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DESIRE AND DISPLACEMENT IN CHRISTOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE: RACE, REDEMPTION, AND CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP

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Abstract

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By Amaryah S. Armstrong

This thesis is primarily a set of close readings in which I interrogate physical and figurative displacements as way into Christology. In part one of my thesis, I read Kathryn Tanner's account of human nature, as characterized by its plasticity and ability to be formed, alongside Hortense Spillers' readings of the “Middle Passage” and Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Here, I show how human nature's plasticity is fundamentally a vulnerability to movement which is open to exploitation through acts of displacement that are driven by disordered desires. Taking events of black displacement as my starting place, I argue that black people's ontological and particular situation as subjects-obects within the logic of white supremacy is the doubled figure of blackness by which white subjectivity and desires are formed. In part two, I respond to this problem of vulnerability and displacement by exploring how the Incarnation reopens the enslaved body as the body of Christ. Through a reading of St. Maximus the Confessor on movement, I explore how it is that Christ's work of redemption reorder's desire, not through an exploitation of human vulnerability, but by inhabiting it in an excessively perfect way. I find this excess provides the possibility of resignifying the black body/being, whose meaning as human is foreclosed by oppressive systems of dominance, through practices of Christian discipleship that displace and decenter the self as acts of reconstituting the self.

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Introduction: The Problems and Possibilities of Displacement

This thesis is primarily a set of close readings in which I interrogate physical and figurative displacements as way into Christology. In part one of my thesis, I read Kathryn Tanner's account of human nature, as characterized by it's plasticity and ability to be formed, alongside Hortense Spillers' readings of the "Middle Passage" and Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Here, I show how human nature's plasticity is fundamentally a vulnerability to movement which is open to exploitation through acts of displacement that are driven by disordered desires. Taking events of black displacement as my starting place, I argue that black people's ontological and particular situation as subjects-objects within the logic of white supremacy is the doubled figure of blackness by which white subjectivity and desires are formed.[1] In part two, I respond to this problem of vulnerability and displacement by exploring how the Incarnation reopens the enslaved body as the body of Christ. Through a reading of St. Maximus the Confessor on movement, I explore how it is that Christ's work of redemption reorder's desire, not through an exploitation of human vulnerability, but by inhabiting it in an excessively perfect way. I find this excess provides the possibility of resignifying the black body/being, whose meaning as human is foreclosed by oppressive systems of dominance, through practices of Christian discipleship that displace and decenter the self as acts of reconstituting the self.

The prelude to the thesis offers a brief history of "racial" and sexual convergences by engaging with the thought of Immanuel Kant, J. Kameron Carter, Ladelle McWhorter, and Robert Bernasconi. In this section, I develop an account of how "race," sexuality, disease, and deviance come to be intimately tied together through the articulation of "race" as an inheritable trait. Here, my intent is to provide sketches of how the "racial" landscape came

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1 This is a term coined by feminist critic, bell hooks, to get at the intersections of oppression. While all of her work is useful for understanding these intersections, See bell hooks, *Killing Rage: Ending Racism* (New York; Macmillan, 1996), in particular.

to be populated as it is today, by the assumption of the stability of "race" and its ability to be passed down through "germs". This section sets up some foundational themes regarding blackness, sexuality, and the body that I begin to flesh out in the following section.

Part one begins with a reading of Kathryn Tanner's account of creation, how human nature's lack of form is that which enables it to image God. This becomes the text I think through to explore how this lack of form is a vulnerability that opens the subject to exploitation, not just redemption. While Tanner's systematic theology accounts for sin and the fall, her primary way of understanding sin seems to be inclined to the individual will though implicitly there seems to be an understanding of larger powers at work.[2] To expand her reading, then, I begin by analyzing the effect of displacement on black subjectivity as worked through disordered desires, engaging with literary critic Hortense Spillers' psychoanalytic meditations on the "Middle Passage" and theologian Willie James Jennings' account of displacement as an act enabled by Christianity. Also, Spillers' and Saidiya Hartman's reading of Harriet Jacobs narrative illuminate sexual desire as one of the primary sources of black displacement. Here, I show the relationship between blackness and displacement to be one predicated upon the undoing of black bodies as gendered in order for them to become property and productive laborers for colonialist projects of conquest. This new instantiation of blackness as property rests upon possibilities of fungibility where the black body is now open to uses of the white captor, and especially to the transferal of white sexual desire onto black bodies. The use of desire in producing displacements (of gender and of white sexual desire), works to establish a captive-subjectivity for black persons—a subjectivity that is always a *being for* the (white) master.

2 In her chapters "Politics," and "Death & Sacrifice," she gestures a bit more explicitly at how situations of oppression might alter how divine power is available to oppressed peoples and how the changeability of human nature can be exploited by other human beings, Tanner never seems to get at this in the firm way I think is required of theology.

My response to the problem of black displacement and the disfigurements it brings comes in part two, where I read Christ's salvation as occurring through a reordering of desire that is made possible by a divine movement towards us. Maximus the Confessor's work on movement as a property of being helps guide my articulation of how Christ reorders desire through his excessive performance of humanity in the form of a slave. This excessive performance, I argue, enables us to re-read the body of Christ, following James Cone and Sarah Coakley, as an enslaved and displaced body, and the Spirit, who enables the assumption of the form of a slave and this slave body's displacement, as the one who constitutes his slave-subjectivity anew through its displacement.

Christian discipleship, then, is a matter of performing Christ performing the slave. Imitating Christ in this identification with the lowliest form of the human—the slave whose social relations set up a being that is a not one. Following Christ, a Spirit led displacement of the slave, then, is an act which, rather than annihilating the slave body as the displacements of the "Middle Passage" and chattel slavery intend, preserves this body *as such* within the life of the Trinity. Further, these displacements open bodies up for re-corporealization as the body of Christ and a re-ordering of desire by destabilizing the supposed 'givenness' of blackness as an identity of captivity to the white master in exchange for blackness as an identity of divinely inspired solidarity with the most oppressed and blackness as a strategy of theopolitical reversal—turning the vulnerability of the enslaved black body into the occasion for the destabilization of white supremacy. This practice of displacement in Christological perspective, I argue, is theologically and politically fruitful as a way through contentious debates on identity politics and how are identities are to be formed as the community of the people of God.

To end my thesis, I begin outlining the trajectories of my thought by discussing what

practices are formational for Christian disciples following in the way of this displaced Christ. First, I turn to theologian Sarah Coakley and her readings of Trinitarian community and prayer practices and Judith Butler's understanding of performativity for an alternative understanding of the subject's displacement in ways that may lead to the possibility of her resignification rather than her reinscription into a position of subjugation.[3] I turn to Coakley not only for her rich Trinitarian theology, but also, for her attention to spiritual practices rooted in desire as the occasions for this power in vulnerability to occur. By coupling Coakley's attention to how these practices of prayer can reorder desire with Butler's concept of performativity, I find a rich possibility of understanding these spiritual practices as destabilizing the seeming 'givenness' of racial identity and subjectivity.

Secondly, I suggest protests as possible sites of Christian formation. While there is some nuance required around what one ought to protest, I argue that solidarity with the poor and oppressed, in following Christ, is what guides these decisions. More particularly, though, this suggestion of protest is meant to explore how one's de-centering can provide the occasion for one's being able to mean *for* another, to bear witness to another, even when outward markers of identity seem to confuse how this is possible. A piece by Eve Sedgwick in her book, *Touching Feeling,* provides the scene of a protest event where the author's fainting becomes the occasion for a new understanding of the curious ways the body opens us to affect, intimacy, and the meanings that come from the spatial relations we inhabit when we are de-centered. Thinking alongside Butler, Coakley, and Sedgwick, then, I argue that in Christ's assumption of humanity, his instability as a subject exposes what white anthropologies occlude, namely the vulnerability and contingency of the human as an embodied being and its eschatological orientation.

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3 Sarah Coakley, *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2002).

My aim in this thesis is to posit a re-articulation of Christ's body in such a way that the deployment of the language of displacement does not necessarily entail the reinscription of bodies within identities that require the captivity of the black body/being within relations of property and exchange. This work, then, is to be an opening up onto the possibility of reconfiguration and imagination that is always already inscribed into the body of blackness as a doubled consciousness.[4] The conditions that enable oppression also become the possibilities of performing reversals that destabilize the structures that give rise to these problematic identities.

It should be clear that my aim here is not to further solidify blackness as an identity, but rather to further elucidate "race" as that which is not a "given"—as contingent upon the workings of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. In continuing a critique of "race" as a given, I follow other theologians who see the possibility of reconfiguring "race" in light of the person of Christ.[5] This attempt to denaturalize "race" is not to be one of those disposals of "race" as a thing of the past in order to move into a "post-racial" world. Rather, this is meant to destabilize the "givenness" of blackness in order to open it up for the possibilities of theologizing in modalities beside identity. In many ways, then, this is a work that hopes to undo itself—that aspires to come undone by recognizing its possibility as contingent upon

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4 Of course, W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Rockland, Maryland: Arc Manor LLC, 2008), 12, work provides the framework for thinking of blackness as a doubled.

5 See M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010); J. Carter, *Race : a Theological Account* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, [1st ed.]. (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1970). Looking through the footnotes, one may find this work seems short on a womanist theological influence. Indeed, womanist theologians are surprisingly sparse in my citations. I feel that this absence needs attention, as I recognize womanist theologians have effected my theological formation a great deal. Thus, while I cannot point to a plethora of womanist theologians in my footnotes, they are certainly present in the issues of body and vulnerability that guide my thought, and in the literary sources that influence my attention to how bodies mean and how discourses construct and deconstruct bodies. The reading of Hagar's and black women's surrogacy in Delores S. Williams Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-talk (Orbis Books, 1995), was ever on my mind as I analyzed white sexual displacement during chattel slavery

the unthought position of blackness and the uncreated life of God.

This, finally, is a piece of poetry.

Some lines, always leaving

more to be said,

always gesturing towards

that storehouse of shared

images in the reader

—in myself.

Prelude: A Brief History of "Race" as a Concept

"Perhaps the body of the anthropophorous animal (the body of the slave) is the unresolved remnant that idealism leaves as an inheritance to thought, and the aporias of the philosophy of our time coincide with the aporias of this body that is irreducibly drawn and divided between animality and humanity."

Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*[6]

"It is a tricky matter to detail the civil existence of a subject who is socially dead and legally recognized as human only to the degree that he is criminally culpable."

Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*[7]

"To become a Negro…. one had to make oneself up as one went along."

James Baldwin, "The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy"[8]

It would be remiss of me to begin this thesis without setting out the racial landscape I find myself writing within. As I see it, this aporia of black subjectivity is a problem for theology as a whole. For, not only is the subjectivity of blackness always that of the captive subject, but the subjectivity of whiteness is that of the master whose subjectivity arises from the violence done to black flesh. Needless to say, my task here will be to briefly set out and illustrate how this figuration is so. In exploring the void of blackness and its articulation as an unthinking and an undoing, we come to see that the undoing of subjectivity as it has been imagined is necessary in order to take up reconfigurations of the human that might make black life livable in another modality.

In taking up the question of blackness for theological anthropology it is not my intention to tie up this question in a closed-ended manner. If anything, I am adamantly

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6 Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. Kevin Attell, 1st ed. (Stanford University Press, 2003), 12.

7 Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford University Press, USA, 1997), 24.

8 James Baldwin, "The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy," in *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction, 1948-1985* (Macmillan, 1985), 298.

trying to undermine that impulse by focusing—not on the ways in which we can present a coherent black identity, but instead on the ways blackness as an aporia is always being undone as a subject, is unresolved, and how this undoing points towards a theological undoing that is primary in the formation of Christian disciples. My project here, then, is to think theologically from inside of the absence that marks blackness as a lack, from the place of the slant that situates blackness obliquely—as the site of non-normative desires, and to find Christ there. In the first part of this work then, I will interrogate sexuality and desire in chattel slavery in order to situate blackness as a scientifically legitimated, theologically dis/oriented, and philosophically unthought position.

For blackness to be aporetic means for blackness to be unresolved. This tension within blackness is perhaps most clearly seen in the emergence of blackness as racial identifier within the discursive grips of the modern myth of development. While it is in the Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment that there begins to be a scientific articulation of blackness as a degenerate position on the human evolutionary scale and as that void between the primitive animal on its way to the civilized human, this situation of blackness upon a scale as the degenerate condition occurred during the beginnings of the European explorations of "New Worlds" and their subsequent colonization and enslavement of African peoples.[9] What concerns me, here, in particular, is the ways this characterization as primitive and animal functions to enable claims of sexual licentiousness, debasement, and gratuity to become one of the primary means of enabling white supremacist construction of blackness as a biological, and thus, essentializing, category of inferiority. As we will see, it is often the case that these deviant desires and their supposedly inherent relation to blackness

[9] For accounts of modernity as a result of globalization and New World encounters, see Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination : Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven Conn.: Yale University Press, 2010); and Jared Hickman, "Globalization and the Gods, or the Political Theology of 'Race'," *Early American Literature* 45, no. 1 (2010): 145–182.

become the condition for expressions of white subjectivity and desire. In what follows, I explore processes of development in the logic of the Enlightenment that enable this construction of blackness to be tied more explicitly (that is through discourses and techniques) tied to sexuality through the thought of Immanuel Kant. However, by the end of this section, I reflect on the ways one need only meditate on racial conditions present in the "Middle Passage" to see the haunting figurations of blackness as unthought and ungendered still hover—displaced and in limbo. What desires have become tied to the black body that allow it to be discarded as unthought? That is the question to which we now turn.

The route to racialization is one of disfiguring the image of God in the nature of the black person. Indeed, we might think of this disfiguring as a reversal of a sacrament. Whereas in Christian theology a sacrament is the outward expression of an inner grace, in science, the outward expression becomes the sign of an inner inferiority, deviance, and degradation. While it is clear that blackness was used before the Enlightenment to refer to people as a marker of their skin color or debased intellect, what is different in the crucible of Enlightenment science, philosophy, religion, along with Western colonizing projects, is the move to articulate blackness a metaphysical position that is tied to the ontology of the slave. This necessarily requires the articulation of how it is that "race" and sexuality converge.

Theologian J. Kameron Carter has already done extensive work in setting out the theological underpinnings of "race" through his analysis of Kant's anthropological work. Here Carter's work, together with philosopher Ladelle McWhorter's work on the genealogy of "race" and sexuality in the US, are what guide and enable my exploration of how the racialization and biologization of groups of people are maintained through theological disfigurations and through the construction of sexual deviances and behaviors that are forcibly attached to the bodies of those seen as racially inferior. I give much attention to

some of the key points of Kant's speculations on human origins, reading him alongside Carter and McWhorter. After this explication of Kant on "race", I turn to 19th century U.S. anxieties over racial purity to show how there is an intimacy of science, philosophy, and theology that enabled a scientific racism to take root in both the pro-slavery and anti-slavery movements, and also enabled racial distortions of sexual desires through the displacement of white sexual desires within figures of blackness and through the pathologization of black sexual desire as deviant or necessarily self-effacing.

Immanuel Kant and the Knowledge of "Race"

Immanuel Kant's contribution to the racialization of persons is quickly becoming well documented. Philosopher, Robert Bernasconi suggests that Kant's contribution lies in his import as "the one who gave the concept sufficient definition for subsequent users to believe that they were addressing something whose scientific status could at least be debated."[10] We will begin to see how Kant's conceptualization of "race" includes the roots of "race" as a "given". This assumed "givenness" has serious repercussions for black ontology.

Kant's concerns about "race" arise mainly through in his reflections on the origins of the human being in his anthropological works.[11] Kant's fixation with "race" appears to arise, in part, out of the growing polygenist position, which posited that each "race" was a distinct

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10 Robert Bernasconi "Who Invented the Concept of Race?: Kant's Role in the Enlightenment Construction of Race," in *Race* ed. Robert Bernasconi (Wiley-Blackwell, 2001), 11. It might be helpful, too, to note, that as Bernasconi is attesting to the scientific legitimation of of race, he is well aware of racism's existence in other forms before this scientific concept arises.

