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“Traditioning” Blackness: A Theo-Ethical Analysis of Black Identity in Black
Theological Discourse

A Dissertation

Presented to

the Faculty of the University of Denver and the Iliff School of Theology

Joint PhD Program

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

by

Ben Sanders III

June 2018

Advisor: Dr. Theodore M. Vial

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Title: “Traditioning” Blackness: A Theo-Ethical Analysis of Black Identity in Black Theological Discourse
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ABSTRACT

The emergence of James Cone’s black liberation theology in the late-1960s and early 1970s marked both a radical challenge to and a historical transformation of the fields of religious and theological studies. Building on Cone’s work, black theological discourse has developed a rich tradition of religious and academic inquiry characterized by its commitment to interpreting Christianity in particular, and religious experience more broadly, from the vantage point of oppressed black people. This dissertation shows that James Cone developed a particular understanding of black identity in his early works and, furthermore, that various scholars have critically engaged this conception of black identity in both explicit and implicit ways. I argue that retaining and developing black theology’s commitment to the lived experiences of oppressed black people requires clarifying the meaning of black identity in light of the complex socio-economic realities that characterize black life in the 21st-century. Borrowing from the work of Latin American theologian Orlando Espin, this dissertation identifies and interprets outstanding examples of critical engagement with Cone’s conception of blackness as moments of “traditioning.” Traditioning marks the ongoing and inevitable process of contesting and reshaping theological realities. This dissertation, then, analyzes the ongoing contestation and reshaping—traditioning—of black identity in black theological discourse. Through this analysis, this dissertation seeks to maintain and develop black theology’s

revolutionary commitment to the oppressed by refracting this commitment through the lens of the historic socio-economic stratification that characterizes black life in the 21st century.

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The labor of this dissertation was supported by so many wonderful people; I will only be able to name some of them here. I am grateful to my advisor Dr. Ted Vial for his insightful and timely feedback on earlier drafts of this work, and for his faithful support of me as a scholar and human being. To the rest of my committee, Dr. Edward Antonio, Dr. Nancy Wadsworth, and Dr. Gary Dorrien, thank you for all the ways you have inspired and shaped this project, and for sticking with me over the years.

As I worked to finish this dissertation, I was called to the wonderful faculty at Eden Theological Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri. I am grateful to my (current and former) faculty colleagues at Eden for a level of support and patience that is too rare in the theological academy. You all cheered me on as I labored to finish this work while simultaneously growing into a faculty member. What a wonderful gift!

I could never name all the mentors, colleagues, and friends who have helped me reach this point, but you know who you are. I cherish you all.

I am profoundly grateful to my family for endowing me with the love and courage necessary to begin and finish this work. To my (late) grandmother, Phyllis Ann Jackson; my parents, Tonia R. Jackson and Bennett T. Sanders; my siblings, Towan, Denzel, and Simone; all my aunties, uncles, cousins, and ancestors. I love you all.

Finally, to my partner, Lyz: thank you for being my teammate, believing in me, and standing with me in valleys and on mountaintops. Thank you for helping me format this work and for reminding me to step away from it, when necessary. I love you and could not have finished this project without you.

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INTRODUCTION

This dissertation was born on November 24, 2014—not four months after the body of Michael Brown, Jr. laid in the street for four hours after being killed by Officer Darren Wilson of the Ferguson, Missouri Police Department on August 9th. I was in San Diego for the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion (AAR) when Barack Obama, the first black President of the United States of America, addressed the grand jury’s decision not to indict Officer Wilson in Brown’s killing. President Obama was solemn and measured, conducting himself with the respectable poise that characterized so much of his presidency. Reflecting a strong understanding of how ideologically divided the nation is, President Obama noted that the grand jury’s decision would have been controversial either way. And then, with the eyes of the country and the world fixed on him, the first black President spoke words that I will likely never forget: “First and foremost, we are a nation built on the rule of law.”¹

I was crushed. I do not know what I was expecting the President to say on that day. I do not think I held any clear expectations; my mental and emotional capacities were still finding the way through the deep, dull but all too familiar pain of having been

¹ “President Obama Delivers a Statement on the Ferguson Grand Jury’s Decision,” whitehouse.gov, November 24, 2014, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2014/11/24/president-obama-delivers-statement-ferguson-grand-jurys-decision>.

reminded that the American legal system sponsors and supports the killing and killers of black people. It wasn't that Obama had said anything wrong or untrue, it was that he left so much unsaid. He noted the pain Brown's parents were facing and he urged law enforcement to work with and not against communities. Obama even identified the connection between distrust of law enforcement and the history structural racism America, carefully commenting that, "*some* of this [distrust] is the result of the legacy of racial discrimination in this country."² I can only imagine the inner turmoil President Obama must have wrestled with as he prepared his careful, presidential statement.

But the balanced, careful demeanor of President Obama's response clashed with the deep pain and anguish in the impromptu gatherings created at the AAR through texts and phone calls. People needed to be together; some cried, some found ways to laugh (to keep from crying), some analyzed, and some sat silently. Despite lacking clear expectations for the President's commentary, I was profoundly disappointed. I wanted and needed more from a black president; the black community deserved more. In all of the gatherings where the majority of bodies reflected the beauty of African diaspora, one passionate thought struck my mind and heart with the clarity of lightning in a dark sky: if this is how black presidents respond to non-indictments of police officers who kill black children, the black community needs to revisit what we mean—and why we mean it—when we say "black."

This dissertation is a combination of the reflection born from the pain of Michael Brown's death and my academic and theological commitments to black theological

² "President Obama Delivers a Statement on the Ferguson Grand Jury's Decision." Emphasis mine.

discourse. By “black theological discourse” I mean the range of mostly religious scholarship that has developed in critical and constructive response to James Cone’s monumental development of black liberation theology.³ In one sense, this dissertation represents my first concerted attempt to wrestle with the Christian theological and ethical meaning of what Eugene Robinson has called the disintegration of the black community. In his book *Disintegration: the Splintering of Black America*, Robinson interprets the stratification that has developed in black American by identifying four socio-economic groups that compose radically different ways of being.⁴ While Robinson’s four groups are not germane to my argument, I am convinced that much of the analytical and conceptual frustration I experienced in President Obama’s response to the non-indictment decision in the killing of Michael Brown has much to do with the kind of structural differentiation to which Robinson aptly calls our attention.

In a different sense, this work also reminds me of Thanksgiving at my grandmother’s house when I was 13 or 14 years old; that is to say, this dissertation represents my most sustained (academic) attempt to sit at the “grown folk table” of the brilliant and beautiful community that has formed me intellectually, professionally, and

³ My introduction to black liberation theology came through the courageous and prophetic teaching of Professor Miguel de la Torre, while I was a student at Hope College in Holland, Michigan. As I wrestled with the meaning of Christian faith in the context of Hope’s rich yet myopic and often painfully racist culture, black theology saved my relationship with Christ by introducing me to theological language and traditions more reflective of my existential experience than the Christianity at the heart of Hope’s Dutch, Reformed milieu.

⁴ The four groups Robinson identifies are (1) “the mainstream” (middle class black folk), (2) “the (socio-economically) abandoned,” (3) the transcendent (super wealthy persons like Oprah Winfrey), and (4) the emergent (recent black immigrants to the U.S.). See: Eugene Robinson, *Disintegration: The Splintering of Black America*, 1st ed. (New York, NY: Doubleday, 2010).

spiritually. Most of the scholars I engage and cite in this dissertation are not merely abstract sources of thought; rather, they are the individuals who have taught me and my peers and who are striving with us to use religious and theological education as a source for positively transforming society and the church. Therefore, it is important to note that this work is not written out of the too pervasive spirit of “tearing down” previous work to make room for my own. Instead, I hope that this dissertation marks the beginning of a productive career in which I honor the courageous and brilliant labor of the scholars and religious leaders whose efforts have graciously and lovingly made room for me to stretch my legs and find my voice. I turn now to an explanation of the method I use in this work.

“Traditioning” as Method

This dissertation uses discourse analysis to interpret the role and nature of black identity in black theological discourse. The form of discursive analysis used in this work is best identified as “traditioning.” In his book *Idol & Grace: on Traditioning and Subversive Hope*, theologian Orlando Espín defines traditioning as “what occurs when we understand ‘tradition’ as a verb or process much more than a content.” Clarifying the difference between tradition as process and tradition as religious or theological content, Espín writes:

‘contents of tradition’ are not and cannot be reduced to propositional doctrinal statements, not when we claim that these doctrinal statements are part of revelation. The contents that are traditioned by Christians have been and still are molded and affected by human histories and human cultures, by power asymmetries and conflict, by ethnic bigotries and social prejudices, by racism and gender biases, as much as by courageous attempts at compassion and truthfulness, by dogged hope and self-giving,

and by a faithfulness to revelation that is far greater than mere obedience or repetitious orthodoxies.⁵

In Espín's rich conceptualization, traditioning identifies both the cultural and historical nature of tradition as such as well as the structural realities that form tradition in ways that normalize evil and injustice. As such, tradition is never pure, it always and already involved in the complexities of societal structures, social and cultural practices, and religious teachings that characterize human experience.

The theological profundity of Espín's concept is its displacement of the power necessary for reshaping religious and theological life. Espín removes this authority from the traditional offices of ecclesial authority to the lives and habits of everyday people. In this sense, traditioning is akin to T.S. Eliot's thinking on tradition, which has been beautifully preserved in the scholarship and public intellectualism of Cornel West.⁶ In an essay titled "Tradition and Individual Talent," Eliot powerfully described the sense of tradition Espín invokes through the concept of traditioning:

Yet if the only form of tradition, of handing down, consisted in following the ways of the immediate generation before us in a blind or timid adherence to its successes, 'tradition' should positively be discouraged. We have seen many such simple currents soon lost in the sand; and novelty is better than repetition. Tradition is a matter of much wider significance. It cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour.⁷

⁵ Orlando O. Espín, *Idol and Grace: On Traditioning and Subversive Hope* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2014), 8–9.

⁶ See: Cornel West, "The New Cultural Politics of Difference," in *The Cornel West Reader* (New York, NY: Civitas Books, 1999), 123.

⁷ T.S. Eliot, "Tradition and Individual Talent," in *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism*, Seventh (New York, NY: Methuen & Co., 1960), 48–49.

Traditioning, then, is the critical political and intellectual struggle through which we interpret the past in light of our current cultural and historical commitments and values, bringing them to bear on the structural realities of the societies in which we live, move, and have our being.

As a mode of discourse analysis, traditioning is vital to this work because its emphasis on struggling for an understanding of the past that positively informs the present resonates deeply with the *raison d'être* of black theology. Black liberation theology emerged in the late 1960s and early 70s as part of a larger cultural movement (i.e., the Black Power movement) to reshape interpretations of faith and reality in light of the black existence. However, the social and economic stratification Robinson identifies in *Disintegration* evidences the need to reassess the role of black theology in the 21st century. Moreover, because the nature of black identity was a central theme in the cultural movement that wrought liberation theology, a critical reassessment of black identity—the work this dissertation undertakes—is well equipped with traditioning as its method.

Chapter Outline

Each chapter of this dissertation traditions blackness through critical analysis of outstanding contributions to black theological discourse. Chapter One of this dissertation considers the classic work of theologian James H. Cone. Cone's work is essential to this project because his conceptualization of blackness lies at its heart. Cone developed blackness as a theological symbol that is, he argues, essential to understanding the

meaning of Christianity in America. I retain a careful commitment to Cone's work throughout this dissertation, but I also think Cone's notion of blackness is at its best when brought into critical and constructive tension with other contributions to black theological discourse. One such contribution is found in the scholarship of womanist theologian Delores Williams, which is the focus of Chapter Two.

Chapter Two assesses what I consider to be the most important critique of Cone's work to date, namely, womanist theo-ethicist Delores Williams's *Sisters in the Wilderness*. Williams's use of womanist methodology in grounding the work of her classic text is remarkably powerful, as is the critique she levels of classic atonement theories. Williams challenges the centrality of the Anselmian satisfactory atonement theories in both theology in general and black theology specifically. While I do not completely adhere to the theological vision Williams proposes in light of her critique, her traditioning of black identity is invaluable to black theological discourse.

The primary way that Williams traditions black identity in black theological discourse is through her use of womanist methodology. Womanism is not simply black theology for women; instead, womanism represents a significant methodological development in black theological discourse, rooted in the lived experiences of black women who suffer at the triply painful intersection of racism, sexism, and classism. Williams's commitment to interpreting Christian faith through the history and experiences of black women expands and enriches black theology's conception of identity beyond what Cone's early work—which was hampered by sexism and the lack of a robust class analysis—could offer.

Chapter Three turns to a consideration of black theology through a postmodern lens, considering the wonderful work of ethicist Victor Anderson in his book *Beyond Ontological Blackness*. Anderson cites black theology for its reliance on what he calls ontological blackness, an approach to black identity that wrongly adheres to idealistic, monolithic notions of black identity at the expense of the rich, complex collection of black subjectivities that actually compose black life. In response to the limitations of ontological blackness, Anderson presses for a postmodern understanding of blackness that honors these subjectivities and thereby enriches black culture. Anderson's use of postmodern theory to reveal the immense reality of difference in black life is another treasured source for traditioning blackness. Postmodern blackness insists that the "true" nature of black identity is always being negotiated or discovered. This chapter considers both the profundity of Anderson's critique and the danger of postmodern blackness, if not checked by a deep commitment to honoring and referencing widely shared black experiences structural violence and oppression.

Chapter Four considers the recent, groundbreaking work of theologian J. Kameron Carter in his text *Race: A Theological Account*. Carter's deep analysis of the racial and racist nature of Western, white Christianity argues that Christian supersessionism created and creates a vacuum in the place formerly held by Jesus' Jewish identity. Through centuries of political, intellectual, and theological development, Western Christianity has filled the vacuum created by supersessionism with whiteness. Moreover, Carter argues that the blackness in black theology is a product of this supersessionist whiteness, and that it is trapped in a mode of dialectical relationality that

is theologically problematic. Carter's assessment of the role and nature of white supremacy in Christianity is profound and further traditions black identity in black theology by begging the question of how liberated blackness can be if it is always rooted in the racial discourse created by whiteness. Carter's critique is incredibly important as it brings issues of racial ontology to bear on the quest for black liberation. I want to hold the richness of Carter's critique in critical tension with the central role of dialectical thinking in the black struggle for freedom.

†

The analyses of these chapters represent my deep conviction that if black theology is to remain a powerfully relevant discourse in the 21st century, it must reassess the meaning of black identity in light of unprecedented socio-economic stratification in the black community. President Obama—and now, President Trump—are outstanding signs of this need, but the more pressing signs are to be found in the hearts and minds of poor black people worldwide who struggle day after day to maintain a healthy sense of meaning, hope, and faith in God.

CHAPTER 1: BLACKNESS IN THE THEOLOGY OF JAMES H. CONE

Before the publication of James H. Cone's *Black Theology and Black Power* (1969) and *A Black Theology of Liberation* (1970), no Christian theologian had sustained systematic analysis of how the Christian gospel relates to black people's struggle for freedom from white supremacist oppression.¹ As a result, American universities and seminaries, the historic hubs of systematic theology in the U.S., produced – and, in many cases, continue to produce – generations of Christians with impoverished understandings of what the gospel means in a country founded on Native American genocide and African slavery developed and perpetuated by European immigrants. Cone's specific contribution to the church is the development of a theological perspective that rebukes white supremacy through sustained analysis of black suffering and the struggle for black freedom. As poor black communities continue to be ravaged by socioeconomic deprivation in the form of underfunded schools, lack of employment opportunities, malnourished food deserts, deadly police brutality, and the Prison Industrial Complex,

¹ My claim regarding the foundational nature of Cone's work is not meant to nullify or devalue the rich tradition of liberative black faith represented in the revolutionary lives of figures like Gabriel Prosser, Nat Turner, Harriet Tubman, and others. Nor am I discounting how the nature of black religion and faith has been powerfully elucidated by essential descriptive and interpretive works from Howard Thurman, W.E.B. DuBois, Benjamin E. Mays, and E. Franklin Frazier. Cone's work builds on this rich tradition but is singular in its commitment to using Christian systematic theology as its focal point.

Cone's commitment to interpreting the gospel's relevance in light of black suffering remains prophetic.

Cone's work is a logical starting point in my analysis of blackness in black theological discourse because he developed a carefully articulated notion of black identity at the beginning of his career. Blackness, according to Cone, is not merely a physical feature that differentiates blacks from other races and, most notably, whites; blackness is a symbol of God's promise to redeem the world by liberating the oppressed from the worldly powers of dehumanization and injustice. Though often neglected, understanding and interpreting this idea of blackness is vital to black theology having a relevant present and future in the American church and, thereby, the world. Toward this end, this chapter will recount the development of black theology in Cone's work and assess Cone's conception of blackness. Next, this chapter reviews some of the early critical responses to Cone's work that helped sharpen his thinking. Lastly, this chapter considers how Cone's notion of blackness might be further developed for 21st century black theological discourse.

The Emergence of James Cone's Black Liberation Theology

After earning a Ph.D. in theology from Garrett Biblical Institute in 1965, Cone wanted to emulate other great black writers by using his pen to interpret white supremacy and black suffering. But Garrett's curriculum had done a poor job preparing Cone to say anything theologically relevant about the black struggle for freedom; having not been assigned a single book by a black author during his entire time as a graduate student,

Cone struggled to relate European theology and philosophy to the maddening reality of American racism.² This apparent estrangement between Cone's academic studies and the black struggle for freedom was accentuated when the young theologian found himself enlivened and inspired by black music and black literature in ways that white American and European theology could not match. Cone expressed the depth of his appreciation for black culture in soteriological terms, writing, "My salvation was found in black music (spirituals, gospels, blues, and jazz) combined with a disciplined program of reading black literature and other writers concerned about human suffering."³ Adversely, Cone mourned the pitifully white nature of his graduate school bibliography remembering, "When I compared [James] Baldwin, [Richard] Wright, [Ralph] Ellison, and Leroi Jones (now Amiri Baraka) with [Karl] Barth, [Paul] Tillich, [Emil] Brunner, and Reinhold Niebuhr, I concluded that I was in the wrong field."⁴ This experience of vocational displacement was so severe that Cone, hoping to make theological sense of the black writers who moved him so deeply, considered pursuing a second doctorate in theology and literature. Instead of going back to school, Cone used the resources at his disposal to begin forging a theological perspective that combined his theological training with his commitment to black liberation. The result of this forging process was Cone's first book, *Black Theology and Black Power*, an explosive critique of white Christianity's explicit and implicit support of white supremacy.

² James H. Cone, *My Soul Looks Back* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985), 36–37.

³ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 42–43.

Instead of being rooted in one of the themes that has traditionally grounded white interpretations of Christian faith (e.g., Christology, soteriology, ecclesiology) *Black Theology and Black Power*, began by interpreting the social and cultural phenomenon of Black Power. Like many young blacks in the late 1960s and early 70s, Cone was drawn to Black Power because it provided cultural and existential resources that helped rebuke white supremacy while exalting the hope of black liberation. In fact, the salvific experience Cone had with black music and black writing as he labored to relate Christian faith to the black struggle should be viewed as a product of Black Power's insistence that a proper understanding of black culture can heal and empower black people living in a white supremacist world.⁵ Echoing Malcolm X's famous words, Cone interpreted Black Power to mean the "complete emancipation of black people from white oppression by whatever means black people deem necessary."⁶ Black Power also meant, "T.C.B., Take Care of Business – black folk taking care of black folks' business, not on the terms of the oppressor, but on those of the oppressed."⁷ As he examined and interpreted Black Power's radical commitment to black liberation Cone began to sense and articulate a strong connection between black liberation and Jesus having been anointed with the Holy Spirit "to set the oppressed free." (Luke 4:18-19)

⁵ For a good interpretation of Black Power and its complexities, see: Jeffrey Ogbonna Green Ogbar, *Black Power: Radical Politics and African American Identity*, Reconfiguring American Political History (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005).

⁶ James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 5–6; Malcolm X, *By Any Means Necessary* (New York, NY: Pathfinder Press, 1992).

⁷ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 8.

Cone argued that “Jesus’ work is essentially one of liberation,” and, therefore, that Black Power’s commitment to *black* liberation made it a point of divine revelation in American history.⁸ Put differently, because the gospel of Jesus Christ reveals God’s determination to liberate oppressed human beings from bondage, Black Power’s commitment to liberating black people from white oppression was an expression of Christian faith. The continuity between God’s liberating activity in scripture (from Israel’s Exodus to the resurrection of Jesus) and the Spirit that empowered black people to resist white supremacist oppression appeared so obvious that Cone declared, “Christianity is not alien to Black Power; it is Black Power.”⁹ In the context of Cone’s theology, then, Black Power revealed both the activity of God in America and the historically racist actions and teachings of the white church, the latter of which epitomizes anti-Christian being.

