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OPAQUE REDEMPTION:
WHITENESS, THEOLOGY, AND THE POLITICS OF THE HUMAN

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OPAQUE REDEMPTION:
WHITENESS, THEOLOGY, AND THE POLITICS OF THE HUMAN

A Dissertation Presented to the Graduate Faculty of

Dedman College

Southern Methodist University

in

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

with a

Major in Religious Studies

by

Timothy L. McGee

May 20, 2017

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This dissertation has its roots in projects and experiences that happened well before my first walk up the grassy, oak-lined Boulevard at Southern Methodist University. Yet, I would have never stepped foot on this beautiful campus, nor would I be at this point today, with a completed dissertation manuscript, were it not for the initial and continuing support and guidance of Joerg Rieger, my dissertation advisor. To him, therefore, goes my first expression of gratitude. He has never been a heavy-handed advisor and therefore, I think, has been all the more influential.

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Opaque Redemption:
Whiteness, Theology, and the Politics of the Human

Advisor: Professor Joerg Rieger

Doctor of Philosophy conferred May ??, 2017

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Who can save us from redemption? Some of the earliest accounts of the African slave trade claimed that slavery saved those marked by the “perdition” of soul, mind, and body (G. E. de Zurara). Postcolonial critics argue that colonization (F. Fanon), orientalism (E. Said), and even liberal democracy (T. Asad) have operated as violent projects of redemption. At the center of these modern politics of redemption, or of modernity as a project of redemption, is a racial figure of the human, what Sylvia Wynter calls Man. This dissertation, *Opaque Redemption: Whiteness, Theology, and the Politics of the Human*, clarifies how the modern racial *ordo salutis* originated and functioned, focusing especially on the destructive violence through which it operates. It then offers a constructive theological reframing of redemption and the politics of human life, giving special attention to the politics of solidarity.

The dissertation is comprised of seven chapters, broken into three parts. Part I uses the writings of G. W. F. Hegel and Sylvia Wynter to narrate the historical breadth and underlying structure of the modern racial *ordo salutis*, noting especially the way it must but also cannot incorporate—include and literally endow with a (human) body—those it deems to reside at the limit or furthest remove of this politics of human salvation.

This politics of “the human” or Man integrates the various modes of oppression and exploitation arranged around race, class, and gender/sexuality.

Part II provides an interdisciplinary elaboration of a central concept taken from the black liberation theologian James Cone: the freedom of the resurrection. By making the relationship to the resurrected Christ central to what it means to be human, Cone offers a decolonial account of human freedom that traverses without being held or determined by any human project, including those organized through the production of (social) death and promises of developed, properly human life. Whiteness, for Cone, functions precisely as this attempt to hold and secure, and thereby re/produce, the proper form of human life. Cone’s theological accounts of black liberation, black suffering, and black poetics alert his readers to material points of human life that exceed and are thereby “opaque” to whiteness, arguing that black life enfleshes an “eschatological freedom” in a way that “parabolizes”—points to and effects—the continuing presence of Christ in the world. The conversation partners in this section range from various theologians gathered around the work Karl Barth, especially Eberhard Jüngel, to the Black Arts poet LeRoi Jones, the continental philosopher Giorgio Agamben, and the black feminist writer Hortense Spillers, among others.

Part III turns to the problems of whiteness and solidarity, arguing that white efforts at solidarity often function as projects of “white redemption.” Instead of rendering whiteness something to be morally bettered or totally overcome, which are two iterations of redemption, these chapters offer a negative praxis of solidarity. Eschewing attempts to redeem whiteness, white people should work to concretely disrupt (negativity) the world that gives it meaning. The conclusion suggests that an anti-work politics (Kathi Weeks)

oriented around the “demands” for a living wage and/or for a shorter work week with no decrease in pay can effectively disrupt the white world in which humanity is “equated” with work (Andrea Smith).

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- BTBP* James H. Cone, *Black Theology & Black Power* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997).
- BTL* James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 40th Anniversary Ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010).
- CD* Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics, Study Edition (31 Volumes)*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, trans. G. W. Bromiley (New York: T&T Clark, 2009).
- CLT* James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011).
- FMP* James H. Cone, *For My People: Black Theology and the Black Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984).
- GMW* Eberhard Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World: On the Foundation of the Theology of the Crucified One in the Dispute between Theism and Atheism*, trans. Darrell Guder (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983).
- GO* James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, Rev. Ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997).
- MSLB* James H. Cone, *My Soul Looks Back* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1982).
- RF* James H. Cone, *Risks of Faith: The Emergence of a Black Theology of Liberation, 1968-1998* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999).
- SB* James H. Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991).
- ST* James H. Cone, *Speaking the Truth: Ecumenism, Liberation, and Black Theology*, 2nd edition (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999).
- TE I* Eberhard Jüngel, *Theological Essays*, trans. J. B. Webster (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1989).
- TE II* Eberhard Jüngel, *Theological Essays II*, trans. J. B. Webster (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1995).

INTRODUCTION

Who can save us from redemption? Though perhaps sounding like a glib question, a kind of modern equivalent to speculating about angels on the head of a pin, the political and theological urgency of this question should not be missed. In his writings on the twentieth century anti-colonial struggles in Africa, Frantz Fanon noted the interplay of redemption, damnation, and suffering in the European (and emerging North American) projects of global control. For Fanon, “the final aim of colonization was to convince the indigenous population it would save them from darkness.”¹ The epistemic moment here is important, for the aim, he argued, is not merely an objective salvation but their subjective conversion. This meant that the colonists tried to “hammer into the heads of the indigenous population that if the colonists were to leave they would regress into barbarism, degradation, and bestiality.”² The colonial “condemnation is continental in scale,” rendering “the entire continent of Africa” as something “akin to a darkness of the human soul.”³

¹ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 149.

² Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 149.

³ Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 150.

This continental condemnation required the production of what had to be redeemed while enacting its destruction as part of this process of redemption. The “aim sought” in the colonial system was not “the death of the native culture” but “rather a continued agony.” This culture, “once living and open to the future, becomes closed, fixed in the colonial status, caught in the yoke of oppression. Both present and mummified, it testified against its members.”⁴ This production of a kind of living death—present but mummified—testifies against and condemns the culture, rendering the violence and destruction of colonial rule at best a moment of salvation and at worst nothing but another iteration of the violence and death deemed to be the natural or inevitable state of the colonized populations. In this context, Fanon suggests that Christianity, “which roots out heresy, natural impulses, and evil” should be situated “on the same level” as DDT, which “destroys parasites, carriers of disease.”⁵ Destruction is (for) salvation. If some people in the Gospels once asked Jesus, with a sense of despair, *who then can be saved*, the question we must face is whether we can avoid it, and what, then, becomes of this “religion of redemption,” Christianity.⁶

Fanon’s critical interrelation of the logic of redemption and colonization is no mere rhetorical flourish or exaggerated and unfounded critique. Before Christopher Columbus ever sailed the ocean blue, at the onset of this age of European exploration and expansion, the enslavement of Africans was already being considered as an act of salvation. In August of 1444, two hundred and thirty five Africans were separated from

⁴ Frantz Fanon, “Racism and Culture,” in Frantz Fanon, *Toward the African Revolution*, trans. Haakon Chevalier (New York: Grove Press, 1994), 34.

⁵ Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 7.

⁶ “Only through Jesus, and thus only in Christianity, has redemption become the central point of religion.” Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, ed. H. R. Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart (Berkeley, CA: Apocryphile Press, 2011), 57.

their communities, “fathers from sons, husbands from wives, brothers from brothers.” The chronicler of this occasion, the Portuguese writer Gomes Eanes de Zurara (or Azurara), notes that, despite witnessing the misery and sadness of these captives, the leader of the venture, Prince Henry the Navigator, sat elevated above the scene on his “powerful steed” and “reflected with great pleasure upon the salvation of those souls that before were lost.”⁷

Moving away from the immediate scene of painful separation, Zurara continues his reflections on what this suffering and sorrow eventually produced: civilized and Christianized Africans. Zurara writes, and it is worth quoting at length,

And so their lot was now quite the contrary of what it had been; since before they had lived in perdition of soul and body; of their souls, in that they were yet pagans, without the clearness and the light of the holy faith; and of their bodies, in that they lived like beasts, without any custom of reasonable beings—for they had no knowledge of bread or wine, and they were without the covering of clothes, or the lodgment of houses; and worse than all, through the great ignorance that was in them, in that they had no understanding of good, but only knew how to live in a bestial sloth.⁸

The statement begins with the temporality of conversion, comparing the lost past to the present state of salvation. This contrastive analysis provides what amounts to a triple negativity or damnation, marking the African captives with a spiritual, ethical, and material “perdition,” a condemnation of their souls, minds, and bodies. As pagans outside the church, their souls lacked the guidance, the *clear light*, of the true Christian faith. Ethically, their lack of human reason—their “great ignorance”—entailed that they had no

⁷ Gomes Eannes de Zurara, *The Chronicle of the Discovery and Conquest of Guinea. Vol. I*, trans. C. Raymond Beazley and Edgar Prestage, Public Domain, Project Gutenberg (London: Hakluyt Society, 1896), <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/35738/35738-h/35738-h.htm>, p. 82-3. The account of Zurara also draws on the theological analysis provided by Willie Jennings in *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 15-64.

⁸ Azurara, *The Chronicle of the Discovery*, 84-5.

understanding of good or evil. Physically, this lack of reason made them live in “bestial sloth,” lacking *any* custom of reasonable beings: no bread, no wine, no clothes, no permanent homes. As the black feminist writer Hortense Spillers says, Zurara’s writing “translate[s] all perceived difference as fundamental degradation[s] or transcendence.”⁹

Through these early moments of the slave trade, human differences became situated on a scale ranging from the ideal, normative form—rational Christian (eventually white) civilization—and a point of absolute negativity or exteriority, the Africans. Slavery, for Zurara, was an instrument of salvation, a translation from absence and death to spiritual, ethical, and physical fullness of life. The totalizing condemnation is an essential element, for it allows the violence and suffering to be deemed inconsequential and, even more strongly, ultimately salvific. If, only paragraphs earlier, Zurara had noted a point of human cultural connection between those who were enslaved and their masters—namely, the value of familial and communal relationships—this connection is erased by the imperative to narrate the transformation, or translation, as one of redeeming the damned. Redemption required positing a point of furthest remove and thus entailed that, regardless of empirical evidence and actual experiences, the Africans *had* to be comparatively damned, interpreted as that null point in human civilization, a total absence that could be registered discursively only by the elaborate cataloguing of various lacks and failures. Spillers notes that this arrangement of difference between exemplar

⁹ Hortense Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” in Hortense Spillers, *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 213.

(transcendence) and failure (degradation) became “the basis of a historic violence that will rewrite the histories of modern Europe and black Africa.”¹⁰

More recently, the anthropologist of religion Talal Asad argues that this “historic violence” of redemption operates through the global politics of liberal democracy. To make “an enlightened space” of reason and law, Asad says, “the liberal must continually attack the darkness of the outside world that threatens to overwhelm that space.”¹¹ In this “secular redemptive politics” there is “a readiness to cause pain to those who are to be saved by being humanized.”¹² For Asad, though it operates differently, this secular politics of redemption is rooted in a previous expansive pattern of Christian missions.¹³ After noting the differences between the earlier Christian and the contemporary secular projects of redemption, Asad continues, “And yet Christianity’s missionary history managed to fuse the two—to fold the spiritual promise (“Christ died to save us all”) into the political project (“the world must be changed for Christ”)—making the modern concept of redemption possible.”¹⁴ It is this concept of redemption—redemption as a central political category—that the dissertation endeavors to clarify and critique.¹⁵ Unlike

¹⁰ Spillers, “Mama’s Baby,” 213.

¹¹ Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 59.

¹² Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 62.

¹³ Asad has been criticized for collapsing different senses of redemption into the same general concept he critiques. See, for instance, George Shulman’s chapter, “Redemption, Secularization, and Politics” in Charles Hirschkind and David Scott, eds., *Powers of the Secular Modern: Talal Asad and His Interlocutors* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), 154-179. The first two chapters provide more specificity to how this operation functions as well as its historical origination and permutations.

¹⁴ Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 62.

¹⁵ This statement gestures to the diverse and divergent approaches gathered under the heading of “political theology.” The classic formulation comes from Carl Schmitt: “All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts not only because of their historical development...but also because of their systematic

Asad, however, it is approached from the vantage point of Christian theology, as this dissertation constructs another theological account of redemption in light of and in response to what can be called this colonial order of salvation (*ordo salutis*).¹⁶

The title of this dissertation, *Opaque Redemption*, reworks a phrase by the Roman Catholic womanist theologian, M. Shawn Copeland. In her book, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being*, Copeland says that she wants “to reaffirm salvation in human liberation as an opaque work.”¹⁷ Christian salvation has a material, political edge for Copeland, but one attuned to opacity. Opacity, both in Copeland’s book and in this dissertation, is used in a particular way, owing to the work of Charles Long on black religion and theology.¹⁸ In its most basic sense, the opaque is that which is darkened and

structure.” See Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2006), 36. Political theology is here being used in a “narrow” sense, to use Vincent Lloyd’s term, where the issue is not just the relationship between theology (or religion) and politics but the way particular political arrangements and concepts are structured analogously to theological concepts. See Vincent Lloyd, ed. *Race and Political Theology* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012). See also Talal Asad’s critical engagement with Schmitt, where he argues that attention should be given to the “differential results” and not only the structural similarities, in *Formations of the Secular*, 189.

¹⁶ The word “construct” is used intentionally to indicate that this work is ultimately closer to the project of “constructive theology” than to political theology. The Workgroup on Constructive Christian Theology describes their approach in this way: “We are not interested in merely describing what theology has been; we are trying to understand and construct it in the present, to imagine what life-giving faith can be in today’s world. In doing so, as with any construction job, we are attempting to build a viable structure. In our case, that structure is an inhabitable, beautiful, and truthful *theology*.” See Serene Jones and Paul Lakeland, eds., *Constructive Theology: A Contemporary Approach to Classic Themes: A Project of The Workgroup On Constructive Christian Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 2005), 2, emphasis original.

¹⁷ M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 102.

¹⁸ Copeland quotes Charles Long’s formulation of opacity in *Enfleshing Freedom*, 22. See also the discussion in her article, M. Shawn Copeland, “Blackness Past, Blackness Future—and Theology,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 112, no. 4 (September 21, 2013): 625–40.

non-transparent, what cannot be seen through. Long connects this meaning of the term to an “involuntary structure,” where the opaque refers also to the imposition of a situation that exceeds integration into a standard or pre-given cultural frame.¹⁹ In this way, opacity becomes related to “oppugnancy,” the “hardness” and oppositional (“standing over against”) aspects of life, particularly in black life, the experience and continuing aftermath of slavery.²⁰ The “opacity of reality” is therefore an experience with the world in which the world is encountered in a way that resists being given over to human practices of making meaning and organizing their communal lives.

Long contrasts the primacy of opacity in black religious experience to the attempt to “see through” reality that characterized the Enlightenment project, an approach that “dissected” and classified reality while banishing “the sheer depths of the real to the arena of unknowability.”²¹ In a different way, he notes that the Christological symbols in Paul Tillich’s theology end up theorizing the finite as what imposes its meaning on the world, suggesting that, following Tillich, the sacrifice of the finite to the infinite in Christianity might be used to curb this project of total domination and control. Yet, Long suggests, “the colonized” were “shorn of their capacities to be loci of manifestation of finite power on the historical scene,” mummified, situated in living death, as Fanon wrote.²² This (dialectical) drama of salvation between the finite and infinite is, therefore, not merely one to which the colonized are outside. The distinction between and reconciliation of the finite makers of meaning and infinite ultimate meaning—humankind

¹⁹ Charles H. Long, “Structural Similarities and Dissimilarities in Black and African Theologies,” *The Journal of Religious Thought* 32, no. 2 (September 1975): 9–24. 16.

²⁰ Long, “Structural Similarities,” 15, 14.

²¹ Long, “Structural Similarities,” 19.

²² Long, “Structural Similarities,” 20.

and the divine—presupposes this meaningless (in)human exteriority, which can never be drawn in but whose minimal presence is required so as to articulate the productivity of these finite world-defining human creatures. Redemption, in other words, requires both that which can be reconciled and that point of exteriority that can never be drawn in. Opacity is what the drama of redemption must incorporate but what it also, by definition, can never include.

For Long—and here he follows an argument from Paul Ricoeur—the “great philosophers and theologians of the West” try to “overcome” the “opaque symbol...for the sake of civilization, for the sake of the human project.”²³ The human, or rather, *the human*, is that which attempts to transform the opacity of life into a negativity, a point of opposition and utter lack, which can then be incorporated into its proper form of civilized life. To make redemption opaque, in this way, is to turn against redemption as a project of humanization or civilization by lingering in and with what these projects ceaselessly endeavor to see through, and thereby (meaningfully) arrange and control. If the human project presupposes a certain *overcoming* of opacity, in this case, by clearly delineating “the human” as the self-determining rational-ethical-law-enacting being from the subhuman “bestial” (Zurara) other, opaque redemptions allow and draw from the unsettling of this division, taking their departure from those particular moments where we experience our lives as resistant to these project completely given over to human rationality or will. If *the human* is a project of (self-)overcoming, blackness as a symbol and carrier of opacity reframes human life along other trajectories, trajectories deeply

²³ Long, “Structural Similarities,” 22.

connected to the historical experiences and movements of African descended people but, following Long and Copeland, trajectories open to all.

Redemption, opacity, and the category of the human are deeply interrelated in the world that followed from those early salvific divisions of humankind, divisions that eventually became instantiated and consolidated as the modern logic of race. To develop a Christian theology attuned to some of these other trajectories—attuned to “salvation in human liberation as an opaque work” (Copeland)—this study engages in a broad and constructive conversation with the black liberation theologian James Cone. Cone’s theological efforts over the duration of his career, which is now entering its fifth decade, have relentlessly interrogated the violence of this project of civilization or humanization. His theology also offers a profound set of Christological reflections that might orient Christian theology along other trajectories. The resurrection of Christ, particularly in his early work, functioned as a central way to destabilize this organization of (human) life through the social production of death, what Achille Mbembe refers to as “necropolitics.”²⁴ By placing the resurrection of Christ as the center of creaturely life, moreover, Cone offers a way to disrupt this very structure of redemptive overcoming. Freedom need not be understood as self-determination—the overcoming of oppugnant (human-animal) nature for the sake of individual and communal projects of self-development—and creaturely life can become oriented toward what always remains beyond the hold(ing) of death, even while within and struggling against it.²⁵

²⁴ Achille Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (December 21, 2003): 11-40.

²⁵ This notion of a freedom beyond, within, and against—and the order of the terms is deliberate—the hold alludes to the conclusion of Aimé Césaire’s book-length poem, *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*, where he speaks of a “standing in the hold” that

Cone's theology guides the constructive efforts undertaken in Parts II and III of the dissertation. These chapters articulate the political and theological valences of what Cone calls "the freedom of the resurrection." To help elaborate this concept, the chapters engage a wide array of authors alongside Cone. Sometimes a section will look more closely at some key writings that have influenced his thought or some central criticisms offered by his interlocutors. Other sections turn to different conversation partners who may or may not even be connected to Cone but who offer some assistance in developing the argument. This broad conversation is held together by the thematic focus of each chapter and by the role of that chapter in unfolding the arguments as a whole. Put more directly, this work, at the end of the day, is not a piece of secondary literature *on* Cone's thought but a constructive theological elaboration and extension of some central themes found in his work, particularly as they gather together around that notion of the freedom of the resurrection. As such, a few autobiographical remarks might help alert the reader to some of the decisions made along the way.

First, and most significantly, I am a white man writing on Cone's theology. The problems and possibilities of solidarity will be engaged explicitly in the final two chapters, which comprise Part III. The question of solidarity, however, is present

moves upward to the "decks" of the slave ship and culminates in the "blood" of a revolt, "standing and free." The poem ends with an indirect allusion to a resurrection beyond the terrain of death, most notably in the repetition of the word "rise" four times, perhaps alluding to the 1865 *Code Noir* where, after the third attempted escape, the slave was to be put to death. The fourth "rise" would then be one beyond the political/physical hold of death. See Aimé Césaire, *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*, trans. Annette Smith and Clayton Eshleman (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2001), 47-8, 51. The account of the slave code comes from Christopher L. Miller, *The French Atlantic Triangle: Literature and Culture of the Slave Trade* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2008), 28. Césaire was familiar with the code, referencing it explicitly in the *Notebook*. See the translator's notes, *Notebook*, p. 63, discussing the line "the twenty-nine legal blows of the whip," from p. 40 of the text.

throughout the work. Nevertheless, the dissertation devotes extensive attention to how Cone articulates his theology of blackness and black liberation. Following Cone, one cannot simply center anti-whiteness in theology, for the critical relation to, or rather against, whiteness follows from God's affirmative relation to blackness.

In his first book, James Cone calls "the white church" the contemporary "manifestation" of "Antichrist."²⁶ To take this claim seriously, as we white theologians ought, means that we cannot merely develop an anti-white or anti-whiteness theology. Antichrist is at its core a negative movement, a false or lying reality that attacks and attempts to destroy what it parodies. Translated for the moment out of the theological language of "Antichrist," whiteness is not a positive reality but a negative and reactive one, an opposition set against and taking its bearings from what it seeks to capture or destroy. Whiteness is what James Cone will call nothingness (Chapter Three). The argument developed in the following chapters will hopefully make this point stronger, for example, tracking Cone's intentionally ambiguous use of racial terms like "whiteness" (Chapter Six). But it is enough, at least by way of introduction, to suggest why a work written by a white man has centered Cone's theological account of black life and blackness. To invoke the language of Karl Barth, an important though often subterranean figure throughout this dissertation, God's "No" to whiteness is enfolded within the greater "Yes" to blackness (Chapter Seven as well as various footnotes throughout the text will make this relation to Barth's work clearer).

Besides the continuing thematic focus on solidarity, my own relation to Cone's theology as a white man has led me to deliberately give more space to some theological

²⁶ Cone, *BTBP*, 73.

arguments presented by white (North American, European) thinkers, particularly those that might advance the argument I am making in some ways while creating other problems due to their inattention to questions of race. In this way, for instance, focusing more on Jürgen Moltmann's theology of hope than on the account given by Martin Luther King, Jr. (Chapter Four) allows me to pinpoint how this redemptive project organized around "the human" still structures Moltmann's theology. The goal of these critical engagements is not to fault the individuals discussed but to highlight Cone's various arguments that every Christian theology *has* to become critically attuned to the global color line so as to effectively reflect on the person and work of Jesus Christ today.

The figure who occupies this complex position most frequently in the dissertation is Eberhard Jüngel, a contemporary German Protestant theologian. His presence in the dissertation comes by way of accident, as I happened to be reading his work for my exam in systemic theology, an exam in which Cone's work figured prominently. Reading his account of "parable" gave me some tools to better understand what was doing with the less helpful resource of Paul Tillich's theology of "symbols" (Chapter Five). There is also a certain resonance between the way Cone's early thought moves between Barth and Tillich and how Jüngel himself worked between Barth and Rudolf Bultmann. Jüngel became helpful again as I thought through Cone's insistent reflections on the crucified God, even after Cone received strong criticisms from his colleagues for this focus on death and suffering.²⁷ On the other side, the more I engaged Jüngel alongside Cone and within the contours of this project, Jüngel became a helpful way to measure some of the difficulty of escaping the problematic, redemptive pulse I find in G. W. F. Hegel's

²⁷ For an overview of these debates, see JoAnne Marie Terrell, *Power in the Blood? The Cross in the African American Experience* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Pub, 2005).

political theology (Chapter One). To that degree, Jüngel shows where a greater attention not merely to Cone's theology but to his theological location—to *black theology* as a *praxis* and not merely a school of theological thought—is vital for ongoing theological work produced by us white people. This complex role hopefully prevents Jüngel from being the foil against which I can demonstrate Cone's greater brilliance or, alternatively, from providing the strong "European" theology to justify and supposedly make more "rigorous" Cone's own theological work. Both approaches would be, to say the least, deeply problematic. The choice of Jüngel as a secondary conversation partner also relates to why I chose Cone instead of Copeland to organize the study: I am a Protestant, a Presbyterian (PCUSA) in fact, and am much more competent engaging various thinkers who "depart" from Karl Barth (both make use of and move beyond) than I am drawing on the Roman Catholic theologians and philosophers that Copeland uses.

Before turning to the initial chapter, it might help to indicate two other aspects of the argument that follows: it is distinctly *confessional* and *theoretical*. At the center of the constructive sections, beginning in Part II (Chapter Three), the resurrection of Christ becomes not merely a thematic focus in Cone's thought but an event that centers this constructive theology as a whole and, indeed, space-time itself. In a rebuttal to William Jones's critique of his black theology, Cone suggests that Jones may provide an external criticism of black theology and the problem of suffering (which the dissertation takes up thematically in Chapter Four) but fails to offer an internal critique because he neglects the center of Cone's own analysis, the claim that "Jesus Christ is the essence and meaning of liberation."²⁸ What follows does not offer explicit arguments in defense of the

²⁸ Cone, *GO*, 245, n. 23.

resurrection or offer critiques of those who, for whatever reason, believe the focus on Christology is inadequate or problematic. Even Cone himself will later retreat from his explicit prioritization of Christology, though there are reasons to see his alternative as inadequate *within* the context of his own thought (see the final section of Chapter Three). The resurrection and the way it relates to the person of Jesus of Nazareth and creation as a whole is developed throughout the dissertation but the basic event, that Jesus Christ rose from the dead, is assumed throughout and is taken, without argument, to be the foundational point for the arguments that follow.

The argument also has a certain theoretical bent to it, where even the discussions of solidarity in Part III deal more directly with the deep theoretical issues in the praxis of solidarity. Chapter Six explores the way anti-racist activity becomes oriented around another project of (white) redemption while Chapter Seven takes up the politics of the human, arguing ultimately for solidarity as a negative critique of and antagonism toward the world of whiteness. Only the conclusion will explore one concrete location of critical action, focusing on the way an anti-work politics (Kathi Weeks) can disrupt both the politics of the human and the capitalist regime of accumulation to which it is attached. The underlying structures and operations of this racialized global *order of salvation* are developed not by way of empirical examples but through the writings of Hegel (Chapter One) and the Caribbean cultural theorist and writer, Sylvia Wynter (Chapter Two). Wynter's work allows the dissertation to sketch the broad historical developments of this global organization of life and death while continuing to focus on some of the deep theoretical issues involved in its consolidation, extension, and continual reformation.

In the introduction to his first book, James Cone clarifies that his text is “no handbook or collection of helpful hints on conducting a revolution.”²⁹ In a different context and for different reasons, Eberhard Jüngel has written that one can have a politics but never a theology of revolution.³⁰ Both statements can be clarified by a third, a phrase taken from again from the work of M. Shawn Copeland. In her book, which is also discussed further in Chapters Four and Seven, she speaks of “retun[ing] our being to the eschatological at the core of the concrete.”³¹ The “eschatological” is not found apart from the concrete and yet it is not reducible to it either. The necessity of and the means for a political revolution—which has to mean something more than merely electing a socialist to the presidency in the U.S.—cannot be secured through theological argumentation, though the “eschatological” at “the core of the concrete” may orient us in that direction. There is, as Cone says, a certain risk to faith. Decisions have to be made in terms of what it means to participate in the life and work of the crucified and resurrected Messiah. Faith, as Cone and Barth both argue, is also obedience, or in Copeland’s preferred term, discipleship.³² This eschatological at the core of the concrete is another iteration of the opaque, with the presence of that which cannot be ordered through human intellectual and volitional means. Whether as excess, undetermined, ambiguous, or opaque, this dissertation takes this exorbitance—to use yet another term, this time owing to Nahum

²⁹ Cone, *BTBP*, 3.

³⁰ Eberhard Jüngel, “The World as Possibility and Actuality: The Ontology of the Doctrine of Justification,” *TE I*, 121.

³¹ Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 103.

³² Cone’s ethics place the emphasis consistently on participation in the present activity of God in Christ over and sometimes against an ethics centered on the imitation of Christ: “the resurrected Christ is not bound by first-century possibilities. . . [We] must regard his past activity as a *pointer* to what he is doing now.” Cone, *GO*, 205, emphasis in the original.

Chandler's work (Chapter Six)—to be central to how the crucified and resurrected Messiah is present and active in our world today. The theoretical aspects of the argument allow this opacity to be centered in a way that an immediate move to concrete practice would problematically pass over. This theoretical element, however, is also by no means impractical or separated from the world (Chapter Five gives some indication as to why).

If one takes redemption through the person of Jesus Christ to be a significant or defining feature of Christianity, then one cannot turn away from how this core confessional element is entangled with the violence unleashed against those who are deemed exterior to the incorporative project of humanization or what, closer to Cone's language, one could call the racial *ordo salutis* that is global modernity. More than many other theorists, G. W. F. Hegel has articulated the core operations and contradictions of this global racial order and tied them directly to the redemptive movement presented in the Gospel, the death of God on the cross. The dissertation, accordingly, begins with Hegel's account of this redemptive death and its relation to those who are, in Hegel's estimation, both within and yet unable to "amalgamate" to this global racial order of salvation.

PART I
THE MODERN RACIAL *ORDO SALUTIS*

CHAPTER 1

OUTSIDE (THE TIME OF) SALVATION: G. W. F. HEGEL

In 1821, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel was worried about the future. The moralizing Enlightenment critiques of Christianity were much more than an intellectual error for him. Combined with the potential volatility of the jobless poor in industrializing capitalist societies, these nations of the Enlightenment were facing a potential political crisis.¹ Hegel writes, and it is worth quoting at length:

Where [the gospel is not preached to] the poor, who [are] the ones closest to infinite anguish; where the teaching of love in infinite anguish [is abandoned in favor of] enjoyment, love without anguish; where the gospel [is] preached in a naturalistic way—[there] the salt [has] lost its savor....

The [common] people, in which reason remains constantly under pressure, [this] class in whose cultivation the truth can exist only in the form of representation, that is helpless vis-à-vis the pressure of its interior impulses, and that experiences pain and need more concretely—indeed, infinite pain and need—[has been] abandoned by its [theological] teachers.²

¹ This concern over the problem of poverty can be found in Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* as well, in which Hegel says, "The important question of how poverty can be remedied is one which agitates and torments modern societies especially." See G. W. F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. Allen W. Wood, trans. H. B. Nisbet (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), §244 (addition), p. 267.

² G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion: Volume III: The Consummate Religion*, ed. Peter C. Hodgson, trans. R. F. Brown, P. C. Hodgson, and J. M. Stewart (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998), 160-1, brackets provided by the translator. Each of the three volumes of the *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*

The gospel of the crucified God was, for Hegel, in danger of being eclipsed by various efforts to historicize and moralize the Christian faith. Instead of fostering a connection between the anguish of the poor and the “infinite anguish” of the God dishonored on the cross—whereby they, in representational form, might understand the truth that they are moments within the self-negating movement of Spirit—the Enlightenment teachers and pastors were treating the gospel as something lodged in the distant past or present and relevant only in various ethical commands or pious feelings. The poor were being barred from universal truth and left in the immediacy of their sensual needs and desires, a finite human existence turned “in upon itself...the extremity of self-satisfied disenlightenment.”³

For Hegel, politically, the potential crisis was that the poor might become what he elsewhere calls “the rabble,” a term he uses for the poor once they have become rebellious and turn against their own society. As will be argued below, the rabble are the presence inside the European state of the Indigenous African and American “animal man in all his savagery and lawlessness.”⁴ The presentation of the Christian gospel—the message of the infinite anguish of God on the cross—might prevent the formation of this

(abbreviated henceforth as *LPR*) contains material from the years 1821 (the manuscript), 1824, 1827, and 1831. For *Volume I: Introduction and the Concept of Religion*, I have used the same paperback version in the series, published 1995. For *Volume II: Determinate Religion*, I have used the previous hardback edition, published 1987. All subsequent citations will be use *LPR* as the title abbreviation, and will include the volume number as well as the year from which the material comes, accompanied by the page number. Thus, this quotation would subsequently be given as: Hegel, *LPR* III/1821, 160-1.

³ Hegel, *LPR* III/1821, 160.

⁴ G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, trans. H. B. Nisbet (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 177. An extended overview of Hegel’s views on race can be found in Teshale Tibebe, *Hegel and the Third World: Making of Eurocentrism in World History* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2011).

unreconcilable evil within the community of the European state. Yet, Hegel notes, this gospel was not being preached to the poor. The gospel was losing its savor and leaving his society vulnerable to a profound political crisis.

Hegel's account of religion—and more broadly, his philosophical thought in general—offers deep insight into the central operations of global racial modernity, or what Denise Ferreira da Silva calls “racial globality.”⁵ The effort made in this chapter is neither to “accuse” nor “excuse” Hegel as an individual historical person but to “use” his thought to expose the theological contours of central political categories in modernity, while highlighting how the modern world is organized around a racialized politics of the human.⁶ To do so, the chapter begins by examining Hegel's account of creation and evil, noting how he distinguishes two forms of evil, which he terms the evil of immediacy and that of the understanding. These two failures in human becoming are concretely materialized in Hegel's thought as the poor, jobless rabble within Europe and as Indigenous peoples in Africa and the America. Both figurations of evil are neither truly inside nor outside the global incorporative history—the temporality—of Hegel's Spirit. They are, in fact, modes of life that provoke the incorporative gesture of modernity that Hegel analyzes and deploys within, or as, his thought. As such, they represent a point of

⁵ See Denise Ferreira da Silva's engagement with Hegel, race, and global politics in her book, *Toward a Global Idea of Race* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2007). This approach to reading Hegel also takes its bearings from Theodor Adorno's claim that “Hegelian metaphysics...describes the way the world actually is, not in historical perspective but in essence.” See Theodor W. Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholzen (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1994), 29.

⁶ The language of excuse, accuse, and use comes from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 4 and 345 n. 47.

contradiction and crisis, for by definition, they must be but likewise never can be included within the self-determining movement of the whole.

Creation, Negativity, and Evil

In his *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, Hegel provides a Trinitarian account of the creation of the world. The primal division—negation, or in theological terms, “begetting”—that distinguishes God the Father from God the Son is a division held within the reconciling movement of divine love, God the Holy Spirit. As he says in his lectures on “World History,” the Father is a “universal” power that divides itself into an other, “his own object,” which is also “an expression of him as he is himself.”⁷ The unity between these two, wherein God is one as both pure potential power (Father) and its absolute externalization in an alien object or other (Son), is the Spirit. Creation arises as a “release” of this negative moment of distinction or division between the Father and Son. The external world—nature “as something independent”—is not a positive, self-grounded reality apart from God but is “only the explicitly negative moment of other-being, of being-external-to-self.”⁸ Nature is a negativity that becomes increasingly self-aware and in control of its movement or progression by way of negation.⁹

⁷ Hegel, *World History*, 51.

⁸ Hegel, *LPR* III/1821, 87.

⁹ Although it cannot be explored in depth here, this negativity is central to the way Hegel understands Spirit as a self-determining organic whole. For Hegel, organic development moves through a negation held within within a greater self-relation. A seed, for instance, is negated in the becoming of a plant, such that its identity as a seed is oriented toward its own end. Yet, it is nevertheless not absolutely lost but continues in its own way in the developed plant. For more on way Hegel’s dialectical negativity builds from his considerations of organic forms of life, see Songsuk Susan Hahn, *Contradiction in Motion: Hegel’s Organic Concept of Life and Value* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007), particularly Part I, “Hegel’s Logic of Organic Wholes.” Frederick Beiser

Hegel provides further clarity regarding nature's negativity in his *Philosophy of Nature*, the second volume of his tripartite *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences*.

He writes,

Nature is the negative because it is the negative of the Idea. Jacob Boehme says that God's first-born is Lucifer; and this son of Light centered his imagination on himself and became evil: that is the moment of difference, of otherness held fast against the Son, who is otherness within the divine love. The ground and significance of such conceptions which occur wildly in an oriental style, is to be found in the negative nature of Nature. The other form of otherness is immediacy, which consists in the moment of difference existing abstractly. This existence, however, is only momentary, not a true existence; the Idea alone exists eternally, because it is being in and for itself, i.e. being which has returned into itself.¹⁰

Otherness has two main forms. There is an otherness of separation, which can be reconciled within the divine (the Son through the Spirit) or refuse reconciliation (Lucifer "against the Son"). There is also this "other form of otherness," an otherness that does not quite exist, for it is negativity that has not even emerged in distinction, being neither Son nor Lucifer. The "negative nature of Nature" includes both the negativity of opposition and the negativity of this immediacy, this failure to enter opposition. Nevertheless, these negativities are not absolutely exterior to the divine reconciliation. Even though nature is

suggests that Hegel focused on and developed an "organic worldview" because it could explain the interrelation of the persons of the Trinity as well as the relationship between the individual and nature. See Frederick Beiser, *Hegel* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 88.¹⁰ G. W. F. Hegel, *Hegel's Philosophy of Nature: Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, trans. A. V. Miller (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), §248, Zusatz, p. 19. All subsequent citations will use the abbreviation *Enc. 2*, to indicate that they are taken from the three-part (1830) rendition of Hegel's *Encyclopedia*. Cyril O'Regan has argued that the Gnostic background, here made explicit with the reference to Boehme, makes "any distinction between nature and finite spirit...a distinction *within* the order of evil." O'Regan, however, too quickly relates "negativity" and "separation" to "evil" and thus does not adequately capture how evil arises not as the essence of negativity (or separation) but as a failure in negativity, and one peculiar to self-conscious spirit. Thus, Hegel's assertion that "animals, stones, and plants are not evil" (*LPR* III/1824, 206) need not be considered, as O'Regan does, as a "conceptual wobble." See Cyril O'Regan, *The Heterodox Hegel* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1994). The quotations come from p. 158 and p. 157, respectively.

“the Idea held fast for a moment *outside* the divine love,”¹¹ this exteriority is not an absolute rupture but the hiddenness of the full union: “in Nature, the unity of the Notion is concealed.”¹²

Creation is, for Hegel, the externalization of an antithesis within God whose reconciliation is hidden through a temporal delay: reconciliation is only explicit and actual through a particular world-historical development.¹³ If creation is the externalization of the antithesis or negativity within Spirit, then it would seem that creation in general and the creation of self-conscious human beings in particular would be identical to a “fall” into evil: both emerge as an opposition that has yet to be reconciled to and within God.¹⁴ This line of thought, though not wholly inaccurate, is complicated by Hegel’s narration of the relationship or even identity between these two different forms of otherness.¹⁵

¹¹ Hegel, *Enc. 2*, §247, Zusatz, p. 14, emphasis added.

¹² Hegel, *Enc. 2*, §247, Zusatz, p. 14.

¹³ The precise temporal mechanism, the “counter-thrust” will be discussed in more detail in the final section.

¹⁴ Besides O’Regan’s discussion in *Heterodox Hegel*, see the discussions of evil and creation in Peter Hodgson, *Hegel and Christian Theology: A Reading of the Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 141-154, 248-265; William Desmond, *Hegel’s God: A Counterfeit Double?* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003), 121-166; William Desmond, “Evil and Dialectic,” in *New Perspectives on Hegel’s Philosophy of Religion*, ed. David Kolb (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992), 159-182; and, Robert R. Williams, *Tragedy, Recognition, and the Death of God: Studies in Hegel and Nietzsche* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 231-262.

¹⁵ In the first volume of the *Encyclopedia*, the Logic, Hegel states that “both evils are in fact the same,” a delightfully dialectical statement that recognizes the difference between the two in form (or stages) while identifying them together as the same content or same failure in becoming. See G. W. F. Hegel, *The Encyclopaedia Logic: Part I of the Encyclopaedia of Philosophical Sciences with the Zusätze*, trans. T. F. Geraets, W. A. Suchting, and H. S. Harris (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1991), §24, add. 3, p. 63.

There are, for Hegel, two primary ways for humans to fail to be reconciled to Spirit, which is to say, there are two different ways in which Hegel characterizes evil, corresponding to the two kinds of “otherness” discussed above. First, in finite self-consciousness, the self is established by eliminating any and all relational determinations or limits. Here, the human enters the negativity Hegel deems initially appropriate, where it stands in opposition to a world pressing in on it through its senses and moving within it through its bodily desires and drives. Instead of following this negativity further and negating this initial negation, the person (or people) remain stuck at this stage. Evil, therefore, means, “singularizing myself in a way that cuts me off from the universal (which is the rational, the laws, the determinations of spirit).”¹⁶ Yet, it is precisely through this separation or “singularizing” movement that the self becomes aware of itself as universal, as a subject capable of rational self-determination. Human rationality or self-consciousness does not have “an external relationship to evil: it is itself what is evil.”¹⁷

Evil can also be the failure of finite Spirit to singularize itself and posit itself as the (abstract) universal at all. In this regard, evil is human nature characterized by immediacy. In immediacy, the animal world of senses and drives dominates. The human subject never actually emerges, for it never posits itself as subject against the material world and its own bodily drives. When “humanity exists only according to nature...it is evil.”¹⁸ Humans ought to negate themselves in their natural state so that they can

¹⁶ Hegel, *LPR* III/1824, 206.

¹⁷ Hegel, *LPR* III/1824, 206.

¹⁸ Hegel, *LPR* III/1827, 298.

transition toward an understanding of their own implicitly universal (rational, free) nature. “Natural humanity” does not negate this human immediacy and is therefore evil.

Natural humanity is finite Spirit in the state of immediacy; abstractly universal humanity is finite Spirit in separation, wherein its immediacy has been negated but this negative separation has not yet been overcome. Evil is, however, less a matter of the state in which finite Spirit lives and more of a matter of the process that Spirit is. As Hegel says in his *Philosophy of Right*:

The human being is therefore evil both *in himself* or *by nature* and at the same through his *reflection into himself*, so that neither nature as such (apart from the naturalness of the will which remains tied to its particular content) nor reflection *turned in upon itself*, i.e. in cognition in general (unless it remains attached to that opposition already referred to) is in itself [*für sich*] evil.¹⁹

The stages of human life—in immediacy or in the understanding—are not evil per se; rather, evil comes from the lack of movement beyond them. Evil is, at its core, a failure of the process that defines Spirit: self-relation through negation. If the reconciling process that defines Spirit is this movement of negativity, then evil can be viewed as a matter of incomplete reconciliation (a failure to completely negate the negation) or as lacking this reconciling movement altogether (a failure to enter negativity at all). To render this same distinction temporally: the evil of the understanding or separation is a failure in becoming, a failure *within* the temporality of development; the evil of immediacy is a failure to become at all, a failure to even enter into human time.

These two modalities of evil, or rather these two forms of the single failure in becoming that is evil, correspond to two figures who complicate Hegel’s political philosophy: the slave and the European rabble. Hegel discusses the problem of the slave

¹⁹ Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, §139, p. 168, brackets supplied by translator.

in connection with humanity in its immediate existence, as a “natural being whose existence (of which the arbitrary will is also a part) is not in conformity with his concept.”²⁰ The rabble—the indignant poor within European civil society—are linked to “the negative understanding,” as having that “disposition” which takes “the negative as a starting-point.”²¹ These two figures of evil trouble Hegel’s account of Spirit as a movement of reconciliation, for they are moments that both must be and yet cannot be incorporated into Spirit’s global dynamics of self-development.

Configuring Evil: Indigeneity

Hegel discusses the problematics of human immediacy through his accounts of Indigenous peoples in Africa, the Pacific Islands, and America. His accounts are by no means consistent, and, as Robert Bernasconi has pointed out, they often exaggerate or contradict the source materials from which he draws.²² These various discussions will be drawn together and consolidated by the term, “Indigeneity,” a term whose abstractness corresponds to Hegel’s determination that such peoples have not developed into properly

²⁰ Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, §57, p. 87, brackets supplied by the translator have been removed.

²¹ Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, §272, p. 306-307.

²² Robert Bernasconi, “Hegel and Court of the Ashanti,” in *Hegel after Derrida*, ed. Stuart Barnett, Warwick Studies in European Philosophy (New York: Routledge, 1998), 41-63. See also his essay, Robert Bernasconi, “With What Must the Philosophy of World History Begin? On the Racial Basis of Hegel’s Eurocentrism,” *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 22, no. 2 (January 1, 2000): 171–201. For a critical engagement with Bernasconi as well as with other critics of Hegel’s Eurocentrism, racism, and support for colonialism, see Timothy Brennan, *Borrowed Light: Vico, Hegel, and the Colonies* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014), 73-131. Brennan’s emphasis on dialogue and mutuality and his endorsement of the humanism in Hegel lead him to downplay the importance of Hegel’s articulation of “Indigeneity” within his thought as a whole. With regards to Bernasconi’s work, this article is less interested in the moral evaluation of Hegel’s position as it uses Hegel to index and draw out the core operations of racial globality.

formed or recognizable social subjects.²³ Hegel is less concerned with developing a rigid empirical system of designation than with depicting the “inner tendency and capacity of the intellectual and moral character of the several peoples.”²⁴ Indigeneity or human immediacy marks, for Hegel, the complete lack of this inner tendency or potentiality to develop properly *human*, that is, self-conscious and rational or universal, modes of life. Racial anthropology and geography therefore mark a global political order structured through various configurations of human potentiality, configurations which themselves are ordered between the two poles corresponding to Indigeneity on one hand and the fully-developed political subject emerging within the European state on the other.

In Hegel’s thought, Indigeneity marks the necessity and difficulty he must face in tracing, or rather, producing the presence of an absence, in this case, the presence of a completely unactualized capacity for human self-consciousness and freedom. As what is potentially present is actually absent, a mode of life corresponding to pure potentiality is, for Hegel, neither truly present nor absent. What *is* actual in this mode of life hangs somewhere in between the category of the animal and the human, the living biological soul and self-conscious (rational) mind. Hegel makes this point explicit when considering the religions of human beings in immediacy. Their religious content is “called spirit, it is spirit, and it has the appearance of spirit, but it is still the spirit that is spiritless, that does

²³ It is worth noting that Hegel consistently places Indigenous American populations at the lowest level of his categorization. See, for instance, the remarks in Hegel, *LPR* II/1824, 274-275 and also in *World History*, 165. See also the discussion in Michael H. Hoffheimer, “Hegel, Race, Genocide,” *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 39, no. S1 (March 1, 2001): 35–62.

²⁴ G. W. F. Hegel, *Hegel’s Philosophy of Mind: Being Part Three of the Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, trans. William Wallace and A. V. Miller (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), §394, p. 45-46. Hereafter cited as *Enc. 3*. Precisely by having worked through the *Logic*, one is able to distinguish the arbitrary empirical differences from the essential ones that are included in, as moments of, Spirit’s self-development.

not yet [have spiritual content].”²⁵ As each religion reflects the capacity of its adherents, these spiritless religions are reflections of spiritless spirit: the potentiality of spirit is present but is completely unactualized and unable to be actualized by them.²⁶ These religions and peoples are on the border of humanity, a location Hegel thematizes by simultaneously including and negating these religions from the sphere of human religiosity: “the very first religion, if we are willing to call it that. . . .”²⁷

Hegel never excises Indigenous peoples from the category of the human, which would entail they were merely animals. Nor, however, can he unequivocally include them, for human existence, as finite Spirit, is inward mediation through self-negation, whereas immediacy is defined precisely by this lack of internal mediation. For Hegel, they live as “animal man,” in which “nothing consonant with humanity is to be found.”²⁸ They are characterized by an “unfree freedom” and are, properly speaking, neither living nor quite dead:

Immediacy. . . is the nonmediated, indeed not even the living, far less the spiritual—it is something dead, as though something could be without this mediation. The natural spirit is essentially what spirit ought not to be or to remain.²⁹

Indigeneity is what Spirit ought not be, that is, evil, for it a living death, a stasis that lacks the movement (mediation, negation) proper to Spirit.

²⁵ Hegel, *LPR* II/1824, 267, brackets supplied by translator.

²⁶ Hegel, *LPR* II/1827, 515.

²⁷ Hegel, *LPR* II/1824, 273; see also *LPR* II/1827, 532. Hegel places this willingness in a negative light when he states that this first stage of religion “we may deem unworthy of the name ‘religion,’” in *LPR* II/1827, 535. He indicates the liminality of this first stage of religion again a few pages later, *LPR* II/1827, 538.

²⁸ “Animal man” is used by Hegel to refer to Africans in *World History*, 177.

²⁹ Hegel, *LPR* III/1821, 93. The phrase “unfree freedom” is taken from *LPR* II/1824, 273, and precedes his discussion of the Eskimos.

In his account of the “Geographical Basis of World History,” Hegel suggests that the essential, distinguishing “feature” of the African character is “intractability” (*Unbändigkeit*).³⁰ This unrestrained, unbound, boisterous, untamed mode of life—*Unbändigkeit*—is “incapable of any development or culture,” and is therefore exterior to the historical development that is the nature of Spirit.³¹ *Unbändigkeit* marks those peoples Hegel considers to be too unbound(ed) to have or be incorporated into any process of formation. This unboundedness or intractability is the animality, immediacy, and inhumanity of Indigeneity. Lacking the inwardness (self-relating negativity) that is a prerequisite for universality (rationality and freedom), their actions have, for Hegel, no purpose, and hence no value: “life in general has no value *for them*.”³² For Hegel, politically speaking, not only is slavery the natural and dominant social relation here, it is an instrument through which more developed cultures may bring them to the higher stage of human development.³³

Although the indigenous populations in Africa and the Americas are grouped together, Hegel makes a significant distinction between the two: “Americans” cannot even survive contact with more developed cultural forms of Spirit. As a “purely natural culture” devoid of the development of Spirit, Indigenous Americans “had to perish as soon as the spirit approached it.”³⁴ For Hegel, the *death* of any cultural or national

³⁰ Hegel, *World History*, 190.

³¹ Hegel, *World History*, 190.

³² Hegel, *World History*, 185, emphasis added. The people to whom Hegel refers are Africans.

³³ “Since human beings are valued so cheaply, it is easily explained why *slavery* is the basic legal relationship in Africa.” Even though “slavery ought not to exist,” it is “still necessary” for “it is a moment in the transition towards a higher stage of development,” which can only come externally. Hegel, *World History*, 183, 184.

³⁴ Hegel, *World History*, 163.

spirit—of any people—results from an internal corruption or decay: “its natural death also appears as a kind of suicide. Thus we see on the one hand how the national spirit brings about its downfall.”³⁵ Unlike more developed nations that go through a cycle of “development [*Bildung*], over-refinement, and degeneration,” Indigenous Americans, Hegel claims, never developed. They simply perished upon mere contact with Spirit’s historical actualization in European activity, for they “were unable to amalgamate” with these superior modes of human life.³⁶ The place of America in history (in time) has to be considered through the transplanted European populations, for the “original American nation has vanished – or as good as vanished.”³⁷

Indigeneity is, for Hegel, bound to both the logic of slavery and genocide. Either mode of external contact—slavery or death—is a result of the utter inner lack of development that Hegel believes defines Indigenous peoples. Slavery and death actualize or make present their inability to actualize Spirit.³⁸ As a mode of existence closer to death than life, Indigeneity exhibits, for Hegel, a troubling non-dialectical negativity, a lack of the capacity that defines Spirit, the capacity of self-relation through negation. Without such a capacity, Indigeneity remains anterior to the sphere of the human, unable to self-actualize or come into possession of its own potentiality. Exit from this sphere of

³⁵ Hegel, *World History*, 60. Hegel elsewhere remarks, “if someone is a slave, his own will is responsible, just as the responsibility lies with the will of a people if that people is subjugated.” *Philosophy of Right*, §57, addition, p. 88.

³⁶ ³⁶ Hegel, *World History*, 164; the past tense also indicates Hegel’s interpretation of Indigenous peoples as already extirpated.

³⁷ Hegel, *World History*, 165. Hegel makes a similar comment in *Enc. 3*, referring to “the original inhabitants of America” as “a vanishing, feeble race.” See Hegel, *Enc. 3*, §393, Zusatz, p. 45.