11 See Immanuel Kant, "Of the Different Races of Human Beings (1775)" ; "On the Use of Teleological Principles in Philosophy (1788)"; Immanuel Kant, "Conjectural Beginning of Human History (1786)"; Immanuel Kant, "Determination of the Concept of a Human Race (1785)." All of which are found in *Anthropology, History, and Education*, ed. Günter Zöller and Robert B. Louden, trans. Günter Zöller and Holly Wilson (Cambridge University Press, 2007).

species in itself.[12] As the polygenist stance often required a rejection of the biblical account of Adam and Eve as the progenitors of all of humanity, many felt it was necessary to respond to polygenism in full defense of monogenism, which posited a single origin of humanity and thus affirmed a biblical account of creation.[13] Kant was one on the side of the monogenist position, and his essays on "race" display this. Throughout many of Kant's various writings on "race", we find that the methodological principles guiding his conjectures provide a monogenist position with legitimation through a mingling of theological, scientific, and philosophical discourses.

First, Kant's writing on "race" applies his claim that the knowledge only comes through "data." He attributes "racial" differences in skin color, hair textures, and other physical features to climate and heredity. Further, he argues that germs and natural predispositions are internal to human beings and are activated by external stimuli (climate). These germs and predispositions are passed on to heredity and create races:

> The human being was destined for all climates and for every soil; consequently, various germs and natural predispositions had to lie ready in him to be on occasion either unfolded or restrained, so that he would become suited to his place in the world and over the course of the generations he would appear to be as it were native to and made for that place .... Here I only note that air and sun appear to be those causes which most deeply influence the generative power and produce an enduring development of the germs and predispositions, i.e., are able to establish a race.[14]

These "germs" and "natural predispositions" Kant speaks of, are what produce the distinct features of certain races. When the germs most suited to particular climates are activated, the other germs are eventually stamped out by the proliferation of the dominant germ. This position, that climate produced variations in phenotypic features, was a standard one at this time, but it, as of yet, does not seem to be enough to warrant the creation of the concept of

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12 Kant, "Of the Different Races of Human Beings (1775)," 85.
13 Ibid., 14.
14 Kant, "Of the Different Races of Human Beings (1775)," 96.

"race". Kant himself points this out, noting the similarities in climates around the world without similarities in the races of inhabitants.[15] Responding to the seeming arbitrariness of his concept of "race", Kant wants to establish the origins of the concept by arguing that various morphologies are not just passed down to progeny through the proliferation of one germ and the extinction of others, but through the retaining of particular traits even after persons have inhabited a new place.[16] The concept of germs and their rootedness within the original inhabitants of particular places become the possibility of an articulation of "race" as a concept. The stability of "race" within a person's body is what makes it so:

> Once a race ... had established itself through the long residence of its original people in northeast Asia or in neighboring America, this race could not be transformed into another one through any further influences of the climate. For only the phyletic formation can degenerate into a race; however, once a race has taken root and has suffocated the other germs, it resists all transformation just because the character of the race has then become prevailing in the generative power.[17]

Kant's understanding of "race" as a degeneration from the phyletic form will tie into Kant's belief in the stability of "race"—that one "race" cannot eventually become another. Yet, this stability is tied to an initial instability (that the phyletic races can degenerate). Bernasconi offers more clarification: "Races are deviations within this genus which maintain themselves over protracted generations, even when displaced geographically, and which produce hybrids or mulattoes, that exhibit the characteristics of both races when they interbreed with other deviations or races."[18] That the "races" create hybrids when bred together rather than further proliferating one of the races was, for Kant, the evidence that the races were distinct sub-species of human, but not derived from separate human origins. These differing features, primarily skin color, are read as signs of *something innate* within them

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15 Ibid., 90.
16 Ibid., 96.
17 Ibid., 96.
18 Robert Bernasconi, "Who Invented the Concept of Race?: Kant's Role in the Enlightenment Construction of Race," in *Race* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2001), 22.

that is maintained and *expressed outwardly* in a way that is no longer tied to their geography,[19] suggesting that "race" is able to become "transform[ed] from lineage to morphology and then to biology."[20]

Here, Kant is not merely relying on his philosophical science as the means to render this transformation. Rather, As J. Kameron Carter argues, these Enlightenment assertions "reveal that the modernity [Kant] envisioned is not areligious. Nor is it inimical to Christian thought forms. Rather, it redeploys Christian thought forms inside of, indeed, as a cultural reflex of Western civilization."[21] For Carter, it is within Kant's teleological framework that Kant's theological thinking enables an emergence of white supremacy. For, it is in Kant's teleological thinking that he establishes the goal of humanity as a perfected (white) civilization.

In his essay "On The Use of Teleological Principles in Philosophy," Kant responds to a misunderstanding about his previous writings on "race". The misunderstanding seems to be that Kant's introduction of a teleological principle guides his apprehensions of nature within a narrative of natural history rather than being properly observational. In short, the problem is that Kant is placing a restriction on reason's ability to grasp a thing through observation by submitting it to a teleological principle. For Kant, though, this is a false dichotomy. He asserts the impossibility of rightly calling observation what is not methodologically guided in the first place.[22] One simply becomes an "empirical traveler" with a wandering narrative that does not lend itself to theorizing.[23] Kant also defends natural

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19 As we will see in the next part of this thesis, Willie James Jennings makes a wonderful argument concerning this dislocation of identity from places. See, Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*.

20 Ladelle McWhorter, Racism and Sexual Oppression in Anglo-America : a Genealogy (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 62.

21 Carter, *Race*, 81.

22 Kant, "On the Use of Teleological Principles in Philosophy (1788)," 197.

23 Ibid.

history, arguing that it is not the creation of a narrative based upon one's speculations but is, in fact, guided by the “laws of efficient causality” which are properly scientific.[24]

Kant then takes up his account of "race" as a further means of clarifying the use of teleology in his concept. Kant finds that, in keeping with his teleological principles, the concept of "race" is one that is quite clearly useful in the categorization of human beings and speculation on human origins, though not necessarily readily available through observation:

> What is a race? The word does not figure in a system of the description of nature, therefore presumably the thing itself is nowhere in nature either. Yet the concept designated by this expression is well grounded in the reason of each observer of nature who infers from a hereditary particularity of different interbreeding animals that does not at all lie in the concept of their species a common cause, namely a cause that lies originally in the phylum of the species. The fact that this word does not occur in the description of nature ..., cannot prevent the observer of nature from finding it necessary with respect to natural history …. [H]e will have to determine the word clearly for this purpose; and this we would like to attempt here. The name race, …, is quite suitably conceived.[25]

Kant has found that in observing the reproduction of certain physiognomic features in the progeny of particular inhabitants of certain geographical spaces, the concept of "race" is one that necessarily corresponds to the phenomena in view and gathers its legitimation from “[Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de] Buffon's rule that animals that generate fertile young belong to the same physical genus.”[26] Because in the reproductive acts of persons from the same "race", skin color, hair texture and other morphological traits are maintained, Kant found "race" to be inheritable, while the fact that persons from different racial groups could reproduce fertile offspring maintained the unity of the races as one species.[27]

For Kant, describing “race” as a phenomenon of morphological diversity legitimated the concept's correspondence with an actual biological fact. It seems that skin color begged

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24 Ibid.
25 Ibid., 199.
26 Bernasconi, “Who Invented the Concept of Race?: Kant’s Role in the Enlightenment Construction of Race,” 22.
27 Kant, “On the Use of Teleological Principles in Philosophy (1788),” 199–200.

for a concept through which it could be understood as natural and persistent. As Bernasconi writes,

> The thrust of Kant's account therefore, was to support the use of teleology within biology as opposed to providing merely mechanical explanations .... Mechanical explanations would allow for the effects of climate to produce further changes in species or parts of the species .... Such changes that had occurred were all preformed. They were also irreversible.[28]

J. Kameron Carter locates a deeper white supremacist bent within Kant's teleology, which locates some inner purposiveness in maintaining racial differences as fixed even after a group has left the particular climates that produced its supposed stable morphological features. Thus, "race" as a given concept enables the articulation of this inheritable trait. Carter locates white supremacy within this bent mainly in how Kant maps the world from origins to telos. Kant suggesting that the origins of humanity ought to be traced back to a climate that is moderate in its temperament because it is that region which is most suitable for food and animals and an inhabitant there would have "diverged the least from his original formation given that he is equally well prepared for all transplantings from there.[29]

In locating the most suitable climate in Europe, Kant establishes European's primacy as the site of origin while also situating the root genus as the universal human form capable of becoming the four different races he classifies.

Phyletic Species.
Whites of brunette color.
First race High blondes (Northern Europeans) from humid cold.
Second race Copper-reds (Americans) from dry cold.
Third race Blacks (Senegambia) from humid heat.
Fourth race Olive-yellows (Indians) from dry heat.[30]

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[28] Bernasconi, "Who Invented the Concept of Race?: Kant's Role in the Enlightenment Construction of Race," 23.
[29] Kant, "Of the Different Races of Human Beings (1775)," 95.
[30] Ibid.

We see here that before he racializes Northern Europeans (the high blondes), he locates "Whites of brunette color" as the "phyletic species."[31] Carter notices that the use of "race" as a descriptor of these inhabitants has dropped out of use, here. For him this move suggest that "whites are a group apart."[32] Here, I think it is worth quoting Carter at length in order to get the full extent of his argument:

> [For Kant, whites] are a 'race' that is not quite a race, the race that transcends race precisely because of its 'developmental progress' (*Fortgang)* toward perfection. That Kant's chart refers to the 'noble blond' of northern Europe as the first race (*Erste Rasse*) must not confuse this basic point, for we have already seen that, properly speaking, this group is really an *Abartung* from the stem genus (*Stammgattung*). At best they are a special kind of 'race.' And even this stem genus of white brunettes which itself is not a race, is ... only the remnant ... of the stem genus. They are a remnant moving toward raciation, progressing toward becoming a race.[33]

Carter recognizes this move as making whiteness "a present reality, and yet [that which] is also still moving toward and awaiting its perfection."[34] For Carter, then whiteness becomes "the teleological end, which is the consummation of all things within the economic, political, and aesthetic—in short, within the structural—reality called 'whiteness.'"[35]

Understanding this developmental telos with whiteness as its origin and end is crucial to note in moving forward. In the move from natural history to biology occurs at the beginning Nineteenth century, one finds a shift in scientific thought where practices of observing and theorizing processes and development. This is a departure from the natural scientific approach of observing and *classifying* the visible differences of things and is especially important as we now turn to the racial situation in Nineteenth century United States where the debate on polygenesis and monogenesis reaches its climax in the clash

31 Carter, *Race*, 89.
32 Ibid., 88.
33 Ibid., 89.
34 Ibid.
35 Ibid.

between anti-slavery abolitionists and pro-slavery defenders. The logic of teleology continued to legitimate White claims to supremacy on *both* sides of the debate. Through analyzing this debate, the workings of rhetoric become clearer in thinking about black subjectivity as a slave-subjectivity—a *being for* their master. As it will become clearer, the language of the human or the subject is compromised language within the regime of White supremacy. As such, the term's application to black persons is not capable of wrenching them free from the grips of a captive body, but rather, reinscribes them within that same position. However, first we must cross the Atlantic to the United States and apprehend an understanding of the scene there.

Science, "Race", and Sexuality

Polygeny and monogeny both arise during the age of naturalism as theories on the origins of races and their development.[36] But, and perhaps more importantly to the task here, these theories rise to particularly intense levels during the slavery abolition movement as it exists in the Nineteenth century. While both groups held some diversity within them as far as what their views on racial origins meant for the place of Black people (and Native Americans) in society, a common stance for monogenists, whether abolitionists or not, was to understand the variations across races as "a product of degeneration from Eden's perfection,"[37] (with white people positioned closer to perfection and black people representing the most debased state of existence) while polygenists often understood the difference in species to situate Blacks and Native Americans closer to the animal in likeness

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36 Stephen Jay Gould, "American Polygeny and Craniometry Before Darwin: Blacks and Indians" in *The "Racial" Economy of Science: Toward a Democratic Future*, *ed.* Sandra Harding. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 90–1.

37 Ibid., 90.

than the human.[38]

While the polygenist scientist, Johan Friedrich Blumenbach is credited as articulating the five racial classifications that species fit into: Caucasian, Mongolian, Ethiopian, American, and Malay, Blumenbach himself understood these categories to have shades of gray between them. Unfortunately, many who utilized them did not. One such person is Samuel Morton, an American physician and anthropologist. For Morton, the five races were not only different species, they were also fundamentally distinct from one another in their development.[39] He coupled this understanding of their distinction with a notion of their inherent stability. While some polygenists, attributing the differences between racial groups to variables like the weather or geographical location, believed the characteristics of "races" could be altered, Morton believed the differences could not change. (As we can see from the discussion of Kant above, this is a similar position, though the method guiding each differs). Thus, while some polygenists (and monogenists) believed the black "race" could be altered and developed to become white, Morton saw blackness as something inescapably primitive and always so.

Morton's polygenism is a bit of a different position from one of the "Founding Fathers" of the United States, Benjamin Rush—a highly regarded physician and abolitionist from Philadelphia—for whom blackness was best understood as a form of leprosy.[40] Indeed, he suggests that though the disease had primarily "ceased to be infectious, more especially from contact," but that there was still danger of this disease being transmitted through sexual intercourse:

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[38] Ladelle McWhorter, *Racism and Sexual Oppression in Anglo-America*, 121.

[39] See Stephen Jay Gould, "Morton's Ranking of Races by Cranial Capacity," *Science* 200, no. 4341, New Series (May 5, 1978): 503–509.

[40] See Benjamin Rush, "Observations Intended to Favour a Supposition That the Black Color (As It Is Called) of the Negroes Is Derived from the Leprosy," *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 4 (January 1, 1799): 289–297.

> A white woman in North Carolina not only acquired a dark color, but several features of a negro, by marrying and living with a black husband. A similar instance of a change in the color of features of a woman in Buck's county Pennsylvania has been observed and from a similar cause. In both these cases, the women bore children by their black husbands.[41]

Blackness, then, seems to be an original sexually transmitted disease in Rush's thought. In understanding blackness as a disease, he was able to offer the remedy, which was that black people could become white when placed under the proper care.[42] Here we see that, regardless of polygenist or monogenist position, the black subject is either stuck in a primitive position, or is diseased and needs to be cured by becoming white.

The construction of blackness as an inherited biological trait formed the foundation for intimately linking fears about “race” and sexuality. The fear of degenerate, diseased, or deviant black bodies mixing with the purity of the white "race" was often used to legitimate racial segregation as well as racist medical practices and classifications. This biologization of “race”, in fact, is one of the primary ways in which the medicalization and pathologization of blackness begins to legitimate black bodies as embodiments of deviance. Soon, this deviant skin color becomes the marker for deviant sexuality and desire, a situation to which we will now turn.

These examples highlight, first, how the importance of science has legitimated white supremacist claims, and second, the ways that within this modern discourse, the Christian convictions of white folks, whether pro-slavery or anti-slavery, are bound together by their belief in “race” as a given and whiteness as the definer of that given. Benjamin Rush, for example, was an active Presbyterian whose faith guided many of his beliefs regarding "race". So, when he wanted to argue for the possibility of living in an integrated society, Rush

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41 Ibid., 294.

42 Ibid., 295–6. Here Rush recalls storys of black people becoming white and suggest different causes for this. Labor and blood-letting are two of the methods.

upheld Christian education along with the "elimination of racial difference" as the hope for a peaceful co-inhabitance of the US.[43] Rush believed that blackness "was not the normal color of any human being's skin and [believed] black skin had to be a symptom of pathology."[44] Indeed, this blackness was disease—a form of leprosy.[45]

Rush's understanding of blackness as disease with a cure which results in becoming white ties back into Carter's reading of Kant's teleology. Namely, that the move to make "race" a germ or gene located within a person's body and passed on to progeny, results in the normalization of certain bodies, those who are less removed from the original human state (which in Kant's and many other scientists' understanding was a state of whiteness) or who are higher on the scale of human development (in the case of racist polygenists theories). These normalized white bodies, then, are held over and against deviant black bodies. The production of deviance here is the result of observation, diagnosis, and prescription. The methods of medicalization are intimately linking with "race" and working to conform certain bodies to the image of whiteness. Furthermore, that the replication of the "races" is located in reproduction becomes the occasion for the ascription of sexual deviance to bodies already marked pathological. It is the goal of medicine, in seeking to make healthy citizens, to bring all others into line beneath this banner of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. To be sure, this is not the case for all abolitionists. This is also not to argue about Rush's intention's or his general good-will towards black folk. Instead, what seems clear is that the connection between "race" and heredity, and between whiteness and teleology fundamentally reposition bodies in light of their governance by white desires.