Throughout American history—by way of explicit perpetuation of white supremacist doctrines and practices and complicit silence, inactivity, and a general unwillingness to risk its life in being faithful to God—the white church has buttressed the idolatrous notion that white supremacy is reconcilable with Christianity. Cone observed that the white church, “has not really gone where the action is with a willingness to die for the neighbor” and is therefore nothing more than a “chaplaincy to sick middle-class egos.”¹⁰ Thus, while Black Power represented the Spirit of God at work in America,

⁸ Ibid., 35.

⁹ Ibid., 38.

¹⁰ Ibid., 80.

white Christianity represented the evil that opposes Christian faith.¹¹ During slavery, instead of dedicating itself to the abolition of slavery, most whites churches encouraged blacks to look toward a heavenly afterlife that would provide well-earned relief from worldly pain. Meanwhile, whites enjoyed relief from worldly pain on earth as they developed and enjoyed American “freedom” at the expense of oppressed blacks. While historians often interpret the Civil War as a tragically bloody but decisively progressive conversion away from the practice of slavery and toward a society characterized by racial equality, Cone points out that Abraham Lincoln (the man credited with ending slavery) once expressed his indifference to abolition and his belief in white supremacy.¹² Even after the Civil War, whites in both the south and north perpetuated white supremacy with the blessing of either the white church’s explicit support or its complicit silence. Through the decades that have followed the Civil War and Reconstruction, the white church has remained painfully silent and woefully inactive regarding segregation, lynching, redlining and “white flight,” socioeconomic deprivation rooted in government neglect, police brutality and murder, and mass incarceration. In light of the white church’s sinful action and inaction, Cone wrote, “If there is any contemporary meaning of the Antichrist (or “the principalities and powers”), the white church seems to be a manifestation of it.”¹³ In response to the anti-Christian practices and values of white Christianity, Cone developed a Christian theological perspective committed to black liberation.

¹¹ Ibid., 73.

¹² Ibid., 10.

¹³ Ibid., 73.

For Cone, Christian freedom (i.e., liberation) meant that Black Power—with its insistence on freedom from the limitations of white supremacy—was not, as many Christian critics insisted, anti-Christian. As already noted, Cone viewed Black Power as an expression of the liberating Word God speaks through Jesus Christ. But for Cone, the Word of God speaks differently to oppressive whites and oppressed blacks. For whites, the Word of God is a warning to repent of an idolatrous faith that valued false senses of security and superiority more than their black sisters and brothers. For blacks, this revelation was an invitation to participate in the liberating freedom for which all humans were created, a freedom that cannot be withheld by the structural power of white supremacy.

Though Cone did not relate this vision of divine liberation to a particular moral or ethical theory, he did argue that the gift of divine freedom is unfaithfully used when individuals and communities work out the meaning of their existence “at the price of [their] brother’s [sic] enslavement.”¹⁴ In the context of U.S. Christianity, Cone’s theology of liberation means that white Christians—who have unfaithfully used Christianity to work out the meaning of their existence at the expense of black freedom—have no theological high-ground from which to advise blacks on Christian morality (e.g., whether or not to use violence in resisting white oppression and what it means to pursue reconciliation). How can white theologians and ethicists set themselves up as authorities on Christian morality and urge blacks to be nonviolent when the theological ethics of white Christianity have justified colonial violence, slavery, and genocide against non-

¹⁴ Ibid., 36.

whites in the name of white supremacist notions of democracy, progress, humanity, and God? White churches hypocritically preached nonviolence and passivity to those resisting white supremacy even as white Christians reaped the benefits of white supremacist structures. The hypocrisy of white churches led to Cone's famous declaration that white theology is "a theology of the Antichrist."¹⁵

While using "Black Power" to (re)interpret the gospel in light of black American life, personal experience kept Cone from an overly simplistic acceptance of any perspective claiming to be "pro-black." In 1970, while moderating a discussion on black religion at a meeting of the Congress of African People (CAP), Cone was thoroughly disabused of the idea that all versions of Black Nationalism represented positive examples of black self-love and intra-communal uplift. Recalling the CAP dialog, Cone wrote, "[s]eeing and hearing the disrespect with which nationalists treated one another cured my romanticism about the affirmation of blacks as the only requirement for a successful black liberation struggle. The mere agreement that white people are devils is not enough to attain our freedom. We must agree not only about what we are against but also about what we are for."¹⁶

Even more disturbing than the disrespect Black Nationalists showed one another was the insulting way they talked about the black church. Remembering popular Black Nationalist criticisms of the black church, Cone seethed, "nationalists advanced the same

¹⁵ James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 20th Anniversary Edition (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1986), 6.

¹⁶ Cone, *My Soul Looks Back*, 55.

criticisms of black churches found in the white media and in white colleges and universities.”¹⁷ For Cone, these critiques were rooted in mischaracterizations of the black church that overlooked its vital role in the black struggle for freedom. To be sure, Cone knew that the black church was far from perfect, but complete dismissal overlooked the formative role of black churches in empowering individuals and communities who resisted white supremacy long before Black Power emerged. On a more personal note, Cone’s parents were among those empowered by the black church; thus he wrote, “[r]ejecting the black church and the Bible would have been like rejecting my mother and father, and I could not do that.”¹⁸ While agreeing that black churches were imperfect and, at times, contributed to the perpetuation of black suffering through theological and social ethical complacency, Cone’s own religious and theological background led him to reject the overly simplistic criticisms of Black Nationalists.

In order to develop black theology further, Cone needed to articulate Christian faith in a way that held at bay both the idolatrous nature of white Christianity and the overly zealous iconoclasm of Black Nationalists. The former wrongly made white people gods by using Christian faith to justify their oppressive way of life; the latter wrongly mischaracterized the black church—an institution that has been vital to the black struggle for freedom—as hopelessly bound to the religion of slave masters. In crafting a third option for black Christian faith, Cone needed to clarify both the meaning of Christianity and the meaning of blackness. Indeed, Cone’s singular contribution to the history of

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., 56.

theology is the construction of a theological perspective that interprets the nature of Christian faith in light of the social and historical realities of black American life.

The impact of Cone's work is evidenced in the present shape of the global theological academy where generations of black and womanist theologians—both within and beyond the United States—have worked to develop black theological discourse in the space cleared by Cone's early writings. However, one of the underappreciated aspects of Cone's early work is his careful interpretation of blackness. If black theology is to maintain a meaningful existence in the complex socio-economic context of the 21st century, those engaged in black theological discourse must work to clarify the theological and ethical character of blackness. With this important work in mind, we turn now to an examination of how Cone developed “blackness” in his early work.

“Blackness” in Cone’s Theology

In his early work, Cone developed a careful interpretation of blackness as a symbol of the God revealed in Jesus Christ without slipping into the perilous trap of idolatry.¹⁹ Understanding Cone's interpretation of blackness is key to understanding black

¹⁹ In a 1971 essay, Paul Lehmann – a colleague of Cone's at Union Theological Seminary – reminded Cone of the ubiquitous danger of idolatry in theological discourse. More specifically, Lehmann was concerned that, “Professor Cone does not always seem to [acknowledge] that “the truth” to which “Christian” theology is open and obedient is not unqualifiedly identical with the concrete reality of blackness or any other concrete reality of the human condition and the human story.” To be sure, Lehmann's critique of Cone is a soft one. At the writing of “Black Theology and “Christian” Theology” Lehmann and Cone were colleagues at Union Theological Seminary and had had previous conversations about the issues Lehmann raises in his essay. The softness of his critique notwithstanding, Lehmann's point regarding the possibility of idolatry in black theology is a helpful hinge in turning toward critical analysis of blackness in Cone's theology. See: Paul L. Lehmann, “Black Theology and ‘Christian’ Theology,” in *Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1966-1979*, 1st ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979).

theological discourse; misunderstanding what Cone means by “blackness” leads to thin, inaccurate interpretations of black theology. Cone began to clarify his understanding of blackness at the end of *Black Theology and Black Power* where he wrote,

Being black in America has very little to do with skin color. To be black means that your heart, your soul, your mind, and your body are where the dispossessed are. We all know that a racist structure will reject and threaten a black man in white skin as quickly as a black man in black skin. It accepts and rewards whites in black skins nearly as well as whites in white skins. Therefore, being reconciled to God does not mean that one’s skin is physically black. It essentially depends on the color of your heart, soul, and mind The real questions are: Where is your identity? Where is your being? Does it lie with the oppressed blacks or with white oppressors? Let us hope that there are enough to answer this question correctly so that America will not be compelled to acknowledge a common humanity only by seeing that blood is always one color.²⁰

In a society and world where skin color has been such a strong, clear symbol and predictor of negative life experiences, Cone’s claim that blackness “has very little to do with skin color” might strike one as strange and even alarming. Such interpretations emerge from underdeveloped understanding of the deeply theological nature of Cone’s work.

From the beginning of his career, Cone aimed to develop a theological perspective that spoke faithfully to and for the experience of the black community. Unfortunately, readings of Cone’s work (and of black theology in general) often mis- or under-read the theological claims being made. These readings often reduce black theology to a religiously informed political statement or an important contribution to American social ethical discourse, but the unique *theological* claims of Cone’s work are

²⁰ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 151–52.

often missed.²¹ As we will see, Cone appropriated theological methods he learned in graduate school to develop a dialectical interpretation of blackness that radically challenged Western theology's commitment to white supremacy.

An ironic but unavoidable aspect of Cone's interpretation of blackness is that while it is used to rebuke the Eurocentric nature of theological discourse, both its method and its theological articulation rely heavily on the writings of European theologians. More specifically, Cone's early work used the works of Karl Barth and Paul Tillich to clarify the theological meaning of blackness. Far from an attempt to prove that he had mastered the Western theological tradition, Cone used European theology as "a smorgasbord of theologies from which I took what I wanted and left the rest [while maintaining] Jesus Christ as defined by the Bible and the black experience as my central theological norm."²² Cone's appropriation of European theology reflects his determination to use the resources with which he was most familiar to address the death-dealing realities of white supremacy. While likely unintended, a positive consequence of Cone's appropriation of European theology is that the employment of methodological frameworks and linguistic concepts familiar to white theologians made it difficult (though certainly not impossible) for white theologians to ignore the critiques of black liberation theology. Still, the irony of Cone's reliance on European theology in the

²¹ The tendency to mis- or under-read the work of black theologians is indicative of how central white supremacy has been to the formation of modern Western theology and, consequently, how difficult it is for theologians formed primarily or solely by the Western tradition to free themselves from thought patterns that presuppose the supremacy of European ways of thinking and being.

²² Cone, *My Soul Looks Back*, 83.

development of a revolutionary *black* theological perspective is inescapable. Later in this chapter, we will see that Cone's early African American critics would not allow this irony to go unaddressed; for now, the task of explicating Cone's use of Barth and Tillich in his articulation of blackness remains.

The dialectical method Cone used to interpret the theological meaning of blackness was an outgrowth of his graduate studies in general and his dissertation in particular. Cone wrote his dissertation on the anthropology of Swiss theologian Karl Barth, the theologian most responsible for the development of the dialectical method in theology. The dialectical method (more popularly referred to as "neo-orthodoxy") was developed in critical response to 19th-century liberal theology which, according to Barth and others, suffered from an overreliance on natural theology and human reason. Dialectical theology sought to revive themes that had been vital to the Reformation (i.e., grace and divine sovereignty) but were subsequently depreciated in light of the Scientific Revolution and the ascendance of human reason in Western culture and religion. At the heart of Barth's theology was a sovereign God who communicated with humanity through divine revelation.

A core component of God's revelation is the divine "No" spoken to all human aspirations to self-salvation. Following the Reformers, Barth insisted that humanity was totally incapable of saving itself and was therefore completely dependent on the divine grace revealed in Jesus Christ. What made Barth's theology "dialectical" is that the divine "No" spoken to humanity's aspirations to save itself gave way to a divine "Yes" rooted in God's grace. This "Yes" is neither rooted in nor dependent upon anything

human beings can do or have done, instead it is rooted in the freedom of God which is most decisively revealed in the person of Jesus Christ. It is the freedom revealed in the person of Christ that both reflects and makes possible the divine gift of human freedom.

Cone used his dissertation to challenge Barth's notion of the ontological impossibility of sin. For Barth, the ontological impossibility of sin underscores the definitive power of God's grace in creation; sin does not evidence the free being God intended for creation, it represents a falling away from God's intention. Cone countered that Barth's ontology was incoherent with scripture. Yes, humanity is dependent upon God for salvation, but Cone argued that humanity needed to choose salvation over sin. Cone's dissertation sought to maintain Barth's Christocentric insistence on God's sovereignty without precluding humanity's need to *choose* freedom by accepting God's gracious invitation to divine-human fellowship through Christ. As such, Cone sought a *via media* between Barth and the other half of the famous natural theology debate, Emil Brunner by insisting that humanity can either accept or reject God's grace and that only acceptance of God's grace can be rightly called freedom.²³ Cone insisted that the "negative possibility [the impossibility of saying "no" to God] cannot properly be called freedom; it is rather a denial of freedom. Real freedom is when man [sic] obeys God because he trusts him."²⁴

²³ The debate between Barth and Brunner centered on whether humans could learn about God through nature (Brunner) or if knowledge of God came solely through God's revelation in Christ (Barth). Karl Barth and Emil Brunner, *Natural Theology: Comprising Nature and Grace by Professor Dr. Emil Brunner and the reply "No!" by Dr. Karl Barth*, First (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2001).

²⁴ James H Cone, *The Doctrine of Man in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Northwestern University: PhD Dissertation, 1965), 170.

The influence of Barth's dialectical theology on Cone's interpretation of blackness is evidenced in Cone's refusal to reduce blackness to skin color. Cone interprets blackness as a moment of divine revelation; in this moment of revelation, a clear "No" is spoken to theologies that use white supremacist standards as the social and cultural norm for interpreting salvation. In turn, a liberating divine "Yes" is spoken to those who choose to struggle for existence beyond the confines of white supremacy. Blacks, therefore, need not and ought not remain subjected to the oppressive teachings of white theology because this theology is rooted in an idolatrous anthropocentrism (white supremacy) to which God—in God's divine freedom—says "No." At this point, though, Cone differs with Barth in an important way, and this differentiation stretches all the way back to Cone's dissertation.

Cone's conviction regarding humanity's freedom to accept or reject God's invitation to fellowship is carried over into his theological interpretation of blackness. For Cone, blackness is not a liberated state of being granted to anyone with a notable amount of melanin in their skin; instead blackness represents conscious acceptance of and existential commitment to God's invitation to live into the freedom for which Christ lived, died, and was resurrected. The freedom to choose blackness is made possible through the gift of divine freedom, and the act of choosing freedom is only possible in the name of God, the source of all freedom. In this way, Cone sought to interpret black liberation as an expression of divine revelation without foreclosing on the sovereignty of God in the name of human agency as liberal theology had done. Cone's theological commitment to dialectical, Christocentric divine transcendence over and against the more

explicitly anthropocentric nature of liberal theology is an important but often overlooked aspect of his theology.²⁵

Along with using a critical engagement with Barth's theology to interpret blackness as a liberating existential choice rooted in the dialectically expressed freedom of God as revealed in Jesus Christ, Cone relies on the work of Paul Tillich to explain how blackness functions as a theological symbol that signifies the liberating power of the gospel without claiming to possess exhaustively or understand comprehensively divine freedom. Cone's appropriation of Tillich is most clear in his second book, *A Black Theology of Liberation* where he wrote, "we cannot describe God directly; we must use symbols that point to dimensions of reality that cannot be spoken of literally. Therefore, to speak of black theology is to speak with the Tillichian understanding of symbol in mind."²⁶ For Cone, then, "blackness is an ontological symbol and a visible reality which best describes what oppression means in America."²⁷ Treating blackness as a "symbol" helps Cone speak concretely about the social and historical realities of black suffering in America without claiming to speak exhaustively about what God is doing in the world. This commitment to speaking concretely but not exhaustively represents a deepening of Cone's appropriative use of dialectical theology in the development of black liberation theology. A closer examination of Tillich's notion of symbol will clarify why Cone used

²⁵ Cone's commitment to a divine transcendence explains the absence of an analysis of his work in the third volume of Gary Dorrien's history of liberal theology. See: Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Crisis, Irony, and Postmodernity, 1950-2005* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006).

²⁶ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 7.

²⁷ Ibid.

it to interpret blackness. We will also see that Cone's work (his early writings through his most recent work) leaves one aspect of Tillich's symbol curiously and unfortunately unaddressed.

The notion of symbol that Cone appropriates in interpreting blackness is found in Tillich's book *Dynamics of Faith*. Tillich argued that issues of ultimate concern can only be expressed symbolically and he described symbols as having six definitive characteristics. First, symbols point beyond themselves to something else. This first aspect of symbol is clearly evident in Cone's commitment to using black experience and black history as sources of theological reflection. Importantly, though, these sources are not ends in themselves. Cone clarifies this and retains his commitment to Christocentrism in *God of the Oppressed* where he wrote, "the black experience is a *source* of the Truth but not the Truth itself. Jesus Christ is the Truth and thus stands in judgment over all statements about truth."²⁸

Second, Tillich argued that symbols participate in that to which they point. As an example he notes that "the flag participates in the power and dignity of the nation for which it stands."²⁹ Similarly, Cone's notion of blackness participates in the liberating divine reality revealed in the life of Christ. Indeed, the reality of black life is both symbol and substance of divine reality without ever fully representing the divine reality as such. Third, symbols open up aspects of reality that would otherwise remain closed. Here, Tillich gives the example of how "a picture and a poem reveal elements of reality which

²⁸ James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 31.

²⁹ Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2009), 48.

cannot be approached scientifically.”³⁰ This aesthetic aspect of symbol is also present in Cone’s interpretation of blackness; it is most clearly present in *The Spirituals and the Blues*, where he examines how black music—whether produced in the church or outside of it—reveals deep-seated themes in the black struggle for freedom. Many of these themes resist the dehumanizing aspects of American racism which might otherwise lead to black nihilism and despair.³¹

Fourth, Tillich says symbols unlock dimensions of the soul that correspond to the newly revealed aspects of reality (see characteristic three above). In expounding on the fourth characteristic of symbol, Tillich writes, “A great play gives us not only a new vision of the human scene, but it opens up hidden depths of our own being.”³² Cone’s notion of blackness coincides with this aspect of blackness, too. The cultural resistance so powerfully represented in black music is made possible the fact that “God has stirred the *soul* of the black community, and now that community will stop at nothing to claim the freedom that is three hundred and fifty years overdue.”³³ Fifth, according to Tillich, symbols cannot be produced intentionally. In correspondence with this point, Cone has interpreted blackness not as an intentional invention of the black community, but as an aspect of divine revelation that emerged in response to the idolatrous practices of

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ See: James H. Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation* (Orbis Books, 1992).

³² Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, 49.

³³ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 56. Emphasis mine.

whiteness. Cone writes of the revelatory emergence of blackness “as the most adequate symbol of the dimensions of divine activity in America.”³⁴

Where Barth rebuked the practice of beginning theology from a cultural (i.e., human) perspective, Tillich viewed such an approach as unavoidable. For Tillich, symbols were necessary to religious and theological reflection, and the human use of symbols partly constituted the necessary “risk of faith” involved in discourses of ultimate concern. Through Tillich’s notion of symbol, Cone could express black suffering as an issue of ultimate concern, even if such an expression meant referring imperfectly to divine reality. The sixth aspect of Tillich’s notion of symbol notes that that symbols grow and die. This aspect of symbol is left curiously unaddressed in Cone’s work and provides an opportunity for black theological discourse to develop a notion of blackness that tends to the unique socioeconomic realities that beset black Americans in the 21st century. I will return to the sixth aspect of Tillich’s notion of symbol later in this chapter, for now, it will be helpful to review how early critics of Cone weighed in on the nature of blackness in religious and theological discourse.

The Religious and Theological Politics of Blackness: early critiques of Cone

While Cone’s early work immediately garnered positive attention and praise from various parts of the academy and church, it was also subject to important criticism. Of particular importance to the work of this chapter is the criticism leveled by three African

³⁴ Ibid., 7.

American male scholars, namely, theologian J. Deotis Roberts, theologian and philosopher Cecil Cone (James Cone's brother), and historian of religions Charles Long. The critiques of these scholars have been widely studied by students of black theological discourse; however, what is unique to my readings of these critiques is how they each, in their own way, weigh in on the proper nature of blackness in religious and theological discourse. While each of these scholars leveled different criticisms of Cone's work, what is important to this project is how these early critiques were rooted in—and not just related to—various interpretations of black identity. I begin with an analysis of J. Deotis Roberts' critique of Cone.