³⁸ Hegel, in a way that follows Aristotle’s understanding of slavery, suggests there is a kind of potentiality some have for slavery: the “natural being” of immediacy is “capable of enslavement.” Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, §57, p. 87.

immediacy—which is characterized by external force, violence, and death—is possible if they come to accept, assuming they are capable, having been moved externally by those members of the ethical state, the fully developed human community of Spirit. This ethical community, however, also produces inside itself a mode of evil that troubles its world-historical work of incorporation: the rabble. Like Hegel’s discussion of Indigenous modes of life, the indignant jobless poor function as a *figuration* or representation of evil; as such, it is better indicated by using the word “rabble” as a technical term, indicated by its capitalization, the Rabble.

Configuring Evil: The Rabble

Hegel’s discussion of the Rabble takes place in a few paragraphs in his *Philosophy of Right* as well as in his various lectures on the subject of politics.³⁹ In Hegel’s analysis, poverty is an inevitable and essential aspect of modern civil societies. Civil society is composed of individuals who interact with one another based on their personal efforts to satisfy their own needs and desires. Since the fulfillment of these needs is the center of this social formation, new ways to satisfy these needs are devised along with new things to be desired. Industrialized forms of labor allow society to streamline its production so that it more effectively provides for the needs of its community while continuing to increase its overall wealth. Yet, as industrialized labor

³⁹ See the thorough discussion of this topic in Frank Ruda, *Hegel’s Rabble: An Investigation into Hegel’s Philosophy of Right* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), as well as the review of the book, Matt S. Whitt, “Indigence, Indignation, and the Limits of Hegel’s Political Philosophy – Ruda’s Hegel’s Rabble,” *Theory & Event* 15, no. 4 (2012). Whitt’s own article on the topic is quite helpful as well, Matt S. Whitt, “The Problem of Poverty and the Limits of Freedom in Hegel’s Theory of the Ethical State,” *Political Theory* 41, no. 2 (April 1, 2013): 257–84.

streamlines the work process, it decreases the amount of people able to work and thereby also decreases the amount of people able to consume the goods produced. Expanding production to provide work for these surplus laborers only ends up producing even more goods relative to the consumers, which again only compounds the problem of poverty since the overproduction of goods leads to the minimization of work in those industries.

There are multiple ways civil society can attempt to mediate this continuing production of an impoverished group deprived of work. Yet, none of the solutions are ultimately adequate.⁴⁰ Charity, for instance, undermines the very basis of civil society, in which one satisfies one's own needs through work. Settler colonization allows the society to access new markets and to move the jobless poor to a new location where they will be able to work. This externalization may be productive for Hegel, in that it extends this developed mode of life to other regions, yet it nevertheless is only a temporary alleviation of the problem and not a remedy for the continuous production of poverty. The "important question of how poverty can be remedied is one which agitates and torments modern societies especially."⁴¹

Poverty can certainly result from individual actions, attitudes, and aptitudes, but any group of workers—and hence any individual worker—can find itself cut off from the labor market and in poverty. Without property and work, they lack the basic attributes of social belonging in this society: they lose "that feeling of right, integrity, and honour

⁴⁰ Ruda notes seven possible ways civil society can attempt to eradicate the poverty it produces and demonstrates how each one cannot ultimately resolve the problem, as either the poverty remains or the attempted resolution contradicts and thereby renders incoherent the essential features of civil society. See Ruda, *Hegel's Rabble*, 32 for a succinct summation. Hegel discusses charity in *Philosophy of Right* §245, p. 267; the discussion of colonization occurs in §248, p. 269.

⁴¹ Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, §244, addition, p. 267.

which comes from supporting oneself by one's own activity."⁴² The jobless poor, however, are not what Hegel calls the Rabble. The jobless poor do not become the Rabble until and unless they become indignant about their poverty. The difference between the poor and the Rabble is a difference in attitude. The Rabble have turned against their society, taking on an attitude of "inward rebellion against the rich, against society, the government, etc."⁴³

As Matt Whitt notes, this "etc." is extremely important, for it signals the general or universal scope of this rebellious attitude and negation.⁴⁴ This totalizing negativity points to the connection Hegel attempts to make between the Rabble and the negativity of the understanding. For Hegel, the negativity—otherness and evil—of the understanding is the pursuit of a "negative freedom," the "freedom of the void."⁴⁵ This negative freedom becomes the "fanaticism of destruction, demolishing the whole existing social order."⁴⁶ Abstract universality preserves and values itself over against—by way of denying or negating—all concrete modes of existence.⁴⁷ The Rabble, it seems, makes precisely this withdrawal from and rebellious turn against the relations that constitute it, placing their whole social world—the "etc."—under negation for having deprived them of their social respectability and their ability to secure the livelihood.

Hegel specifically invokes the language of evil when discussing the Rabble. Those unable to work for their living become "frivolous and lazy," which "in turn gives rise" to a particular or rather compacted "evil": the "rabble do not have sufficient honour

⁴² Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, §244, p. 266

⁴³ Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, §244, p. 266.

⁴⁴ Whit, "The Problem of Poverty," 262.

⁴⁵ Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, §5, 38.

⁴⁶ Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, §5, 38.

⁴⁷ Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, §5, 38.

to gain their livelihood through their own work, yet claim that they have a right to receive their livelihood.”⁴⁸ The evil is two-fold, pointing to the deprivation of the poor and their corresponding assertion of a right. Civil society is, for Hegel, “obliged to feed its members,” but civil society is organized around and for the individual provision of “their own livelihood” through work.”⁴⁹ The assertion of a right to livelihood apart from work is, for Hegel, the epitome of this contradictory position of the evil of understanding: the very abstract and negative freedom it affirms requires the existence of the social world it turns against. “No one can assert a right against nature,” Hegel claims, “but within the conditions of society hardship at once assumes the form of a wrong inflicted on this or that class.”⁵⁰ Unlike Indigeneity, which for Hegel lives in a state of nature, the Rabble lives in society. Hardship is not simply the violence and disorder of natural life but becomes a “wrong inflicted” on them. Yet, in this civil society, social recognition and rights, as well as material provisions, come from work. To claim a right to livelihood without work invokes the language of civil society in a way that violates or negates this society’s basic order. Here, at this point, Hegel faces a contradiction he cannot sublimate. The indignation of the Rabble threatens to collapse the distinction between society and nature, for they make a claim to rights (society) on the basis of their sheer immediate physical needs and desires (nature). Further, this collapse of the distinction between society and nature, where the evil of the abstract understanding blurs into the evil of immediacy, always and necessary accompanies these modern societies.

⁴⁸ Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, §244, p. 266.

⁴⁹ Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, §240, addition, p. 264.

⁵⁰ Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, §244, p. 266-7.

The Rabble are always possibly present in modern civil society: anyone can become poor and deprived of work and any poor person can, by simple indignation, become Rabble.⁵¹ The problem this “latent” Rabble creates for Hegel is that it is indeterminate in a way he cannot resolve: they no longer belong to civil society and yet they cannot simply be treated as nonmembers. If organic life moves through this negative self-relation—negating itself and sustaining its life within this negation, or, as he also says, wounding and healing itself—then the Rabble has become lazy and rotten (*Faul*), cut off, putrefied, and beyond healing.⁵² As Mark Ruda summarizes, “the rabble

⁵¹ Ruda clarifies this ever-present yet indeterminable possibility of the Rabble, calling it the “double latency” of the Rabble. Ruda, *Hegel’s Rabble*, 46-7.

⁵² “But the divine principle of turning, of return to self, is equally present in cognition; it gives the wound and heals it” (*LPR* III/1821, 103). If Spirit “is the absolute power to endure this [infinite] anguish” (*LPR* III/1824, 215), Indigeneity is what cannot achieve this meaningful or spiritual suffering. From this vantage point, one can more readily discern the problem with Slavoj Žižek’s enlistment of Hegel and “the death of God,” for instance, in his opening contribution to the exchange with John Milbank, “The Fear of Four Words: A Modest Plea for the Hegelian Reading of Christianity,” in Slavoj Žižek and John Milbank, *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?*, ed. Creston Davis (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2011), 24-109. For Žižek, “The Spirit heals its wound not by directly healing it, but by getting rid of the very full and sane Body into which the wound was cut” (72). Getting rid of the full body or the pure origin requires, however, a distinction be made between the necessarily open and incomplete body of cognition—the human proper—and what Hegel marks as Indigeneity and what Žižek refers to as human “animality” (93). Žižek, through Alain Badiou, marks the central point of his materialist ontology: “How can a human animal forsake its animality and put its life at the service of a transcendent Truth?...In other words, how is a free act possible? How can one break (out of) the network of the causal connections of positive reality and conceive an act that begins by and in itself?” (Žižek, 92). After having previously declared the Christ-event as essential for the transition from human animality to pure ego or self-consciousness (59), Žižek critiques Badiou for thinking that the event itself constitutes this shift, for it is only within “humanity proper” that “an Event can inscribe itself” (93). The point is that the “parallax gap” Žižek seeks between “ordinary reality” and “the Event” (99) is located in the interpretive capacities of proper humanity as distinguished from those who cannot read reality (as subjects) because they are simply driven along, like animals, by it. Žižek must both posit and deny this problem of human animality or immediacy so as to articulate the proper human agency (freedom) of European (revolutionary) subjects.

degenerates into an animal because he is evil.”⁵³ As members of civil society, Hegel treats the Rabble as rational and free, though beholden to an abstract freedom that has turned against the external conditions that provide them this very freedom. Yet, as indignant and lazy, the Rabble becomes marked by the conditions of immediacy, of “savagery” and “bestiality.”⁵⁴ They no longer belong to the political body of rational self-determining individuals at all, the way a severed hand no longer belongs to the body but becomes un-organic, an existence deprived of its organic life, rotting and irredeemable.⁵⁵ To treat the Rabble as an instantiation of the negativity of the understanding is to hold out the possibility of their redemption, their incorporation back into the political body they stand against. To treat them as an instantiation of human immediacy, as “natural man” present in the developed European ethical community, is to mark them as cut off and excluded, incapable of belonging. Whether they are interior or exterior to the society is the problem Hegel, and with him, these modern societies, face. Without such a determination, civil society cannot intelligibly account for *their* existence, which entails they cannot account for its own existence, since the Rabble are a constitutive element (always and necessarily a possibility) of civil society. It is precisely here, at this potentially volatile transition point between the jobless poor and the Rabble, that Hegel’s philosophical interpretation of the Crucified God operates: the jobless poor can still access the universality of this negative moment in which they suffer, and thereby avoid

⁵³ Ruda, *Hegel’s Rabble*, 70. Whitt notes use of bestial language and savagery in “The Problem of Poverty,” 262.

⁵⁴ Whitt, “The Problem of Poverty,” 262.

⁵⁵ Ruda discusses the particular importance of Hegel’s use of a severed hand as an analogy. Ruda, *Hegel’s Rabble*, 82.

becoming Rabble, by connecting their own social anguish to that of God's suffering on the cross.

The Death of God: Religion, Anguish, and Reconciling the Rabble

Hegel provides a succinct summary of his philosophical interpretation of the Christian Gospel when he says,

Within this history [of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ] as spirit comprehends it, there is the very presentation of the process of what humanity, what spirit is—implicitly both God and dead. This [is] the mediation whereby the human is stripped away and, on the other hand, what-substitutes-in-itself returns to itself, first coming to be spirit thereby.⁵⁶

Christology, in particular the death of God, plays such a pivotal moment for Hegel because it is the historical moment that manifests explicitly (in material form) both the absolute separation of humanity from God (finite Spirit from infinite Spirit) and the dissolution of this very separation and therefore the reconciliation of God and humankind. The cross is that moment in which death, negation, finitude, and evil are revealed to be internal to God's very own dynamic life. The crucifixion of Jesus is thereby the turning point in Hegel's philosophy of religion, for it is the point through which all the preceding and subsequent movements are revealed to be moments within the self-determining freedom of Spirit.

There are, in fact, multiple deaths revealed on the cross. As death is the pinnacle or defining moment of finitude, human finite life is revealed for what it is: implicitly dead, defined by this utmost limit. Further, the death on the cross is a dishonorable death, the death of a criminal in which Jesus's social community abandons him. It is,

⁵⁶ Hegel, *LPR* III/1827, 326-327.

accordingly, the revelation of the fundamental possibility of a kind of social death: the death of the human as a socially recognized being.⁵⁷ Finally, if religion is the “relation of human consciousness to God,” then this death is the death of religion or of the religious man, the separation of the one who belonged totally to God from God.⁵⁸

These multiple deaths on the cross reveal God because this historical, material death is a moment of the divine life: “God has died.”⁵⁹ That God has died reveals that God cannot be understood as the abstractly infinite unmoved divine being, for God “becomes the other and sublates this other.”⁶⁰ This absolute negativity as a matter of self-relation *is* the process of and as divine Spirit. Since this particular death is included within Spirit’s very life, finite humans can see that the negation of their negativity—the negation of their finite life, sociality, and religion—is not simply a loss but the possibility of their true and genuine affirmation as moments internal to the divine. It is now possible for humans to live truthfully, with the knowledge that they and their world are not realities grounded in themselves but are related to God as moments of this divine negativity. As moments of *divine* negativity, they are truly affirmed within the life and love that is God. Life in this externality—in finitude—is now possible as a mode of reconciled life, beyond the evil of a falsely self-positing, self-possessed finitude.⁶¹

⁵⁷ Orlando Patterson refers to “the liminal state of social death” as “institutionalized marginality” wherein one is integrated in the social group as one who does not belong, what he terms “liminal incorporation.” See Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 46, 45.

⁵⁸ Hegel, *LPR* I/1827, 150.

⁵⁹ Hegel, *LPR* III/1824, 219.

⁶⁰ Hegel, *LPR* III/1824, 219.

⁶¹ One can ascertain the insufficiency of various theological critiques of human “self-possession,” for Hegel offers precisely that critique, centered on the cross, and grounded within a relational political theology. The critique of self-possession through the

In his 1821 *Philosophy of Religion* Lecture Manuscripts, Hegel emphasizes the social import of God's dishonoring on the cross. Since God is the one who also died on the cross,

the dishonoring of existence has been elevated to a position of highest honor, all the bonds of human corporate life are fundamentally assaulted, shaken, and dissolved. The cross corresponds to our gallows. If the symbol of dishonor is made into a badge [of honor] and is raised up as a banner whose positive content is at the same the kingdom of God, then the inner disposition [of the citizens] is at root withdrawn from the life of the state and from civil affairs.⁶²

Hegel views the historical situation of Christians at the time of Rome as resonating with his contemporary context, concluding his 1821 lectures as a whole with a direct comparison between his own historical moment and that of the Roman Empire.⁶³ The elevation of what has been dishonored by being criminalized and excluded from the community's social life—the death on the cross—withdraws the inner disposition or attitude of the citizens from the state.⁶⁴ Historically, as Hegel emphasizes in his later variations on these lectures, this creates the Christian community of spirit, which begins with a spiritual withdrawal from the world and the political state but gradually moves toward the formation of a spiritual community that seeks its reconciliation in the worldly sphere. As the “principle of freedom has penetrated into the worldly realm itself...it is in the ethical realm that the reconciliation of religion with worldliness and actuality comes about and is accomplished.”⁶⁵ By comparing his present stage to that of the Roman

dispossessive love of God on the cross is already found in Hegel, and found within his own work to clarify—not overturn—the deep structures of racial modernity.

⁶² Hegel, *LPR* III/1821, 130, brackets added by the translator.

⁶³ Hegel, *LPR* III/1821, 130 and 159.

⁶⁴ Patriotism is a “disposition” of “trust,” the “consciousness that my substantial and particular interest is preserved and contained in the interest and end of an other (in this case, the state).” Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, § 268, p. 288.

⁶⁵ Hegel, *LPR* III/1827, 342.

Empire, Hegel opens up two ways to relate the infinite divine anguish revealed on the cross to the anguish of the poor in European civil society.

From one perspective, Hegel is discouraged that the Enlightenment theology of his day has eviscerated the knowledge of the true infinite and has therefore rendered the proclamation of the Gospel as a message of abstract morality uninterested in and disconnected from the anguish of the common poor people. The truth of the Gospel, if preached, would not bar the poor from universality and freedom but allow them to see their genuine freedom even in their anguish and social dishonor. The divine does not exclude but is found even within dishonored existence; accordingly, this dishonorable existence is elevated by and incorporated into God's life. The poor need not accept their dishonor as definitive of their identity. The rebellious attitude, laziness, and shamelessness of the Rabble are not essential and necessary aspects of being impoverished: one could take a Christian view and relate this social dishonoring and suffering to the infinite anguish of God on the cross. The Gospel, in this way, pacifies the poor, allowing them to access the true universal in representational form, giving them a content for their faith that contains and upholds them and their infinite anguish. The Gospel prevents and possibly overcomes the formation of the Rabble.

The other way of reading Hegel is to suggest that the Gospel does not simply assuage the anguish of the poor but volatizes them so that they, like the early Christian community, withdraw from their nation state so as to form another mode of common life adequate to the nature of Spirit. The Gospel here would function as a revolutionary principle through which the impoverished masses could recognize themselves as moments of Spirit in spite of the decay that marks the dominant civil society, a society

which positions them as (potential) Rabble. In this case, the travails of poverty that create among the poor a kind of “helpless[ness] vis-à-vis the pressure of its interior impulses” are connected to the divine anguish, such that these physical impulses do not dominate them.⁶⁶ The poor retain their rational freedom, allowing them to create a concretely universal society over against the corruption and corrupting influence of the modern capitalist state. The eternity of the community of Spirit, which cannot pass away, would develop and not collapse with the dissolution of the nation form. Hegel, in 1821, refused to comment on how “the present day is to solve its problems,” though his development of this section in 1824 and in 1827 suggests quite strongly that he “offer[s] guidance” toward the former trajectory, at least in these later years.⁶⁷

Whether moving along a conservative or more radical trajectory—what becomes the rightwing and leftwing Hegelians—this political theology of the Crucified God functions to prevent the transformation of the European poor into that mode of life Hegel configures as Indigeneity: human life in nature or in immediacy. To put the matter from the other side, both the radical and conservative readings of Hegel’s political theology require that the community of Spirit defines its concrete universality over against those people situated beyond redemption, marked by an evil that defies incorporation for it lacks any connection to a freely willing, redeemable human subject.

⁶⁶ Hegel, *LPR* III/1821, 160-161.

⁶⁷ Hegel, *LPR* III/1821, 162. In the later iterations, Hegel no longer views the philosophical community as a “sanctuary” composed of those who preserve “this possession of truth” but are “untroubled about how it goes with the world” (*LPR* III/1821, 162). Rather, now the Christian community develops progressively toward the “community of philosophy” as the highest mode of the “kingdom of the Spirit” (*LPR* III/1824, 247).

In a peculiar moment in his Lecture Manuscripts, Hegel suggests that the “immediacy of natural being itself exists only as something posited, as a willing, a transition.”⁶⁸ To make immediacy the result of an act of will is to interpret it as a mediation, as not immediate or unmediated, but something for which those in this state are responsible:

That human being is a natural [being] is a matter of its will, its doing. No excuse to the effect that human being is as it is by nature, education, or circumstances [can] justify, excuse, or take away the guilt. In this alone, that [evil] is a matter of human responsibility, is human *freedom* recognized—its being posited by humanity itself; humanity has dignity only through [the acceptance of] guilt.⁶⁹

The necessity of this argument follows from the definition of human being as “a transition” based on the movement of free will, and therefore as a transition, movement, or becoming for which the human is responsible. Guilt, in other words, is foundational in Hegel’s political theology. To assert that an existence in immediacy was unwilled would define this existence as beyond good and evil, without guilt and hence without ethical or political responsibility. It would be an existence unrelated to the political theology of redemption, unconnected to the incorporative project of global human self-determination.

However, the need to attribute responsibility and guilt to those he characterizes as living in a state of nature or immediacy contradicts this very notion of human immediacy. A few paragraphs later, Hegel therefore writes that for those in immediacy who have a “natural will,” there is “indeed formal freedom, but right along with it the content [is] given—[so it is not] free will and [there is] no guilt.”⁷⁰ The natural will is the will “of desire,” where the human capacities of reason and willing are so thoroughly overridden

⁶⁸ Hegel, *LPR* III/1821, 102.

⁶⁹ Hegel, *LPR* III/1821, 102.

⁷⁰ Hegel, *LPR* III/1821, 103.

by sensual desires as to afford no mediation, no moment of separation, and hence no moment of rational deliberation or free self-determination. The capacity to will freely is present but it is completely unactualized, and further, the person in this condition cannot be responsible for their situation, for they lack the potentiality to will otherwise: there is “no guilt” in this case. To be in immediacy is to be trapped and governed by necessity, by externality, with no internal recourse to human rationality and freedom.

If human rational self-consciousness emerges through disciplined, habituated activity—activity oriented to the universal—then the Rabble loses the habit of activity proper to Spirit through their joblessness, a loss that is a “de-education or un-education,” while Indigenous life, is, as Hegel notes for Africans, “incapable of any development or culture, and their present existence is the same as it has always been.”⁷¹ The point of connection as well as the substantial difference between the Rabble and Indigenous life centers on the necessity of disincorporation within the inclusivity that is Spirit’s very life: the Rabble are the latent possibility of disincorporation within civil society while Indigeneity represents the incapacity to be incorporated, or rather, the incapacity to incorporate themselves. The Rabble is the exterior interior to Spirit and Indigeneity is anterior to Spirit itself, included within as what Spirit in its human form has by definition always already left behind.⁷² The Rabble are left with a lingering point of connection

⁷¹ Ruda, *Hegel’s Rabble*, 75; Hegel, *World History*, 190.

⁷² One can note the consonance of this distinction with that developed by Giorgio Agamben, between an inclusive exclusion, Indigeneity as that which is included in the human as what the human categorically excludes, and an exclusive inclusion, the Rabble as that which is excluded though belonging to the sphere of the human. Agamben suggests that these two movements are historically distinct, representing a modern and ancient version of the “anthropological machine” of the West, neglecting, as he does elsewhere, the modernity of slavery and also the mobilization and integration of both configurations within the thought of a thinker he knows well, Hegel. See Giorgio

here, *having been* members of civil society, which is to say, the Rabble can situate their rebellion by retaining the split between self-determining citizen-subjects and their racialized unfree subhuman others, or they can contest the situation as a whole from its total point of exteriority, as an iteration of a mode of life with no intelligible connection.

Theorizing the Rabble through Indigeneity—instead of retaining the implicit distinction between them—allows one to pinpoint the precise point of incoherence that Hegel faces. In the Rabble, the whole developmental logic falters. Civil society faces and in fact of necessity produces that which remains unintelligible to it: neither inside nor outside, neither past nor present, neither responsible nor irresponsible, neither human nor nonhuman, neither living nor dead, Hegel’s system of thought stumbles over the necessity and impossibility of isolating and incorporating the animality of human political subjects. A limit that is necessarily indeterminate cannot be incorporated, and such an irresolvable indeterminacy is an essential feature of this system. Spirit redeems by marking some lives as beyond the sphere, the developmental temporality, of redemption, which entails also that this Spirit moves only in relation to that which necessarily remains unintelligible and unassimilable to it.

Outside the Time of Salvation

Human immediacy materializes the gap between the animal and the human, which Hegel draws together through the term “animal man.” The difference between animal life

Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. Kevin Attell (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2004), p. 37. Agamben’s account of the “anthropological machine” is discussed in Chapter Seven.

and the life of self-conscious (human) Spirit is, ultimately, a matter of time, or rather, the mode of temporality:

The survival of the [animal] species consists purely in a uniform repetition of one and the same mode of existence. But with spiritual forms, it is otherwise; for in this case, change occurs not just on the surface but within the concept, and it is the concept itself which is modified. In the natural world, the species does not progress, but in the world of the spirit, each change is a form of progress.⁷³

For natural life—plants and animals—temporality is cyclical. The changes are only on the surface since the same content, the genus or species, remains the same. Humans, on the contrary, are distinguished in that external changes correspond to changes within the concept. Spiritual life is self-produced, such that every externalization is not merely a surface differentiation but is a moment within the species' production of its essence or content. Accordingly, “world history as a whole is the expression of spirit in time, just as nature is the expression of the Idea in space.”⁷⁴ Nature, as spatiality, lacks the self-propelled temporality of self-conscious Spirit. What Hegel calls “natural man” is situated explicitly prior to history. Human immediacy—like spatiality—is prior to the movements of productivity, prior to the temporality of self-determination through negation.

Catherine Malabou, in her celebrated book *The Future of Hegel: Plasticity, Temporality, Dialectic*, distinguishes three stages in the historical development of Spirit, corresponding to three different relations to time. The initial Greek stage is the “becoming essential of the accident,” where external accidents are shaped and molded by the self-forming subject so as to display the essential or universal nature of (human) substance. The second central stage is the rise of modern subjectivity, beginning in Christianity, mediated through Lutheran Christianity, and culminating in the European

⁷³ Hegel, *World History*, 128.

⁷⁴ Hegel, *World History*, 128.

Enlightenment philosophers. This stage is the “becoming accidental of essence,” where essence (the universal) externalizes and empties itself into its other (accidental being), coming to itself in this dispossession or kenosis. If the repetitions of habit are the central element in the initial (Greek) mode of self-formation—whereby externality is shaped into the form of essence—at this stage Spirit enters the temporality of the event, the rupture of revelation, in which essence divests itself so as to enter into what it is not. Temporality is now strongly linear: the event—the appearance of essence, or revelation—cannot be repeated. This second stage is, therefore, the negation of the first, including the negation of its temporality: “Christ is thus the figure of a pure event, the exact opposite of the habitual.”⁷⁵

Hegel’s own philosophical position is the third stage, offering another mode of self-development and temporality, which sublates or synthesizes these two previous stages. If the Greek time is the repetition of habit and Christian time a mode of anticipation (coming to oneself by emptying out all content), the temporality of this third stage of Absolute Knowledge is the temporality of retrospection. Both previous temporalities and their related accounts of self-development require a split between the interior and exterior, essence and appearance. In the Greek mode, the subject transforms the accidents of appearance into expressions of essence. In the modern mode, the subject arrives at its essence by giving itself over to what it is not (the external realm of appearance) while still retaining its self-relation even in this exteriority. In either case, the internal essence and external appearance are opposed. In the moment of Absolute Knowledge one finally overcomes, that is, sublates, this opposition between essence and

⁷⁵ Catherine Malabou, *The Future of Hegel: Plasticity, Temporality and Dialectic*, trans. Lisabeth During (New York: Routledge, 2004), 117.

appearance, receiving and giving form, habit and kenosis. With this negation, a new temporality of self-development opens up.

Hegel describes this mode and temporality of self-development in the *Philosophy of Religion* as a “counterthrust,” in which “the result casts off its position as a result” and accordingly the “first [moment] from which we begin...is itself posited in the result as something posited and no longer something immediate.”⁷⁶ The historical process of mediation—for example, the historical, dialectical progress of philosophy—can be seen as *development* only by virtue of a particular event that arises and claims this previous trajectory as its own process of origination or development. Immediacy, in this way, has no sense of its own and it only arises through some other event claiming this immediacy as the infinite potentiality and actual void of itself in the past. This recollective interpretation follows automatically from the event and is, for Malabou, the movement of the system as a whole without an author or controlling agent. The closed, immanent whole—Spirit—moves dynamically without ground, for the event automatically constitutes what precedes it as its own history of development, thereby placing itself at and as its own origin. This self-origination or self-development is *not* the work of a particular ego—human or divine—but is simply the system itself, Spirit. Self-consciousness here emerges not as the omnipotent author of the system but as its rational interpreter.

Self-development requires positing immediacy as the terminal point of a counter-thrust back to one’s beginning, such that it is present in and as its own beginning in a

⁷⁶ Hegel, *LPR* I/1824, 322. Žižek discusses it as the moment of dialectical reversal: “This is the dialectical reversal of contingency into necessity, i.e., the way the outcome of a contingent process is the appearance of necessity: things retroactively ‘will have been’ necessary.” Žižek, “The Fear of Four Words,” in *The Monstrosity of Christ*, 77.

sphere where it is completely absent (in actuality): the presence of an infinite potentiality and total absence of itself. The event which produces the past contingencies as essential moments of its self-development requires positing a point of furthest remove from itself which it can still claim to inhabit: this is, for Hegel, the sphere of human immediacy or Indigeneity. This counterthrust requires a division between the accidents that become necessary—those happenings that are included in a line of development—and the unessential accidents that produce nothing. Insofar as the fullness of the event is the pole that grounds and organizes those essential accidents as moments of its self-development, the emptiness of sheer potentiality is the other pole that organizes the unessential accidents as a matter of complete arbitrariness without developmental potential.

Spirit is not simply the event, nor the interpreter of the event. It is, rather, this global-historical constitution organized between the two poles of self-productivity. On one side, there is the developmental process that Spirit, the system without an author, claims as its own, thereby rendering certain contingencies as essential points internal to itself and therefore, politically speaking, internal to the (development of the) sphere of politics of rights, morality, and ethics. Unsurprisingly, Malabou's abbreviated recapitulation of Hegel limits this trajectory to ancient Greece, Western (Protestant) Christianity, and modern European philosophy. On the other side, there are those contingencies that were not and cannot be incorporated but remain, statically present within the whole and necessary for it. This is the sphere of the un(re)productive and arbitrary, included in the system only in virtue of having been marked by self-constituted

Spirit as an infinite potentiality that actualizes nothing of importance.⁷⁷ This sphere of arbitrariness is one in which violence and death are already taken to be the natural or given state.

One can certainly attempt to soften the contours of this global division and render Hegel's account more inclusive or pluralistic. Yet, such a gesture still operates precisely through the identification of a particular mode of life with the *telos* of humanity proper. The problem at hand is not the possible breadth or extension of Hegel's system to include those Hegel claims must be left behind (or brought along only through external measures). Rather, the problematic of racial globality is the very logic in which such an incorporative gesture presupposes a decision as to what constitutes the human proper, a decision that necessitates and builds from the production of a group that is within but excised from the category of the human, as either anterior to or cut off from the proper human form.⁷⁸

Malabou situates this decision, through which the human constitutes itself, outside the sphere of personality, divine or human, placing it instead as a kind of automatic feature of (immanent) Spirit.⁷⁹ This automatism of the initial founding gesture—similar to the “release” that constitutes the externality of space and the immediacy of human life—instantiates a global process of simplification, in which the various contingencies

⁷⁷ In this way, arbitrariness or contingency is necessary even though no particular arbitrariness or contingency is necessary: the anterior must be materially present but what defines its position as anterior is the lack of anything that could be the first step in the development or history of Spirit.

⁷⁸ As Lisa Marie Cacho says in another context about a “politics of representation,” which is to say a politics in which marginalized groups seek inclusion through recognition of their innate but deprived human value: “recuperating social value *requires* rejecting the other Other.” See Lisa Marie Cacho, *Social Death: Racialized Rightlessness and the Criminalization of the Unprotected* (New York: NYU Press, 2012), 17.

⁷⁹ Malabou, *Future of Hegel*, 158.

condense themselves into their genuine essential forms and are incorporated into this global system of Spirit. Malabou envisions these intra-human relations as less oppositional than Hegel does, suggesting that they “they engage themselves in a relationship of reciprocal tension that creates a ‘space’ between them, a space not of confrontation but of difference-within-continuity.”⁸⁰ Nevertheless, this difference-within-continuity still requires that point of furthest remove, that which cannot be condensed into this simplified or contracted necessity. It requires the dialectically necessary other pole within the system, what is too unbounded (*Unbändigkeit*) to be in formation, or to use Malabou’s favored term, what is too unbounded to be “plastic,” where plasticity refers to the giving, receiving, and exploding of form. These two poles also ensure that even difference-within-continuity will always be implicitly hierarchical in terms of one’s power of or potential for self-formation.

The other problem in Malabou’s argument is that the “system without an author” requires a historical community that self-consciously arranges or produces itself as a moment within the system as a whole. Only through this community can one rightly attribute to the system the automatism of decision. To put this point differently and from the other side, the automatic decision of and as the system—its total immanence or complete lack of transcendent point of determination—requires that this decision be communally produced as a specific human decision that also takes itself to be or declares itself to be identical to, as a moment of, the system as a whole. For Hegel, the dispersal of sovereignty into the global system itself *is* a human event, a moment within Spirit that identifies itself with the constitution or origin of this system, and in this way, constitutes

⁸⁰ Malabou, *Future of Hegel*, 165.

itself as the origin and goal of human life. This particular human community must posit itself as the center or core through which Spirit itself splits and organizes the globe between the community of rights and responsibility on one side and those stateless beings given over to violence on the other (genocide and slavery as the exemplary aspects of external determination).

Arguing for inclusion within this sphere of rights or the human, or from the other side, for a less oppositional or exclusive formulation, is insufficient, as the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion themselves rely upon a previous violent split between the self-determining community “transparent” to or reconciled with the system without author (Spirit) and those others whose affectability, contingency, and unboundedness can only be obliterated or annihilated, whether through their violent incorporation—destroying their culture—or their physical annihilation.⁸¹ This organization of the globe *is* the logic of raciality and incorporation is the pulse or central operation within and as globalized racial modernity. Yet, this global organization of racialized salvation did not originate with Hegel. To glimpse the longer expanse of this project—and to begin to imagine what lies beyond its incorporative processes—it is necessary to turn elsewhere.

⁸¹ This sentence refers again to Denise Ferreira da Silva’s important work. Silva contrasts the logic of exclusion (representation) with that of obliteration or annihilation, arguing that the latter subtends the racial order: “Although the logic of exclusion has become the prevailing account of racial subjection, the basic strategies of race relations, ‘race prejudice’ and ‘race consciousness’, presuppose the logic of obliteration, for they consistently (re)produce modern social configurations as actualizations of a transparent [or self-determining] I and effectively produce as consciousness the others of Europe, whose intrinsic affectability will lead to their annihilation.” Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race*, 157-158.

CHAPTER 2:
THE COLONIALITY OF REDEMPTIVE BEING: SILVIA WYNTER

Hegel's brilliance and failures follow from his intellectual method: he gave his thought over to the global project of civilization that marked his day, allowing its dynamics to shape and thereby be discerned through the movement of his thought.¹ Sylvia Wynter, the Jamaican writer and theorist, attempts to "decipher" these same dynamics through a different approach, by "marrying" her thought to those excised from and "damned" by the long and continuing history of this global order.² This intellectual solidarity contests the condemnation of those excised from the dominant category of the human. If a specific and humanly produced narrative regarding the proper formation of human life is in fact the operative center of this global system, which Wynter endeavors

¹ See Theodor W. Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1994), 29.

² Wynter refers to her work as a "deciphering practice" in her essay, "Rethinking Aesthetics: Notes Toward a Deciphering Practice," in *Ex-Iles: Essays on Caribbean Cinema*, ed. Mbye Cham (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1992), 237–79. She speaks of the need to "marry our thought" to those Frantz Fanon called *les damnés* or "the condemned" in her essay, Sylvia Wynter, "'No Humans Involved': An Open Letter to My Colleagues," *Forum N.H.I.: Knowledge for the 21st Century*, 1, no. 1 (Fall 1994): 42–73. The phrase comes to Wynter from Zygmunt Bauman, who uses it in *Legislators and Interpreters: On Modernity, Post-Modernity and Intellectuals* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987).

to show, then one can rewrite this narrative for the sake of inventing another arrangement of human life that would be beneficial to the human species, and the broader environment, as a whole. To “undo their narratively condemned status,” it is not enough to write these excised populations into the history Hegel outlines, the history of what Wynter calls “Man.”³ Instead, for Wynter, one must undo the narrative itself, overcoming this redemptive project of humanization by gaining knowledge and control over how humans construct themselves, using this “new science” to create a truly universal or “species-wide” project of material liberation.⁴

Wynter’s project of full human emancipation requires that humans achieve control over the narratives that constitute them. This effort to acquire the “autonomy of cognition” follows from the advent of the secular age, which Wynter situates in the aftermath of 1492.⁵ The creation of self-correcting and objective forms of knowledge, the natural sciences, opened the possibility to understand human existence itself apart from any particular cultural form or narrative. However, as this secularity emerged entangled within the violent expansion of the mercantilist states, the attempt to know human life apart from any cultural framework was overridden by the imperative to know and engage these newly encountered forms of human life in ways conducive to the stabilization of

³ Wynter, “No Humans Involved,” 70. Wynter will use the designation ‘Man’ with reference to the work of Michel Foucault, though her thinking along these trajectories precedes and differs from Foucault’s work and formulation. For more detailed considerations of Wynter’s relation to Foucault, see the collection of essays, Anthony Bogue, ed., *After Man, Towards the Human: Critical Essays on Sylvia Wynter* (Kingston, Jamaica: Ian Randle Publishers, 2005), particularly chapters 6 and 13.

⁴ The phrase “new science” comes from Aimé Césaire’s work; Wynter frequently discusses his work at the end of her essays, when proposing how to resolve the many different problems she discusses. The meaning of the phrase will be discussed more thoroughly in the final section of this chapter.

⁵ Wynter speaks of the “autonomy of cognition” in three essays on Christopher Columbus’s voyages, which are discussed in the following section.

this newly emergent global order. Wynter positions her work as a repetition and extension of the break initiated by lay humanist scholars at the founding moments of global modernity, allowing the opening of the secular to be fully completed and turned against the ongoing coloniality to which it remains tethered.

This political project to unleash the full “autonomy of cognition” create problems in Wynter’s account, something that can be gauged through the way religion is, for her, an obfuscating set of practices that must be left behind for the maximization of humankind’s self-inventive powers. The species-wide humanism Wynter seeks requires that religion, or culture, become relativized; those who would interpret their communal modes of life as anything other than completely immanent and self-produced are left outside of this politics of complete human freedom. To begin this account of Wynter’s critical and constructive engagement with what one could call the “coloniality of Absolute Being,” to modify a phrase of hers, it will be helpful to turn back behind Hegel and look at the decisive ruptures that follow from the paradoxical or “Janus faced” effects of 1492.⁶

The Advent of Man

Everything changed after Columbus’s voyage in 1492, though Wynter will argue that another event, occurring almost sixty years later, is equally decisive for the formation

⁶ For the reference to 1492 itself as well as its effects as “Janus faced,” see Sylvia Wynter, “Columbus, The Ocean Blue and Fables That Stir the Mind: To Reinvent the Study of Letters,” in *Poetics of the Americas: Race, Founding, and Textuality*, ed. B. Cowan and J. Humphries (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997), 146, 149.

of the modern world system that continues at present.⁷ In 1550-51, two towering intellectuals squared off for a debate in the Spanish city of Valladolid: the Dominican priest, Bartolomé de Las Casas, and the humanist scholar, Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda. At stake was no small issue at the time, and one with tremendous consequences for everything that follows. In Valladolid, they debated how the emerging Spanish Empire ought to treat Indigenous populations, and on what intellectual and legal basis this treatment should rest. In Wynter's analysis, Sepúlveda's argument ultimately carried the day, a victory that marks the present as well as the past:

The new system of classification being put in place by Sepúlveda [is] the system that still provides the epistemic laws for our contemporary human system in its global dimension.⁸

Both the possibility of a fully autonomous human emancipation and the reality of the genocidal violence through which Christendom transformed itself into the civilization of "the West" follow from this system of classification, worked out in that debate in Valladolid. Before turning to this debate and its momentous consequences, it is necessary

⁷ Immanuel Wallerstein's notion of "world systems" influences Wynter's conception of global modernity. She engages it in an earlier essay as well as a more recent piece of writing. See Sylvia Wynter, "Ethno or Socio Poetics," *Alcheringa/Ethnopoetics* 2 (1976): 80. See also, Sylvia Wynter and Katherine McKittrick, "Unparalleled Catastrophe for our Species? Or, to Give Humanness a Different Future: Conversations," in Katherine McKittrick, ed., *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2014), 42.

⁸ Sylvia Wynter, "New Seville and the Conversion Experience of Bartolomé de Las Casas: Part Two," *Jamaica Journal* 17, no. 3 (October 1984): 46–55, the quotation is on p. 53. See also, Sylvia Wynter, "New Seville and the Conversion Experience of Bartolomé de Las Casas: Part One," *Jamaica Journal* 17, no. 2 (May 1984): 25–32. Other commenters connect Las Casas more closely to the development of modern political ideals. Gustavo Gutierrez, for instance, emphasizes Las Casas's support for the freedom of conscience in his book, *Las Casas: In Search of the Poor of Jesus Christ* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2003). In a book on the broader intellectual movement of which Las Casas was part, he is linked to the development of the discourse on human rights. See André Azevedo Alves and José Moreira, *The Salamanca School* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013).

to turn back to the initial disruption that it sought to resolve: the impact of Christopher Columbus's voyages.

For Wynter, all the diverse social and personal forces that led to Columbus's journeys place him squarely within the burgeoning humanist break from the medieval scholastic framework.⁹ To undertake his journeys, he had to drastically challenge the dominant theological beliefs of his day, thereby in effect undermining the dominant social order to which they were directly connected. The standard geographical view held by his opponents divided the world between the uninhabitable torrid zones to the south and north and the habitable temperate regions that marked Europe and the Mediterranean. The bi-polar division of the globe was, in fact, a theological division of grace. Given the scientific understanding of world at the time, the solid landmasses should have sunk below the water, and therefore the habitable area around the Mediterranean was understood to result from God's miraculous preservation.¹⁰ This global, theological division marked those realms external to this temperate, habitable region as regions external to the redemptive economy of salvation. The geographical division subtended and expressed the primary social division within the medieval feudal order, the division between those within God's redemptive economy and those external to it, especially, for Wynter, the division within the Christian community between the celibate clergy as representatives of lofty spirit and the laity as representing the sinking, corrupted flesh.

⁹ Sylvia Wynter, "Columbus and the Poetics of the Propter Nos," *Annals of Scholarship* 8, no. 2 (1991): 257. See also her essay, "1492: A New World View," in *Race, Discourse, and the Origin of the Americas: A New World View*, ed. Vera Lawrence and Rex Nettleford (Washington: Smithsonian Institute Press, 1995), 5–57.

¹⁰ Wynter, "1492," 19, 21.

The 15th century explorations began to undermine this sacred geography. In 1441, the Portuguese rounded Cape Bojador on West Africa and headed further south, finding an inhabitable region actually inhabited by black-skinned peoples, some with whom they could establish trading relations and others who would be brought back as slaves.¹¹

Columbus, in light of these and other events, proposed that the global division between the uninhabitable and the inhabitable zones of the earth was a factual and, in particular, a theological mistake. Since God created the world for the sake of human life and its redemption, God would not create so much space devoid of human life. Through this theological argument, Columbus began disconnecting geographical knowledge from its previous theological or “sacred” context. God created the earth for the sake of human existence. God’s actions, and hence the products of such actions, are rationally ordered and thereby should be intelligible to human beings themselves, on their own.¹²

Accordingly, even though Columbus’s own millennial beliefs regarding Christ’s immanent return were a decisive feature of his own motivations to find new routes across the earth, his underlying arguments and the effects of his voyages allowed the earth to be known outside of the regnant sacred geography and in terms intelligible to and verifiable for human beings as such. Yet, these transformations, which are part of the advent of objective, self-correcting scientific modes of knowledge, occurred within and for the sake of an expansive mercantilist state, which immediately expropriated the land and took

¹¹ Wynter, “1492,” 10. See also Sylvia Wynter, “On How We Mistook the Map for the Territory and Re-Imprisoned Ourselves in Our Unbearable Wrongness of Being, of Désêtre: Black Studies Toward the Human Project,” in *Not Only the Master’s Tools: African American Studies in Theory and Practice*, ed. Lewis Gordon and Jane Anna Gordon (Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2006), 166 n. 13. Hugh Thomas discusses this event in his book, *The Slave Trade: The Story of the Atlantic Slave Trade: 1440-1870* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1999).

¹² See Wynter, “Columbus and the Poetics of the Propter Nos,” 256-257.

control of the people it “discovered” on the basis of the continuing theological argument that the inhabitants were “idolaters.”¹³

As the previous geographic division between those within and those external to the Christian *ordo salutis* unraveled, human nature itself became the material and conceptual site through which to settle disputes regarding the newer global arrangement afforded by the “discovery” and control of these territories, peoples, and wealth. This anthropological question, or crisis, was the heart of the debate between Las Casas and Sepúlveda. As Wynter says, the debate was a

clash as to whether the primary generic identity [of the human] should continue to be that of Las Casas’s theocentric Christian, or that of the newly invented Man of the humanists, as the rational (or ratiocentric) political subject of the state.¹⁴

As Wynter’s statement implies, the question as to the legality of particular social and political relations—namely, slavery and the *encomienda* labor system—was a question resolved by delineating the contours of the “primary generic identity” of the human. For Las Casas, the European cultural modes of life were themselves internal to and expressions of God’s redemptive order. Those capable of and inclined toward these cultural expressions and salvific processes must be included within the political and social arrangements proper to this spiritually redeemed human life. Slavery and expropriation of land was permissible for those who refused and violently contested the processes of conversion. For Sepúlveda, on the contrary, the particular forms of European cultural life, including its alphabetic writing, were expressions of the basic human

¹³ Wynter notes the importance of the background of the crusades, especially as one of the reasons Europeans began the voyages of expansion was to find a route to bypass Islamic control of the trading routes on land. The influx of wealth would then be deployed to help regain control of Jerusalem. See Wynter, “1492,” 10, 25.

¹⁴ Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being,” 288.

capacity to be rational, that is, to have one's life ordered through the internalization of natural law and its expressions in the social codes and legal orders of the nation state.¹⁵ Expropriation of land and bodies was fitting for those cultures lacking such rational organization for they were, to use the terminology Sepúlveda takes from Aristotle, natural slaves.¹⁶

With Sepúlveda, the anthropological account of the proper form of human life undergoes a “degodding” similar to that of the sacred geography. Like Columbus, Sepúlveda drew on a particular strain of theology, this time natural law instead of apocalyptic millennialism, to establish an “essentially secular system of classification based on a represented essential difference between modes of the human.”¹⁷ Just as the previous sacred geography was unable to account for the material experiences of encountering habitable lands and unexpected peoples, so the previous sacred anthropology was unable to account for the material relations enacted by the expanding mercantilist states, in which fitness for inclusion within this realm depended on a supposed bio-cultural capacity for inclusion, namely rationality. What was so decisively new with Sepúlveda—and the reason Wynter stresses a deep continuity between him and the contemporary world—is that this anthropology rendered invisible its own local,

¹⁵ In her essay on the Jamaican folk dance, Jonkonnu, Wynter focuses on Sepúlveda's contrast between human cultures of writing and the subhuman oral cultures. See Sylvia Wynter, “Jonkonnu in Jamaica: Towards the Interpretation of Folk Dance as a Cultural Process,” *Jamaica Journal* 4, no. 2 (1970): 34–48, esp. p. 35.

¹⁶ “The Spanish monarchy was to legitimate its claim to the ownership of the vast expropriated territories of the Americas and the Caribbean on the basis of this Aristotelian derived conception of a “*by-nature difference*” between Spaniards/Europeans as Aristotle's *natural masters* on the one hand, and the indigenous peoples on the Americas (classified generically as *Indians*), as *natural slaves*.” Sylvia Wynter, “Human Being as Noun? Or Being Human as Praxis? Towards the Autopoetic Turn/Overturn: A Manifesto” (Unpublished essay, 2007), 4, n. 9.

¹⁷ Wynter, “New Seville, Part II,” 52.

cultural form. Whereas for Las Casas the social and political relations followed from a distinct and particular mode of human life—one internal to God’s particular historical economy of salvation—for Sepúlveda, the social and political relations followed from the nature of human being considered generically, though again, this generic account was still initially situated within a broader theological framework of natural law. Put from the side of those whose flesh came to represent the externality to salvation that was previously signified by geographical location: for Las Casas, externality was a matter of not (yet) being included in the particular sphere of Christian grace, whereas for Sepúlveda, externality was a matter of being not (yet) included in the general sphere of the (rational) human itself.

For Wynter, then, Sepúlveda located the nascent humanistic developments inside the project of Spanish (and more broadly, Western Christendom or European) expansion and colonialism. The opening movement of the secular—the “degodding” of accounts of space and, with it, of human life—became bound to what Wynter calls “the coloniality of being”: human life became detached from its theological coordinates (secularized) while and even through being reframed on the basis of the “overrepresentation” of a Spanish-European mode of life as if it were the generic or universal mode of human existence. Once this single mode of life was universalized and generalized such that it became *the* normative expression of human being, what Wynter calls Man, all other modes of life had to be culturally represented as failed approximations of it, as *lacking* genuine human being. Being (human) itself was in effect colonized. Wynter argues that this system, which coalesces around and gains articulation by Sepúlveda, underwent various reconfigurations and further “secularization” while still sustaining the same racialized

divisions between Man and its subhuman others. These shifts—from the proper form being centered around nobility and celibacy, then to rationality and property, and now to post-Darwinian accounts of creative entrepreneurial power—all occur within the fundamental trajectory of the “coloniality of being” initiated in the sixteenth century. To better understand how these forms shift alongside changes in material means of production and why, despite the transformations, Wynter still detects a fundamental continuity operating underneath it all, one must turn to her general account of human cultural formation.

Bio-Cultural Human Re/Production

In a play on the Christian scriptural language, Sylvia Wynter suggests that humans are “words made flesh.”¹⁸ The difference or rupture between the human and all other animals is this enflehsment of language. Each animal comes to inhabit and know its whole world in ways conducive to the realization of its genetic impulses, particularly, the perpetuation of its species-specific mode of existence through its proximate biological relations. Bees, for instance, engage and know their world through the various protocols required to sustain their particular hive, an organization that allows some bees to be uninvolved in the genetic reproduction of offspring insofar as other members of the hive take on that responsibility.¹⁹ One cannot expect bees to know and engage their world

¹⁸ Sylvia Wynter, “The Pope Must Have Been Drunk, The King of Castile a Madman: Culture as Actuality and the Caribbean Rethinking of Modernity,” in *Reordering of Culture: Latin America, the Caribbean and Canada in the 'Hood*, ed. Alvina Ruprecht and Cecilia Taiana (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1995), 35.

¹⁹ The example of bees is Wynter’s own example, which she uses in numerous places; see, for example, Wynter, “On How We Mistook the Map for the Territory,” 156.

otherwise, as if a bee should be expressly interested in the well-being of all bees regardless of the particular hive or come to know their ecosystem in ways unrelated to the fundamental imperative to realize or instantiate themselves through their hive.

This genetic ordering of animal life is, for Wynter, *not* determinative of human animals, which entails that human existence is not merely a smooth progressive continuity among animals but is a “rupture,” crossing a “threshold” in which human behaviors become motivated by something other than these biological drives and genetic codes: language.²⁰ Humans differ from other animals in that language has the power to rewrite the bio-evolutionary impulses that govern and organize other species. Cultural narratives connect approved behaviors to the pleasure center of the brain, thereby organizing human lives at a material, bio-chemical level around the culturally specific mandate to stably reproduce that particular social world. Kinship or biological relation moves beyond strictly genetic determinations to symbolic ones, as individuals are bonded together as members of this particular social group, a group invented or forged through its linguistic practices. Human consciousness—both awareness of self and awareness of the world, including other humans—is thereby always a culturally formed kind of consciousness. Humans know themselves and their world through a framework that is adaptive to the continuing reproduction of their particular social order, analogous to the ways in which bees know their world in ways that are advantageous to the production of their hive. “Meaning and being are coeval,” for there is no human existence outside of—

²⁰ “This form of life crossed a threshold after which it would come to motivate and orient its behaviors through the mediation of the Word.” Sylvia Wynter, “‘Genital Mutilation’ or ‘Symbolic Birth’? Female Circumcision, Lost Origins and the Aculturalism of Feminist/Western Thought,” *Case Western Law Review, Colloquium: Bridging Society, Culture and Law: The Issue of Female Circumcision* 47, no. 2 (1997): 501–52, quotation on p. 519.

prior to, more basic than—a particular cultural-linguistic framework.²¹ Far from leaving human communities perilously adrift or unstable, human language is strongly determinative in Wynter’s account, functioning analogous to the governing genetic codes that organize and regulate non-human animal behavior.²²

The governing structure of any human cultural form, for Wynter, has a fundamental binary pattern and a basic redemptive logic.²³ At the center of each culture is a reproductive logic organized around the replication of a normative, cultural framing of what it means to be human. This culturally defined mode of human being is formed through a binary opposition, the proper form of existence arising through a negative relation to its “liminal” or “abject” others, those who come to be marked by “alterity,” defined as the “state of being otherwise.”²⁴ This liminal or abject other is the antitype of

²¹ Sylvia Wynter, “‘A Different Kind of Creature’: Caribbean Literature, the Cyclops Factor and the Second Poetics of the Propter Nos,” *Annals of Scholarship* 12, no. 1–2 (1997): 165.