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43 Ladelle McWhorter, *Racism and Sexual Oppression in Anglo-America*, 105.
44 Ibid., 106.
45 Ibid.

Part I: The Displacement of Desire

Human Nature, Desire, and Displacement

"What is of interest about human nature is its plasticity, its susceptibility to being shaped or molded by outside influences generally."

Kathryn Tanner, *Christ the Key*[46]

"I am talking about longitudinal effects, and that explains the metaphor of architecture. Any house can be filled with new people and new practices, but the very shape of the house and where things are positioned exert a deep and abiding influence on those who live in the house."

Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*[47]

In her systematic theology, *Christ the Key,* Kathryn Tanner attempts to answer what it means for humans to be created in the image of God. In her prelapsarian account of the *imago Dei*, she argues that this ability to image God is an effect of human nature's "lack of given definition, malleability through outside influences, unbounded character, and general openness to radical transformation."[48] Throughout her work, Tanner argues that "human nature must be characterized by an expansive openness that allows for the presence of God within it. It must be the sort of nature that has or makes room for the divine within its basic operation."[49] Central to this account of human nature is Tanner's explanation of what (or who) the image of God is and her emphasis on participation in the life of God as the way in which we achieve this image.

The image of God in Tanner's theology, is not to be attributed to the possession of

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46 Kathryn Tanner, *Christ the Key* (Cambridge, UK ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 40–1.
47 Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 243.
48 Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 1.
49 Ibid., 37.

"reason, free will, or the ability to rule over others as God does."[50] Instead, Tanner takes a Christocentric approach to understanding the image of God and reads Genesis 1:27 as referring to the divine image of the second person of the Trinity.[51] Noting that "humans are not simply said to be the image … but to be made 'in' or 'after' or 'according to' it, … [suggests] the image primarily being referred to is a divine one and not a human one at all."[52] Human's being the image of the second person of the Trinity is the way humans enter into the relational life of the Trinity, and as such image God. There are still differences, though, in how humans are able to image God versus how Christ, the incarnation of the second person of the Trinity, is able to image God. Because Christ *is* the second person of the Trinity, he exists in God's life as a matter of his very nature whereas human beings, as created, are necessarily of a different nature (created versus uncreated) and thus exist in God's life as a matter participation in what they are not.[53]

For Tanner, this difference of nature between Christ and humans shows what possibilities of imaging God are open to humans through participation in God's life. Thus, Tanner explains, there are two kinds of participation, weak and strong, which characterize how humans image God. She attributes a weak kind of participation (which results in a weak image) to created beings as a whole by virtue of their being contingent on God for existence. In this sense, for created beings to exist, they necessarily must participate in God's life.[54] To *be created,* then, is to participate in God's life in a weak sense. Tanner notes that this weak sense is unavoidable due to the "difference in underlying media, so to speak."[55] Because there is a radical disjuncture between being uncreated and being created, "the divine simply

50 Ibid., 1.
51 Ibid., 5.
52 Ibid.
53 Ibid., 7.
54 Ibid., 10.
55 Ibid., 12.

cannot be imitated very well in what is not divine."[56]

The strong kind of participation, though, rather than being a natural property of being as such, is a supernatural gift of the Word and Spirit which is imparted to human nature as that which is not natural to itself, but which human nature requires to image God in a strong sense—to image God as Christ images God.[57] This strong sense of participation is perfectly expressed in the person of Christ, whose hypostatic union of the human and the divine enables him to perfectly image the relations of Triune God. For Tanner, this means that

> ordinary human beings would be the image of God in the strongest sense too, then, not when trying to image the divine image in a created fashion all by themselves, but instead, when drawing near to the divine image so as to become one with it.[58]

For created humans to participate in this strong way, then, requires a creature's reception of "the divine image itself for their own .... [In this way] creatures would receive from God what is beyond themselves – the divine image itself – and be considered the image of God themselves primarily for that reason."[59] Human nature's ability to image God in a strong sense, then, is a product of this ability to be formed by the reception of the image.

This possibility of receiving God's image in a strong sense is what it means to be created in the image of God. Participation in God's life is what humans are created *for*. Without this presence, human beings are without form and incapable of functioning as we ought. At our creation, then, the we are formed, not only by being made as rational creatures, but by being endowed with God's wisdom through gifts of the Word (the one who shows us how to image God) and the Holy Spirit (the one who enables us to image

56 Ibid.
57 Ibid.
58 Ibid., 13.
59 Ibid., 12.

God), which guide our reasoning faculties.[60] These gifts enable human beings to be oriented towards God as that source of our being and the goodness and wisdom which illuminates our understanding of *how* we ought to *be* humans most properly (which is to be images of God). A strong participation in God's life, then, is an inhabitation of the source of our being and the possibility of being receiving the gift of grace which enables to have this divine image for our own. Originally, Tanner speculates, this strong sense of participation through grace was the end human beings moved towards by abiding in God's life.[61] Until then, waiting for the Incarnation, the presence of the Word and the Spirit's given to us at our creation, enabled our abiding in God's life and sustained our attachment to the divine and our movement towards imaging God in the strongest sense.[62]

The Fall, then, is the loss "of both the Word and Spirit almost immediately as a consequence of sin."[63] This loss occurs by virtue of our possession of these gifts at our creation. Taking them to be our own, we "failed to realize how they could be lost through our own inattention to their cultivation, … by failing to draw upon them, turning away from them, and therefore leading lives inappropriate to them."[64] Thus, in Tanner's prelapsarian account of human nature, it was our changeability that both enabled our strong sense of participation in God and our turning from that life and falling into sin. What is of interest to me in Tanner's account, then, is her emphasis on human freedom in choosing whether its nature will be formed into God's image or not. The process of formation "is not an entirely passive or haphazard process of openness to influence by the environment, but one that the

60 Ibid., 28.
61 Ibid., 19.
62 Ibid., 20–21.
63 Ibid., 32.
64 Ibid., 34.

exercise of human choice directs."[65] This exercise of choice guides the formation of human beings by focusing on and attending to the source by which human life desires to be formed:

> Because of this shaping through affect-laden concern, human life takes a variety of forms depending on what it is people care about …. They thereby attach themselves to these objects of desire and draw them into themselves, so to speak, as variable organizing principles of their lives. [66]

Tanner's account of human nature's formation is useful in its attention to the plasticity and malleability of the human as that which enables its transformation. Of course, this plasticity also opens human nature up to being poorly formed by sin. Addressing the problem of sin, Tanner claims that it is not our "human capacities such as free will" that sin attacks, but rather, "the way divine power is present to us."[67] And more:

> [Sin] makes that power inaccessible to us …. Human nature in and of itself is not the primary or direct focus when considering the effect of sin on us. At issue instead is the status of divine power within us, whether or not, that is, we continue to draw upon it, and the consequences for us if we do not.[68]

For Tanner, then, the ability to participate in God's life in a strong sense through divine power, is what is compromised in sin. While our nature still requires nourishment through participation in the divine life of God for us to exist as we were naturally intended, "sin alters what is available in our surroundings for our proper nourishment."[69] Tanner continues:

> Sin forces us to make do with external inputs to which our nature does not suit us. Missing what we need, we substitute other things for it: created inputs replace a divine one as our central formative principle. But this means we are forced to work in way we are not designed to. Nothing we do, consequently, is satisfying for us. Made to be ever-expanding containers for divine food, we repeatedly take within ourselves created goods with the expectation that they will be similarly

[65] Ibid., 45.
[66] Ibid., 46.
[67] Ibid., 67.
[68] Ibid.
[69] Ibid., 68.

> satisfying; but rather than filling us up those created goods merely run through us leaving us empty and hungry for more[70]

"Of course," writes Tanner, "sin does not make for an unhealthy environment without our cooperation."[71] Sin is the willful inhabitation of "an environment … that is not suitable for our nature; [sin] means we seek of ourselves nourishment that is not good for us."[72] This willful inhabitance of an unhealthy environment points to the disorientation of our "fundamental desires and inclinations … [which are] not properly attuned to our own good, [and are] frail or even damaged in their orientation to what is naturally good for us."[73] Tanner's claim that disoriented desires and inclinations are the source of this willful inhabitance of an unhealthy environment is the grounds for this work.

Here, I apply Tanner's account of the changeability and need for formation human nature requires to the circumstances of black people inhabiting a white supremacist society in the United States. Bringing together Tanner's theological account of human nature and the experiences of black persons serves to expand the understanding of how human nature's plasticity and changeability functions. Tanner's account illuminates how humans can willfully act in collusion with sin through participating in and willfully inhabiting unhealthy environments. Still, Tanner's account seems to run against some limitations in thinking of forced or coercive inhabitance of an unhealthy environment, as is the case in situations of oppression. In attending to events of forced inhabitation, then, the picture of free will as the ability to choose whether we will inhabit a healthy environment (in God's life) or an unhealthy environment (in sin) seems to be called into question. It is not only the plasticity of human nature that is important in this case, but how that plasticity is opened up to re-

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70 Ibid.
71 Ibid., 69.
72 Ibid.
73 Ibid.

formation through its fundamental vulnerability to being shaped.

I suggest that this vulnerability in the plasticity of human nature is best understood as labile to *movement*, both physical and figurative. The situation of created beings in space and time is fundamentally open to acts of destabilization and displacement, which become primary to carrying out the work of oppression, and to the work of redemption in Christ. As Tanner notes, sin does not change the malleability of human nature itself, but it does inhibit what possibilities of nourishment are available to that nature within the spheres that humans inhabit. In what ways, then, are we able to account for how it is that fallen humans, are able to re-form human beings and bodies other than their own into the image they desire? I suggest that through techniques of movement and its regulation we begin to see how these reformations occur.[74]

More specifically, I ponder what strategies of divine empowerment are available to black persons within a White supremacist society through examinations of the "Middle Passage" and the narrative of Harriet Jacobs. I look to the events of the "Middle Passage" and the narrative of Harriet Jacobs to help articulate the disorientations that occur in the disordered desires of White supremacist acts of physical and psychic displacement. First, I explain how these displacements refigure blackness into an image that grants subjectivity to those who are capable of inhabiting whiteness and captivity to who are capable of inhabiting blackness, fundamentally shifting the space of inhabitance in the West.[75] As is the case in the improper use of human plasticity, it is disordered desires that I locate as the source of these physical and psychic displacements.

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74 For more on movement and it's regulation as a technique of power, see Michel Foucault, *History of Madness*, trans. Jean Khalfa (New York: Routledge Press, 2006).

75 Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*.

The Displacement of Desire

"It is still true, alas, that to be an American Negro male is also to be a kind of walking phallic symbol: which means that one pays, in one's own personality, for the sexual insecurity of others."

James Baldwin, "The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy"[76]

"Let's face it. I am a marked woman, but not everybody knows my name. 'Peaches' and 'Brown Sugar,' 'Sapphire' and 'Earth Mother,' 'Aunty,' 'Granny,' God's 'Holy Fool,' a 'Miss Ebony First,' or 'Black Woman at the Podium': I describe a locus of confounded identities, a meeting ground of investments and privations in the national treasury of rhetorical wealth. My country needs me, and if I were not here, I would have to be invented"

Hortense Spillers, "Mamas Baby, Papas Maybe"[77]

Blackness and sexuality have been bound together since the creation of "race". The introduction "race" as a "germ" that is passed down through heredity was the primary contribution of Kant's articulation of "race"—that was enough to make "race" something both biological and tied to the realm of sexuality. It is the acts of displacement as witnessed in the "Middle Passage", that attest to the radical inter-workings of the power of "race" on sexuality and sexuality on "race" and both together on the bodies of black persons. Hortense Spillers elucidates this history in her essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe." The intersection of desires and displacement come to the fore in her analysis of the "Middle Passage" and various slave narratives. Of key insight to her work is the understanding of blackness as forcibly disfigured into a *being for* the white master—a construction that has continued to pervade and reproduce itself in US dominant culture into the present day. Black subjectivity, then, is a slave subjectivity.

Modernity's disfigurations of the black body result in this inescapable ontological position of slavery. Taking after Spillers, Frank B. Wilderson defines the black position in modernity:

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[76] James Baldwin, "The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy," in *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction, 1948-1985* (Macmillan, 1985), 290.

[77] Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," in *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (University of Chicago Press, 2003), 203.

> [Modernity is the] period, [in which] slavery is cathedralized. It 'advances' from a word which describes a condition that anyone can be subjected to, to a word which reconfigures the African body into Black flesh. Far from being merely the experience of the African, slavery is now the African's access to (or, more correctly, banishment from) ontology."[78]

Black subjectivity is paradoxical in its being as non-being. Yet, it is a non-being based in a kind of relationality or (non)relationality. Saidiya Hartman further develops this inference, defining blackness

> in terms of social relationality rather than identity; thus blackness incorporates subjects normatively defined as black, the relations between blacks, whites, and others, and the practices that produce racial difference. Blackness marks a social relationship of dominance and abjection and potentially one of redress and emancipation; it is a contested figure at the very center of social struggle.[79]

These depictions of blackness are a far cry from the neo-liberal multicultural depiction of blacks as a formerly enslaved group who now, for the most part, enjoy their freedom. Instead, Wilderson and Hartman point to the transformations of "Black flesh" into an ontological position of slavery—a position which does not require the physical enslavement of blacks in order to continually repeat and reconstitute black relationality in terms of the master/slave framework.

It is this captive-subjectivity that makes blackness open and labile to holding the displaced desires of whiteness. To be captive—to have a *being for* as constitutive of one's identity is to be necessarily set up in opposition to the other. It is the necessity of invention that Spillers speaks of in the quote that opens this section. The slave's body/being is what enables the articulation of the master's body/being. How do these displacements influence the workings of productive power upon the black body?[80] It appears that these techniques

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78 Frank B. Wilderson, *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Duke University Press, 2010), 18.

79 *Scenes of Subjection*, 56–7.

80 "The body becomes a useful force only if it is both a productive body and a subjected body." in Michel Foucault, *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan, Second Vintage Books ed.

are tied to the doubled black identity that exists doubly as being and non-being—a being and a *being for*. And, power is primarily exercised through the workings of white desire as they are attached to ontological positions. As we have already seen, the work of science to naturalize blackness as a concept also brings with it the pathologization and observation of blackness. The medical procedure of diagnosis, for example, functions to articulate what is wrong with blackness. And, we find, that what is wrong with blackness is not simply its degenerate racial state, but it's deviant sexuality.

The constitution of deviance as an inherent property of the black body/being enjoys fecund use in its reification of limitations of black-subjectivity and a seemingly limitless exploitation by white-subjectivity. Thus, the constraints on the black body function primarily through attributions of excess, while white-subjectivity is depicted as having balanced the passions and thus, as capable of rule. The paradoxical workings of white desire are tied to the paradox embedded in the black body. Blackness as a consolidation of sexual deviance constitutes its totality as an identity and totality as impurity. Blackness is both the excess of desire (it is licentious, brute, lustful) and desire's stagnation (black bodies are incapable of existing outside of their deviant desires).[81] This excess and stagnation, then, becomes the occasion for enforcements of captivity. The perception of blackness as having no boundaries on its desire, no limits to its criminality, legitimates the confinement, quarantining, captivity, violence, and sexual assault of black persons. In reality it is the doubled work of a seemingly restrained, but secretly excessive power, domination, and violence of white supremacy on the black subject that instantiates these deviances. Thus, we see that in the ability to classify, clarify, and contain black-bodies as captive-bodies, sexuality

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(Vintage, 1995), 24. This work's deepening of the understanding of how power functions is fundamental to my thesis.

81 Foucault observes a similar treatment of madness in *History of Madness*. His thought

emerges as a mechanism of producing the black-subject as deviant, lascivious, and in need of restraint.