In his 1971 book, *Liberation and Reconciliation: a Black Theology*, J. Deotis Roberts argued that liberation and reconciliation constitute “two main poles of Black Theology” that “are not antithetical.”³⁵ As such, Roberts agreed with James Cone regarding the liberating nature of Jesus Christ, but believed Cone had erred in separating the work of black liberation from that of interracial reconciliation. Where Cone stressed that black liberation had to begin with black self-love, Roberts argued that both liberation and reconciliation were divine processes in which humans, through the grace of Christian discipleship, were welcomed to participate.³⁶ The model of and for Christian discipleship

³⁵ J. Deotis Roberts, *Liberation And Reconciliation: A Black Theology, Second Edition*, 2 edition (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 1,8.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 41. Roberts posited that the goodness of creation humanity's status as co-creator with God.

is Jesus Christ, and Roberts argued that “the liberating Christ is also the reconciling Christ.”³⁷

While the aim of Roberts’s book was to clarify his understanding of the theological relationship between liberation and reconciliation, it is important to note that he prefaced his theological work with by clarifying his understanding of black identity. In the preface to the first edition of *Liberation and Reconciliation*, Roberts wrote, “Afro-American is my version of blackness. It includes a positive appreciation for the Euro-American contribution to black culture in this country. Afro-American does not, however, preclude the possibility that we will seek a deeper knowledge and understanding of Africanisms upon our experience.”³⁸ That Roberts felt it necessary to preface his theological work by clarifying his understanding of black identity reveals the contestable nature of blackness in black theological discourse. That is, Roberts’s work exemplifies how different interpretations of black identity lead to the articulation of distinct and divergent versions of black theology. This coterminous relationship between interpretations of black identity and variations of black theology will be further evidenced in the critiques of Charles Long and Cecil Cone.

In a 1971 essay titled “Perspectives for a Study of Afro-American Religion in the United States,” historian of religion Charles Long identified a “need to present a systematic study of black religion—a kind of initial ordering of the religious experiences

³⁷ Ibid., 20.

³⁸ Ibid., ix.

and expressions of the black communities in America.”³⁹ In Long’s view, the study of black religion suffered from a paucity of methodological perspectives as only two approaches—social scientific methods and theological apologetics—had been used. Long categorized James Cone’s work as an example of the latter. Moreover, he argued that this methodological paucity in the study of black religion “has led to a narrowness of understanding and the failure to perceive certain creative possibilities in the black community in America.”⁴⁰ In response to the perceived methodological scarcity in black religion, Long proposed a methodology rooted in the historical interpretation of three “symbolic images”: (1) African as historical reality and religious image, (2) the involuntary presence of the black community in America, and (3) the experience and symbol of God in the religious experience of blacks.⁴¹ Through historical analysis of these symbols, Long sought to interpret “the religious consciousness of blacks in America which,” he argued “is the repository of who they are, where they have been, and where they are going.” In a statement that can be read as a critical reference to Cone’s use of existentialism in *Black Theology and Black Power*, Long hastened to add that “a purely existential analysis cannot do justice to this religious experience.”⁴² In route to constructing a the theological interpretation of Black Power, Cone described existential absurdity as “the absolute contradiction between *what is* and *what ought to be*” in black

³⁹ Charles H. Long, “Perspectives for a Study of Afro-American Religion in the United States,” in *Significations* (Aurora, CO: The Davies Group Publishers, 1999), 188.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 187.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 188.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 197.

life; it explains both the pain that so often attends being black in a white supremacist society, and the insurmountable sociopolitical realities that often serve as the backdrop for the articulation of black people's hope.⁴³

For my purposes, I am not primarily concerned with whether Long's historical methodology represents an advancement in the study of black religion; instead, I am interested in how Long's perceived scarcity in methodological approaches to the study of black religion functions as an implicit critique of Cone's notion of black identity. Long's assertion that his historical methodology is better suited to reach the "religious consciousness of blacks" than Cone's "purely existential analysis" is another way of saying that he better understands how to access and interpret blackness. In other words, what is at stake for Long in his critique of Cone is not merely the study of black religion, but also (because the study of religion is about, among other things, how persons make meaning in life) establishing and defending particular methods for thinking about and explaining blackness as such.

Cecil Cone's critique of his brother's work focused on the proper starting point of black theology. James Cone had argued that liberation ought to be the central theme of black theology, but in his book *The Identity Crisis in Black Theology*, Cecil Cone countered by asserting that the proper starting point of black theology is "the black religion it purports to represent."⁴⁴ Cecil Cone argued that black religion was comprised

⁴³ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 8–9.

⁴⁴ Cecil Cone, *The Identity Crisis in Black Theology* (Nashville, TN: The African Methodist Episcopal Church, 1975), 6.

of African Traditional Religion, the environment of slavery, and the Bible. He cited anthropologist Melville Herskovits, W.E.B. Du Bois, and John Mbiti as authoritative sources on the presence of African religiosity in black American life, treated the importance of slavery in the black religious experience as self-evident, and argued that African religious roots combined with the desperate condition of slavery to form a hermeneutical framework that gave blacks access to “the deepest meanings of [the] Scriptures.”⁴⁵ Cecil Cone charged his brother with neglecting a fuller account of black religion in the name of Black Power (which, Cecil argued, provides important but incomplete insights to black theology) and an analysis of liberation that is too dependent on the work white theologians. As a result, Cecil Cone identified an identity crisis in his brother’s work and challenged him to “make up his mind concerning his confessional commitment: Is it to the black religious experience or to the Black Power motif of liberation with a side-long glance at the black religious experience?”⁴⁶

Similarly to Roberts’s work, Cecil Cone’s criticism of his brother includes an alternative interpretation of black identity. Indeed, Cone’s argument regarding the centrality of black religion in black theology and his assertion that his brother James’ work suffers from a (black) identity crisis are interdependent. The confessional commitment about which Cecil Cone challenges his brother to “make up his mind” is not merely concerned with the role of black religion in black theology, it also regards which notion of black identity is best suited for interpreting the relationship between Christian

⁴⁵ Ibid., 26–39.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 122.

faith and the black American experience. As Cecil Cone saw it, his brother's inadequate consideration of black religion in black theology was attributable to his trying to "beat the whites at their own theological games."⁴⁷ In other words, Cecil Cone thought his brother was kept from the fullness of blackness—as revealed in black religion—by an unnecessary obsession with the very theological systems he (James Cone) sought liberation from. Taken together, the works of Roberts, Long, and Cecil Cone help underscore the contestable nature of blackness in black theological discourse and, in doing so, reveal a too long neglected aspect of black theology: the nature of blackness.⁴⁸

James Cone took these critiques to heart without being dissuaded from his insistence that Christian theology is a theology of liberation and, therefore, that the struggle of black people for political liberation revealed God's will for humanity. A direct response to these critics is found in an essay titled "An Interpretation of the Debate among Black Theologians," where Cone granted that his critics were onto something, writing, "I have learned much from this discussion on Black religion and Black Theology. . . . If the struggle of the victims is the only context for the development of a genuine Christian theology, then should not theology itself reflect in its speech the language of the people about whom it claims to speak?"⁴⁹ Cone's earliest attempts to

⁴⁷ Ibid., 113.

⁴⁸ A fourth perspective (which I've excluded for the sake of brevity in this section) that could be included among critics of Cone who help clarify the contestable nature of blackness is found here: Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of African Americans*, 3rd ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998).

⁴⁹ James H Cone, "An Interpretation of the Debate among Black Theologians," in *Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1966-1979*, vol. One (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 434.

implement linguistic shifts reflective of the black experience are evident in both *The Spirituals and the Blues* and *God of the Oppressed*; moreover, the remainder of Cone's theological corpus reflects a sustained attempt to root black theology in the historical, social, and religious language of black life.

This linguistic shift in Cone's work is rooted in a notion of blackness that Cone further develops—albeit implicitly—through his engagement with critics of his early work. As we have seen in this section, these critiques were not merely pressing Cone to rethink theological method, they were also challenging the notion of blackness that undergirded his work. Because Cone does not explicitly name how his understanding of blackness shifts over time, it is important that interpreters of black theology work to make sense of what blackness refers to in the complex socioeconomic context of the 21st century. With this in mind, I turn now to a constructively critical engagement of Cone's notion of blackness.

Traditioning Blackness in Cone's Theology

In *A Black Theology of Liberation*, Cone established a litmus test for the faithfulness of his theology: “[m]y definition of theology and the assumptions on which it is based are to be tested by the working out of a theology which can then be judged in terms of its consistency with a communitarian view of the ultimate.”⁵⁰ Two important points emerge from Cone's identifying this litmus test. First, the naming of this test

⁵⁰ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 1.

clarifies Cone's commitment to the discipline of Christian theology. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, readers often misread and mischaracterize Cone's work as a religiously informed political statement, thus missing the unique theological contribution of his work. In clarifying the grounds on which his theology can be tested ("its consistency with a communitarian view of the ultimate"), Cone clarifies the important relationship between his work as a theologian and the lived experience of the black community.

One of the unfortunate side effects of liberal and liberationist Christianity's emphasis on "praxis" is the undermining of Christian theology as a discipline. While the relationship between Christian theology and praxis is undoubtedly important, too often the important difference between Christian theology and praxis is neglected in the name of rebuking abstract ivory tower-based reflection. Though well-intentioned, this rebuke can become a hindrance to the important work of Christian theology. As Cone writes, Christian theology is "*a rational study of the being of God in the world in light of the existential situation of an oppressed community, relating the forces of liberation to the essence of the gospel, which is Jesus Christ.*"⁵¹ The practice of reflecting critically on the gospel in order to produce theological articulation that guides and informs the communal praxis of Christian life is vital to the life of the church. Cone's litmus test reminds that Christian theology relates to the praxis of Christian life conterminously; the border between theology and ethical praxis is soft, but important.

The second point revealed by the litmus for Cone's theology is directly related to the sixth characteristic of Tillich's symbol and to clarifying the meaning of blackness in

⁵¹ Ibid.

black theological discourse. As noted above, Cone's work attends to five of the six characteristics of Tillich's notion of symbol, leaving the sixth curiously unaddressed. The sixth characteristic of Tillich's symbol – that symbols change and die – remains largely unaddressed in Cone's work. In the context of the Black Power movement, Cone adopted and developed an interpretation of blackness that resisted what Cornel West has called the "normative gaze" of white supremacy.⁵² Rooted firmly in the particularity of his historical context, Cone's interpretation of blackness rebuked the anti-Christ of white theology in the name of God's liberating message to oppressed blacks; however, because all theology is the product of a particular social and historical context, and because the social and political discourse constituting black identity has shifted significantly since Cone began his career as a theologian, the faithfulness of black theology's future will depend on clarifying the grounds on which "blackness" remains a symbol of liberating/liberated blackness in the context of the 21st century. What does "blackness" in black theology refer to in the 21st century and why? What happens to black theological discourse when it comes to terms with the fact that theological symbols—blackness included—change and die over time? These questions are of vital importance to the future of black theology because the socioeconomic realities that compose "black America" have changed drastically since the late-1960s gave birth to black liberation theology.

⁵² Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance!*, 20th Anniversary Edition (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 53.

Conclusion

Cone's interpretation of blackness has helped clear important discursive space in Christian theology. Within this space, generations of black theologians have been able to critique the myopic, Eurocentric nature of the theological academy and, in turn, reshape academic and ecclesial discourse in the name of black liberation and in light of the particular realities of black culture. The purpose of this chapter has been to show how Cone's interpretation of blackness represents both symbolic (in a particular, theological sense) and contestable space. As examined above, Cone uses his familiarity with the theological frameworks of Karl Barth and Paul Tillich to provide an interpretation of blackness in his early work. Additionally, I have shown how early African American critics of Cone's work can be read as not only challenging the nature of his theological method, but also as taking Cone to task for his interpretation of blackness.

I have also argued that Cone's work can be read as tending to the first five aspects of Tillich's notion of symbol but that the sixth aspect of symbol—that symbols change and die—is not addressed implicitly or explicitly in Cone's work. If black theology is to remain a relevant theological discourse in the 21st century, the nature of blackness as a contestable theological symbol must be clarified with appeals to the specific realities that compose black life in this moment.

In the conclusion of this dissertation, I will propose a constructive theo-ethical framework for the future of black theological discourse. The ability for theological symbols to change and die will be a vital part of my constructive work. For now, I turn to

an analysis of how womanist theology has built on and enriched the notion of blackness in black theological discourse.

CHAPTER 2: THE EXPANSION OF BLACKNESS IN WOMANIST THEOLOGY

Womanist theology and ethics is not merely a subset of Black Liberation Theology developed by black women; instead, the multi- and interdisciplinary content of womanist research is a novel site of inquiry which takes seriously the histories and lived experiences of black women as source for reflection on and interpretation of the nature and meaning of being in community. Moreover, womanism's focus on being in community has challenged and helped further the work of black male theologians in deeply important ways. In this chapter, I will explore how womanist scholars—but particularly Delores Williams with her classic text *Sisters in the Wilderness*—have contributed to the ongoing reformation of blackness in black theological discourse by. As we will see, womanist thought presses black theology's conception of blackness by focusing on how biblical interpretation and theological tradition has been used to silence and render invisible the experiences of black women. If black theology's notion of blackness is to be articulated in a way that is meaningful to the 21st century, it must come to terms with and be molded by the particular challenges of womanist scholars.

The Emergence of Womanist Theo-Ethics

Womanist theology and ethics emerged out of creative engagements with writer Alice Walker's definition of womanism. At the outset of a collection of essays titled *In*

Search of Our Mothers' Gardens, Walker provides the following four-part definition for the term "Womanist":

- Womanist 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 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. Lover herself. *Regardless*.
- 4.** Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender.¹

Walker's emphasis on willful, responsible, and in-charge behavior is reflected in womanist scholarship's emphasis on the powerful particularities of black women's lives. To begin the work of this chapter, I will explore the development of womanist theology and ethics in the foundational works of Katie Cannon and Jacquelyn Grant.

The two foundational texts in womanist theology and ethics are Katie Geneva Cannon's *Black Womanist Ethics* (1988) and Jacquelyn Grant's *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus* (1989). Together, Cannon and Grant's work helped establish

¹ Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), xi–xii.

the foundation of what has become womanist theo-ethics, an unapologetically interdisciplinary discourse that interprets Christian faith through the lens of black women's experiences. Cannon, a Christian social ethicist, was the first black woman to earn a doctorate from Union Theological Seminary in New York City; she was also the first black woman to be ordained in the United Presbyterian Church, USA. Cannon was drawn into the culture of the Black Power movement when Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated during her first year of college. While discerning which academic field was right for her (for a time, Cannon was committed to becoming a Hebrew Bible scholar) and negotiating the white elitism of Union Seminary, Cannon was drawn to the possibility of using the experiences of black women as a resource in moral reflection.

In 1988, Cannon's dissertation was published as *Black Womanist Ethics*, providing womanist theo-ethics with its foundational text. Cannon's approach to ethics emerged from her observation that "the doing of Christian ethics in the Black community was either immoral or amoral" because dominant perspectives in ethics presupposed "freedom and a wide range of choices" that were not lived realities in black communities because of racism.² For Cannon, the tendency to ground ethics in notions of freedom and choice failed to take seriously the social and political realities that circumscribe black freedom and litters the black deliberative process with life-threatening dangers. Moreover, "[d]ue to the extraneous forces and the entrenched bulwark of white supremacy and male superiority which pervade this society," Cannon observed that

² Katie G. Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics*, 1st Edition (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, USA, 1988), 2.

“Black women are the most vulnerable and the most exploited members of the American society.”³ In *Black Womanist Ethics*, Cannon mined the lived experiences of black women and discovered a tradition of ethical reflection “that does not appeal to the fixed rules or absolute principles of the white-oriented, male structured society.”⁴

One of the major contributions of Cannon’s groundbreaking text was the establishment of black women’s literature as a primary source for ethical reflection. Cannon clarified the importance of black women’s literature by interpreting the life and work of Zora Neale Hurston; she saw Hurston’s life and work as emblematic of the moral wisdom and spiritual strength black women contribute to the black community, even as these contributions are often devalued in or excluded from patriarchal renditions of black history. In the face of “multilayered oppression” and painful historical omissions, Cannon insisted that “Black women’s literary tradition delineates the many ways that ordinary Black women have fashioned value patterns and ethical procedures in their own terms, as well as mastering, transcending, radicalizing and sometimes destroying pervasive, negative orientations imposed by the mores of the larger society.”⁵

While *Black Womanist Ethics* did not develop an explicit interpretation of the term “womanist,” Cannon was deeply influenced by Alice Walker and recalls the season of her life in which “‘womanism’ became the new gatekeeper in my land of

³ Ibid., 3–4.

⁴ Ibid., 4.

⁵ Ibid., 76.

counterpain.”⁶ Cannon used “womanism” as an interpretive lens in ethics, clarifying the meaning of womanist ethics as she worked, and casting a vision in which the rich power of black women’s lives would be taken seriously as a source of critical theory and method. Importantly, Cannon imagined womanist theory and method as having profound consequences for the nature of religious studies. She insisted that the goal of womanist ethics is not to make elitist and hegemonic spaces more inclusive; instead womanism functions as a source of critical theory and method with the potential to “recast the very terms and terrain of religious scholarship.”⁷

In 1989, the year after Cannon gave birth to womanist ethics with *Black Womanist Ethics*, Jacquelyn Grant’s *White Women’s Christ and Black Women’s Jesus* brought womanist theology into existence. Grant argued that while feminist theologians rightly criticized the practice of treating male experience as normative and superior in Christian theology, these same theologians perpetuated their own oppressive theological norms by rendering black women invisible. A survey of feminist theology led Grant to conclude that while feminist theologians articulate an important critique of androcentric theology, “they do not transcend their own criticisms” because “feminist theologians’ sources for women’s experience refer almost exclusively to White women’s experience.”⁸ The tendency of feminist theologians to reduce women’s experience to *white women’s*

⁶ Katie Geneva Cannon, *Katie’s Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community* (New York, NY: Continuum International Publishing Group, 1995), 23.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Jacquelyn Grant, *White Women’s Christ and Black Women’s Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1989), 5.

experience overlooked the radically different lives that white and black women have lived both during and after slavery.

Grant charged feminist theologians with having “misnamed themselves by calling themselves feminists when in fact they are White feminists, and by appealing to women’s experience when in fact they appeal almost exclusively to their own experience.”⁹ Far from an innocent categorical mistake, Grant contended that “[for white feminists to] misname themselves as “feminists” who appeal to “women’s experience” is to do what oppressors always do; it is to define the rules and then solicit others to play the game.”¹⁰ Feminist theology’s lack of racial analysis made it necessary to clarify the important theological differences that emerge from a careful examination of the differences between the experiences of black and white women; womanist theology was born in this process of examination and differentiation.

Like womanist ethics, womanist theology takes the experiences of black women as its primary interpretive lens; however, *White Women’s Christ and Black Women’s Jesus* was distinguished by its explicit naming of the “tri-dimensional experience of racism/sexism/classism” in the lives of black women.¹¹ Mindful of the dangers of emphasizing racism and sexism at the expense of classism, Grant argued that “[f]or Black women doing theology, to ignore classism would mean that their theology is no different from any other bourgeois theology. It would be meaningless to the majority of Black

⁹ Ibid., 200.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 209.

women, who are themselves poor.”¹² In womanist theology, a proper understanding of black women’s experience—womanist theology’s primary interpretative source – prioritizes the experiences of poor black women, and progress toward holistic liberation – womanist theology’s *raison d’être*—is gauged by the state poor black women. As sources for womanist theology, Grant named black women writers who have historicized and interpreted black women’s experiences in the church, the Bible—read and heard in light of black women’s experience, and Jesus, the black political messiah whose divine humanity reveals God’s solidarity with oppressed black women. Of these three sources, Grant’s interpretation of Jesus Christ is of singular importance to the development of womanist theology.