²² Wynter continually stresses the “law-likely” way in which cultural codes are bio-chemically enacted, such that human knowledge and action is “determined” through and by these “sociogenic” codes. See, for instance, Wynter and McKittrick, “Unparalleled Catastrophe,” 58.

²³ Wynter will sometimes use terminology with Christian resonances to describe more general cultural or religious patterns. Instead of interpreting this use of language as an uncritical “overrepresentation” of Christian religious norms as if they were isomorphic to religiosity-in-itself, one can recall that, for Wynter, after 1492, all cultural formations begin to be reconfigured through the dominant order of Christendom and “the West.” As she writes, “all the earlier forms of the abject would come to be subsumed, by the world religion of Judeo-Christianity, under the topos of mankind’s enslavement to original sin.” As Gil Anidjar has pointed out in a different context, “other religions are only construed as religions because of Christianity, as a result of their dialectical—more often, asymmetric—interactions with it.” See Wynter, “Rethinking Aesthetics,” 254; Gil Anidjar, “Of Globalatinology,” *Derrida Today* 6, no. 1 (May 2013): 13. The indirect connection to particular Christian characteristics is part of what it means to be intelligible as a “religion” at all.

²⁴ Sylvia Wynter, “Alterity,” in *Dictionary of Multicultural Education* (Phoenix, AZ: Oryx Press, 1997), 13–15, quotation found on p. 13. Wynter uses the terminology of “abjectness” in “Rethinking Aesthetics,” 254–5.

the approved mode of cultural life, a concrete embodiment of “symbolic death.”²⁵

Through a kind of containment, management, and potential overcoming of this other, the cultural order establishes itself and its boundaries, thereby specifying the mode of human life it must securely transmit to the future.²⁶ The material modes of production—the arrangements of human material labor and relationships—function within and toward the goal of sustaining and prolonging this cultural order. Wynter will often speak of “production and reproduction,” as the material relations of labor and the gendered relations of biological reproduction interrelate, something that can be represented by speaking of modes of re/production.

One can diagram Wynter’s basic framework in the following way:

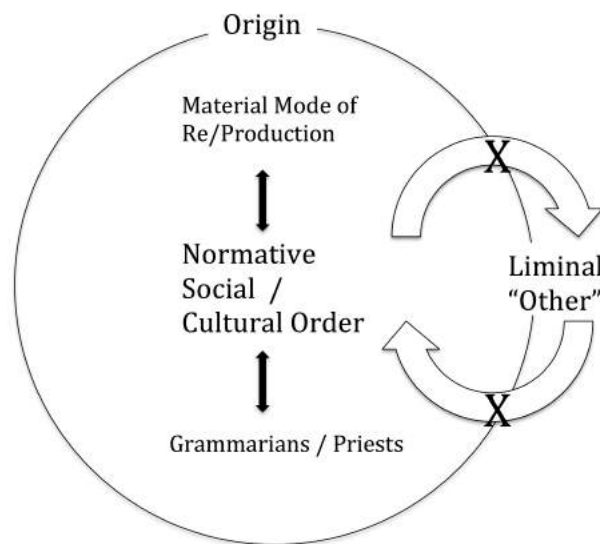


Figure 1 Wynter's Basic Structure of Human Cultural Formation

²⁵ For the notion of “symbolic” life and death, see Wynter, “A Different Kind of Creature,” 160.

²⁶ As Wynter says, “it is the specific ‘type of non-culture’ which enables its self-definition as that specific type of culture.” Sylvia Wynter, “The Ceremony Must Be Found: After Humanism,” *Boundary 2* 12/13 (1984): 19–70, quotation found on p. 27. Wynter refers to the works of Peter Winch, Boris Uspenky (Uspenkij), Hayden White, Peter Schmidt and Claude Levi-Strauss to support this understanding of language and culture.

In the diagram, one can see the normative framing of human life at the center with the liminal others situated at the border, neither within nor excluded from the particular cultural order but connected through their very exclusion (the “X”).²⁷ At the top of the diagram, the point of transcendence is designated as “origin.” Each cultural order provides a narrative of its origin that grounds this genre or mode of human existence beyond itself, most notably with some connection to an extra-human realm of meaning, the abode of the gods or divinity.²⁸ This divinely given or transcendent order of life remains threatened by these liminal others, or rather by the disruptive forces that come to be understood as embodied within this grouped deemed “otherwise” than proper.

The material modes and divisions of production and reproduction intersect—or in the modern arrangement and language, gender and class combine—as both have their fundamental *telos* in prolonging and transmitting, that is, re/producing, this genre of human being. Just as there is no pre-cultural human existence, no human “as such” but only distinct cultural modes or genres of human existence, so also there is no determinative “economic” or “gendered” human interest outside or prior to this cultural framework. Human desires and ways of knowing are organized and mandated through the particular cultural arrangement, in the same way that non-human animals move within and come to know their world through their own species-specific adaptive codes.

²⁷ Wynter’s account here resonates with Giorgio Agamben’s discussion of “the exception,” and particularly his analysis of the role of exclusion and exemplarity in the founding of any set. See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), esp. 21-23.

²⁸ “What is common to all [groups of people] are cosmogonies and origin narratives.” Wynter and McKittrick, “Unparalleled Catastrophe,” 34.

For Wynter, with the advent of human being, it is truly *story* or *myth* all the way down, and questions of social status and sexual identity are set within and determined through a particular narrative about the proper form of human life.

The intellectuals or grammarians—the broader category that includes the traditional function of the priests—work to maintain the integrity of this founding narrative as the community moves through space and time. The narratives tell a story of creation (origination) and of a threat that must be managed and overcome (redemption). Yet, these stories must possess a certain flexibility within their communal repetition so that the community can maintain itself in spite of the unexpected and possibly disruptive events that occur along the way. The intellectuals or priests manage this interplay between alteration and continuity, thereby supporting the replication of the basic communal story and its governing codes. In other words, the intellectuals are tasked with continually reformulating and propagating the ideology that organizes and sustains the culture's particular mode or genre of human life. They ensure that the world will continually be known through that culture's self-justifying epistemology, which is to say, through the framework of knowledge that allows the culture to understand the world in terms conducive to the community's ongoing re/production.

The revolutionary break Wynter locates in 1492 is that one group of liminal others, the lay humanist scholars as outsiders to the clerical spiritual ideal, were able to break free from their culturally mandated way of knowing the world. Through their work, the world became known, geographically, outside of any particular culture's adaptive governing codes. For Wynter, this is a truly revolutionary break, for never before had one group of human beings devised a path of knowledge that could be organized and

corrected apart from any cultural system, that is, apart from any arrangement of the world that required a transcendent (divine) point of origination and ground. It is, for Wynter, the advent of secular, scientific modes of knowledge. However, instead of being applied to human existence itself, Las Casas and Sepúlveda both missed the opportunity. Las Casas remained bound to the prior theological framework while Sepúlveda buttressed a new account of the human that was fundamentally tethered to—bound and determined by—the imperatives of the expanding mercantilist state.²⁹ Although Sepúlveda ultimately carried the day over his opponent, the secular no longer operated to emancipate people from culturally specific forms of knowledge but rather came to represent a particular form of being human as if it were the generic mode of human existence itself. As a cultural form that had the material and cultural power to forget its own particularity and relativity, this new globally humanist figure unleashed and organized the genocidal logic that followed after 1492. The “others” to this form of human life became subhuman and inhuman others; as such, they were only capable of inclusion through their destruction. Their exclusion from existence itself could represent no real loss to this systematic organization of life and knowledge, for their being was discursively or narratively produced as an absence.

Against the current secularized framing of redemption and generic human being—the post-Darwinian entrepreneurial conqueror of scarcity, the one biologically or culturally determined to exert dominance and power—Wynter seeks to replay this humanist break at the site of the human itself, dislodging human existence from its

²⁹ Wynter argues that the transition from the category of “natural heretics” to “natural slaves” functioned in part to allow the Empire to bypass and limit papal authority. Wynter, “On How We Mistook the Map for the Territory,” 138.

restriction within and domination by the global order of Western, racialized capitalistic society.³⁰ Put differently, through the Darwinian iteration of racial and capitalist modes of domination, the secular has remained ideological, a way to ground a particular genre of the human, Man, outside of any particular cultural order, in this case, by appeal to genetic and biological determination (natural selection, wherein Nature itself functions as the new ideological point of transcendence, the story of origin). Against this secularist ideology, Wynter seeks to rehabilitate the secular as a mode of critique and to develop a new, autonomous knowledge of human existence that would be undetermined by any culturally-adaptive way of knowing. For Wynter, just such a further expansion of the humanist break was initiated in the diasporic black radical tradition of the twentieth century.

Alterity, Religion, and Ideology

Drawing on the pioneering studies of W. E. B. Du Bois and Frantz Fanon, Wynter discusses the internalized splitting of the colonized subject, or more precisely, the internalization of the contradictory nature of this racialized global order of salvation.³¹ As

³⁰ The notion of “racial capitalism” comes from Cedric Robinson, though the particular referent here is the global arrangement the previous chapter outlined through Hegel. See Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill, N.C: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

³¹ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox, Revised (New York: Grove Press, 2008), ch. 5. Wynter often links these two figures and systems of thought. For instance, see Sylvia Wynter, Sylvia Wynter, “The Pope Must Have Been Drunk, The King of Castile a Madman: Culture as Actuality and the Caribbean Rethinking of Modernity,” in *Reordering of Culture: Latin America, the Caribbean and Canada in the Hood*, ed. Alvina Ruprecht and Cecilia Taiana (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1995), 31. For the emphasis on “double consciousness” as the internationalization of the contradictions, see Lewis Gordon, “Is the Human a Teleological Suspension of Man? Phenomenological Exploration of Sylvia Wynter’s Fanonian and Biodecean Reflections,”

Wynter says in an interview, “the guiding thread that has lasted all through my work is, How do you deal with the stereotyped view that you yourself have been socialized to accept?”³² This question led Fanon, in particular, to propose a new kind of knowledge of the human, moving beyond and against individualized Freudian psychology as well as the racialized life sciences following in Darwin’s wake. These negative, internalized stereotypes were neither individualized (born from a family structure) nor behaviorally “adaptive” (allowing for greater chances of survival and reproduction of one’s genes). These negative patterns of valuation were humanly produced—through and as a social formation—and yet became internalized to the extent that they shaped basic human, biochemical responses, particularly responses of pleasure and fear. Fanon worked to understand and undermine the internalization of anti-black cultural norms by colonized black subjects, and through this knowledge, to articulate his and their knowledge in excess to the normativity of white, European society (Man). As simultaneously inside and outside the cultural order, these diasporic back subjects could glimpse and produce a “transcultural” knowledge of human life, a knowledge not bounded or structured by the adaptive codes of any particular human cultural formation.³³

The transcultural opening of Fanon’s perspective, as extended and clarified through Wynter’s work, operates on two fronts. It “provincializes” Europe by

in *After Man, Towards the Human: Critical Essays on the Thought of Sylvia Wynter*, ed. Anthony Bogues (Kingston, JA: Ian Randle, 2006), pp. 237–257.

³² Sylvia Wynter and David Scott, “The Re-Enchantment of Humanism: An Interview with Sylvia Wynter,” *Small Axe: A Journal of Criticism* 4, no. 2 (September 2000): 119–207, the quotation is found on p. 131.

³³ Wynter discusses this “transcultural” knowledge in multiple places, including in her essay, “Towards the Sociogenic Principle: Fanon, Identity, The Puzzle of Conscious Experience, and What It’s Like to Be ‘Black,’” in *National Identities and Socio-Political Changes in Latin America*, ed. Mercedes F. Duran-Cogan and Antoni Gomez-Moriana (New York: Routledge, 2001), 30–66.

understanding that the proposed binary between Man and its human lack is simply one local, cultural instantiation of a more general feature of all human cultures. All cultures produce themselves through their liminal others, but Europe mistakenly presents its cultural other as if it were lacking human being in general.³⁴ Secondly, this transcultural perspective suggests that cultural difference has no normative center. Cultures are simply different *modes* or *genres* of being human. Particular normative cultural arrangements are not divinely or transcendentally instituted but are contingent and local instances of human self-production. They are relative to others and all modes of life are subject to deliberate human alteration. As cultural forms created from the “abyss” of the transatlantic slave trade—such that diasporic black cultural forms were both metaphorically and materially disgrounded—diasporic black radical thinkers could understand and show how human life *is* precisely this disgrounded process of cultural self-production.³⁵ This perspective on the universality of human auto-poesis—human self-formation through the various bio-cultural codes they themselves produce—gives insight into the universal function of cultural ideology.

Ideology, on Wynter’s account, has two main functions. First, ideology represents the interests of a particular group as if they were the general and obvious interests of all involved. Secondly, ideology masks the ways in which a particular mode of

³⁴ The term “provincializing” is taken from Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).

³⁵ Besides Du Bois and Fanon, Wynter presses this line of argument through her discussion of Édouard Glissant’s poetic work. See Sylvia Wynter, “Beyond the Word of Man: Glissant and the New Discourse of the Antilles,” *World Literature Today* 63, no. 4 (Autumn 1989): 637–648. The notion of the abyss in relation to the slave trade is powerfully engaged by Glissant in the opening pages of his book, *Edouard Glissant, Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1997).

knowledge is self-produced. Religion, for Wynter, is simply a particular instance of the more general pattern of cultural ideology.³⁶ Religion secures a particular social order against these two different threats or challenges. It provides an *authorizing* function, such that the members of the social order are shielded from its contingent and purely human origin, as well as a *justifying* function, such that this particular order is embraced by its members as good and what is taken to oppose or threaten it is rejected as evil.

Religion as ideology prevents the experience of transcultural relativity and its accompanying insight into the innate alterability of any cultural mode. When viewed from the transcultural perspective opened up by black radical diasporic intellectuals, ideology stifles human creativity—and hides the fact that it performs this work—by masking the work humans do to create their own modes of life and by blocking other ways humans could constitute their own lives. Wynter’s transcultural humanist challenge takes hold of the insight that humans are shaped by the cultural orders they themselves produce and uses it to produce a mode of being and knowledge that overturns ideological overrepresentation, thereby creating a mode of life and resources adequate for “the human’s full realization of its creative powers.”³⁷

Though it emerged entangled in the colonality of being, the secular is on Wynter’s account ultimately a critique of ideology through the production of non-culturally-specific modes of human knowledge. The secular as a mode of scientific knowledge provides non-adaptive knowledge of the world, or insight into the world as it

³⁶ Sylvia Wynter, “On How We Mistook the Map for the Territory,” 134-36.

³⁷ Sylvia Wynter, “After the New Class: James, *Les Damnés*, and the Autonomy of Human Cognition,” unpublished manuscript of a paper presented at the conference, “C. L. R. James: His Intellectual Legacies,” Wellesley College, Wellesley, MA, April 19-21, 1991. The quotation is found on p. 100 of the manuscript.

is from the vantage point of the human species as a whole. In this way, the transcultural knowledge produced by Fanon should be understood as providing knowledge of human cultural life that parallels the objectivity of the other sciences: it is to be independent of any and all cultural frameworks and their respective, adaptive knowledge of the world.³⁸ Like scientific modes of knowledge, the descriptions of human being would transcend particular cultural forms and their respective genres of being human, providing access to the basic patterns and laws through which humans constitute themselves within their differing cultural forms.

From this perspective, it would seem as if religion is simply a mode of ideology that must be overcome through this emerging, transcultural account of the human. In her essay, “Toward the Sociogenic Principle,” Wynter argues that her approach does not entail the “reduction” of ideological forms of consciousness to an objective scientific reality. For instance, one can describe a particular sound in the scientific language of a “wave phenomenon” without denying the phenomenological experience of hearing that sound. In the same way, Wynter proposes, one can attend to the ways humans produce their own adaptive modes of consciousness without simply claiming that the experiences of the self, others, and the world formed by these modes of consciousness are “false.”³⁹ Ideology, for Wynter, is in a way fundamental and inescapable; the task is not to “reduce” it to the truly real (scientific description) but to use this knowledge of human cultural self-production to gain control over the kinds of consciousness—and hence kinds

³⁸ “While from the Renaissance onwards, Western intellectuals have, by means of the development of the natural sciences, enabled us to obtain nonadaptive knowledge of our nonhuman levels of reality, we have hitherto had no such parallel knowledge with respect to ourselves and the nature-culture laws that govern our modes of being, of behaving, of mind, or of minding.” Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being,” 317.

³⁹ Wynter, “Toward the Sociogenic Principle,” 58-61.

or genres of being human—we inevitably produce. The question is not whether humans will live through various stories or myths but whether they will exercise this auto-poiesis deliberately and freely, living through the stories they autonomously create.

Nevertheless, Wynter's narration of this new goal of autonomous human self-production risks creating a universal humanism—secularized and emancipatory—that relies on its own liminal other, in this case, ethnic-religious groups that refuse this degodded, material redemption as the *telos* of free human (political) action. Religion, for Wynter, is not problematically ideological in itself. Yet, it may become so if religious adherents refuse to relativize their cultural mandates for the sake of furthering and extending this global human task of emancipation, an emancipation achieved through and identical with the full embrace of the immanence and alterability of any mode of human self-organization. The way this problem emerges in Wynter's work, as well as a possible resolution of it, can be found most clearly in one of Wynter's earlier writings, "Ethno or Socio Poetics." The next section will offer a close reading of this essay, for through it, one can better gauge the difficulty involved in reclaiming the politics of universal humanism from the over-representation of one mode of life, whether religious or secular, as if it were the generic or truly universal form of human being. One can also add a stronger material analysis to her account of the "advent" of Man after 1492.

Ethno-Poetics: Transcultural Creativity Beyond Dialectics

Wynter's essay, "Ethno or Socio Poetics," comes from a presentation she gave in 1975, at a conference that gathered poets and intellectuals to engage the topic of "ethnopoetics," tentatively defined as "the intersection between poetry and anthropology

in our time.”⁴⁰ Wynter begins and ends the essay by articulating her concerns that ethnopoetics will become an abstract, dialectical counterpoint to the supposed “universality” of the Western literary tradition. Instead of contesting and severing the overdetermination of the human and its linguistic/literary production by “the West,” it would actually repeat the basic logic and leave the fundamental social, political, material relations in place. As she puts it, with reference to Theodor Adorno:

Rather than binary opposition what we seek in other poetics are the areas which Western poetics by its imperative of conceptualizing itself in a concrete historical situation of dominance over all others, *had to eliminate*.⁴¹

The “ethnos” as the abstract negation of “the universal” (Western Man) fails to contest the material relations of power (the “situation of dominance”) enacted through the very consolidation of all humans into the binary split between Man and its racialized others.

For Wynter,

it was the concrete, material, essentially economic impact of the New World upon the Old, that would essentially transform that Old World from one civilization amongst others - the Christian, to THE ONE, the West, to which all other civilization were OTHER.⁴²

There are two important points Wynter makes in this sentence and throughout the essay.

⁴⁰ The definition of the term comes from Nathaniel Tarn, who is quoted by Michel Benamou in his foreword to this issue of *Alcheringa/Ethnopoetics* 2 (1976), p. 5.

⁴¹ Wynter, “Ethno or Socio Poetics,” 93, n. 43. She quotes a few paragraphs from Adorno’s *Negative Dialectics*, a section that ends (though she does not directly quote it) with the following remark: “But whatever truth the concepts cover beyond their abstract range can have no other stage than what the concepts suppress, disparage, and discard.” See Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 2007), 9-10.

⁴² Wynter, “Ethno or Socio Poetics,” 81. As she says elsewhere, “We propose that this break in thought, attitude and relation, by which a dual and oscillatory process [of humans adapting to and transforming their natural environment] was replaced by the singleminded conquest of Nature by Western Man, began with the discovery of the New World. Or, if it did not being, a quantitative change brought a qualitative change in emphasis.” Wynter, “Jonkonnu,” 35.

First, the rupture (not transition) through which this transformation of identity occurred was geo-economic: it was “the discovery of vast areas of land” that allowed a “new relation to Nature,” which also “was a new relation to Other Men.”⁴³ Secondly, “in creating themselves as the norm of men, the Western bourgeoisie *created* the idea of the Primitive, the idea of the savage, of the ‘despised heathen,’ of the ‘*ethnos*’: they created the idea of their own negation.”⁴⁴ As the antitype to this new norm of being human, these “others” were not the negation of a particular cultural way of being but the negation, the lack of or antagonism to, human being itself.

Wynter discusses three key aspects of this new, globally material, dialectical formation of human identity. First, the community of the “we” needs—that is, it *must produce*—its other, for it is only in relation to this other that it has identity. This negative, hierarchical and antagonistic mode of relation to “the other” provides its sense of itself and its new relation to nature and other peoples. Secondly, this dialectical relation forms concrete human life through the relation of two “ciphers” or “abstractions,” the normative ideal of the West (Man) and its subhuman, external other (the Primitive). Thirdly, these abstract identities are mediated by *objects*, by the commodity, especially the technological weaponry used to solidify Western global domination. In this way, “the power to name objects,” to even name oneself “human,” is given to the commodity: “objects name him. Freedom is a Cadillac.”⁴⁵ Neither the master nor the slave—normative Man and its subhuman others—are autonomous, for both depend not simply

⁴³ Wynter, “Ethno or Socio Poetics,” 79, 82.

⁴⁴ Wynter, “Ethno or Socio Poetics,” 83.

⁴⁵ Wynter, “Ethno or Socio Poetics,” 87.

on each other but on the commodity, the weaponry, that mediates their relationship and provides them their respective social positions and identities.

Within the world produced through the dialectic of Man and its Other as mediated by the commodity, blackness moves, for Wynter, as a mode of life not bound to these dialectical relations. In “black popular culture - spirituals, blues, jazz, Reggae, Afro-Cuban music - and its manifold variants” black peoples “reinvented themselves as a WE that needed no OTHER to constitute their Being,” laying down in consequence the “cultural parameters of a concretely universal *ethnos*.”⁴⁶ Black popular culture lived within the position of negation, such that they were positioned as both Man (internal to the globalized colonial project) and Man’s antithesis (as the most degraded form of or limit to Man). From such a vantage point, as living within and as the negative, blackness exceeds the dialectic structure of colonial modernity. Without needing an “other” to constitute their Being or mode of auto-poesis, black cultural life enacted a concretely universal “ethnos” heretical to European humanism and its “idealist philosophy.”⁴⁷

The transformation of human self-constitution through the creation of a global commodity culture required the exclusion of particular modes of human being and knowing. As “western man ‘pacified’ New World nature, eliminated the ‘savage,’ penned them up in reservations, he did the same with whole areas of his Being.”⁴⁸ Poetry then becomes the index of the Being that must be “penned up” for the

⁴⁶ Wynter, “Ethno or Socio Poetics,” 85.

⁴⁷ “The Not-I of the Western idealist philosophy of humanism, with its concomitant, the later rights of man, was, most ultimately, the non-white sub-man assimilated to Nature, and the most ultimately non-white was the black.” Wynter, “Ethno or Socio Poetics,” 86.

⁴⁸ Wynter, “Ethno or Socio Poetics,” 83. Wynter has been critiqued for her focus on the transformation of the human subject and lack of attention to a political struggle for nonhuman life. However, as should be clear from the argument above, to reconceive

sake of the re/production of Man. In a “world named by objects, poetry dies except insofar as it laments its own loss.”⁴⁹ Through poetry, humans name their world and thereby invent and reinvent themselves along with their world, which is to say, the world too participates in these reinventions. This imaginative, self-constituting possibility is a mode of human life and freedom that *had* to be eradicated or enclosed so that nature and bodies could be transformed within and for the sake of the re/production of a commodity culture. Yet, as an “unproductive” mode of human life—gauged from the vantage point of the goal of the re/production of Man via the commodity—this liminal, chaotic, unbounded “otherness” was required for the advent of the civilizing projects that were taken to establish Europe as *the* human civilization. As Wynter suggests, then, and as the previous chapter argued, this project of civilization required the entrapment of modes of human being it could not know but which it must condemn as evil, animal, or subhuman.

Nevertheless, Wynter’s articulation of this concretely universal, non-dialectical mode of human self-constitution appears problematically connected to a lingering dialectical structure. In the opening paragraphs of her essay, Wynter suggests that ethnopoetics, if it resists commodifying and reifying “native” culture productions, names a concretely universal practice that parallels Christianity’s, or rather the Apostle

human life beyond the normative protocols of Man is also to reinterpret the human in relation to nature. To put the point from the other side—and in a way that Wynter makes explicit in an other essay—the problem with contemporary environmental ethics is that they frame the issue as a relation of the human-in-general *to* the environment and thereby undercut the more radical critique that would name the problem as a particular, contingent, neo-Darwinian capitalist framing of human life, wherein those evolutionary “dysselected” suffer the damages and dangers produced by the environmental catastrophes necessary to ensure the re/production of Man. See, for instance, Wynter’s comments in an interview, “Yours in the Intellectual Struggle,” in *The Caribbean Woman Writer as Scholar: Creating, Imagining, Theorizing*, ed. Keshia N. Abraham (Coconut Creek, FL: Caribbean Studies Press, 2009), 32–69, particularly her comments on p. 58-9.

⁴⁹ Wynter, “Ethno or Socio Poetics,” 87.

Paul's "revolutionary breaking out of an orthodoxy."⁵⁰ Negatively, for Wynter, Christianity ended up replacing "one orthodoxy" with another, in effect making the whole world its religious "other." Yet, precisely by making everything "the other," Paul's preaching situated "Christianity as a universal religion" distinct from "the particular 'we' of Judaism."⁵¹ At the outset of her essay, Wynter again relies on a deeply ambiguous point, on one hand trying to articulate a non-dialectical mode of practice and, on the other, trying to situate this non-dialectical practice within a universal, teleological project of "revolution" or rupture from the closed and limited *genres* of being human, here drawing on a familiar positioning of Judaism as a non-universal, exclusive genre—ethnic, religious, cultural—of human being.⁵² The goal of transforming the "abstract universal" of Western humanism into "the concretely human global, the concretely WE," requires marking this rupture or emergence. The abstract universals (Christianity and its secularized and colonized humanism) and the abstract particulars (the ethnic others) must be present as what this concretely universal human community must leave behind or overcome.⁵³ The problem here is not the critique of the abstract universal or closed particular, but rather with the way this rupturing event seeks to regain control over its origin, to ensure its emancipatory detachment from what came prior. It therefore needs these insufficient modes beings so that it can demarcate and define itself over against them. The trajectory to be pursued—the emancipatory project—can only be marked by

⁵⁰ Wynter, "Ethno or Socio Poetics," 78.

⁵¹ Wynter, "Ethno or Socio Poetics," 78.

⁵² On the connections between the race, modernity, and Christian supercession, see especially J. Kameron Carter, *Race: A Theological Account* (New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 2008) and Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

⁵³ Wynter, "Ethno or Socio Poetics," 89.

way of the continuing re/production of these failures on the way to this becoming. It is perhaps not accidental that this problematic is introduced under the heading of a universalizing Christianity as distinguished against the closed and particular “we” of Judaism. There are, however, other points in Wynter’s work that offer ways to move beyond this lingering dialectical and indeed supercessionist framework.

Non-Dialectical Poetics of Flesh

Wynter’s work binds together a critique of the “coloniality of being” with an effort to establish a new scientific model that could generate knowledge of human life apart from any cultural frame. One can clarify this connection between a critical liminality and a new epistemology by looking at two key notions in Wynter’s work, that of “demonic grounds” and what, following Aimé Césaire, she calls a new “science of the word.”

The phrase “demonic grounds” indicates the attempt to “conceive of a vantage point outside the space-time orientation of the humuncular observer.”⁵⁴ Taken from Alex Comfort’s scientific work, the notion of a “demon” here is used as “shorthand for an imaginary intelligence which does not process inputs in human terms.”⁵⁵ The effort, for physicists, is to articulate a possible point of view—a way of viewing and interpreting reality—outside and hence unimaginable for those who can only experience the world from within the spatiotemporality of a living human subject. This “demonic” perspective

⁵⁴ Sylvia Wynter, “Beyond Miranda’s Meanings: Un/silencing the ‘Demonic Ground’ of Caliban’s ‘Woman,’” in *Out of the Kumbia: Caribbean Women and Literature*, ed. Carole Boyce Davies and Elaine Savory Fido (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1990), 364.

⁵⁵ Alex Comfort, *Reality and Empathy: Physics, Mind, and Science in the 21st Century* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1984), 61.

is not a view from nowhere but one outside the perspective and experience of any human observer. For example, one could postulate a “flatlander” perspective, which would be spatially two-dimensional, flat or lacking “depth.”⁵⁶ The demonic is not an-archic, without any rules, but rather has its principle of order or system of intelligibility outside human experience.

Wynter makes use of this concept of the demonic as a way “to suggest the possibility of an observer/site of observation that is *non-analogically* oriented, that is, one outside the present discursive formations and meaning ‘fields’ of our present order and its related episteme.”⁵⁷ This perspective is epistemically, not ontologically, “outside.” It is a way of observing and encountering events without being coordinated or even capable of being coordinated by the present system of knowledge. The “demonic” is, by definition, non-incorporable, bearing no analogy or point of contact with the present episteme but possessing a point of vantage that is inaccessible to the regnant system of knowledge.⁵⁸ This view of the present organization of being and knowledge from outside its governing

⁵⁶ Comfort, *Reality and Empathy*, 61-2.

⁵⁷ Wynter, “On Disenchanting Discourse,” 207 n. 3, emphasis added. This notion of the demonic is thereby related to her understanding of the politics of utopian writing, which challenges ideology from a position “outside” of that specific social order’s prescribed rationality. See Wynter, “On How We Mistook the Map for the Territory,” 157.

⁵⁸ Katherine McKittrick slightly shifts or extends the meaning of “demonic” beyond Wynter’s analysis. For McKittrick, “In mathematics, physics, and computer science, the demonic connotes a working system that cannot have a determined, or knowable, outcome. The demonic, then, is a non-deterministic schema; it is a process that is hinged on uncertainty and non-linearity because the organizing principle cannot predict the future.” For Wynter, the demonic functions less as a non-deterministic schema or organizing principle but more as a principle and schema that defy organization within the present system of knowledge. See Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women And The Cartographies Of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), xxiv.

symbolic code can be discerned, Wynter argues, through the work of womanist and black feminist writers.

The advent of modernity in 1492 shifted the dominant binary within the local medieval culture—and for Wynter, of all previous “traditional and religiously based human orders”—away from the gendered division of male and female to one between “men” and “natives.” Gender now operates within this more fundamental proto-racial division.⁵⁹ In the aftermath of this division, white women were included but subordinated within the sphere of Man (white patriarchy) while native women were occluded completely, external to Man and also de-gendered, as the white woman signified generic womanhood. This “exclusion” is in fact an “obliteration,” for it produces a mode of human life outside the governing frame of Man that has to be overcome—incorporated—so as to ensure the position of Man as arbiter of all meaning and all forms of human life.⁶⁰ Human life itself is organized through the demand to re/produce this form of Man, a demand in which black women are necessarily absented and silenced. By critically questioning the “systematic function of her own silencing,” black feminist and womanist writers approach the systematic ordering of human life around Man from a vantage point that cannot be incorporated into the system, from a demonic ground. By refusing this incorporation which can only silence or destroy, they occupy a position from which to critique the present order and their systematic function with it, producing a system of knowledge capable of describing human cultural formation apart from the governing,

⁵⁹ Wynter, “Beyond Miranda’s Meanings,” 358.

⁶⁰ Wynter, “Beyond Miranda’s Meanings,” 359.

adaptive logic of this, or for Wynter, any cultural form.⁶¹ This new, transcultural knowledge of the human is what Wynter means by her attempt to create, following Aimé Césaire, a new science of the word.

In his essay “Poetry and Knowledge,” which was originally written between 1944 and 1945, Césaire argues for a kind of human knowledge—the human as object and subject of knowledge—that exceeds the “poor and half-starved” instrumental knowledge generated by the physical sciences and mathematics.⁶² This new, or rather reclaimed ancient knowledge can be gauged through poetry. For Wynter, Césaire’s proposal of a new “study” or “science” of the word is the knowledge of the human species as bio-culturally constituting itself through language and narrative.⁶³ It is a view of human life *not* as externally determined by divinity (theology) or nature (biology) but as reconfiguring its own bios through the word. The human species is *homo narrans*, narrating itself into existence.⁶⁴ Poetry retains the *praxis* of auto-poesis outside of the present order of Man. It therefore offers glimpses into the possibility of a new scientific

⁶¹ Wynter refers to this project as able to “complete the *partial* epistemological mutation” of the initial secularization enacted by lay humanist scholars. Wynter, “Beyond Miranda’s Meanings,” 365, emphasis original.

⁶² Aimé Césaire, “Poetry and Knowledge,” trans. A. James Arnold, in *Lyrical and Dramatic Poetry, 1946-82*, trans. Clayton Eshleman and Annette Smith (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, n.d.), xlii – lvi, quotation found on p. xlii. I take the emphasis on “instrumental knowledge” from Adorno and Horkheimer, but it clearly captures Césaire’s concerns that “scientific knowledge enumerates, measures, classifies, and kills” (xlii). See Theodore W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Schmid Noerr Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford Univ. Press, 2009). Césaire’s essay is central to Wynter’s work and is discussed, among multiple other places, at the conclusion of some of her most programmatic essays, including “The Human as Noun?,” “Towards the Sociogenic Principle,” and “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being”; she also discusses it at the end of two important interviews or discussions, “The Re-enchantment of Humanism” and “Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species?”.

⁶³ Wynter and McKittrick, “Unparalleled Catastrophe,” 65.

⁶⁴ Wynter and McKittrick, “Unparalleled Catastrophe,” 67.

knowledge of the human species, where humans are essentially oriented to poetic praxis, as animals living through and in their cultural-linguistic self-production.

If what the species as a whole has in common is its self-constitution through specific cultural forms, then it is possible to use this knowledge to expose the contingency of particular arrangements of human life that exclude or marginalize various “others.” It is also possible to use this knowledge to self-consciously or autonomously create other ways of being-human that do not depend on the dialectical processes through which a particular social order constitutes itself by producing and maintaining, in negation, its liminal other. If human beings experience and come to know the world and themselves through narratives they produce, then it is possible to intentionally create narratives oriented towards maximizing this self-creative power for everyone. Wynter understands her work as an intellectual to offer this kind of solidarity, “marrying” her thought to the liminal subjects “damned” by the present order of being human (Man), or, as she says, working to “undo their narratively condemned status.”⁶⁵ If the liminal subjects live a truth that cannot be incorporated into the present system of knowledge and organization of social life, then the work of the intellectual class (or “grammarians”) can be to rewrite knowledge—the narratives through which humans understand themselves and the world—on the basis of a commitment to this truth and its potentially species-wide emancipatory project. As Katherine McKittrick summarizes, the goal is not to create a new image of *the* human to replace Man but “to be bring a challenge to *where* humanness

⁶⁵ Sylvia Wynter, “No Humans Involved,” 62, 70.

takes place.”⁶⁶ This challenge is already being lived, and for Wynter, the narratives that condemn or “damn” these lives to extraneousness and disposability must be challenged and new ones written to take their place.

Nevertheless, the problem emerges once again in that this project of a new humanism relies on a teleological conception of human existence oriented toward the full autonomy of human self-determination. There are, in fact, two distinct but interrelated problems here, one concerning the temporality of Wynter’s own narration of the human journey to full self-determination and the other concerning this goal of autonomous self-production.⁶⁷ Religion, for Wynter, is fundamentally something of the past: the present is marked by “now purely naturalized modes or genres of humanness.”⁶⁸ This secularization is problematic, for Wynter, only because it has been insufficiently completed. Nature still functions quasi-religiously or ideologically, as the external and extra-human grounding point for the present arrangement of our now global political order. This external ground must be removed, for such ideological “projection” of human agency onto some other source only functions to render “opaque” the ways humans are constituted as particular subjects through the very social orders they create.⁶⁹ Religion is what allowed these processes of human auto-poesis to be “hitherto outside our conscious awareness,” and thus a turn to religion would be a turn back to what “hitherto” remained opaque and

⁶⁶ Katherine McKittrick, “Axis, Bold as Love: On Sylvia Wynter, Jimi Hendrix, and the Promise of Science,” in *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*, ed. Katherine McKittrick, 155.

⁶⁷ For some of these issues, particularly regarding the temporality of Wynter’s project of emancipation, see David Marriott, “Inventions of Existence: Sylvia Wynter, Frantz Fanon, Sociogeny, and ‘the Damned,’” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 11, no. 3 (May 18, 2012): 45–89.

⁶⁸ Wynter and McKittrick, “Unparalleled Catastrophe,” 18.

⁶⁹ Wynter, “On How We Mistook the Map for the Territory,” 134.

inaccessible.⁷⁰ The teleological development—the full unleashing of this self-creative potential, the suspension of its restraint through various ideological closures and obfuscations—requires that one demarcate its ultimate limit (completely heteronomous human existence) and specify the varying degrees of success toward this complete fulfillment (lay humanists, the fully secularized anthropology allowed by Darwin, the black radical tradition). The same binary structure of creation and redemption remains, at least implicitly, though the radical threat has moved from the external determination of nature to the ideological, heteronomous determination of culture or religion.

Only at the end of the study will it be possible to gauge whether the very category of “the human”—even one so overtly decolonial and species-wide as Wynter proposes—always requires and therefore produces these liminal others through whom the project of human development or emancipation is marked. Yet, one can make an initial step beyond this point by returning to what, at heart, ideology is for Wynter: ideology functions as that which “must *conceal-oversee* the truth of a relation.”⁷¹ The religious-secular and implicit transcendent-immanent framing of ideology can be downplayed, for ultimately the “truth of a relation” is to be gauged from the concrete existence of the liminal subject. From this vantage point—from the “demonic grounds” of what by definition defies incorporation into the present order—other concrete modes of being and thought can be produced and imagined, ones which might not become bound to an epistemic and teleologically framed political project of autonomous human self-creation. The following section turns to the black liberation theology of James Cone to offer such an account.

⁷⁰ Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being,” 329.

⁷¹ Wynter, “Ethno or Socio Poetics,” 86.

PART II

WHITENESS, DEATH, AND THE FREEDOM OF THE RESURRECTION

CHAPTER 3:
WHITENESS AS NOTHINGNESS: THE REFUSAL OF THE RESURRECTION

What Sylvia Wynter calls Man, the black liberation theologian James Cone calls whiteness. Reflecting on his early life experiences in Bearden, Arkansas, Cone notes that though he never had personal experiences with the more “blatant” forms of violence under white supremacy, like “lynching, rape, [or] police harassment,” he still experienced and became deeply attuned to its “ethos,” which was “inherently dehumanizing for black people.”¹ The “struggle to survive with dignity” required a complex set of negotiations between enduring humiliation for the sake of survival and contesting injustice for the sake of affirming one’s dignity, and thereby risking one’s life.² The tension became “a dilemma for the black community: to assert one’s humanity and be killed, or to cling to life and sink into nonhumanity.”³ In this way, whiteness operated and continues to operate through the threat of death, or more precisely, through the social production of

¹ Cone, *MSLB*, 18-19.

² Cone, *MSLB*, 21.

³ Cone, *BTL*, 12.

“death-bound” life, where “to breathe in white society is dependent on saying yes to whiteness, and blacks know it.”⁴

As a Christian theologian, Cone will turn to the category of nothingness to clarify the theological dynamics and problems of this death-laden existence within whiteness. “The structure of white society,” Cone argues, “attempts to make ‘black being’ into ‘nonbeing’ or ‘nothingness.’”⁵ The erasure of “black people’s contributions to humankind...was and is their way of making us think that we are nothing. To be nothing means that you have done nothing in history worthwhile.”⁶ Nothingness is not simply the cessation of biological life. To use a distinction the German Protestant theologian Eberhard Jüngel makes between “perishing” and “nothingness,” perishing is the cessation of life, which is still relationally connected, especially to the Creator of life, such that even this death is part of the relational dynamics and “becoming” of creaturely existence. Nothingness is the antagonism to the relationality of life itself, the destruction of possibilities, not merely the end of one’s biological existence but the attempted destruction or annihilation of the relationality of creaturely existence itself.⁷ In a way that resonates with another German theologian, Karl Barth—on whom Cone wrote his dissertation—nothingness is a reactive force, not a consolidated feature of reality having existence on its own but a refusal, in particular, a refusal of God’s gracious decision to be

⁴ Cone, *BTL*, 12. The phrase “death-bound life” modifies the title from Abdul JanMohammed’s important study of Richard Wright’s novels, *The Death-Bound-Subject: Richard Wright’s Archaeology of Death* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2005). Cone refers to this text in his most recent book; see *CLT*, 15, where he follows the reference by writing, “African Americans did not have to see black bodies swinging on southern trees or personally experience mob violence to know that they daily risked death.”

⁵ Cone, *BTBP*, 7.

⁶ Cone, *MSLB*, 28.

⁷ Jüngel, *GMW*, 210-225.

God always and only in relation to God's creation. For Cone, this means that whiteness can be interpreted as nothingness in a theologically precise sense. It is the refusal of and antagonism toward the particular movement between God and creation as centered on the gracious incarnation and resurrection of Jesus Christ. "Racism" is the "complete denial of the Incarnation and thus of Christianity."⁸ Whiteness is "Antichrist" because it functions as the attempted severance of this relationship between God and creation that is the person of Jesus Christ.⁹ Life becomes equated with biological survival under white supremacy and the exercise of human freedom is countered by the violent threat and reality of death.¹⁰ Whiteness attempts to organize life—all life, including divine and human life—around itself, thereby refusing the mediation of Christ. It takes itself to be the particular norm or goal of creaturely existence as well as the universal or generic form of creaturely life itself, what, following Wynter, one can call the coloniality of (human) being.

This chapter reframes and sharpens the argument developed in the previous two chapters while also making an explicit turn to the theological, particularly to the centrality of the resurrection in James Cone's earlier writings. The chapter will first offer a working definition of whiteness as a way to connect the various arguments unfolded in Part I to Cone's work, while also drawing in some more recent work in whiteness studies. After offering this necessarily incomplete analysis of whiteness, the chapter will focus on the way the nothingness is materialized in whiteness as the refusal of what Cone calls the

⁸ Cone, *BTBP*, 73.

⁹ Cone, *BTBP*, 73.

¹⁰ Cone, *BTL*, 12.

“freedom of the resurrection.”¹¹ Whiteness refuses a world concretely structured around the contemporary presence of the crucified and resurrected Christ, while this relationship between the resurrected Christ and the oppressed offers black people a freedom to live beyond this death-bound life forged under white supremacy.

Whiteness: Toward an Incomplete Definition

Throughout his public theological career, nearing half a century now, James Cone offers no systematic theorization of whiteness but instead describes, comments upon, critiques, and castigates whiteness as he develops his theological analysis. From first to last—and despite some of his later criticisms of his early writings—his work is not an *anti-white* theology but an affirmative *black liberation* theology.¹² Karl Barth, the theologian on whom Cone wrote his dissertation, has suggested that one cannot approach the concept of nothingness directly:

Only from the standpoint of Jesus Christ, His birth, death, and resurrection, do we see [nothingness] in its reality and truth, without the temptation to treat it as something inclusive or relative, or to conceive it dialectically and thus render it innocuous.¹³

Cone will diverge from Barth on the full scope of this claim—that *only* from this standpoint can the truth be “seen”—but the centrality of theology in his interpretation of whiteness should be noted at the outset, for it explains why a theological critique of

¹¹ Cone, *GO*, 115.

¹² Reflecting on the “weaknesses” of his “early texts,” Cone says “it was as if the sole basis for black theology were racism among whites...Black theology, then, was being created out of a negative reaction to whites rather than a positive reaction to the history and culture of blacks.” Cone, *FMP*, 87. Part of the argument in this chapter, as well as throughout the dissertation, is that Cone’s early thought has a complexity that many, including Cone himself, miss.

¹³ Karl Barth, *CD III/3*, vol. 18, p. 16 [305].

whiteness has to center Cone's theological account of blackness, particularly his early account that develops this critique in light of the resurrection.¹⁴

Despite never attempting a systematic analysis and explication of whiteness at either a genealogical or structural level, one can find a certain consistency in Cone's thought as he repeatedly connects whiteness to three material processes: violence, constriction of movement and development, and control over resources.¹⁵ Instead of keeping these three categories as separate or unrelated aspects of whiteness, one can attempt to draw them together, in which case whiteness might be understood as a violence that targets and constricts black social freedom for the sake of white control over

¹⁴ Cone would operate with what, in the context of a theological analysis of love, Eberhard Jüngel calls a "pre-understanding" that "may well be corrected or made more precise" but which nevertheless offers a "provisional understanding." Jüngel, *GMW*, 317. Barth himself offers something proximate to this point, suggesting that the existentialist writings of Sartre and Heidegger are "determined in and by real encounter with nothingness," which they may "misinterpret." However, for Barth, the "self-reliant" modern subject will always approach nothingness with an "unshakeable confidence" that cannot be "affected, let alone broken" by any "purely secular upheavals." What Barth fails to consider is that this ostensibly self-reliant subject has always been formed in relation to those others deemed affectable and externally directed, which is to say, not everyone encounters "nothingness" from the objective and subjective position of self-reliant assurance and thus the relationships among theology, secularity, and political upheaval might also shape up differently in this context. See Barth *CD* III/3, 56-7 [345-6].

¹⁵ For some broader discussions, see James H. Cone, "Theology's Great Sin: Silence in the Face of White Supremacy," *Black Theology* 2, no. 2 (July 1, 2004): 139-52, and also James H. Cone, "Calling the Oppressors to Account for Four Centuries of Terror," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 31, no. 3 (June 1, 2004): 179-86. For some representative comments on the violence of whiteness, see (among many others): *BTBP*, 75, 143; *BTL*, 12, 24, 140-1; *RF*, 35; *ST*, 67-8. On white oppression as constriction or delimitation, see, for instance: *BTBP*, 16, 142; *BTL*, 156 n. 4; *SB*, 23-4. For comments on the control over communal, material resources, see: *FMP*, 195-196, 204; *MSLB*, 136; *RF*, 26, 143, and also, James H. Cone, "Epilogue: An Interpretation of the Debate among Black Theologians" (1979), in James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Theology: A Documentary History, Vol. I, 1966-1979*, 2 Rev (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 430. Cone comments on the way lynching regulated both black life and formed white social interactions in *CLT*, 9, 12.

the resources for and patterns of communal belonging. To build on this initial trajectory in Cone's work while drawing on other analyses of whiteness, it is possible to construct a more detailed, though still incomplete definition of whiteness.

It should be said at the outset that attempting to define the diverse and divergent practices that coalesce around whiteness is impossible: the temporal and geographical breadth, coupled with the necessary incompleteness, complexity, and contradictoriness of any form of human social life defies such consolidation. Yet, a definition, despite its necessary inadequacy, can draw attention to some of the main trajectories and structures that operate within and as whiteness while nevertheless granting space for the ambiguity and incompleteness inherent in it.¹⁶ Accordingly, as an initial attempt to elaborate some key aspects that coalesce within—or comprise the “assemblage” of—whiteness, one could say that *whiteness is a mode of social belonging that establishes itself as the proper form of the human through anti-black violence for the sake of white control over the accumulation of capital and its attendant processes of eco-social re/production.*¹⁷ The

¹⁶ Cone notes the way “whiteness” operates as a summation of various interrelated systems of domination: “We can easily identify many of the outside forces that oppress us—racism, corporate capitalism, police brutality, unjust laws, prisons, drugs, and so forth. The list could go on and on, and that is why it is convenient to sum them all up in one word—*whites!*” Cone, *FMP*, 159. The proposed definition seeks to do more than merely sum up a list; it indicates in a provisional way how these divergent practices coalesce within and as whiteness.

¹⁷ Andrea Smith's articulation of the “three pillars” of white supremacy also speaks broadly of general structures and processes of whiteness. See Andrea Smith, “Indigeneity, Settler Colonialism, White Supremacy,” *Global Dialogue (Online)* 12, no. 2 (Summer 2010): 1–13; Andrea Smith, “Heteropatriarchy and the Three Pillars of White Supremacy: Rethinking Women of Color Organizing,” in *The Color of Violence: The Incite! Anthology*, ed. INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2006), 66–73. A helpful discussion of different trajectories in “whiteness studies” can be found in Jennifer Harvey, *Whiteness and Morality: Pursuing Racial Justice Through Reparations and Sovereignty* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012). Willie James Jennings offers his own schematic overview of whiteness studies in a

earlier discussions of race in the dissertation offer some background for this definition. However, there are four aspects that require further clarification: the phrase eco-social re/production, the notion of anti-black violence, the contradictoriness of the definition, and the implicit redemptive logic.

The phrase “eco-social re/production” gestures back to Sylvia Wynter’s work, drawing out two key aspects of the global productions of whiteness. The abbreviated term ‘eco-’ points to the production of a global commodity culture through the transformation of space and land, a transformation that carried with it a destructive dispossession—assimilation or/as genocide—of Indigenous peoples. “Social re/production” refers to Wynter’s argument that the material means of production and hetero-patriarchal normativity work together for the shared cultural mandate to reproduce this particular, proper or normative, mode of human life. The phrase as a whole thus points to connections between ecology, gender, and labor within the processes of capital accumulation. It also follows Wynter in connecting the patriarchal, ecological, and class dynamics of capital to the normative communal goal to re/produce the proper form of the human, Man, specified here as whiteness.

long footnote, clarifying how his book offers an additional perspective. See Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 305-6, n. 137. Alexander Weheliye refers to “mobile structures of dominance such as race or gender” as “assemblages,” taken the initial bearings of this term from the work of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, defining assemblages as “continuously shifting relational totalities comprised of spasmodic networks between different entities (content) and their articulation within ‘acts and statements’ (expression).” See Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2014), 46. The quotation is of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 87-88.

The definition speaks of “anti-black violence” but it would perhaps be better to speak of “racial violence.”¹⁸ The emphasis on anti-blackness is present in the definition as Cone, particularly in his early work, argues that blackness is a concrete symbol for racial violence in general.¹⁹ Cone’s argument in favor of this controversial claim will be explored in Chapter Six, but there are a few reasons to prefer the notion of racial violence to anti-black violence in terms of a definition on its own (and not as a reflection of Cone’s thought). First, anti-black violence is itself embedded within a longer history of the violent exclusion and domination of people internal to what becomes Europe, specifically the relationships of the English to the Irish and the Spanish to Jews and Muslims.²⁰ The notion of racial violence picks up this kind of proto-racial violence that will be reconfigured within and through the production of whiteness. Secondly, racial violence can include what the first chapter discussed as Indigeneity, which picks out the broader category of those deemed external to the community of Man, not only descendants of Africans but also Indigenous Americans.²¹ Third, specifying racial

¹⁸ See Denise Ferreira da Silva, “No-Bodies: Law, Raciality and Violence,” *Griffith Law Review (Griffith University, as Represented by Its Socio-Legal Research Centre)* 18, no. 2 (June 2009): 212–36.