In looking at the "Middle Passage", we see the key event in rendering black bodies vulnerable to the workings of white desire is an act of physical displacement that enables psychic and theological displacements as well. Hortense Spillers suggests as much, writing:

> Though the notorious 'Middle Passage' appears to the investigator as a vast background without boundaries in time and space, we see it related... to the opening up of the entire Western hemisphere for the specific purposes of enslavement and colonization.[82]

The expulsion of black persons in the "Middle Passage" is the legitimation of the power of the White supremacist logic to decide the uses of blackness and the black body. This is a position the black body seemingly cannot escape, for, the black person is captive within their very subjectivity. Under the guise of illimitable freedom in the boundless expanses of the ocean, black displacement occurs. Black bodies becomes chained to the prison of always existing as that background against which the truth of being as found in Whiteness becomes visible. For the black body—in its position as liminality—displacement in the "Middle Passage" necessarily constitutes the violent force of imperialism.

In this handing over to the water, there is a relinquishing of the black body to the destabilizing properties of water's movements—its work of opening the body up to vulnerability in identity, and the forcible reinterpretation of the body within the realm of the White supremacist logic. The water's destabilizing properties, then, correspond to the destabilizing power enacted upon black bodies in their forcible displacement. The displacement of black persons from their land is an act seemingly in harmony with the movement of the sea and White displacement of black bodies is seen as in harmony with the

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82 Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," in *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (University of Chicago Press, 2003), 213–4.

movement of White progress and civilization. The unity of the work of the ocean and White supremacy in displacing the identities of black persons is brought to the fore:

> Those African persons in "Middle Passage" were literally suspended in the "oceanic," if we think of the latter in its Freudian orientation as an analogy for undifferentiated identity: removed from the indigenous land and culture, and not-yet "American" either, these captive persons, without names that their captors would recognize, were in movement across the Atlantic, but they were also nowhere at all. Inasmuch as, on any given day, we might imagine, the captive personality did not know where s/he was, we could say that they were the culturally "unmade," thrown in the midst of a figurative darkness that "exposed" their destinies to an unknown course.[83]

It is the disorientation of space, that "on any given day... the captive personality did not know where s/he was" that opens the black body/being to being "unmade" and then remade as was seen fit by White supremacist desires.

> 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 of miles away from the point of departure. [84]

The "richness of possibility that is not interrupted, not 'counted'/'accounted,' or differentiated," suggests these desires are necessarily tied to the accumulation of wealth and pleasures that would enable the stability of an emerging national U.S. economy. The necessary stability of the national economy requires the fungibility of the black body/being.

Further, the stability of this economy is fundamentally predicated upon a theological displacement as well. It is the act of displacement logically—displacing Jews and displacing God—that gives European's legitimacy in their actual physical displacement of peoples from across the globe.[85] Even without forcing people to leave the land, they are changing how different cultures are able to inhabit space through viewing them within an imperialistic imagination. The cultural sight of white supremacy, then, sees whiteness as a sign of election

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83 Ibid., 214–5.
84 Ibid., 215.
85 Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 60.

that displaces landscapes and geographic boundedness as a significant mark of identity in exchange for "race" as significant markers of identity.[86]

While Europeans are willingly leaving the places they have been bound to in order to amass wealth, they are forcing African's to leave the lands that are intricately tied to their identity. In the colonizing project, then, identity is becoming shaped by the European desire for boundary-lessness, and whatever ways of knowing community and self that have been established based on places are quite forcefully dislocated.[87] This dislocation of self and communities leaves a silence in the articulation of identity that is filled by "race". As Jennings writes, "The central effect of the loss of the earth as an identity signifier was that native identities, tribal, communal, familial, and spatial, were constricted to simply their bodies, leaving behind the very ground that enables and facilitates the articulation of identity."[88] Within the displacing effects of a colonizing Christianity, identity now resides solely on the body and must be reevaluated within the rising economic order. The way bodies can be known is now subjugated to a rift wherein the earth as a signifier is rent from those bodies who live upon it.[89]

Jennings contrasts the problematic ontological implications of the colonialist project with "Barth's positive ontology of divine being."[90] That is, in understanding God's being as revealed in divine action (particularly in creation, here), God is also revealed as being unconditioned by creation and as such, is supremely independent—supremely free. As created beings, since our being and nature comes out of God's supremely free being, creation is mutually interdependent in that our freedom is a condition of our being created

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86 Ibid., 60–63.
87 Ibid., 53–54.
88 Jennings, *The Christian Imagination,* 43.
89 Ibid., 60.
90 Ibid.

by an unconditioned God; and, as the source of our freedom is the same, we can not escape from our mutual dependence on God and thus our mutual createdness as a part of God's divine action which flows out of God's being.[91] Contrasting Barth's positive ontology with the God-like actions of the colonizers towards the colonized, Jennings conceives of

> racial being [as] an act of continual conference in which mutual interdependence is. . . placed on a trajectory toward an endless becoming organized around white bodies. European colonialists in acts of breathtaking hubris imagined the interlocking nature of all people and things within their own independence of those very people and things."[92]

White being, then, becomes supremely independent in the colonizing act, displacing God as the source of creation's mutual interdependence not only by tying these bodies and lands together anew as property, but by imagining their actions of enslavement and dislocation to arise out of their white beings which are divinely ordered rather than seeing their actions as arising out of a drastic undoing of theology that is destructive to the image of God in the bodies of black Africans as well as the created environment.

This displacement of God, further displaces identity by recognizing it, not as connected to the mutual interdependence of creation and thus pointing to God's being as the source of created being, but as inscribed within a White supremacist understanding of being as a racialized ontological reality wherein Whiteness confers being, nature, *and worth* to the rest of creation. The result is Whiteness, not only displacing God as the supremely free divine being, but drastically reordering the goodness of creation in relation to itself rather than to God. The use of land and bodies, then, becomes ordered by a racial arithmetic wherein the worth of bodies and land lies, not in their revelation of creation as flowing from God's freedom and love, but in their situation as sites of occupation where White rule reaps the fruits of life that are present in the bodies of Black folks and the richness of the earth.

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91 Ibid., 60-1.
92 Ibid., 61.

This racial arithmetic counts and accounts for the black body in terms of its value as a contributor to the wealth of Western empires, particularly, here, the U.S. Spillers notes the working of this arithmetic on gender as an identifier that undergoes transformation as attached to these labile commodities and objects of imperialistic desire:

> Under these conditions, one is neither female, nor male, as both subjects are taken into 'account' as quantities. The female in 'Middle Passage,' as the apparently smaller physical mass, occupies 'less room' in a directly translatable money economy. But she is, nevertheless, quantifiable by the same rules of accounting as her male counterpart.[93]

The black body in the "Middle Passage" undergoes a transformation from flesh to mass that is enabled through the erasure of gender. The mass of blackness, then, "is quantifiable by the same rules of accounting as her male counterpart"—rules which ascribe value to black bodies depending on their ability to produce wealth for the burgeoning economy of a white nation and pleasure for those capable of enjoying the nation's wealth.

The hovering black body/being, broken open over the Atlantic ocean, is rendered pliable within the hands of this capitalistic regime and when the black body reaches this New World, it is met by this new mathematical order, within which, it has, "at least from the point of view of the captive community," come to signify "a private and particular space, at which point biological, sexual, social, cultural, linguistic, ritualistic, and psychological forces converge."[94] These convergences, though, soon become the site of "externally imposed meanings and uses" which Spillers lists:

> (1) the captive body [is] the source of an irresistible, destructive sensuality; (2) at the same time—in stunning contradiction—it is reduced to a thing, to *being* for the captor; (3) in this distance *from* a subject position, the captured sexualities provide a physical and biological expression of 'otherness'; (4) as a category of 'otherness,' the captive body translates into a potential for pornotroping and

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93 Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 206.
94 Ibid.

embodies sheer physical powerlessness.[95]

Here, the 'blackness' of the body is the 'otherness' of the body and the ground for a reshaping of African persons into a captive body that is characterized by the meanings imbued within it—it becomes the site of use, in it's being for, and also a site of loss. With the opening of blackness to its figuration as captive, other figurations of bodies, such as gender, are displaced from the black body in a startling similarity to the displacement of persons from land:

> The loss of the indigenous name/land provides a metaphor of displacement for other human and cultural features and relations, including the displacement of the genitalia, the female's and the male's desire that engenders future. The fact that the enslaved person's access to the issue of his/her own body is not entirely clear in this historic period throws in crisis all aspects of the blood relations, as captors apparently felt no obligation to acknowledge them.96

The possibilities of relationality that exist with the loss of gender, are thrown into a state of confusion, here. The concepts of kinship and intimacy are both thrown into crisis as the proximity of bodies in the "Middle Passage" is used to create more distance between their identities. Upon reaching their destination this distance, for black folks, is the occasion for a diasporic identity wherein "the captive person developed, ... certain ethical and sentimental features that tied her and him, across the landscape to others, ... of the same and different blood in a common fabric of memory and inspiration."[97]

And yet, this diasporic construction of kinship has "no decisive legal or social efficacy."[98] Because the relations of property fundamentally structure how it is that black folks are able to relate to one another and to white people, black bodies' function as captive-subject necessarily undermines any construction of kinship as legally or socially legitimate.

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95 Ibid.
96 Ibid., 217.
97 Ibid., 219.
98 Ibid.

Furthermore, that the relations of property are conferred through a transformation of black females' wombs into the site of the captor's expansion of wealth fundamentally disfigures the 'feminine'. Thus, Rather than birth being that which constitutes black females as mothers and their offspring as children, through the same undoing which sees the dissolution of black bodies as gendered there is the undoing of kinship ties of black bodies for that which transfers property:

> The enslaved must not be permitted to perceive that he or she has any human rights that matter. Certainly if "kinship" were possible, the property relations would be undermined, since the offspring would then "belong" to a mother and a father. In the system [of chattel slavery] genetic reproduction becomes, then, not an elaboration of the life-principle in its cultural overlap, but an extension of the boundaries of proliferating properties.[99]

Here the biological functions of reproduction become subjected to the situation of captivity that defines the black body as a *being for*. Rather than birth being an act that constitutes kinship and a child's relationship to their mother and father, parenting is rent from the function of the black female and male. Instead their bodies, subjugated to the market's logic, reproduce other captive-bodies which further the amassing of wealth and the creation of a class of labor with no rights that cannot be taken away. Spillers argues that it is the convergence of the economic and the social upon the black female body that enables the reproduction of property and further reveals "the dynamics of signification and representation that the gendered female would unravel."[100] Not only is the value of black bodies accounted for within this realm of a capitalist, white supremacist mathematics, but "female 'motherhood' as a rite/right" is undone in the black female body.[101]

This last point has the possibility of making some cringe at its essentialism in the supposed proper attachment of the birth function to the female body. What is important to

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[99] Ibid., 220.
[100] Ibid.
[101] Ibid.

note though, is that Spiller's is attempting to show the ways in which that which supposedly signifies and represents the female body *does not* signify or represent the female when applied to the black female body.As such, attempts to name the black female are misnomers.[102] As a captive body, these supposedly given identifiers of the female are undone because of her position as property—as a *being for*. It is Spiller's (and my) intention to attend to this aporia.

> Because African-American women experienced uncertainty regarding their infants' lives in the historic situation, gendering, in its coeval reference to African-American women, insinuates an implicit and unresolved puzzle both within current feminist discourse and within those discursive communities that investigate the entire problematics of culture.[103]

This puzzling position of gender when it comes into contact with the black body is further exposed in the realm of sexual desire. The black (female) body, here, serves additionally as the container for white sexual desire. As such, the possibility of white pleasure and desire in the realm of chattel slavery is dependent on the black body's vulnerability. This body's vulnerability becomes the possibility for pleasure, as it is the slave body whose labor creates the wealth by which white persons are able to establish pleasurable lifestyles, and it is the slave body who availability as property enables its exploitation by white sexual desire. Hartman locates this intimacy of white pleasure and desire in the fungibility of the slave:

> The relation between pleasure and the possession of slave property ,... can be explained ... by the fungibility of the slave—that is, the joy made possible by virtue of the replaceability and interchangeability endemic to the commodity—and by the extensive capacities of property—that is, the augmentation of the master subject through his embodiment in external objects and persons .... The fungibility of the commodity makes the captive body an abstract and empty vessel vulnerable to the projection of others' feelings, ideas, desires, and values;

This emptiness of the black body as vessel is the condition of its captivity. As such, the black body is open, not only to having meanings and desires imposed on it, but the actions of the black body/being in its captivity further reify the position of enslaved. We see this through

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102 See the Spillers quote that opens this section.
103 Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 224.

the captor's ability to possess the body as his/her own:

> The dispossessed body of the enslaved is the surrogate for the master's body since it guarantees his disembodied universality and acts as the sign of his power and dominion. Thus, while the beaten and mutilated body presumably establishes the brute materiality of existence, the materiality of suffering regularly eludes (re)cognition by virtue of the body's being replaced by other signs of value, as well as other bodies.[104]

The displacement of white sexual desire onto the black body, then, is simply another instance of the exploitation of the exchangeability of human nature (as read through the black body's). Through its transportation across the Atlantic and the displacement of identity, the black body is physically opened to the whims of White supremacist desire—for the wealth and pleasure of white subjects. But also as an originary construction of "race", the black body is also that opening out of which the possibility of white subjectivity emerges. Thus, we see in Harriet Jacobs' Incidents in the Life of a Slave girl, for example, how the black (female) body becomes the vehicle for the possibility of white possession of sexual desire for themselves, and further, the use of black bodies in chattel slavery enables the possibility for white persons inhabiting space as the objects of another's desire. This will become clearer as we look at Jacob's account.

First published in 1861 under the pseudonym Linda Brent, Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl,* recounts her experience of slavery as a black female in all of its grim brutality, not the least of which is her triangulation in the relationship of her owner and his wife. When her master, Dr. Flint, begins to proffer sexual advances to the teenaged Jacobs, Mrs. Flint's anger and attention is direct at Jacobs as if she is willfully seducing Dr. Flint. When Mrs. Flint confronts Jacobs and Jacobs recounts Dr. Flint's advances, Mrs. Flint forces Jacobs to sleep in the bedroom next to hers. At first Jacobs believes this to be a way for her to be rescued from the anxiety-ridden interactions with Dr. Flint, but soon, this situation

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[104] Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 21.

comes to be more terror-filled than her interactions with Dr. Flint are. Jacobs recounts Mrs. Flint's actions:

> Sometimes I woke up, and found her bending over me. At other times she whispered in my ear, as though it were her husband who was speaking to me, and listened to hear what I would answer. If she startled me, on such occasion, she would glide stealthily away; and the next morning she would tell me I had been talking in my sleep, and ask who I was talking to. At last, I began to be fearful for my life.[105]

Mrs. Flint's terrorizing of Jacobs in the night becomes another instance of white desire being displaced on the vulnerable black body. Spillers' commentary on this passage is exceptional and worth quoting at length:

> The 'jealous mistress' here (but 'jealous' for whom?) forms an analogy with the 'master' to the extent that male dominative modes give the male the material means to fully act out what the female might only *wish*. The mistress in the case of Brent's narrative becomes a metaphor for his madness that arises in the ecstasy of unchecked power. Mrs. Flint enacts a male alibi and prosthetic motion that is mobilized at *night,* at the material place of the dream work. In both male and female instances, the subject attempts to *inculcate* his or her will into the vulnerable, supine body. Though this is barely hinted on the surface of the text, we might say that Brent, between the lines of her narrative, demarcates a sexuality that is neuterbound, inasmuch as it represents an open vulnerability to a gigantic sexualized repertoire that may be alternately expressed as male/female. Since the gendered female *exists* for the male, we might suggest that the ungendered female —in an amazing stroke of pansexual potential—might be invaded/raided by another *woman* or man."[106]

Here the ambiguities of gender, sexuality, and desire, as displayed when they are in contact with the ungendered black body come to the fore. Spillers' locates the enactment of white sexual displacement as a product of the white imagination working on the vulnerability of the black body. Further, it is the extension of patriarchal power as wished for and enacted by the white woman that enacts these displacements. These possibilities for coercion and exploitation mark the site of the black body as labile to the workings of white desire while simultaneously marking the white body as capable of desiring through its use of the black

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105 Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, ed. Nell Irvin Painter (Penguin Classics, 2000), 33.
106 Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 222.

body. It is the black body's fungibility, it's ungendered possibility of being "invaded/raided by another *woman* or man" that displays the extent to which the captive body is necessarily inscribed within its existence as *being for* the other. And through this fungible black body that Mrs. Flint achieves some subjectivity of her own. The white and black female bodies are both doubles and negations of one another. Each represents the possibilities open to the other's body.[107]

Thus, the scene of the white woman utilizing the black female body as the vehicle for her desire stands out as an instances wherein the vulnerability of the black female body to abuse and rape, becomes the occasion for the white woman to work a displacement of her desires that enables some kind of subjectivity for herself within a patriarchal society and is aided by the relations of property that constitute black subjectivity in chattel slavery. "Thus," writes Saidiya Hartman, "the desire to don, occupy, or possess blackness or the black body as a sentimental resource and/or locus of excess enjoyment is both founded upon and enabled by the material relations of chattel slavery."[108] Indeed, the black body as "a sentimental resource and/or a locus of excess enjoyment," is fundamental to the possibility of using the black body.

