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On Being an Issue of Delores:
A Meditation on Black Faith in an Antiblack World

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Abstract

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Given the ubiquity of antiblackness in the world, black faith must consider an agenda of black care that interrogates the privileging of political ontology and recognition espoused in Black Liberation Theology and, subsequently, Black Practical Theology. Liberation and freedom, conceived in humanist discourses, including theology, miscalculate the relationship between liberation and antiblackness and the violence that structures the relation. The project meditates on a transformative fidelity grounded in God's presence within black pain and suffering, what I call black dolor. The spiritual materiality of this transformative fidelity emerges as black-on-black care. As a meditation drawing on the work of black radical feminists and the practices of Afro-Pentecostal women like my mother, the dissertation suggests how black-on-black care supplies black existence with meaning without privileging the metrics of humanism that structure the modern world's antiblackness.

As an intervention in Black Practical Theology, the project directly engages the chief contentions regarding blackness articulated by radical black feminists, afropessimists, and black optimist thinkers. Challenging the foundational liberal humanist and humanitarian assumptions foundational to Black liberational thought and its successors, namely Black Practical Theology; these thinkers recognize the human as parasitic to blackness. Blackness is not a kind of human, but non-human from which the human emerges, thus posing a problem for thinking liberation into the category of human as appropriate for the black. The black needs liberation *from* the human. This project considers the possibility of an intramural fidelity within blackness that welcomes a divine intervention, presence, and relationality that grounds thinking, imagining, and practicing intramural black care, or black-on-black care. Black on-black care potentializes undermining the political and ontological antiblack world by testifying against the world's idolatrous relationship with antiblackness and affirming the capacity within blackness to redress black dolor with black care. Ultimately, the project works to open a mystical theological path for thinking a Black Practical Theology that does not find its coordinates of liberation and wholeness within the antiblack logics of political ontology but in the practices of women like my mother, Delores.

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Introduction

The Problem

Research and writing this project have entailed sitting unflinchingly with antiblackness.¹ While much of my thinking prior to grad school focused on racism directed at black people, the grammar of antiblackness pointed me to something more entrenched in the spirit of the age. Antiblackness leads with a negation. It is the *not* being black that yields an experience or expression, however proximal or temporal, of humanness and recognized subjectivity.² Said differently, nobody wants *to be* black. Black existence, then, in an antiblack world is destined to be filled with pain, grief, and sorrow; bare.³ The dishonor and violence that accompany and engulf those born black shape the dilemma of black existence, its cogitation, theological contemplation, and creative endeavors. How are black people to navigate a world that requires their subjection in order for said world to exist? How can a liberation grounded in the humanist logic of *not* being black *be* for black people? And what practices can black people embody that do not find their validity in the humanist logic of an antiblack world, its god(s), and its

¹ Antiblackness is a term of specificity. Unlike the general term racism to describe ethnic and cultural conflict moving in any direction, antiblackness is clear on its target of negation and oppression - blackness. Notions of the social and political as central to and for the Human structure a constitutive rejection of Blackness and Black people. See, Moon-Kie Jung and João Helion Costa Vargas, eds., *Antiblackness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), 8.

² Jared Sexton, "People-of-Color-Blindness: Notes on the Afterlife of Slavery," *Social Text* 28, no. 2 (103) (June 1, 2010): 36, <https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-2009-066>. For a treatise that address antiblackness by white Christian ethicist see "Christ Divided : Antiblackness as Corporate Vice / - Emory University Libraries," accessed May 27, 2023, <https://emory.primo.exlibrisgroup.com>.

³ Here, I am referencing more directly words and sentiments of the Mother in Langston Hughes, "Mother to Son," 1922, <https://poets.org/poem/mother-son>. Bare-ness as the stripping of political ontology and recognition is taken up more fully in Giorgio Agamben's work. See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen, 1st edition (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1998).

theologies? This meditation wrestles with these questions fully aware that no resolution is entirely sufficient.