Building on James Cone’s insistence that Jesus’ historical particularity is essential to understanding the nature of Christ, Grant insists that Christ’s concern for “the least of these” means that Jesus understands and is revealed in the lived realities of poor black women as they confront the tri-dimensional oppression that ravages their lives. The particularity of Jesus’s concern for the least of these means that God sees and seeks to transfigure the tri-dimensional oppression that ravages black women’s lives. Grant’s Christocentric method is important because it makes the particularity of black women’s experience a robust site of shared community. Explaining this shared community, Grant wrote:

By this I mean that in each of the three dynamics of oppression, Black women share in the reality of a broader community. They share race suffering with Black men; with White women and other Third World women, they are victims of sexism; and with poor Blacks and Whites, and

¹² Ibid., 210.

other Third World peoples, especially women, they are disproportionately poor. To speak of Black women's tridimensional reality, therefore, is not to speak of Black women exclusively, for there is an implied universality which connects them with others.¹³

While the list of social issues that characterize womanist theo-ethics has grown to include human sexuality and environmental issues, this growth has occurred in the rich soil established by the respective publications of *Black Womanist Ethics* and *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus*. Cannon and Grant established a rich foundation for womanist theo-ethics that continues to thrive in religious and theological discourse. More specifically, Cannon and Grant's early work established two themes that continue to shape womanist theo-ethics: (1) black women's stories (fiction and non-fiction) as a source of theory and method in womanist scholarship and (2) the centrality of Christology in womanist theology. These two themes in womanist scholarship have been central to how womanist theology has helped tradition blackness in black theological discourse.

"Blackness" in Womanist Theo-Ethics

How has womanist theo-ethics contributed to the ongoing reformation of blackness in black theological discourse? In route to answering this question, it will be helpful to examine how womanism has critiqued and built on the work of male black theologians. A classic site for this type of examination is theologian Delores Williams's

¹³ Ibid., 216.

book *Sisters in the Wilderness*. A review of Williams's work—particularly its development of a biblical hermeneutic and Christology rooted in the lived experiences of black women—will shed light on how the theoretical and methodological foundations established by Cannon and Grant have been used by subsequent waves of womanist scholars to construct a powerful discourse on the meaning of black faith. Of more immediate concern to this project, Williams's work, through thoughtful critique of black theology, exemplifies how womanism has deepened and enriched the meaning of “blackness” in black theological discourse.

In her classic text *Sisters in the Wilderness*, theologian Delores Williams rereads the story of Hagar (Genesis 16, 21:8-21)—the slave girl of Sarai (Sarah), wife of the biblical patriarch Abram (Abraham)—in route to constructing a womanist theological perspective that rebukes the repression and exclusion of black women's experience in black theology. At the heart of Williams's theology is a biblical hermeneutic that emerges from her commitment to taking seriously both the complex nature of black history in America and the unique experiences of black women in this history. As will become evident, Williams's biblical hermeneutic differs significantly from modes of interpretation that have driven the work of black male theologians, and these different approaches to scripture have important consequences for how blackness is understood in black theological discourse.

In clarifying the unique contributions black women's lives offer to Christian theology, Williams differentiates between the “liberation tradition of African American biblical appropriation” popularized by James Cone and the “survival/quality of life

tradition” for which she advocates.¹⁴ Popular among black male theologians, the liberation tradition emphasizes God’s liberating activities, especially as seen in the exodus from Egypt and the story of Jesus quoting the prophet Isaiah in his address to the synagogue in Nazareth (Luke 4:16-21). While noting how important the liberation tradition of biblical interpretation has been in and to black history, Williams argues that this mode of biblical interpretation is rooted in “the black historical period of American slavery.” As such, relying solely on the liberation tradition of biblical interpretation “consign[s] the community and the black theological imagination to a kind of historical stalemate that denies the possibility of change with regard to the people’s experience of God and with regard to the possibility of God changing in relation to the community.”¹⁵ Williams, then, approaches the borders of liberationist thinking and dares to imagine black theological existence beyond a story rooted in and defined by slavery. The survival/quality of life method of biblical interpretation represents an alternative approach to scripture and is a vital component of Williams’s imaginative work. Understanding how Williams uses this method of biblical interpretation requires examining her rereading of the story of Hagar.

While traditional readings of Genesis 16 center Abram and his wife Sarai’s struggle to conceive a son who will sustain their lineage, Williams rereads this story through the lens of black women’s historical experiences of oppression and makes the

¹⁴ Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 2–6; Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom*, 30th anniversary edition (Oxford New York Auckland Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 2007).

¹⁵ Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 151.

divinely ordained survival of Hagar, Sarai's slave girl, central to the story.¹⁶ Williams's rereading tells of Sarai's giving Hagar to Abram in the hopes that the slave girl will become pregnant and serve as a surrogate mother in place of Sarai, who is unable to bear a son. After becoming pregnant through the sexual relationship Sarai forces her to have with Abram, Hagar comes to despise Sarai who, in turn, mistreats Hagar. To escape Sarai's abuse, Hagar flees into the wilderness where poverty and homelessness threaten her life and the life of the unborn child in her womb. However, God meets Hagar in the wilderness and directs her to return to Sarai in submission.¹⁷ Along with telling Hagar to return to Sarai, God promises the slave girl that the son in her womb is the beginning of a line of descendants "too numerous to count" (Genesis 16:10). While God's directive ensures the *survival* of Hagar and her unborn child, Hagar's return to Sarai—the woman whose selfishness and impatience led her to violently objectify Hagar, reducing her to a surrogate in the name of continuing Abram's lineage—is not compatible with the liberation tradition of biblical interpretation. Williams, therefore, argues that survival, not liberation, is the central characteristic of Hagar's relationship with God.

The importance of Williams's work to black theological discourse becomes most apparent as she relates the experiences of Hagar to those of black women. In Williams's reading of Genesis 16, Hagar's story becomes emblematic of the oppressive realities that have always characterized the experiences of black American women. Like Hagar, God

¹⁶ For Williams, "rereading" names more than simply the act of reading again, it identifies a particular method of biblical interpretation formed by Latin American women. See: *Ibid.*, 7–8.

¹⁷ Though the Bible tells of Hagar being met not by God but by an angel of the Lord, Williams cites biblical scholars who problematize clear distinctions between an angel of Lord and God's self. See: *Ibid.*, 20.

has enabled black women in America to survive, even when liberation has seemed impossible. Williams animates the emblematic relationship between Hagar and black women through a list of shared experiences; included among these shared experiences are motherhoods defined or circumscribed by violence, social-role surrogacy, and homelessness and economic hardship. While all of these experiences conspire in forming the deadly web of socioeconomic oppression that unyieldingly threatens the holistic being of black women, the issue of social-role surrogacy plays a decisive role in the construction of Williams's theological perspective.

Surrogacy ravaged the lives of black women both before and after the Civil War. As Williams notes, “[i]n the antebellum South[,] coerced surrogacy roles involving black women were in the areas of nurturance, field labor and sexuality.”¹⁸ In these antebellum surrogate roles, enslaved black women had little to no say over their labor and bodies; black women were forced to raise and nurse white children (even when doing so separated them from their own families and children), worked long hours of hard physical labor, and were constantly subjected to the violent sexual desires of white men. Even after the Emancipation Proclamation was issued, black women's surrogacy persisted, often on a semi-voluntary level made necessary by socioeconomic realities. Williams aptly describes the strange freedom blacks sought to make sense of in postbellum America, writing, “[w]hile black women and men did realize a small measure of success in determining surrogate roles black women would not fill after emancipation, certain

¹⁸ Ibid., 62.

social realities limited black women's power to choose full emancipation from all surrogacy roles."¹⁹

After slavery, attempts by free blacks to model their families after the idealized middle- and upper-class structure of white families – with men working and women staying home – were often frustrated by the persistence of white supremacy in postbellum socioeconomic norms. These racist norms limited most black men to labor options that constantly threatened black families with insolvency. In instances where black families weathered the economic storm of white supremacy, it was often the domestic labor of black women in the houses of white families that made the decisive difference between a black family being poor and entirely destitute.²⁰ In Williams's view, black women, like Hagar in wilderness, have not experienced liberation in their experiences of racism, sexism, and economic oppression; instead, black women have used their faith in God as sources for survival and forging the best quality of life possible for themselves and their loved ones.

As she brought the consequences of rereading Hagar's story and revaluing black women's history to bear on the development of womanist theology, Williams developed a deeply important critique of black liberation theology. She argued that black theology's overreliance on the theme of liberation in biblical interpretation, combined with the androcentric history used in interpreting black experience, created and perpetuated a

¹⁹ Ibid., 73.

²⁰ See: Tera W. Hunter, *To "Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors after the Civil War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

theological atmosphere in which black women's lives do not matter to the interpretation of divine reality.²¹ Moreover, Williams connects black theology's narrow biblical hermeneutic and androcentric interpretation of black experience to what she sees as an impoverished Christology. The root of black theology's impoverished Christology is rooted in the tendency of many male theologians to normalize the invisibility of black women's experience by interpreting God's redemptive work as an act of divine surrogacy.

As Williams labored to develop an alternative Christological vision – one that did not treat surrogacy as part of God's will – she reinforced her commitment to developing womanist theology in a way that would not ignore the lived experiences and real sufferings of black women, even when doing so meant transforming long held views on faith. She clarifies this commitment in the following quote:

More often than not[,] the theology in mainline Protestant churches (including African American ones) teaches believers that sinful humankind has been redeemed because Jesus died on the cross in the place of humans, thereby taking human sin upon himself. In this sense Jesus represents the ultimate surrogate figure; he stands in the place of someone else: sinful humankind. Surrogacy, attached to this divine personage, thus takes on an aura of the sacred. It is therefore fitting and proper for black women to ask whether the image of a surrogate-God has salvific power for black women or whether this image supports and reinforces the exploitation that has accompanied their experience with surrogacy. If black women accept this idea of redemption, can they not also passively accept the exploitation that surrogacy brings?²²

²¹ Williams cites James Cone's work as the most outstanding example of a biblical hermeneutic that emphasizes liberation at the expense of biblical stories and perspectives that problematize the idea of God as liberator. On the issue of black experience, Williams charges James Cone, J. Deotis Roberts and Cecil Cone with using androcentric language that precludes the possibility of black women's experience shaping the meaning of "black experience." Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 144–61.

²² *Ibid.*, 161–62.

As an alternative to atonement theories that normalize surrogacy, Williams urged womanist theologians to “[u]se the sociopolitical thought and action of the African-American woman’s world to show black women their salvation does not depend upon any form of surrogacy made sacred by traditional and orthodox understands of Jesus’ life and death,” but instead emerges from “Jesus’ life of resistance and by the survival strategies he used to help people survive the death of identity.”²³ Williams’s theology has major implications for interpreting blackness as the ground of black faith; we turn now to an interpretation of these implications.

Traditioning Blackness in Womanist Thought and Action

The singular contribution of Williams’s work to black theological discourse is its ability to bring a deep interpretation of black women’s suffering in black history to bear on Christian faith. More specifically, in critiquing black theology’s reliance on atonement theories that normalize surrogate violence, and in doing so in a way that reshapes black consciousness through a radical insistence on the centrality of black women’s experience to understanding black existence, Williams’s womanist perspective gestures toward the possibility of black theological imagination being transfigured through an expanded conception of blackness itself. This transfiguration of blackness occurs through womanism’s reformulation of black history and black culture, sources vital to the interpretation of blackness in black theology. As black histories and interpretations of

²³ Ibid., 162, 164.

black culture are molded by the powerful and invaluable content of black women's lives, constructive possibilities for black theological discourse are renewed and expanded.

Through its commitment to honoring the lived realities of black women, *Sisters in the Wilderness* exemplifies how womanist theo-ethics presents new creative possibilities for interpreting black encounters with the sacred.

Traditioning blackness with Williams's critique of black theology in mind requires interpreting the role and meaning of suffering in black Christian faith.²⁴ Indeed the major theological differences that Williams identifies – between the liberation and survival/quality of life traditions of biblical interpretation and between cross-centered atonement theories and the life-centered interpretation of Jesus Williams advocates for – center around how suffering ought to be interpreted in black faith in general and in the faith of black women in particular. Williams refuses to sanctify the multi-faceted suffering of black women, no matter how deeply entrenched such sanctifying practices are in the culture of Christian faith. In this refusal, Williams resists androcentric Christianity's use of implicit and explicit practices and teachings that contort Christian faith by casting an idolatrous vision of creation that reduces the value and potential of

²⁴ Other important critiques of black theology's interpretation of suffering are found in texts by philosopher William R. Jones and in the theological and religious work of Anthony Pinn. See: William R. Jones, *Is God A White Racist?: A Preamble to Black Theology* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1997); Anthony B. Pinn, *Why, Lord?: Suffering and Evil in Black Theology* (New York, NY: Continuum, 1999). Though the respective works of Jones and Pinn converge with *Sisters in the Wilderness* in addressing the issue of suffering in black Christianity, their works differ in important theoretical ways. More precisely, Williams understands herself to be working as a Christian theologian and so is concerned about giving faithful articulation to the meaning of what God is saying to the black community through Jesus. Jones and Pinn, on the other hand, approach black theology from atheist humanist perspectives and are concerned with interpreting and critiquing black theology using theoretical assumptions that emerge from these perspectives. I will have more to say about how the atheist humanism of Jones and Pinn contribute to traditioning blackness in the next chapter.

black women to their potential and capacity to be serve or “help meet” the desire of men and other wealthy women. Just as James Cone is uncompromising in his rejection of white supremacy, Williams is rightly relentless in her rebuke of the hermeneutical practices and ecclesial teachings that normalize the suffering of black women.

While *Sisters in the Wilderness* offers a desperately needed corrective to the Christian church’s sexist silence regarding black women’s suffering, it also raises difficult questions about how the being of God as revealed in Jesus ought to be understood in a world where systemic violence regularly ravages the lives of poor and oppressed people. What, for example, do survival, quality of life, and the healing ministry of Jesus offer those mourning or experiencing the end of black life as a result of violent social and cultural practices? To be sure, the answer is not “nothing.” The black community’s ongoing experience with violent death produces generational trauma that threatens the community with a pervasive hopelessness; yet hopelessness often gives way to gratefulness for one’s own survival (i.e., for life itself), especially in situations where our social locations are closely intertwined with those of the victims. In turn, this gratefulness for survival may inspire a cycle of discipleship characterized by the type of life-giving ministry that empowers others to survive. This is, of course, but one of many possibilities for how Williams’s theological vision might take life-affirming form in community.

The powerful potential of Williams’s work notwithstanding, I maintain that Williams’s critique of normalized suffering needs to be held in critical, faithful tension with the importance of Christ’s cross for those whose lives are circumscribed by intimate

experiences with death. This tension is vital to Christian faith because, in a fallen world, “state-sponsored” torture and killing of oppressed people is an ontological fact to which Jesus’ story must powerfully and definitively speak. It is not enough to know that Jesus came empowering some to survive; Jesus’s story must confirm that the God called “Emmanuel” (“God is with us,” Matthew 1:22-23) is not merely an “ally” with resources, but is also one who shares with us the painful danger – and even death – that comes as we struggle against oppressive principalities and powers. Thus, while we must reject the sanctification of suffering, we also must retain our ability to find God amidst our suffering, even suffering unto death.

Through maintaining a faithful tension between embracing Williams’s rebuke of practices and teachings that sanctify black women’s suffering, on one hand, and retaining our ability to witness to the God who is with us even in death, on the other, the nature of blackness in black theological discourse is radically expanded. In addition to blackness not being beholden to white supremacist norms (chapter 1), *Sisters in Wilderness* reminds that traditioning blackness for the 21st century requires an existential commitment to acknowledging and resisting the sanctification of violent, institutional sexism against black women. Resisting the violence that threatens black women’s lives is not merely a social justice issue that the church should address in an auxiliary sense; instead, it is an essential part of any community’s faithfulness to the God of liberation. As such, any community claiming to be black must have the holistic inclusion and liberation of black women as an irreplaceable part of its core. Moreover, because black women bear the burden of their multifaceted oppression in ways that black men can never understand,

being black also means following black women's leads in determining how faithful we have or have not been in witnessing against the abuse and dehumanization that plagues their lives. Any community claiming to be concerned with black liberation while rendering invisible the lived experiences and sufferings of black women is like a house divided against itself, it cannot and will not stand.

Conclusion

In remembering the pivotal role of Williams's womanist critique of black theological discourse, it is important to note her reliance on the foundational theory and method established by Katie Cannon and Jacquelyn Grant. Indeed, creative and constructive continuity has been one of the hallmarks of womanist theo-ethics. Womanist scholarship continues to pay homage to Alice Walker's layered definition by holding space for the various social and religious perspectives of black women who find their way to womanism and are empowered by its commitment to treating black women's lives as vital to critically and constructively interpreting black faith. Works such as Stephanie Mitchem's *Introducing Womanist Theology*, Melanie Harris's *Gifts of Virtue, Alice Walker, and Womanist Ethics*, and edited volumes such as Monica Coleman's *Ain't I a Womanist, Too?* and Stacey Floyd-Thomas's *Mining the Motherlode* explain, explore, and contest the nature of womanist theo-ethics. Meanwhile volumes like Cheryl Townsend Gilkes's *If It Wasn't for the Women*, Emilie Townes's *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*, Kelly Brown Douglas's *Sexuality and the Black Church*, Keri Day's *Unfinished Business*, and Eboni Marshall Turman's *Toward a Womanist*

Ethic of Incarnation continue to press and develop womanist perspectives on the black church, social ethics and culture, and Christian theology.²⁵

Beyond tracking continuity in womanist theo-ethics, noting Williams's use of approaches established by previous womanist scholars and how scholars after Williams underscores the communal, cooperative nature of womanist theo-ethics as an academic discourse. The communal and cooperative nature of womanist theo-ethics represents both a rare practice in a religious studies field so deeply and widely defined by individual monographs, and a rich connection between womanist theory and womanist method. The yield of this cooperative approach to scholarship is evident in the magnificent work done by the Womanist Approaches to Religion and Society Group at the American Academy of Religion (AAR). The Womanist Group of the AAR has helped mold waves of womanist scholars who continue to inform and expand the meaning of blackness in the study of religion.

²⁵ For a small selection of the rich tradition of womanist thought, see: Stephanie Y. Mitchem, *Introducing Womanist Theology*, 7.2.2002 edition (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002); Melanie L. Harris, *Gifts of Virtue, Alice Walker, and Womanist Ethics* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Melanie L. Harris, *Ecowomanism: African American Women and Earth-Honoring Faiths* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2017); Stacey M. Floyd-thomas, *Mining the Motherlode: Methods in Womanist Ethics* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2006); Monica A. Coleman, *Ain't I a Womanist, Too?: Third Wave Womanist Religious Thought* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2013); Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, *If It Wasn't for the Women. . .: Black Women's Experience And Womanist Culture In Church And Community* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000); Emilie Maureen Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Emilie Maureen Townes, *A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering* (Mayknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993); Kelly Brown Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective* (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1999); Keri Day, *Unfinished Business: Black Women, the Black Church, and the Struggle to Thrive in America* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2012); Keri Day, *Religious Resistance to Neoliberalism: Womanist and Black Feminist Perspectives*, 1st ed. 2015 edition (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Eboni Marshall Turman, *Toward a Womanist Ethic of Incarnation: Black Bodies, the Black Church, and the Council of Chalcedon*, 1st ed. 2013 edition (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

The commitment among womanist scholars to seek communal and cooperative modes of knowledge production represents a radical openness to being with and learning from different perspectives. This type of radical openness has always been viewed suspiciously by the white supremacist structures that devalue and demean black life. How, then, ought blackness relate itself to difference so that it retains its constitutive particularities while not simply reiterating ways of being that have been normalized by white supremacy? As we continue we continue to tradition blackness through an examination of outstanding texts and themes in black theological discourse, I turn now to the issue of difference in black theology.

CHAPTER 3: BLACK IDENTITY AND POSTMODERNITY

While chapters one and two traditioned black identity in the revolutionary work of James Cone and the discourse-shifting labor of womanist theo-ethics, this chapter turns to the topic of black identity's relationship to postmodern discourse by assessing Victor Anderson's groundbreaking text *Beyond Ontological Blackness*. The emergence of postmodern criticism challenged long held notions about the nature of reality, truth, and human nature. Though marginalized in much postmodern discourse (a predictable carryover from more "modern" times), the realities of black life have not remained completely segregated from postmodern reflection. Cornel West and bell hooks were two of the first scholars to undertake the dialogical work of interpreting postmodernity from a black perspective and then interpreting black life in light of postmodern values. From the beginning of this dialog, the relationship between black life and postmodernity reflected the cultural chauvinism of white supremacy. hooks helpfully identifies this postmodern chauvinism as the imperial-white supremacist-capitalist-patriarchy characteristic of much modern Western culture, while insightfully West refers to the cultural chauvinism of postmodernity as "neo-hegemonic," a modified articulation of the oppressive norms of that shaped the modern world.