¹⁹ See Cone, *BTL*, 8.

²⁰ Cedric Robinson notes the importance of the previous domination of the Irish and the Slavs in the formation of racialized global capitalism. See Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill, N.C: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 1-29. George Fredrickson takes the 15th and 16th century blood purity laws enacted against Jewish converts in Spain to be the “first real anticipation” of modern racism. See George Fredrickson, *Racism: A Short History* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003), 31.

²¹ If one approaches Native struggles from the issue of theft of land, then they are positioned, as it were, within the family of Man, as a nation with sovereign rights that were not respected; however, if the analytic focus is on the question of genocide, then the unrestrained violence enacted through the enslavement of African peoples can be understood to be operative in this context as well, as *racial* and not only anti-black

violence allows one to attend to the ways whiteness both racialized itself and also placed itself outside of racialized identities, for *raciality* is not simply a way to categorize “distinct” people but an organization of violence that produces racial, meaning *nonwhite*, others.

This notion of anti-black or racial violence points to the contradictory logic of the racialization process as a whole. The proposed working definition implies that whiteness produces itself for its own pre-established, “white” self-interests. In addition, the very notion of “racial violence” requires the discourse of racial identity. Whiteness is formed through racial violence and yet violence becomes racialized through the formation of whiteness. Racial violence, in this way, both forms *and* is a result of whiteness. The contradictoriness cannot be removed, for the formation of whiteness operates through this kind of contradictory logic. To quote Steve Martinot’s account of this dialectical process:

The racialization of whites comes about through the racialization of others. For white people to be white, they must have defined and racialized others as nonwhite, and to have defined a nonwhite in order to define and racialized themselves as white. As Ian Lopez puts it, whiteness is a double negative; it is what is not nonwhite. At no time does this process unfold outside a structure of domination. A system of domination racializes itself only by racializing those dominated, through whose oppression (including exclusions and derogations) it creates the special meanings by which to do so... Racism brings race into existence.²²

It is within a relation characterized and structured through violence or domination that one group of people narrated and structured its mastery along “the color line.” One must make this point in an even more complicated manner, for there was not “one group of

violence. See Frank Wilderson, III, *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

²² Steve Martinot, *The Rule Of Racialization: Class, Identity, Governance* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2002), 186, referring to Ian Lopez, “White by Law,” in *Critical Race Theory*, ed. Richard Delgado (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), p. 547.

people” who proposed and secured their own mastery, for whiteness was not a pre-given identity but a diverse and divergent communal project forged within a situation of (increasingly global) domination, wherein land and bodies were being violently ordered in service to the accumulation of wealth. The invention of white racial identity is a negotiation with and response to this violent accumulation of wealth.

This relation of violence—a way of relating to and through violence—is not only central to the formation of white identity; it both forms and justifies a theological mode of redemption, which then becomes secularized as a project of “civilization.” In his reflections on Cone’s theology and whiteness, James Perkinson suggests that one should understand “soteriology” in a broad sense to refer to “any (political) logic that discursively legitimizes a choice to risk the ‘human absolute’—the suffering (or causing) of death—for the sake of the preservation or accomplishment of a pure or whole identity.”²³ For Perkinson, soteriology is, or at least is similar to ideology; it is a kind of “rationalization, one way or another, of the fact of death.”²⁴ Although this initial analysis is helpful, the emphasis should be placed on *the proper* instead of the *pure* or *whole*, as whiteness can surrender claims to (biological) purity or wholeness while still maintaining its self-definition as the proper mode of human being. Postmodern notions of fragmentation and multicultural claims to diversity might be taken to disrupt white purity or wholeness without fundamentally interrupting the “machinery of whiteness” as a project of redemption. Perkinson is by no means unaware of these problems, but to clarify the force of his argument, it is advantageous to construe the problematic,

²³ James W. Perkinson, *White Theology: Outing Supremacy in Modernity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 65.

²⁴ Perkinson, *White Theology*, 67.

following Wynter, as one of the “proper” and not as the problematic of the modern production and white disavowal of being a “split” subject.²⁵ Thus, one could say, whiteness takes the future of the world and the work of God—or later, in secular form, evolutionary progress, civilizational development, or global security—to be dependent on the continual construction and expansion of its social life through the violent domination and exploitation of its less-than-human others.

Although there are multiple points wherein one could contest this complex organization of creaturely life that Cone calls whiteness, Cone’s theological critique of whiteness by way of the resurrection allows one to contest multiple aspects at once. Whiteness cannot “overrepresent” itself as the proper form of the human, for human being is ontologically determined by its relationship to the crucified and resurrected Christ. The violence through which whiteness constructs and reconstructs itself is not ultimate because human existence as a whole is situated inside a relationship that exceeds even the powers of death. The implied imperative and temporality of reproduction—the need to produce and secure the future of this way of life as if it were the future of human life *per se*—is undermined by the material shaping of creaturely becomings and space-time itself around the incarnation and resurrection of Jesus Christ. These different aspects will be explored in the following chapters, but the remainder of this one will focus on the resurrection and the material realities of creaturely life and freedom over against the threats of death and nothingness.

²⁵ For the notion of the “split” subject of modernity, see Perkinson, *White Theology*, 75.

Resurrection and Divine Identification

At the beginning of *A Black Theology of Liberation*, Cone places the resurrection at center of the meaning of freedom and therefore at the heart of the theological task:

The task of Christian theology, then, is to analyze the meaning of hope in God in such a way that the oppressed community of a given society will risk all for earthly freedom, a freedom made possible in the resurrection of Jesus.²⁶

Theology explicates the hope of freedom found through and in the resurrection of Jesus for the sake of the community of the oppressed. The central theme of theology is a relation, not relationality as an abstract ontological category, but the particular relation between the crucified and resurrected Jesus of Nazareth and the oppressed community struggling—risking all—for earthly freedom.

Cone's emphasis on the resurrection of Christ gives a distinctive shape to his Christology. It is neither the human life of Jesus nor the eternal divine Logos that centers Cone's thought. Rather, it is a soteriological concern structured by the cross and the empty tomb.²⁷ Jesus "is not dead but resurrected and is alive in the world today."²⁸ Both the humanity and divinity of Jesus Christ are thought from, through, and for the sake of this contemporary encounter with the Crucified and Risen Lord in the struggle for black freedom. The question about the identity of Jesus is "derived from Christ himself as he breaks into our social existence," as one who is not a past figure but a present reality,

²⁶ Cone, *BTL*, 4.

²⁷ "The soteriological value of Jesus' person must finally determine our Christology" (Cone, *BTL*, 126). It is "Jesus's soteriological value" in the past, present, and future that leads and even makes it "necessary" for us to "inquire about his person" (Cone, *GO*, 111)

²⁸ Cone, *BTL*, 130.

living with us from the other side of death, as resurrected, and therefore, as our contemporary.²⁹

The contemporaneity of Christ is neither the docetic, mystical immediacy of Christ in the inner-sanctum of the human heart nor is it the historically extended embodiment of Christ as the Church.³⁰ Christ is contemporaneous because time always moves from and toward the crucified and resurrected person of Jesus of Nazareth, such that we move along with Jesus of Nazareth in *his* time and he speaks to and dwells with us in *our* time. Cone articulates Christ's living presence throughout his work, saying in his most recent book, "[Christ's] divine presence is the most important message about black existence."³¹ As he wrote in his first book, "Jesus is not safely confined in the first century. He is our contemporary."³² The "dialectical" structure of this experience of Jesus Christ in the material realities of the present is most clearly articulated in the Christology chapter of his fourth book, *God of the Oppressed*.

Although the question of Christ's identity begins "as he breaks into our social existence," this experience of his contemporaneity is not simply a positive affirmation of our own reality. Christ is not defined by or as whatever it is that we find positive or helpful.³³ "There is," Cone writes, "an otherness which we experience in the encounter with Christ," a sense that this one is not dissolvable within or containable by the present

²⁹ Cone, *GO*, 100.

³⁰ Cone suggests that the "Church is a continuation of the incarnation" in *Black Theology and Black Power*, though he continues to in the following paragraph to note a contemporaneity of Christ apart from the church: "it is the job of the Church to become black with him [Christ]." Cone, *BTBP*, 69. This movement is not a contradiction but an aspect of Cone's "paradoxical" or "dialectical" account of this relation.

³¹ Cone, *CLT*, 21.

³² Cone, *BTBP*, 38.

³³ Cone, *GO*, 100.

experience.³⁴ The presence of this otherness turns one back to Scripture: “the Jesus” encountered in “black experience is the Christ of Scripture.”³⁵ In fact, “because of divine grace” in the present moment, the community is “taken from the present to the past and then thrust back into their contemporary history with divine power to transform the sociopolitical context.”³⁶ Cone refers to this movement back and forth as an “event of transcendence,” which allows the community to “break the barriers of time and space as they walk and talk with Jesus in Palestine.”³⁷ This transcendence is also oriented toward the future, the eschaton, wherein the community also lifted “out of history” and experiences the heavenly future that awaits them.³⁸

Cone specifies two different movements. In the first, Christ, as the resurrected one, moves beyond the confines of his first century existence to be present with the church as their contemporary. The other movement is one whereby, through an encounter with this contemporary presence of Christ, the church moves backwards in time, becoming genuine contemporaries with Christ. Both movements or perspectives must be held together, dialectically, as Cone says.³⁹ The person encountered in the contemporary social struggles *is* the historical human being, Jesus of Nazareth, such that one neither encounters Jesus apart from this history nor engages the history of this person apart from his contemporary presence in these struggles. This history is not merely an event that

³⁴ Cone, *GO*, 101.

³⁵ Cone, *GO*, 102.

³⁶ Cone, *GO*, 102.

³⁷ Cone, *GO*, 103.

³⁸ Cone, *GO*, 105.

³⁹ Cone interweaves both movements in his account of Jesus Christ in the Black Spirituals: “Through the blood of slavery, black slaves transcended the limitations of space and time. Jesus’ time became their time. . . . Jesus was with them! . . . Jesus was present. . . and he is coming again” (Cone, *SB*, 49-51). Cone speaks of the “dialectical” relationship in *GO*, 103-4.

remains buried in the past or one that has been elevated outside of time and space altogether; rather, it disrupts and reorganizes space and time within and around itself. Because the historical person becomes “the One who stands at the center of their view of reality,” and because this historical person was raised by God from the dead, the slaves and other oppressed persons can “look beyond the present to the future... The future reality of Jesus means that what is contradicts what ought to be.”⁴⁰ The present itself becomes redefined, or more sharply, placed under negation by the future reality of the resurrected one who is present to the community in a way that always draws the community back into his own historical life, death, and resurrection. They move through their own present in communion with this one who lived, died, rose, and promises to come again.

One can further extend this account of the way the resurrection contours space and time, situating creation itself within and through the history of the crucified and resurrected Christ, by turning to the theology of T. F. Torrance.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Cone, *GO*, 121.

⁴¹ Although Cone’s thought moves in some ways toward the direction of Torrance, there are other paths or trajectories within Cone’s thought as well. For instance, Cone writes, the “eschatological revolution is not so much a cosmic change as it is a change in the people’s identity, wherein they are no longer named by the world but named by the Spirit of Jesus” (Cone, *ST*, 19). One could take this to imply a kind of immaterial, internal change except that the power “to name” under whiteness, as Cone notes and as was argued through Sylvia Wynter, presupposes the very material relations forged through power to put to death. The trajectory developed here is not a departure from Cone but an emphasis that extends certain aspects of his thought while admittedly and intentionally downplaying others.

Resurrection as the Center of Space-Time: T. F. Torrance

In two books dedicated to the relationship between Jesus Christ and creaturely space-time, T. F. Torrance has analyzed the complex spatiotemporal relationships that derive from God's genuine, historical and material presence to creatures in the incarnation and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. Space, Torrance argues, is not a container but a field ordered through the forces and relationships that constitute it. As relativity theory teaches, "the geometrical structures of space-time change according to the accumulation of mass and the field of gravitation caused by it."⁴² The geometric structures are neither timeless universal structures nor are they, as Immanuel Kant proposes, innate structures of the human mind used to organize and structure the world that appears to us in our experience. The geometric structures of space-time change. Space-time itself is relative to the "contingent events" or dynamic happenings that comprise it.⁴³ Space cannot be understood separately and independently from the dynamic relations and activities that happen, which entails, Torrance argues, that any account of space-time must take into consideration the nature of the events occurring and agents acting within the field.

The incarnation is not a violation of the laws of creation but the decisive event that confirms and establishes the ordering of space-time to and through its relationship with God. This entails that space-time is real for God in God's relationship to creation, not as a container that encloses God but as the field constituted by God's very definite acts of creation, incarnation, and resurrection. One must give full weight to the contingent

⁴² Thomas Forsyth Torrance, *Space, Time and Incarnation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 68.

⁴³ Torrance, *Space, Time and Incarnation*, 69.

dynamics that organize creaturely life while still affirming, on the basis of the incarnation, that these created realities and relations are open and incomplete on their own, for they are ultimately coordinated through the infinitely transcendent force of God's activity in Jesus Christ. Space-time is organized through the "dynamism and constancy" of the living Creator who exercises the infinitely dynamic divine power within the realm of creation from a particular location: the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.⁴⁴ In a very real and material sense, Jesus Christ is the center and central force organizing creaturely space-time.

Like Cone, Torrance elaborates a certain pattern of relations that chart the way space-time is organized through and around the living person of Jesus. However, in a way that differs from Cone, Torrance places more emphasis on the *ascension* of Jesus. In an important statement that outlines his claim, Torrance writes,

The withdrawal of Christ from visible and physical contact with us in our space-time existence on earth and in history means that Jesus Christ insists in making contact with us, not first directly and immediately in his risen humanity, but first and foremost through his historical involvement with us in his incarnation and crucifixion. That is to say, by withdrawing himself from our sight, Christ sends us back to the historical Jesus as the *covenanted place* on earth and in time which God has appointed for meeting between [humans and Godself].⁴⁵

The resurrection does not leave behind the life of the one crucified but takes it up into itself, affirming it, affirming this one as the one through whom and as whom God will be God for humankind and all creation. The resurrection "confirms" creaturely reality; it is not a new creation *ex nihilo* nor an immaterial continuation of human consciousness freed

⁴⁴ Torrance, *Space, Time and Incarnation*, 73.

⁴⁵ Thomas Forsyth Torrance, *Space, Time, and Resurrection* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1977), 133.

from spatiotemporal materiality.⁴⁶ Yet, the presence by which the living and resurrected Christ encounters us is mediated by the work of the Holy Spirit, who draws us into the creaturely opening to God that *is* the historical life and death of Jesus. The ascension, in short, entails we encounter the living and resurrected Christ only in the historical life of the Crucified.⁴⁷ In this way, as Cone also argues, the historical Jesus is contemporaneous, in that our creaturely space-time is truly centered and organized around his historical life and this historical life is a living reality through which the resurrected and living Christ is made present to us by the Spirit.

This pattern of relationships, for Torrance, sheds light on the spatiotemporal reality of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus while saturating these events with a depth that cannot be ordered or constrained within the usual patterns of creaturely existence. Within the history of this first-century person, one encounters the living God. One is confronted in the flesh of Jesus not with the conundrum of the infinite trying to “enter” into a finite container but with the mysterious depth wherein one encounters the divine transcendence in, and only in, the flesh of this historical figure. The resurrection gives an “invincible constancy and persistence” to the historical life and death of Jesus, such that this life cannot be bypassed along the way to God or constrained and contained within any system of life or thought. The resurrection confirms and establishes the centrality of Jesus of Nazareth for all of God’s relationships with the world. As such, the resurrection also has an “open indeterminate quality,” a kind of “excess in reality over the mundane actualities of our perishable existence.”

⁴⁶ “In the risen Jesus therefore, creaturely space and time, far from being dissolved are confirmed in their reality before God.” Torrance, *Space, Time, and Resurrection*, 127.

⁴⁷ Torrance, *Space, Time, and Resurrection*, 134.

This excess cannot be controlled or regulated through “the kind of reified objectivity which is the result of our own ‘objectifying’ operations and the massive subjectivity they embody.”⁴⁸ This excess is present, contemporaneous, in a way that is understandable to us—a real history of a real, enfleshed person—without being circumscribed by the kinds of knowledge predicated on the mastery, control, or manipulation of reality. The resurrected one can be known “only as we allow the resurrection to break through the normal patterns of our knowledge and to constitute itself the ultimate and ultimately indefinable ground on which it is to be understood.”⁴⁹ One can speak of this reality “only in strange and unfamiliar ways,” in what Torrance calls, following Athanasius, a “paradeigma” or “pointer.”⁵⁰

This excess and its “paradeigma” or perhaps parables will be discussed in Chapter Five. The task in the remaining part of this chapter is to account for how whiteness is the materialization of nothingness in the spatio-temporal world shaped around the living presence of the resurrected Christ. Blackness, by designating a mode of living beyond this death-bound life within this very life, enfleshes the eschatological, creaturely freedom given to the world and confirmed in the resurrection of the Crucified.

Nothingness and the Power of Death

Death, for Cone, is “the symbol of nothingness, and the possibility of the complete annihilation of being.”⁵¹ However, “the resurrection of Jesus means that God is

⁴⁸ Torrance, *Space, Time, and Resurrection*, 176-7.

⁴⁹ Torrance, *Space, Time, and Resurrection*, 177.

⁵⁰ Torrance, *Space, Time, and Resurrection*, 177; Torrance, *Space, Time and Incarnation*, 16.

⁵¹ Cone, *SB*, 67.

not defeated by oppression but transforms it into possibilities of liberation.”⁵² At times, Cone appears to give a dialectical account of this struggle between being and nothingness, drawing explicitly on Paul Tillich’s work.⁵³ In *The Courage To Be*, Tillich provides a helpful summation of his own views:

If one is asked how non-being is related to being-itself, one can only answer metaphorically: being ‘embraces’ itself and non-being. Being has non-being ‘within’ itself as that which is eternally present and eternally overcome in the process of the divine life. The ground of everything that is is not a dead identity without movement and becoming, it is living creativity. Creatively it affirms itself, eternally conquering its own non-being.⁵⁴

Nothingness is a necessary moment internal to being itself. It is the power of the negative through which the ultimate ground of everything (being) is not statically dead but creatively living and in process. Being is the creative inclusion and overcoming of this, its own, nothingness.

Tillich, in a very Hegelian line of thought, positions negation—or nonbeing, finitude—as a moment internal to and overcome by the self-creativity of what is ultimate.⁵⁵ However, this Hegelianism is put in reserve by Tillich’s existential-

⁵² James H. Cone, “Christian Theology and the Afro-American Revolution,” *Christianity and Crisis* 30, no. 10 (June 8, 1970), 124.

⁵³ Cone, *BTBP*, 7.

⁵⁴ Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be*, Fontana Library (London: Collins, 1962), 43. Tillich will make the same point in the language of finitude. See Tillich, *Courage to Be*, 174-175, as well as the similar formulation in *Systematic Theology, Vol. 1*: “God is infinite because [God] has the finite (and with it that element of nonbeing which belongs to finitude) within [Godself] united with [God’s] infinity.” Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Vol. 1: Reason and Revelation, Being and God* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1973), 252.

⁵⁵ In *The Ontology of Paul Tillich*, Adrian Thatcher notes the influence of Hegel’s doctrine of being and non-being while attending to the various other sources Tillich deploys, esp. Jacob Boehme and Friedrich Schelling. Thatcher also draws attention to other key ways Tillich articulates the relationship between being and nonbeing within the divine: the ground and abyss of being, the divine and demonic. See Adrian Thatcher, *The*

Kantianism, in which the categories of human thought are structured by and therefore only applicable to the finite world of our experience.⁵⁶ The language used above for God as “living creativity,” is, as Tillich notes, “metaphorical” speech. To speak of God as living is to “assert that [God] is the eternal process in which separation is posited and is overcome by reunion.” This dialectical livingness is “the process in which potential being becomes actual being.” However, as this distinction between potentiality and actuality does not apply to God or being-itself, “we cannot speak of God as living in the proper or nonsymbolic sense of the word ‘life.’”⁵⁷

Despite this non-literal application of the dialectics of creativity to God, Tillich’s rendering is inadequate for Cone, as it ultimately makes the existential threat to being—nothingness—necessary and essential for the creative development of life, which would in turn render whiteness *necessary* for black life on one hand and position blackness as itself oriented toward its own negation once the whiteness that mobilizes it has been overcome.⁵⁸ It also fails to remain closely connected to the theological center of Cone’s thought, the contemporaneity of the resurrected Christ.

Ontology of Paul Tillich (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), esp. ch. 3, “Non-Being.”

⁵⁶ For Tillich, Kant’s “doctrine of the categories is a doctrine of human finitude.” *Systematic Theology, Vol 1*, 82, n. 7. This existential Kantianism rejects Hegel’s attempts to overcome human estrangement from the divine by means of philosophical reason.

⁵⁷ Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Vol 1*, 242.

⁵⁸ Frantz Fanon brilliantly responds to the way Jean-Paul Sartre connected the movement of Négritude to a “weak stage” (the first negation) of an anti-colonial dialectics, writing “the dialectic that introduces necessity as a support for my freedom expels me from myself...I am not a potentiality of something; I am fully what I am. I do not have to look for the universal...My black consciousness does not claim to be a loss.” Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008), 114.

In this way, Karl Barth's own theological account of nothingness offers some assistance.⁵⁹ For Barth, nothingness cannot be placed inside a coherent ontological framework, for doing so mistakes nothingness for the less threatening and dramatic negativity inherent in creaturely life. To equate nothingness with this negativity disparages God as creator as well as God's creation, in effect giving the full horrors of sin and death a kind of provisional goodness within God's own life and in the world. Nothingness is not an element of creaturely life but the refusal of creaturely life and existence as relationally determined through God's gracious decision to be God for God's creatures. In God's self-determination to be God for God's creatures in Jesus Christ, a self-determination that *is* God's very being, God rejects the possibility of a godless creation. God rejects a "being that refuses and resists and therefore lacks [God's] grace. This being which is alien and adverse to grace and therefore without it, is that of nothingness."⁶⁰ As such, nothingness has no positive reality in itself, nor is it an essential aspect of divine or creaturely life. Nothingness is inexplicable, what Barth calls an "impossible possibility."⁶¹ Nothingness is, but it exists only as the refusal of a world centered around the grace of God's decision to be God as Jesus of Nazareth.

Though privative, nothingness makes its force felt in a particular way, as a kind of false inhabitation of the limitations, or negations, that structure creaturely life. For any creature, its "distinction from God and its individual distinctness" is constituted by a "not," which is inherent to it and good, for it distinguishes the creature from God and

⁵⁹ For a helpful analysis of Barth's theological analysis of evil and nothingness, see Wolf Krötke, *Sin and Nothingness in the Theology of Karl Barth*, trans. Philip Gordon Ziegler and Christina-Maria Bammel (Princeton: Princeton Theological Seminary, 2005).

⁶⁰ Barth, *CD* III/3, 353.

⁶¹ Nothingness "'is,' not as God and [God's] creation are, but only in its own improper way, as inherent contradiction, as impossible possibility." Barth, *CD* III/3, 351.

from other creatures. This “not” is therefore “at once the expression and frontier of the positive will, election and activity of God.” This negativity or “not” is the boundary inherent in the relationality of life—between God and creation and within creation—and yet, precisely here, in the distinctions that constitute creaturely life, creation becomes “contiguous” to nothingness, though still not having any “any connection with it.”⁶²

Nothingness is the (impossible) eradication of creaturely limits and distinctions, the attempted undoing of creaturely life at its center and deepest point, which is the mediation of life, divine and creaturely, through Jesus of Nazareth. To call whiteness nothingness in this sense is to say that whiteness refuses the limitations on and ordering of creaturely life—space and time itself—through the divine grace of God in Jesus of Nazareth. Nothingness refuses this world as God’s world, as *this* God’s world, the God who comes to this world as “a weak and threatened and vulnerable creature.”⁶³

Nothingness attempts to make difference and vulnerability—finitude, the “not” inherent and good in creaturely existence before God and with others—a threat and liability, something dangerous that must be guarded against and overcome. Nothingness transforms the ungrounded graciousness of creaturely life—its lack of necessity, foundation, or guarantee—into a struggle for security over against what it cannot contain or control.

“To be,” for Cone, “is to know that one’s being is grounded in God’s liberating activity.” We “*become* what *we* are.”⁶⁴ Through the resurrection, “people can now be

⁶² Barth, *CD* III/3, 364.

⁶³ Barth, *CD* III/3, 358.

⁶⁴ Cone, *BTL*, 112, emphasis in the second quotation is in the original.

what they are—liberated humans.”⁶⁵ To exist through one’s material relationship to the resurrected Christ—Christ as one’s contemporary, which is the condition of all existence—places one in a relationship to what exceeds death within death-bound life. The “resurrection is the divine guarantee that their lives are in the hands of him [Christ] who conquered death.”⁶⁶ As the resurrected one, Christ “bestowed upon the people a status of being, enabling them to transcend death.”⁶⁷ This status of being or identity cannot be taken away or given (over to) death: “if one has a relationship with the Resurrected One, then one can know that one has an identity that cannot be taken away with guns and bullets.”⁶⁸ This identity cannot even be held or possessed at all. Even what is most one’s own, one’s very death, is now reconfigured through this relationship to the resurrected Christ.⁶⁹ Life and death—and with it, the totality of human identity or the formation of subjects—are situated in a relationship that exceeds them. They cannot appropriate who they are and therefore who they are can never be captured or taken away by those who instrumentalize death for the sake of (falsely) securing (their own) life.⁷⁰ Nothingness here is shown to be the refusal and attempted capture or constriction of

⁶⁵ Cone, “Christian Theology and the Afro-American Revolution,” 124.

⁶⁶ Cone, *RF*, 21.

⁶⁷ Cone, *SB*, 70.

⁶⁸ Cone, *GO*, 132.

⁶⁹ The notion of “own-ness” reworks Heidegger’s articulation of “being-toward-death.” Heidegger describes “being-towards-death” as Dasein’s “ownmost possibility which is non-relational and not be outstripped—which is certain, and as such, indefinite.” See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2008), 307.

⁷⁰ Eberhard Jüngel stresses the falsity of nothingness, describing nothingness as a refusal not by way of opposition but by way of a false affirmation, in short, as a lie. See Eberhard Jüngel, *Justification: The Heart of the Christian Faith: A Theological Study with an Ecumenical Purpose*, trans. Jeffrey Cayzer (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2001), 106-110.

(human) life, a movement of possession or holding. The “death and resurrection of Christ bestows upon people a freedom that cannot be taken away by the oppressors.”⁷¹ Yet, this reframing of death through the resurrection of Christ is not the result of a dialectical struggle over nothingness but is rather the affirmation and “confirmation” (Torrance) of creaturely life and freedom. Creation itself has and will always be organized around the dramatic events in which God demonstrated the full extent of God’s commitment to only be God with God’s creatures.

Freedom and the Opening of God

For Cone, God has “defined” God’s very being “according to the liberation of the oppressed.”⁷² This self-definition for the sake of liberation is the determination of God to be God for God’s creatures even to, and through to the other side of, the cross. The movement of cross and resurrection is not, however, a dialectical process of incorporation, whereby the absolute point of limitation or separation is posited and overcome through the greater dynamics of divine love. As Barth suggests, nothingness was set aside at creation as well as through the cross, giving it a doubly “past” sense and making it in no way a necessary element of God’s inner life or a potentiality inherent in creation itself.⁷³ Creation itself has always been related to the resurrection, for creation

⁷¹ Cone, *SB*, 83.

⁷² James H. Cone, “Black Theology and Black Liberation,” in *Black Theology: A Documentary History, Vol. 1: 1966-1979*, ed. James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore, 2nd Rev. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 109.

⁷³ For nothingness as the “eternal past” set aside in creation, see Barth, *CD III/3*, 64 [353]. For nothingness being “consigned to the past in Jesus Christ,” particularly through the resurrection, see Barth, *CD III/3*, 74 [363]. The two statements cohere because “the grace of God is the basis and norm of all being, and this grace reaches its most intensive point in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.” Barth, *CD III/3*, 65 [354].

has its basis in God's unwavering commitment to be God for creatures in Jesus of Nazareth. This commitment, or self-definition, is also the determination of God's own life, such that God is *who* God is as the one who liberates.

Though wary of speculative theological thought, Cone provides a deep reconsideration of God's being as "defined" for liberation in *God of the Oppressed*.⁷⁴ In the book, Cone provides a subtle reworking of Barth's notion of the "threefold" Word of God (as revelation, scripture, and proclamation) when he notes that the sermonic interpretations of Scripture are more than "words about God." Scripture proclaimed is the Word of God as a "poetic happening, an evocation of an indescribable reality in the lives of the people."⁷⁵ The indescribable reality is the life of God in the lives of the people, the presence of Jesus Christ in and as the community:

Christ is not a proposition, not a theological concept which exists merely in our heads. He is an event of liberation, a happening in the lives of oppressed people struggling for political freedom. He is the eternal event of liberation in the divine person who makes freedom a constituent of human existence.⁷⁶

Liberation is "fellowship with God," such that one's "true humanity is actualized in God."⁷⁷ This liberation is God's very life, for Christ is this eternal event who makes and gives freedom, a freedom that exceeds even the powers of death through the resurrection. This liberating event [Christ] that is God's eternal life [Father] is the power of God as

⁷⁴ The following discussion of James Cone and Eberhard Jüngel on the Trinitarian logic of "the opening" was originally published in an extended reflection on the topic, Timothy McGee, "God's Life in and as Opening: James Cone, Divine Self-Determination, and the Trinitarian Politics of Sovereignty," *Modern Theology* 32, no. 1 (January 1, 2016): 100–117.

⁷⁵ Cone, *GO*, 17.

⁷⁶ Cone, *GO*, 32.

⁷⁷ Cone, *GO*, 130.

Spirit, for Jesus is the one anointed by the Spirit in baptism.⁷⁸ In fact, “God’s revelation in Jesus Christ is identical with the presence of his Spirit in the slave community in struggle for the liberation of humanity.”⁷⁹

This notion of God’s revelation being identical to God’s life as well as to the oppressed community is articulated by Cone in a succinct statement of his views:

As the Gospel portrayal of Jesus demonstrates, the God of Israel is the God whose will is made known through God’s *identification* with the oppressed and God’s activity is always *identical* with those who strive for a liberated freedom.⁸⁰

Identification implies difference as well as a movement toward, a life lived ecstatically and in relation. However, the claim that this activity is identical with those who strive for freedom erases such difference, for in this sense, the efforts for liberation simply are the activity, and therefore the very life and being, of God.⁸¹ There is an eschatological element at work here, which Cone will also label transcendence, wherein from the creaturely side, the creature can never claim to possess or otherwise “initiate” this activity of God and yet, from God’s side, God has “elected” to identify these struggles against oppression as God’s own life.⁸² The very being of God is this movement or spacing between identification and identity, wherein God is this opening—an event—that requires while also confounding the logic of identity and difference.

⁷⁸ Cone, *GO*, 68.

⁷⁹ Cone, *GO*, 181.

⁸⁰ Cone, *GO*, 206, emphasis added.

⁸¹ Jesus’s “actions have their origin in God’s eternal being,” and as the preceding section on the resurrection showed, for Cone, Jesus’s activity (contemporaneity) continues in these struggles for liberation. Cone, *GO*, 74.

⁸² Cone, *GO*, 90.

In *God as the Mystery of the World*, Jüngel unfolds the complex logic of this opening, which he refers to as God's being as "turning toward" or more frequently as "coming to," a being in advent.⁸³ In a helpful summation, Jüngel writes,

God is in Godself the one who expresses Godself. God's 'inner being' is itself a turning toward what is 'outside.' God communicates with Godself without withholding Godself from others. As love, God makes it possible to share in God's life, in the life of love. God's identification with the man Jesus is, consequently, the *revelation* of the *eternal* being of God, as a special and unique event...From all eternity God *is in and of Godself* in such a way that God is *for* humankind. As the Eternal, God is for perishable humankind [*vergänglichen Menschen*], whose perishability has its ground in this Pro-Being of God, a ground which prevents the process of perishing [*Vergehen*] from ending in nothingness.⁸⁴

To begin interpreting this complex and condensed set of claims, it will be helpful to focus on the second sentence, which states that God's "inner being" is itself a "turning toward" what is "outside." This life as "turning towards" is the divine life of freedom in love, a life that becomes identified with and identical to the human life and especially death of Jesus.⁸⁵ This identification is God's life; God's being is in this "turning toward" an other, this particular other, the Crucified Jesus of Nazareth. This notion of "turning toward" requires while simultaneously undoing the notions of interiority and exteriority.

Jüngel initially describes this "turning toward" as a kind of excess, as God's "overflowing being."⁸⁶ This overflowing is God's life in self-communication, "before all

⁸³ Jüngel narrates the Triune relations of God through the language of arrival: God comes from God (Father) to God (Son) as God (Spirit). See Jüngel, *GMW*, 380-9.

⁸⁴ Jüngel, *GMW*, 220-221, translation modified. For the German original, see Eberhard Jüngel, *Gott als Geheimnis der Welt: Zur Begründung der Theologie des Gekreuzigten im Streit zwischen Theismus Und Atheismus* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1986), 299-300.

⁸⁵ The language of freedom in love comes from Karl Barth's description of "The Being of God as the One Who Loves in Freedom," which is §28 in the *Church Dogmatics*. See Barth, *CD II/1*, 1-65 [257-321].

⁸⁶ Jüngel, *GMW*, 222.

‘self-having,’ all ‘self-possession.’”⁸⁷ The ecstatic self-communication in which God exists is the “being of love” in which life itself “goes beyond itself,” such that the relational movements that *are* God’s life continue even when facing and enduring the full assault of nothingness.⁸⁸

This divine “overflowing” is not, however, a surfeit of pure presence, for God in God’s self-revelation to humans is revealed as absent: “revelation is the becoming present of an absent one as absent.”⁸⁹ For Jüngel, this interplay of presence and absence is both linguistic and Trinitarian. The “becoming present” is an identification in which God is experienced as coming to us precisely insofar as God is not separable from these creaturely words (“language-events”) through which God comes. As Jüngel himself notes, though he doesn’t develop this line of thought as rigorously as Cone, if God’s life is revelation and this revelation “has as such worldly speech as a part of itself,” then this revelation is bound to the particular cultural and historical trajectory in which this divinely elected speech is produced.⁹⁰ Yet this binding (or what Cone calls “appropriation”) still entails that God’s turning towards is simultaneously a presence and absence, for God comes as God in what is distinct from God.⁹¹ If this turning towards the other necessarily involves the confounding of or crossing out of presence as well as interiority and self-possession, then God is not immediately “self-present” to Godself but

⁸⁷ Jüngel, *GMW*, 222.

⁸⁸ Jüngel, *GMW*, 222. Chapter Four will offer a critique of the lingering dialectical structure of Jüngel’s account of nothingness and divine love.

⁸⁹ Jüngel, *GMW*, 349.

⁹⁰ Jüngel, *GMW*, 348. “[To] the degree that language is the epitome of human historicity, we must speak of human history when we use the concept of revelation.” Jüngel, *GMW*, 349.

⁹¹ “God enters into the social context of human existence and appropriates the ideas and actions of the oppressed as God’s own.” Cone, *GO*, 90.

“comes to God” always in Jesus Christ and the Spirit of the community of the resurrection. This identification is, however, not the erasure of difference; nor is this difference the separation of discrete or enclosed identities. God’s life is *turning toward*; God’s being is this divine opening, an opening that, as it were, disrupts the logic of the self-enclosed purity of identity or the priority of the sovereign, self-generating and all-powerful will.

The instability of boundaries within their very affirmation—what Jüngel calls an identification that is “more than mere identity”—gives rise to the fundamental paradox of Christian life and thought, which is, for Cone, that God’s very life is this non-identical identity with the oppressed.⁹² Christ “is the *otherness* in the black experience that makes possible the affirmation of black humanity in an inhumane situation.”⁹³ Although often read as identifying Jesus directly with blackness, Cone consistently resists a dyadic relation between two discrete entities, Christ and the black experience, marking it in this quotation by that third term, ‘otherness’. This otherness indicates a between, not a separate third thing, but the gap or absence whose presence is also inherent within the appositional relationship arising between the other two terms, Christ and the black experience. Otherness is a term in common, expressing a common or commons held or possessed by neither. This otherness marks an excess in relation, a movement between, in or rather as the between of these two terms, such that the two terms—Christ and the black experience—are also already open, already in relation beyond themselves.

⁹² “The central message of the Incarnation is the proclamation that the divine has entered the human situation so as to redeem humanity. To be sure, there is an absolutely distinctive character in divine revelation, but God has chosen not to apply the radical otherness of divine existence to the struggle of the oppressed for freedom but to the oppress who make people unfree.” Cone, *GO*, 89-90.

⁹³ Cone, *GO*, 105, emphasis in the original.

It is unclear whether Christ provides this otherness or if the otherness is the aspect of black experience with which Christ is identified: “Christ is the otherness in the black experience.” The ambiguity of the sentence is vital, for the excessive relation, the between that moves or constitutes the two terms in their mutual excess, cannot simply be placed on one side, as Christ, or the other, the black experience. The otherness, as it were, does not “belong” to either but marks what Cone calls a dialectic or paradoxical connection. On one side, Cone will refer to this connection as God’s election or appropriation of the struggles of the oppressed. In this sense, God *identifies* with the oppressed. On the other hand, Cone will argue, Christologically, that these struggles are *identical* to the activity of God, an activity that is God’s very life and being. This spacing or gap between identity and identification is this opening, this excessive relation. This otherness in (the) common(s) *is* possibility, or freedom, that is, it is the divine affirmation of black life beyond the nothingness of whiteness.

Blackness as Living (From) the Excess of Life

From this focus on the opening of and as God’s very life, it is now possible to clarify Cone’s *theological* account of black life in the face of the nothingness materialized through the dehumanizing realities of whiteness. To build from and move beyond the language of Cone, though hopefully still expressing the deep currents of his thought, human existence is ultimately *dis-grounded*, for it is grounded in God but this God is not a ground but the displacement of grounding and a giving (of) space, an

opening.⁹⁴ God is, to use a phrase from Anna J. Cooper and developed in Karen Baker Fletcher's womanist thought, "a singing something."⁹⁵ As Cone notes, "for blacks, their Being depended upon a song. Through song, they built new structures for existence in an alien land."⁹⁶ God is this singing something, not a song (potential) to be sung (reiterated as actuality) but is this very singing itself. God is this "poetic happening" in which the severance from the past and the looming threat of death hanging over the immediate future do not determine the rhythm and creativity of life.⁹⁷ This singing something is the divine life as love, the opening in which God lives, God's being as this opening for life even within and therefore beyond the power of death.

⁹⁴ Carlyle Stewart, III suggests that Cone's thought incorporates both "classical theism" (God is *a* being) and "existential-ontological theism" (God is the ground of being). Stewart is certainly correct to note ways Cone modifies or extends both of these positions but does not appreciate the ways in which these shifts make both options untenable as interpretive lens, for neither can satisfactorily think through God's being in and as opening. Put differently, Stewart does not sufficiently attend to the ways Cone's work resonates with Barth's own thought regarding the divine self-definition or the eternal election to be God as Jesus Christ. See Carlyle Fielding Stewart, III, *God, Being and Liberation: A Comparative Analysis of the Theologies and Ethics of James H. Cone and Howard Thurman* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1989), esp. 34-48. This statement of the "groundlessness" of God also draws from Eberhard Jüngel: "God has no ground. If God is the one who disposes over being and nonbeing (and thus the one who distinguishes between being and nonbeing), then there is no degree of necessity which can be postulated of him. As groundless being, God is not necessary and yet more than necessary." Jüngel, *GMW*, 33.

⁹⁵ Karen Baker-Fletcher, *A Singing Something: Anna J. Cooper & the Foundations of Womanist Theology* (New York: Crossroad, 1994).

⁹⁶ Cone, *RF*, 16; see also p. 116.

⁹⁷ This emphasis on the creativity of life takes into account the ways Cone's thought developed in conversation with and in response to criticisms from womanist theologians. As JoAnne Marie Terrell summarizes, "While varieties of womanist theology are critical of black theologies of liberation, they do not oppose the project of black liberation; they place a more nuanced emphasis on the goal of *survival* and *quality of life* issues for African American people, male and female." See JoAnne Marie Terrell, *Power in the Blood? The Cross in the African American Experience* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Pub, 2005), 102. See as well Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 143-177.

Nonbeing, sin, evil, and death—accepting Cone’s close linking of these terms—these antagonistic realities are refusals of God’s opening, and therein refusals of this dis-grounded existence for the sake of securing one’s own, individual and cultural, ground of being.⁹⁸ Nothingness is the delimitation or attempted closure of the opening of being for the sake of securing life. This false upholding of life—and nothingness *is* a lie—operates through and unleashes the power of death.⁹⁹ White supremacy is thus the material reality of nothingness, the attempted securing of the future of life through the re/production of the figure of Man.

Eschatological freedom is this opening of the divine life in the middle of a reality that appears defined and delimited by structures of death and oppression. It is the excess to life in the middle of life, in the middle of a life cut off from origin and end.¹⁰⁰ This excess is the divine singing, the songs through which life was created without claiming to be “grounded” in and as the teleological origin and end. This mode of life is lived from and as the divine opening, from and as the life of the crucified and resurrected Christ. The

⁹⁸ One can glimpse how Cone is not necessarily refusing but rephrasing and reframing Paul Tillich’s existential dialectics of nonbeing. There is a kind of proximity between Cone and Tillich when Tillich talks about “absolute faith” as “the accepting of acceptance without somebody or something that accepts. It is the power of being-itself that accepts and gives the courage to be.” Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (London: Collins, 1962), 179. Insofar as Tillich is attempting to articulate the divine outside of an ontology of self-possession and presence—or more basically, of beings and things—Cone and he are in a similar position. For Cone, this dis-grounded acceptance that gives the power or courage to be *is* the opening of the life of God as Jesus Christ and present as the Spirit, an opening moreover that is not framed, as it is in Tillich, as a kind of dialectical overcoming of nothingness. For a closer reading of Cone’s reworking of Tillich’s dialectical account of being, see Carlyle F. Stewart, “The Method of Correlation in the Theology of James H Cone,” *Journal of Religious Thought* 40, no. 2 (September 1, 1984): 27–38.

⁹⁹ Jüngel, *Justification*, 106-110.

¹⁰⁰ This notion of “the middle” is developed in Bonhoeffer’s *Creation and Fall*. See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, trans. Douglas Stephen Bax, vol. 3, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 26-33.

resurrection is the uninterruptedness of this divine opening, the singing something and poetic Word of God, even in the face of sin and death. Oppression, sin, and death give rise to revelation *as resurrection from the dead*, but creation was always already this openness and creativity, this movement without appropriation or possession, which is to say, creation was always already this freedom.¹⁰¹ The resurrection is not the dialectical negation of creaturely death but is the divine re-affirmation of creaturely life in its ungrounded, finite fragility, even under conditions of sin and nothingness (death).¹⁰² The resurrection is the affirmation that this open creativity of life exceeds even the nothingness of death that attempts to curtail and annihilate it.¹⁰³

Blackness, however, is also for Cone consistently linked to suffering, such that possibilities of living (from) the beyond of life are possibilities for suffering flesh. If the resurrection reinterprets the cross, the resurrected one is still always the one who was crucified. The next chapter will take up this intersection between suffering and possibility within the human relationship to the contemporaneous Christ. However, before engaging the way Cone frames the theological, ontological, and political priority of the possible, it

¹⁰¹ This interplay of death and life, of life in and beyond death, is articulated strongly through a process-relational theology in Karen Baker-Fletcher, *Dancing with God: The Trinity from a Womanist Perspective* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2006). This point will be developed in more detail in the following chapter, particularly in the concluding section.

¹⁰² Torrance, *Space, Time, Resurrection*, 79.

¹⁰³ This paragraph and the one that follows takes Barth's claim that the covenant is the "internal basis" of creation one step further, for God's self-determination to be God for us in Christ (covenant) is God's self-determination to give life to creatures even beyond the annihilating powers of nothingness. Put differently, if Barth thinks creation itself Christologically, Cone places the resurrection at the center of this Christology and hence, also, at the center of creation itself. This rendering is not alien to Barth himself, who writes, Christ's "resurrection sums up the whole process of revelation." Revelation is God's very being and creation is oriented toward this revelation. Cone's should be read as concretizing and extending these reflections. See Barth, *CD III/3*, vol. 18, p. 22 [312].

is necessary to address the matter of the body, the way *that* body matters, the body crucified and raised to new life.

The Matter of Resurrection

Despite the centrality of the resurrection in Cone's early theological critique of the death-laden realities of white supremacy, Cone never addresses a debate that would be well-known to him, given his familiarity with German Protestant theology, namely, whether the resurrection marks some kind of *continuation* of the particular life of Jesus of Nazareth beyond death or speaks rather of a continuing presence experienced in the event of our faith. Simply put, does talk about resurrection refer primarily to the experiences of the community of faith or to an event that necessarily involves the corporeal, historical person, Jesus of Nazareth?¹⁰⁴ This question becomes more acute when, in his later work—such as the 1997 Preface to *God of the Oppressed*—Cone refers to Jesus as “an important revelatory event among many,” explicitly retracting his earlier understanding of Jesus as “God's *sole* revelation.”¹⁰⁵ Here, the resurrection shifts toward a noetic register, involving the particular, contextual disclosure of a more general feature of reality, what becomes a more generic and universal human experience of transcendence. In this way, as Cone states in his most recent book, “The resurrection of Jesus is God

¹⁰⁴ This formulation of the question comes from Paul Molnar's chapter on the resurrection and incarnation in Karl Barth's theology: “Let us begin by employing the categories developed by David Fergusson and ask whether Barth believes the resurrection is an event in the life of Jesus that gives meaning to the faith of the disciples and to ours or if he believes it is created by or realized within the faith of the disciples and our faith.” Paul D. Molnar, *Incarnation and Resurrection: Toward a Contemporary Understanding* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 1. Molnar is referencing David Fergusson's article, “Interpreting the Resurrection,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 38 (1985): 287-305.

¹⁰⁵ Cone, *GO*, xiv.

giving people meaning beyond history.”¹⁰⁶ Thought along this direction, the resurrection potentially slides away from the flesh of Christ and moves toward the existential affirmation of a general human identity that exceeds all the conditions of historical, death-bound life, including even the materiality of the body.

Although Cone does not make this argument, his own emphasis on the materiality of the body and life itself provides some motivation to give precedence to the resurrection as a matter of flesh. In his theological account of “the black experience as a source of theology,” Cone pays careful attention to the affective and bodily registers of this experience. The “truth of black” Christianity—Cone writes “black religion,” though in his later work he will show more care in not equating black religion with Christianity—is found in “shout, hum, and moan as these expressions move the people closer to the source of their being.” Through and in these expressions,

the divine One informs and becomes present in black reality and is best defined in terms of black people’s response in body and spirit to that divine source... The key to the theological affirmation here is not only the verbal assent to the power of God to grant identity and liberation to an oppressed and humiliated people. Equally important is the verbal passion with which these affirmations are asserted and the physical responses they elicit from the community.¹⁰⁷

The affective register of Cone’s account of truth will be developed in the fifth chapter; the importance here is the centrality of *the body*, or as the next chapter will argue, the centrality of *the flesh* in this experience of Christ’s contemporary presence. The theological affirmation of an excess to life, what he later calls transcendence, is not merely cognitive but is enfleshed, which can also be taken to mean that this excess involves the matter of flesh. The experience of the resurrected Christ is not the

¹⁰⁶ Cone, *CLT*, 26.

¹⁰⁷ Cone, *GO*, 21.

affirmation of the continuity of disembodied consciousness after death; nor is it the verbal word that God will continue to relate to one's past life even after it finally ends. The experience of the resurrected Christ is the experience of an otherness given, and thereby affirmed, for the flesh, which is to say, it is the experience of a fleshly transcendence in a communion made possible by the transcendence of Christ's flesh beyond the powers of death and nothingness.

One of T. F. Torrance's remarks on the resurrection bears proximity to Cone's thinking, or more precisely, to the line of reflection this chapter is developing through Cone's work. Torrance wrote,

[The] risen Jesus Christ cannot be discerned within the frame of the old conditions of life which by his resurrection he has transcended, and cannot be understood except within the context of the transformation which it has brought about.¹⁰⁸

This transformation, as Cone argues throughout his work, is a transformation that must involve our very flesh. For one, the very *experience* of the otherness that is Christ has this affective-corporeal, enfleshed, register. At another level, it is the connection between the resurrection and the desires of the flesh that orients the *critical* aspect of the belief of the resurrection. As "long as we look at the resurrection of Christ and the expected 'end', we cannot reconcile ourselves to the things of the present that contradict his presence."¹⁰⁹ The resurrection of Christ brings with it a refusal to accept the present conditions of flesh because the resurrection of his flesh demonstrates that *all flesh has a future* not captured or held by the present configuration reality. One could press the critical or negative element even further, for the resurrection cannot be depicted directly within the frame or

¹⁰⁸ Torrance, *Space, Time, and Resurrection*, 37.

¹⁰⁹ Cone, *BTL*, 149.

resources of this world precisely because this world is predicated on the destruction of flesh, particularly as Sylvia Wynter intimates with her notion of “demonic grounds” and the configurations of gender and sexuality within race, of black female flesh. The resurrection of the flesh affirms both the end of this world—the world of and as whiteness, of the white man—and the possibilities of flesh beyond this end, beyond this world, even while in it.¹¹⁰ A resurrection that left Christ’s body in the tomb would be one that rendered meaning—as well as justice and liberation—as something ultimately detached from the movements and desires of flesh.¹¹¹

Though elements in Cone’s theology are open toward this kind of account, Cone never makes it and then explicitly moves away from it in his later theology. Cone expresses his deep concern that this theological focal point on Christ would become coordinated with a Christian political absolutism, a claim that *only* a particular iteration of Christianity provides the vantage point and resources to enact and sustain emancipatory political projects. Put differently, Cone worries that the Christocentric contours of his early theology in effect enclose or capture both God and humankind in a particular theological system, thereby replicating in a subtle way the constriction of life he deems central to white supremacy. This chapter and the ones which follow seek to

¹¹⁰ Cone connects the negative theological meaning of “the world” to the material structures of global racial capitalism in *BTL*, 140.

¹¹¹ Though not an argument in favor, or against, this theological point, one can find some confirmation for this emphasis on the resurrection of flesh in a couple comments Theodor Adorno makes: “At its most materialistic, materialism comes to agree with theology. Its great desire would be the resurrection of the flesh, a desire utterly foreign to idealism, the realm of the absolute spirit. . . [H]ope means a physical resurrection and feels defrauded of the best part by its spiritualization.” Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 2007), 207, 401.

further develop and clarify these possibilities of flesh in a way that extends Cone's early Christological emphasis while carefully attending to his later concerns.

CHAPTER 4

POSSIBILITY AND SUFFERING FLESH

Over time, James Cone's theology moves from the resurrection to the cross. In his first books and articles, the cross is the background for a theology of the resurrection. By the time he publishes *God of the Oppressed* in 1975, the cross and the resurrection are almost always thought together, one closely following the other. In his most recent book, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, Cone reverses his earlier emphasis, arguing for the priority of the cross over the resurrection: "The cross speaks to oppressed people in ways that Jesus' life, teachings, and even his resurrection do not."¹ Following Ernst Käsemann's work on the New Testament, Cone says, quoting Käsemann: "The resurrection is... a chapter in the theology of the cross."²

The previous chapter reflected on death or nothingness from the vantage point of the resurrection; this chapter reverses the order, looking at the ontological priority of possibility from the perspective of the suffering and death of God on the cross. The opening is not just excess; it also becomes figured within a cut, a wound, a gap: "hope in

¹ Cone, *CLT*, 26.