In other words, the displacement of white sexual desires is read onto the black body through hearing black female articulations of their plight (being subject to sexual violence from their masters) as consent and desire for sexual encounters with their masters/white

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107 "We could say that African-American women's community and Anglo-American women's community, under certain shared cultural conditions, were the twin actants on a common psychic landscape, were subject to the same fabric of dread and humiliation. Neither could claim her body and its various productions—for quite different reasons, albeit—as her own, and in the case of the doctor's wife, she appears not to have wanted her body at all, but to desire to enter someone else's, specifically, Linda Brent's, in an apparently classic instance of sexual 'jealousy' and appropriation. In fact, from one point of view, we cannot unravel one female's narrative from the other's, cannot decipher one without tripping over the other. In that sense, these 'threads cable-strong' of an incenstuous, interracial geneaology uncover slavery in the United States as one of the richest displays of the psychoanalytic dimensions of culture before the science of European psychoanalysis takes hold." Ibid., 223.

108 Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 21.

men. Here, the black body becomes the means and lens through which white women are able to experience intimacy through black women's supposed excess of desire for white men. This dysfunctional substitution of the white body for the black, thrives on the denouncements of black female articulations as necessarily hiding lust beneath their cries of non-desire and ultimately renders black women as the agents of sexual deviance and responsible for their own rape. Regardless of what they say, black women are always going to be subject to violence for their criminality. This attribution of criminality, in fact, continued to exacerbate the fungibility of the slave, as the possibility of exchanging the slave body is what enables these desires to reside within the black body/being.

Hartman highlights how the uses of the, slave coupled with the slave's excess of pleasures (deviant as they are), occlude the violence to which the slave is subject. For, "although, ... enjoyment was predicated on the wanton uses of slave property, it was attributed to the slave in order to deny, displace, and minimize the violence of slavery."[109] This occlusion of violence is also an occlusion of white dependence on the slave for the possibility of their desire. Instead, "The expectations of the slave property are ontologized as the innate capacities and inner feelings of the enslaved, and moreover, the ascription of excess and enjoyment to the African effaces the violence perpetrated against the enslaved."[110] Indeed, Jacobs tells us as much when she writes: "[The slave] is not allowed to have any pride of character. It is deemed a crime in her to wish to be virtuous."[111] Thus black criminality, sexuality, and subjectivity converge under the shadow of property relations that fundamentally reinscribe their actions within the conditions of their subjugation. Both black (female) submission and resistance to the desires of her white owners is an occasion for the

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[109] Ibid., 25.
[110] Ibid., 26.
[111] Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 34.

slave's constructd criminality to be reinforced, her sexuality to be re-constituted as deviant, and her subjectivity to be re-figured as a *being for*.

Hartman notes how it is these convergences, these optical illusions of occlusion, than shape blackness as a 'given'. Her work is concerned with exposing exactly how it is the performance of black subjectivity—a coerced position—that constitutes this givenness.[112] The forcibly created and maintained body of blackness as an inherent bio-sacrament, a inner truth expressed through the outward sign of black skin (however arbitrarily that is constructed) is a product of a strategic violation of the black body/being which depends on the deviance of black bodies to constitute their criminality—a criminality which in turn opens the black body up again for punishment and rearticulates blackness as an object to be feared. Here, it is the convergence of white desires and the discourses (legal, social, theological, scientific, etc.) that enable the black body/being to be *used for* another. But also, it is the coupling of the desires and discourses with the materiality of black flesh that enables the displacement of desire that necessarily maintain blackness as deviant. Thus, discursive and non-discursive techniques are employed to maintain the givenness of the black body as slave.

> [It] is not that the black body exists prior to the discourses and practices that produce it as such but that what is particular to the discursive constitution of blackness is the inescapable prison house of the flesh or the indelible drop of blood—that is, the purportedly intractable and obdurate materiality of physiological difference.[113]

The impossibility of getting out of black body renders the dis-figuration of blackness into an "inescapable prison house of the flesh" seemingly total in its transformation and inherent in its performance. The black body, it seems, is forced into inhabiting this position and space as an object whose subjectivity simply girds up its objectivity. The workings of desire on this

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112 Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 57.
113 Ibid., 58.

object are enabled by the legally and socially constituted relations of property that define the black body/being. Here, a series of theological insights also get at how power is at work.

Just as "the presence of the divine is what makes the human capacities of reason and will expand," it is the presence of domination and exploitation that forecloses human capacities of reason and will as we see in the situation of the black slave. For, the black slave is forcibly dis-located within a landscape ordered by the logic, not of a divinely loving and creating power, but of a tyrannical supremacy of whiteness, capital, and patriarchy. The disorder of white desire, then, works to foreclose possibilities of black desire that would exist towards another who is not the (white) master.

Aporetic Openings

The dissolution of identity that occurs in the displacement of black bodies from land and identity from bodies suggests the precarious position the plasticity of human nature necessarily entails.[114] This malleability is not just a possibility of opening for God's transformation, but it is a vulnerability liable to exploitation by other persons and powers. The undoings of identity here have as their root, not the divine power and love of the triune God, but the disordered desires of empire which enable the physical and figurative displacements necessary for this white supremacist libidinal economy to consume this vulnerable and open black flesh. In many ways, then, Mrs. Flint's desire to inhabit another's body capable of desire could be read as an exemplification of the underlying theological problem.

The disordered desire here points to the longing for an eschatological body capable

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[114] Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 206.New World, diasporic plight marked a *theft* of the *body*—a *willful* and violent (and unimaginable from this distance) severing of the captive body from its motive will, its active desire. Under these conditions, we lose at least *gender* difference *in the outcome*, and the female body and the male body become a territory of cultural and political maneuver, not at all gender-related, gender specific." in Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 206.

of desiring rightly. These misreading of theological desire as sexual contribute to the problematic entrapment of the black body within these sexual exploitative conditions. It is, then, the inability to hear desire in its *theological* tenor that disables white persons from inhabiting a body capable of desire—the body of Christ (which is developed in the next section). But, it also seems to foreclose the possibility of transformative action to simply end here, in the foreclosure of possibility of getting *out of* this logic, *out of* this vulnerability, and *out of* the doubled identities produced within this cultural regime. Indeed, I argue that strategies for transformation ought not to attempt the extraction of exploited bodies from these positions of vulnerability, but rather, ought to see the ways the logic's origination upon these doubled identities and vulnerabilities is indeed the possibility of its undoing.

What I mean here is that the possibilities of resignifying the black (and white) body are opened up by the very conditions of their oppression. The plasticity, excessive desire, criminality, vulnerability, and doubling that serve as the grounds that necessarily enable White racist logic and desire to dis-order the black body also reveal the fault line that runs through the white subject who, even in the occlusion of their constitution as contingent upon the enslaved body, is liable to the same fragility (though in a different mode) that characterizes the black slave.

Saidiya Hartman shows this in Harriet Jacobs narrative by pointing to the way Jacobs as an author utilizes the position of her enslavement as weakness to smuggle her desire for understanding of the difference in position of slave women and free white women in the North. Hartman reads this reversal of desire and vulnerability as a destabilization of white female subjectivity through the alluring ruse of seduction as a narrative tool. Jacobs plays on sentimental literary tropes and the compromised position of the slave girl "introduces [Northern white women] to the situation ethics of the enslaved and the necessary practices

of cunning, duplicity, and sophistry."[115] For Hartman the utilization of this desire, though, does not liberate Jacobs as a free doer, but rather necessarily requires her participation within a discourse that requires her self-effacement in order to assert her agency and desires. This need to smuggle her intentions into her humiliation, then, is the predicament of the enslaved whose deviant sexuality renders her incapable of existing outside of this always already compromised position. I wonder, then, if the person of Christ gives us any insight into how existing within this compromised position in a new modality is made possible through the vulnerability, desire, and doubled identity that seem to be the conditions only of oppression.

115 Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 107.

Part II: Desire and Displacement in Christological Perspective

Movement, Human Nature, and Redemption

"Movement driven by desire has not yet come to rest in that which is ultimately desirable. Unless that which is ultimately desirable is possessed , nothing else is of such a nature as to bring to rest what is being driven by desire. Therefore if something moves it has not come to rest, for it has not yet attained the ultimately desirable. Those who have not yet reached the end, since they have not yet come to rest."

St. Maximus the Confessor, "Ambiguum 42"[116]

As we have seen, the investigation of black subjectivity as a way into theological understandings of human nature, sin, and redemption comes with several obstacles, I have focused on displacement, especially as it pertains to sexual desires and the libidinal economy of exchange that arises to account for black bodies. Spillers' and Jennings' readings of the violent displacements that occur under colonialism and in the "Middle Passage" as those spaces which open up the black body to its erasure from humanity show physical and figurative displacement as fundamentally implicated in the annihilation of black bodies and being. By this, I mean that both the body and the being of black persons are fundamentally incoherent as bodies and being within the logic of White supremacy.

I would suggest, though, that to read Spillers and Jennings insights into displacement as the only mode in which displacement can function is too hasty a discarding of the work of displacement and its ability to open up persons to alternate modes of existence. I would suggest that we can further expand upon Spillers' and Jennings' insights into how displacement functions. Here, a turn to the theological, particularly the Christological, shows Christ's body is able to interpret displacement as an act of Christian discipleship that is not an annihilation of the self or the self's negation. Instead, Christ's displacement suggests a suspension of the self that *preserves the body as being* within the Trinitarian life. In order to

[116] Maximus the Confessor, "Ambiguum 42," in *On the Cosmic Mystery of Jesus Christ: Selected Writings from St. Maximus the Confessor*, trans. Paul M. Blowers and Robert Louis Wilken (Crestwood, NY: StVladimir's Seminary Press, 2003), [1069B], 47.

address this way of preserving the body within the Trinitarian life, through Christ, I turn to several works by Maximus the Confessor's that pertain to the concept of movement as a property of being.

In the previous section's discussion of human nature as fundamentally a plasticity, an ability to be formed, we came to see that it is a function of disordered movements and forcible displacements that open the black body up to meaning as a *being for*. This vulnerability that is inherent to movement—exemplified, here, in the physically displaced black bodies who were transported across the Atlantic and the figurative movement of white desire onto black bodies in constituting white subjectivity—is proper to human nature as a whole. Indeed, this understanding of movement as a property of *being* is no creation of modernity. The patristic theologians Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, and Maximus the Confessor each develop theological and metaphysical understandings of movement as it relates to human nature.

One of Maximus' key insights into the nature of movement comes out of his responses to Origen's cosmology. I will briefly summarize this cosmology here in a way that lacks Origen's rich nuance but will help us see how Maximus builds on his concepts. For Origen, creation begins with God's creation of rational beings who exist in a pre-historic rest in the life of God from which they fall due to their attention being moved away from God.[117] Origen's cosmology, then, "could be stated concisely as a triad: becoming-rest-movement. Rational beings become (that is, come to be), they first enjoyed a state of rest and contemplation, they fell and initiated movement."[118] The result is that God created

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117 For more, see Origen, *De Principiis,* in *Fathers of the Third Century: Tertullian, Part Fourth; Minucius Felix; Commodian; Origen, Parts First and Second*, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. Frederick Crombie, vol. 4, 1st ed., The Ante-Nicene Fathers (Grand Rapids, Michigan: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1885), 2.9.2.

118 Andrew Louth, "Cosmic Theology," in *Maximus the Confessor* (London; Routledge, 1996), 64.

bodies as punishment for becoming bored with God but also as a way of enabling human beings to return to life with God. For Maximus, the problem with Origen's understanding of movement and rest was that Origen understood the two to coexist. In Maximus' view, this is an impossibility. Movement, for Maximus, is a property of being. As such, to *be* is to be in motion—to exist as a differentiated being from others due to one's being in motion, one's being in space and time.[119] For God to create humans, then, was to necessarily create human nature as *being in motion,* as "no creature is by nature unmoved."[120] Movement, then, is related to becoming and is directed by desire towards rest in God.[121] Here, Maximus performs a reconfiguration of Origen's triad, from becoming-rest-movement to becoming-movement-rest.

For Maximus, this reconfiguration of movement enables a way of understanding finitude and materiality as proper to the created world and not as punishment for the loss of attention towards God.[122] However, this reconfiguration still allows Maximus to retain Origen's concept of the human will's movement as able to lead to sin. This inclination to sin, though, is not what is most natural to the human will, however. Sinful inclinations in movement are a distortion from the Fall.[123] "The human person," writes Maximus, "is not moved naturally, as it was fashioned to do, around the unmoved, that is its own beginning (I

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119 While his own theological commitments definitely shape his interpretation of Maximus' work, I find Balthasar's reading of being and movement in Maximus's work to be highly engaging and perceptive in his understanding of Maximus' metaphysics. See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy : the Universe According to Maximus the Confessor*, trans. Brian E. Daley (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2003), 138.

120 Maximus the Confessor, "Ambiguum 7," in *On the Cosmic Mystery of Jesus Christ: Selected Writings from St. Maximus the Confessor*, trans. Paul M. Blowers and Robert Louis Wilken (Crestwood, NY: StVladimir's Seminary Press, 2003), 47.

121 Ibid., 46.

122 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy*, 130.

123 To be sure, there is more nuance to Maximus's understanding of the will, namely, the distinction between the natural will and the gnomic will in his writings. Here, my references to the will in Maximus' work are concerned with his understanding of how the natural will ought to cooperate with the divine will. As such, I blur the lines between the natural and the gnomic quite a bit. For a deeper examination of the will in Maximus, see Ian A. McFarland, "'Naturally and by Grace': Maximus the Confessor on the Operation of the Will," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 58, no. 4 (2005): 410–433.

mean God), but contrary to nature is voluntarily moved in ignorance around those things that are beneath it, to which it has been divinely subjected"[124] Thus, movement towards sin is contrary to the natural function of movement, which is to be directed by desire towards the good that is God.[125]

I take up Maximus' conception of movement because movement is fundamental to understanding displacement and desire as they function problematically in the tearing of people from land and conjuring of "race" as a marker of captivity and freedom in the "Middle Passage" and chattel slavery. But movement is also fundamental to understanding how desire and displacement function as they operate Christologically—as a function of discipleship which opens up bodies *to be joined in meaning as the body of Christ* through the reordering of desire. Maximus' cosmological reading of Christ guides my reading of the possibility of displacement as an act of discipleship both in it's understanding of human nature as directed by desire (for good or for ill), and its articulation of the means by which Christ's assumption of humanity enables the possibility of moving anew. That is, this process occurs through a divine reordering of desire and thus, the cooperation between the human will and the divine will that enables humans to experience God's life as fully as possible. In the Incarnation, then, Christ breathes life into the lethargic limbs of those inhabiting a world of suffering and oppression and offers his body—a body capable of desiring rightly—as the space in which we now live and move and have our beings. The way Christ becomes this new place of dwelling for us is through a uniting of divine power with human lack, a unity that requires the principle of movement, or change, as one that is proper to human nature for its possibility. This unity, we will see, is perfectly seen in Christ's performance of the

124 Maximus the Confessor, "Difficulty 41," in *Maximus the Confessor*, by Andrew Louth (London; Routledge, 1996), 1089D.
125 Maximus the Confessor, "Ambiguum 42," 47.

slave (Phil. 2:7).

Thus, it is an exercise of movement that enables human desire to turn *away from* God and it is an act of divine movement in Christ's assumption of humanity that enables humans to move naturally again. “For,” writes Maximus, “[Christ] had this as the sole cause of his fleshly birth – the salvation of human nature,” and by virtue of this birth he became “subject to [humanity's] passibility.”[126] This subjection to humanity's passibility, as we will see, becomes the means through which Christ perfectly performs how it is that the human will ought to function naturally in cooperation with the divine will.