This chapter begins by examining the emergence of postmodernity, paying particular attention to some of what sets it apart from modern discourse. Next I review

Anderson's insightful critique of ontological blackness in black culture in general and in black theology in particular. In light of the groundbreaking assessments of West and hooks, which I tend to in the third section of this chapter, I argue that Anderson's critique of ontological blackness and his proposal of a grotesque aesthetic grounded in pragmatic naturalism does not tend closely enough to the structural realities that characterize the African American experience. My goal here is not to dismiss Anderson's work – his critique is far too important! – but rather to enrich the gifts of his critique by placing them in relationship with assessments from the previous chapters.

From Modernity to Postmodernity

Western modernity refers to the cultural, political, and intellectual transformations that radically reshaped Western European ways of knowing and being from the late 15th to the early 20th century. The early modern period is characterized by the emergence of Renaissance values in intellectual and aesthetic fields, Christopher Columbus's discovery of the so-called New World in 1492, and the Protestant Reformation.¹ Native American genocide, colonial slavery through the Transatlantic Slave Trade, and the exploitation of working class Europeans provided the economic engine of modernity, and the era of Enlightenment represented the social and intellectual concretization of modernity through developments in philosophy, science, and aesthetics.²

¹ George E. Tinker, *Missionary Conquest: The Gospel and Native American Cultural Genocide* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993). Also Mignolo

² Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance!*, 20th Anniversary Edition (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 27.

Central to the structure of Western European modernity was what Enrique Dussel has referred to as “a dialectical relation with a non-European alterity.”³ Dussel shows that modern Western discourse begins as “Europe affirms itself as the ‘center’ of *World History*.”⁴ Dussel’s analysis of European modernity reveals modern Western discourse as more than a Western European development. Instead, and this moves beyond Dussel’s helpful analysis, modernity marks the ascendance of violent colonialism and, eventually, nationalism, as ways of being that are made normative through the violent implementation of European values across the globe. These ways of being are grounded in teleological grand narratives like “the dialectics of Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth,” but the truthfulness of these governing narratives was and is not self-evident. Instead, the truth claims of modernity’s grand narratives relied on a reciprocal relationship with metanarratives that produced what philosopher Jean-François Lyotard called discourses of legitimation.⁵ These legitimizing discourses were grounded in the epistemology of modern science and used appeals to observation and evidence to establish discourses of experiential regularity and claims to global and universal truth.

Postmodernity represents critical challenges to the dominant epistemological claims and narratives of the modern world. The challenges of postmodernity are

³ Enrique Dussel, “Eurocentrism and Modernity (Introduction to the Frankfurt Lectures),” *Boundary 2* 20, no. 3 (Fall 1993): 65.

⁴ Dussel, “Eurocentrism and Modernity (Introduction to the Frankfurt Lectures).”

⁵ Jean-Francois Lyotard and Fredric Jameson, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, 1st edition (Minneapolis: University Of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiii.

increasingly compelling in light of pervasive evidence that modernity's grand projects and narratives represent unfulfilled promises rooted in Eurocentric and white supremacist ways of thinking and being. The unfulfilled promises of modern discourse have taken center stage in social and political movements developed in and led by marginalized communities. In the context of these movements, the shortcomings of modernity are not merely about the condition of knowledge (Lyotard) or Eurocentrism; instead, in the context of these movements, modernity's broken promises take the form of globalized structural violence that ravages the lives of poor people, especially poor people of color, on a perpetual basis. Indeed, due in large part to the histories and analyses produced by oppressed communities, postmodern discourse has been shaped by a widespread unwillingness to accept blindly the presuppositions and promises of modernity's grand narratives. This incredulity toward modernity led Lyotard to imagine a postmodern future characterized by discourses of fragmentation, but oppressed communities have pressed beyond Lyotard, showing that fragmentation is not merely about difference and discontinuity, it's also about repression, oppression, poverty, hunger, and neo-colonial violence in the name power and privilege.

Given the potential for postmodern discourse to disturb the oppressive and repressive discourses of the modern world, it should not be surprising that black theological discourse has been impacted by postmodernity. However, as we will see, for all of the potential synergy between postmodernity and theology, the meaning of postmodern discourse vis-à-vis black life creates just as many questions as avenues for creative collaboration.

Victor Anderson's Postmodern Critique of "Ontological Blackness"

Ethicist Victor Anderson's *Beyond Ontological Blackness* represents the outstanding critique of black theology from a postmodern perspective. Anderson rightly perceives much of black cultural discourse as having been flattened into an idealized, heroic politic in which African Americans are encouraged to forego individual fulfillment in the name of an oversimplified black whole. Anderson refers to this flattened conception of black identity as ontological blackness, which he defines as "a covering term that connotes categorical, essentialist, and representational languages depicting black life and experience."⁶

Anderson critiques ontological blackness for playing an overly determinative role in discourses on black culture. Of particular interest to Anderson are "the ways that devotion to ontological blackness, its categories and its interests in racial solidarity, loyalty, and authenticity, conceals, subjugates, and calls into question African Americans' interests in fulfilled individuality."⁷ As Anderson sees it, ontological blackness represents a grand narrative that pressures African Americans to sacrifice individual fulfillment in the name of an imagined black whole, even as this imagined whole overlooks important intra-communal differences. Anderson judges that ontological blackness is unable to account for the "dispersed and not always commensurable interests

⁶ Victor Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness: An Essay on African American Religious and Cultural Criticism* (New York, NY: Continuum Intl Pub Group, 1995), 11.

⁷ Anderson, 15.

of class, gender, sexual differentials, and race.”⁸ Ontological blackness, then, represents a tragically oversimplified notion of black identity predicated on a contrived conception of black community. The tragedy of ontological blackness has to do with its willingness to sacrifice the richness of African American subjectivity in the name of an imagined black unity. For Anderson, African American cultural and existential fulfillment requires honoring the individual realities of black life; therefore, ontological blackness, with its tragic willingness to sacrifice black subjectivity in the name of contrived black unity, forecloses the possibility of cultural and existential fulfillment for black people.

As a cultural critic, Anderson judges ontological blackness to be “incommensurable with the demand for a new cultural politics of black identity that meaningfully relates to the conditions of postmodern North American life.”⁹ In light of postmodern North American life, Anderson prescribes and constructively appropriates bell hooks’ notion of “postmodern blackness.” Where ontological blackness sacrifices subjective difference in the name of an oversimplified whole, postmodern blackness “recognizes that black identities are continually being reconstituted as African Americans inhabit widely differentiated social spaces and communities of moral discourse.”¹⁰ Postmodern blackness, then, does what ontological blackness cannot do; namely, it acknowledges and honors the various religious, socio-economic, gender, and sexual orientation sites from which the beauty of black life is given infinitely unique expression.

⁸ Anderson, 15.

⁹ Anderson, 15.

¹⁰ Anderson, 11.

Anderson's critique of black theological discourse—which is inclusive of womanist theology—argues that black theology's notion of symbolic blackness represents a form of ontological blackness that circumscribes discourses on black faith and diminishes black theology's potential to be a resource in discourses contributing to African American cultural fulfillment. As we saw in chapter 1, James Cone developed symbolic blackness as a way to explain why the black experience in America represents a site of Christian revelation. Black theology's discursive commitment to symbolic blackness is concerned with interpreting *the* black experience, but it is precisely this practice of imagining the black experience as being reducible to a singular phenomenon that Anderson identifies as a central problem for African American cultural criticism. As Anderson puts it, "because Cone collapses metaphysics into ontology, blackness is reified into a totality or a unity of black experience."¹¹ As such, blackness in Cone's thought is one and has little to no room for the rich reality of difference in African American life to which Anderson seeks to bear witness.

For Anderson, the problem with symbolic blackness in black theology boils down to the seeming inability of black life to be freed from white racism. On one hand, Cone insists that black theology is diametrically opposed to white theology and whiteness; on the other hand, black theology's ontology is rooted in resisting the suffering and oppression caused by whiteness. As such, black theology's symbolic blackness seems to articulate and defend a form of ontological blackness that must, by its very nature, be rooted in the suffering from which it claims to be liberated. Anderson envisions an

¹¹ Anderson, 91.

ontology not bound to the crisis of responding to white racism, thus he writes, “where there exists no possibility of transcending the blackness that whiteness created, African American theologies of liberation must be seen not only as crisis theologies; they remain theologies in a crisis of legitimation.”¹² In response to the limits of black liberation theology, Anderson aims to develop a public theology in which cultural fulfillment for individuals is not sacrificed in the name of ontological blackness. Because Cone’s black ontology is defined and delimited by actively resisting the oppression and suffering that results from white racism, it is an outstanding example of the limited discourses on African American culture beyond which Anderson wants to move in his work.

Because ontological blackness—of which black theology’s symbolic blackness is a representative sample—prioritizes accounts of black identity “that emphasize the heroic capacities of African Americans to transcend individuality in the name of black communal survival,” Anderson uses the concept of postmodern blackness to articulate an alternative understanding of black identity that does not necessitate sacrificing individuality and is not categorically defined by an ongoing struggle against the existential limitations wrought by white supremacy.¹³ Anderson responds to the discursive limitations of ontological blackness by proposing a Nietzschean grotesque aesthetic. Where the heroic aesthetic of ontological blackness prioritizes “irreducibility [and] nobility of origin,” the grotesque aesthetic emphasizes creative tension between

¹² Anderson, 117.

¹³ Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness*.

oppositional sensibilities while prioritizing “neither negation nor mediation.”¹⁴ For Anderson, negation and mediation between oppositional sensibilities represents movement toward the type of contrived whole at the heart of ontological blackness, whereas the grotesque aesthetic he prefers leads to a notion of blackness that is malleable enough to represent forms of African American life that do not fit the limited contours of black theology’s symbolic blackness.

Anderson identifies the grotesque aesthetic already at work in African American literary criticism of the late 20th century. Anderson identifies Henry Louis Gates’s critical reflection on the nature of racial aesthetics in African American literature. Gates wonders whether particular literary themes or the race of the poet makes poetry “black.”¹⁵

Anderson also resonates with Houston Baker, Jr.’s analysis of blues music in black culture as Baker emphasizes the deeply subjective nature of the blues.¹⁶ Toni Morrison, Madhu Dubey, and bell hooks represent further examples of the aesthetic Anderson has in mind as each of these women write in ways reflective of a commitment to self-reflexive work that illumines the intersectional nature of pain and joy in black women’s lives. This type of intersectional pain struggles to find expression in the oversimplified discourses of ontological blackness. Together, Gates, Baker, Morrison, Dubey, and hooks represent the possibility of inhabiting and developing discursive space in which the

¹⁴ Anderson, 127.

¹⁵ Anderson, 133; Henry Louis Gates, *Loose Canons: Notes of the Culture Wars*, First Edition edition (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1992).

¹⁶ Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness*, 134; Houston A. Baker Jr, *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory*, 1 edition (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

meaning of blackness is not only protected but debated, expanded, and risked as African Americans seek to enjoy the goodness of life in fuller and freer ways.

In *Creative Exchange: a Constructive Theology of African American Experience*, Anderson provides further theoretical and theological explanation for his critique of ontological blackness. In *Creative Exchange*, Anderson uses pragmatic naturalism to orient his theological work, explaining that,

pragmatic naturalism is the *metaphysical* aspect of pragmatism. By metaphysical thinking, I simply mean the ways that we picture the world, and for a pragmatic naturalist such as myself, the picture is one in which parts of experience are related to other parts and then related to wholes that are then related to larger wholes within a comprehensive picture of the world.

Significantly, Anderson adds that the worldview provided by pragmatic naturalism “will not rest well with any radical positivistic mandate to relegate human subjectivities to the unknowable while making reality of only the physical fields and properties of experience.”¹⁷ Rather than being relegated to an unknowable realm, Anderson’s pragmatic naturalism treats subjective experience as the ever-widening realm from which we encounter wholes. It follows that God, for Anderson, “is the world—its powers, processes, and patterns into which we have our being and to which we are all related in creative exchange.”¹⁸ Anderson yearns for the Beloved Community imagined by Martin Luther King, Jr. and Howard Washington Thurman; he presses for a world in which conflict is transformed into creative exchange and particular communities are not merely engaged but enlarged through connections with other communities and families.

¹⁷ Anderson, *Creative Exchange*, 13.

¹⁸ Anderson, 16.

Anderson's goal is the transformation of African American cultural criticism from a discourse rooted in ontological blackness to one dedicated to the cultural and existential fulfillment of black people. Toward this end, he critiques black theological discourse for allowing its work and potential to be tragically limited by a symbolic understanding of black identity that is incapable of escaping the circular existential crisis of ontological blackness in which black life is essentially and finally defined by the violence of white supremacy.¹⁹ For now, though, I am primarily interested in evaluating Anderson's critique of symbolic blackness in black liberation theology. En route to evaluating Anderson's critique of black theology, it will be helpful to examine the relationship between postmodernity and black identity in more detail.

(Post)modernity and Black Identity

The pervasiveness of white supremacy in our globalized world threatens even the most deconstructive discourses with the possibility of being limited by the cultural chauvinism and white supremacist norms that characterized modernity. In an essay titled "Postmodern Blackness," bell hooks critiqued postmodern discourse for perpetuating the exclusionary culture of modernity by ignoring the subjugated experiences of black people in general and black women in particular. Despite its claims to being focused on otherness and difference, hooks argued that postmodern discourse "is dominated primarily by the voices of white male intellectuals and/or academic elites who speak to

¹⁹ Anderson has built on his initial critique of ontological blackness in subsequent work where he has strived to construct a pragmatist theology of African American experience. See: Anderson, *Creative Exchange*.

and about one another with coded familiarity.”²⁰ Scholars of postmodernity, according to hooks, “seem not to know black women exist [and do not] even consider the possibility that [black women] might be somewhere writing or saying something that should be listened to, or producing art that should be seen, heard, approached with intellectual seriousness.”²¹ In response to the cultural exclusion at work in much postmodern scholarship, hooks challenges postmodernist scholars to fulfill the radical potential of their discourse by taking the experiences of black women and men seriously. As a contribution toward fulfilling this radical potential, hooks offers the beginnings of a postmodern interpretation of black culture. As we have seen, Victor Anderson borrows hooks’s notion of postmodern blackness to describe an alternative aesthetic that, he feels, is better suited to imagining black identity beyond the confines of ontological blackness and white supremacy.

For hooks, the challenge of imagining blackness through a postmodern lens is that much of what constitutes popular interpretations of black identity has been deeply formed by the black power movement which “was influenced by perspectives that could easily be labeled as modernist.”²² Moreover, hooks argues (and Anderson agrees deeply with her on this point) that constricting notions of black identity are the byproduct of impositions from both outside and within the black community. Black identity, hooks argues, has its

²⁰ Bell hooks, “Postmodern Blackness,” in *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1990), 24.

²¹ Ibid.

²² hooks, “Postmodern Blackness,” 25.

own grand narrative that is protected by a commitment to patriarchy and to concealing “the way in which class mobility has altered collective black experience so that racism does not necessarily have the same impact on [all black] lives.”²³ For African Americans who notice and want to dethrone the limitations of black identity’s grand narrative, postmodern discourse can be a highly efficient tool. For example, hooks uses postmodern discourse to advocate for a “process of decolonization that continually opposes reinscribing notions of “authentic” black identity,” opting instead for notions of blackness that are both “oppositional and liberatory.”²⁴

While sharing hooks’s conviction that postmodern discourse bears potential to enrich analyses of black culture, Cornel West is also concerned about postmodernity’s potential to be “neo-hegemonic” in relation to the black community. According to West, neo-hegemony “constitutes a new phase of hegemonic culture; it postures as an oppositional force, but, in substance, is a new manifestation of people’s allegiance and loyalty to the status quo.”²⁵ Neo-hegemony is a serious possibility for postmodern racial discourse because of how foundational white supremacy is to the structure of Western discourse. Therefore, even the most well-intended postmodern discourses may not delve deep enough into the foundations of Western epistemology to deconstruct white supremacist ways of thinking and being. West explains postmodernity’s neo-hegemonic

²³ hooks, 28.

²⁴ hooks, 28, 29.

²⁵ West, *Prophesy Deliverance!*, 120.

potential by describing what he perceives as a paradoxical relationship between Afro-American life and postmodern culture:

The paradox of Afro-American history is that Afro-Americans fully enter the modern world precisely when the postmodern period commences; that Afro-Americans gain a foothold in the industrial order just as the postindustrial order begins; and that Afro-Americans procure skills, values, and mores efficacious for survival and sustenance in modernity as the decline of modernity sets in, deepens, and yearns to give birth to a new era and epoch.²⁶

Though wary of postmodernity's potential to re-inscribe white supremacist ways of being under the guise of cultural criticism, West does not dismiss postmodernity; he sees its potentially rich resource for explaining and imagining black culture in its most creative, humane and liberated forms. However, in order for postmodernism to be such a resource, West argues that postmodern discourse must be conceived in the social and historical context of black life, life uniquely defined by creative resistance in the face hegemonic, state-sponsored terrorism. For West, black music represents the outstanding example of postmodern proclivities in black life; he cites bebop as a revolt against middle-class "jazz of the museum," and hip hop as the site of "a fragmented subject pulling from past and present, innovatively producing a heterogeneous product."²⁷

The analyses of hooks and West help clarify the tension between black identity and postmodernity. On one hand, hooks and West note the tendency of postmodern scholars to ignore the richness of black life, thereby perpetuating the violently repressive Eurocentric chauvinism of modernity. On the other hand, hooks sees the potential for

²⁶ West, 44.

²⁷ Cornel West, "The Political Intellectual," in *The Cornel West Reader* (Civitas Books, 1999), 286–88.

postmodern discourse to contribute to liberated notions of black identity, and West sees postmodernism as a potential tool for describing the fragmented, heterogenous expressions of resistance that have characterized the best of the black freedom struggle. In light of the tensions between black identity and postmodernity, it remains to be seen whether postmodernity's deconstructive discourse will reach and transform the white supremacist norms that composed modernity's foundations and continue to define black life as that which must be devalued, dehumanized, and even negated in the name of a twisted interpretation of American democracy.

Traditioning Black Identity vis-à-vis Postmodernity

As we have seen, Anderson's critique of black theology focuses on the role of symbolic blackness in James Cone's theology, which Anderson calls ontological blackness. While most clearly articulated in Cone's work, Anderson argues that the problem of ontological blackness persists in the most outstanding aspects of black theological discourse. Symbolic blackness is an example of ontological blackness, Anderson alleges, because it collapses the complexity of black individuality into a contrived whole that cannot account for social, economic, and other types of variation in African American life. This collapse—which Anderson describes as a collapse of metaphysics into ontology—is rooted in black theology's inability to imagine the nature and goals of black life apart from the violent dehumanization of black life wrought and maintained by white supremacist structures. Thus Anderson interprets black theology's understanding of blackness as unable to move beyond being rooted in whiteness; it can be

nothing other than the blackness that whiteness creates and cannot account for the rich, diverse aspects of African American experience that imagine and live life beyond the limits of white supremacy.

The assertion that black theology is limited by its discursive commitment to ontological blackness raises deeply important issues that scholars invested in black theological discourse would be unwise to ignore. On one hand, Anderson is right: the repressive nature of ontological blackness threatens the richness of black life in a way that no black theologian concerned with liberation, justice, or wholeness can ignore. In the 21st century, when some African Americans inhabit social and economic spaces that were once unimaginable, what does “blackness” mean? And, in light of these newly inhabited social and economic spaces, what social, political, and existential realities does blackness signify? On another hand, Anderson’s critique of black theological discourse reveals critical tension between individual fulfilment and communal liberation that ought to be carefully examined and addressed addressed before too quickly surrendering the symbolic blackness of black theological discourse and pivoting toward his grotesque, postmodern blackness. An important area of black theological and ethical interpretation emerges out of the tension between the insightfulness of Anderson’s critique and the tension between black individual and communal life.

Anderson identifies the critical tension between community and individual, noting that “moral rhetorics such as community, unity, racial pride, and black interests.... tend to mitigate whatever claims critics also want to make for difference.”²⁸ Yet he leaves this

²⁸ Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness*, 155.

tension unresolved because of its potential to serve as a creative source for African American cultural fulfillment. As we saw above, both bell hooks and Cornel West note the tension between postmodern discourse and black life, but Anderson is more concerned with constructing a postmodern alternative to ontological blackness than with identifying tensions between postmodernity and black life. Thus, while Anderson's postmodern critique of ontological blackness provides an important disruption to oversimplified discourses in African American culture in general and black theology in particular, his interpretation of postmodern blackness raises new issues regarding how this tension relates to the structural injustice black theology sought prophetically (if imperfectly) to address. Part of what keeps Anderson from addressing the tension between postmodernity and black life is how he appropriates bell hooks' notion of postmodern blackness.