² Cone, *CLT*, 26, quoting Ernst Käsemann, "The Pauline Theology of the Cross," *Interpretation* 24, no. 2 (April 1970): p. 177. Käsemann's sentence goes on to clarify that placing the resurrection as a chapter in the theology of the cross means that the resurrection is "not its supersession."

black possibility...had to be *carved out* of wretched conditions.”³ It is not, interestingly, the “black possibility” that had to be painfully opened up within wretched conditions, but the *hope* in this possibility. With “the possibility of violent death” being “always imminent,” this hope is hope in a black possibility not calibrated by or contained through the violent regulation of life and production of death that is whiteness. This possibility in which Cone hopes, this “black possibility,” exceeds and is more fundamental than any potentiality or actual situation: it is the possibility of God’s opening, the contemporaneity of the crucified and resurrected God.

Cone’s discussion of the possibilities open in the “wretched conditions” afflicted upon black people by white supremacy has generated much critical discussion.⁴ Some have criticized Cone for rendering suffering redemptive, so that suffering itself becomes good and not something to resist.⁵ If suffering is redemptive or constitutes the favor of God, then perhaps the goodness or even existence of this God must be questioned.⁶ Others have suggested that Cone’s account of possibility and freedom lacks a metaphysical description that would account for the way life necessarily revolts in systems of oppression.⁷ Still others have countered that Cone’s account of possibility is overly focused on liberation. God does not appear to always be liberating the oppressed,

³ Cone, *CLT*, 15, emphasis added.

⁴ JoAnne Marie Terrell provides a helpful overview and engagement with this discussion in, *Power in the Blood? The Cross in the African American Experience* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Pub, 2005).

⁵ See Anthony B Pinn, *Why, Lord?: Suffering and Evil in Black Theology* (New York: Continuum, 1999).

⁶ See William R. Jones, *Is God A White Racist?: A Preamble to Black Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997).

⁷ See Theodore Walker, Jr., *Mothership Connections: A Black Atlantic Synthesis of Neoclassical Metaphysics and Black Theology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004).

so perhaps possibility should be connected to reconciliation, or, for that matter, communal survival.⁸ Then, there is also the matter as to whether Cone overly identifies blackness and “black possibility” with these “wretched conditions,” such that blackness becomes the product of, and therefore always bound up with and dependent on, white supremacy.⁹

Despite these various critiques and concerns, Cone nevertheless continues to speak of the cross, suffering, and possibilities of and for black life. This chapter will articulate the underlying theological claims that structure and sustain Cone’s relentless attempt to articulate the hope and possibility found in the God of “the cross and the lynching tree.” It will begin by looking at two sources of Cone’s understanding of hope in a world marked by and produced out of black suffering: Martin Luther King Jr. and Jürgen Moltmann. Cone, in his own reflections on his theological trajectory, suggests that he slowly moved toward King’s understanding of suffering and also moved away from the early influence on his work by Moltmann.¹⁰ This section will focus more strongly on what, in Moltmann’s *Theology of Hope*, is problematic not just for Cone’s own theological development but for the broader argument being developed in this dissertation. After critiquing the presumed corporeal universality of Moltmann politically

⁸ See J. Deotis Roberts, *Liberation And Reconciliation: A Black Theology*, Second Edition (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), and Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995).

⁹ See Victor Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness: An Essay on African American Religious and Cultural Criticism* (New York: Continuum International, 1999).

¹⁰ For Cone’s growing acceptance of King’s view of suffering, see Cone, CLT, 92. Cone learned to be suspicious of the conversations surrounding Moltmann’s “hope theology” through the critical responses of J. Deotis Roberts, Major Jones, and José Bonino. See Cone, *FMP*, 68-72 and the notes to this discussion on p. 230-233.

engaged subject, the chapter will turn to a different analytic of corporeality, “flesh,” and to other ways of envisioning possibility and its related existential characteristic, hope.

Suffering and the Problem of Hope: King and Moltmann

Cone consistently links questions of suffering and hope, including the much-criticized notion of redemptive suffering, to the life, work, and theology of Martin Luther King, Jr. In Cone’s narration of King’s work, King began his early ministry focused on the theme of justice. Love quickly took over as the focal point, as King sought to address the white community while fostering non-violent resistance within the black community. Hope “became the dominant theme” only later in King’s career, as he faced the failures and disappointments of the civil rights struggle.¹¹ Hope “in God’s coming eschatological freedom” was central not just to King but to all those who had “lived in the context of hundreds of years of slavery and suffering.” Hope “is derived from the suffering of people who are seeking to establish freedom on earth but have failed to achieve it.”¹² Hope, however, is not simply a psychological defense mechanism to ward off despair. It is a kind of opening or freedom even within, and therefore beyond, the context of material oppression. Hope refuses to let suffering and oppression have “the last word” regarding the meaning of their lives.¹³

¹¹ Cone, *RF*, 65. See also Ch. 8, “‘Shattered Dreams’ (1965-1968)” in James H. Cone, *Martin & Malcolm & America: A Dream or a Nightmare* (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1991), esp. 235-243.

¹² Cone, *RF*, 81.

¹³ Cone, *RF*, 81.

For King, the “hope that emerges out of terrible circumstances” is expressed most forcefully through the motif of the cross.¹⁴ On the cross, “God transform[s] a tragic situation into something redemptive.”¹⁵ The cross is not the triumph of suffering itself but the triumph of God even in and through suffering. The possibilities that arise in suffering and death are possibilities that do not come innately, as if suffering and death on their own had some potential to transform; the possibilities come from God. King’s narration of redemptive suffering therefore never “legitimize[d] suffering.”¹⁶ For Cone, and he argues for King too, there is “nothing redemptive about suffering in itself.”¹⁷ The emphasis should be placed on the qualifier, *in itself*. Suffering may be redemptive for King and Cone, but this redemptive aspect is not to be found in the suffering itself but rather in the possibilities that God brings to the community even in the midst of this suffering. Hope arises from failure and suffering, but hope does not live from this suffering. It is sustained by “God’s coming” or, what is the same thing, “eschatological freedom.”¹⁸

In his first books, Cone expresses this thematic of hope and eschatological freedom not by way of King’s work but with reference to the German Protestant theologian, Jürgen Moltmann. Later, Cone became disenchanted both with the book and especially with its reception among “American white ‘hope’ theologians.”¹⁹ Cone and

¹⁴ Cone, *CLT*, 91.

¹⁵ Cone, *CLT*, 86.

¹⁶ Cone, *CLT*, 92.

¹⁷ Cone, *CLT*, 92, 150.

¹⁸ Cone, *RF*, 81. The sentence actually places the two together, referring to “God’s coming, eschatological freedom,” placing the emphasis on this freedom’s futurity. Yet, as has been argued and will be developed further in the following chapter, God’s advent *is* this eschatological freedom experienced in and yet unbounded by the present reality.

¹⁹ Cone, *GO*, 117.

other black theologians began to “move away from the political theologies of Europe” because they started taking seriously the warnings delivered by the Antillean-born psychologist and militant in Algeria, Frantz Fanon: “underneath the European language of freedom and equality there is slavery and death.”²⁰ It is this relationship between hope, freedom, and death that ultimately renders Moltmann’s early *Theology of Hope* unserviceable for Cone’s theological account of black liberation.

For Moltmann, hope does not build from suffering and failure; suffering itself results from hope. It is the promise of the future that places one in contradiction to reality such that the present becomes “a negative present.”²¹ The promise of the future generates a hope that “unmasks” the failures and limitations of this life, revealing its flaws and negativity. This hope—as a mode of engaging the world, moving in space and through time—comes to the world through the resurrection of Christ, in particular, through the concretely universal community formed around this resurrected Messiah and participating in the divine work of transforming the world.²² The very idea of “world history,” Moltmann suggests, “first became possible as a result of Christianity’s sense of

²⁰ Cone, *FMP*, 71. His discussion of European political theologies takes its aim at Moltmann’s *Theology of Hope*. The lesson he and others took from Fanon comes from the conclusion of Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*, which Cone quotes.

²¹ Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 215.

²² Moltmann sets up his account of eschatology as the “concrete universal” that sublates the abstract universalism of what he calls “transcendental eschatology” (Barth/Bultmann) and the false particularism of historical eschatology (Pannenberg). Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 37-94. This concrete universality is also developed in contrast to the particularity of Judaism (see, for instance, p. 286). Despite these problems, one should note that Moltmann’s later thought changes precisely through his conversations with both Christian liberation theologians and Jewish philosophers and theologians.

mission” and it continues “even where Christianity is no longer the centre of this mission, as a kind of “secular messianism.”²³

The universalizing scope of the Christian mission—which continues under its secular form—provides a freedom to enter suffering and expenditure. The “expectation of the kingdom of God” leads one “in missionary hope to oppose and suffer under the inadequacies of the present,” bringing one “into conflict with the present form of society,” and causing one “to *discover* the ‘cross of the present’ (Hegel).”²⁴ By understanding oneself as having “a mission for the future of the world and of [humankind],” one separates oneself from the immediacy and unity with the world as it is.²⁵ One thereby enters into contradiction with what exists, suffering the present out of hope for the world that is latent within the world’s own contradictoriness. It is by “beginning to hope for the triumph of life” that one actually comes to perceive “the deadliness of death and can no longer put up with it.”²⁶

Hope, which generates a separation from immediacy and an entrance into the suffering of the present, is deeply connected to the body. Moltmann develops this connection by way of the Pauline distinction between the flesh (*sarx*) and the body (*soma*). The “power of the flesh” is, on Moltmann’s reading, what binds humans to “the transitory,” which is by its very nature “always already past.”²⁷ The power of the flesh is, therefore, the power of death as the fleetingness of time, the instability and transitoriness

²³ Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 262.

²⁴ Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 334, emphasis added.

²⁵ Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 334.

²⁶ Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 214.

²⁷ Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 212.

of the present. The body, or corporeality (soma), comes “to the fore in hope.”²⁸ In “the darkness of the pain of love, the person of hope *discovers* the dissension between the self and the body.”²⁹ The discovery of this dissension is the knowledge of the body as a *human* body. The relationship between self and body arises not from their unity but from the distinction, from the ability to differentiate between the self and its corporeality. This distinction is animated by hope, for it is the expectation of the future that produces the separation from bodily immediacy such that the body can then become an object of consideration. Christian hope, therefore, not only produces the distinction between self and body but produces this distinction as one of suffering and awaiting redemption. Through the promise of resurrected life, the self comes to experience itself in its bodily life (including its world) as *not yet* redeemed and therefore, as distinct from the flesh, which has no redemption since it is part of the world that has already passed away. The universal scope of redemption as the resurrection of the dead and the creation of a new world produces a universal solidarity grounded in the body, in the corporeality that *suffers* the present by virtue of the expectation for what is yet to come. This universality grounded in the body is also the universality of history as *world history*, as history organized through and as a universal mission to redemptively transform—to participate in or rather suffer the transformation of—the world.

Cone becomes more suspicious of Moltmann’s work, especially as a result of the criticisms brought by theologians like J. Deotis Roberts, Major Jones, and José Bonino. Instead of tracing out their various critical responses or digging further into Moltmann’s

²⁸ Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 214.

²⁹ Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 213, emphasis added and translation altered to remove gendered language.

own subsequent development of his theology, pressure should be placed on a point that Cone gestures toward but does not fully enter in his criticisms of Moltmann. In one critical discussion of Moltmann and the various “hope theologians,” Cone notes that the spirituals express a black theology of hope that “did not arise out of dialogue with Marxism... Their hope sprang from the actual presence of Jesus, breaking into their broken existence, and bestowing upon them a foretaste of God’s promised freedom.”³⁰ Although Cone does not frame the issue in this way, and perhaps could not, as he had not yet had to rethink his theology from the challenges and perspectives opened by womanist theology, one can already see in his suspicion of Marx(ism) a challenge to the supposedly universal *corporeality* of the “revolutionary” or “hopeful” subject. Although they were “contemporary with Marx,” African slaves were not considered to be the revolutionary subjects through or to whom the future would come.³¹ They were barred from history, from progress, from the future, and therefore, considered and materially positioned as exterior to the *corporeality* of the universal human subject of mission. Moltmann’s theology of hope is the hope for those who objectify their own bodies and put them to their own uses, “expending” them in love and hope for the transformation of the world. This relation between self and body, however, is one that has been historically and materially produced through—in conceptual distinction from and through the material use of—the flesh of the slave. It is not through Cone, at first, but through the black feminist and womanist accounts of “flesh” that the conceptual differences between the universal (white) human body and (black) flesh can be gauged, and from there, the critique of Moltmann’s theology of hope more fully articulated.

³⁰ Cone, *GO*, 117.

³¹ Cone, *GO*, 117.

Hope of Flesh: Spillers and Copeland

What Hegel considered too unbounded (*Unbändigkeit*) to be incorporated—with the emphasis on *corporāre*, “to form into or furnish with a body”—still moves, living in ways that, as Sylvia Wynter suggests, *had* to put in reserve(s) for the development of capitalist modes of eco-social re/production.³² Hortense Spillers has famously called this corporeality outside or “before” the socially established body, “flesh.” In light of the material forces and brutality of slavery, Spillers suggests that one should distinguish between “the body” and flesh to register the corporeal differences between “captive and liberated subject-positions.” “In that sense,” she says, “before the ‘body’ there is the ‘flesh.’”³³ This anteriority of flesh—a position of “cultural *vestibularity*” in distinction from culture proper—is not a pre-cultural biological residue but rather a specific cultural production of human materiality within but not belonging to the cultural order or social body. The “liberated” subject position, the body of the socially recognized subject who becomes “white,” also arises through this meticulous violence directed at captive flesh.

Spillers situates the medico-scientific mobilization of violence and the social production of the captive as liminal subject within the transformative disruption of the slave ship. As Spillers remarks,

we might say that the slave ship, its crew, and its human-as-cargo stand for a wild and unclaimed richness of *possibility* that is not interrupted, not counted/accounted, or differentiated, until its movement gains the land thousands

³² Oxford English Dictionary, “Corporate, v.,” accessed August 26, 2016, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/41830?rskey=UDa4PB&result=3>.

³³ Hortense Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” in Hortense Spillers, *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 206.

of miles away from the point of departure. Under these conditions, one is neither female, nor male, as both subjects are taken into account as *quantities*.³⁴

The distinction between male and female slaves in the slave ship was a matter of spatial quantity, that is, the difference was marked in terms of how much room one would take up in the slave ship. Space itself was quantified financially: maximization of potential profit governed the organization of space on the slave ship. The ship between the shores transformed *all* human relations and beings (both the crew and the human-as-cargo) through these racialized financial relations: all matter is financial, and once the ship lands, this matter realizes its (economic) potential in different directions, as the difference between bodies and flesh, liberated and captive subject positions.³⁵ Although Spillers does not put it in these terms, *flesh* is the extension of this bodily-matter-as-possibility once *landed* and *marked* (bought, organized, dissected, exploited, opened, and otherwise put to work by those who become white masters or are connected to this class as what Theodore Allen calls the “intermediary control stratum”).³⁶ The violence directed at flesh is an attempt to force this “unclaimed richness of possibility” to bear a form that justifies its social location as the inevitable result of its own potentiality: the marking of flesh cannot be “read” as wounds against the body for they demarcate this captive social

³⁴ Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” 215.

³⁵ One recalls here Wynter’s argument that the two positions, master and servant, were themselves mediated by the commodity-weapon, which is to say, the different potentials of financialized matter—liberated bodies and captive flesh—did not precede but were forged through the violent interrelation between the two positions as mediated by the technological objects that allowed the historical development of global capital.

³⁶ The term “intermediary control stratum” is taken from Theodore Allen’s works on “the invention of the white race” and refers to the way that whiteness was invented as a way to enlist non-slave-owners into the slave-holding order by having them work to discipline and control the labor and movements of African slaves. Theodore W. Allen, *The Invention of the White Race*, 2 vols., Second ed. (New York: Verso, 2012). Steve Martinot expands and develops the phrase in *The Rule Of Racialization: Class, Identity, Governance* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2002).

position as having no potentiality for incorporation, no trajectory toward the (proper) body of a social subject.³⁷ The “liberated” social subject—the white masters and their subservient white control stratum—requires this other position as flesh or cultural vestibule so as to demarcate its own position as equally the natural, obvious, and necessary actualization of its own inherent potentiality. The financial quantification of all life becomes profitable only by way of this divergent realization of social position—flesh and body—a divergence produced and secured through a systematic deployment of violence and brutality that undergirds, and therefore is hidden under, the present discourse of race and ethnicity.

Instead of contesting the institution and horrors of slavery from the vantage point of lost bodies, Spillers suggests both naming and turning to the flesh itself—the “materialized scene of unprotected female flesh—of female flesh ‘ungendered.’”³⁸ If the linguistic, cultural, and political order—as well as its expressive ontology—produces black female flesh as beyond the bounds of a (gendered) body, Spillers refuses to jettison this social position so as to join “the ranks of gendered femaleness.” Instead, she interrogates and interrupts this social (dis)organization of bodies from the vantage point of flesh, forging a “place for this different social subject.”³⁹ This project therefore refuses to read flesh merely as, in Alexander Weheliye’s summary, “an abject zone of exclusion

³⁷ Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe” 207.

³⁸ Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe” 207.

³⁹ Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe” 228.

that culminates in death” but understands it as “an alternate instantiation of human” that is not coordinated by or bound to the “the mirage of western Man.”⁴⁰

Although she quotes from Spillers’s essay, the womanist theologian M. Shawn Copeland does not make use of Spillers’s distinction between the body and the flesh in her book, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being*.⁴¹ Instead, Copeland repositions the language of *flesh* through an emphasis on activity and praxis: flesh is the matter of enfleshing. For Copeland, the human body is most fundamentally a sacrament, and as a sacramental reality, it can be blasphemed under the conditions of chattel slavery or what she refers to as the “new imperial (dis)order” at present.⁴² Nevertheless, these dehumanizing social structures cannot eradicate the “sacramentality” of human bodies. By attending to and prioritizing black women’s experience, Copeland develops a theological anthropology that can, by virtue of this particular focus, attend to the sacramentality of every-body.⁴³

The body, as a sacrament, is “the medium through which the person as essential freedom achieves and realizes selfhood through communion with other embodied selves.”⁴⁴ The spirit or person is in excess to the body and yet this excess is mediated and expressed materially and visually, by and as the body.⁴⁵ The body is not and can never be the perfect expression of invisible spirit. To use the words of Yves Cattin, whom

⁴⁰ Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2014), 43.

⁴¹ M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010). Copeland refers to Spiller’s essay on pages: 29, 30, 116, and 129.

⁴² Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 65.

⁴³ Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 6.

⁴⁴ Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 24.

⁴⁵ Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 7.

Copeland quotes, the body is a kind of “impotence” that “prevents the human spirit from presenting itself as pure absolute spirit.”⁴⁶ The sacramental nature of the body depends on this impotence, this inability to perfectly express spirit. By virtue of this impotence, the body becomes a site of revelation for what exceeds this material, embodied expression, an excess that is nevertheless “enfleshed” or “incarnate[d]” within and through it.⁴⁷

This impotence of the body resists the dehumanizing, desexing, degendering, desacralizing practices and ramifications of the slave trade.⁴⁸ If the body cannot perfectly express this excess, then the efforts by slave traders and masters to read this invisible potential off the body—to *mark* the body so as to simultaneously “constrain” and get hold of the subject’s essential freedom—likewise cannot succeed. In Spillers’s formulation, the “markings on the captive body” remain “undecipherable.”⁴⁹ What Copeland calls the “Enlightenment-spawned pornographic pseudoscience” dedicated to *reading* and thereby *holding* the possibilities of spirit must fail, for they cannot overcome the “opacity” of flesh, the impotence of the body that mediates the excess or freedom of the subject without allowing this subject to be reduced to the material forces aimed at transforming the body into an object.⁵⁰ In spite of the terrible and terrifying ways in which slavery and its aftermaths attempted to reduce black women’s bodies to objects of “property, of production, of reproduction, of sexual violence,” black women continued and continue to

⁴⁶ Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 7-8, quoting Yves Cattin, “Human Beings Cross Frontiers,” in *Frontier Violations: The Beginnings of New Identities, Concilium*, vol. 2, eds. Felix Wilfred and Oscar Beozzo (London & Maryknoll: SCM / Orbis, 1999), 3-4.

⁴⁷ “The body is the medium through which human spirit incarnates and exercises freedom in time and space.” Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 39.

⁴⁸ “Black women not only were dehumanized, but degendered and desexed,” Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 37.

⁴⁹ Spillers, “Mama’s Baby,” 207.

⁵⁰ Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 11.

be “subjects of freedom” who “literally and metaphorically...reclaimed their bodies and the bodies of their loved ones from bondage.”⁵¹ As Copeland notes, “incarnate spirit refuses to be bound,” yet this freedom is not the total domination of the material by the spirit but the “impotence” of the material that “contests...resists...escapes.”⁵² This freedom from captivity—this freedom that cannot be held, objectified, or completely conscripted or incorporated into any program—was enfleshed, Copeland summarizes, as freedom for God, freedom for being human, freedom for loving without restraint, freedom for community and solidarity, and freedom for healing and self-love.⁵³

Drawing Spillers and Williams together—and with Wynter’s work in the background—one could suggest that the flesh is at once the necessary production of as well as what cannot belong to the order signified by “the body of Man.” Flesh is the socially concocted “vestibule” of the body proper, of the body as organized within and for the sake of the re/production of Man. Flesh names the inhabitation of a brutal, yet failed or impossible project. On the one hand, it names the attempted social production of bodies determined by a sheer potentiality of use—the financialization of matter as quantities of potential return on investment—and yet, as Spillers notes, even in its discursive erasure, the problem and effects, the impact and resistance (or impotence) of this corporeality or flesh can be detected. Flesh, as the antechamber or vestibule of Man, is, therefore, not simply given over to or determined by Man but also marks an excess to this social order structured on and for the sake of Man’s re/production. Flesh, as this excess, is the enfleshing (of) spirit, the corporeal resistance to or an “impotence” for the

⁵¹ Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 29, 38, 39, respectively.

⁵² Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 7.

⁵³ Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 46; the different orientations of freedom are discussed p. 47-51.

organization of life under the regime of Man. This excess to Man is the always possible “otherwise” that exceeds the transformation of bodies into potentialities of use.⁵⁴ The heart of racial capitalism thus reaches its limit at black female material existence in slavery and its aftermath, which is why, for Copeland and Spillers, critically attending to and prioritizing black women is central and necessary to any project that aims to imagine modes of human life beyond the present global racial order. It is this narration of freedom, as a matter of and in *flesh*, that confounds the universal body and history of mission elaborated by Moltmann.

The inadequacy of Moltmann’s analysis of hope, therefore, is not only that it falsely universalizes a particular European context as the bearer of the concrete universal but also that this mode of missional, redemptive life necessitates, while hiding or ignoring, a differentiation between those for whom this suffering and dispossession is a mark of subjectivity, agency, and historical life—of their connection to *the future*—and those for whom such suffering is rendered unhistorical or de-subjective, that is, for whom such suffering is considered the natural or given state.⁵⁵ Put more strongly, Moltmann’s subject of hope *enters* a suffering that is not its own but is, in this construct, naturally the suffering of those exterior to Man (“flesh” in his terminology). The subject is distinguished as a human subject by its capacity to “expend” and “expose” itself so as to “gain firmness and future.”⁵⁶ This activity of self-expenditure thus requires the distinction

⁵⁴ On freedom and the “otherwise,” see Ashon Crawley’s reflections on Alexander G. Weheliye’s book, *Habeas Viscus*, in Ashon Crawley, “Stayed | Freedom | Hallelujah,” Los Angeles Review of Books, May 10, 2015, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/review/stayed-freedom-hallelujah>, accessed February 2, 2017.

⁵⁵ “Because black suffering figures in the domain of the mundane, it refuses the idiom of exception.” Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*, p. 11.

⁵⁶ Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 337, 327.

between a suffering that is the mark of agency and that suffering which is non-agential, as it is not the result of a masterful risking or hazarding of the self by its missional entrance into a foreign suffering for the sake of loving or “existing for” others.⁵⁷ This freedom in and as self-expenditure is not only different than the freedom Copeland and Spillers articulate, which resists and escapes objectification by its (sacramental) impotence (Copeland) and indecipherable physicality (Spillers); it materially and conceptually requires its counterpoint in what is not incorporated (world, flesh) so that it can be the agent or subject who acts to “mediate” God’s future to this exteriority that must, yet, by definition, cannot be incorporated.⁵⁸

The difficulty Cone and Copeland, as well as other black theologians, face is whether and how to relate the Crucified Christ to suffering flesh, given that such a link risks reaffirming a world that construes black life as naturally or inherently given over to suffering, pain, violence, and death. As was suggested above, with Cone and King, the key move made is to claim a possibility that is open in suffering but which is not beholden to it, not a hidden potentiality buried within it that could be put to use or “expended.” This possibility is, in this sense, ontologically more fundamental than the actual or factual reality, exceeding even the violence unleashed to demarcate and constrict its actualization.⁵⁹ For Cone, it is the possibility of the resurrection, of eschatological freedom. This priority of the possibility in and as flesh can be further

⁵⁷ Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 327.

⁵⁸ Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 290.

⁵⁹ “The Afro-American revolution involves tension between the actual and the possible, the ‘white-past’ and the ‘black-future,’ and the black community accepting the responsibility of defining the world according to its ‘open possibilities.’” James H. Cone, “Christian Theology and the Afro-American Revolution,” *Christianity and Crisis* 30, no. 10 (June 8, 1970): 123.

clarified by way of two critiques of the Aristotelian potentiality/actuality paradigm, starting with Giorgio Agamben's work before turning more fully to Eberhard Jüngel's reflections on possibility and the Crucified God.

Potentiality and Possibility: Agamben and Jüngel

In different ways, Eberhard Jüngel and Giorgio Agamben draw on Martin Heidegger's work to contest what they take to be a fundamental problematic in "Western" philosophical thought and political life, one developed through Aristotle: the primacy of actuality over possibility.⁶⁰ For Aristotle, every potential for some action requires the potential to not do it. If there was no corresponding non-potential, for instance, to walk or not to walk, then the potentiality would always be actualized, at least if there were no external obstacles thwarting it. While walking, the potential to walk is not lost or expended but remains. Potentiality therefore involves two important factors: it is "autonomous" from actuality (whether or not it is actualized in no way impinges on its existence) and every potentiality is also an "impotentiality," a potential not to. These two factors entail that in any theory of action, impotentiality must be present and manifest without being extinguished: all potentiality is equally or even more emphatically impotentiality, and impotentiality is not extinguished or lost when actualized.⁶¹

For Agamben, the relation instituted between a potentiality and its full actualization is precisely how the death-laden politics of sovereignty function. The

⁶⁰ Kevin Attell provides a helpful commentary on Agamben's relationship to Aristotle as well as his account of potentiality in his article, "Potentiality, Actuality, Constituent Power," *Diacritics* 39, no. 3 (2009): 35–53.

⁶¹ The emphasis on impotentiality over potentiality follows from the fact that a potentiality is only a potentiality because it is *need not* be actualized, that is, because of the impotentiality.

sovereign is the one who sets a constituting power (potentiality as the power to establish any political order) in relation to a constituted power (actuality as the power inscribed within an actual political order). The sovereign is not identified at either pole, as either potentiality or actuality, but as the one who occupies or moves in the relation between the two. The act or decision of the sovereign establishes a political order not by giving itself wholly to this order but by positioning itself as simultaneously inside and outside of it. The sovereign is the power above the law, the one who can suspend the law and declare a state of exception, a point at which the law no longer applies. By withholding this power of the exception, the sovereign establishes and maintains the normal legal order.⁶² In this way, the movement from potentiality—or rather, from “impotentiality,” the potential *not* to—to act is a metaphysical sovereignty of being, such that what is comes from itself, “presupposing” nothing else but its own power to withhold or withdraw itself even in its act.⁶³

Agamben can be read as attempting an internal critique or disruption of the Aristotelian potentiality-sovereignty regime, one which ultimately fails to consider let alone think from what this regime does not and constitutively *cannot* wholly capture—flesh. The kind of potentiality that interests Agamben is the potentiality that “belongs to

⁶² One can note certain resonances between Agamben’s account of sovereignty and Wynter’s account of the redemptive structure of social formations, where “the exception” names her category of “liminality.” One should also note a connection to Hegel’s Trinitarian account of creation, where creation is the release of a negativity held outside of the reconciling movement of divine love, the subsequent negation of this negation.

⁶³ “Sovereignty is always double because Being, as potentiality, suspends itself, maintaining itself in a relation of ban (or abandonment) within itself in order to realize itself as absolute actuality (which thus presupposes nothing other than its own potentiality).” Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 47. This quote has clear and important parallels to Hegel’s Trinitarian dialectics, though it cannot be developed fully in this context.

someone who, for example, has knowledge or an ability.”⁶⁴ The notion (and logic) of possession is repeated in the formula, twice: the potentiality “belongs” to someone who “has” an ability. Agamben’s efforts to displace the logic of sovereignty are located within his attempt to undo this mode of self-relation as a kind of self-possession and self-realization. Yet, by virtue of this focus, Agamben holds onto the distinction that operates beneath Aristotle’s account, the distinction between a potentiality that can be actualized or withheld by a fully rational being and a differing potentiality to become the “animate part” of another’s (masterful) body, the potentiality of the natural slave.⁶⁵ Even when Agamben directly addresses Aristotle’s notion of slavery, he still does so only from the vantage point of what the slave’s body represents to thought, to those self-determining rational beings.⁶⁶ Alexander Weheliye’s criticism of Agamben’s treatment of the “Musselmänner”—the group comprised of those most degraded by the Nazi concentration camps—is also pertinent here: Agamben seems unable to consider them as

⁶⁴ Giorgio Agamben, “On Potentiality,” in Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, ed. and trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 179.

⁶⁵ For Aristotle’s *Politics*, see Terence Irwin and Gail Fine, trans., *Aristotle: Selections* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1995), 455 [1253b 30-35] and 460 [1255b 10-15], respectively. Denise Ferreira da Silva focuses on this lingering self-possessed or self-determining subject in Agamben’s thought in her article, “No-Bodies: Law, Raciality and Violence,” *Griffith Law Review (Griffith University, as Represented by Its Socio-Legal Research Centre)* 18, no. 2 (June 2009): 212–36.

⁶⁶ Giorgio Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016). “The slave in fact represents a not properly human life that renders possible for others the *bios politikos*, that is to say, the truly human life... In Western culture, the slave is something like the repressed” which reemerges “in the modern worker” (20-1). One notes both the emphasis on what the slave represents and the way even the acknowledgement of slavery as the repressed (in thought) positions it a pre-modern form that only “reemerges” in altered form in the modern worker.

“as actual, complicated, breathing, living, ravenous, desiring beings.”⁶⁷ He thereby glosses over or fails to consider that flesh might be more and move otherwise than the bare life that functions as sovereignty’s necessary counterpoint.⁶⁸

Eberhard Jüngel challenges the Aristotelian prioritization of actuality over potentiality from the vantage point of Christology, in particular, by way of the doctrine of justification. Jüngel develops a notion of possibility beyond and ontologically prior to actuality by way of this relationality of God’s Word.⁶⁹ God’s address to humans is the self-revelation of God’s very being and the creation of new possibilities for human life.⁷⁰ The “justifying Word of God remakes our human existence anew, by relating us to Jesus Christ and there bringing us to ourselves, outside ourselves.”⁷¹ This remaking of human existence occurs through a relation in which God places us, a relation to God’s very being in the Crucified Christ. It is not through relationality *in general*—as a general or generic metaphysical category—but by relating human beings to this one, the crucified and resurrected Jesus Christ, that God remakes human life without reference to human

⁶⁷ Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*, 122, the quote refers to the way Agamben renders the “Musselmänner” mute and passive, the furthest point of the political production of bare life, a rendering accomplished in part by ignoring the testimonies of those who survived this extreme condition of life in the Nazi concentration camps.

⁶⁸ Agamben claims that the body as a whole is captured within a biopolitical discourse and political arrangement, an argument that inadequately attends to the flesh. See Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 187.

⁶⁹ See, for instance, Jüngel’s essays, “The World as Possibility and Actuality: The ontology of the Doctrine of Justification” (*TE I*, 95-123); “Humanity in Correspondence to God: Remarks on the Image of God as a Basic Concept in Theological Anthropology” (*TE I*, 124-153); “The Emergence of the New” (*TE II*, 35-58); “On Becoming Truly Human: The Significance of the Reformation Distinction Between Person and Works for the Self-Understanding of Modern Humanity” (*TE II*, 216-240). See also the discussion in *GMW*, 213-221.

⁷⁰ Eberhard Jüngel, *Justification: The Heart of the Christian Faith: A Theological Study with an Ecumenical Purpose*, trans. Jeffrey Cayzer (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2001), 200-201.

⁷¹ Jüngel, *Justification*, 213.

(im)potentiality or actuality, or, in Jüngel's more traditional Lutheran language, without reference to human works and merit.

Justification through Christ alone, grace alone, the Word alone, and faith alone—the Protestant “exclusive formulae”—entails an anthropology that attributes not only the meaning of human lives but the ontology of human personhood to something other than human actions or capacities.⁷² The most basic, determinative or definitive aspect of being human is God's address to it in Jesus Christ. This address establishes a relationship between God and humans through Jesus, such that all humans live from and through the history of this one person. This relationship is God's justifying grace, whereby sinners, with their withdrawal inward and tendency toward their regulatory control over and hence destruction of relationships, are placed in a relation that interrupts their relationship to themselves and places them “outside” themselves. This interruption and reconstitution of the self in exteriority to itself—as a being in relation to Jesus of Nazareth—is the justification of the sinner, or, grace.⁷³

Jüngel stresses that this relationship to the Crucified does not make humans something *more* than human, something divine, but instead denies their ability or need to cross the threshold and move beyond human life, even life moving toward death. Theological anthropology, for Jüngel, can “thus be defined as denying the divinity of humanity.”⁷⁴ The possibility beyond human (im)potentiality is not the abolition of the limits and boundaries that mark human existence. One does step beyond human being but

⁷² See also Jüngel's Essay, “On Becoming Truly Human.”

⁷³ “We have not understood our justification until we see it as a fundamental interruption of our own life context and see Jesus Christ as being this fundamental interruption.” Jüngel, *Justification*, 81.

⁷⁴ Jüngel, “Humanity in Correspondence to God,” *TE I*, 152, original emphasis removed.

is rather returned to oneself, in one's human life, as one related to the Crucified God. God is not "the uttermost of human possibilities; rather, *because God is beyond that extreme boundary, God is all the more on this side* of the boundaries of human existence, present in the weakness of human existence."⁷⁵ One is not relieved of the burden of facing the boundaries of human life, most especially the inevitability of death.⁷⁶ The transformation, the new possibility, is that one now approaches death through the Crucified God, the God who also continues to live even in and through the suffering and death of the cross. God's life as love, the relationality of the Triune God, continues even in perishing, and this continuation is the excess to death within death. One can neither ignore the reality of death nor treat death as the ultimate defining point of life, for this being-in-relation to the Crucified God ontologically structures both human life and death.

Faith, for Jüngel, is not an action or decision through which humans reconstitute themselves, or even participate in their own reconstitution, as justified sinners. In faith, "we *discover* ourselves as new people, constituted by God."⁷⁷ This discovery is the acknowledgement of God's justifying grace, the acknowledgement that one is indeed related to oneself indirectly and externally, that is, through Jesus Christ. In this way, faith is a "pure passivity, [an] unalloyed inactivity"; sinners "can contribute nothing to their justification except to be present in a purely passive sense."⁷⁸ Past activities and present (im)potentialities do not constitute or contribute, or for that matter prevent, the relationship in which they have been placed. This relationship to God through Jesus

⁷⁵ Jüngel, *GMW*, 341, translation modified to remove gendered language, but the emphasis is in the original.

⁷⁶ Jüngel, *GMW*, 394.

⁷⁷ Jüngel, *Justification*, 241.

⁷⁸ Jüngel, *GMW*, 340; *Justification*, 250, respectively.

Christ provides possibilities for life that exceed human (im)potentiality in-itself, even the possibility and inevitability of death.

Jüngel frames this reconstitution of death through the greater movement of God's love on the cross as a dialectical movement: "a dialectic of being and nonbeing takes place which belongs to the essence of love."⁷⁹ Love is a surrender of the self, a kind of dispossession, so that the self comes to itself only in the love of the other, the beloved.⁸⁰ One might initially read his account of death-laden love to involve a kind of opening up of an enclosed self. On this reading, the self is first self-related and therefore enclosed; it then encounters the beloved and is taken out of its inward self-relation for the sake of being-in-relation to this other. In this way, it comes to itself again in a new way, as lover and beloved. Jüngel, however, rejects such a rendering of the dialectic, for love does not require an initial self-enclosed or self-possessed being, a kind of being that for him is not creaturely life together but the sinful drive toward relationlessness. The "new being which arises out of love," he says, is "prevenient," even a "prevenient consequence in which the self-loss in the event of love is already surpassed by the new being which the loving I receives from the beloved Thou in the act of surrender."⁸¹ Yet, if this new being is prevenient, then his talk of "nonbeing," "self-loss," and the "dimension of death" in love becomes unclear. There is no actual loss in love since the new being is always already there and what is lost was never actually present in the first place.

Jüngel posits this dialectic of love and death to articulate how divine love gives place for the negativity inherent in becoming (perishing) while orienting such negativity

⁷⁹ Jüngel, *GMW*, 325.

⁸⁰ Jungel, *GMW*, 317.

⁸¹ Jüngel, *GMW*, 322.

toward life (relational possibility), such that the threat and reality of nothingness (as the destruction of the relationality of life) are incorporated (cross) and overcome (resurrection). The problems arise because Jüngel's theology repeats the dialectic of the sovereign subject, wherein being in relation requires some kind of separation or negation, an opposition that is still nevertheless held within or always-already implicitly incorporated.⁸² This entails either that he render self-enclosure somehow a necessary first stage in this dialectic of love, implying a close proximity between or even identity of creaturely existence and sin, or that he render all his talk about "loss" in love merely rhetorical, for there is no enclosed being prior to this negative moment within (divine) love.

One can see another alternative to this dialectical dilemma within Jüngel's own work. He writes, "only in the *unity* of the giving Father and the given Son is God the *event* of giving up which *is* love itself in the relation of the lover and beloved."⁸³ To understand "giving up" as dispossession requires the presence of pre-existing subjects who (masterfully) enter this loss, surrendering themselves for the sake of the new being produced in love. One could, however, attempt to think through the event of giving up *apart from the dialectic of (sovereign) being*, apart from subjects who take hold of themselves—come to possess themselves—by maintaining a relation to themselves even in, or rather precisely through, their utter loss or withdrawal. Put differently, Jüngel need not think through this event of "giving up" as the dispossession of what is self-possessed

⁸² "The ban is essentially the power of delivering something over to itself, which is to say, the power of maintaining itself in relation to something presupposed as nonrelational. What has been banned is delivered over to its own separateness and, at the same time, consigned to the mercy of the one who abandons it—at once excluded and included, removed and at the same time captured." Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 109-10.

⁸³ Jüngel, *GMW*, 374.

or as the constitution of the subject through its self-surrender. If the event of love *is* a “giving up,” then one could read this event as both *prior* and *resistant* to the dialectical formation of subjects, which is to say, prior and resistant to any dialectical account of possession and dispossession. One would move from the temporal dialects of becoming to the spatial register of giving space or “mak[ing] room,” as the womanist theologian Eboni Marhsall Turman says.⁸⁴ In the language of the account of creation in the first chapter of Genesis, one could also speak of *letting there be*. It is along this trajectory that

⁸⁴ “God’s exclusively unorthodox body that defies the status quo is inclusive of, rather makes room for other(ed) bodies.” Eboni Marshall Turman, *Toward a Womanist Ethic of Incarnation: Black Bodies, the Black Church, and the Council of Chalcedon* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 42. Turman helpfully points to the priority of possibility over the potentialities that govern actuality (43), yet her “Chalcedonian logic” operates more on a grammatical or analogical level, which leaves this ontological priority of possibility unclear and problematic. For Turman, God’s “mulattic composition” (4) in the Incarnation renders Jesus’s identity outside “of the boundaries of normative humanity...and normative godliness” (54). Turman, however, never provides an account of *why* the very particular and peculiar interrelation of distinct natures in the incarnation ought to function as a model for any and all differences. In terms of Christology, the very ineffability and exclusivity of what Chalcedon describes suggests it might not and perhaps should not function as a general model precisely because the difference between God and creation as well as their unity in the person of Jesus Christ are not similar to creaturely differences or kinds of unity. Further, unlike Jesus, our hypostasis or person—the agent acting—is human, not divine. In terms of identity and difference, Turman appears to problematically conceptualize difference as innately and irresolutely oppositional, for instance, suggesting that difference “inevitability generates” the “privilege of separation, marginalization, and...brutality” (55). Identity becomes both what results from the constant mediation of these oppositional differences and is also what orchestrates these mediations without being determined by them. The human self is thus strangely positioned above and beyond “the flesh” and whatever occurs “according to the flesh” is not determinative in the same (analogous) way and perhaps for the same reason (47-8, 159-60) that Christ divinely transcends what befalls his human nature. The way Barth, Jüngel, and Cone have, in their own ways, “so completely historicized the two natures of Christ” allows a different approach to Christology, relational ontologies, possibility, human nature, and the historical and violent formation of racial identity. The phrase used above comes from Bruce McCormack’s account of Barth’s Christology and Trinitarian theology in his article, “The Doctrine of the Trinity after Barth: An Attempt to Reconstruct Barth’s Doctrine in the Light of His Later Christology,” in *Trinitarian Theology after Barth*, ed. Myk Habets and Phillip Tolliday (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2011), 103.

one can now consider what Moltmann, Agamben, and Jüngel do not, namely, the relationship between the Crucified God and the “unsovereign” being of flesh.⁸⁵

Enfleshing Possibility

Flesh does not operate through or abide by the distinctions between activity and passivity, agential subject and material object, actualization and potentiality.⁸⁶ The flesh is the body opened, the interior externalized as marked (Copeland) or ripped (Spillers). This opening of flesh points to its status as socially de-constituted, or rather, constituted socially as vestibular to the body proper, as a kind of anterior openness, existing before the body of the universal subject of history as its absent or unactualized terrain of potentiality. This flesh through and against which the body of Man constitutes itself, however, also exceeds this social order and remains unaccountable to and uncalculable for it. As Alexander Weheliye says, “The flesh thus operates as a vestibular gash in the armor of Man, simultaneously a tool of dehumanization and a relational vestibule to alternate ways of being.”⁸⁷ There is a mode of life—corporeal and corporate—in and of the flesh, “exorbitant” to the (sovereign) political body of Man.⁸⁸ This exorbitance of the flesh is not an ahistorical point of transcendence untouched by suffering nor is it the transformation of external suffering through its incorporation into a universal project of (bodily) redemption. The exorbitance of the flesh is that “relational vestibule” that

⁸⁵ The term “unsovereign” is taken from Nahum Dimitri Chandler, *X—The Problem of the Negro as a Problem for Thought* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 163.

⁸⁶ Though not emphasizing the category of flesh, see also Fred Moten’s important descriptions of blackness in his article, “The Case of Blackness,” *Criticism* 50, no. 2 (2008): 177–218.

⁸⁷ Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*, 44.

⁸⁸ “Exorbitant” is here being used in line with Nahum Chandler’s reflections in *X*.

indicates or points to a certain excessiveness that resists transformation into any project or formation. Flesh therefore remains, even in suffering, unheld and indeterminate, opaque.

In *God of the Oppressed*, James Cone argues that “the cross of Jesus reveals” that God is “not merely sympathetic” but “totally identified with” the “poor” in their “agony and pain.” Their pain *is* “God’s pain, for God takes their suffering as God’s own, thereby freeing them from its ultimate control of their lives.” In the “divine event that happened on the cross,” the oppressed are “liberated” to “fight against suffering while not being determined by it.”⁸⁹ Almost forty years later, writing on *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, Cone again affirms that suffering is not determinative, yet he gives more space to the existential import and impact of this suffering, allowing, as it were, the flesh to not be eclipsed by this subject whose freedom from the “ultimate control” of suffering can only be registered as a “fight” against it. In this text, Cone asks,

What is the meaning of this unspeakable black suffering—suffering so deep, so painful and enduring that words cannot even begin to describe it? Only the song, dance, and the shout—voices raised to high heavens and bodies swaying from side to side—can express both the wretchedness and the transcendent spirit of empowerment that kept blacks from going under, as they struggled, against great odds, to acknowledge humanity denied.⁹⁰

If the freedom of the resurrection was implicitly structuring his earlier argument—where the cross defeats the powers of sin, suffering, and death through the resurrection of Christ—here the resurrection is situated, as he suggests, back within the history of the

⁸⁹ Cone, *GO*, 161. Regarding the “suffering” God, T. F. Torrance writes, “If God is merely impassible [God] has not made room for [Godself] in our agonied existence, and if [God] is merely immutable [God] has neither place nor time for frail evanescent creatures.” Thomas Forsyth Torrance, *Space, Time and Incarnation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 75.

⁹⁰ Cone, *CLT*, 124.

cross.⁹¹ Again, however, the song, dance, and shout—the creative and corporeal expressions of the black community—register this “struggle to make sense out of their senseless situation” and point to that which, though burdened with and marked by the violence of white supremacy, nevertheless remains unheld and undetermined by it.⁹²

M. Shawn Copeland succinctly expresses this complex engagement with overwhelming yet not absolutely determinative violence and suffering, drawn from her reading of female slave narratives. Regarding these stories, she writes, “these are narratives of affliction, but not narratives of despair; the women may be caught, but they are not trapped.”⁹³ For Copeland, like Cone, the configurations of life, suffering, and death are social matters. The vision for life, the crafting of meaning, or the carving out of hope even in suffering are matters of a communal and corporeal praxis. The body itself, in this regards, is not a pre-social or pre-discursive reality but is already a social reality. Pain and death are not individualizing in a way that erases the social community, for the experiences of pain and the confrontation with death are shaped theologically and communally.⁹⁴ For Copeland as well as Cone, God appropriates this personal and communal black suffering on the cross. It is not suffering that defines black life but black

⁹¹ Cone, *CLT*, 26.

⁹² Cone, *CLT*, 124.

⁹³ M. Shawn Copeland, “Wading Through Many Sorrows:” Towards a Theology of Suffering in a Womanist Perspective” in *Womanist Theological Ethics: A Reader*, eds. Katie Geneva Cannon, Emilie M. Townes, and Angela D. Sims (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 147.

⁹⁴ For an argument in a different context about the social configuration of pain itself, see Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), chapters 2-3. The argument also follows from Wynter’s formulation that there is no non-cultural mode of human existence, such that culture does not overlay some more basic or fundamental biological existence but humans exist as (cultural) words in flesh.

life that remains in excess to this suffering, even within it. This “black possibility” is that “dream of a new world...carved out of wretched conditions.”⁹⁵

As Copeland argues, the impotency of the body marks this possibility or excess, for the “soul” always exceeds the social formations that mark, wound, tear, as well as discipline, order, and otherwise “imprison” the body.⁹⁶ To translate Copeland out of the language of soul and body, the social life in flesh always exceeds the social formations that produce the body.⁹⁷ This excess is appropriated by God, such that between the world and this flesh lies another enfleshment: the crucified and resurrected God. As Copeland writes, “Jesus of Nazareth is the paradigm of enfleshing freedom; he *is* freedom enfleshed.”⁹⁸ But this between, the point of appropriation, is not between God and the body of the universal subject (self-possessed or dialectically dispossessed) but between God and flesh. This connection or “appropriation” also removes the body of Man from its deceptive and oppressive position as the universal mediator or concrete universal, as the generic-ideal form toward which all modes of life are to be directed.

This appropriation is a reiteration of black flesh as God’s own life, a reiteration which does not subsume one within the other, that is, it is *not* dialectical. It is a mode of setting beside, appositionally, such that neither is determined in itself or through a

⁹⁵ Cone, *CLT*, 15.

⁹⁶ This phrasing is playing with Foucault’s inversion, wherein he refers to the soul as the “prison of the body” in Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Random House, 1977), 30. However, this chapter (and the study as a whole) departs from Foucault by emphasizing that these new “disciplines” did not replace the cruelties directed at (marking) flesh.

⁹⁷ One could note a connection to Wynter’s argument in “Ethno or Socio Poetics,” or, to provide a different but related point of reference, to Raymond Williams’s point that “modes of domination...select from and consequently exclude the full range of human practice.” See Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 125.

⁹⁸ Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 53.

dialectical relation to its other but rather by its being placed beside one another: “divine blackness” and equally “black divinity.”⁹⁹ Divinity is an iteration of blackness and blackness of divinity—and for Cone, this relation is *Christological*—such that neither comes to be “through” the other, nor are they constituted independently of one another and then subsequently related. They are conjoined in an interrelated in-definiteness, or, more strongly put, in an excess that is common between them without being “held,” “owned,” or “possessed” by either, or, put even more strongly and with Jünger’s theological vocabulary in mind (though modified), in their mutual address and possible love.¹⁰⁰

This interrelation of the Crucified and black flesh resonates with and does not contradict Delores Williams’s profound and important work to free “redemption from the cross.”¹⁰¹ For Williams, “the resurrection does not depend upon the cross for life, for the cross only represents historical evil *trying* to defeat good.”¹⁰² The cross was and is not the instrument of salvation: Jesus’s life, his “ministerial vision” is salvific, and the

⁹⁹ The first phrase follows from Cone’s expositions of the statements that God and Christ are black; for the latter phrase, see Cone, *GO*, 125.

¹⁰⁰ In Karl Barth’s idiom, “The freedom in which God exists means that [God] does not need [God’s] own being in order to be who [God] is.” Barth, *CD II/1*, vol. 8, p. 50 [306]. The “common” is not pantheistically or panentheistically ordered but marks rather how “God enters into the closest relationship with the other, but [God] does not form such a synthesis with it” (56 [312]). It is an appositional not dialectical relation and one which moves from the very freedom, the “empirical decision” (51 [307]) and event in which God “unites” Godself “with the other and the other with” Godself (57 [313]).

¹⁰¹ Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 164; see, Delores Williams, “Black Women’s Surrogacy Experience and the Christian Notion of Redemption,” in *Cross Examinations: Readings on the Meaning of the Cross Today*, ed. Marit Trelstad (Minneapolis: Augsburg Books, 2006), 19–32. See also the essays and dialogue between Karen and Garth Kasimu Baker-Fletcher in their book, *My Sister, My Brother: Womanist and Xodus God-Talk* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Pub, 2002), 73–116.

¹⁰² Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 165, emphasis added.

resurrection affirms this life even against the “evil attempt to kill it.”¹⁰³ Cone’s theology places an emphasis on nothingness, suffering, and death so as to draw out the excess within this life even to these realities. In this way, Cone and Williams are not offering opposing analyses but moving along a similar trajectory with different emphases. Cone places an emphasis on the excess to *death* within life, whereas Williams places the emphasis on the excess to death *within life*. For Williams, Jesus “conquered sin in life, not in death.”¹⁰⁴ Williams links the resurrection to the kingdom of God as they show “humankind how to live peacefully, productively and abundantly in relationship.”¹⁰⁵ The resurrection is the continuation of the life-giving ministry of Jesus even beyond the power of death and this mode of life “is not something one has to die to get to.”¹⁰⁶ It is a mode of life beyond death within this life, that is, not as something that cannot die but a way of living in which death is not the ultimate horizon. Williams critically draws out how in Cone’s effort to position black life in excess to death, death can become re-centered at the expense of an emphasis on the relational mode of life Jesus lived.