Indeed it is Christ's being “emptied out without change all the way to the passibility of our nature” that enables Christ to assume humanity “in an authentic sense.”[127] In the Incarnation, Christ truly becomes human without a loss of divinity. This true assumption enables a true perception—an image of the invisible God that is the revelation of the work of God's divine power upon the plasticity of human nature:

> Having become truly subject to natural perception by means of the incarnation, a visible God, also called, 'God below', he has made manifest the super-infinite power by means of flesh which is passible by nature, 'since it' – and this unambiguously refers to the flesh – 'was mixed with God, and he has become one. In this, the better part achieved the victory', for the deifying Word actually assumed flesh in a hypostatic identity.[128]

The openness of the body to the work of God (that “he has made manifest the super-infinite power by means of flesh which is passible by nature”) is, here, the occasion for the restoration of humanity, not through coercive force, but through Christ's perfectly performing the very nature by which human beings exist as such—through processes of movement, or change, that fundamentally shape and reshape desire.

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126 Maximus the Confessor, “Ambiguum 3” in *Maximus the Confessor: Ambigua to Thomas, Second Letter to Thomas*, trans. Joshua Lollar (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2009), 55.

127 Ibid.

128 Ibid.

How is it that Maximus' thought can conceive of movement as enabling reshaping without fundamentally changing the nature of the thing? Here, Kathryn Tanner's articulation of weak and strong senses of participation are useful in enunciating how it is that God redeems humanity in Maximus' view. First, by virtue of being made by God, all created things participate in God in that their life is absolutely contingent upon God's life, whereas God, as creator, has freely entered into relationship with creation and does not depend on creation for existence. Thus, there is a radical otherness between God and the world in that God and creation are wholly different kinds of things. And yet, there is a radical intimacy too in that the world is absolutely dependent on God for its life and must always be existing *within* God. Because of this shared life in God, there are shared qualities between created things. One of these shared qualities, for Maximus, is the way movement works, it creates changes which fundamentally alter *the mode of being* or *how* it exists, but does not alter "the natural principle" of the thing itself or *what* the thing is and the laws that regulate what possibilities of change are available.

For example, my physically moving from a city to a rural farm town would be a fundamental altering of the possibilities that are open to me for *how* I exist (I may have to grow my own food, for instance, rather than going to the grocery store for everything I eat). My existing within this rural farm town, though, might move me to desire comforts of the city more. But while these movements *do* change *how* I inhabit space (I will have to get used to a new landscape and what exists within it, and I may be terribly bitter about not being in the city), and are formative of myself as a person (I may change my understanding of myself as a city dweller and begin to view myself as a rural farmer who misses the city) neither of these movement is an altering of my being psychosomatic, or my being human, for

instance.[129] This somewhat extravagant example exemplifies the point that movement is a property of being is constant, but it does not just arise in "big" or immediately-felt movements.[130] Indeed, writes Maximus, "generally speaking, all innovation is manifested in relation to the mode of the thing innovated, not its natural principle."[131] If this were not the case, "the principle, if it undergoes innovation, [would] corrupt the nature, as the nature in that case does not maintain inviolate the principle according to which it exists."[132] Thus, to be moved is necessarily a shaping of ones mode of being, not a changing of one's nature as such.[133]

The principle by which human nature exists is "in soul and body as one nature constituted of rational soul and a body; but its mode is the scheme in which it naturally acts and is acted upon, which can frequently change and undergo alteration without changing at all the nature along with it."[134] In using scheme to denote that which shows the structure or arrangement of a thing, Maximus suggests that the mode within which humanity naturally "acts and is acted upon" is movement. Thus, *how* the human plasticity (which is its natural principle) is shaped is through processes of movement within space and time. This plasticity is what differentiates its activity from others creatures (human and non-human alike), and this differentiation depends on one's location within a particular space and time and the direction of desires, both yours and others toward you.

This way of altering modes without altering the principle by which the nature exists

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129 Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 225–27.

130 It is important to note, here, that this idea of movement is not a commentary on processes of evolution, but is concerned with the metaphysical concept of movement as it relates to differentiation, activity, and change.

131 Maximus the Confessor, "Ambiguum 42," 89.

132 Ibid., 90.

133 This differentiation between mode of being and natural principles of being becomes important when we look at how an understanding of its own humanity has been available to black person even as the black body/being as a captive body/being has been unavailable and open to white desires.

134 Maximus the Confessor, "Ambiguum 42," 90.

is not exclusive to humanity (as we have seen, it is characteristic of all being), for "such is the case for every other created thing as well, when God, because of his providence over what he has preconceived and in order to demonstrate his power over all and through all things, desires to renew it with respect to its creation."[135] Thus, we see that God's way of renewing creation is to alter the mode in which a thing exists according to the principle by which it exists. God thus moves creation simultaneously according to God's own desires and to the nature of the things itself.[136] Indeed, Maximus' point seems to be the naturalness of the way God's power works on created beings. "The mode thus innovated, while the natural principle is preserved, *displays a miraculous power, insofar as the nature appears to be acted upon, and to act, clearly beyond its normal scope.*[emphasis mine]"[137] Thus God empowers nature *in the most natural way possible*, indeed, an *excessively* normal way ("beyond its normal scope").

Maximus offers several examples of this empowering at work. This empowerment is seen in the lives of Enoch and Elijah whom "God acted on... when he translated... [them] from life in the flesh, subject to corruption, to a different form of life... not by altering their human nature, but by changing the mode and domain of action proper to their nature."[138] Also, in turning the water in Egypt to blood "without denying its nature at all, since the water remained water by nature even after it turned red."[139] But, Maximus locates the Incarnation as that event "for which and through which all these other [innovations] took place." It is in the Incarnation, then, that

> God innovated human nature in terms of its mode, not its principle, by assuming flesh mediated by an intelligent soul; for he was ineffably conceived without human

135 Ibid.

136 Tanner's insistence that where we dwell (in God or in sin) does not compromise our free will (which would be the principle by which our nature exists), but rather, compromises what modes of divine power (or innovation) are available to us, resonates strongly here.

137 Maximus the Confessor, "Ambiguum 42," 90. [Emphasis mine].

138 Ibid.

139 Ibid.

> seed and truly begotten as perfect man without corruption, having an intelligent soul together with his body from the very same moment of his ineffable conception.[140]

This unity of the person of Christ is the image of the "perfect man without corruption" because Christ, being God and man, has joined the divine power to the nature of humanity and works, in a perfection of humanity's movement, to bring desires into their right order by means of exceeding the normal scope of human willing. By this we see that the way Christ reorders humanity's desire is through his exceeding the threshold of the normal in such a perfectly uncorrupted way that the normal itself is reinvigorated with this grace—with this excessively perfect desire—and able to mean anew.

And it is here, in Christ's performance of humanity *par excellence,* that we begin to see how practices of Christian discipleship might uncover a way of inhabiting identities and places anew. As an example of this Maximus points to Philippians 2 as showing how Christ perfectly unites humanity and divinity through the work of divine power. Here, Paul exhorts the Philippians to imitate Christ by having his mind, a mind that leads Christ to dispossess himself of his form as God and take up the form of a human—the form of a slave (Phil. 2:1-8). Reading this depiction of Christ's assumption of humanity as a *performance* of the slave, Maximus writes:

> By performing the activities of a slave as a master would perform them, that is, fleshly activities in a divine way, he demonstrated the dispassionate power which naturally rules among fleshly things, making corruption disappear through suffering, and fashioning indestructible life through death. Likewise, by doing the deeds of a master while comporting himself like a slave, that is, the divine deeds by means of the flesh, he showed forth an ineffable self-emptying, which does a divine work by means of passible flesh for the whole human race that had become earthen in corruption.[141]

Here, Christ performs the slave on two levels. First, he performs the slave—that is the

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[140] Ibid., 91.

[141] Maximus the Confessor, "Ambiguum 4," in *Maximus the Confessor: Ambigua to Thomas, Second Letter to Thomas*, trans. Joshua Lollar (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2009), 59–60.

human—to perfection (he is the most human of all humans) and as such, exceeds the normative activity for human nature. He images how the human will ought to cooperate with the divine will. And secondly, in a doubling of the slave/human, Christ performs the slave *as performing the master*—that is the divine—and shows the slave to be capable of acting out "the divine deeds." This capability of performance requires "an ineffable self emptying" where Christ extends the divine power to the limits of human nature's vulnerability (that is the position of the slave) *and then exceeds* this extension in his death on the cross. Further, he extends the distance of the first and second persons of the Trinity by dying. This extension is indeed, a break—a rupture of foreclosed human desires and of the relations of the first and second persons of the Trinity. But there is also a reversal that is performed, through the power of the Spirit. In the emptiness of the grave, this divine power shows that even death is a limit that can be exceeded by divine power and love. Christ's emptying of himself, even to the point of death, is the rupture opens to the Spirit's work of testifying to the love of the Father for the Son.

The work of the Spirit, here, in bearing witness relationship between the Father and the Son which images the desire towards humanity that they have for one another, also works to preserve the love between the two:

> The Spirit's role [is] as the one who in the aftermath of the crucifixion confesses that the love uniting the Father and the Son is stronger than death. If the... [relation of the Father and Son] ... finds its limit on Calvary, in the resurrection the Spirit makes the further, decisive confession that even this limit is no limit.[142]

Indeed, it is this love towards us that guides the perfect cooperation of the wills in the person of Christ and enables the preservation of each nature, divine and human, in their particularity so that even in their being exceeded, broken, and ruptured open, they are

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[142] Ian A. McFarland, "The Ecstatic God : The Holy Spirit and the Constitution of the Trinity," *Theology Today* 54, no. 3 (1997): 340.

perfectly united, held together (not dissolved into one another), in the body of Christ.[143] The unity of form in the person of Christ (that the divine assumes the human who perfectly performs the slave performing the master) not only holds together, but exemplifies the union of the wills as one that functions through the cooperation of the natures. This cooperation is the center of Christ, the God-man, who,

> Acting in both [natures] reciprocally and naturally, ... was shown truly to preserve them, preserving them unconfused for himself, since he remained both dispassionate by nature and passible, immortal and mortal, visible and intelligible, the same one being both God and man by nature.[144]

Christ's holding together of these radically other natures is the possibility of redemption.

In the hypostatically united body of Christ the exchange of bodies occurs in a new modality. Rather than being the foundation of a transnational slave trade, it is the foundation of a transformational way of inhabiting the body—with the mind of Christ. This mind, rather than overtaking the flesh through the joining of humanity to divinity, works in unity with the natural activities of the flesh that are opened by divine power in order to achieve its ends. How this paradox, working through cooperation, is the grounds of this new economy of exchange is the mystery of the Christian faith:

> How great and truly fearful is the mystery of our salvation. For that which pertains to us by nature - which Christ was himself – is 'demanded of us', but 'we are granted' what pertains to us by union, that which Christ was but is beyond our nature, unless somehow the habit of a sin-loving inclination fashions the material for the working of evil from the weakness of its nature.[145]

Here, Maximus' image of discipleship begins to appear. For, in Christ, our natures are "demanded of us." We must move and be moved. But what Christ shows us in his union of divine and human is *how* it is that we must move and *in whom* "we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). Maximus saw Christ's prayer in the garden of Gethsemane as that

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143 Maximus the Confessor, "Ambiguum 4," 60.
144 Ibid.
145 Ibid., 61.

exemplary moment of this cooperation of the divine and human wills: "Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want, but what you want" (Mt. 26:39).[146]

Maximus' reading of this prayer in the garden as a harmonization of divine and human will, is contingent upon the question: "whom do you understand as the subject? The man who is just like us, or the man we consider in the role of Savior?"[147] Here, Maximus is writing against the Monothelites who, understanding Christ to exist with two natures but one divine will, read this passage as the overcoming of Christ's human nature ("if possible, let this cup pass...") by his divine will ("not what I want, but what you want").[148] Maximus nimbly negotiates these questions of subjectivity, divine and human wills, and salvation through a close reading of the passage and the place of negation in understanding the harmony of wills that is represented in this passage.

If, Maximus argues, we divide Christ's willing from his human nature in this way, we end up in a problematic position: We negate our very salvation. For, according to Maximus, if we understand the will in the "Not what I will" to be "the man we consider in the role of Savior," the divine will, then it cannot be separate from the will of the Father. And if it is the will of the Son, willing in perfect harmony with the Father, then we are

> compelled to refer what is willed, which is precisely the declining of the cup, to the very same eternal divinity. For even if you say that the negation is the negation of [the Son's] willing something for himself separately from his Father, it is nevertheless not a dismissal of what is willed itself. For it is impossible for the negation to apply to ... the Only-Begotten's willing something for himself separately from the Father *and* that which is willed itself. Otherwise, since the Father and the Son always share a common will, negation would be negation of what is willed by God, namely, our salvation—and we know that is what God wills by his very nature.

Thus, Maximus displays how, because we know God wills our salvation, the negation of

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146 McFarland, "'Naturally and by Grace'," 424–26.

147 Confessor Maximus, "Opusculum 6," in *On the Cosmic Mystery of Jesus Christ: Selected Writings from St. Maximus the Confessor*, trans. Paul M. Blowers and Robert Louis Wilken (Crestwood, NY: StVladimir's Seminary Press, 2003), 174.

148 McFarland, "'Naturally and by Grace'," 424.

"not my will" cannot be applied to the person of the Son as eternally existing and willing with the Father *and* to the declining of the cup. Instead, we must ascribe the willing here, in the garden of Gethsemane, to the person of Christ, the hypostatically united God-man, as a demonstration of the "harmony between the human will of the Savior and the divine will shared by him and his Father, given that the Logos assumed our nature in its entirety and deified his human will in the assumption."[149] The person of Christ, then, is able to perfectly perform the natural function of the will not by forcibly coercing the human will, but by inhabiting that will so perfectly and naturally that it is exceeded, transcended, and brought into a synthesis with the divine will. This synthesis, rather than resulting in the annihilation of the human will is a most full inhabitation of that will such that our human wills are opened up again to the possibility of desiring rightly.

Displacement, Desire, and Christian Discipleship

"Not-having the body of Christ is not a lack, not a negative: because Christ's withdrawal of his body makes possible a greater identification with that body. In fact, the Church in its identification becomes the body of Christ .... The identification here, in Christ, is analogical—a participation in and through difference that enables co-creativity. The displacement does not operate within an economy of death-bound subjectivity..., but within eternal, trinitarian life."

Graham Ward, "The Displaced Body of Jesus Christ"[150]

The work, up to this point, has been to show how it is that God redeems according to the principles of nature and the divine will. In looking at the person of Christ and his doubled natures and wills, we see that it is precisely this doubling that enables the accomplishment "[of] this great feat of the economy of salvation for our sake through the

[149] Maximus, "Opusculum 6," 176.
[150] Graham Ward, "The Displaced Body of Jesus Christ," in *Cities of God* (London: Routledge, 2000), 108.

mystery of his incarnation."[151] It is an operation of transformation that reopens human nature (principally defined by its plasticity) to a mode of inhabitance lived through God's grace. There is now, through Christ, the possibility of participation in God's life in a strong sense. This transformation works through a fundamental reordering of desire that moves the natural inclination of the will back towards God and the possibility of participation in the Triune life again. It should be stated, though, that the reordering of desire reaches its consummation in the eschaton, and, as we are still beings bound to movement in space and time, our desire and our wills must be regularly shaped by practices of discipleship continually help to re-form ourselves. It is the daily practice of abiding in Christ (John 15), of moving in him (Acts 17:28), that shapes the Christian life.