Anderson rightly highlights hooks' commitment to "radical postmodernist practice" that emphasizes the politics of difference as a corrective to essentialism in discourses on black identity and creates a conceptual space that welcomes disparate black voices. However, he pays short shrift to the extreme care and particular concerns with which hooks enters the conversation regarding postmodern discourse. While agreeing that postmodernity's critique of essentialized identities provides vital insights to contemporary struggles for black liberation, hooks also notes that postmodern discourses, grounded as they often are in Eurocentric discourses on identity, are often problematic for black people living in a society "which seeks to prevent the formation of radical black

subjectivity.”²⁹ Because Eurocentrism is not relegated to the modern world in cultural shifts to postmodernity, assaults on black subjectivity can continue, even in spaces committed to difference, fragmentation, and the death of grand narratives. In order for postmodernity to contribute positively to the formation of radical black subjectivity, postmodern discourses must be developed and articulated in ways that counter Western commitments to Eurocentric worldviews, which are always characterized by what hooks calls “imperialist-white supremacist-capitalist-patriarchy.”³⁰ For hooks postmodern blackness represents the radical expansion of discourses that resist the structural abuse and devaluation of black life, especially the particular subjectivities of poor black people. Difference, then, is not a value in and of itself for hooks; instead, she insists that difference must be defined as the means to an under- or untapped bevy of resources in the ongoing war against white supremacy.

While both hooks and Anderson value postmodern blackness as a resource for challenging essentialism in discourses on black identity, hooks’s use of postmodern blackness retains an ethical and political thrust that resonates with black theological discourse’s determination to rebuke the structural and theological evil that unceasingly assaults black life. Anderson also wants to reject structural and theological evil, but he entrusts the nature of his ethical and political thrust to the outcome of a grotesque aesthetic in which risk-ridden encounters yield creative exchange. Here we glimpse an important difference between “postmodern blackness” in hooks and Anderson. hooks

²⁹ hooks, “Postmodern Blackness,” 26.

³⁰ bell hooks, *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope* (New York: Routledge, 2003), xiii.

retains a deeper commitment to ontological blackness and a greater suspicion regarding postmodernity than Anderson is comfortable with. She writes of Cornel West describing “our” (i.e., blacks’) collective plight even as she seeks to affirm “multiple black identities [and] varied black experience.”³¹ Anderson is not as suspicious of postmodern discourse. He capitalizes on postmodernity’s emphasis on linguistic fragmentation, using it to challenge overly deterministic discourses on race in general and black identity in particular. Simply put, Anderson seeks to move beyond ontological blackness while hooks’s political commitments lead her to work toward developing a more whole, healthy black ontology. As such, while insightful and informative, Anderson’s critique of ontological blackness leaves too much about the widely-shared, concrete realities of black suffering unsaid.

There is liberatory potential in Anderson’s critique of ontological blackness in black theology, but the realization of this potential depends on the tension of Anderson’s grotesque aesthetic yielding cultural resources that unequivocally resist white supremacy. It is not enough to yearn for forms of black being not bound by white supremacy; the moral, political, and theological means for such being must be clarified. What remains unclear is how why Anderson’s postmodern blackness is desirable when so much of African American experience yields a world (to use the language of Anderson’s pragmatic naturalism) in which black being signifies marginalization, oppression, dehumanization, and the ever-present possibility of being killed. In such a world, faith in the Beloved Community is only possible in the face of Martin King’s fear that he had

³¹ hooks, “Postmodern Blackness,” 26–28.

integrated black people into a burning house.³² In such a world, the hope that tense encounters give way to creative exchange represents a dangerous hospitality, the reality of which has been dramatized in cell phone video footage of black people being killed in tense encounters with law enforcement. It is in this world, characterized by the tragedy of violent black death defended by law, custom, and the property rights of (white) citizens that notions of black identity must be articulated. These notions of black identity should empower people for creative political and theological hope; Anderson is helpful here, but not as helpful as he could be had he considered the political advantages of healthy ontological blackness. In a world so deeply shaped by anti-black racism, a grotesque aesthetic of black identity not rooted in the struggle against white supremacy seems an idyllic privilege that is foreign to most blacks.

Conclusion

When Anderson problematizes Cone's "collapsing metaphysics in ontology" in the name of articulating postmodern blackness, he overlooks the radicalness of the ontology in which Cone chooses to ground reality. This is the reality of the black Christ whose incarnation occurs as an expression of God's desire to free black people from the idolatrous myth that the violence of white supremacy finally defines their lives, even as this violence characterizes much of daily black existence. In this way, what Anderson

³² King's fear that he had integrated black people into a "burning house" is attributed to Harry Belafonte's sharing the memory of his final conversation with King.

reads as a collapse of metaphysics into ontology is actually the liberation of black ontology from a metaphysic created and defined by white supremacist violence.

Anderson's work seems to be more concerned with interpretations of black culture than with engaging concrete realities of characteristic of much African American experience. And this labor is not without its value; after all, it is only through careful analysis of African American culture that oppressive and repressive grand narratives within the African American community rooted in sexism, classism, and homophobia can be unmasked. In traditioning black theology's interpretation of black identity vis-à-vis postmodernism, I want to suggest that Anderson's critique of ontological blackness, if it is to do its best, most useful work, must be held in creative tension with the insightful analyses of West and hooks which stress the structural realities of poor black folk, especially poor black women. West and hooks provide a helpful discursive bridge between the insights of Anderson's critique and the persistent truths in black theological discourse. In this way, I imagine a creative exchange between black theology and Anderson's critique of any form of black identity that would claim to be final. All of these approaches to black theological discourse must be held in tension as we strive to imagine a robust notion of black identity for 21st century black theological discourse.

CHAPTER 4: BLACK IDENTITY AND THE PROBLEM OF RACIAL THEOLOGY

In 2012, Jonathan Tran published a piece in *Christian Century* titled “The New Black Theology: Retrieving Ancient Sources to Challenge Racism.”¹ The article reviewed the respective works of J. Kameron Carter, Willie Jennings, and Brian Bantum, three African American theologians, and concluded that their collective trajectory could “change the face not only of black theology but theology as a whole.” Tran’s interpretation of these recent works rightly focused on and praised their innovative use of “dogmatic texts from the patristic period to the Reformation,” sources that “nonwhite male theologians have historically been hesitant to trust.” However, despite Tran’s insightfulness regarding the use of patristic and Reformation texts in these recent works, his claim that the trio’s collective work represents a revolutionary bridge connecting black theological discourse and sectors of the church that have traditionally ignored black theology’s claims is curious as none of the three theologians identify their work with black theological discourse.² Tran’s curious labeling of these recent theological works

¹ Jonathan Tran, “The New Black Theology: Retrieving Ancient Sources to Challenge Racism,” *The Christian Century*, accessed March 28, 2018, <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2012-01/new-black-theology>.

² See: J. Kameron Carter, *Race: A Theological Account* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, USA, 2008); Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race*, First (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010); Brian Bantum, *Redeeming Mulatto: A Theology of Race and Christian Hybridity* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010).

reflects the Christian church's ongoing struggle to make sense of how African American life fits into the body of Christ (i.e., can African Americans do theology without it being "black" theology?).³ Ironically, Tran's labeling these works "the new black theology" signifies the kind of racial thinking that Carter, Jennings, and Bantum all seek to disturb.

In beautifully unique ways, Carter, Bantum, and Jennings are all concerned with the relationship between race, racism, and Christian faith. However, while black theology has traditionally centered interpretations of black life and culture as resources for interpreting and critically engaging Christian faith, the collection of works Tran reviewed share a different commitment. The three theologians are all committed to interrogating how Western Christianity has combined supersessionism and white supremacy to ground Christian faith in racial and racist social logic. Notwithstanding Tran's curious labeling, the relationship between these recent works on racial identity and black liberation theology is an understandably enticing intersection to interpret. After all, black theological discourse has represented the vanguard of theological discourses on racism since its inception in the late 1960s, and the recent works of Carter, Jennings, and Bantum represent powerful engagements with the problem of Christian racism. Additionally, all three theologians are African Americans concerned with the nature of Christian identity vis-à-vis race and racism.

³ My concern with Tran's essay echoes that of the outstanding black religious scholar Gayraud S. Wilmore who responded to Tran's piece on the Christian Century website by asking why black theology, having only cleared space for itself in the 1960s, needs to so quickly transform its discourse by focusing on and engaging "traditional" resources of Christian faith. Tran's response expressed a concerning desire to drop "(dis)qualifying qualifiers [to theology] like black." See: Tran, "The New Black Theology."

In this chapter, I engage one of the three texts considered in Tran’s review essay, namely, J. Kameron Carter’s *Race: a Theological Account*. I feature Carter’s text in this chapter because his work provides an outstanding critique of black identity in black theology. While not completely satisfying, Carter’s critique represents a rich contribution to black theological discourse that ought not be overlooked. This chapter begins with a brief summary of the thesis in *Race* before quickly moving to a summary of Carter’s critique of black liberation theology. Finally, in the way of traditioning black identity in black theology, I identify the gifts and limitations of Carter’s critique.

J. Kameron Carter’s Race: A Theological Account

In *Race: A Theological Account*, J. Kameron Carter argues that modernity’s obsession with race originates in the problem of Christian supersessionism through two crucial steps. First, Jews are established as a racial “other” in relation to Christians; that is, Jews become the “other” used to justify and clarify the nature of Christian being. Second, after being racialized, Jews are characterized as dangerous and inferior outsiders to the Christian world. According to Carter, taken together, these two steps establish (first) race as “a political economy, an *ordo*, or a social arrangement” that was subsequently used to interpret modern Christian being and (second) racism as a governing logic near the heart of modern Western Christianity (step two).⁴ White supremacist Christianity is the outcome of this two step process. When Christian

⁴ J. Kameron Carter, *Race: A Theological Account* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, USA, 2008), 4–8.

supersessionism severed Jesus the Christ from his Jewishness in the name of “universal” salvation, a cultural and historical vacuum was created that has been filled—through centuries of Western European imperial and colonial violence often disguised as Christian evangelism—with whiteness. White supremacist Christianity, then, treats white culture and identity as essential to true and proper (Christian) being.

In Carter’s assessment, Christian supersessionist logic, which he represents through a critical reading of second century Gnosticism, has been so central to the making of modern Christianity that theologians have struggled to imagine social visions beyond its confines. Moreover, Carter argues that racial and racist thinking grew out of supersessionism’s obsession with clarifying Christian being through a dialectical process of othering. That is, supersessionist Christianity grounds Christian identity in *not being* “others” (i.e., non-Christians). Through developments in modern (Kantian) philosophy and the burgeoning fields of the natural sciences, this supersessionist emphasis on being Christian through not being non-Christians gives way to an anthropological process of clarifying different types of “others” who are not Christians. In the colonial context of the developing new world, this theological and anthropological process becomes a racial and racist process as European Christians, who come to declare themselves “white,” clarify and justify their dominant relationship to religious and now racial others through a racialized, white supremacist Christianity.

In assessing the state of anti-racist scholarship, Carter finds that, compared to other academic areas, Christian theology has produced pitifully inept analyses of race and

racism.⁵ Moreover, Carter asserts that even when theological projects—like black liberation theology—are undertaken with sincerely anti-racist intentions, the logic of race shows itself to be so deeply ingrained in Christian theology that it delimits Christian social thinking. The pitiful nature of Christian theological engagement with race and racism is exacerbated by the fact that Christian theology played a major (arguably, *the* major) role in creating and sustaining racial and racist ways of thinking and being. As such, the anemic responses Christian theologians have offered to the problems of white supremacy and racism reflect a pervasive culture of apathy and complicity that infects both the church and the theological academy. According to Carter, an adequate theological disruption of race and racism will need to repair the supersessionist breach between what Christianity has become and the Jewish tradition that produced Jesus. For Carter, repairing this supersessionist breach requires rethinking the nature of Christian theology as a social and intellectual discourse, and this rethinking requires reassessing the identity of Jesus Christ. More precisely, the work Carter envisions analyzes how the being of Jesus Christ came to be synonymous with whiteness, and, therefore, how whiteness came to constitute the normative center in Western Christianity. Of particular interest to my assessment of Carter’s work is how his analysis of race and racism in Western Christian discourse leads him to critically engage black identity in black theological discourse.

⁵ Carter names “sociology, political science, and economics[...]biology and genetics[...]philosophy and history[...]literary, religious, feminist, cultural, and (post)colonial studies” among the disciplines that have outperformed Christianity in analyzing race and racism. See: Carter, 3.

Black Theology as Racial Theology

Carter includes black liberation theology in his survey of discourses limited by racial thinking. His analysis of black theology focuses on the work of James Cone, but Carter insists that both other outstanding male black theologians (like Dwight Hopkins⁶) and womanist theology share the racial limitations of Cone's work. Carter argues that "the brilliance of Cone's thought—indeed, its underdeveloped apex—is in its analysis of Being's "concreteness," which is revealed in Jesus of Nazareth."⁷ Carter lauds Cone's rejection of Christological abstraction, noting the delicate balance Cone strikes between Karl Barth's emphasis on divine freedom and Paul Tillich's method of correlation. As we saw in chapter one, Cone shares Barth's commitment to Christocentrism and divine transcendence but disagrees with Barth regarding the nature of human freedom. Barth's deeply Calvinist notion of God as "wholly other" relegates human access to grace to God's sovereign will. Cone differs with Barth on this point. For Cone, God's freedom is reflected in humanity's being created *imago dei* and, as such, humanity mirrors the divine its freedom to actively choose divine relationship over sin. However, Cone also sees that white theology has used the gift of creaturely freedom to claim ownership of Christ in the name of white supremacy. Cone, then, seeks a way to affirm the essential nature of ontological freedom (i.e., humanity's ability and responsibility to choose God) while also

⁶ An outstanding figure in Black Theology's "second generation" of scholars, Hopkins' important works include: Dwight N. Hopkins, *Shoes That Fit Our Feet: Sources for a Constructive Black Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993); Dwight N. Hopkins, *Down, Up, and Over: Slave Religion and Black Theology* (Fortress Press, 1999); Dwight N. Hopkins, *Being Human: Race, Culture, and Religion* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005).

⁷ Carter, *Race*, 160.

accounting for the idolatrous nature of white Christianity. To do this Cone needs to address the issue of cultural difference, without abandoning his commitment to Barthian divine transcendence. It is at this point that Tillich's method of correlation and, more specifically, his notion of symbol (an outgrowth of Tillich's correlative method) helps Cone articulate the particular meaning of Christian faith with reference to history and culture. For Carter, Cone's critique of white supremacy in Christian faith began to address the problem of race and racism in theology but was short-circuited by Cone's wonderfully creative but, ultimately, fatally flawed reliance on the dialectical methods of Barth and Tillich.

As an example of the radical potential Carter saw in Cone's work, he lifts up the Christology Cone develops in his classic text *God of the Oppressed*. There Cone insisted, through a lens that considered social context, scripture, and tradition, that because Jesus is "Who He Was," "Who He Is," and "Who He Will Be," Jesus is also black. For Cone, "The phrase 'Black Christ' refers to more than the subjective states and political expediency of black people at a given point in history. Rather, this title is derived primarily from Jesus' past identity, his present activity, and his future coming as each is *dialectically* related to others."⁸ Cone's insistence that "Jesus is Who He Was" is of special interest for Carter as it reflects Cone's theological commitment to defending the centrality of Jesus' Jewishness. Interpreting the meaning of Jesus' historical context, Cone wrote, "Jesus' past is the clue to his present activity in the sense that his past is the medium through which he is made accessible to us today." Moreover, and this is vital for

⁸ James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 122. Emphasis mine.

Carter's assessment of Cone's Christology, Cone adds "*Jesus was a Jew!* The particularity of Jesus' person as disclosed in his Jewishness is indispensable for christological analysis."⁹ For Carter, the severance of Jesus from his Jewishness is the decisive step in preparing the way for Christianity to become racialized and, ultimately, for whiteness to be divinized. Cone's commitment to Jesus' Jewish identity represents a crucial moment of resisting Christian supersessionism, but, for Carter, this moment of resistance is tragically underdeveloped. Ultimately, Carter argues that Cone's work falls short of fully resisting Christian supersessionism and thus reinforces the racialized nature of Western theology.

Despite Cone's insistence on the Jewishness of Jesus in *God of the Oppressed*, Carter reads him as abandoning the supersessionist potential of black theology by interpreting Christian being dialectically. Cone's dialectical approach, Carter argues, precludes the experience of divine transcendence, which would definitively expose the bogus claims racial thinking and being has made on Christian faith. Cone's work might have signified this transcendent power; instead, Carter argues (and here Carter's critique intersects with the work of Delores Williams, reviewed in chapter 2), Cone's theology reinforces the logic of Christian supersessionism by binding the ultimate meaning of Christ's being to the cross-resurrection event.¹⁰ Cone is committed to the cross because he

⁹ Cone, 106, 109.

¹⁰ Carter, *Race*, 173. Recall that Williams uses a womanist methodology to challenge the pervasive role of classic atonement theories in Christian theology because such theories can be used to normalize the dehumanizing surrogacy that has plagued the existences of poor black women in America.

believes it is “the great symbol of the Christian narrative of salvation.”¹¹ Moreover, the cross is also the definitive sign of Jesus’ solidarity with suffering black people.

For Carter, Cone’s emphasis on the cross-resurrection event reflects the dialectical method Cone inherited from Barth and Paul Tillich. While Cone’s method allowed him to interpret the meaning of black Christian faith in revolutionary ways, Carter thinks this dialectical approach locked Cone into a Christological framework incapable of transcending the limits of racial thinking. “This is evident,” Carter writes “in that [Cone] maintains an insuperable hiatus between “who Jesus *was*” in the world of scriptural witness and “who Jesus *is*” now *pro nobis*.”¹² Carter attributes this “insuperable hiatus” to Cone’s working to strike a balance between a Barthian *analogia fidei* (analogy of faith) and a Tillichian *analogia existentia* (analogy of existence) in the articulation of his Christology. This Barth-Tillich balance helped Cone relate Christian faith to the social and historical realities of black culture, and the suffering this culture has resisted, without recanting of his commitment to divine transcendence. But Carter finds Cone’s use of both Barth and Tillich limited in its capacity to eschew Christian supersessionism and dethrone racial thinking. Barth’s emphasis on radical transcendence helped Cone challenge the idolatrous collusion between Christianity and white culture. However, while problematizing white Christianity for perpetuating oppression and injustice in the name of God, Cone also wanted to interpret black culture and the historical experiences of black people as a site of divine revelation. Carter rightly shows that Barth is only so

¹¹ James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), xiv.

¹² Carter, *Race*, 171.

helpful to Cone on this latter point as “[w]hat is difficult to articulate in Barthian terms is how creaturely truth participates in God’s truth.”¹³ Cone, then, turned to Paul Tillich’s work to interpret the theological significance of black culture.

Tillich’s method of correlation holds questions of ontology and the teachings of Christianity in dialectical tension such that theological answers are always bound to ontological realities. Tillich’s method allowed Cone to address the existential questions of black existence to Christian faith and, vice versa, the answers of Christian faith to the hardships of black life. The ability to relate the radical truth of Christian faith to black life is the heart of Cone’s work; indeed, it is on Tillichian grounds that Jesus becomes black in black liberation theology, as Cone used the correlation between the biblical account of Christ’s existence and the historical existence of black people to declare blackness a symbol of God’s activity in history. For all of Cone’s careful work with Barth and Tillich, Carter maintains that his commitment to dialectical thinking precludes the possibility of escaping the supersessionist logic that reduces Christian faith to racial thinking. Cone seems to sense the limitations of dialectical thinking and eventually uses Martin Buber’s notion of the “I-Thou” relationship—a relationship in which two beings encounter one another in mutuality and wholeness—to describe the relationality liberated black being strives for. Following Buber, Cone juxtaposed the ideal I-Thou relationship with the objectifying “I-It” relationship, where mutual encounter is replaced with an

¹³ Carter, 175.

objectifying process in which the “I” always encounters an idea or representation of another, never the “Thou-ness” of the other that makes her an “I” in her own right.¹⁴

Echoing the critique of Victor Anderson reviewed in the previous chapter, but in particularly orthodox theological tone, Carter critiques Cone’s Tillichian ontology for limiting the being of Christ “to a broader narrative of struggle and rivalry between being and its concealment or withdrawal back into nonbeing as the condition that makes history possible and, indeed, moves it as a history of liberation.”¹⁵ In this Tillichian approach, Carter argues, “cultures, history, and people groups have no lasting value in and of themselves.”¹⁶ This lack of value is problematic for Carter as it perpetuates an image of creation in which the immanence of history is hopelessly unrelated to divine transcendence. It follows that the meaning of Christ’s salvation for history is rendered abstract, replaced by Tillich’s existential “courage to be.” Cone used Tillich’s “courage to be” to encourage black self-love and determination in a white supremacist society, but Carter argues that this approach abstracts the meaning of Christ’s incarnation in ways that are incompatible with Cone’s theological aims. Even after Cone tries to make his method more dialogical than dialectical by employing Martin Buber’s classic I-Thou approach to relationality, Carter problematizes “how I-ness itself functions as the normalizing term of the polarity,” thereby foreclosing the possibility of mutually transformative relationship.