Both Williams and Cone emphasize what this chapter has referred to as the exorbitance of the flesh. Cone emphasizes this exorbitance in relation to death, as a life in relationship to God and in historical, communal creativity, which remains in-definite in face of—undetermined by— suffering and death. Williams, on the other side, emphasizes the modes of life that arise within but in excess to—a vision beyond the—structures of oppression and their attendant productions of suffering and death. Redemption, for Williams, is not only the opening of life beyond death, an opening which is the

¹⁰³ Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 165.

¹⁰⁴ Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 166.

¹⁰⁵ Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 167.

¹⁰⁶ Williams, “Black Women’s Surrogacy Experience,” 31.

affirmation of creation; it is also God “giving humankind the ethical thought and practice upon which to build positive, productive quality of life.”¹⁰⁷ Cone and Williams, read together and through the notion of flesh developed through Copeland and Spillers, articulate a possibility for life that exceeds the im/potentialities of a given, historical present or situation. Both offer resources for imaging human corporeal life as in-definite, as opening beyond death-bound life within this life, as living from possibilities that are in excess to it, as they are the possibilities of life in and through relation to the crucified and resurrected God. These possibilities, as Cone notes, arise from the “the song, dance, and the shout,” which is to say, these possibilities are a kind of *poesis*, to use Sylvia Wynter’s term, a theological poetics.

¹⁰⁷ Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 165.

CHAPTER 5
POETICS OF THE BLACK CHRIST

Jesus Christ is black, baby. James Cone wrote this line in the summer of 1968, when, over the course of a single month, he completed his first book in theology, *Black Theology and Black Power*. The claim regarding the blackness of Christ has a much longer history, but Cone was doing something different with it, something that can be gauged by attending to that easily overlooked final word, *baby*.¹ If Cone's interpreters have generally favored his later explanations, particularly where he relies on Paul Tillich's theology of symbols, this chapter will focus on the affective and political associations indicated and enacted by that final word, *baby*. Not only does this word indicate a different trajectory for Cone's theological language—one rooted in his engagement with the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s—it also suggests that a different linguistic category, namely metaphor or parable, might be more adequate to Cone's disruptive, expansive, and political uses of language. To begin this engagement with the

¹ For this history, see Kelly Brown Douglas, *The Black Christ* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1993). She has published a shorter overview, based on the book. See Kelly Brown Douglas and Delbert Burkett, "The Black Christ," in *Blackwell Companion to Jesus*, ed. Delbert Burkett, vol. 53, Blackwell Companions to Religion (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 410–26.

political contours of Cone’s theologically disruptive poetics—both disrupting the language of theology and crafting theology within and as a disruption of the grammar or language of the dominant order of things—it will be helpful to explore the work of a major figure in the Black Arts Movement, one with whom Cone was closely connected: LeRoi Jones (who later changed his name to Amiri Baraka).²

The Black Arts Movement and Black Theology: LeRoi Jones

Cone explicitly positions his formulation of “black theology” in relation not only to Black Power politics but also to the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s.³ For Cone, “Black Theology seeks to do in religion what LeRoi Jones, Larry Neal, Ron Karenga, and others have done in their specialized fields.”⁴ As “the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept,” to use Larry Neal’s phrasing, the Black Arts Movement in the

² This chapter uses the earlier name, LeRoi Jones, as it is these early writings that figure in this discussion and which are quoted by James Cone. Cone himself suggests the importance of prioritizing black radical writers and organizers when he asks, “Could it be that American theologians can best understand their task by studying LeRoi Jones, Malcom X or the Black Panthers rather than merely mouthing the recent rhetoric of German theologians?” James H. Cone, “Christian Theology and the Afro-American Revolution,” *Christianity and Crisis* 30, no. 10 (June 8, 1970): 124-5. Although this chapter will turn to the “recent rhetoric” of a different German theologian, Eberhard Jüngel, it does so in the same manner in which Cone will also continue to quote German theologians, not “merely mouthing” their views but putting them to work for his own particular purposes.

³ For a more general account of the cultural politics of the Black Arts Movement, see Amy Abugo Ongiri, *Spectacular Blackness: The Cultural Politics of the Black Power Movement and the Search for a Black Aesthetic* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009). Cone refers to black theology as the “theological arm of Black Power” in “Black Theology and the Black Church: Where Do We Go From Here?” in *Black Theology: A Documentary History, Vol. 1: 1966-1979*, ed. James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore, 2nd Revised (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 268.

⁴ Cone, *BTBP*, 131-132. In an essay printed in *Ebony* magazine in 1970, Cone says, “Blackness as a liberating force is also found among black poets. LeRoi Jones, Sonia Sanchez and Don Lee are representative examples.” James H. Cone, “Toward a Black Theology,” *Ebony* 25, no. 10 (August 1970): 116.

1960s sought both the “destruction of the white thing” and the production of a “cultural revolution in art and ideas” rooted in the black—particularly the poor black—community.⁵

In a 1962 address titled “The Myth of a ‘Negro Literature’,” LeRoi Jones narrated both the predicament and possibility of black arts in the U.S.⁶ Jones begins by lamenting the mediocrity of black writing in contrast to the creativity expressed in black music. Black literature, Jones argues, fails because it is a “a social preoccupation rather than an aesthetic one.” The writers wrote to demonstrate their inclusion in white bourgeois culture, their membership in “cultivated” humanity.⁷ The aesthetic productions coming from poor black communities, particularly music and folklore, were uninhabited with this longing for acceptance secured through imitation; these art forms, for Jones, developed a distinctive aesthetic concern that might foster another trajectory for black writers.

Jones presses his argument further, suggesting that it is the bitter experience of being refused “assimilation” that produces the distinctive trajectory of black arts and culture. For Jones, black art is not a retrieval of a lost African heritage; it draws on these

⁵ Larry Neal, “The Black Arts Movement,” in *SOS—Calling All Black People: A Black Arts Movement Reader*, eds. John Bracey Jr, Sonia Sanchez, and James Smethurst (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2014), 55, 56, respectively. Cone quotes and discusses Neal’s essay, *BTBP*, 132.

⁶ Jones’s essay can be read as a kind of critical restatement of Richard Wright’s 1937 essay, “Blueprint for Negro Writing.” The title itself contests Wright’s earlier essay, although Jones goes on to make many of the same criticisms of bourgeois black literature that Wright previously made. See Richard Wright, “Blueprint for Negro Writing,” in *Within the Circle: an Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present*, ed. Angelyn Mitchell (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994), 97-106.

⁷ LeRoi Jones, “The Myth of a ‘Negro Literature’,” in *Home: Social Essays* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1968), 108.

and other sources to forge a distinctly black American cultural life.⁸ This black life unfolds as included within but always barred, at some point, from fully entering “the dominant terror of the white man’s culture.” Jones continues:

And it was this boundary, this no-man’s land, that provided the logic and beauty of his music. And this is the only way for the Negro artist to provide his version of America—from that no-man’s land outside the mainstream. A no-man’s-land, a black country, completely invisible to white America, but so essentially part of it as to stain its whole being an ominous gray.⁹

This black American existence is neither internal nor external but exists on the boundary, paradoxically both separate and inseparable from white American life. It exists on this border, a “paradox[ical]” experience—or experience as paradox—of being both a “separate experience, but inseparable from the complete fabric of American life.”¹⁰ This “no [M]an’s land,” to alter Jones’s language through Sylvia Wynter’s term, is not a “margin” to the center, for it both simultaneously completely invisible or absent—for the white middle class, “the Negro has never really existed”—and yet such an essential part that it colors the entirety of American cultural life.¹¹ This position of being “an integral part of that society, but continually outside of it, a figure like Melville’s Bartleby” is Baraka’s articulation of the distinct trajectory and possibility of black arts and black culture, a cultural formation marked by its “brilliant amalgam of diverse influences.”¹²

Binding artistic production to this cultural place of liminality transforms the practice of writing and even the understanding of language itself. As Jones says in

⁸ One should detect the similarity to Sylvia Wynter’s argument in her essay, “Ethno or Socio Poetics,” *Alcheringa/Ethnopoetics* 2 (1976): 78–94.

⁹ LeRoi Jones, “Myth of a Negro Literature,” in LeRoi Jones, *Home: Social Essays* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1968), 114.

¹⁰ Jones, “Myth,” 111.

¹¹ Jones, “Myth,” 113.

¹² Jones, “Myth,” 114. Bartleby is also an extremely important figure for Agamben’s political ontology.

another essay, artistic products are only “the remains” or “leavings” of the more important process and activity: “[the] process itself is the most important quality because it can transform and create, and its only form is possibility.”¹³ This possibility is not an abstract set of realities which are not yet but could perhaps become actualized; rather this possibility is the “will to existence, the unconnected zoom,” that is, creative movement.¹⁴ The word “unconnected” is extremely important, for it positions this possibility and creativity away from the question of and quest for origins; that is, it marks the ungrounded liminality of black culture, its position in and as no-Man’s land, as what can never be included and therefore as what lives from beyond this project to ground or determine incorporation.¹⁵

Jones emphasis on the creative process instead of the final product impacts how one understands the relationship between form and content. Form, “how a thing exists,” and content, “why a thing exists,” characterize the remains of the activity, what he calls the (dead) “heads on the wall” that follow from hunting.¹⁶ One must be wary of replacing the process, the hunting, with the thing, the dead trophies hung on the wall. Writing endeavors not simply to give form to content but to “make that wild grab for more! To

¹³ Jones, “Hunting is Not Those Heads on the Wall,” in Jones, *Home*, 174.

¹⁴ Jones, “Hunting,” 175.

¹⁵ Patrick Roney wonderfully summarizes this aesthetic groundlessness in Jones’s poetry, writing “Life continually wills out beyond itself or *fictions* itself, rendering each instance of stability as yet another fiction which, insofar as it strives to remain fixed, will be overcome. In that way, reality reveals itself as groundless, and he who affirms this groundlessness will be prepared for the free creation of new fictions.” Patrick Roney, “The Paradox of Experience: Black Art and Black Idiom in the Work of Amiri Baraka,” *African American Review* 37, no. 2/3 (July 1, 2003): 407–27, the quotation on p. 415.

¹⁶ Jones, “Hunting,” 176.

make words surprise themselves.”¹⁷ Jones clarifies this surprise and expanse in another essay on “Expressive Language,” stating:

Words have users, but as well, users have words. And it is the users that establish the world’s realities. Realities being those fantasies that control your immediate span of life. Usually they are not your own fantasies, *i.e.*, they belong to governments, traditions, etc., which, it must be clear by now, can make for conflict with the singular human life all ways. The fantasy of America might hurt you, but it is what should be meant when one talks of ‘reality.’ Not only the things you can touch or see, but the things that make such touching or seeing ‘normal.’ Then words, like their users, have a hegemony.¹⁸

The world, then, is between words and users; but this reality of the world is a fantasy, a narrative, a culturally produced world. Writing, for Jones, expands words, drawing them back into possibilities not orchestrated by the fantasy that constitutes reality. The world between words and users is, therefore, the world of possibility, the creativity and expanse—the unconnected zoom—that is the motion of artistic thought and which gives rise to artistic artifacts as the remains of this process. This possibility in language, as a motion or activity, as dis-grounded movement, cannot be held, captured, or comprehended conceptually. Language expresses this movement aesthetically, as “a *tone* and *rhythm* by which people live.”¹⁹ Affect thereby becomes a register for the experience—the movement of thought, of “art-ing”—as it signals the excess within thought that calls forth thought, the excess that gives rise to thought and which therefore gives rise to culture.²⁰

¹⁷ Jones, “Hunting,” 175.

¹⁸ LeRoi Jones, “Expressive Language,” in *Home: Social Essays*, 168.

¹⁹ Jones, “Hunting,” 172.

²⁰ Jones, “Expressive Language,” 170. By culture, Jones means most simply “the way [people] live...their total experience,” which is to say, “the form, the overall structure of organized thought (as well as emotion and spiritual pretension).” LeRoi Jones, “The Legacy of Malcolm X,” in *Home: Social Essays*, 245.

Black arts are political precisely because this expansive creativity of black life simultaneously negates the ossifying and murderous realities of white bourgeois culture while enlivening the revolutionary creativity of the poor black masses. To put this point differently, and to quote Patrick Roney's discussion of Jones's poetics, "rather than [art] serving as an ideological weapon in the struggle for change, revolution can only be justified by art—that is, as a creative act."²¹ As Roney clarifies, the black (radical) tradition Jones articulates and expresses in his writings "shows the tradition as incomparable to the space of inclusion that defines citizenship, nationality, or land—all limiting spaces that project their inside and outside. To be *in* tradition is to affirm its porousness, its openness to an outside toward which it is always already turned."²² This tradition that affirms its porousness and openness is one always already in movement, turning, a movement that cannot be incorporated or subsumed. White capitalist culture, or whiteness, is displaced precisely because it operates through the process of enclosure and incorporation, which Jones articulates through the image of the prison system: "you will be pre-born into your cell."²³ Yet, "there is no reason why we should allow the white man to destroy the world, just because he will not share it, will not share it with the *majority*."²⁴ The destruction of this white world is justified, for Jones, as Roney suggests, because it destroys the self-creativity and openness—the dis-grounded movement—that is (human) life.

²¹ Patrick Roney, "The Paradox of Experience: Black Art and Black Idiom in the Work of Amiri Baraka," *African American Review* 37, no. 2/3 (July 1, 2003): 407–27, quotation on p. 423.

²² Roney, "The Paradox of Experience," 424.

²³ LeRoi Jones, "The Last Days of the American Empire," in *Home: Social Essays*, 190.

²⁴ Jones, "The Last Days," 192.

This radical politics moving through a radical aesthetics—the conjoined Black Arts and Black Power movements—is the background in which James Cone, after having quit reading theology and making plans to seek a second doctorate in literature, wrote his first essay on theology, “Christianity and Black Power” (1967), his first book *Black Theology and Black Power* (written in 1968 and published a year later), and his second book, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (written 1970).²⁵ In a dialogue about this second book, Cone speaks about his theological writing in a way that shows this deep political and aesthetic connection. He says,

“Meaningful discourse” is always language which does not threaten the powers that be....If the oppressed are to attain their freedom, they must begin to create a new style of communication which is consistent with their struggle for liberation.²⁶

Cone not only develops this contestation or struggle for liberation within language or “discourse”; he makes this disruption of the established order and the opening of new possibilities and freedom a theological, and indeed, Christological matter: *Jesus Christ is black, baby*. It is this deployment of language that Cone will later attempt to articulate through the notion of “symbols,” though perhaps the theological category of parable is closer to the movement of, as, Cone’s thought.

Symbols, Parables, and the Advent of God: Eberhard Jüngel

Symbols, for Cone, “point to dimensions of reality that cannot be spoken of literally.”²⁷ Even “the word ‘God’ is a symbol that opens up depths of reality in the

²⁵ For Cone’s autobiographical narration of this period, see *MSLB*, 41-45.

²⁶ Cone and Hordern, Dialogue, 1079.

²⁷ Cone, *BTL*, 8.

world.”²⁸ To defend these claims, Cone draws on Paul Tillich’s theology of religious symbols. For Tillich, symbols point to something beyond themselves, participate in that reality, and open up new dimensions of reality as well as of the soul; they cannot be produced intentionally, and they grow as well as die.²⁹ Unlike Tillich, however, Cone emphasizes both the creative and the political aspects of language. Cone argues that black theology is less focused on the symbolic word itself than on the act of creation opened or opening within symbolic speech, an act directly connected to the political struggle over and within language. It is this activity that is the heart of Cone’s account of the black Christ.

When examined more closely, Cone’s account and use of “symbols” bears closer proximity to Eberhard Jüngel’s theology of parables than to the Tillichian framework Cone actually references.³⁰ For Jüngel, metaphors are “the articulation of discoveries,”

²⁸ Cone, *BTL*, 61.

²⁹ Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1957), 41-43.

³⁰ Robinson James offers a “Tillichian” critique of Cone’s departure from the negative relationship between the divine and symbols, wherein symbols are barred from idolatrous claims to ultimacy by being placed under negation even as they participate in the transcendent. See Robison B. James, “A Tillichian Analysis of James Cone’s Black Theology,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 1, no. 1 (1974): 16–30. Cone does indeed engage “negativity” differently and the Christological focus of his thought presses his account of language away from Tillich’s dialectics of transcendence and immanence, which is the ontological context for his account of symbols. Diana L. Hayes suggests turning to Paul Ricoeur’s theory of symbols and metaphors in her essay on Cone, “James Cone’s Hermeneutic of Language and Black Theology,” *Theological Studies* 61, no. 4 (December 1, 2000): 609–31. Trevor Eppehimer suggests one should use the category of parable in his essay, “Victor Anderson’s *Beyond Ontological Blackness* and James Cone’s Black Theology: A Discussion,” *Black Theology* 4, no. 1 (January 1, 2006): 87–106. For a helpful account of Jüngel’s understanding of parables, see R. David Nelson, *The Interruptive Word: Eberhard Jüngel on the Sacramental Structure of God’s Relation to the World*, T & T Clark Studies in Systematic Theology, Volume 24 (London: T & T Clark, 2013), especially Part I, on address, metaphor, and parable.

discoveries which are made possible by an event of address.³¹ Jüngel does not frame the category of metaphor by a divide between literal and non-literal speech but rather by distinguishing “addressing” speech from “defining” speech.³² Language itself is “structured in a thoroughly metaphorical way” as language allows things in the world to be encountered in new ways.³³ To be addressed, for Jüngel, is to be brought into a community and given a world through language.³⁴ The “self” does not exist prior to but is constituted within and through the address.³⁵ Both the self and the world are altered, “expanded” in coming to speech. New relations arise between the world and human beings in this address, relations which are themselves, through this expanded language, now aspects of worldly existence.³⁶ Address is, therefore, fundamentally creative and oriented towards the possibilities that exceed what is actual.

³¹ Jüngel, “Metaphorical Truth,” *TE I*, 51.

³² Jüngel, “Metaphorical Truth,” *TE I*, 67, theses 1 and 2, quotation from thesis 2. John Webster, who is largely responsible for the increase of attention paid to Jüngel’s theology among English speaking theologians, inadequately attends to Jüngel’s inclusion of metaphor within the context of “ordinary” and “literal” speech in his essay, “Eberhard Jüngel on the Language of Faith,” *Modern Theology* 1, no. 4 (July 1, 1985), 266.

³³ Jüngel, “Metaphorical Truth,” *TE I*, 69.

³⁴ Raymond Williams has noted how language “is an *indissoluble* element of human self-creation,” focusing on how this constitution of a world in or as a language is saturated with and structured by relations of exploitation and domination. See Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 29, emphasis original. For Williams, one cannot temporalize the human relation to language, such that human activity produces language or language produces distinctly human activity. The relation between language and human social activity or consciousness is characterized by “simultaneity and totality” (29). Jüngel often discusses this relationship between human being and language in the dialectical terms of becoming, an account which would separate human being from language, such that humans “exist as a passing over from being into language” (Jüngel, “Metaphorical Truth,” *TE I*, 52). However, one can also interpret Jüngel’s statements in a way more proximate to Williams, such that, as R. David Nelson summarizes, “being is a *happening* that occurs *as* language occurs.” See Nelson, *Interruptive Word*, p. 17, emphasis original.

³⁵ Jüngel, *GMW*, 172.

³⁶ Jüngel, “Metaphorical Truth,” *TE I*, 57.

A metaphor—or at least a good metaphor—enables its recipients to “discover” themselves “and thereby the world.”³⁷ A metaphor does this by drawing together two worlds (or contextual frames) in a surprising and conflicted way, such that one now discovers something new about the world through the juxtaposition of these frames. For instance, the basic Aristotelian metaphor, “Achilles is a lion,” draws together while also holding apart the “worlds” of the warrior and of the lion.³⁸ The tension between these two worlds or contexts produces new meaning, which is to say, the tension relates the person or people addressed to the sphere of the warrior and to Achilles in a new way. This new relation is also what makes a metaphor an interruptive event: a metaphor provides new insight by disrupting existing relations and ways of interpreting oneself and one’s world.

If metaphors particularly and language more broadly are embedded in social and worldly relations, then Jüngel must clarify how theological speech can adequately refer to a God who is not simply *part* of this world. Jüngel provides his answer through what he calls the “analogy of advent.”³⁹ Succinctly put, one can speak truthfully about God in the language of this world because God is the one who came and who continues to come to this world in Jesus Christ. It is the *humanity of God* that allows humans to speak truthfully in worldly language about God. Revelation *is* God’s being, and revelation is “that *event* in which God becomes accessible in language.”⁴⁰ God addresses humankind

³⁷ Jüngel, “Metaphorical Truth,” *TE I*, 57.

³⁸ Jüngel, “Metaphorical Truth,” *TE I*, 61.

³⁹ Jüngel offers a longer argument against the other main alternative, the emphasis on the radical transcendence of God such that God is so wholly unlike creaturely realities that God can only be spoken of indirectly and by way of negation. For Jüngel, this approach ultimately renders one unable to speak about and hence unable to know God at all. See Jüngel, *GMW*, 226-81.

⁴⁰ Jüngel, *GMW*, 288.

in and as Jesus Christ; in and as a response to this interruptive address, human language can speak truthfully about God.⁴¹

Jüngel provides a formula for the basic model of metaphorical speech about the Christian God, one taken from his analysis of Jesus's parabolic speech: God's coming to the world ($X \rightarrow a$) is like the relationship of something in the world to something else ($b:c$), or, put together, $X \rightarrow a::b:c$.⁴² This worldly relationship, $b:c$, is meaningful in its own right. For instance, the statement, 'a pearl is hidden in the field,' refers to a perfectly intelligible, though unusual, worldly reality or state of affairs. Nevertheless, by being related to something else, in this case to God's worldly advent, this creaturely reality is expanded, placed in a new relation such that it now carries eschatological import. This event of address through parable or analogy is an event in which people "bring" God into language while God also "comes" to language, with the latter being the condition of possibility of the former.⁴³ It is God's advent that allows and even demands, or rather, that demands and therefore provides truthful speech about God through metaphors or parables.

A parable, which is basically an extended metaphor for Jüngel, is an event. Metaphors provide an encounter with the new or unknown, not the clarification or definition of the old or already known.⁴⁴ It is precisely this mediation or event-quality that gives the metaphor its own complicated way of navigating or moving between being and nonbeing. Paul Ricoeur, in his account of metaphor, draws attention to this fact by noting that the metaphorical use of the verb 'to be' expresses a tension "between an 'is'

⁴¹ Jüngel, "Metaphorical Truth," *TE I*, 65.

⁴² Jüngel, *GMW*, 285.

⁴³ Jüngel, *GMW*, 295.

⁴⁴ Jüngel, *GMW*, 290, 292.

and an ‘is not’” as well as “between *same* and *other*.”⁴⁵ Jüngel helpfully invokes this excess to identity that is the nature of the parabolic form of God’s existence in Jesus Christ:

The mystery of the God who identifies with the human Jesus is the increase of similarity and nearness between God and the human which is *more than mere identity* and which reveals the *concrete difference* between God and the human in its surpassing mere identical being.⁴⁶

The phrase ‘more than mere identity’ includes but exceeds the notion of identity, or rather, it indicates a tension between identity and non-identity. Jesus is neither merely the same as God nor other than God. God is God *as* Jesus Christ; Jesus is Jesus *as* God. This ‘being-as’ is, as Ricoeur argues, the notion of ‘being’ at the center of metaphorical speech.⁴⁷ Jesus is the metaphor or parable of God and God *is* metaphorical being, or, in idiom of Karl Barth, God *is* God’s revelation.⁴⁸

Given that parables are events, the “content” or “theme” of the parable cannot be “abstracted from the ‘form’ of the parable.”⁴⁹ The parable gathers or “collects” the elements (x, a, b, c) and relates them anew within the very parable itself: “the kingdom of God comes into language in the parable as a parable.”⁵⁰ In the parable itself, form and content cannot be separated, for the parable is an event, an address, and not merely a verbal relation between discrete entities. God “arrives” in language and thereby is not an

⁴⁵ Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-Disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language*, trans. Robert Czerny, Kathleen McLaughlin, and John Costello, SJ (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981), 248, 256 (italics original), respectively. See also, Jüngel, “Metaphorical Truth,” *TE I*, 60-1.

⁴⁶ Jüngel, *GMW*, 288, italics original.

⁴⁷ “The tension characterizing metaphorical utterance is carried ultimately by the copula *is*. Being-as means being *and* not being. Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, 306.

⁴⁸ Jüngel, *GMW*, 288.

⁴⁹ Jüngel, *GMW*, 294.

⁵⁰ Jüngel, *GMW*, 295, the language of “collecting” is found on p. 294.

unknown “x” but is the one whose very being *is* this particular arrival in language, this parabolic revelation.⁵¹ God’s arrival in this particular “word event” is not a “capacity of language itself...but rather an alien possibility which is opened up to language and required of it.”⁵² This possibility exceeds the actualities that bring it to speech; nevertheless, “people bring” this interruptive possibility, the kingdom of God, “into language” and it does not arrive otherwise.⁵³

The “interruptive” aspect of Jüngel’s account of parable has been criticized. If the ordinary context is interrupted by the new such that the old set of terms (b:c) gains a completely unprecedented eschatological meaning, then it seems unclear how the metaphor produces knowledge and does not render the subject matter, in this case the God who comes, unknown. If the tension between the familiar and the new is characterized by such a radical interruption and discontinuity, then it seems that the new, God’s coming to the world, cannot be known or encountered within the terrain of the old at all.⁵⁴ This critique bears particular relevance in the present argument, for Jüngel’s emphasis on interruption and the impossibility of language bringing itself into correspondence with God carries with it a deep neglect of the material and social relations that operate within language: the interruption is emphasized so strongly that the material setting on the “language event” is also pushed to the side by Jüngel. However, as Raymond Williams notes, language cannot be separated from cultural forms, and more significantly, from the “specific inequalities” that organize the communal self-

⁵¹ Jüngel, *GMW*, 286.

⁵² Jüngel, *GMW*, 289.

⁵³ Jüngel, *GMW*, 295.

⁵⁴ Nelson, *Interruptive Word*, 56-7 for a summary of this critique.

constitution in language.⁵⁵ To speak of language, or even of “culture” without attention to the divides and struggles operative within it is to miss how language is a social “activity” or “practical consciousness” that unfolds within systems of exploitation and domination.⁵⁶

The issue here is not with the category of interruption itself. For James Cone, the problem would be fundamentally Christological, for it would neglect the way that God’s coming to the world in Christ ($X \rightarrow a$) demands and allows the relations of power inherent in the social and practical activity that *is* language to be transformed, or as Cone says, liberated. When James Cone claimed that *Jesus Christ is black, baby*, the affective and political aspects of this claim were brought to the forefront as a way to disconnect Christian theology—particularly as an academic and intellectual project in which Cone had been trained—from the hegemonic processes of white supremacy. The truth of the claim is precisely that of a metaphorical truth, with all the political elements of this expansive disruption emphasized.

The Black Christ

Metaphors bear a certain complex relation to negation or nonbeing, or death. When Richard Wright famously wrote, “The Negro is America’s metaphor,” he drew attention to the violence of this metaphorical existence: “the history of the Negro in America is the history of America written in vivid and bloody terms.”⁵⁷ Frank Wilderson,

⁵⁵ Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 108.

⁵⁶ Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 36.

⁵⁷ Richard Wright, *White Man, Listen!*, collected in Richard Wright, *Black Power: Three Books from Exile: Black Power; The Color Curtain; and White Man, Listen!* (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2008), 734.

III has powerfully lingered within and emphasized this anti-black violence and terror through which (white) America comes to be. After quoting Wright, Wilderson notes, “a metaphor comes into being through a violence that kills, rather than merely exploits, the object so that the concept might live.”⁵⁸ The distinction between terror and exploitation points to a difference between black and white lives under racial capitalism, what Raymond Williams calls the distinction between “class and the excluded social (human) area,” which is to say, the relationship and difference between the (potential) Rabble and Indigeneity.⁵⁹ Wilderson can be read as replacing the parentheses around the term ‘human’ with a line through it, ‘~~human~~’, for the excluded human social area is the exclusion of some from the sociality of humanity, or rather, it is the formation of *the human* (Man) through the production of those excluded and erased from the sociality of human being, ejected from humanity through the production of “social death.”⁶⁰ The concept is formed through and lives from this violence that kills. The metaphor is an agent of mediation and redemptive death: it destroys the object (black social death) for the sake of producing the concept (white social life).

James Cone offers a similar but ultimately divergent way of entering into this dialectic of life and death. Metaphors can be understood not as what negates the object for the sake of the concept but as an excess or expansion moving or opening *between* the object and the concept. Cone’s attention is focused on the *activity* of creation even within

⁵⁸ Wilderson, “Gramsci’s Black Marx,” 231. Wilderson is actually quoting Cornel West’s quotation of Richard Wright, in Cornel West, “Black Strivings in a Twilight Civilization,” in *The Future of the Race*, edited H.L. Gates Jr. and Cornel West (New York: Knopf), 72.

⁵⁹ Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 126.

⁶⁰ Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985).

and therefore in excess to the erasure or destruction of those positioned as “objects” or commodities. This excess expressed in creativity—in the linguistic and ontological terrain of metaphor—means that, for Cone, blackness is not, as it is for Wilderson, the object destroyed but rather is the creativity and freedom that lives *in between* the destruction of the object and the crystallization or precipitation of the concept, between death and life, nonbeing and being.

Metaphors live in the tensile space between two orders: one known and familiar, yet crossed out or negated, the other, unknown and in process of being discovered and/or created. Cone’s emphasis, following LeRoi Jones, is less on the objects produced or consumed—concepts or objects—and more on the process itself, for as Jones noted, the “objects” and “concepts” are all “leavings” of the creative process itself.⁶¹ Whether invoking the terminology of “self-definition” in his early work or “powerful imagination” in his most recent, Cone both points to and performs this creative process or poetics of and as black life.⁶² This freedom to live—actively, creatively, affectively—from beyond the destruction of life that is white America is what Cone calls the “the particular experience of blackness.”⁶³ It is neither anchored in itself (as self-possessed, as object) nor in the dominant social life (the concept, established discourse) but rather lives from beyond itself, in that no-Man’s-land beyond incorporation, to again echo Jones and Wynter. It is, therefore, quite fittingly a parable of eschatological freedom, the freedom

⁶¹ One could put the difference more sharply by suggesting that Wilderson subordinates metaphorical discovery and creation to the dialectical formation of concepts, which leaves him with no other political recourse but to point out the utter destructiveness of these dialectics through his “pessimism.”

⁶² Cone, *BTBP*, 6; *CLT*, 94-5.

⁶³ James H. Cone and William Hordern, “Dialogue on Black Theology,” *The Christian Century*, September 15, 1971: 1080.

of the resurrection. As a parabolic expression of this freedom, Cone will emphatically and affectively argue that Jesus Christ is black, *baby*.

The resurrection becomes central to the way Cone moves from Jesus Christ's Jewishness to his blackness because it is the basis of Christ's contemporaneity. In *Black Theology and Black Power*, Cone does not focus explicitly on the resurrection but instead makes an ecclesial argument for the blackness of Christ: "the Church is a continuation of the Incarnation"⁶⁴ Nevertheless, Christ is black in a way independent from the church, for "it is the job of the Church to become black with him."⁶⁵ In his second book, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, the affective term "baby" is dropped but his articulation still elicits the affective element by ending with an exclamation: "Jesus is the black Christ!"⁶⁶ In this iteration of the claim, Cone clarifies the relation between his ecclesiology and Christ's independent contemporaneity: the church is the community of the oppressed that seeks to live "in accordance with [Christ's] resurrection."⁶⁷ Given that "the black community is an oppressed community primarily because of its blackness," Christ becomes black so that the black community can experience the freedom of his resurrection.⁶⁸

In *God of the Oppressed*, his third book, Cone makes fully explicit the way the blackness of Christ is related to Christ's Jewishness, and does so once again by way of the resurrection: "It is on the basis of the soteriological meaning of the particularity of his Jewishness that theology must affirm the christological significance of Jesus' present

⁶⁴ Cone, *BTBP*, 69.

⁶⁵ Cone, *BTBP*, 69.

⁶⁶ Cone, *BTL*, 127.

⁶⁷ Cone, *BTL*, 126.

⁶⁸ Cone, *BTL*, 126.

blackness.”⁶⁹ The “soteriological meaning” of Jewish particularity is, for Cone, the framing of Jewish identity within God’s historical promises and acts of salvation, which reach their apex in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. The resurrection does not negate but affirms this soteriological universality that *is* Jewish (covenantal) particularity. The resurrection is “the fulfillment” of God’s “original intention for Israel to be” the ones through whom “the divine freedom” becomes “available to all.”⁷⁰

The resurrection “means that God’s identity with the poor in Jesus is not limited to the particularity of his Jewishness.”⁷¹ Although this statement appears to subsume Jesus’s Jewish particularity so that he can now be identified with any and all of the oppressed, the particularity of his Jewishness has already been interpreted through its covenantal and soteriological significance. Put more simply, Jewish identity for Cone does not operate according to a strict logic of closed or bounded racial identity.⁷² When Cone writes that Christ “*is* black because he *was* a Jew,” this statement does not entail that Christ is no longer a Jew.⁷³ As was argued in the fourth chapter, the spatiotemporality of Cone’s account of the resurrection, especially as extended through T. F. Torrance’s work, prevents this way of relating the present to the past. Further, the relationship between Christ’s Jewishness and blackness is organized, as Cone says, soteriologically, meaning, in terms of how both particularities inhabit the eschatological freedom of creaturely life beyond the enclosure or colonization of (human) being through the mechanisms of death. If the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth is the eternal

⁶⁹ Cone, *GO*, 123.

⁷⁰ Cone, *GO*, 124.

⁷¹ Cone, *GO*, 124.

⁷² J. Kameron Carter discusses this question in relation to Cone in his book, *Race: A Theological Account* (New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 2008), 157-193.

⁷³ Cone, *GO*, 123.

affirmation and not abrogation of God's covenant with Israel, then black modes of enfleshing this eschatological freedom can become parabolic expressions of this Jewish covenantal reality, which was condensed and confirmed in the flesh of Jesus Christ. This eschatological reading of Cone's account of the "black Christ" allows a constructive engagement with womanist arguments that Christ should be imagined as "Black *and* female."⁷⁴

Christ as Black and Female

Kelly Brown Douglas criticizes the arguments regarding the blackness of Christ for remaining isolated in academic settings and for having a limited or "one dimensional" understanding of oppression.⁷⁵ Jacquelyn Grant has also argued that black feminism "grows out of Black women's tri-dimensional reality of race/sex/class."⁷⁶ To suggest a "one dimensional" understanding of oppression is to suggest that both sex and class—as well as other multiple dimensions of oppression—are absent. In Douglas's strong rendering, "the Black Christ was such a thorough response to the 1960s black freedom struggle that it was impotent in dealing with concerns beyond racism."⁷⁷ At the level of intersectional analysis, the Black Christ at best occluded and ignored aspects of oppression outside of racism and at worst functioned to affirm a black masculine politics and theology at the expense of black women in general, and poor black women specifically.

⁷⁴ Jacquelyn Grant, "Black Christology: Interpreting Aspects of the Apostolic Faith," *Mid-Stream* 24, no. 4 (October 1985): 366–75.

⁷⁵ Douglas and Burkett, "The Black Christ," 421.

⁷⁶ Jacquelyn Grant, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1989), 202.

⁷⁷ Douglas and Burkett, "The Black Christ," 421.

For Grant, God is not only “concrete” in the man Jesus but also “in the lives of those who will accept the challenges of the risen Saviour the Christ.”⁷⁸ Here, the particularity of Christ is significant at its broadest or most universal element, his “humanity,” and the resurrection offers an expansion beyond the particularities of this historical figure such that, given the “experiences of Black women” and the presence of God in Christ to them, Christ—not Jesus, the historical figure—“is a Black woman.”⁷⁹

Douglas worries that this representation of Christ as a black woman is still too restrictive. “Christ can be found in the faces of all those in whom this Christ is present, all those who promote life and wholeness for the black community, whether women or men.”⁸⁰ Christ is identified with, and therefore symbolically represented by all who struggle against the various forms of oppression that devalue and inhibit black communal life. Limiting the appearance of Christ to one form, even a single “intersectional” or “multi-dimensional form, like Christ as a poor black woman, risks ignoring or excluding other ways Christ is present among and to the community.

Both Douglas and Grant point to the limitations of various narrations of “the Black Christ,” particularly in how various authors’ neglected to consider the situation of black women. Both Douglas and Grant struggle and ultimately disagree in terms of the representation or concretization of the universality of Christ. For Grant, black women’s “tri-dimensional” reality (race, sex, class) is the point “where the particular connects up with the universal.”⁸¹ For Douglas, even this tri-dimensionality is insufficiently universal, and therefore the symbolic representation of Christ should not be limited in the way

⁷⁸ Grant, *White Women’s Christ and Black Women’s Jesus*, 220.

⁷⁹ Grant, *White Women’s Christ and Black Women’s Jesus*, 220.

⁸⁰ Douglas and Burkett, “The Black Christ,” 423.

⁸¹ Grant, *White Women’s Christ and Black Women’s Jesus*, 216.

Grant suggests. Cone's underlying theological argument, however, need not be interpreted along a trajectory of "indigenization," to use J. Deotis Roberts' term. For Roberts, the particularity of Jesus, his Jewishness, becomes subsumed in a universal Christ, who is then subsequently re-particularized in various cultural contexts on the basis of Christ's identification with struggles against oppression and, as womanists will add, for wholeness and quality of life.⁸² Further, the question of Jesus's gender and sexuality, which Cone does not adequately consider, need not be understood as a matter of simply adding another level or line of oppression. Put differently, both the movement between the universal and the particular as well as the very meaning of gender and sexuality have been reframed through Christ's death and resurrection.

In her recent book on queer theology, the Trinity, and importantly, the resurrection of Christ, Linn Tonstad emphasizes the way the resurrection disrupts heteropatriarchal organizations of reproduction and human sexuality. In her book, she writes,

There is no reason to figure the resurrected Christ as masculine or male. The end of gender means also the end of marriage. The redemption of sexual difference must then be its end in the form that we know it.⁸³

⁸² This critique of "indigenization" is a response to the criticism of Cone's "black Christ" by J. Deotis Roberts in his book, *Liberation And Reconciliation: A Black Theology*, 2nd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 71-73. After summarizing several different "transpositions" of Christ into different cultural contexts, Kwok Pui-lan asks theologians to consider the "implications of the deemphasis of Jesus' Jewishness." Yet, Kwok likewise assumes that the transpositions occur through a negation of the particular for the sake of generating a universal that can then be transplanted again in another culture. Cone's account of the black Christ moves along a different trajectory. See Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 184.

⁸³ Linn Tonstad, *God and Difference: The Trinity, Sexuality, and the Transformation of Finitude* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 275.

The necessity to secure communal reproduction—the necessity to reproduce and manage the continuity and development of *the* people, ecclesial or otherwise—comes to an end in the resurrection. Instead of offering a point of transcendence to secure claims of proper (human) identity, the resurrection is an “apokalypsis on identity and representation.”⁸⁴ Resurrection “time is not continuous with the order of the now,” in which the demand to re/produce the social order governs life and structures relations of gender and sexuality. The resurrection does not offer wholeness that supplements and thereby overcomes (or incorporates) the instability of human life. Instead, it entails “representational discontinuity and apophasis, ambiguity, and epistemic frangibility.”⁸⁵ The church is not offered continuity beyond itself but has a point of “nonidentity,” a non-incorporable relation, placed at its very center.⁸⁶

For Tonstad, this means that an ecclesiology attuned to the disruptive negation following the resurrected and *absent* Messiah is centered not on the future of “the Child,” the ideal representative and inheritor of a communal identity; rather, the church represents “the abortion of the current order of continuity and repetition.”⁸⁷ The language of “abortion” symbolizes “a fundamental refusal of the logic of reproduction in both its biological and socio-symbolic senses.”⁸⁸ At this level, Tonstad’s thought seeks to indicate an “excess” that can be “accessed only by refusing identity’s positivity and representation’s stability.”⁸⁹ Yet, this *refusal* of a logic of reproduction becomes dialectically bound to the dominant order, the excess accessed by, and only by, inhabiting

⁸⁴ Tonstad, *God and Difference*, 263.

⁸⁵ Tonstad, *God and Difference*, 263.

⁸⁶ Tonstad, *God and Difference*, 276.

⁸⁷ Tonstad, *God and Difference*, 273.

⁸⁸ Tonstad, *God and Difference*, 273.

⁸⁹ Tonstad, *God and Difference*, 273.

this negativity that refuses the offer of “inclusion” back into the dominant or hegemonic social order. Her work at this point bears proximity to that of Frank Wilderson, in that the social production of death—for Wilderson via anti-blackness and for Tonstad via the heteropatriarchal regime of sexuality—can only be contested by granting the dominant social’s orders consolidation of itself through this violence. The “abortion” is the “anti-concept”—what can never be refashioned or drawn into the dominant mode of the social—whereas, for Cone, the dominant social order need not be granted this ultimate power that can be resisted only negatively: the hegemonic order is a reactive structure designed to capture what *precedes* and *exceeds* its closures.⁹⁰ Blackness, for Cone, is *excessive* to “identity’s positivity and representation’s stability” but is not merely

⁹⁰ This excess is related to what Joerg Rieger refers to as a “surplus” of “the real,” drawing on Jacques Lacan’s work. For Rieger, the “real absolutely resists symbolization... The real is what keeps disrupting any turn to language and the text.” Reality, or the dominant cultural-symbolic system, is constructed through the repression of the real, of that which disorders its construction of the normal, of the status quo. The real “grows out of repression by those in power” though it “can never be completely restrained by them and eventually transcends them.” The real “does not have its existence independently from the powers that be” but is an effect of the imposition or construction of reality: “in creating the real, the symbolic order cannot help but prepare the conditions that eventually will undermine its absolute power.” The point of connection and difference here is with the force of that term *never*, where Rieger states that the real can *never* be completely restrained or ordered. This “never” can follow from the system itself—the system creates its point of failure and eventual demise—or can point to something that precedes and exceeds the system, the point of crisis that elicits the dominant order(ing) of capture. The question, to borrow Fred Moten’s rendering (which has been central throughout) is whether resistance follows from or in some way precedes the organization of the system. For Joerg Rieger’s discussion of the Lacanian real, see Joerg Rieger, *Remember the Poor: The Challenge to Theology in the Twenty-First Century* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1998). All quotations come from p. 76-84. See also his brief description of a “Christological surplus” in Joerg Rieger, *Christ & Empire: From Paul to Postcolonial Times* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 10-11, and then subsequently throughout the text. For Fred Moten’s notion that “resistance is prior to power” and the “object” prior to the “discipline that is set in motion in order to regulate it,” see the interview with him, Fred Moten, James Cahill, and Rachel Thompson, “‘The Insurgency of Objects:’ A Conversation with Fred Moten,” *Octopus* 1 (Fall 2005): 51.

indicated by a negative refusal of this social order but rather as the movement that exceeds—and thereby elicits and yet defies—the protocols organized for its capture.

Blackness, for Cone, lives from beyond this death-bound life, enfleshing the eschatological freedom given to creatures through the ordering of space-time toward, through, and for the incarnation and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Whiteness refuses this eschatological freedom through its attempt to *establishes itself as the proper form of the human*, a form produced *through anti-black violence* and enacted *for the sake of white control over the accumulation of capital and its attendant processes of eco-social re/production*, to draw on the definition provided in Chapter Three. Wynter, Spillers, and Copeland all point to way black women’s gender and sexuality cannot be coordinated or chartered through this organization of *human life* inside and for the sake of whiteness, or Man. The ecclesiology of “abortion” that Tonstad advocates is the abortion of “the Child” of inheritance—the child that inherits the future of the social order by being its representative (or, in a earlier reproductive economy, by being the ones who are or the ones who beget such white male figureheads and property owners). The “demonic grounds” that Wynter specifies, in which black women are placed outside the racial-reproductive logic of Man altogether, is neither included within this reproductive order nor is it its determinative negation and refusal, or abortion.⁹¹

⁹¹ Tonstad engages the issue of futurity and the “Child” through Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2004). To quote from José Muñoz’s appreciative yet critical engagement with Edelman’s book, “all children are not the privileged white babies to whom contemporary society caters.” José Esteban Muñoz, “Cruising the Toilet: LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka, Radical Black Traditions, and Queer Futurity,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 13, no. 2 (May 14, 2007): 362.

The “excess” to the identitarian reproductive order—which is set within and operative through whiteness—is not the absolute negation of this order but that which this order attempts but always fails to regulate. The “invention of the white race” occurred precisely through a concern over the management of unintended or wayward reproductions, both biological and ecclesial, as evinced historically by the way whiteness emerges as an identity marker in the early North American colonies only after various antimiscegenation laws were enacted and after it was made clear that Christian baptismal rebirth did not, in fact, alter one’s social status.⁹² Whiteness emerged as an effect of a society organized through the legalized capture of movements deemed outside the order of law. The racial logic of slavery was a measure used to keep hold of forced labor, as English laborers could escape and blend in at other colonies and Native American peoples could escape and live beyond the colonies themselves. Whiteness, in other words, names the attempted regulatory control and mastery over all relation, simultaneously placing itself as wholly relational (nothing but this order of relation, the generic form of the political) and the sovereign foundation of all relation (the particular ones through whom this organization of life emerges). This order, as a whole, emerges by way of what it must always attempt to yet never can succeed in regulating: black lives and particularly black women’s relational movements, including their sexuality.⁹³

The *blackness* of Christ in Cone’s thought is, or at least might be read as, always-already positioned beyond the representative regime of gender and sexuality. To say that

⁹² Theodore W. Allen, *The Invention of the White Race, Volume 1-2*, Second Edition (New York: Verso, 2012).

⁹³ For an account of this dynamic from within the field of whiteness studies, see Steve Martinot, *The Machinery of Whiteness: Studies in the Structure of Racialization* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2010).

Christ must be thought of as both “black and female” does not indicate an inclusion of femininity or female sexual identity—whatever one might take these terms to mean—into the realm of the proper human form. Nor is this reference to Christ as “black and female” merely one more “context” of oppression to be listed among countless others. Rather, it is a significant and strategic way of indicating the way the resurrection disrupts the patriarchal organization of reproduction internal to whiteness. To be clear, Cone himself did not make this argument. The point is that the black feminist and womanist critiques of the heteropatriarchal norms within black theology do not function as additive demands asking for inclusion but instead disrupt the inclusivity or incorporation configured through the whiteness of Man, which continued unchecked by patriarchal tendencies in black theology.⁹⁴ On a linguistic level, one could suggest that the metaphorical disruption and expansion of this claim about the *black Christ* is being brilliantly extended and sharpened, not switched out for a different parable. In a different way, the truth of the resurrection is more effectively displayed or attested by way of these reflections on the “demonic grounds” of the flesh of the resurrected Christ. But that question, the question of *truthful metaphorical speech*, is one that must be engaged more directly.

Theological Poetics and the Social Production of Truthful Speech

Truth, in the context of theology at least, is an event or happening: “truth is divine action entering into our lives and creating the human action of liberation.” It “is an event that happens *to* us and often *against* our will... Truth affirms consciousness in the

⁹⁴ In the 1986 preface to the book, Cone names the “failure to be receptive to the problem of sexism in the black community and society as a whole” to be the “most glaring limitation of *A Black Theology of Liberation*.” Cone, *BTL*, xx. See also Cone, *FMP*, 122-139, esp. p. 134.

struggle to be through an affirmation of its right to be.”⁹⁵ Theologically, the divine truth is a person, Jesus Christ, and yet “there is no truth in Jesus Christ independent of the oppressed of the land—their history and culture.”⁹⁶ This interplay or spacing between Jesus Christ and the oppressed of the land gives the divine truth its dialectical or paradoxical quality, or, in the idiom developed above, its parabolic nature. The freedom of the oppressed—the “socio-political context of the liberation struggle”—is the contextual location of the God who *is* truth.⁹⁷

To deny that truth is independent of human practical consciousness—language—does not entail a cultural relativism with regard to the truth. To conclude such would be to miss the theological and political work involved in “speaking the truth.” To extend Cone’s thought: it would seem the disagreements between realist and anti-realist (or idealist) notions of truths presuppose a subject-object duality that he is implicitly challenging.⁹⁸ Cone’s emphasis on activity and language as practical consciousness refuses the split between mind and world that then leaves one scrambling, philosophically, to propose some measure to bind them together (the mind constructing

⁹⁵ Cone, *GO*, 28, 96, respectively.

⁹⁶ Cone, *GO*, 31.

⁹⁷ James H. Cone, “Content and Method of Black Theology,” *Journal of Religious Thought* 32, no. 2 (September 1, 1975): 90–103, citation from p.100.

⁹⁸ For a more extensive discussion, see Clive Cazeaux, *Metaphor and Continental Philosophy: From Kant to Derrida* (New York: Routledge, 2007). Cazeaux, drawing Martin Heidegger and Gaston Bachelard together, suggests that both thinkers “configure the encounter between subject and world as an opening, which is to say that subject and world meet each other not as two pre-formed components but as entities who acquire their being through their mutual participation in or as an opening. This achieves a different kind of belonging within epistemology. Conventionally, the foundations of knowledge are *ascribed* either to the subject or to the object, hence the oscillation between realism and anti-realism. In contrast, the image of the opening works epistemologically as a metaphor for knowledge but the opposition conventionally expressed in terms of subjectivity and objectivity is ascribed differently,” p. 150.

the connection or the world providing it to the mind). Yet, this emphasis on activity and practical consciousness does not render Cone's account of truth "pragmatic," where truth is what works within a particular project or activity. Truth is encountered in an event or happening, and while this truth-event affirms and gives strength for the struggle for freedom, it is not identical to such affective or pragmatic responses.

Truthful theological speech is necessarily offered in hope: it is metaphorical speech uttered or written in hope that such speech will be affirmed and appropriated by God in the context of the community seeking liberation. The metaphorical speech is itself situated within a narrative context. It is for the sake of the story of God in Jesus Christ that metaphors are, and must be, introduced. The formula Jüngel provided to analyze parabolic speech is, in fact, just a condensed narrative form. God's coming to the world is like the relationship between these two other realities in the world. Cone, also, emphasizes the centrality of story: "the form of black religious thought is expressed in the style of story and its content is liberation."⁹⁹ Further, within this story, the relationship between form and content is dialectical, which is to say, paradoxically held together:

The relation between the form and content of black thought was dialectical. The story was both the medium through which truth was communicated and also a constituent of truth itself. In the telling of a truthful story, the reality of liberation to which the story pointed, was also revealed in the actual *telling* of the story itself.¹⁰⁰

Truth here is decidedly relational, arising between the presence of God, the storyteller, and the community gathered together. Truthful speech is speech in which God's presence in and as this community is displayed, both pointed to and experienced. That one encounters this truth—the truth that *is* Jesus Christ—depends on the interrelations and

⁹⁹ Cone, "Content and Method," 91, emphasis removed.

¹⁰⁰ Cone, "Content and Method," 94, emphasis in the original.

interactions of the human members of this event as well as the presence and activity of the Spirit. Put from the other side, this event (the poetic Word) is what gives these various members (God, preacher, congregation) their identity, or rather affirms their existence in relations that exceed the protocols of identity; it can only be articulated in the language of identity reconfigured paradoxically and contextually.