This reordering of desire that comes through re-formation is primary to the resignification of "race" and persons in its destabilization of subjectivity as primary and turn to personhood, as found in the Trinitarian life, as a way of rethinking the self's constitution. Here, instead of stability, coherence, and continuity, that define the subject position, the instability, incoherence, and discontinuity of the body of Christ in its moments of displacement points towards another way of inhabiting norms that exceeds them and, in so doing, "safeguards bodies as such—stops them disappearing."[152] In this reading of Coakley, and Butler, I attempt to tread a precarious place—a liminality that emerges in acts of doubling which, while intended to undo problematic constructions of the identity and bodies, also have as their effects the possibilities of "rewriting the body again."[153]

I am concerned with the following questions: By what means is the self constituted in Christian theology? What do these modes of constitution mean for cultivating a Christian

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151 Maximus, "Opusculum 6," 176.
152 Ward, *Cities of God*, 117.
153 Ibid., 115.

discipleship that is capable of disrupting worldly norms in order to preserve the dignity of the *imago dei* that is gifted to human persons? In short, I am concerned with practices of Christian discipleship and the interruption of cycles of violent oppression, exemplified here by chattel slavery, the "Middle Passage", and their reverberating legacies. I see displacement and desire as extending across the plane of space that could be described as *in Christ*. For me, then, the person of Christ is not simply a figure of individual particularity, God-as-human subject in history, but a location—a space of relationality—within which the performances of Christian discipleship take place. This *being in Christ* points to New Testament depictions of Christic communion, of personhood as a *being in relation* whose source is located in the body of Christ as both a physical and mystical reality of the human person as mystery. This body is necessarily that of the slave, then, as it is this body Christ assumes. In a startling alignment with the distortions of relationality that occur for the black captive body/being within en route through the "Middle Passage" and during chattel slavery (and continuing today), Christ identifies with this body—the body of the slave, and as such, opens it up to mean anew. Through this identification, the slave condition becomes the sign of the human condition. And, following James Cone, blackness becomes synonymous with salvation.[154]

To do black theology then, is, to do orthodox theology. It is, as James Cone has argued, to understand blackness as an "ontological symbol and a visible reality" and to identify with this blackness.[155] To understand blackness as such is to affirm Cone's argument that in the Incarnation, Christ becomes black, which is to say that the paradox of the black body as both subject and object, as both a being and a *being for,* is embodied in the person of Christ. Thus, "the human encounter with paradox [in the black body] indicates a

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[154] Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 66.
[155] Ibid., 27.

participation in the ultimate paradox, that of Jesus Christ."[156]

Christian discipleship, then, is characterized by this *being* and *being for* but reordered by divine desire, which becomes *our* desire through Christ. It is a paradox of being constituted as one's self, while also being undone and displaced as one's self. This paradox of constitution of the self and displacement of the self is not stably assigned to the slave/human or the master/divine. For, in the person of Christ, it is his emptying of himself of the form of God that enables him to truly become human, which is formless apart from the life of God. And, it is his inhabitation of human formlessness (a vulnerability) so fully, all the way to the point of death, that opens human nature up to being re-formed again by the divine power of God's grace. A displaced Christ (displaced in the sense that his body is not stable in it's identity, operates within paradox, moves about, is transposed into bread, comes close in the Incarnation and withdraws in the Ascenscion) rather than annihilating the body as the logic of white supremacy attempts, enables the sanctification of the body *as such*, through its entrance into a space that is not constituted by the logic of modernity in its white supremacist, capitalist, and patriarchal conception, but instead is made to move by the divine love that circles throughout the relations of the Trinity—particularly through the work of the Spirit.

And this abiding and moving is enabled by the Spirit, who Christ sends to us after his ascension into heaven. The person of the Spirit, the one who witnesses to the love of Father for Son to each other, further witnesses to that love as extended towards us in incorporating us into the body of Christ. Here, I draw out some of the implications on my thoughts of Christian discipleship as practices of displacement of the self and the self's reconstitution as I see them at work in two modes: prayer and protest. Engaging Sarah Coakley's work on

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156 Vincent Lloyd, "Paradox and Tradition in Black Theology," *Black Theology: An International Journal* Forthcoming (n.d.): 6.

prayer alongside Judith Butler's work on performativity traces the displacement of the subject that allows her reconstitution within the body of Christ. A turn to Eve Sedgewick's recollection of a protest event, then, also helps us to think about how bearing witness to the work of the Spirit, in constituting us into the body of Christ, might require our de-centering. Both accounts, then, remind us of this primacy of the Spirit in inhabiting the body of Christ.

Prayer, Protest, and Christian Praxis

Read alongside Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*, Sarah Coakley's writings on prayer illuminate how, just as it is Christ's *performance* of the slave performing the master that exceeds human nature and opens it up to God's grace, it is the performance of Jesus performing Christian practices of discipleship that open members of the church *body* to mean anew. In light of the disfigured black body/being, this Christic imitation can be read as a theopolitical strategy for identifying with the doubled figure of the black body/being. While Butler and Coakley focus on how gender binaries come undone through excesses of desire, here, my focus is on how they read excesses of desire as performing a displacement of seemingly stable norms.

Bodies, performativity, and desire become ways of exceeding norms and opening up space for resignification of identities and new practices of community. Here, having set out "race", gender, and sexuality, as vectors within the matrix of social oppression, it seems that to rupture one point is to open the possibilities of the others. Coakley and Butler's work also calls into question the nature of “race” as stable. I argue that a Christology that recognizes the excessive nature of desire can inform practices that dislodge illusions of stability within the category of "race" in a way that recognizes and reorders desire.

Given the particular roles each person of the Trinity enacts, Christians affirm that the enabling of human participation in the divine life of the Trinity is the work of the Holy

Spirit. That gift, the Spirit, "by which humanity is empowered to live out the Christ-life as its own,"[157] is the breath of God poured out on humanity and shared through its resting upon the incarnate body of Jesus, the second person of the Trinity. Christ's becoming human is the occasion for the Spirit of God to descend and abide with God's people in order that they might experience the fullness of who God is—Trinity. The Spirit, then, is the person of the Trinity who incorporates believers into the divine life by making them like Christ. Not a wafting transcendence, the Holy Spirit is the personification of the love that exists in the community of the Trinity—that all-powerful love that guides Jesus's work on earth, raises Jesus from the dead, and makes witnesses of believers by revealing the resurrected Christ to them. The formation and transformation of subjects, then, is the work of the Spirit, and this work exists within the community of the Trinity and in the lives of believers. Butler's conception of the performative and its relationship to the triad of sex, gender, and desire also appears to share a similar understanding of the work of the third (desire), in reconstituting the subject.

In Butler's account of subjectivity in Gender Trouble, the subject is produced through subjugation to the cultural norms and repetitions that create a coherent self. In the case of the gendered subject, one must "maintain relations of coherence and continuity among sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire" in order to be rendered intelligible.[158] This coherence is normalized through "the heterosexualization of desire [which] requires and institutes the production of discrete and asymmetrical oppositions between 'feminine' and 'masculine.'" [159] Those genders that deviate from heterosexual desire, where "gender does not follow from sex and [and where] the practices of desire do not 'follow' from either sex

157 Ibid., 24.
158 Butler, *Gender Trouble,* 17.
159 Ibid.

or gender" are said to be non-existent within our current cultural regime of intelligibility.[160] This understanding of gender effectively illuminates stable gender identity as a performative achievement. The possibility of its achievement, though, is also the possibility of its failure. In a similar way that the vulnerability of the black body/being produces a vulnerability in the white subject who is violently constituted from the black body/being, because the heterosexual gender binary is constructed as following from stable sexed bodies, those bodies whose gender and desire do not appear to follow result in the failure to attain gender coherence. It is the proliferation of these "failed" performances (failed because they exceed the norms) that Butler believes can "provide critical opportunities to expose the limits and regulatory aims of that domain of intelligibility and, hence, to open up within the very terms of that matrix of intelligibility *rival and subversive matrices* of gender disorder" [emphasis mine].[161] In Butler, we see that the failure to follow from culturally normative gender expression renders possible gender's subversion. We might extend this understanding of norms as able to be exceeded by desire when we look both at the figure of the enslaved person and the figure of Christ.

Pointing to the places where gender does not follow from sex, and where desire does not follow from gender, or where sex proves to be an act, exposes sex as a production of the discursive convergence of norms. Butler writes:

> The possibilities of gender transformation are to be found precisely in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a failure to repeat, a de-formity, or a parodic repetition that exposes the phantasmatic effect of abiding identity as a politically tenuous construction.[162]

For Butler, the illusory nature of sex as that origin which makes gender and desire intelligible requires a reconfiguration of sex, gender, and desire that is not rooted in their metaphysical

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160 Ibid.

161 Ibid.

162 Ibid., 141.

fiction but points to its cultural production. The power to disrupt gender identity, then, is within the processes of its production, namely the performance of gender and desire that is incoherent within the heterosexually interpreted discourse. Similar to the fault lines mapped within structures of white supremacy by the doubled figure of blackness, the processes of producing subjugated subjects necessarily comes undone when the performances of the subjugated exceed the norms attributed to them.

While for Butler the subject is produced through discourse—through her entrance into language and the repetition of performances that render her culturally intelligible—the subject in the Christian tradition is re-produced through submission to the Spirit in obedience to God and the repetition of practices that establish her participation in the divine life. Through the power of the Spirit, then, the self of the believer is constituted through her displacement or de-centering. The 'I' of the believer in Christian tradition, then, is undone by the Spirit's work and is met by a radical incoherence of identity that requires the Spirit's intercession.[163] And, following Coakley, the practice of contemplative prayer opens up this intercession in the pray-er up and coincides with Butler's exhortation to moments of incoherence that throw the constructed nature of gender into relief.

Coakley argues that gender and problems of power and submission carred with it can be reconfigured through Christian practices of contemplative prayer. Of course, the practices of prayer are many and varied. One can silently meditate upon a passage of scripture, repeat a single phrase, be moved into a series of unintelligible 'tongues', or simply sit in silence and listen for God. Coakley finds that these practices "can claim to aid a radical

[163] Notice the similarity here between Butler's notion of disruptive gender performance as displacing the gender binary and the life of the believer in the Spirit that displaces identity in order to come into a new identity in Christ. In Christian theology, Christ's identity is always already disruptive to binaries in its transgression of the boundaries between divinity and humanity and is continually being displaced in events like the Incarnation, the Transfiguration, and the Eucharist, where the body of Christ is enfleshed, altered, and transformed.

dispossession to the Spirit's power to reformulate and redirect our worldly thinking about gender."[164] Coakley understands the practice of contemplative prayer as an opening to the Spirit with disruptive possibilities and the alternatives to dominant understandings of power that can be found in this radical dispossession to the Spirit. Moreover, Coakley maintains the position that "close analysis of [contemplative] prayer, and its implicitly trinitarian structure, makes the confrontation of a particular range of fundamental issues about sexuality unavoidable."[165]

Coakley's turn to the contemplative as an empowering and disruptive practice (both to the self and to worldly powers of domination) arises out of her commitment to feminist theology and politics. On the theological side, Coakley wants to affirm that there is not a discarding of Christian practices and doctrines simply because they have been utilized in ways that oppress women. Yet, she also does not want to ignore the legitimate concerns feminism has raised for theology, especially its critique of patriarchal dominance in the church. Her essay, "Kenosis and Subversion," deals with the problems of submission for feminists theologians given submission's primary place within the life of Christ—Christian's moral examplar *par excellence*. Coakley suggests a feminist reconceptualization of the *kenosis* or, self-emptying, that is characteristic of Christ, enabling feminist theologians to understand the turn to vulnerability as a form of power. "This is because," argues Coakley, "we can only be properly 'empowered' here if we cease to set the agenda, if we 'make space' for God to be God. Prayer which makes this 'space' may take a variety of forms .... [it] may use a repeated phrase to ward off distraction, or be wholly silent; it may be simple Quaker attentiveness, or

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164 Coakley, "Trinity and Gender Reconsider," 139.
165 Sarah Coakley, "Living into the Mystery of the Holy Trinity: Trinity, Prayer, and Sexuality," in *The Holy Spirit: Classic and Contemporary Readings* (Oxford; Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 45.

take a charismatic expression (such as the use of quiet rhythmic 'tongues')."[166]

When Coakley describes the repeated phrase and charismatic expression, she is particularly relevant to the discussion at hand because the repetition of words or the act of charismatic expressions point to a repetition—a performativity that constitutes the subject even while producing an incoherence in the subject. This constitution and incoherence come primarily through "the Spirit" who as Romans 8:26 tells us, "helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God." In this passage, the pray-er is open to the Spirit through the act of prayer. Even though the Christian may not know what to pray for, the Spirit's intercession enables the believer to be open to the will of God. The sighs too deep for words render the believer incoherent to herself, displaced by the Spirit's intercession through which the Father knows the will of the Spirit, who then incorporates the believer into this will. And, through this exchange, the Father's will is known (see note).[167] This displacement of the self through the practice of prayer "is profoundly transformative, 'empowering' in a mysterious 'Christic' sense; for it is a feature of the special 'self-effacement' of this gentle space-making—this yielding to divine power which is no worldly power—that it marks one's willed engagement in the pattern of cross

166 Sarah Coakley, "Kenosis and Subversion: On the Repression of Vulnerability in Christian Feminist Writing" in *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy, and Gender* (Oxford; Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 34-5.

167 The presence of the patriarchal 'Father' language for the first person of the Trinity, can be seen as a sign of how deep the ties to portraying the divine power as male goes. However, in the reconfiguration of power, gender, and desire that is being attempted in this paper, I find the possibility for God the Father to be undone, not by removing the title for the person of the Trinity, but by considering it to be a theological construction of relationality to the other persons of the Trinity that reconfigures assumptions of power and stability that are usually inscribed into the figure of the Father. While I affirm Feminist projects of renaming God, for my own work here, I find maintaining the traditional patriarchal language can undo itself when prodded in the right places and provides a more stimulating experiment for my work here than renaming God precisely because of it's destabilization of a supposedly essential conception of gender identity.

and resurrection, one's deeper rooting and grafting into the 'body of Christ'."[168] The sense of losing one's self to find one's self is the paradox of Christian identity in the life of the Spirit and is marked by the submission of one's self to the working of that Spirit. Taking these practices of performativity and prayer together, then, allows us to ponder the possibilities of reinhabiting norms in ways that would address the predicament of black subjectivity and perhaps provide a new theopolitical strategy. I suggest that it is the primacy of desire in Butler's work and the work of the Holy Spirit in constituting the body of Christ where these new strategies emerge.

It is "the phantasmatic nature of desire", Butler argues, that "reveals the body not as its ground or cause, but as its occasion and its object."[169] In Butler's work, desire is not located in any metaphysic outside of power or within a stable body. The body, like everything in Butler's work, is a production of discursive constraints. She writes, "The strategy of desire is in part the transfiguration of the desiring body itself. Indeed, in order to desire at all it may be necessary to believe in an altered bodily ego which, within the gendered rules of the imaginary, might fit the requirements of a body capable of desire."[170] Desire, instead, *arises from* and *works on* the culturally constructed body "as a self-supporting signifying economy that wields power in the marking off of what can and cannot be thought within the terms of cultural intelligibility."[171]

And it is not that desire in Butler moves about unhindered by the body. Indeed, because the body is "always already a cultural sign, [it] sets limits to the imaginary meanings that it occasions, but is never free of an imaginary construction."[172] Desire works on the

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168 Ibid., 35.
169 Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 71.
170 Ibid.
171 Ibid., 78.
172 Ibid., 71.

body as a negotiation of the discursive limitations by which identity is produced. Within the heterosexual matrix, the working of desire is one which projects an imaginary body that is able to hold as natural the localization of pleasure within body parts that reify binary gender norms.[173] The possibility of desire to be disruptive to this binary, though, lies in its character as imaginary. Butler writes: "this imaginary condition of desire always exceeds the physical body through or on which it works."[174] This excess of desire is the place of parody for Butler—the place where gender coherency fails and the troubling of gender occurs. "Just as bodily surfaces are enacted *as* the natural," writes Butler, "so these surfaces can become the site of a dissonant and denaturalized performance that reveals the performative status of the natural itself." [175] The createdness of gender, the possibility of one failing to perform it coherently, is what opens it up for resignification—for the parodic. Butler claims that there are useful and problematic ways of parodying gender:

> Practices of parody can serve to reengage and reconsolidate the very distinction between a privileged and naturalized gender configuration and one that appears as derived, phantasmatic, and mimetic--a failed copy, as it were. And surely parody has been used to further a politics of despair, one which affirms a seemingly inevitable exclusion of marginal genders from the territory of the natural and the real. And yet this failure to become 'real' and to embody 'the natural' is, I would argue, a constitutive failure of all gender enactments for the very reason that these ontological locales are fundamentally uninhabitable.[176]

Reading Butlerian desire as residing in the excess of the body that appears to be (or is visibly) imagined and phantasmatic, is an invocation to question 'natural' bodies. Indeed, desire as an excess of the body, for the Christian, is a gesture towards the source of all desire, that is God. It is, ultimately, the failure of desire to follow from gender in a coherent (read:

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[173] "Pleasures are said to reside in the penis, the vagina, and the breasts or to emanate from them, but such descriptions correspond to a body which has already been constructed or naturalized as gender-specific." Ibid., 70.