The Thesis

In this project, I, like many before me, wrestle with what remains significant about black faith for black people in this world.⁴ My guiding conviction is that black faith, even as it has to contend with the harsh realities of this world, is not beholden to sustaining the World's antiblackness. That is, black faith is a means by which to transform black fidelity *from* an inordinate privileging of humanist notions of liberation political, social, and theological *to* a privileging of intramural care. This intramural care, what I call *black-on-black care*, establishes and affirms a spiritual materiality, by way of divine inhabitation, enabling blacks to see, recognize and care for each other in ways antithetical to the World's antiblack violence. Black faith and black-on-black care are both *in* the world, but not *of* it.

The Method

Practical theology has long been interested in understanding how practices inform and shape faith on one hand and analyzing practices using approaches and forms of inquiry cultivated outside of theology. To this end, practical theology works both in descriptive and prescriptive modes. As this project aims to speak most directly into practical theology, I aim to expand the interdisciplinary discourse by engaging critical black thought emergent in radical black feminism, afropessimism, and black optimism. Unlike traditional engagements with social

⁴ By *World*, I mean the aggregate of practices, places, people, and policies that cohere as the social, political, and cultural configuration the Human, and blackness's exclusion from such. The World is the stage upon which antiblackness is performed and sustained, where humans and their adjacents are defined by their *not* being black. Frank Wilderson, across the body of his work, takes this term as "the world of Humans." See Frank B. Wilderson, *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham [NC]: Duke University Press, 2010), 15. I will elaborate more fully on this term later in the project.

science, where the theological task privileges mining solutions for black people of faith, this project wrestles with the foundational questions regarding our understanding of blackness in the world. Such foundational questions may seem too abstracted for theological discipline geared towards practice, yet the project proposes in its methodology a reconsideration of the practice of thinking black theology. While the aforementioned disciplines offer the critical analytical framework for the project, the attendant practices of black faith emerge from the practices of afro-Pentecostal black women, namely my mother Delores. To do this, the project reads the prayer, and care practices of these black women as mystical, in the sense that they privilege divine experience above rationality and are efficacious in the realm of faith.

As a mystical grammar, Black faith provokes a transformative fidelity that nurtures care *for, in, by, with, among, and between* those born and un-alived into blackness. As Fred Moten suggests, this mystical iteration of blackness “remains unresponsive to the governance that it calls and the governments that it rouses. The paraontological distinction brings the secrecy and openness of this gathering into relief as well.”⁵ As a paraontological inhabitation, black faith’s mystical grammar is a mode of *unresponsiveness* to the state’s pre-occupations. As such, coherence in this mystical grammar is not legible via the logic of resistance or surrender to the State, but instead a tarrying for, with, in, by, and around the indeterminacy of the miraculous.⁶ As

⁵ Fred Moten, “Black Op,” *PMLA/Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 123, no. 5 (October 2008): , <https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2008.123.5.1743>.

⁶ This articulation of the miraculous stands in contradistinction to Carl Schmitt’s notion of the miracle as the state of exception, whereby the sovereign suspends formal legality. Following Franz Rosenzweig, I read the miraculous as an *ambiguous sign*. As Daniel Brandes summarizes, “Rosenzweig’s semiotic conception emphasizes the reception of the miraculous deed, its impact and uptake, and the orientation that it provides for the community of its witnesses and interpreters.” See Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, University of Chicago Press ed (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 15. And Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1985), 95, 110. And Daniel Brandes, “The Miraculous Birth of the given: Reflections on Hanna Arendt and Franz Rosenzweig,” in *Judaism, Liberalism, and Political Theology*, ed. Randi Rashkover and Martin Kavka (Bloomington (Ind.): Indiana University Press, 2014), 198.

a theological orientation, black faith's mystical grammar is a means and mode of spiritual discernment. The fruit of this discernment is not only a connection with the divine, but a realized practice of black-on-black care, even the refusal of "coercive mimeticism."⁷ By centering the practices of women like my mother as examples of black faith and subsequently black-on-black care, the project points to the need to consider alternative modes of black religious expression as vital to black survival and flourishing in an antiblack world and tarrying for its end.

