas Guarino begins his *Foundations of Systematic Theology* with the claim that "There has rarely been much doubt among Christians that the content of their faith radiates a certain beauty." By this, Guarino means the overarching "love story" in Scripture of innocence lost and redeemed by a "just and compassionate God" who saves His people and conquers sin by the resurrection of Christ.[12] However, Guarino contends that the beauty of the Christian faith "is not served or illuminated simply by any

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10   Shannon Sullivan, *Revealing Whiteness: The Unconscious Habits of Racial Privilege* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006), 20.

11   See Bernasconi's "On Needing Not to Know and Forgetting What One Never Knew: The Epistemology of Ignorance in Fanon's Critique of Sartre," in *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, eds. Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2007).

12   Thomas G. Guarino, *Foundations of Systematic Theology* (New York: T&T Clark, 2005), ix.

presuppositions."[13] That is, if the Christian faith and its doctrines are to maintain a "recognizable and suitably mediative form"—one that is faithful to tradition and attractive in how it reveals the Biblical narrative—it must acknowledge that some presuppositions and theoretical exigencies are better suited to retaining the intelligibility and beauty of Christianity than others.[14] Thus, Guarino's book discusses philosophy, truth, hermeneutics, language, and other topics that Guarino considers essential to an appropriate framing of Christian theology. Similarly, I contend that if Christianity is to remain truthful to its core claim of God's universal and reconciling love for all of humanity, and if it is to be relevant in our increasingly pluralistic and "brown" America,[15] it too must attend to particular disciplinary presuppositions and frameworks.

As we continue on in the work of constructing a theology that witnesses to a God worth worshiping, it's still my hope that Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.'s words have a ring of truth to them: "No one can say that Christianity has failed. It has never been tried."[16]

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13   Guarino, *Foundations of a Systematic Theology*, x.
14   Guarino, *Foundations of a Systematic Theology*, x.
15   See, for example, Bryan Massingale's section on "The Browning of America and Racial Resistance" in *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church*, 9–13.
16   Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., *Marching Blacks* (New York: Dial Press, 1973), 194.

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