The liberation struggle does not guarantee truthful speech about God but is the context in which such speech can arise. It is necessary but not sufficient. It is necessary but not sufficient because of who God is: God is the one who brings *liberation* (and thus the context of liberation is necessary) and *God* is the one who brings liberation (and thus the context of liberation is not sufficient). This insufficiency to guarantee or force divine speech preserves the distance and differentiation between God and the world, which far from minimalizing or downplaying the concrete particularities of a given struggle for liberation actually functions to preserve its own creaturely significance in its own rights. It points to the opening of creaturely life, an opening to “the Word that we do not possess” and which also does not “possess” us, and yet on whom we depend and who depends on us for this production of faithful speech.¹⁰¹ Faith does not take hold, through its language, of the creaturely world; rather, “faith itself forces one to remain *open to life* as it is lived anywhere.”¹⁰² Faith is oriented to metaphorical-being, the discovery and creation of modes of life in response to the opening of and as God in Jesus Christ. Faith is political and always already a mode of practice—even more so, for Cone, than towards correct linguistic expression—because truthful theological speech, which is to say,

¹⁰¹ Cone, *GO*, 95, emphasis removed.

¹⁰² Cone, *GO*, 95, emphasis added.

speech that corresponds to the presence and activity of God in Jesus Christ, is speech that is itself expanding within and for the sake of liberation.

PART III

SOLIDARITY, POLITICAL THEOLOGY, AND THE HUMAN

CHAPTER 6
AGAINST (WHITE) REDEMPTION¹

“What can I do to help?” This seemingly innocent gesture of assistance has seemed, and still seems, to many white people to be the right question to ask. The question recognizes the existence and urgency of these struggles against racial violence and oppression; it also does not presume to take control of the various movements. It is, in this way, the quintessential approach of “an ally.” Yet, when Malcolm X heard this question, he simply responded: “nothing.”² LeRoi James—later Amiri Baraka—replied even more strongly: “you can help by dying.”³ Later in their lives, both X and Baraka reconsidered and qualified these forceful remarks.⁴ But the initial responses, even if deemed rhetorically excessive, point to a fundamental problem.

James Cone, in an early dialogue on his black theology, incisively named and critiqued the underlying problem of this seemingly innocent and straightforward question:

¹ This chapter is a slightly modified version of a previously published article, Timothy McGee, “Against (White) Redemption: James Cone and the Christological Disruption of Racial Discourse and White Solidarity,” *Political Theology* (January 19, 2017): 1–18.

² This scene has been memorably depicted in the movie on Malcolm X’s life. See Spike Lee et al., *Malcolm X*, DVD (Warner Home Video, 2000). The film is based on the book, Malcolm X and Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X: As Told to Alex Haley* (Ballantine Books, 1973). See p. 292 for the description of this encounter.

³ Amiri Baraka, *The Autobiography of Leroy Jones* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1997), 285.

⁴ X and Haley, *Autobiography*, 383-4; Baraka, *Autobiography*, 285-6.

I find that the white-skinned person is worried too much about [their] own "salvation," rather than about the liberation of the black community.⁵

This comment cuts to the core, for underlying the question of how to help is another, more urgent question, how do I become or exemplify what it means to be a good white person. The question, as Cone intimates, is not about strategies and tactics in a project of black liberation; the questioner seeks guidelines regarding what is necessary to become or to show that one has become a better white person. It is ultimately a question about white redemption.

Cone's remark follows a discussion about his confusing use of racial terms in his then recently published book, *A Black Theology of Liberation*. Cone would use the terms 'white' and 'black' to move between what he called the universal and the particular, or relatedly, the symbolic and literal. Whiteness, for instance, could refer to actual white-skinned people or symbolically represent the oppressors. Cone's use of racial terms and the responses of some of his critics will be addressed below. But by way of introduction, it is helpful to note that, in this dialogue, Cone argues that the ambiguity of his discourse is "necessary," "intentional," and even "indispensible."⁶ The question, "what can I do to help," in this way, might be taken as a refusal to inhabit this ambiguity, the paradoxical tension *between* the two poles, the literal and symbolic, the particular and the universal. Put differently, and in anticipation of the argument that unfolds over this and the following chapter, the white concern to be recognized as a good ally—or as having "become" black, as Cone puts it in his early work—evinces a concern to secure redemption by overcoming or incorporating the "opacity" of this inhabitation in (the)

⁵ James H. Cone and William Hordern, "Dialogue on Black Theology," *The Christian Century*, September 15, 1971, p. 1080.

⁶ Cone and Hordern, "Dialogue," 1079, 1080.

between. Whiteness is Cone's preferred term for this incorporative project that Sylvia Wynter calls Man, and this project draws its life and form—its dynamics and trajectories—through what remains too unbounded to be incorporated within, or redeemed through it.

To track Cone's disruptive engagement with the discourse of race—and the material realities organized through it—this chapter will begin by exploring Cone's theological efforts to think in (the) between, drawing on Nahum Chandler's recent articulation of this appositional movement. The chapter will then turn to Cone's paradoxical use of racial terminology, engaging this early dialogue as well as the book it discusses, *A Black Theology of Liberation*. This reading of Cone's ambiguous discourse of race will be further developed in the third section, by way of a conversation with two critics of Cone's account of blackness: Victor Anderson and Alistair Kee. The fourth section will draw out the intertwined relation between whiteness and death, while the conclusion will delve deeper into Cone's critique of whiteness as a project of redemption, noting in particular what his critique entails for white projects of solidarity.

Thinking Between

James Cone has a penchant for using the conjunction 'and' in the titles of his books and essays. His very first book, *Black Theology and Black Power*, and his most recent one, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, have this pattern. In the forty-plus years between these two books, one finds multiple other books and essays having the same

basic, conjunctive form.⁷ Throughout these various titles, one of the terms will often have a distinctly theological or Christian association, whereas the other term might not; often, but not always, the Christian term will come first. The consistency of this practice and its duration suggest that this mode of setting two terms beside one another, or thinking from and through the movement between these terms, has been and remains central to Cone's theological method.

In a few recent articles, Vincent Lloyd has reflected on one of Cone's consistent designations for his peculiar way of setting two realities beside one another: paradox (emphasizing here the root, para-, "by the side of, beside").⁸ Paradox, in Lloyd's rendering, has a primarily epistemic meaning and is used in an explicitly theological setting. It refers, most basically, to "moments of irresolution, without the possibility of resolution through secular means."⁹ Secularism, as Lloyd suggests elsewhere, "smoothes or contains paradox."¹⁰ The determinative paradox of Christian thought—the incarnation, the setting beside one another in the most intimate yet non-incorporative union, the God-Man Jesus of Nazareth—is flattened or jettisoned when theology subordinates itself to

⁷ For a few instances, among many, many others, see: James H. Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1991, originally published 1972); James H. Cone, "Black Theology and the Black Church: Where Do We Go From Here? (orig. 1977)," in *Black Theology: A Documentary History, Vol. 1: 1966-1979*, ed. James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore, 2nd Revised (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 266–75; James H. Cone, "Christian Faith and Political Praxis," *Encounter* 43, no. 2 (March 1, 1982): 129–41; and James H. Cone, "God and Black Suffering: Calling the Oppressors to Account," *Anglican Theological Review* 90, no. 4 (September 1, 2008): 701–12.

⁸ *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v., "para-, prefix₁," accessed September 15, 2016, <http://www.oed.com.proxy.libraries.smu.edu/view/Entry/137251#eid32256200>

⁹ Vincent Lloyd, "Paradox and Tradition in Black Theology," *Black Theology* 9, no. 3 (November 1, 2011): 265–86, quotation on p. 270.

¹⁰ Vincent Lloyd, "Black Secularism and Black Theology," *Theology Today* 68, no. 1 (April 1, 2011): 58–62, quotation on p. 61.

politics or culture, that is, when it becomes an iteration of a general schema or order of things, what Lloyd calls its secularization.¹¹ Blackness, too, indicates the paradoxical, the inhabitation of “an impossible position,” one simultaneously “included and excluded.”¹² Black theology is therefore attuned to “risk,” for it lives from and reaches for the impossible, the intimate union of its own foreclosed position with that of God’s paradoxical presence in the human Jesus of Nazareth.¹³ Whiteness, or the secular, are projects of risk management and containment, or perhaps more accurately, of concealment: “Whites don’t take risks because they don’t *see* risk.”¹⁴ Whiteness, like or *as* the secular, is a refusal of the creative failure and riskiness of living with the paradox of (divine-human) life.

Lloyd’s engagement with Cone’s paradoxical theology helpfully attends to one aspect of the “indispensable” ambiguity in his thought; yet, the epistemic focus—paradox as what defies resolution—seems oddly secular. Especially in the earlier Barthian-inflected theology that Lloyd values, the incarnation is not only an interruption of all immanent modes of knowledge and human truth claims; paradoxically, it is also the divine revelation and hence genuine and truthful knowledge of God’s very life within creaturely realities.¹⁵ For Cone, human statements and their necessary material and cultural settings can be taken hold of by God such that they genuinely correspond to, and therefore refer truthfully to, this God in the flesh. The epistemic question is itself set

¹¹ “By black secularism I simply mean discussions of black religion that give cultural or political analysis primacy over theology, and so foreclose the theological imagination.” Lloyd, “Black Secularism,” 59.

¹² Lloyd, “Paradox and Tradition,” 272, 279

¹³ Lloyd, “Paradox and Tradition,” 277.

¹⁴ Lloyd, “Paradox and Tradition,” 277, emphasis added.

¹⁵ Lloyd expresses his preference for Barth in Cone’s early work in “Black Secularism,” 61-2.

within a theology of the event, or of the advent, of God: Christian language is oriented to and follows from a real “*encounter* with [Jesus Christ] *now*.”¹⁶ Building on the fifth chapter, one could suggest that the para-doxical mode of Cone’s theology is oriented toward the para-bolic, the way creaturely speech acts or events become occasions for the advent or “coming” anew of the crucified and resurrected Christ within the concrete realities of the world today.

One can further clarify some aspects of Cone’s appositional thought—to use a term that indicates both the paradoxical and parabolic—by turning to the recently published book by Nahum Chandler, *X: The Problem of the Negro as a Problem for Thought*. Chandler begins this book with an opening reflection on the first, famous phrase in W. E. B. Du Bois’s book, *The Souls of Black Folk*: “Between me and the other world.”¹⁷ The conjunction between the two terms is set within the opening movement of that initial preposition, *between*. For Chandler, opening the sentence through the presupposition ‘between’ indicates that the two terms conjoined, me and the other world, cannot be situated as discrete entities and placed in an “oppositional” or dialectical logic, wherein the terms are situated over against one another and deemed unable to be in relation (Aristotle’s law of non-contradiction) or are held together in their opposition by way of some higher third term (Hegel’s dialectical logic).¹⁸ The preposition indicates that this relation is the “condition of its referent,” which is to say that the terms—separately or taken together—are not conceptual or factual elements, entities or essences, but are “a

¹⁶ Cone, *BTL*, 31, emphasis original.

¹⁷ Chandler, *X*, quoting Du Bois on p. 2.

¹⁸ Chandler, *X*, 3, 37 for Aristotle; and for Hegel, see p. 17.

movement.”¹⁹ “Between,” Chandler writes, “dissipates any simple notion of inside and outside, of above and below.”²⁰ This appositional movement “disrupts the logic of a stable boundary,” and, as Chandler suggests, this erection of stable boundaries—of solidified concepts or routinized modes of existence—follows from and attempts to capture or resolve a “crisis” in meaning or social life.²¹ Concretely, as Steve Martinot has suggested in his reflections on the formation of the racial nation state, the state is formed by those who seek to prevent the subjugated from simply walking away and living otherwise.²² The appositional movement, the ‘between’ redoubled through the conjunction ‘and’, is not a quest back to some original pure movement beyond this capture or stabilization; it is rather a mode of inhabiting, of living and practicing within but un beholden to the violence that founds or forms that particular (social, linguistic) order.²³

This movement is not the movement of abstract thought but of thought as “an inhabitation of the problem of essence.”²⁴ One could call it a practice that inhabits this spacing and movement between, an “always renewed opening to that which is beyond any given form of being.”²⁵ The “problem of essence” is this opening without a pure origin. Without a stable genealogy or line of descent, the boundaries between “it” and “the other” falter or become destabilized and labile, given over to this very movement from which it draws life and yet simultaneously tries to contain. Diasporic African

¹⁹ Chandler, *X*, 5.

²⁰ Chandler, *X*, 6.

²¹ Chandler, *X*, 46.

²² Steve Martinot, *The Machinery of Whiteness: Studies in the Structure of Racialization* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2010), 67.

²³ Chandler, *X*, 46; cf. 34.

²⁴ Chandler, *X*, 56-7.

²⁵ Chandler, *X*, 34.

populations live (from) this disruptive “paraontological” movement, whereby they have a certain “excessiveness” or “exorbitance” to the “traditional ontology” that would “determine the Negro as one thing purely and simply.”²⁶ The movement inhabits without being bound to the stabilizing gestures of ontology.

Chandler connects this movement—this way or practice of inhabitation—to the deconstructive movement Jacques Derrida follows, especially in Derrida’s early work. Derrida, as Chandler notes, often frames the movement of deconstruction as “doubled,” wherein a hierarchical binary is both reversed *and* the general system of representation is displaced. As Derrida says, “deconstruction does not consist in moving from one concept to another, but in reversing and displacing a conceptual order as well as the nonconceptual order with which it is articulated.”²⁷ Chandler, in a lengthy footnote, charts it as a fourfold movement. The “ground” of the authority of the dominant term is questioned by reversing a binary, and through that “shaking” of the binary, one overturns

²⁶ Chandler, *X*, 34. J. Kameron Carter discusses this term, “paraontological,” in relation to Chandler’s work, a term that is also frequently used by Fred Moten. Carter’s comments on “the between” in relation to their work as well as to that of Hortense Spillers is worth citing here:

“Or in light of Chandler we can say that ‘between’ is both a problem for (logocentric) thought as well as its ante- and thus counterlogical possibility. We might think of ‘between’, to draw on another of Spillers’s powerful formulations, as that interstitial drama that marks the paradoxical subject position that is a nonsubject position, the subject position of nonbeing: “Under this particular historical order black female and black male are absolutely equal”...And thus, between is blackness, paradoxical blackness, paraontological blackness.” See J. Kameron Carter, “Paratheological Blackness,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 112, no. 4 (September 21, 2013): 589–611, quotation on p. 594.

Carter is quoting from Hortense Spillers’s essay, “Interstices: A Small Drama of Words,” found in Hortense Spillers, *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 152-75, quotation on p. 156.

²⁷ Derrida, “Signature Event Context,” in Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc.*, ed. Gerald Graff, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman and Samuel Weber (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 21.

not just the terms but the authoritative discourse itself. Third, this overturning and trembling of an entire discourse takes place, and can only take place, *within* those determinative concepts, as one cannot “simply leap” beyond them but may “inhabit” them differently. This engagement, fourth, tracks its own movement, such that it draws attention to its own “dependence” on the authoritative discourse while also noting how it challenges the system as a whole, thus “displacing the recuperative [or perhaps redemptive] operation of metaphysics.”²⁸ Deconstruction names a movement, a practice that marks itself within while unsettling the governing hierarchies through which a particular mode of thought—language, culture—attempts to ground itself as origin by the production and incorporation of its liminal other (the construction of the binary).

For Cone, the “deliberate” and “indispensable” ambiguity of his racial language marks his refusal to allow a stabilizing operation to operate unchecked in *racial* and *theological* discourses. In fact, for Cone, theology becomes another iteration of whiteness precisely when it functions as a kind of regulatory or stabilizing discourse. What Cone calls the white over-interest in their salvation is this attempt to once again re-center and stabilize their (and all other) relations and identities, a move that is both *anti-black* and, Cone says, *anti-Christ*.²⁹ The black struggles for liberation—whether Black Power in the late 1960s or Black Lives Matter at present—become *sites* for reforming white identity into a new iteration of the proper, as once again taking hold of its (now recognized as violent, illicit) origination and placing it under its sovereign control, now by way of being a “good ally” or, as Cone referred to it in these early writings, by taking themselves to have become black. But to understand what this “becoming black” might possibly mean

²⁸ Chandler, *X*, 186-188, the quotations are found on 187 and 188, respectively.

²⁹ Cone, *BTL*, 6, 8.

for Cone—and how it points to a practice irreducible to and uncontainable by these white concerns over their own salvation—it is necessary to turn more closely to the ambiguity Cone deliberately cultivates when he places racial terms in motion between the universal and the particular, the symbolic and literal.

Deconstructing Racial Discourses

The dialogue in which Cone critiques this white concern over their own salvation took place in 1971 between himself and a former white professor (whom Cone appreciatively remembers in his most recent book), William Hordern.³⁰ Hordern begins the dialogue with a critical question, noting that many white theologians feel “excluded” from dialogue with Cone because “they were born with skin of the wrong color.”³¹ This complaint, an iteration of what is now called “reverse racism,” is connected, Hordern argues, to the “vague” and perhaps inconsistent use of racial terms in Cone’s theological writings. Sometimes Cone uses ‘white’ to mean ‘oppressors’ while at other times he uses it to refer to white-skinned people. Cone’s distinction in *A Black Theology of Liberation* between the literal and symbolic use of racial terms points to this discrepancy, but as Hordern suggests in the dialogue, many white readers still felt excluded by his language. Cone’s response, which reaffirms the essential role of this ambiguity, shows that the distinction between “literal” and “symbolic” blackness does not smooth out or cleanly separate his usage of racial categories into two discrete categories. For Cone, the

³⁰ Cone notes that he chose systematic theology instead of ethics in part because of the way Hordern treated him “as a human being, capable of thinking theologically,” unlike the “blatantly racist” ethics professor there. See Cone, *CLT*, 58; see also his remarks in *MSLB*, 33-4.

³¹ Cone and Hordern, “Dialogue,” 1079.

emphasis in his work is on the disruptive force that comes into play precisely through this doubled use of racial designations that confounds standard or straightforward interpretation.

In *A Black Theology of Liberation*, Cone anticipates these criticisms over his use of racial language and dedicates a lengthy three-paragraph endnote as well as another paragraph-long one to respond to them directly. In the body of the text, Cone claims that freedom from “the oppressive character of white society” means the oppressed must affirm “their identity in terms of the reality that is anti-white.” In this way, “blackness” can stand “for all victims of oppression” who seek “liberation from whiteness.”³² The first lengthy footnote follows from this argument. The next footnote is appended to a sentence that comes two pages later, where Cone argues that “white theology” is not “Christian theology at all” because it “has consistently preserved the integrity of the community of the oppressors.”³³ The proximity of the notes and the arguments that prompt them means that they can and should be read together. Between them, one can track the deconstructive movement Cone articulates as blackness and the way this movement itself elicits a distinction between white people and whiteness without allowing the two terms to be cordoned off from one another or collapsed back into each other.

In his text and these two accompanying endnotes, Cone articulates four different senses of the term blackness, which one could demarcate as: (1) identifying characteristics, (2) historical experience, (3) identification, and (4) representative symbol. To speak of blackness as an identifying characteristic is to speak of blackness as “a

³² Cone, *BTL*, 8.

³³ Cone, *BTL*, 10.

physiological trait” that refers to “black-skinned people in America.”³⁴ Black or white at this level refers to bio-genetic descent registered or marked by phenotype. To think of race *alone* at this level, however, is to take “too seriously the American definition” of race.³⁵ The “literal” register of race does not refer to biological lines of descent but to a historical experience and communal practice, one that is doubly marked by reference to the brutal history of anti-black violence, speaking of both the experiences of oppression as well as the freedom beyond and against such oppressive forces. Cone often emphasizes the violence of white supremacy when articulating this “literal” account of blackness. In his dialogue with Hordern, Cone says he cannot “deemphasize” the literal aspect of blackness because “my people were enslaved, lynched, and ghettoized in the name of God and country because of their color.”³⁶ This history also gives whiteness a literal reference point, pointing to the way it originated from and was organized through this racial or anti-black violence.

In his critique of those who think of race merely as physiological appearance (race in the first sense), Cone suggests that one can determine “the blackness of a particular perspective” simply by asking, “for whom was it written, the oppressed or the oppressors?”³⁷ Here race shifts away from both the biological and cultural (historical) registers and becomes a matter of identification and action: “I do not condemn all persons who happen to look like white Americans; the condemnation comes when they act like them.”³⁸ Race on this heading is a performance, a mode of acting in relation to a

³⁴ Cone, *BTL*, 156, n. 5.

³⁵ Cone, *BTL*, 156. N 4.

³⁶ Cone and Hordern, “Dialogue,” 1080.

³⁷ Cone and Hordern, “Dialogue,” 1080.

³⁸ Cone, *BTL* 156, n. 4.

particular community. This way of framing the matter also means that black-skinned people are distinct from blackness, for blackness requires this mode of identification with the community of the oppressed.³⁹

This distinction by way of one's identification finally shifts blackness to the level of an "ontological symbol for all those who participate in liberation from oppression."⁴⁰ This "symbolic" use of blackness indicates the "universal note in black theology,"⁴¹ a universality that points to the freedom of "all human beings."⁴² This freedom is not merely a result or outcome from struggles against oppression; it precedes and is the target of structures of oppressions themselves.

The way blackness precedes these oppressive structures can be grasped through Cone's definition of oppression in this first lengthy endnote. "Oppression," Cone says, refers "not only to economic, social, and political disfranchisement; there is the disfranchisement of the mind, of the spiritual and moral values that hold together one's identity in a community."⁴³ Oppression targets both the material means and the cultural forms of communal re/production. Both the "psychic" and "social" processes of forming a collective life together are disrupted by and reorganized through this oppression.⁴⁴ This is "precisely what has happened to black persons in America."⁴⁵

The key word Cone uses, 'disfranchisement', refers to a removal, reversal,

³⁹ As Cone says at the end of his first book, "There seems to be enough evidence that though one's skin is black, the heart may be lily white. The real questions are: Where is your identity? Where is your being? Does it lie with the oppressed blacks or with the white oppressors?" Cone, *BTBP*, 152.

⁴⁰ Cone, *BTL*, 157, n. 5.

⁴¹ Cone, *BTL*, n. 5.

⁴² Cone, *BTL*, 157, n. 5.

⁴³ Cone, *BTL*, 156, n. 4.

⁴⁴ Cone, *BTL*, 156, n. 4.

⁴⁵ Cone, *BTL*, 156, n. 4.

negation, or undoing (dis-), in this case, a reversal or undoing of “franchisement.” To “franchise” is to make or set free, to liberate. The suffix, ‘-ment’, adds the sense of accomplishment or result: franchisement is thus the (given or accomplished) state of freedom or liberation. To speak of material or psychic disfranchisement is to speak of an undoing of what is prior, of a freedom before or prior to the establishment of the protocols that “define, locate, or set [one] aside.”⁴⁶ The “disfranchisement” of a communal identity points to a black social life that precedes the structures of oppression through which bounded racial identities were forged. In this sense, Cone positions black persons and black social life prior to whiteness and its racial order of being: oppression is something that “has happened to black persons,” which is to say, whiteness operates as an attempted undoing or reversal of black social life as a freedom unheld by or unaccountable to the law and order of the (burgeoning and then consolidated) U.S. empire-state.⁴⁷

To be black, for Cone, is to be marked by a history of oppression, to identify with the community who has been oppressed, and to symbolically represent oppression. Yet, blackness is also anterior to “the machinery of whiteness,” to use Steve Martinot’s phrase, which organizes itself through this anti-black or racial violence. In this way, blackness is a communal mode of life, identification, and symbol of liberation. This precedence, however, is not and cannot be articulated through notions of strict racial identity as matters of inherited essences (race in the first sense), for this racial (bio-

⁴⁶ Cone, *BTL*, 156 n. 4; the quotation has been altered to remove the past tense; the sentence originally reads: “To be oppressed is to be defined, located or set aside according to another’s perspective.”

⁴⁷ Cone, *BTL*, 156, n. 4. The term “empire state” is taken from Moon-Kie Jung, *Beneath the Surface of White Supremacy: Denaturalizing U.S. Racisms Past and Present* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), 55-9.

cultural, essential) identity is the product of white supremacy. Cone thus designates this anteriority as a kind of freedom, the franchisement, that precedes and exceeds its own attempted undoing (disfranchisement) by white supremacy. Blackness is, in this way, *neither* a racial essence *nor* a social construction that can be taken up or discarded at will, which would be implied if the first or third uses were taken on their own. Yet, it is linked to both, as something that traverses and unsettles the essentialist *and* anti-essentialist discourses of race. Central to Cone's way of negotiating or moving between these various senses is that second point, which he calls the "literal" aspect of blackness.

The way Cone moves between the "literal" and the "symbolic"—a movement that itself allows the third aspect of identification and complicates the initial or given physiological description of race—is deeply Christological. In his dialogue with Hordern, Cone narrates the movement in this way:

Through my particular experience of blackness, I encounter the *symbolic* significance of black existence and how that existence is related to God's revelation in Jesus Christ. In the divine-human encounter, the particular experience of oppression and liberation, as disclosed in black-skinned people, is affirmed as God's own experience; and through that divine affirmation, I encounter the universal meaning of oppression and liberation that is not limited by skin color.⁴⁸

Cone begins with the particular or literal, for "the universal has no meaning independent of the particular."⁴⁹ This particularity takes on a "symbolic significance" by the way God has affirmed this particularity through Jesus Christ as "God's own experience." It is *through* that affirmation that Cone encounters the universal meaning of both oppression and liberation. The symbolic or universal is not an abstraction that de-particularizes or generalizes an existing phenomenon; it is a movement *between* two particularities, "the

⁴⁸ Cone and Hordern, "Dialogue," 1080.

⁴⁹ Cone and Hordern, "Dialogue," 1080.

particular experience of oppression” and the particularity of “God’s revelation in Jesus Christ.” The universal is not a general or regulatory concept but a movement between two terms that are themselves (a, or in) movement: black freedom and divine revelation.

This Christological elaboration of the “between” moves slightly differently from the paradoxical relation articulated by both Lloyd and Chandler. Chandler speaks of “the paradoxes that arise in this domain [of thought in general] wherein origin and telos, habitus and being, are in ceaseless and irremedial withdrawal.” This inability to “address the question of the Negro” along this trajectory of thought, the inability to make the “African diasporic subject” the “final object of a project of science or knowledge” is not merely the collapsing incurvature of finite thought confronted with the boundaries of its (self-)knowledge; it is “the very movement of freedom.”⁵⁰ Blackness cannot be rendered an object of thought precisely as it inhabits and transgresses, moves between and through and *withdraws* from these divergent registers. This freedom, this withdrawal from the protocols that assign and regulate, that *disfranchise* black social life, is, for Cone, not the “agonistic irruption as existence” but the eschatological excess of God’s life at the center of creaturely life.⁵¹ To come to the matter directly, the issue between them—where they join in their respective divergence—is their narration of the possibility within and beyond the reality of death. But before discussing this relation to death, it will be useful to further

⁵⁰ Chandler, *X*, 53.

⁵¹ Chandler, *X*, 53. I have pointed to a divergent narration and not an opposition as a way to hold onto Cone’s oppositional approach, an approach that does not require theology to try to position itself as a master-discourse. Cone nowhere claims nor does he need to claim that “Black Power” can only become truly radical or political by becoming, by being incorporated in and organized through the protocols of, “Black Theology.” Joining moves otherwise than incorporation.

reflect on Cone's ambiguous use of racial terms by way of responding to two powerful and influential critics of his thought.

Ambiguity via Anderson and Kee

Attending to Cone's deliberately ambiguous inhabitation of the discourses of race is important, as some readers have suggested Cone renders blackness as merely the negation of whiteness, which would both make blackness *only* a designation of suffering and also bind it to, such that it always stood in need of, the violence of white supremacy. This understanding is at the heart of Victor Anderson's critique that James Cone "ontologizes" blackness. For Anderson, an ontological understanding of blackness misses the historical contingences and tragedies through which human communities develop meaningful and fulfilling lives together. Blackness becomes equated with heroic survival under white supremacy, such that this racial identity depends on white supremacy to construct its own sense of itself. This racial identity then repeats the dialectical structure of whiteness, producing its own "liminal" others who are deemed to lack "authentic" (ontological) black culture. Anderson argues that Cone's efforts to separate and oppose black being from white supremacy end up creating "contradictions" he cannot resolve.⁵²

One could focus this concern over ontological or essentialized blackness by asking what Cone might mean when he suggests that all of the oppressed must affirm "their identity in terms of the reality that is anti-white."⁵³ For Anderson, Cone here remains trapped in a dialectical struggle against whiteness: to affirm one's identity as

⁵² Victor Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness: An Essay on African American Religious and Cultural Criticism* (New York: Continuum International, 1999), 91.

⁵³ Cone, *BTL*, 8.

anti-white is to craft an identity that is still bound to whiteness through this negative relation. It is, as Anderson says, the blackness that whiteness creates, only here, the essentialized binary terms are simply reversed. To read Cone along this line, however, moves too quickly over the deliberate ambiguity of Cone's account. To be fair to Anderson, even Cone himself will later forget or gloss over this aspect of his work, siding with critics like Anderson by saying that, in his first two works, it "was as if the sole basis for black theology were white racism."⁵⁴

One can begin to work with these contradictions—to put them to work—by noting the complicated wording of the statement. The "oppressed of the land" do not affirm *an* anti-white identity but rather affirm an identity "in terms of the reality that is anti-white." One can ask: what are the relationships between identity, reality, and anti-white here? It is not the identity that is anti-white but a reality that is anti-white. Importantly, "anti-white" functions as an adjective, modifying this "reality." This reality could be anti-white either (or both) because it is the (dialectical or oppositional) negation of whiteness or (and) because it is a mode of identity "exorbitant" to whiteness and is thereby the negation of the terms of identity through which whiteness operates. This distinction, minor though it seems, positions the "anti-white" reality as also "ante-white," that is, as preceding the sinful enclosure (disfranchisement) through which whiteness operates. Blackness, in this sense, would be precisely *anti-white* because it is *ante-white*. It is the "liberation from whiteness" because blackness and liberation are not the dialectical negation of whiteness (not "anti-whiteness") but the "franchisement" or sociality that precedes, exceeds, is the target of, and resists the oppressive, violent

⁵⁴ Cone, *FMP*, 87.

delimitation of reality that is whiteness.⁵⁵ If blackness were simply anti-whiteness it would remain beholden and bound to white supremacy, as Anderson worries. Yet, the “reality” in terms of which the oppressed affirm their identity exceeds blackness *within blackness*. One could thus say that, for Cone, blackness exceeds itself, and in virtue of this excess, is open to all—even white-skinned persons—while also being irreducibly concrete, material, social, living, enfleshed (“literal”). This is the necessarily ambiguous terrain of blackness, its complex movement (as the) between (of) the particular and universal, the literal and symbolic.

One can now also address Alistair Kee’s criticism that Cone’s early account of blackness becomes “a new imperialism” by insisting it represents and therefore speaks for other oppressed groups.⁵⁶ If Anderson worries that the particularity of Cone’s account of blackness becomes tethered to whiteness and constrictive of the complex realities of black life, Kee is here putting pressure on the universality of blackness as a symbol that now eclipses and subsumes other oppressed groups. Like Anderson, Kee is not exactly wrong to note these concerns; but also like Anderson, he fails to engage the movement of Cone’s ambiguous use of racial terms, critiquing what he calls the “suspiciously convoluted” contours of Cone’s racial logic.⁵⁷ The problem is not that readers like Anderson and Kee (or even Cone in his later reflections) are flat wrong but rather that they overlook these other, more complicated and disruptive aspects of Cone’s argument.

⁵⁵ “Or, in a slight variation of what Chandler would say, blackness is the anoriginal displacement of ontology...[It] is ontology’s anti- and ante-foundation, ontology’s underground, the irreparable disturbance of ontology’s time and space.” Fred Moten, “Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh),” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 112, no. 4 (September 21, 2013): 739.

⁵⁶ Alistair Kee, *The Rise And Demise of Black Theology* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2006), 61.

⁵⁷ Kee, *Rise and Demise*, 61.

To say that blackness can “stand for” all victims of oppression does not assume a pre-given racial logic—racial, essential blackness—and then declare that the painful experiences borne by these people allow their particularity to incorporate and represent all others. Cone’s thought moves differently, working to displace the logic of (closed, essential) racial identity as part of a strategy to expose and contest its hidden violence. Blackness is representative for Cone because it is not a bounded or dialectically formed mode of identity. Blackness for Cone names a concrete, material location that exceeds the formation of bounded racial identity, and through this excess, contests the racializing logic at the core of white supremacy. Blackness is not *anti-whiteness* but a mode of life, a historical and material mode of practice, a reality as Cone says, that is anti-white in the sense developed above: it is anti- / ante-white, a freedom that moves within, is inflicted by, but remains un beholden to the violent production of racial identities. Blackness is open and “representative” not in the sense of possessing a set of particular properties that are common to all oppressed groups—a claim rightly critiqued by Kee and Anderson, though it is not precisely what Cone is arguing. Rather, blackness can “stand” for oppression because it lives historically and materially within and as that disruptive force that both marks and displaces efforts to ground, secure, or otherwise stabilize human identity (in the advent of race, through notions of blood purity and biological descent, transmuting later into cultural terms).

Blackness is what whiteness must but cannot capture as it attempts to position itself as the proper or representative form of the human. Blackness is located and moves within that contradictory space Vincent Lloyd intimated, neither included nor excluded, and by virtue of this liminality or alterity, this being otherwise, blackness does not

demarcate itself through borders and the production of its “other.”⁵⁸ Blackness is therefore representative for Cone because it dwells in and enfleshes the contradictory location that deconstructively inhabits a racial discourse, and thereby also overturns the material modes of social re/production connected to it. Nevertheless, this displacement can only happen *within* those terms itself, which is why Cone marks the non-exclusivity or openness of “black life” within racial terms (blackness in the first two senses) while still attending to the material excess of this life beyond those racial designations (black universality). As Cone says in these endnotes, the oppressed “must use the thought forms of the master and transform them into ideas of liberation.”⁵⁹

One could restate these responses to Cone’s critics, and bring it closer to the theological center of his thought, by way of the close connection Cone draws between blackness, oppression, and the threat and power of death. Blackness is not bound to the violence that sustains white supremacy precisely by the way it inhabits—moves within while remaining unbounded by—the social production of death. It is this movement or practice, which is not a quest for or securing of grounds, that gives blackness its representative quality, its “exemplarity” (Chandler), without requiring boundaries sustained through the determinate negation of its improper other (Anderson) and therefore without its exemplarity functioning to imperialistically override and subsume other oppressed peoples (Kee).⁶⁰ The white question about the work it must do to regain

⁵⁸ This sentence builds from Sylvia Wynter’s definition of alterity; see, Sylvia Wynter, “Alterity,” in *Dictionary of Multicultural Education* (Phoenix, AZ: Oryx Press, 1997), 13–15.

⁵⁹ Cone, *BTL*, 156 n. 4.

⁶⁰ “The example as proposed and elaborated in this chapter attempts to suggest a thinking of the structure of exemplarity such that an irreducible nominality sets in motion a liability within the figuration of the exemplar. In other words, we might say that we are always

itself, as a good white ally or someone who has become black, refuses this complex movement in relation, particularly in relation to (its) death, a point both Cone and Chandler develop by way of that allusively towering white figure, the abolitionist John Brown.

John Brown, Whiteness, and Death

In his first book, *Black Theology and Black Power*, James Cone refers to the story of Malcolm X telling a white woman that there was “nothing” she could do to help. Cone endorses that response as one given to “the white liberal,” yet qualifies it by adding: “there are places in the Black Power picture for ‘radicals’...prepared to risk life for freedom. There are places for the John Browns.”⁶¹ The difference between the liberal and the radical is, Cone intimates, a difference in relation to death, one exemplified by John Brown.

The third chapter of Chandler’s book, *X*, reflects on the “double” and “never only double” deaths of John Brown.⁶² Reading Du Bois’s biography of John Brown, Chandler suggests that the melancholy Du Bois picks up in Brown is “rooted in [Brown’s] uncertain struggle over the possible meanings of his own death.”⁶³ Death, therefore, “was the central meaning of life for John Brown.”⁶⁴ This relation to death was not only the preparation to risk life, as Cone points out, but also the way that Brown understood and

called on to rest with, if not simply go by way of, the specificity of the example...Due to the particularity of the example, we can never formalize absolutely or completely.”

Chandler, *X*, 134.

⁶¹ Cone, *BTBP*, 28.

⁶² Chandler, *X*, 112.

⁶³ Chandler, *X*, 115.

⁶⁴ Chandler, *X*, 114.

practiced a way of living by giving or putting this “socially granted life,” this life as a white man, to death. John Brown lived facing or practicing a relation to two deaths, the first death as “that ordinary historical being called a ‘White’ man, and again, [secondly,] as that flesh-and-blood being who can only be given a ‘proper’ name: John Brown.”⁶⁵ One notes here that entangled distinction between the particular and the general, John Brown as member of that general class of being, a white man, and John Brown “proper.” But between these two deaths, more proliferate, for the “‘proper’ name can never have an absolutely proper reference,” and therefore its death is never properly or securely its own. With regard to whiteness, by lacking a “true or simple ground,” this whiteness cannot simply be put to death, for even in becoming “otherwise” than simply white, this “very figure of being” is reproduced, haunting, and therefore reclaiming or reliving even this death of John Brown as a white man.⁶⁶ For Du Bois, then, as Chandler points out, Brown’s life and death are only intelligible within the general framing of the double consciousness Du Bois outlines as both a “negative” and “affirmative” aspect of African diasporic self-consciousness.⁶⁷ John Brown became “detour[ed]” through or “by way of the other.”⁶⁸ These irretrievable and yet generative losses are the life, or lives, of John Brown, the “shuttling instability...of the proper in general.”⁶⁹ This life is lived “both within death and yet beyond, otherwise than a simple mark, so that we can come to recognize the lineaments, the lines of intersection and contoured relief, another form of

⁶⁵ Chandler, *X*, 115.

⁶⁶ Chandler, *X*, 116, 117.

⁶⁷ Chandler, *X*, 120.

⁶⁸ Chandler, *X*, 117.

⁶⁹ Chandler, *X*, 127.

fold.”⁷⁰ Within and beyond, for the death is never singular, never its own, and so death is also “something other than simply loss,” and may “perhaps be thought also as a name for possibility, for that which gives, generosity.”⁷¹

Cone names this possibility—a possibility within and yet never bounded or absolutely captured by death—freedom. This freedom is “the meaning of the resurrection of Jesus.”⁷² “Christian freedom is the recognition that Christ has conquered death,” a recognition that does not turn Christians away from death but sets them afoot along a particular practice or mode of living within and moving through another doubling of their death.⁷³ Their deaths—the multiple deaths of even one—are enfolded into Christ’s death, given to them again, such that they can live beyond their death(s) within this death-bound life.⁷⁴ As long as Christians “look at the resurrection of Christ,” they cannot “reconcile” themselves “to the things of the present that contradict his presence.”⁷⁵ This refusal to adjust to or affirm the present means something different for white and black persons, as they are differentially positioned toward (their) death(s) in white supremacy. Put from the other side, whiteness “contradicts” the “continu[ing] presence” of Christ, which means that Christ bears a different relation to those who are identified with or against the (false) reality of whiteness (race in the third sense).⁷⁶ This antagonism to whiteness is, however,

⁷⁰ Chandler, *X*, 126.

⁷¹ Chandler, *X*, 125. Cf., p. 87: “What would then appear as at stake would be an immanence in which the possibility of existence can always be understood as simultaneously life and death.”

⁷² Cone, *BTL*, 33.

⁷³ Cone, *BTL*, 125.

⁷⁴ Taking this term from Abdul R. JanMohamed, *The Death-Bound-Subject: Richard Wright’s Archaeology of Death* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2005).

Cone references this work in *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, p. 15.

⁷⁵ Cone, *BTL*, 149.

⁷⁶ Cone, *BTL*, 127.

not a platform or a symbolic identity one simply adopts. The critical “exorbitance” to whiteness is irreducibly a historical and material practice. The particularity (Cone) or nominality (Chandler) of black life cannot be subsumed within or ordered through a general conceptual framework. To do so, for Cone, is to miss both the position of blackness and how God in Christ comes alongside it: the universality *is* this movement between two irreducibly particular and ungrounded practices, the divine life of freedom in the particularity of Jesus of Nazareth and the creaturely freedom beyond the manifestations and machineries of death in the particularities of black experience under white supremacy.

In his dialogue with Hordern, Cone states his “difficulty with white students is that they appropriate black symbols without encountering the concrete experiences which gave rise to them.”⁷⁷ To encounter these experiences, to become detoured by way of them, is to give up control over any project of whiteness, including control over becoming properly white, even under the guise of being a good ally or comrade, or as having become anti-white or black. The responses of Malcolm X, LeRoi Jones / Amiri Baraka, and James Cone take aim precisely at this presumption to engage in a project of white redemption, whether as enacting a proper whiteness (anti-racist) one has already secured or determining the means necessary to be recognized as, and thereby secure, a new proper identity through the undoing of one’s own whiteness. Both movements presuppose a particular relation to life and death, the assertion of a kind of sovereignty or power to determine—to capture and constrain—their historical meanings and effects.

Cone speaks of a white “conversion” in which they will “destroy their whiteness

⁷⁷ Cone and Hordern, “Dialogue,” 1085.

by becoming members of an oppressed community.”⁷⁸ Cone emphasizes that this joining is a long process over which whites do not have, or need, control.⁷⁹ This critique of white projects of redemption as organized around white needs and under white control is important. Yet, one must once again attend closely to the ambiguity of Cone’s racial language, for the destruction of whiteness is not a work that can be simply undertaken, as if whiteness were (only) a particular thing (race in the first two senses), or, on the other side, as if it were totally separable from its particularity (race in the second two senses). One could perhaps speak of a practice that would be a kind of letting whiteness crumble, a practice not intent on producing or seizing another mode of being *after* white but which seeks and exploits the instability and impropriety—the ambiguity—proper to it, bending it, as it were, in the direction Cone suggests: not toward other ways of becoming good white people but engaging in all sorts of practices that would be conducive for and oriented toward black liberation. To clarify what this might mean, it will be helpful to once again turn to these extremely important moments where Cone reflects on his own text, both the endnotes gathered *A Black Theology of Liberation* and the dialogue following its publication.

White Redemption and Solidarity

In the endnotes this chapter has discussed, Cone reframes the notion of Christian redemption. He writes, “[T]he redemption of which [Christ] speaks has nothing to do with stabilizing the status quo. It motivates the redeemed to be what they are—creatures

⁷⁸ Cone, *BTL*, 103.

⁷⁹ Cone and Hordern, “Dialogue,” 1080; Cone, *BTL*, 102-3; and most strongly in *GO*, 222.

endowed with freedom.”⁸⁰ Cone here contrasts efforts of stabilization with freedom; as he puts it in the body of the text, being the “image of God” means “to be creative: revolting against everything that is opposed to humanity.”⁸¹ This freedom as creative revolt is what it means to be a human creature. Redemption is not grace perfecting nature; it is not a gift overcoming a lack. Redemption is the motivation “to be what they [already] are,” which is to say, redemption is the affirmation of this freedom within and beyond, in excess to, this death-bound life.

White people aiming at becoming good moral subjects (“helping”) or overcoming their whiteness exhibit a lack of patience, moving, as Hordern suggests in his conversation with Cone, “too quickly from the particular to the universal.”⁸² This hasty movement in effect passes over and even makes use of black struggles for freedom in the efforts to find a white self (again) in and as the universal. The contemporary presence of the crucified and resurrected Christ does not offer white people such a quick escape. For Cone, white conversion means their undoing in between, in relation to the contemporary and particular presence of Jesus Christ in black struggles for liberation. This white over-concern with their salvation ultimately expresses a refusal to linger, smoothing out the tensions into a simple program for action (tell me what to do) or a quick shift in their identity and under their control (calling themselves black). Even the practice of lingering in and exploiting this destabilization is withdrawn from white capture or enlistment in a project. The resurrection of Christ does not offer a universal or generic mode of ungrounded creaturely life but a particular one, one arising within and as the movement

⁸⁰ Cone, *BTL*, 156 n. 4.

⁸¹ Cone, *BTL*, 99.

⁸² Cone and Hordern, “Dialogue,” 1080.

between two particularities, the joining or setting side-by-side the divine life in Jesus Christ and black movements for survival and freedom.

Conversion, then, means something less than the destruction of whiteness and the work to put one's socially given identity to death. Redemption might be something much less heroic and therefore all the more difficult for us white people, for it requires us to live with the ways our whiteness cannot be brought under our control. Yet, if we are attentive, we still might come to inhabit it in ways that move "otherwise" than as it has been given to us.⁸³ For Cone and Chandler, white people are not accustomed to this movement and practice that engages their "own always already in motion becoming, as other."⁸⁴ Theologically speaking, for Cone, this is because white people and white Christianity refuses to be and live in relation to contemporary presence of Jesus Christ. As he says in these endnotes, "whites do not really know what they are saying when they affirm Jesus as the Christ. He who has come to redeem us is not white but black."⁸⁵ This blackness is not singular or bounded, an enclosed particularity, but is a concrete mode of inhabiting this "always already in motion becoming, as other." As such, blackness is always distinct but inseparable from the historical particularities of black people and experiences. The white demand to separate this out, to parse and enclose—cleanly separating oneself from one's own whiteness and taking on the symbolic register of a blackness severed from its particularity—is a refusal of this freedom, which is to say, for Cone, it is a refusal of the living presence of Jesus Christ.

⁸³ Chandler, *X*, 117.

⁸⁴ Chandler, *X*, 163.

⁸⁵ Cone, *BTL*, 156, n. 4. Chapter Six will discuss Cone's theology of the Black Christ.

To redeem whiteness by simply overcoming it grants it a reality it does not have while bypassing the particularities it actually exhibits. To let it crumble is to exploit those particular points where whiteness seizes and yet necessarily fails to control its own lability or instability. The offer to help—or the desire to be recognized as a good ally or as having become black—at one level refuses to take seriously the problem of whiteness while simultaneously taking too assuredly its own ability to confront the problem. To *get rid* of one’s own whiteness refuses getting lost, “detoured” as Chandler says of Brown. Getting lost can never become a project. One can never “succeed” at it.⁸⁶ White commitments to success, even to successfully overcoming our own whiteness, refuse the detouring of our lives through the one who came not as “a universal human being but an oppressed Jew.”⁸⁷ This one’s very identity is itself given over to, in motion alongside, *oppositionally* with others, not generically, but concretely and particularly, especially with and for “oppressed persons.”⁸⁸ White eagerness to appropriate the symbols of blackness, to be recognized as black (or a good white ally), is an eagerness to step over—subsume or supersede—this movement (in) between.⁸⁹ But to be detoured in this particular way, that is, as a theological practice, is to become oriented toward and lost within the particular movements of this conjunction, this movement between Jesus Christ and these black struggles for liberation.

⁸⁶ Though not developed here, this line has as its background a statement by Dietrich Bonhoeffer: “The form of the crucified disarms all thinking aimed at success, for it is a denial of judgment.” Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, ed. Clifford J. Green, trans. Reinhard Krauss, Charles C. West, and Douglas W. Stott, vol. 6, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 90.

⁸⁷ Cone, *BTL*, 90.

⁸⁸ Cone, *BTL*, 91.

⁸⁹ Vincent Lloyd critiques this “supercessionism” in the introduction to his book, *The Problem with Grace: Reconfiguring Political Theology* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), 1-26.

Cone's criticisms of the white liberal and white quests for salvation are harsh precisely because in the pursuit of goodness—in the enactment of these various good intentions—this white project of redemption engages in a subtle play for control over itself by way of its relation to these black struggles for freedom and the person of Jesus Christ. This white project of salvation is a refusal of the movement in between, or rather, as this movement cannot be refused, it is the attempted restriction and coordination of it into a project oriented around white success, of white being or becoming *properly* human. But the resurrection does not unleash a project of completion, filling a lack, perfecting the natural. It is the affirmation of the instability and ungovernable, the “unsovereign” creaturely freedom that already and always is, though our whiteness continually attempts to place it—ourselves, others, the world—in our hold, as our reserve.⁹⁰ Yet, “he who came to redeem us is not white but black; and the redemption of which he speaks has nothing to do with stabilizing the status quo.”⁹¹

⁹⁰ Chandler, *X*, 163.

⁹¹ Cone, *BTL*, 156, n. 4.

CHAPTER 7
OPACITY, HUMANITY, SOLIDARITY

Whiteness is violence, particularly, the violence through which the human, or Man, is constituted as the mode of social belonging required to secure processes of capital accumulation. The figure of Man both exerts pressure on and is formed by the shifting organization of capitalist modes of production, or, as Sylvia Wynter might also say, Man is the narrative through which all life is organized for the sake of particular and yet always shifting globally capitalist formations. Violence is directed at nonwhite persons for the sake of forming the white (social) body, and yet, by virtue of its relation to capitalism, whiteness does not shield its members from exploitation but reconciles them to it, to use a phrase by Noel Ignatiev.¹ White people are thus partially shielded from the violence through which Man is constituted, often by way of participating in such violence. Yet, this protection from and allowance for their participation in racial violence is offered as the means for securing their acceptance of their own exploitation. This violence is also always looming, for those who were once recognized as belonging can

¹ Noel Ignatiev, “The Point Is Not To Interpret Whiteness But To Abolish It” (The Making and Unmaking of Whiteness, University of California, Berkeley, CA, 1997), <http://racetraitor.org/abolishthepoint.html>, accessed September 7, 2016.

become cut off, rendered putrefying threats to the stability of social order, what Hegel referred to as “the Rabble” and which might be translated into the North American context at present as “white trash.”

Hegel offered the exploited poor citizens a participation in the human by way of God’s dishonoring death on the cross. This effort to sustain the link between the poor and the human through the Crucified God-Man can be mobilized, on a conservative front, to reconcile the poor to their exploitation within capitalist society. It could also be used to urge the poor to withdraw from the society that exploits and dishonors them so that they may then produce a political community antagonistic toward the capitalist social order and its political form of the state. The poor, in effect, can side against themselves with the state or with themselves against the state. Both options are present in Hegel’s account of the relationship between the Crucified and the poor. Both options, however, repeat the racialized split between the political subject of self-determining freedom and “animal man” mired in contingency and always-already oriented toward its own violent end.

Against this rightwing or leftwing incorporative humanism—whether in theological or secular mode, or, as in Hegel, as a transitional moment between the two—this dissertation turned to James Cone’s account of the freedom of the resurrection, a freedom that moves otherwise than toward and through the political body of Man. By developing Cone’s account of eschatological freedom in relation to prominent categories in any theological anthropology—death, possibility, the body, and language—the preceding chapters gesture toward another theological account of human life. Instead of pressing further into the material realities of this eschatological freedom, this final

chapter focuses on the meaning of this political theology of freedom for white people in particular.

The decision to emphasize Cone's account of eschatological freedom in black life follows from, and has its theological justification in, the Christological arguments that move throughout the previous chapters. Even before this turn to Cone's Christological account of black freedom, however, the argument in the first chapter suggested a strong reason to presume that any political theology written with an interest in white solidarity must prioritize a critique of the racial violence undergirding the incorporative politics of the human. The European Rabble are the possibility and threat internal to the state of the unbounded—neither properly living nor dead, not fully animal and yet not quite human—Indigenous others who are marked by and governed through political relations of violence. The second chapter expanded this argument through Wynter's contention that exploitation through capitalist modes of production presupposes relations of domination that have been and continue to be secured through racial violence.² The Rabble's supposed political universality, in fact, actually requires the function of the capitalist state that it takes itself to be opposing, for the Rabble are indignant at being members of the political community of Man who are nevertheless treated arbitrarily and violently, that is, as if they belonged to the state of nature. The false sense of universality both hides the division between Man and its subhuman others and holds onto the violence that subtends this division. Only by severing this remaining hold of Man can the violence undergirding

² "Economic exploitation only follows on, and does not precede, the mode of domination set in motion by the *imaginaire social* of the bourgeoisie." Sylvia Wynter, "Beyond the Categories of the Master Conception: The Counterdoctrine of the Jamesian Poiesis," in *C. L. R. James's Caribbean*, ed. Paget Henry and Paul Buhle (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992), 63–91, quotation on p. 81.

capitalist formations be effectively critiqued, which is to say, only by dismantling Man can white people resist the exploitation and threat of violence directed at them within capitalism.