[174] Ibid.

[175] Ibid., 146.

[176] Ibid.

heterosexual, or white, or male) way coupled with it's displacement in a imagined and fantastic body that enables the subject to mean anew. In other words, that bodies desires would exceed the norms attributed to them, that black persons would desire freedom and would articulate that, for example, does not follow from the body that has been constructed as a "given". It seems, then, that there are deep possibilities for thinking about Butlerian desire—possibilities that are situated within the life of the Trinity as the source from which desire comes and the Incarnation as that event which brings this desire in excess (because it has been located beyond us) into the enslaved body (because in the Incarnation it is now within the form of the slave).

Indeed, Coakley finds that it is the desire of each person for the other in the community of the Trinity that is disruptive to worldly (read: binary) constructions of identity, particularly gender. Coakley finds some possibility of thinking about gender and the Trinity that are able to destabilize the gender binary first by posing the question, "what 'difference' does it make to the issue of gender that God is three?"[177] For Coakley, the threeness of the Trinity and the primacy of the Spirit in incorporating believers into the divine life is where the possibility of disruption lies. It is

> precisely by the regular discipline of silently listening to the Spirit in prayer and of meditating on the Bible, ... precisely by [the] handing over—in these pneumatological interactions—of my human desire to control, order, and categorize my world, I am already inviting what is 'third' in God to break the hold of my binary thinking.[178]

The third person of the Trinity, the Spirit,

> becomes the very source and power of a transformed understanding of gender, one rendered labile to the workings of *divine* desire in us. No longer do I start with the binary building blocks of 'male' and 'female,' but instead with a primary submission in prayer to a form of love that necessarily transcends, and even ruptures, my normal forms of gender understanding.[179]

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177 Coakley, "Trinity and Gender Reconsidered," 139-40.
178 Ibid., 140.
179 Ibid.

Here, Coakley wants to destabilize the gender relations between the members of the Trinity by suggesting that we do not ascribe gender into the Trinity as if "the (known) gender binary somehow has been interposed in a cleansed form, but rather as an irreducible threeness that always *refuses* a mere mutuality of two."[180] This refusal of reduction to the binary further resists the inclinations towards "allocat[ing] the binary of 'masculinity' and 'femininity' to different 'persons,' or even to their relation, but instead to step into a circle of divine desire (the 'sighs too deep for words ' that signal the Spirit's gift of loving plenitude, drawing us to the 'Father') which is necessarily beyond our comprehension and categorization."[181]

The transfiguration that desire works on the subject in Coakley's theology, here, is quite similar to the workings of desire in Butler, in that it is desire in excess (as one might call the eternal relations of desire in the Trinity) that refigures the subject's notions of gender. The Spirit as that person who enables this disruption opens up the space in which "[neither] maleness or femaleness are necessarily *obliterated* ... either now or eschatologically, but rather they are rendered spiritually insignificant, or (as we might now put it) nonbinary in their possibilities, in the face of the Spirit's work and our transformation into Christ's body."[182]

Indeed, the body of Christ, if read in Butlerian terms, is that altered and transfigured bodily ego which is capable of desire and believers are brought into this body in a way that, rather than naturalizing binaries of identity (black/white, masculine/feminine, homosexual/heterosexual), displaces them through the relations of the Spirit. It is through "Christ, and the life in him that [Christians] share ... a very 'mingling' of divinity and humanity, an *erotic* transformation of apparently settled roles and statuses precisely in their

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180 Ibid., 140.
181 Ibid.
182 Ibid.

intersection."[183] Christ's body, as a transgressive questioning of binaries, is read by Coakley (through Butlerian terms, here) as the site of a disruptive perfomance:

> Since the Son himself in the very act of incarnation, has transgressed the difference between the *fundamental* metaphysical binary of divinity and humanity, we may rightly see the incarnation, also, as a destabilization of basic binaries. Indeed, when the writer of the letter to the Ephesians (Eph. 5:21-33) explicitly genders this binary and speaks of Christ as the bridegroom or husband of the ('feminine') church, and yet the church as his very *own* body we again see—in my suggested reading—not necessarily the simple reinstantiation of an existing patriarchal or subordinationist view of gender (although it seems to be such!) but instead the beginnings of an alluring questioning of it.[184]

The invitation, then, to enter into the body of Christ through the power of the Spirit, requires an entrance into a body whose desire does not follow from his gender, but arises out of and works on the body of believers, which is his own body. Within the life of the Trinity, then, there is a refiguring of identities through the incomprehensible relations of divine desire that constitutes the persons of the Trinity and Christian disciples. Similarly, Coakley's reading of Ephesians 5 might extend to Philippians 2:1-11 as Christ's "alluring questioning" of the slave. Here, again Paul utilizes a binary master/slave and speaks of Christ as both being equal with God and being a slave. To be sure, this transformation of us is is a process of daily discipleship which we often fail at. Yet, the hope of salvation in Christ as an eschatological vision guides us to continually live in God's life.

This "alluring questioning" brings us to the place of protest in forming Christian disciples. In the chapter, "Interlude, Pedagogic," from her book *Touching, Feeling,* Eve Sedgwick provides the texture of a protest in thick description as a teaching moment that sets the stage for her attempts at exhibiting a closeness to the texts she is working with in the larger book. Rather than repeat the theoretical production of knowledge as a distanced and abstracted performance, Sedgwick's aim in this book is to pull the text close—to

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183 Ibid., 141.
184 Ibid., 140-1.

embrace and wrestle the work—in order to examine the possibilities of new engagements with material that don't rely on the tendencies towards dualism, certainty, and the centrality of the author that have been revealing themselves in Western academic discourse. To exemplify this, she begins by bringing the reader to the scene of a protest and displaying her body as an effected site of meaning.

The rally to which Sedgwick brings the reader is concerned with the local public broadcasting channel's censoring of a film on black gay men. More than a gathering for an honorable cause, it is a gathering sparked by the reception (or non-reception) of an affective/aesthetic experience (Marlon Rigg's *Tongues Untied)* that results in the demonstration. The affective/aesthetic undercurrents of the protest event expand the pedagogic possibilities of that event to include various bodies. At this event, Sedgwick's fainting becomes the occasion for a new perception of the protest: the displacement of meaning that she experiences in her disorientation upon waking from fainting, is what arouses Sedgwick to the protest's (and the classroom's) potential as harbinger of a useful kind of displacement that may be able to cultivate practices of intimacy through their effects.[185]

Here, Sedgwick shows how her decentering enables her body to mean anew—to mean for another:

> if that sprawling body offered testimony, it was less to a triumphal purposefulness than to a certain magnetic queerness (by magnetic I mean productive of deviance) in the process called demonstration. What felt to me like an almost telescopic condensation of the protest event embodied, as the most radical condensations will, less the power of condensation than of the displacement of meaning that interline it.

This passage is dependent upon the images that have come before: "that image, of a

185 It would be interesting to think about Christian education within this framework of de-centering and disorientation.

mountainous figure, supine, black-clad, paper-white, weirdly bald, ... Silence = Death emblazoned, motionless, apparently female, uncannily gravid with meaning"—that image which "was available to everybody there except herself."[186] The language works in the passage, and throughout this whole section of the book, to carry images which, in turn, carry meaning. The effectiveness of this point in the story—the awakening—has been built on the growing inflation of these word-images with some meaning.

But that meaning which is in the protest event Sedgwick shares is not available except through the medium of bodies which themselves gesture towards meaning in other places. It is the displacement of meaning that these bodies, Sedgwick's body, witness to. And what does it mean that this is a white woman whose fainting de-centers herself from the protest event? That crowds of camera people begin to crowd around her toppled body? That the meaning of her body in this moment is unavailable to her? Sedgwick is invested in the recreation of an event in which she was the de-centered center of the protest event precisely because the meaning (or the learning) lies in the image of her de-centering. The embodiment of "the displacement of meaning" that occurs in her fainting spell—an image she was not able to witness—develops a closeness to the protest event because she has embodied it in some way.[187]

And it Sedgwick's inability to witness the meaning of her de-centering is gestured towards. This new perception of the protest occurs because her body *was* witness to something that she could not see: the queerness of the demonstration process. A queerness which is the ability for Sedgwick's body to *mean for* black queer bodies while at the same time that meaning is unavailable to Sedgwick (but there is still *some* meaning available to

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186 Ibid, 32-3.

187 Indeed, the poem that begins the section suggests Sedgwick is only able to rely on the affective work of words and the repeated TV image of her fainted body to get at any sight of herself in that moment.

her?). This displacement of meaning from Sedgwick's consciousness to an unconscious and unstable meaning highlights the curious sight/witness that is the body. The body fainted, the body ridden with cancer that has learned to be a cancered body from men with *AIDS*, the "white" body, the "female" body, Sedgwick's "own" body, that is possibly not her own anymore. A body that is being made to mean inside a media frenzy and a capitalism driven medical machine that likes to see vulnerable white women. A body that is being made to mean in its relation to other bodies—in relation to black bodies—in the protest event whose meaning is dependent on the de-centered center of their corporately gathered bodies.

This invisible gap between the witness of embodiment and the incoherence of the thing itself being witnessed to is what is being performed in the particular protest Sedgwick is recalling. The protest event needs bodies—needs a "witness" to the deviance asserted in the invisible gap of black queer representation. Her "white" "female" body becomes a witness to queer "black" "male" bodies in some way it is unable to in other spaces. And, her body is drawn into this witness through experiences of the affective and aesthetic (the film and the newspaper and the student interactions). And this is where Sedgwick moves to the teaching moment of this event, though the teaching is happening all through the reminiscence, because this event and the memory of this event has altered Sedgwick's pedagogy and very position in the classroom.

She is knocked off kilter as teacher, exemplar, and persuader. She becomes decentralized from the static position of authority in the classroom in the face of the affective and aesthetic threat and mourning that other bodies witness to. Sedgwick offers us an example of how the affective is capable of being shared and how spaces that require representation might be spaces where that sharing is valued for the disruptive blow it delivers to the perpetually spinning top of the white supremacist capitalist patriarchy.

Sedgwick further suggests that the displacement of meaning that gathers folks together in a production of deviance arises out of the navigation of the affective and aesthetic that is offered out of each body. The film, *Tongues Untied,* which seeks to articulate the realities of black gay men, the "brutalities of every day's paper," and her interactions with students, cause an eruption of deviance that destabilize the meaning of something like "black, queer" and allow for new possibilities of perception. Words are able to mean differently because they are knocked off kilter by *non sequitur* bodies.

In bringing this event and image to the forefront of her work, Sedgwick performs the possibility of this alternate meaning. She enters into the discussion reflecting on the knowledge that is opened up in events when they've lost their center as a stable identity. In so doing, the lesson of de-centering is shared with readers through her repetition of the fainting. In pulling close the disorientation and grasping at the meaning that occurs while knowing that the meaning is there, somewhere, Sedgwick alludes to the troubling of "gender", "race", and "body" that bodies doubly perform and witness to, offering us new insights and thoughts to meditate on, while simultaneously removing the need for a stable meaning these bodies offer. Caught up in the wobbling plurality of embodied testimony, Sedgwick shows that attention to the affective and aesthetic as seen in the protest event enables us to teach each other using the meaning that our bodies become even when it continues to elude our attempts to clutch it and instead, hovers beside us, close enough to embrace.

This move into prayer and protest as a way of exploring the praxis of Christian discipleship, then, necessarily converges with the earlier discussion of black bodies/being as subjugated by the disordered desires of White supremacy by which it is distorted and displaced. What emerges here, as we saw briefly in Harriet Jacobs narrative, is not only the

seemingly total envelopment of black bodies/being within white desire, but also the frailties and fractures inherent to desire that open it up to being redirected. The norms to which we are bound in our situation as created beings, are always exceeded because of the life of the Trinity who sustains the existence of the world. This move into gender, then, also illuminates the way the desire of one person for the other in the community of the Trinity is what grounds the possibility of disruptive performances. White supremacist distortions of desire, then, as a foreclosure of black possibility and livability, are met by the limits which they cannot exceed, and thus the encircling of bodies within this libidinal economy necessarily leads to death.

But it is the excessive/eternal desire out of which humans are formed in the image of God that enables the turn that occurs in the doubled figure of Christ—the God-man who destabilizes the constructed nature of this doubled figure of the slave and re-cognizes the enslaved body as materially significant and dignified. The work of theology, then, is primarily one of opposing modernity's pseudo-theological, biological, physical, and psychological accounts of blackness, that result in the atomizing of the person—her reduction to physiognomic properties in the de-construction of her body into parts, to her physical situation *as property*, or to her ontological position *as property,* or to her teleological movement towards whiteness as the consummation of her *being for*. In short, the accounts of the body in modernity too often result in the reinscription of the person within the conditions of her doubling and are a turn to the nothingness of non-existence.

In an orthodox theological account though, the otherness who is God—God's being outside of the world—freely creates from nothing because of the excessive love as whom God exists. While still in the midst of the nihilism and annihilation of white supremacy, capitalist, patriarchy, then, God moves towards us in the doubled figure of Christ who

enters into the blindingly seductive light of whiteness and empties it through his divine power—all the way to the grave—and rises again in the power of the spirit with a renewed and reopened body that invites us to come and die. Die to the worldly powers and desires that would foreclose the life we have in God, die to the identities that reinscribe us within the powers that bring death and damnation, die to the places we inhabit that are filled with the hatred and ugliness of idolatry and unbelief. Christ issues a call to us, to fully exist as human—vulnerable, contingent, prone to wander—in order that we may, finally, have rest in God.

Into the Aporia: Blackness as Theopolitical Strategy

"What does it mean when Cone writes, 'The logic of liberation is always incomprehensible to slave masters'? Might it mean something deeper than an accusation of willful ignorance or false consciousness? Might it suggest that there is a fundamental link between the incomprehensible, the black, and the theological? And might this incomprehensibility be linked with the fundamental character of black life, which Cone describes as filled with contradictions?"

Vincent Lloyd, "Paradox and Tradition in Black Theology"[188]

"For [DuBois], this movement of "double consciousness," although appearing, or motivated in its appearance, under the heading of the negative, also appears under the heading of the affirmative .... For Du Bois ... the difficulty of this double reference did not mean that the Negro should reject one term or aspect of its identification for another. Rather, this doubling was the very future or possibility of its becoming. It marked out the very space and possibility of desire and the future."

Nahum Dimitri Chandler, "Originary Displacement"[189]

In this thesis, I have set out how it is a turn *into* blackness as an aporia through which the primacy of Christ as a body to *in-habit* emerges. The turn to vulnerability in human

188 Lloyd, "Paradox and Tradition in Black Theology," 6.
189 Nahum Dimitri Chandler, "Originary Displacement," *Boundary 2* 27, no. 3 (2000): 272–3.

nature—its plasticity and openness to power—is what establishes both the conditions of oppression and liberation. My claim here should not be understood as a remix of the trope of redemptive suffering as taken on by marginalized persons. Rather, here I point to the ways in which the structure of the logic that enables the discourses and practices of oppression to instantiate a 'givenness' of identity is already, at its inception, unstable and unable to get outside of the very vulnerability it occludes. This attempt to escape the human condition—our contingency and lack of form—is at the heart of disordered desires.

Blackness, then, both is and is not the limits of the human. It is the limits of the imagination as crippled by white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchy. But it is precisely this limit that is broken open in the person of Christ's assumption of the slave/human, and thus, it is a limit no more. The situation of blackness as liminal, then, provides a way of thinking strategically about theopolitical possibilites of reversal and renewal performed from within this modality of doubled and excessive identities and points to blackness (as a position of relationality and a mode of discipleship) as that which marks the paradox of the human—a paradox that is most perfectly performed in Christ.

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