¹⁴ Martin Buber, *I And Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, 1st Touchstone Ed edition (New York, NY: Touchstone, 1971).

¹⁵ Carter, 172.

¹⁶ Carter, *Race*, 188.

In addition to further assessing Carter's critique of black theology, I am interested in the fact that Carter expresses his critique of I-ness in relation to black identity in black theology. Carter summarizes his critique this way:

[I]f it is the case that black existence reveals the human condition such that whites lose themselves as oppressors by entering into the horizon of black existence and, conversely, blackness itself is transformed by receiving into itself those exiting the status of whiteness, then it follows that the framework of binary separateness in an I-Thou structure is too deeply impoverished to even begin to explain the kind of miscegenation toward which black theology seems to gesture.¹⁷

Cone's work signifies the possibility of disturbing the racial and racist imagination that supersessionism and white supremacy have planted near the heart of Western Christianity, but ultimately, Carter judges Cone's attempt to "salvage the blackness that modernity has constructed by converting it into a site of cultural power" as "not radical enough."¹⁸

Carter argues that Cone's dialectical methodology, grounded as it is in black being, refuses the type of "miscegenated" existence revealed in Christ and replaces divine transcendence with an existential courage to be black. Carter finds the theological structure of this black being unsatisfying because, "the Israel of God is Mulatto." That is, the God who covenanted with Israel, the same God who is revealed in the life of Jesus, does not exist in racial purity, even in the name of justice. Instead, both YHWH and Jesus, the person disclosing the nature and purpose of Israel's God are "miscegenated, and out of [this] miscegenation [disclose] the God of Israel as the God of the Gentiles

¹⁷ Carter, 190.

¹⁸ Carter, 192.

too.” Carter rightly judges that Cone’s dialectical blackness, grounded as it is in the unapologetic politics of Black Power, is uninterested in theological miscegenation.

Cone interprets blackness as being bound to struggle in dialectical—or, at best, dialogical—relationship to the threat of non-being. Carter is grateful for Cone’s focus on black being because it infers the possibility of dislodging Christian faith from racial thinking by showing that blackness has something to say “from its own vantage within the expansive horizon of being,” something that “reveals the depths and significance of what it means to be in the world.”¹⁹ However, in Carter’s view, the radical potential of Cone’s ontology is tragically restricted by its inability to overcome the theological legacies of supersessionism and racial thinking. As we have seen, Carter sees these legacies as collaborating to sever Jesus from his Jewish roots and, second, to imagine Jesus as white. Cone gestures toward disturbing both supersessionism (in *God of the Oppressed*) and the whiteness of Jesus (in his assertion that Jesus is black), but his reliance on Barthianism keeps him from assigning deep theological value to history and culture while Tillich’s method of correlation limits the meaning of black history and black culture to the symbolic realm, thereby weakening the ability for these aspects of being to relate to and reveal divine transcendence. Carter argues that this unresolved tension, what he calls an “insuperable hiatus,” is the result of not fully reconciling Jesus to his Jewish roots and, thereby, with YHWH’s covenantal relationship with Israel.

For Carter, YHWH’s covenant with Israel represents a fundamentally different relationship than is possible with Cone’s dialectical thinking, which mimics the logic of

¹⁹ Carter, 189.

race. Viewed through YHWH's relationship to Israel, Carter sees the Jewish identity of Christ as a *covenantal* expression of God's being with Israel, in all of its social and historical concreteness, rather than a *dialectical* expression of ontological opposition (e.g., human *versus* divine, or black *versus* white). Thus the covenantal vision of YHWH's relationship to Israel grounds the being of Christ in what Carter calls historical or participatory transcendence. Clarifying both the theological value of this transcendence and what he finds problematic in Cone's dialectical method, Carter writes,

It is precisely this participatory [or historical] transcendence, this ecstasy by which God *is* God for us, that makes creation transcendent in itself in its ecstasy back to its Creator, YHWH. The problem with dialectical thinking and related forms of philosophical thinking is that they begin from closure and then have to negotiate passage through an "ugly broad ditch" between things that are closed.²⁰

For Carter, then, the participatory or historical transcendence of YHWH's covenant to Israel draws all of creation into the transcendence of God where dialectics are finally synthesized and the "ugly broad ditch" is bridged by divine being. Moreover, the life of Jesus, when understood apart from Christian supersessionism, is a continuation of YHWH's transcendent covenant with Israel. Carter's covenantal interpretation of Jesus' Jewishness is his solution to the "ugly broad ditch" of dialectical thinking which creates an "insuperable hiatus" in Cone's racialized Christology. In reading the Jewishness of Jesus as covenantal rather than racial, Carter envisions a "Christian theology of Israel" in which "God's identity as God for us" reveals "God's communion with Israel as a communion for the world."²¹

²⁰ Carter, 191.

²¹ Carter, 193.

Carter's assessment of Cone's theology displays remarkable theological insight and creativity, and his assessment of the deep theological nature of racial thinking in the modern world represents a rich and important contribution to anti-racist Christian theology. But how does Carter's critique shape black theology's discourse on black identity? And does this reshaping represent a positive development for black people striving to live freely in a white supremacist society? With these questions in mind, I turn now to an assessment of Carter's critique of black theology, maintaining my particular interest in its implications for black theology's discourse on black identity.

Traditioning Black Identity vis-à-vis Racial Theological Discourse

The outstanding gifts of J. Kameron Carter's work are its deep, sustained analyses of how modern Western European and "New World" American cultures have used the social logic of race and racism to define Christianity on white supremacist terms. Moreover, Carter shows that the twisted genius of this racialized Christianity is its theological (or "pseudoteological") nature, which is grounded in supersessionism. At the heart of racialized Christianity, then, is the conflation of the cultural and intellectual values of white supremacy with Christianity. More precisely, Carter argues that this racialized Christianity capitalizes on supersessionism's severance of Jesus from his Jewish roots and fills the cultural and theological vacuum created by this severance with whiteness. The breadth of Carter's analysis—ranging from early church figures to Enlightenment themes to literary analysis of slave narratives and African American religious studies—is impressive and exemplifies possibilities for interdisciplinary

conversations that are often considered unlikely, unwise, or unnecessary. Carter's ability to engage these various fields and historical periods while maintaining a commitment to Christian theological analysis represents exciting possibilities for Christian theologians to inhabit discursive spaces that too often remain foreign lands. The breadth and theological depth of Carter's book has received only part of the attention and careful analysis its giftedness deserves.

At the heart of Carter's critique of black theology is what he sees as the problem of dialectical thinking. Carter reads black theology as foreclosing the possibility of divine transcendence through its commitment to a racialized ontology (read: blackness) which, tragically and ironically, black theology inherits from whiteness. Due to the theological limitations of the racial ontology black theology inherits from whiteness, Carter argues that black theology, despite its revolutionary gesture toward a form of Christian faith freed from the confines of whiteness, remains lodged in dialectical struggle in relation to liberation, while never actually being liberated. Black theology is limited, Carter asserts, because it does not adequately account for the deeply embedded racial logic of dialectical Christianity in its revolutionary critique and, therefore, gets stuck in a Christian vision that cannot imagine Christian being beyond the confines of race. Carter argues that the blackness of black theology—the heart of black theology's ontological expression—is actually a product of the white supremacist/racialized Christianity that Cone and others have sought to overcome. As a corrective to what he views as the ontological limitations of black theology in particular and modern Western Christianity more broadly, Carter offers a Christian theology of Israel that retains the Jewishness of Jesus, exposes the

idolatrous nature of white supremacist and racialized Christianity, and imagines theological space in which “dark people” who have been lethally marginalized by white Christianity “must be engaged precisely in their theological specificity: that is, as ways of narrating being beyond race, despite the surrounding world’s persistence in holding them and itself hostage to the metaphysics of race.”²²

In developing a critical response to Carter’s rich theological reflection on and critique of race and white supremacy, it is important to note that his work is developed in discursive space cleared, in large part, by the labor of scholars who have been shaped by or connected to black theological discourse.²³ The discursive relationship between Carter’s work on race and white supremacy in theology and black theology is important because Carter’s insistence that “dark people” narrate their being in “theological specificity” echoes black theological discourse’s determination to reflect on and proclaim the nature of divine being from the particular space of oppressed black being. The decisive difference between Carter’s work and black theology is that the former insists on “narrating being beyond race,” while the latter insists on being liberated in the painfully complex space of a racialized society. What is unclear in Carter’s work is how “being beyond race” relates to the “theological specificity” of dark people’s lives. *Indeed, the outstanding shortcoming of Carter’s important work is the conflation of all racialized being with white supremacist being.*

²² Carter, 378.

²³ Indeed, this discursive connection is at the heart of Jonathan Tran’s 2012 piece in the *Christian Century*, reviewed at the beginning of this chapter. See: Tran, “The New Black Theology.”

As Carter knows, it is the darkness of dark people, read through the racist aesthetic value system of white supremacy, that both signifies and justifies the grounds of their violent marginalization. As such, it is the racialized marginalization of dark people in colonial and post-colonial contexts that must be engaged theologically. What remains unclear in Carter's work is what it means for dark people—whose very darkness is read as such as a result of racism and white supremacy—to speak with theological specificity in a world “beyond race.” Ironically, Carter's critique of black theology brings him face-to-face with the question that motivated the inception of Cone's theological work in 1969: how does one give theological expression to the particular realities of dark and/or black people in a way that is not limited by the cultural and theological confines of white supremacist racial thinking? For all of Carter's critiquing black theological discourse for its dialectical and dialogical methodology with regards to racial identity, his own theological vision stalls in articulating a clear, worthwhile alternative.

Carter's theological vision imagines dark people speaking from the spaces that racism has created while, somehow, doing so in a way that (re)presents being beyond race. However, how such a vision holds together and, just as importantly, what such a vision means for identity discourses in black and other “dark” communities of faith is troublingly unclear. Carter rightly sees that white supremacy's stranglehold on Christian faith is so tight that even explicit, well-intentioned attempts to escape it often merely tighten its grasp. It is on these grounds that Carter cites Cone's dialectical (black) ontology for failing to escape the logic of race. But does Carter's critique leave space for black (or dark) Christians to be black (or dark) and Christian at the same time? Carter's

response to this question is unsatisfying. In his laudable attempt to imagine Christianity beyond the confines of white supremacy, Carter unnecessarily delimits the role that liberated racial identity can play in revealing divine transcendence. In Carter's view, all racial identity—even non-white racial identity—is conceived as having the same social and theological limitations as white supremacy. Racial identity always asserts an ontological “I” (or we) in the place of the participatory transcendence YHWH uses to covenant with Israel and, thereby, with all of creation. As such, when Carter interprets the slave narratives of Briton Hammon, Frederick Douglass, and Jarena Lee in the third part of *Race: a Theological Account* as examples of an Afro-Christian tradition of “imagining the world from the scriptural world of Jesus,” he seems far more interested in clarifying the nature of “Christian” than “Afro.”²⁴ While Carter's investment in interpreting the meaning of “Christian” is attributable to his work as a Christian theologian, his bracketing of “Afro” identity as a site of Christian being is problematic. After all, it is from the unique and particular experiences of being black (Afro) in white supremacist Christian space that so much of white supremacist Christianity has been robustly challenged.

In light of Carter's critique of racial reasoning, it seems that “Afro” is little more than a placeholder meant to clarify the particular ethnic location from which the truth of Carter's anti-supersessionist Christianity just so happens to be interpreted in the third part of *Race*. Indeed, the gift of Carter's critique of whiteness is that one might insert any ethnic (or human!) starting point—say, for example, Irish or German—and still find

²⁴ Carter, *Race*, 342.

one's way to the truth of Carter's non-racial Jewish Jesus. To be sure, the stories and interpretive moves made inside of "Irish-Christian" or "German-Christian" traditions seeking to account for the non-racial Jesus would be radically different than those used in an Afro-Christian tradition, but it seems that these radically different roads represent a kind of transracial/ethnic agnosticism where all racial and ethnic roads rightly aimed at the non-racial Jewish Jesus lead to the top of the same mountain, where people of all shades will remove their sandals and stand in the covenantal space in which YHWH is faithful to Israel in order to save the world. This transracial vision is a beautiful image of God's desire for creation, but it is not nearly particular enough to account for and address the unique challenges and gifts wrought by modernity's commitment to anti-blackness. One therefore wonders why black folk, especially poor black folk, who have encountered transcendent power *within*—and not merely beyond—blackness should invest in Carter's theological vision of telling dark people's stories beyond race. While Carter's critique of white supremacy presupposes a racialized world, one wonders if his theological vision does not press toward the much-ballyhooed post-racial world, where race either does not or should not matter. Whether or not Carter aspires to a post-racial vision, his relative disinterest in the nature of the "Afro" in "Afro-Christian" betrays a problematic conflation of racial identity and whiteness.

Conclusion

The best of the "Afro-Christian" struggle in America is represented not merely by moving "beyond race"—a social, political, and, for most, existential impossibility for persons of the African diaspora—but by the transformation of what racial identity means

and can mean in society at-large and in the realm of faith. This commitment to transformative thinking and being is the magnificent power that drives what the late historian Vincent Harding called “the river” of black struggle for freedom.²⁵ The beauty of this river lies in its ever-present willingness to nourish any—regardless of social identity—who thirst to understand how YHWH’s covenant with Israel has been maintained and evidenced in the strength, radical self-love, and democratic spirit that characterizes the best of black American life. Carter drinks from this river in interpreting the slave narratives named above, but he hesitates to rest at the river’s banks for too long, afraid, it seems, that its nourishment is not enough to overcome the thirst created by white supremacist Christianity. It is in this hesitance to rest on the banks of the black struggle’s river that one sees a tragic conflation of racial identity and white supremacy in Carter’s work.

Carter seems unable to imagine black or Afro identity as anything other than a by-product of whiteness. As such, attempts to counter whiteness from the site of black identity represent the reification of race, which is always and already the first step toward falling into the dialectical trap that tragically and decisively limits ontological potentialities and possibilities on the grounds established by white supremacy. For Carter, then, blackness is ontologically *and categorically* imprisoned by the logic of race and cannot save itself. It is only inside of Carter’s beautifully modified Christianity that blackness or “Afro” identity is decisively converted and redeemed. However, despite its

²⁵ Vincent Harding, *There Is a River: The Black Struggle for Freedom in America*, Reissue edition (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1981).

interpretive beauty, Carter's interpretation of the Afro-Christian tradition undervalues the miraculous role that black or Afro-American life has played in transforming the meaning of Christian being in the Western world. To be sure, the work of definitively saving Christianity from colonial whiteness is an ongoing project, but the theo-political efforts of people like Henry McNeal Turner, Ida B. Well-Barnett, Howard Thurman, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Fannie Lou Hamer evidence a rich tradition of distinctively black resistance to the overly determinative role of white supremacist racial reasoning. Moreover, this distinctive black tradition resists white supremacy's racial reasoning from within—not beyond—the space of blackness.

Unfortunately, Carter too quickly conflates all racialized ontologies with a white supremacist worldview and, therefore, overlooks a potentially powerful collaboration between the blackness of Christ and the non-racial Jewishness of Jesus. Such a collaboration could lay bare the false claims of white colonial Christianity from multiple directions. Not only would the non-racial Jewishness of Jesus challenge the supersessionism that, eventually, idolatrously places whiteness in the place of YHWH's covenant with Israel, but because of the pervasiveness of anti-black racism in modern Christian theology, the blackness of Christ would challenge notions of Christian belonging to be deeply and radically rooted in being with and for those society considers invisible or dispensable. This confluence of Cone's symbolic blackness and Carter's non-racial Jewish Jesus represents a radical challenge to white supremacist Christianity and its supersessionist roots. Instead, Carter's theological vision—in its admirable commitment to rebuking the white supremacist logic of race and the blackness this logic creates—does

not capitalize on the rich possibilities of this collaboration. This missed opportunity to combine the insights of the Jewish Jesus and the black Christ is attributable to Carter's fear that the dialectical nature of blackness in black theology cannot yield to the covenantal relationship YHWH established with Israel. Carter does not believe that racial identity can be redeemed, but Cone's point—which, in a way, is the core assertion of black liberation theology—is that the meaning and value of racial identity (read: blackness) can, in fact, be redeemed and transfigured by the power of God's liberating spirit.

What Carter overlooks is the powerful way that blackness *as being in dialectical relationship to whiteness* has already displayed the revolutionary ability to free itself from the logic of racism and white supremacy—even as it will not relinquish the realities of racism as the grounds from which revolutionary freedom is worked out. Historic black leaders such as Wells-Barnett, King, Hamer, and Malcolm X evidence the ability for blackness to exist in dialectical opposition to white supremacy while remaining open to dialogical relationship with others who share YHWH's commitment to justice. These leaders have inspired and led movements that have shaped not only American political discourse, but cultures of social and political resistance around the world. This spreading of the Spirit is God's doing, but it is made possible by black dialectical struggle. Carter rightly notes that the spreading of black culture's resistance is bound to the violent identity politics that modern White colonialism has rooted in the logic of race, and, to be sure, black folk have not always wrestled with the nature of racial identity in healthy, holistic ways (sexism, classism, and heterosexism continue to denigrate the richness of

black identity!). However, it is in this wrestling, this dialectical struggle with the ubiquitous forces that threaten black life with non-being, that God has met and continues to meet black people—even as he met Jacob/Israel (Gen. 32:22-32). Traditioning blackness in light of Carter’s rich critique of black theology requires holding his critique of Christian supersessionism and modern racial and racist social logics in tension with ways that God has used black identity—*as being in dialectical relationship to whiteness*—to remind the world of YHWH’s desire to redeem creation. We must remember, too, that YHWH began the process of participatory transcendence through a black community (Israel) that needed to be wrestle itself free from slavery so that the gospel might be known to the world.

CONCLUSION

Through a critical survey of outstanding scholarship from theologians, ethicists, cultural critics, and philosophers, this dissertation has examined and analyzed some of the ways black identity has been explicitly and implicitly contested in black theological discourse. This project has been both descriptive and prescriptive in its analysis and, in light of this analysis, this concluding chapter has three main goals. First, this conclusion will clarify and personalize what I understand the importance of this research to be. Second, this chapter will briefly develop the constructive claims I have made at the end of each chapter. Finally, this work closes by gesturing toward future research projects that have grown out of the writing and research of this dissertation.

Why Tradition Blackness?

Before proceeding with the conclusory work of this chapter, it will be helpful to say a word about why an analysis of black identity is important in this moment. I wish to highlight two interrelated aspects of this project's importance, one social and political, the other personal. First the social and political importance of this work. As I conclude this dissertation, the importance of assessing and interpreting the meaning of blackness in black theological discourse has been heightened by the deplorable conduct of President Donald Trump and his administration. In 2016, Trump's unapologetic bigotry, sexism,

materialism, and wanton disregard for national and international peace and safety was granted executive authority when he defeated then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in the general election. Trump's path to the White House was paved by white votes. According to the Pew Research Center, Trump won 58% of the general white vote, received slightly more votes than Clinton among whites who were college educated, and dominated the race for votes among whites without a college degree.¹⁴² However, what is especially notable to me as a black Christian theo-ethicist is the simultaneous convergence of white supremacists and white evangelicals in support of Trump.

Donald Trump, the candidate white supremacist David Duke glowed about while taking part in the racist "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville, Virginia in August of 2017 (Duke publicly celebrated Trump's promise to "take the country back"), received 80% of white evangelical votes in the general election. Duke was so confident in the role whites like him played in the election that when President Trump published a vague tweet addressing the violence that erupted in Charlottesville (Trump tweeted, "We ALL must be united & condemn all that hate stands for. There is no place for this kind of violence in America. [Let's] come together as one!"), Duke responded with a tweet of his own, encouraging the President to "take a good look in the mirror [and] remember it was White Americans who put you in the presidency, not radical leftists."¹⁴³

¹⁴² Alec Tyson and Shiva Maniam, "Behind Trump's Victory: Divisions by Race, Gender, Education," *Pew Research Center* (blog), November 9, 2016, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/11/09/behind-trumps-victory-divisions-by-race-gender-education/>.