Dismantling the figure of Man, as Wynter and Cone both argue, takes place from a particular trajectory and among those bearing a particular social position, what Wynter (following Fanon) calls “*les damnés*” [the damned] and Cone calls “the oppressed.” By virtue of their social formation within and yet beyond the political form of Man, these “liminal” groups have a particular insight into how the dominant social order operates and also live in ways that are unbounded by, in excess to, the regulatory order of Man. For Wynter, this means that the intellectual class must “marry our thought” to the damned, coming to the “truth” that they themselves *are*, not by subsuming them within the present proper form of the human but by dismantling “the coloniality of being” through the effort to “undo their narratively condemned status.”³ If the preceding chapters can be read as outlines for a theological anthropology that undoes the narrational condemnation unleashed within the redemptive project of whiteness, this concluding chapter both furthers this critique of Man *and* specifies what it means for us white Christians to “marry our thought” or become joined to those who have been (narratively) condemned.

³ Sylvia Wynter, “‘No Humans Involved’: An Open Letter to My Colleagues,” *Forum N.H.I.: Knowledge for the 21st Century*, 1, no. 1 (Fall 1994): 42–73, quotations from p. 62, 70. The notion that the poor *are* the truth is taken from Frantz Fanon’s writings; the phrase marry our thought phrase comes from Zygmunt Bauman.

Against Reconciliation

“In a world in which the oppressors define right in terms of whiteness, humanity means an unqualified identification with blackness.”⁴ This sentence, found in *A Black Liberation Theology*, effectively displays the various aspects of Cone’s Christologically informed theological anthropology. Since God has identified with black struggles for liberation in Jesus Christ, not only are God and Christ black, but white Christians must also identify with blackness to the point where they “die to whiteness” and can be spoken of as “becoming black.”⁵ Since blackness exceeds black people, even black people must *identify* with blackness, and in his early work, Cone castigates the various black churches at the time for failing to make this identification.⁶ To identify with blackness is also to say, as Cone continues in the same paragraph, “To hell with your stinking white society and its middle-class ideas about the world. I will have no part in it.”⁷ This identification with blackness refuses incorporation into the (political) body of Man. Cone, not surprisingly, often expresses skepticism that white people would make such a turn and is suspicious that when they do, they do so for the sake of being considered good white people and not to end the violence through which whiteness (re)constitutes itself.

Cone’s assertion that “humanity means an unqualified identification with blackness” is not an abstract claim about some generalized anthropology; it is a strategic and forceful interruption of the operative logic of Man, the first move in a deconstructive displacement, wherein the governing binaries are reversed so that the whole order

⁴ Cone, *BTL*, 16.

⁵ Cone, *GO*, 222, 221.

⁶ Cone, *BTBP*, 91-115. Cone provides some historical and autobiographical context to his early criticisms of the institutional black church in *FMP*, 99-121.

⁷ Cone, *BTL*, 16.

organized through them can be unsettled.⁸ It also undergirds Cone's critique of theologies and politics that would emphasize reconciliation: "reconciliation and liberation on white terms have always meant death for black people."⁹ Reconciliation on white terms, or incorporation into the body politic of Man, means death, for blackness has taken on a set of significations in the white social imagination as that which is too unbounded to be incorporated. Entrance or inclusion means, as Denise Ferreira da Silva says, obliteration.¹⁰ Instead of dismissing the category of the human itself, however, Cone disrupts the way it is constituted under white supremacy and thereby reframes what might be meant by "reconciliation."

Cone's critical engagement with the category of the human and the politics of reconciliation grounded in the "universality" of the (generic) human is deeply Christological. Jesus is "the divine revelation of God's intention for humanity."¹¹ God however "did not become a universal human being but an oppressed Jew, thereby disclosing to us that both human nature and divine nature are inseparable from oppression and liberation."¹² Reconciliation is the accomplishment of Christ's work of liberation, a work that is determinative of what it means for God to be God and for humans to be human. Reconciliation is "not a human quality or potentiality" but is the "divine action" that changes all our relationships through Christ's "death and resurrection," thereby

⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc.*, ed. Gerald Graff, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman and Samuel Weber, 1st ed. (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 21.

⁹ Cone, *GO*, 220.

¹⁰ Denise Ferreira da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 154-5.

¹¹ Cone, *ST*, 42.

¹² Cone, *BTL*, 90-1.

freeing “us from the principalities and powers and rulers of this present world.”¹³ These principalities and powers are “not only metaphysical realities but earthly realities as well,” the various institutional formations of control through the power of death: “the systems of government symbolized in the Pentagon, which bombed and killed helpless people in Vietnam and Cambodia....the police departments and prison officials, which” shoot and kill “defenseless blacks for being *black* and for demanding their right to exist.”¹⁴ The resurrection means that we have been “set free from the powers of slavery and death,” and this freedom is the “objective reality” of reconciliation.¹⁵

This Christological account of reconciliation entails a differential relation to Christ’s work depending on whether one is more readily included within and aligned to Man or one is positioned as the liminal (less-than-fully-human) other:

While divine reconciliation, for oppressed blacks, is connected with the joy of liberation from the controlling power of white people, for whites divine reconciliation is connected with God’s wrathful destruction of white values. Everything that white oppressors hold dear is now placed under the judgment of Jesus’ cross.¹⁶

If who we are as humans is revealed through and in fact constituted in Jesus of Nazareth, then reconciliation is the reconstitution of the human beyond (“liberation from”) and against (“wrathful destruction of”) Man. Without the destruction of Man, reconciliation loses this Christological determination and becomes another iteration of the incorporative, redemptive operations of Man. To shift the emphasis: without the focus on the concrete materiality of God’s solidarity with humans and all creation enfleshed in Jesus of Nazareth, Christians lose their ability to offer any theological disruption of the

¹³ Cone, *GO*, 209.

¹⁴ Cone, *GO*, 212-13.

¹⁵ Cone, *GO*, 213.

¹⁶ Cone, *GO*, 217.

way Man subsumes—incorporates and negates, while still requiring the (disappearing) presence of—its less-than-human others.

Although Cone, like Wynter, remains committed to the possibility of an-other humanism—a decolonial and anticapitalist humanism developing “after Man”—this effort to reframe the notion of human life, or the category of the human, has not gone uncontested. The first chapter showed how Hegel’s conceptualization of “Indigeneity” functioned to materialize the absence of the identifying markers of the human. Giorgio Agamben has argued that the “anthropological machine” central to Western politics and ontology operates through a ceaseless division between the human and the animal. This division always produces a kind of anthropological state of exception, wherein some group is designated as dwelling in the gap or split between the two categories, included in the category of the human as what fails to be human (i.e., Indigeneity) or excluded from the category of the human to which it also belongs (i.e., the Rabble).¹⁷ Belonging to the (political) sphere of the human is an achievement—and, for Hegel, it is the result of the self-determining movement of *Geist* itself—and therefore requires the presence of failures in human becoming so as to demarcate itself. The category of the human, it seems, requires the production and maintenance of the split between the human and the animal, a split that itself produces another division between a mode of life established as exemplifying the ideal human form, Man, and those liminal others who reside at the limit of the human, veering toward the category of the animal. Wynter’s concern with “overrepresentation” would be mistaken, on this critical line of inquiry, because the establishment of the exemplar and the exception follows from the split between the

¹⁷ Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. Kevin Attell (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2004), 33-8.

human and the animal.¹⁸ The global racial order cannot be successfully dismantled through a politics centered around the human because the political characteristics of “the human” are, as Denise Feirra da Silva argues, already racialized.¹⁹ The basic split between the human and the animal or, as Andrea Smith argues, between the human and the rest of creation, necessitates the production of social categories for those failures in human becoming, those neither inside nor outside the category of the human, people who are not political subjects but some kind of “natural resource.”²⁰

Although Cone does not explicitly engage these criticisms, his thought, from beginning to end, has an anthropological focus. After all, in a certain sense, “theology is anthropology.”²¹ There are many sources for Cone’s insistent focus on the dehumanizing aspects of racism and, as he says in his most recent book, on the black production “of a cultural identity that made them human and thus ready to struggle.”²² It is through one source in particular that this chapter will engage these criticisms of the category of the human. Cone wrote his dissertation on Karl Barth’s theological anthropology, and one can find in Barth’s approach to theological anthropology some resources to disrupt the “anthropological machine” briefly outlined above. In a way similar to Agamben, Barth

¹⁸ Giorgio Agamben reflects on the relation between the example and the exception in *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 21-5.

¹⁹ Silva, *Global Idea*; see also Denise Ferreira da Silva, “Notes for a Critique of the ‘Metaphysics of Race,’” *Theory, Culture & Society* 28, no. 1 (January 1, 2011): 138–48.

²⁰ Andrea Smith, “Humanity Through Work,” *Borderlands* 13, no. 1 (May 2014): 1-17, quotation on p. 4.

²¹ Cone, *BTL*, 87. Cone’s full comment reads: “It is the *divine* involvement in historical events of liberation that makes theology God-centered; but because God participates in the historical liberation of humanity, we can speak of God only in relationship to human history. In this sense, theology is anthropology.”

²² Cone, *CTL*, 28.

also argued that a certain political project of the human lay underneath the wreckage of modern global politics as they coalesced in Nazi Germany.

Against Man: Karl Barth's Christological Anthropology

In a shorter analysis of nineteenth century theology, Karl Barth argues that the “religious anthropocentrism” of the time fueled the social and political crises of the twentieth century. This anthropocentrism left Christians without a “guiding principle” and in effect “condemned” them to “uncritical and irresponsible subservience to the patterns, forces, and movements of human history and civilization.”²³ The reluctance to “take socialism seriously” and the alignment of the church with the “growing nationalism and militarism” that eventually culminated in the rise of “national socialism” were “symptoms” or “indications of the situation brought about by the religious anthropocentrism of” nineteenth century theology.²⁴ Christian participation in and endorsement of the capitalist-fueled, nationalistic imperialism of the time, for Barth, followed from the coordination of Christianity with the anthropocentrism of nineteenth century European thought and culture.

Barth offers a more extended analysis in an earlier survey on nineteenth century theology, a book based on his lectures given in 1932-33.²⁵ In this analysis, Barth places all the various development in eighteenth and nineteenth century thought under the

²³ Karl Barth, “Evangelical Theology in the 19th Century,” in Karl Barth, *The Humanity of God*, trans. Thomas Wieser and John Newton Thomas (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 27.

²⁴ Barth, “Evangelical Theology,” 27- 28.

²⁵ Karl Barth, *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century: Its Background and History*, trans. Brian Cozens and John Bowden, New Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002).

heading of “the absolute man.” The eighteenth century can be understood “in terms of a striving to reduce everything to an absolute form.”²⁶ The Man of the “age of absolutism”—which is Barth’s term for the eighteenth century—is the one who

discovers his own power and ability, the potentiality dormant in his humanity, that is, his human being as such, and looks upon it as the final, the real and absolute, I mean as something ‘detached’, self-justifying, with its own authority and power, which he can therefore set in motion in all directions and without restraint.²⁷

The nineteenth century is characterized by a shift, already beginning in certain eighteenth century figures, wherein this figure of the absolute human becomes a problematic object of knowledge. The eighteenth century, “rejoicing in its command of all things, had *not* asked after this, after man himself, for all the importance man had assumed for it.”²⁸

The expansive task of humanization (eighteenth century) became a problem once various thinkers began to analyze the human who is given this monumental task (nineteenth century). Humanization is, for Barth, the overcoming of external determination by incorporating it into the historical development of human life, treating “everything given and handed down in nature and in history as the property of man, to be assimilated to him and thus to be humanized.”²⁹ Theologically speaking, this entails “if not the abolition, at least the incorporation of God into the sphere of sovereign human self-awareness, the transformation of the reality that came and was to be perceived from outside into a reality that was experienced and understood inwardly.”³⁰ It is not accidental then that Barth ends his account of the background development of nineteenth century theology with Hegel, who for Barth is “the mighty and impressive voice of an entire era,

²⁶ Barth, *Protestant Theology*, 41.

²⁷ Barth, *Protestant Theology*, 22.

²⁸ Barth, *Protestant Theology*, 211.

²⁹ Barth, *Protestant Theology*, 68.

³⁰ Barth, *Protestant Theology*, 70.

the voice of modern man, or of the man who, from 1700 to 1914, was called modern man.”³¹

For Barth, the subsequent rejection of Hegel’s thought by nineteenth century theology represented a crisis in the figure of man, where “the self-confidence of modern man...could only be a broken self-confidence.”³² It is this broken self-confidence that Michel Foucault registers when he refers to the “threshold” of modernity as the point in which “finitude was conceived in an interminable cross-reference with itself,” interminable and therefore not traversable or analyzable within “the space of representation” that characterized the eighteenth century regime of knowledge.³³ Put differently, the loss of self-confidence marks the full emergence of man as an object of scientific knowledge, as *externally* determined by language, labor, and life in ways that prohibit this figure from ever incorporating this externality and mastering it through representational knowledge or what Barth calls the imposition of form.³⁴ Nineteenth century man thereby appears, for Foucault, in a way similar to Barth, “in his ambiguous position as an object of knowledge and as a subject that knows: enslaved sovereign, observed spectator.”³⁵

In his constructive development of theological anthropology in his *Church Dogmatics*, Barth wryly notes that, “in modern theology, when the theologian neither could nor would prove the existence of God, he attempted at least to prove that of man,

³¹ Barth, *Protestant Theology*, 383.

³² Barth, *Protestant Theology*, 392-4.

³³ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage, 1994), 318, 317.

³⁴ The triad language, labor, and life are central terms in Foucault’s analysis.

³⁵ Foucault, *Order of Things* 312.

i.e., his distinctive being of man in the cosmos.”³⁶ For Barth, this attempt to prove the distinctness of the human along against any kind of sheer biological continuum aligned nineteenth and twentieth century thought with “the Christian position at this point.”³⁷ Yet, although he does not note this connection, his comments on nineteenth century theology point to the *political* necessity of such proofs of the distinctness and superiority of the human: the crisis in the category of the human, Man, was a crisis within an expansive project of civilization.³⁸ The colonial order of things, or, to stay closer to Barth’s own language, the nationalistic and expansive capitalistic global order, was at stake in this religious and secular understanding of the human.

In his development of his own theological anthropology, Barth places a decisive obstacle to the various politico-philosophical and religious humanisms.³⁹ Barth interrupts the ceaseless production of the divisions through which the “anthropological machine” (Agamben) operates, when he writes, “the human nature of Jesus spares and forbids us our own.”⁴⁰ The statement is carefully crafted, for the formula follows Barth’s own reversal of the usual ordering of the phrase, “law and gospel,” placing gospel prior to the

³⁶ Barth, *CD*, III/2 vol. 14, p. 80 [84].

³⁷ Barth, *CD*, III/2 vol. 14, p. 80 [84].

³⁸ It is worth noting that the lectures contained in the book *Protestant Theology* precedes the writing of this section of the *Church Dogmatics* while the shorter talk on the topic, “Evangelical Theology,” was given after this section of the *Church Dogmatics* had been completed.

³⁹ Barth explicitly engages in a theological reflection, or interruption, of the “new humanism” arising in Europe after the Second World War in two pieces of writing collected in the short volume, Karl Barth, *God Here and Now*, trans. Paul M. van Buren (New York: Harper & Row, 1964). See Ch. 1, “The Christian Proclamation Here and Now,” which was originally an address given in 1949 on the theme of “A New Humanism,” and then his subsequent reflections on this conference and his own remarks, placed as Ch. 7, “Humanism.”

⁴⁰ Barth, *CD* III/2, vol. 14, p. 43 [47].

law.⁴¹ To spare is grace, to forbid is law; and thus, in this single sentence, the priority of grace over law, and the way in which law follows from grace, is indirectly set forth. Unsurprisingly, then, Barth immediately continues, “Thus it is our justification. And because of this, it is the judgment on our own humanity.”⁴² The human nature of Christ is the gracious relation of God to all creation, which places creation in the right relationship to God and through this justification or making righteous condemns sinful humanity. Cone’s claim that reconciliation speaks grace to those exterior to Man and judgment against those aligned with or beholden to Man extends and concretizes this central aspect of Barth’s theological anthropology.

Christ’s humanity does not spare and forbid our human nature but rather a human nature *of our own*, which is also to say, it spares and forbids a generic (account of) human nature. The decisive feature or attribute of human nature is not something humans possess, a potentiality or capacity, but is this relationship to Christ: “the ontological determination of humanity is grounded in the fact that one [human] among all others is the [human] Jesus.”⁴³ It therefore “belongs to the human essence” that Jesus became human and “that in Him” we have “a human Neighbor, Companion, and Brother.”⁴⁴ This relational determination is beyond our choice, for “we cannot break free from this Neighbor.”⁴⁵ The inability to break free from this neighbor is the justification of our

⁴¹ For an engagement on the relationship between law and gospel and Barth’s reversal of the usual order of the phrase, see Eberhard Jüngel, “Gospel and Law: The Relationship of Dogmatics to Ethics,” in Eberhard Jüngel, *Karl Barth, a Theological Legacy*, trans. Garrett E. Paul, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986), 105-126.

⁴² The order of this relationship connects to the way Cone prioritizes a theological account of blackness that leads to the condemnation of whiteness.

⁴³ Barth *CD* III/2, vol. 14, p. 126 [132].

⁴⁴ Barth, *CD* III/2, vol. 14, p. 127 [133].

⁴⁵ Barth, *CD* III/2, vol. 14, p. 127 [133].

human nature as well as the condemnation of its sinful and false mode of self-establishment.

If the determinative aspect of the human—the distinction or divide that demarcates the human—is not something immanent to the human, then all the divisions and interrelations through which humans live are not, on their own, decisive features of what it means to be human.⁴⁶ The *real* human, that is, humanity determined through its relationship to God through Jesus of Nazareth, cannot “merge into” the environment, as merely one configuration of being along an unbroken biological continuum. Yet, the separation of the human from the rest of creation is not sustained by any immanent attributes or “phenomena of the human,” for “in themselves,” these phenomena “are neutral, relative and ambiguous...In themselves, they may equally well point to the essential unity of man with surrounding reality as to his difference from it.”⁴⁷ To deny any distinct qualities of the human species is, for Barth, absurd; yet, to try to erect an ontological distinction between human beings and all others on the basis of these qualities or phenomena is a hopeless task.⁴⁸ It is only if the ontological distinctness is

⁴⁶ Barth develops this point in the section on “The Phenomena of the Human,” *CD III/2*, vol. 14, p. 67-126 [71-132].

⁴⁷ Barth, *CD III/2*, vol. 14, p. 75 [79].

⁴⁸ Cary Wolfe, in a very different context, suggests that one must neither create a single line between the human and *the* animal nor erase this line but rather pluralize it: “Not one line, then, but many. But not “no line” either, and a further way of “delinearizing” it is to realize that the material processes— some organic, some not— that give rise to different ways of responding to the world for different living beings are radically asynchronous, moving at different speeds, from the glacial pace of evolutionary adaptations and mutations to the fast dynamics of learning and communication that, through neurophysiological plasticity, literally rewire biological wetware.” This approach refuses to reduce all differences to a single biological plane, life itself, while respecting the divergences and necessarily unknown—to us—qualities of different modes of creaturely life. See Cary Wolfe, *Before the Law: Humans and Other Animals in a Biopolitical*

already known, and therefore known from some place apart from such phenomena, that these phenomena can be interpreted as signs of “real”—as opposed to abstract—humanity.

Since the decisive feature of human being is its relation to Jesus of Nazareth, humans need not (grace), cannot, and must not (law) attempt to institute the boundaries through which they articulate and maintain their distinctness on their own. Humans are truly distinct from creation by, and only by, God’s particular way of relating to all of creation, including us, through Jesus of Nazareth. This distinction of the human from the rest of creation “does not require any unbecoming depreciation of any of our fellow-creatures.” If the decisive determination of our existence is that God has bound us to Jesus of Nazareth as our neighbor, then we must also accept that God might have God’s own particular relation to other creatures and that “we do not know what particular attitude God may have to them.”⁴⁹ For Barth, “this one man [Jesus Christ] was and is and always will be the meaning and motive of all creation.”⁵⁰ We do know what this means for other creatures as God has “veiled them” to us in “mystery.” It is precisely the actual yet unknown quality of God’s relationship to them through Jesus Christ that prohibits our disregard or abuse of them as “our fellow-creatures.”⁵¹

This determinative relationship of all creation to Jesus Christ interrupts the “anthropological machine” by removing the immanence of and human control over the operative division between the human and the rest of creation, the division that itself

Frame (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2012), 74. The point is not that Barth and Wolfe are arguing the same thing but that there is a way to connect them together.

⁴⁹ Barth, *CD III/2*, vol. 14, p. 74 [78].

⁵⁰ Barth, *CD III/2*, vol. 14, p. 131 [137]

⁵¹ Barth, *CD III/2*, vol. 14, p. 74 [78].

opens the space for the liminal other, what Agamben refers to as the “exception.” The particularity of Jesus Christ, his way of being for God and for others, also means that one cannot separate Jesus from those for whom he comes and with whom he identifies: “if we see Him alone, we do not see Him at all.”⁵² This concrete mode of connection, the joining of God and humankind, and indeed all creation, through Jesus of Nazareth was lost by nineteenth century European theology (and Christianity), a loss that had, from Barth’s perspective, quite destructive political implications.

These interrelated joinings or relations through Jesus of Nazareth are central for a theological critique and reframing of politics after (and against) Man, and yet this joining or solidarity is what is rendered so complicated by the incorporative, expansive humanism undergirding the “coloniality of being.” Cone is so relentless in his criticism of white liberals and theologies of reconciliation because the desire for connection is so proximate to this Christologically oriented joined life and, accordingly, is even more violent and dangerous in its unspoken regulation of the space and form of belonging. To begin developing Cone’s account of solidarity beyond the political body of Man, the next section will develop M. Shawn Copeland’s Christological account of solidarity and political theology, using Cone’s theology in this connection to emphasize the work of *negation* required for white Christians.

Opaque Solidarity: M. Shawn Copeland

Solidarity is central to M. Shawn Copeland’s account of the Christian life as well as to what it means to write theology. Copeland, like Cone, is deeply attuned to how

⁵² Barth, *CD* III/2, vol. 15, p. 13 [216].

whiteness operates as a kind of redemption project that centers around the re/production of a particular form of human bodily life. In her book, *Enfleshing Freedom*, Copeland disrupts this problematic performance of salvation, one which relates directly to the body, or rather, to the interplay or opening between two bodies, that of Christ and the Church.

She writes,

With the expression *mystical body of Christ*, I want to reaffirm salvation in human liberation as an opaque work, that is, a work that resists both the reduction of human praxis to social transformation and the identification of the gospel with even the most just ordering of society... To think of human being in the world as the mystical body of Christ retunes our being to the eschatological at the core of the concrete, reminds us of our inalienable relation to one another in God, and steadies our efforts on that absolute future that only God can give.⁵³

Opacity, or liberation as “an opaque work,” is another way of marking the in-definiteness of the possibilities of flesh and is linked, for Copeland—through the work of Charles Long—to the “symbol” and “experience” of blackness.⁵⁴ This opacity was implicitly noted through the discussion of Hegel, for Indigeneity was, in Hegel’s thought, the presence of an absence that demanded to be understood and incorporated into the political sphere of the human but which was in fact coded as what defied incorporation. Hegel had to understand, see, and incorporate it and yet by definition it represented what defied this global movement or project of incorporation. Cone, Copeland, Williams, Spillers, and even Agamben all make a similar political move, one which challenges the political logic of racial globality not by seeking inclusion but by disrupting that very incorporative process, for Copeland, by placing redemption back into relation with

⁵³ M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 102-103.

⁵⁴ Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 22.

opacity.⁵⁵ To reframe redemption as *opaque* is to disturb the ordering of hierarchical arrangements of the human on the basis of its proximity to Man: it neither seeks inclusion within the order of Man nor simply reverses the hierarchy such that the liminal other is now “the new norm.” Rather, as has been argued throughout these chapters, this ambiguous, in-definite, undetermined, or now opaque freedom of the flesh displaces the redemptive structuring of racial globality, of whiteness as an *ordo salutis*.

Opacity, or rather the “experience” of opacity is not displaced by revelation but is an aspect of “divine revelation.”⁵⁶ Drawing on the work of Charles Long, Copeland suggests in another article that the opaqueness of revelation is not something to be “overcome.” Instead, “theology draws us near to [the opacity of the symbol] and into its meanings, its agonies, and its ecstasies.”⁵⁷ Opacity, for Long, is encountered as an “involuntary structure,” an experience of what exceeds and resists individual and communal efforts to define or elucidate reality.⁵⁸ The transatlantic slave trade and its aftermath created a profound and painful experience of opacity: the black slave was cut off from the sources of meaning (land and its related religio-cultural patterns); the slave

⁵⁵ One can note a similar response in Karl Barth’s commentary on Romans, where “subjection” to the authorities is “an action void of purpose, an action, that is to say, which can spring only from obedience to God. Its meaning is that humans have encountered God, and are thereby compelled to leave the judgment to God. The actual occurrence of this judgment cannot be identified with the purpose or with the secret reckoning of the human being of this world.” Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns, 6th ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), 483-4. The entire ordering has already been dissolved, from outside, and thus it is incapable of demanding or enacting such incorporation and is not to be opposed directly but by this action without a purpose.

⁵⁶ Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 22.

⁵⁷ M. Shawn Copeland, “Blackness Past, Blackness Future—and Theology,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 112, no. 4 (September 21, 2013): 635.

⁵⁸ Charles H. Long, “Structural Similarities and Dissimilarities in Black and African Theologies,” *The Journal of Religious Thought* 32, no. 2 (September 1975): 16.

bore the opacity disavowed by the civilizing mission of the Enlightened West; and the slave was in a situation that she or he had to refuse to normalize or render, in itself, meaningful. The slave “had to experience the truth of his [or her] negativity and at the same time transform and create another reality.”⁵⁹ This mode of inhabiting the negative transformed and created a new reality through “a transformation of our consciousness to be a part by virtue of not being a part.”⁶⁰ Freedom was not the freedom of seeing through and manipulating all things or of overcoming “the other,” a freedom that would seek inclusion within the project of Man.⁶¹ Rather, living and creating from this non-place—from this no-Man’s land—black culture and religion plumbed the depths of this opacity, living from the “hardness” of reality in both its brutality and its resistance to efforts to reorganize it: “reality itself was opaque and seemed opposed to them.”⁶² Black religious consciousness, for Long, refuses the disavowal of opacity and instead lives and creates from within this opaqueness, a position that is, for Long, the fundamental and basic position of human creativity and religious experience. It is therefore a position open to all though, for historical and material reasons, bound up with blackness, black peoples, and black religions.

For Copeland, this opaque work of redemption “resists” being instrumentalized for the sake of any project. Solidarity, for Copeland, connects to human liberation but exceeds any particular (political) project. The “praxis of solidarity is made possible by

⁵⁹ Charles H. Long, “Structural Similarities,” 14.

⁶⁰ Long, “Structural Similarities,” 14.

⁶¹ “If this freedom is not to be simply the sentimental imitation of the [Hegelian] lordship-bondage structure with a new set of actors, it would have to be a new form of freedom.” Charles H Long, “Freedom, Otherness and Religion : Theologies Opaque,” *Chicago Theological Seminary Register* 73, no. 1 (December 1, 1983): 22.

⁶² Long, “Freedom, Otherness and Religion,” 23.

the loving self-donation of the crucified Christ, whose cross is its origin, standard, and judge. Solidarity can never be severed from *this* self-giving love.”⁶³ Solidarity is a Christologically oriented category, one enabled by the relation of the Crucified Christ to “the exploited, despised, and poor.”⁶⁴ What she beautifully terms the “eschatological at the core of the concrete” is this presence, the contemporaneity of the Crucified. The solidarity of God in the opacity of human life resists incorporation within any project, no matter how “redemptive” or “just” it appears. Solidarity “sets the dynamics of love against the dynamics of domination.” This love, however, is not a generic ideal but the concrete, enfleshed love of the Crucified Jesus.⁶⁵ This presence, the presence of this one, gives direction to a political praxis that attempts to be faithful to this excess, this divine joining of bodies, what Copeland calls, following Bernard Lonergan, the “divine solidarity in grace.”⁶⁶

This divine solidarity is affirmed in and by the “embodied praxis” of the church.⁶⁷ In the “raised body” of “the lynched Jesus,” a “compassionate God interrupts the structures of death and sin, of violation and oppression.”⁶⁸ This “interruption” becomes, for Copeland, the guiding motif for the way “political theology” functions to orient Christian praxis toward the political without reducing this praxis of solidarity to any program. In her Presidential Address to the Catholic Theological Society of American, titled “Political Theology as Interruptive,” Copeland provides a brief definition of her understanding of a Christian political theology:

⁶³ Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 99.

⁶⁴ Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 99.

⁶⁵ Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 94.

⁶⁶ Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 104; for her citation of Lonergan, see p. 169, n. 68.

⁶⁷ Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 127.

⁶⁸ Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 126.

Compactly, political theology may be expressed as following the crucified Jesus, that is, making the memory of Jesus of Nazareth public through a Christian *praxis* in society that acts in compassionate solidarity with the dead and past victims of injustice in history.⁶⁹

This emphasis on memory, building from Johann Baptist Metz, refuses the temporality of progress and thus becomes, for Copeland, a key moment through which to attune “our being” to the eschatological presence of the Crucified within the concrete realities of the present. If Christ is contemporaneous and Christ’s identity is his identification with “victims of injustice,” then these victims are present as well, in Christ, such that their past sufferings make demands on the present, interrupting the consolidation of the proper form of Man by making the “cries,” “faces,” and “bodies” of the victims, the liminal others, the cry, face, and body of God.⁷⁰

For Copeland, the proper method of theological anthropology thus comes to represent the mode of Christian praxis or discipleship more generally: one relates the bodies of the victims to the living body of the Crucified Christ. For Copeland,

To place maimed lynched bodies beside the maimed body of Jesus of Nazareth is the condition for a theological anthropology that reinforces the sacramentality of the body, contests objectification of the body, and honors the body as the self-manifestation and self-expression of the free human subject.⁷¹

To “place beside” is the fundamental *para-bolic* mode of activity that presses Christian life toward the political without the political itself absorbing and dissolving the theological, or rather, eschatological aspect of this life. This human freedom is the freedom of the flesh, not that of the “white male bourgeois European” whose “embodied

⁶⁹ M. Shawn Copeland, “Presidential Address: Political Theology as Interruptive,” *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 59 (2004): 71–82, quotation on p. 74-5.

⁷⁰ Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 101-2.

⁷¹ Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 124.

presence ‘usurped the position of God’ in an anthropological no to life for all others.’⁷² This freedom of the flesh is relationally, affectively contoured, not oriented toward inwardly controlled self-determination but rather to the determinative eschatological relation of Christ’s flesh to its own.⁷³ It is this determinative relationship to the crucified and resurrected Christ that orients Cone’s own account of solidarity in his essay, “Christian Theology and Political Praxis.”⁷⁴ In Cone’s account, however, another aspect of this solidarity and its relationship to truthful Christian living and speech becomes clear, namely, this solidarity moves through a concrete negation of the present.

Negative Solidarity

The title of this essay, “Christian Theology and Political Praxis,” repeats that pattern found throughout Cone’s writings, wherein his titles are formulated through the conjunction of two terms. Cone’s theological work is a sustained production of and theological reflection on this work of conjunction, a theological work arising out of the disruptive force of this conjoining and placing beside (para-ble), signified by that word, repeated so many times in his titles, ‘and’. The conjunction in the context of this essay refers to the rejection of the “dichotomy between spiritual and physical salvation,

⁷² Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 89. Copeland is quoting Enrique Dussel, “Domination-Liberation: A New Approach,” in *The Mystical and Political Dimensions of the Christian Faith: Concilium*, eds., Claude Geffré and Gustavo Gutiérrez (New York: Herder and Herder, 1974), 41.

⁷³ This critique of “self-determination” and the emphasis on affect, relationality and external determination take their bearings from Denise Ferreira da Silva’s work. See Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race*, “Notes for a Critique,” and also Denise Ferreira da Silva, “Toward a Black Feminist Poethics: The Quest(ion) of Blackness Toward the End of the World,” *The Black Scholar* 44, no. 2 (2014): 81–97.

⁷⁴ This essay is reprinted in *ST*, 35-49.

between faith and political praxis.”⁷⁵ The ‘and’ refuses this separation and instead “insists on their dialectical relationship.”⁷⁶ This dialectical conjunction takes its orientation from the incarnation, for “the connection of faith with praxis is found in Jesus Christ. The incarnation connects faith with life and work.”⁷⁷

This connection is not an abstract joining but quite particular. Jesus Christ reveals “God’s solidary with the victim,” the joining of God’s very life with that of the oppressed. God is “the One who came in Christ for the liberation of the poor.”⁷⁸ Theology must therefore “side with the victims of economic injustice” because it must represent “*the Victim*, Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified because he was a threat to the political and religious structures of his time.”⁷⁹ Jesus is the revelation of God’s “solidarity with the historical liberation of the oppressed.”⁸⁰ Jesus is the revelation of God’s very activity—and therefore life and being—as a movement of conjunction, of joining. Christian faith *and* political praxis are therefore both set within and organized through this prior activity of God’s solidarity: “one meets God in the process of historical liberation.”⁸¹ In this way, the ‘and’ placed between “Christian faith” and “praxis”—or between theology and politics—is Christological, for God’s very life is revealed in Christ as this practice of joining, a joining that is at the heart of creaturely life.

⁷⁵ Cone, *ST*, 37.

⁷⁶ Cone, *ST*, 37. Cone thinks dialectics within and as a mode of non-incorporative setting beside or paradox. Vincent Lloyd, “Paradox and Tradition in Black Theology,” *Black Theology* 9, no. 3 (November 1, 2011): 265–86.

⁷⁷ Cone, *ST*, 47.

⁷⁸ Cone, *ST*, 42.

⁷⁹ Cone, *ST*, 39.

⁸⁰ Cone, *ST*, 42.

⁸¹ Cone, *ST*, 47.

Cone never retreats from the particularity of this conjunction: the joining is never the abstract connection between God and humankind but between the God of Israel and an oppressed Jew. It is the particularity of this conjunction that not only refuses a dichotomy between faith and practice, and with it, theology and politics, but establishes the mode of political engagement: “the gospel is inseparably connected with the bodily liberation of the poor.”⁸² The bodily liberation of the poor is a material parable of the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ. This liberation is both the enfleshment of eschatological freedom and the destruction of what constricts such freedom. Put in the language of truth, the parabolic or metaphorical nature of truth does not just expand the world through the creation or discovery of possibilities not governed by actuality; this parabolic form of truth also sets itself against what refuses these possibilities. As Cone says in this essay, “people must prove the truth by destroying the existing relations of untruth.”⁸³

The person of Jesus, in whom faith and practice are joined, signifies both a setting beside (parable) and a setting aside (negation). “Inherent in the gospel,” for Cone, “is the refusal to accept the things that are as the things that ought to be.” Christians speak truthfully both through the production of parables of Christ’s advent, as Chapter Five argued, and also, as Cone argues in this essay, by refusing to “accept the world as it is.”⁸⁴ It is this latter point that is especially important for us white Christians. “Political Praxis,” in this trajectory, is critique, not the parabolic enfleshment of the new but the studied destruction of what opposes parabolic freedom, of what, facing this new, can be

⁸² Cone, *ST*, 37.

⁸³ Cone, *ST*, 44.

⁸⁴ Cone, *ST*, 36.

understood as old and passing away.⁸⁵ As Cone says, the reconciling work of Christ means something different for us formed as white, for it is the judgment against the false mediations of (the white) Man. It is toward this negation of Man and not toward reconciliation that white Christians must direct their attention.

This work of negation is not understood on its own or as the sole or only legitimate response to this racial order. It is, following the argument of Barth, Copeland, and Cone, a secondary element, a kind of corollary to the opaque and eschatological freedom of black life. The white affirmation of this black life—the affirmation that these struggles for liberation and quality of life are parables of God’s advent to us white people in Jesus Christ—is not articulated and embodied through a white claim to be “beyond” white supremacy through “reconciliation” but to be against this normative framing of human life itself. The negativity functions to preserve the appositionality that whiteness always seeks to incorporate. Less abstractly put, focusing on the negation of Man forestalls white tendencies to use even anti-racist solidarity as another project of white redemption, as a way of remaking themselves as properly white—or even properly non-white—and thereby still tethering themselves to and working to uphold another iteration of Man. This negative solidarity refuses to transform this being-in-relation—this connection, joining, setting beside—into a project under white control and oriented toward white success. To negate the world of Man, as white people, is to leave ourselves without hope in this (white) world but with hope that nevertheless there is a redeemer,

⁸⁵ “Thus as an event in time, the eschaton equally functions as a *judgment* upon what takes place in time. That which remains new is the crisis of time.” Eberhard Jüngel, “The Emergence of the New,” *TE II*, 54. See also, Eberhard Jüngel, “Humanity in Correspondence to God: Remarks on the Image of God as a Basic Concept in Theological Anthropology,” *TE I*, 124-153, esp. 124-5.

and he is not white but black. Precisely here, in its negativity, this solidarity can also become what Joerg Rieger and Kwok Pui-lan call “deep solidarity,” the solidarity of those who are not benevolently turning to those they deem less fortunate but the solidarity of those who share in the same struggle.⁸⁶ The conclusion will argue that the politics surrounding work—the imperative to work to live and orient one’s life around work—can be reframed as a strategic location at which to unhinge, to interrupt and overturn, the world of Man.

⁸⁶ Joerg Rieger and Kwok Pui-lan, *Occupy Religion: Theology of the Multitude* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2012).

CONCLUSION

The equation of Indigeneity with animality and nature is effected through the equation of humanity with work. Andrea Smith¹

In his efforts to imagine and elaborate a broad struggle against global capitalism, the Marxist geographer David Harvey notes that the political movement can begin “anywhere,” whether in struggles against exploitive conditions of labor, violations of political rights, degradations of nature, or disruptions of daily life. “The trick,” he suggests, is “to keep the political movement moving from one sphere of activity to another in mutually reinforcing ways.”² The connections between these different “spheres”—like job conditions, legal rights of citizens, social domination of nonwhite persons, access to education—are already present as the “historical evolution” of capitalism emerged through their complex interrelation.³ The point, however, is not to get stuck and isolated in one area but to politicize and challenge these connections so that the complex yet integrated totality might be critically overturned.

¹ Andrea Smith, “Humanity Through Work,” *Borderlands* 13, no. 1 (May 2014): 1.

² David Harvey, *The Enigma of Capital and the Crises of Capitalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 228.

³ Harvey, *The Enigma of Capital*, 123. Harvey lists seven “distinctive ‘activity spheres’ within the evolutionary trajectory of capitalism: technologies and organizational forms; social relations; institutional and administrative arrangements; production and labor processes; relations to nature; the reproduction of daily life and of the species; and ‘mental conceptions of the world’” (123).

The definition of whiteness offered in Chapter Three pinpoints some aspects of the complex social arrangement that is whiteness. In particular, it noted the essential interrelation between what now often gets termed “identity politics” and “class politics.” White efforts at solidarity so frequently remain inadequately critical because only one side is given attention. To repeat the definition of whiteness provided in Chapter Three, *whiteness is a mode of social belonging that establishes itself as the proper form of the human through anti-black violence for the sake of white control over the accumulation of capital and its attendant processes of eco-social re/production.* The first half of the definition speaks of social belonging organized around the proper form of human life, Man, and the anti-black or racial violence that marks its exteriority. The second half then attends to what is at stake in this social form of Man, particularly the control over capital accumulation at its broadest and most fundamental levels, not merely control over wealth but the various means of social and economic production and reproduction.

On one side, white efforts of solidarity often focus specifically on this anti-black violence, perhaps most recently centering around the struggles against police brutality and violence. Noting their “privilege” to be plainly identified within the community of Man, these anti-racist efforts seek to overcome the various exclusions of nonwhite persons from this mode of social belonging and its protections. In this way, whiteness is overcome by extending a multicultural politics of human rights and protections. Yet, by neglecting this connection to the second half of the definition—the accumulation of capital—this solidarity ends up buttressing a kind of multicultural global capitalism, an inclusive form of Man to which these benevolent antiracists unquestionably belong and which must incorporate its various nonwhite and “poor white” others (poor white in the

doubled sense of economically impoverished and improperly being white). Following Harvey, the point is not that the struggle focuses on the wrong thing but that it fails to move throughout the definition as a whole, particularly across the two aspects of human identity and capitalist regimes of accumulation.

On the other side, white solidarity can focus on these issues of capital accumulation and its attendant processes of eco-social re/production. In this situation, solidarity is forged through class antagonisms, which create a common situation in which racial and gendered differences are increasingly decentralized or subsumed. White solidarity, in this instance, means recognizing how capitalist modes of re/production create a common line of struggle across the various different kinds of identity—incorporating all into a new, revolutionary body politic. Politics of race become interpreted as a way the ruling class utilizes biological and cultural differences to divide a group that should be united around their common struggles against capitalist exploitation. To prioritize racial struggles, under this interpretation, plays into the hand of the ruling class, for it consolidates a division within the working class (or, as is often said these days, among the 99%) and neglects the greater shared reality of being people exploited by the global, capitalist elite. This approach, however, does not simply inadequately address the racial violence through which the political body of Man is constituted; it fails to grapple with how capitalist modes of exploitation are *already* racialized.

In the epigraph to this conclusion, Andrea Smith notes the way the connection between animality and Indigeneity was accomplished through a particular framing of human life as essentially one of capitalist labor, or work. To be deemed a “non-worker” is to be placed outside the sphere of the properly human, beyond the political body of

Man.⁴ Once outside, excluded, these indigent non-workers have no claim on the community of responsible citizenry. They do not have rights because they do not belong to that community capable of having rights. As G. W. F. Hegel suggests with regards to those “non-developing” peoples, any recognition of rights is not a recognition of what is actually there but what, by means of external transformation under the enlightened control of the more humanly developed community, could be there.

For Hegel, the Rabble emerges through the peculiar and, for him, unfounded claim to have a right for life itself, a claim disconnected from their productive contributions to civil society and rooted in the subjective malformation or evil that arises through their lack of work. In this situation, to claim a right of public assistance, one must demonstrate that one is objectively and, or at least, subjectively a member of the *working* poor. The “evil” of the Rabble is that they claim a social assistance without belonging to that class of honorable, productive citizenry: they have become “frivolous and lazy” and yet still “claim... a right to receive their livelihood.”⁵ Whether arguing for assistance as an underpaid hard worker or demanding it simply by virtue of being a member of this society, both claims for a right to live rest on that tacit distinction between the subjects of the developed society, a nation state, and those animalistic others in the state of nature: “no one can assert a right against *nature*, but *within the conditions of society* hardship at once assumes the form of a wrong inflicted on this or that class.”⁶

In this situation, work—not merely any expenditure of energy but that activity suitable for securing a livelihood within the present capitalist economic system—is both

⁴ Smith, “Humanity Through Work,” 2.

⁵ G. W. F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. Allen W. Wood, trans. H. B. Nisbet (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), §244, p. 266.

⁶ Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, §244, p. 266-267.

about access to the means necessary to sustain one's existence and about membership or belonging to that community whose life warrants such (state) investments and protections. Work, in other words, is both about eco-social modes of reproduction (the means to sustain and replicate one's life) and about the proper form of human life at a communal and individual level. Work thereby offers a very strategic place at which to contest the whole complex social formation James Cone calls "whiteness," one that neither ignores the way race is always entangled with regimes of capitalisms nor forgets that even the category of work already functions within a racialized, violent politics of the human.

The political effort, then, is to effectively challenge the capitalist organization of work—waged labor—while suspending instead of tacitly or explicitly reaffirming a politics of the proper form of human life, the human as a project in and of development. Turning to an "antiwork" politics can support this kind of engagement. In her book, *The Problem with Work*, Kathi Weeks builds from feminist and Italian ("autonomist") Marxist thinkers to articulate such an "antiwork" politics. The negative or critical aspect is placed at the forefront of her analysis because work is so dominating that it is difficult to imagine modes of human life where work would be decentered, what she calls a "postwork imagination." The "refusal of work" she argues,

is not a renunciation of labor *tout court*, but rather a refusal of the ideology of work as highest calling and moral duty, a refusal of work as the necessary center of social life and means of access to the rights and claims of citizenship, and a refusal of the necessity of capitalist control of production. It is a refusal, finally, of the asceticism of those—even on the Left—who privilege work over all other pursuits.⁷

⁷ Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 99.

The placement of work at the center of social life means that work shapes and coordinates, or at least puts pressure on, *all* modes of human activity and social interaction.⁸ It also becomes the quintessential marker of human social belonging. The refusal to work—and the accompanying demand for resources through which to sustain one’s life—is, however, not a refusal of all activity but an effort to delink all the various aspects of human life from the present organization of work and to politicize “life against work.”⁹

The development of an anti-work politics is pursued here not for the sake of a generic ideal of life itself—whether deemed vibrant in its potentialities or stripped bare.¹⁰ The life turned against work is the life that refuses incorporation, which is to say, it is the life lived in the freedom of the resurrection. Turning against work is a strategy, a means to bypass the tendency to separate the politics of (human) identity from the politics of (capitalist) accumulation. To be against work—to work against the regime of work—is to turn against capitalist exploitation *without* repeating the racialized division between the human and its unproductive, animalistic other. To work against the regime of work is to turn against the racialized figure of the human without allowing corporate multiculturalism to absorb this political effort. To work against work is to refuse the instrumentalization of human life for the sake of any project. There are no human

⁸ Weeks, *The Problem with Work*, 8. The notion of “pressure” comes from Joerg Rieger’s work. See Joerg Rieger, *Grace Under Pressure* (Nashville, TN: United Methodist General Board of Higher Education, 2011).

⁹ Weeks, *The Problem with Work*, 35.

¹⁰ For a critical analysis of Giorgio Agamben’s “bare life” politics, see Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2014). For a critical analysis of the way vitalist theories and politics operate racially, see Donna V. Jones, *The Racial Discourses of Life Philosophy: Négritude, Vitalism, and Modernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

potentialities that *must* be developed or unleashed. There is, in fact, no essential work to be done.¹¹

This lack of purpose is a material parable, framed negatively, of the creation of the world out of nothing as well as the resurrection of Christ. The language of “gift,” so common today, points in this direction, but often remains thoroughly economical, setting up exchanges that allow the gratuity to be incorporated and managed through a series of unspoken yet nevertheless determinative protocols and required responses.¹² The turn to an anti-work politics is an effort to guard this essential purposelessness from the teleology of any humanistic project and from the bureaucratic rationalization of all activity for the sake of profit. Both aspects have to be refused simultaneously and the ideology of work—the imperative to organize life through work and to seek in work the fulfillment or actualization of human life—is a strategic place to develop such a refusal. The “eschatological at the core of the concrete” (Copeland) is not a potential that must be unleashed or actualized but is, among other things, the presence of a fundamental negation, the refusal of the coordination and indeed instrumentalization of life within and for any human project, any project of “the human.”

One can certainly attempt to moderate the demand to and demands of work, making it more financially, socially, and personally rewarding. Yet, following Weeks, these political projects of reform should also take aim at the demand to work itself. The goal should not simply be better work or better wages but *less work* overall with the equal

¹¹ See Giorgio Agamben, “The Work of Man,” trans. Kevin Attell, in *Giorgio Agamben: Sovereignty and Life*, ed. Matthew Calarco and Steven DeCaroli (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), 1-10.

¹² Jacques Derrida’s famous reflections on the aporia of the gift can be found in his book, *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1994).

distribution of whatever work is nevertheless required. Weeks considers two political demands oriented around these goals: the demand of a basic, guaranteed income and the demand for shorter hours.

Demands, for Weeks, have, or at least can have a certain utopian dimension to them: they can “point toward the possibility of a break, however partial, with the present.”¹³ These utopian demands are “concrete,” connected to “actually existing tendencies,” but are also excessive to these realities, not merely an incremental extension of a given trajectory.¹⁴ The particular demand is simultaneously a goal in-itself and a provocation to reconfigure the existing political terrain. Demands constitute “a new subject with the desires for and the power to make further demands.”¹⁵ In this way, the “utopian demand...is at once a goal and a bridge.” It is a call to action for the sake of an “open-ended” goal that “could have a transformative effect” on the existing field of political options altogether.¹⁶ A demand is not the conclusion of a syllogism but the affirmation and assertion of a desire, or rather, the expression and enacting of a broader political desire condensed around a particular point of action. The utopian demand is not an instrumental plan of action, for it draws from and seeks to extend “the possibility of living differently.”¹⁷ It is not a first step in a tightly constructed series of steps but the location of a particular good—a concrete end—whose pursuit allows and requires movement that cannot be plotted from the present state of politics or reduced to any given set of established political subjects. For this reason, the utopian demand is enacted by a

¹³ Weeks, *The Problem with Work*, 220.

¹⁴ Weeks, *The Problem with Work*, 220.

¹⁵ Weeks, *The Problem with Work*, 223.

¹⁶ Weeks, *The Problem with Work*, 222.

¹⁷ Weeks, *The Problem with Work*, 220.

“coalition,” not a single group claiming to be the ones through whom the future will develop but a less structured group gathered around the particularity of the demand itself.¹⁸

To decrease the centrality of work in our daily lives and in our understanding of the good or proper human life, Weeks suggests two concrete, utopian demands: a guaranteed basic income and a shorter work week with no decrease in income. Neither demand is a total attack on waged labor. Even with a guaranteed basic income, working for wages would still be imaginable and even required, as people could be motivated through additional income to perform socially necessary work. Likewise, a thirty-hour workweek at a livable wage does not overturn the entire capitalist system of waged labor. Nevertheless, both demands attack the central dominance of work in society and affirm the desire to prioritize life over against the incessant imperative and need to work. Both are political programs oriented toward a “life beyond work,” a life not organized around any externally mandated productive project (waged labor).¹⁹

The two political demands and the accompanying desire for life unregulated by work are taken up here, at the conclusion of this study, for the way they can mobilize concrete political action without being tethered to the incorporative project of human development. Both a guaranteed basic income and a shorter workweek refuse the close proximity between fitness for exploitable work (waged labor) and inclusion in the sphere of protected human life (citizen). As Wynter suggests, the present “damned” of the earth—those external to the proper and protected mode of human life, Man—has shifted to the precarious employed and unemployed in cities and increasingly now in the suburbs

¹⁸ Weeks, *The Problem with Work*, 223.

¹⁹ Weeks, *The Problem with Work*, 145.

of Northern nation-states and the “underdeveloped”—or rather, marginalized, ruthlessly exploited, and violently disregarded—members of the Global South.²⁰ In this situation, a demand for the material means through which to sustain one’s human life without engaging in any work (guaranteed basic income) or through significantly less work (thirty-hour work week) amounts to a refusal of the present global arrangement *and* the dominant figure of Man as those whose creativity (the entrepreneurs) or ceaselessly exploited labor (the hard workers) overcomes the scarcity of resources—a scarcity that is socially produced though ideologically described as the natural and given order of things. Unlike Wynter, however, this political project is not predicated on a positive demand for emancipation as full human autonomy but rather on the more minimal and negative humanistic demand. It is not the positive and known essence of humanity that is at stake but precisely its unavailability and opacity. One turns against work to affirm and to make concrete the *unavailability* of human life for its determination within this civilization project of Man, or any human project at all.

²⁰ Sylvia Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation – An Argument,” *New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 260-1.

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