¹⁴³ Libby Nelson, "'Why We Voted for Donald Trump': David Duke Explains the White Supremacist Charlottesville Protests," *Vox*, August 12, 2017, <https://www.vox.com/2017/8/12/16138358/charlottesville-protests-david-duke-kkk>.

One of the reasons an analysis of black identity in black theology is important in this social and political moment is that black Christians in America have known for a long time that white Christianity and white racism have a long, violent history as two sides of the same coin. Despite awkward attempts at racial reconciliation in evangelical circles, the actions, theological teachings, and political decisions of white evangelicals continue to reflect an abiding faith in white cultural superiority.¹⁴⁴ Black liberation theology emerged as an unapologetic rebuke of white Christianity's death-dealing relationship to black people. In light of Trump's election, it is clear that black theological discourse's envisioning Jesus as an oppressed black person—an envisioning that has been richly supported and developed by subsequent developments in the areas of Bible, ethics, and history—is not merely a relic of the Civil Rights and Black Power eras. Trump stumps for law and order, as the family of Stephon Clark—the unarmed 22-year old shot to death by law enforcement in Sacramento, California on March 18, 2018—mourn his killing. But American “law and order” has rarely represented good news for black people. In the age of Trump, the casting of quality moral and theological visions—grounded in black existential and communal determination to be freed from the idolatrous belief that white supremacy is the will of God—is as important as ever. There is a deadly connection between white America's commitment to white supremacist Christianity, its support of law and order candidates like Trump, and the making of police officers who are

¹⁴⁴ For a rich treatment of the complex nature of racial reconciliation in Nancy D. Wadsworth, *Ambivalent Miracles: Evangelicals and the Politics of Racial Healing* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2014).

professionally trained and physiologically wired to shoot black bodies first and make up stories later.¹⁴⁵ Through the radical claim that Jesus is black, black theology welcomes Christians, especially Christians of African descent, to forge theological and political identities that reshape social relations and invigorate oppressed communities with hope in the midst of what Emilie Townes has brilliantly called the cultural production of evil.¹⁴⁶

Second, in addition to the social and political importance of analyzing black identity in black theology, such an analysis is of great personal importance to me. The current vocational form of my calling to Christian ministry grants me the opportunity to work as a theological educator, and I have the remarkable gift of having been called to the wonderful faculty of Eden Theological Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri. Eden is perhaps best known for its connection to Reinhold and H. Richard Niebuhr, the brothers whose theological and ethical reflection on the church and society played a major role in shaping Christian theology in the early 20th century. What Eden is best known for now and, we pray, will be more widely known for as we labor, is its commitment to Christian theological education that prepares leaders for society and the church who are committed the justice-creating tradition rooted in the life of Jesus. Eden is a mere 15-20 minutes from Ferguson, Missouri, the city in which Michael Brown, Jr. was killed on August 9th, 2014. The uprisings that emerged in St. Louis

¹⁴⁵ Joseph Goldstein, “‘Testilying’ by Police: A Stubborn Problem,” *The New York Times*, March 18, 2018, sec. N.Y. / Region, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/18/nyregion/testilying-police-perjury-new-york.html>.

¹⁴⁶ Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*.

after Brown's death and the subsequent decision of a grand jury to not indict Officer Darren Wilson (the man who killed Brown) compelled Eden to deepen the relationship between its commitment to progressive theological education and the social and economic realities that shape day-to-day life in our region.

I joined the faculty at Eden almost a year after Brown was killed. The pain of the city was then—as it is now—palpable. I live and work in a city and state where the culture had already been formed by the Missouri compromise, the Dred Scott decision, and the East St. Louis massacre (among other factors important to understanding life in St. Louis and Missouri), *before* Brown was gunned down. The existential realities of the next generation are being shaped by this historic commitment to white supremacy and racism in St. Louis, where social and economic realities continue to shape the day-to-day realities of the next generation, as the social and economic realities of racism have disproportionately negative impacts on poor children, especially poor children of color and most especially black kids.¹⁴⁷ But St. Louis is also beautiful! Beyond its distinct seasons, wonderful trees, birds (and despite the hellacious 6-week period beginning in early-mid July when the humidity makes it hard to breathe!), the beauty of St. Louis is embodied by the various communities and peoples who are refusing to allow the structures of white supremacy to rest normatively. The Movement for Black Lives in St. Louis has displayed and

¹⁴⁷ Tony Messenger, "In St. Louis Schools, Water Fountains Are Symbols of Inequality Again," *Washington Post*, August 30, 2016, sec. PostEverything, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2016/08/30/in-st-louis-the-water-fountain-is-again-a-symbol-of-inequality/>.

created amazingly gifted leaders who use their social, economic, and existential resources to transform the city, state, and region into a place where justice rolls like a river and righteousness like a never-failing stream (Amos 5:24). In St. Louis, where cries of “Black Lives Matter!” are regularly retorted with the ideologically oppositional “*Blue* Lives Matter!”, an academic analysis of black identity is reflective of the social and political discourses that are always and already being hotly contested throughout the city. In my particular work at Eden, an analysis of black identity in black theological discourse allows me to think with students and colleagues in ways that relate the sacred work of theological education to material realities in the streets.

Toward Robust Blackness for 21st Century Black Theological Discourse

In chapter one of this work, I engaged the monumental thought of James Cone, paying particular attention to how he conceptualized black identity in his early works. Cone used an innovative combination of Barthian and Tillichian theological method to articulate the meaning of Christian faith in black life. Moreover, as part of interpreting the meaning of Christian faith for black life, Cone developed a robust theological interpretation of blackness that sought to rescue the truth of Christianity from the idolatrous limitations imposed by white supremacy. Near the end of the chapter, I identified the need for contemporary work in black theology to clarify the meaning of blackness in light of social and economic transformations in late 20th-century America. Because Cone used Paul Tillich’s notion of symbol to develop his notion of black identity, I argued that one way to advance this process of discursive

clarification would be to capitalize on the sixth aspect of Tillich's symbol. Cone's work can be read as addressing the first five characteristics of Tillich's symbol but the sixth aspect—that symbols change and die over time—is not accounted for in Cone's interpretation of black identity in black theology. Having come to the end of this work, I must say more about how the sixth component of Tillich's symbol can inform and enrich black theology in the 21st century by building on Cone's classic formulation of black identity.

According to Tillich, symbols, like living beings, grow and die. "They grow when the situation is ripe for them, and they die when the situation changes."¹⁴⁸ Before Cone developed blackness as a symbol of Christian identity in the context of black theology, it emerged in the hearts and minds of black people across America in the Black Power movement of the mid- to late-1960s. Indeed, Cone relied on the spirit of black power in developing the work in which his understanding of symbolic blackness came forth. But ought such blackness still speak in the 21st century? And if so, what should it say? There are those of all racial and ethnic backgrounds who believe that the blackness that shaped black liberation theology—the blackness of the Black Power movement—has spoken its timely word, created the necessary change, and that now its moment has passed.¹⁴⁹ Such critics of blackness cite the legal developments of the 1960s, the social and economic power of those Eugene Robinson

¹⁴⁸ Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2009), 49.

¹⁴⁹ "On Views of Race and Inequality, Blacks and Whites Are Worlds Apart," Pew Research Center's Social & Demographic Trends Project, June 27, 2016, <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2016/06/27/on-views-of-race-and-inequality-blacks-and-whites-are-worlds-apart/>.

referred to as “the transcendent,”¹⁵⁰ and the unprecedented racial integration that shaped late 20th century American life. For folk of this ilk, the election of Barack Obama is typically the decisive sign that structural racism in the United States is over and, therefore, that blacks no longer deserve the “special privileges” they are widely perceived as receiving from a guilt-ridden federal government. Such arguments helped create the presidency of Donald Trump and threaten to reshape America in ways that negate the radical progress so many have struggled and died to bring about.

Setting aside the outlandishly fallacious claims about black “special privileges,” the wrongheaded idea that structural racism has been eliminated ought to spur internal reflection among those of us invested in the quality of black theological discourse. More specifically, though the claim that structural racism is has ended is wrong, scholars actively contributing to black theological discourse must engage in the difficult work of interpreting how social and economic transformations in and around black communities represent the reshaping of symbolic blackness (black identity) in black theology. That is, scholars of black theological discourse must set about the work of describing and analyzing the various social and material conditions constitutive of black life in the 21st century. Womanist theologians and ethicists, the focal point of chapter 2, have created incredibly important inroads toward this work.

The richness of womanist theo-ethics is its uncompromising commitment to the particular experiences of black women, especially poor black women. This commitment to the essential—but often neglected—realities of black women’s lives

¹⁵⁰ Robinson, *Disintegration*, 139.

has produced radical challenges to the oppressive architecture of racist and androcentric Christianity. Delores Williams's classic text *Sisters in the Wilderness* has been outstanding in this regard. Williams's brilliant interweaving of black women's histories led her to challenge role of Anselmian atonement in divinizing and perpetuating violence in the lives of black women. In exemplifying womanism's commitment to the particular experiences of black women, Williams traditions black identity with the practice of relating various forms of black suffering under the canopy of black faith.

Along with interpreting the meaning of social and economic transformations in and around the black community, analyzing the nature and meaning of black suffering in the lives of black women—the gift of Williams's work in particular and womanist theology in general—is an essential part of traditioning black identity in 21st-century black theological discourse. While I agree with Williams's critique of the role classic atonement theories play in normalizing black women's suffering, I differ on the question of how her critique ought to relate to theological and ethical teachings. I believe that it is only through allowing various forms of black suffering—but especially the suffering of poor black women—to speak inside of Christian faith that black theology can charge into the 21st century with a fuller sense of what it means to be black and committed to black liberation. In order for this suffering to speak in ways that radically expand our understanding of black identity, black theology must retain the symbols that highlight God's being with creation in its suffering (e.g., the cross), without allowing this suffering to be rendered acceptable.

In many ways, Victor Anderson's critique (the subject of chapter 3) builds on the insights of womanist theo-ethics. Like womanism, Anderson's critique of ontological blackness presses the reality of difference in the black community. What sets Anderson apart from womanism, and what makes Anderson's critique of black theology novel in the historical development of black theological discourse, is his use of postmodern criticism.

In postmodern blackness (a concept Anderson borrows from bell hooks), Anderson identifies a critical method that disturbs all normative claims, even normative claims in marginalized society. As such, postmodern blackness will maintain its commitment to difference and its critique of overly-determinative claims, even in the context of womanist discourse. Anderson uses postmodern analysis to explicate the ways that ontological blackness ("a covering term that connotes categorical, essentialist, and representational languages depicting black life and experience"¹⁵¹) mirrors the violence of white supremacy in oversimplifying the beautiful complexities of black life.

Anderson's commitment to unveiling, honoring, and protecting the rich differences that compose the whole of black experience is another essential aspect of traditioning blackness. In fact, engaging the reality of difference in the black community is the heart of what is needed to tradition blackness. However, Anderson's commitment to subjective, postmodern difference must be held in tension with

¹⁵¹ Victor Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness: An Essay on African American Religious and Cultural Criticism* (New York, NY: Continuum Intl Pub Group, 1995), 11.

communal narratives about the structural realities that ravage black life. Without this tension, two dangers loom. First, ontological blackness can continue to minimize difference in the black community in harmful ways. Second, without the tension of black community grounding postmodern interpretations, postmodern difference can yield the type of abstract analysis that renders black life invisible. Cornel West and bell hooks identify this latter danger in their analysis of postmodernity, but Anderson problematically overlooks it in his insightful critique.

Chapter four of this dissertation considered the groundbreaking work of theologian J. Kameron Carter. Carter's work on race calls attention to the relationship between black identity and the social logic of racism. He argues that black theology, for all of its revolutionary potential, is short-circuited by its commitment to a dialectal, racialized ontology. This ontology, Carter argues, is reflective of the supersessionist logic that granted white supremacy access to the heart of Christian faith: the identity of Jesus. As a corrective to the problem of Christianity's supersessionist racial logic, Carter prescribes a Christian theology of Israel that invites people of color to speak their truths, beyond race.

Carter's work contributes to the traditioning of black identity in black theology by challenging the deep theological roots that bolster white supremacy. However, his assertion of being beyond race is problematically unclear. Carter envisions a Christian social logic that refuses race's dominance of Christian community, but how this idealistic vision can become reality with "beyond race" as a medium is unclear. The process of traditioning black identity will benefit from Carter's critique of racialized

theology. But in order to do its best work, Carter's critique must be held in tension with the wisdom that emerges from dialectical ontology. Carter clears the way to think carefully about how dialectical being is faithfully reconciled with Christianity, but the wholesale rejection of dialectical ontology forecloses too much of black history to be helpful. The tensions I identify near the end of chapters 1-4 provide important insights, though not clear-cut directions, for traditioning a radical form of black identity in black theological discourse. I conclude this dissertation by explicating some of the characteristics of black identity that I perceive these tensions revealing.

The death of blackness in black theology would represent the death of black theology as such. And while all symbols change and die, I do not believe that it is time for blackness or black theology to die. However, if black theology is to retain its role as a vital source for revolutionary theological reflection in the 21st-century, blackness in black theology must change, that is, it must be traditioned. The process of traditioning means critically (re)interpreting the meaning of black identity in black theology in light of the continually developing social and economic stratification in and around the black community. Though I discovered the issue of black identity in black theology through critical engagement with academic sources, the challenge of reinterpreting black identity in black theological discourse is not merely an academic exercise. Interpreting black identity in black theology has important ramifications for grassroots social movements, especially the Movement for Black Lives.

One of the tensions in and around the Movement for Black Lives is a struggle for movement leadership as well as moral and spiritual authority. In St. Louis, this power struggle is often waged between young movement leaders and religious leaders in the community who have been slow, hesitant, or uninterested in moving themselves and their congregations into the streets. Of course, not all church leadership is against the movement (many clergy members have been actively in the movement in various ways from the very beginning of the St. Louis uprising), and not all young people are actively involved in protesting the institutional racism in the city; however, the discord between many churches and those raising their voices in the streets is evident enough to represent a legitimate black identity crisis.

As protestors demand that the city and state honor the value of black life, they do so out of socio-economic spaces that have been neglected for decades and, in some cases, over a century. In this way, these protestors and the actions they take call attention to forms of black life representative of particular forms of black identity that are characterized by socio-economic deprivation and being regularly subjected to the institutional violence of a racist law enforcement and legal system. Religious leaders—especially black religious leaders—who, for various reasons, keep themselves and their congregations out of movement activity represent a different form of black identity, one more akin to the accommodationist tradition of Booker T. Washington. These different responses to the killing of Michael Brown represent competing notions of black identity in public space, and while both protestors and passive religious leaders have the right to exist and be heard, the former resonates

much more strongly with the politics of the Christ revealed in black liberation theology.

To be sure, differing social and theological visions of black identity between people protesting in the streets and those who choose to stay out of movement activity is not a new phenomenon. The differences between Martin Luther King, Jr. and the stubborn and fearful religious leaders who wrote him while he was imprisoned in Birmingham, Alabama represents an earlier struggle for the nature of black identity (King, of course wrote his famous “Letter from Birmingham Jail” in response). What *is* unique about the current moment is that the struggle for the proper theological and ethical meaning of black identity is happening in a socio-economic context that finds the black community more disintegrated than it has ever been. There have always been social and economic differences in the U.S. black community, but never before have these differences represented such radically different forms of life on such a large scale. Ironically, many of the drastic socio-economic differences in black life are products of the social and legal victories of the Civil Rights Movement.

In light of both the historic disintegration that categorizes black life in this moment and the rich insights that black theological discourse has provided to this point, 21st-century black theological discourse must be unapologetically related to and identified with the day-to-day realities of poor and working class black folk—especially poor black women—whose daily lives are the fodder for an insatiable white supremacist capitalism that has had its appetite for black life intensified by the specter of Donald Trump’s presidency. For 21st century black theologians, this means

deepening black theology's commitment to having black identity represented and interpreted in the language, music, stories, and values that animate and compose the lived realities of poor black folk, those most vulnerable to state-sponsored white supremacy. The interpretation of black identity in black theological work must be undertaken in increasingly interdisciplinary ways that challenge traditional understanding of what counts as "theology proper." This interdisciplinary blackness should presuppose (not work its way toward) a rejection of patriarchy, homophobia, and xenophobia. Blackness in 21st century black theology must also be increasingly intercultural, in a broad sense. That is, 21st century black theology must develop and maintain a commitment to being in community with and learning from the lived realities of differently black and non-black poor folk who share the experience of systematic subjugation. This intercultural commitment is particularly important as the Trump administration bolsters its commitment to racist xenophobia. Lastly, this radical blackness must be composed and continuously renegotiated in ways that resist oversimplification and the temptation to sellout.

In September of 2017, barely three years after Michael Brown's killing, former St. Louis Police Officer Jason Stockley was acquitted in the 2011 shooting of Anthony Lamar Smith, a black man. As is the case in most encounters with police that leave black people dead, the details of the case were contested, and the media characterized Smith as the type of black person worthy of the death that met him. Of course, Smith could not speak on his own behalf. The afternoon after the verdict came down, my fiancé and I headed downtown to take part in protest action. We could not

just sit at home; we needed to be with people who could relate to the all too familiar pain we were feeling. When we arrived downtown, we were welcomed into a radical space in which the meaning and value of black life and black identity were being radically asserted even as it was being reimagined in the face of tragedy. If black theological discourse in the 21st-century is to retain the radicalness for which it became known in the 20th-century, it must be a resource for traditioning black identity in pained spaces like the one that welcomed us on that September day. Black theology must tradition black identity in and for places where suffering and death are only overcome by the power of who poor black folk understand themselves to be.

Limitations and Opportunities Future Research

As I *finally* complete this dissertation, I am aware that this work contains limitations, some of which I am particularly aware. One such limitation is that I begin with a consideration of James Cone's work. Cone's writings were my introduction to black theology, and when I arrived at Union Seminary in the fall of 2005 to begin the Master of Divinity program, I didn't think I could ever appreciate James Cone's work more than I did the day I met him in person. I was wrong. Studying with Dr. Cone not only deepened my appreciation for his work, it developed in me a distinct appreciation for religious and theological education not only as an intellectual venture, but as a mode of deep spiritual formation. My deep love and appreciation for Dr. Cone notwithstanding, I am aware that black liberation theology was made possible by the courageous struggles of generations of black folk (and a too small number of non-black allies). Figures like

Harriet Tubman (d. 1913), Henry M. Turner (1835-1915), Ida B. Wells-Barnett (1862-1931), and Marcus Garvey (1887-1940), to name only a few, prepared the way for the 20th-century struggles that made Cone's work possible. Moreover, the telling of these stories, as a part of traditioning blackness, will strengthen the work this dissertation begins.¹⁵²

A second limitation of this work is its somewhat dated thin engagement with the rich developments in womanist theology and ethics. I name some of the remarkable scholarship being done in womanist circles in chapter 2, but these texts and the roles they play in traditioning blackness deserve deeper analysis than I was able to give here. A third limitation of this dissertation is an underdeveloped explicit socio-economic analysis. As I have said, Eugene Robinson's work on socio-economic stratification in the black community has inspired me deeply. However, this dissertation lacks a rich socio-economic analysis, and the development of such an analysis is important to the work I begin here. Such an analysis would examine the historic development of socio-economic stratification within and around the black community and would press issues of belonging and communal identity in ways that assess communal values and religious and theological teachings.

A fourth limitation of this work is that it is highly conceptual in a way that pays short shrift to embodiment as a profoundly important aspect of black identity and black

¹⁵² In this regard, Gary Dorrien's recently published texts developing a history of the black social gospel are blessed gifts. See: Gary Dorrien, *The New Abolition: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Black Social Gospel*, Reprint edition (Yale University Press, 2018); Gary Dorrien, *Breaking White Supremacy: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Black Social Gospel*, 1 edition (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018).

being. Black people are not merely radical consciousness; we are also embodied beings who wear different types of clothes, eat various foods, and have been socialized by life experiences to move our bodies in different ways. Finally, this dissertation is limited by its sole focus on black identity in U.S. black theology. I am not unaware of the rich and various contributions of black theologians in England, Africa, and the Caribbean and I look forward to deepening my understanding of the local histories that have developed these approaches. Toward this end, this past year marked my first trip to the continent of Africa. As part of a travel seminar at Eden Seminary, I spent two indescribably powerful weeks in Ghana as part of a travel seminar Eden offers in conjunction with the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Ghana. I look forward to sustaining and developing the relationships I developed in Ghana, and I look forward to the ways these relationships will enable me to think globally about black identity and black theology. All of these limitations represent rich opportunities for future research that I am excited to undertake.

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