Primary Sources

My mother and her name, Delores, along with some of her lived experiences, shape the trajectory of the journey ahead. If in fact "all theology is autobiographical," that is, thinking and reasoning about God from what is nearest to us, our experiences and lived lives, then the theological witness of this project is my attempt to discern the shape and character of my faith, born in, through, and by a black womb.⁸ From my mother, I have a dual inheritance—I share in the reality of what it means to be black in this world, and what it means to have faith in spite of this world. As such, this meditation wrestles within the conditions of (im)possibility for black faith in an antiblack world.

In addition to my mother, the writings of William Wilberforce also function as primary texts for this dissertation. William Wilberforce was considered the preeminent British abolitionist against the Transatlantic Slave Trade and slavery during the 18th and 19th centuries. Nevertheless, his political position, and the policies he espoused cement black subjugation in the

⁷ Courtney Goto, "Writing in Compliance with the Racialized 'Zoo' of Practical Theology," in *Conundrums in Practical Theology*, ed. Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore and Joyce Mercer, Theology in Practice, Volume 2 (Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 2016), 110.

⁸ In his book review, Peter Paris attributes this quotation to Union Theological Seminary Professor James Muilenberg. Peter J. Paris, "James H. Cone, The Cross and the Lynching Tree," *The Journal of Religion* 96, no. 2 (April 2016): 265–266, <https://doi.org/10.1086/685038>.

modern world. By reading his advocacy as a practical theology, we can understand how both his politics center a humanist concern and how black dolor makes legible said concern. That is black bodies and the ideologies surrounding them do more to legitimate an intramural white humanist concern over and against total redressing of antiblack violence.

Bridging the world between my mother Dolores and Wilberforce's abolitionism is the slave ship *Dolores*. Captured after the British abolished the Slave Trade, Dolores's issue, her black cargo, was condemned and returned to the Crown as property. Meanwhile, the ship's captain that captured her and the rear admiral overseeing the captain fought in court over the bounty from Dolores' capture. Wilberforce's abolition fails to privilege black care in service to political priorities. By contrast, practices of care attending Delores, my mother, demonstrate a different logic from which to engage black dolor.

The Intervention

As black practical theology aims to address the issues impacting black people in the world, it is strengthened by considering practices that critique the world so that it decenters normative and endemically antiblack notions of freedom and liberation. This project is not interested in redeeming the category of human via full black integration. Instead, the project privileges means, modes, and expressions of black faith that critique the antiblack world through the very practice of black care. Moreover, these care practices testify to the faith of black women whose religious labor may not rise to the level of political action, even as their concern may never be to redress the political. As such, their faith practices demonstrate modes of transformative fidelity that discern God's presence in black dolor as affirming black existence. On one hand, this affirmation, what I call second-naming, recognizes the world's vapidty and its

antiblackness and, on the other, the capacity for care of those within the steely grip of black dolor.

Chapter Outlines

In the first chapter, I map out the constellation of thinkers and ideas that anchor the journey.

This chapter functions as the chapter on my research method and a literature review. The first part of the chapter is rather autobiographical and explores the religious contexts that inform the research agenda. The chapter ends with an extensive engagement with the argument's primary interlocutors in order to frame the argument unfolding in subsequent chapters.

Chapter two's primary argument is that dolor is the inescapable vessel for the Black in the world and is also the mother of Black Faith. While this claim may present as hyperbolic at the outset, it is only so because we have often failed to give careful and sustained attention to the ways in which Black flesh and Black bodies never escape forms of trafficking. The hold remains to this day, and there is still trauma in its wake. With an afropessimist criticality, I turn to the archives to narrate how liberal humanism does not restructure the asymmetrical power relations that ensure black social death. That possibility remains unthought. I move from there to consider how Cone understands faith to emerge from/with suffering as both as paradox, or in my taking as an issue. I make the case that in the midst of black social death is black faith, and that black faith contends with suffering in ways that may not be legible or sensible to the world. Even if that faith does not undo black social death, it orients blackness in the hold towards an intramural recognition. This intramural recognition, even if tenuous, bears witness to God's solidarity, God's kenosis. Following Cone, I read God's "of-ness" as that which is too structured by the dolor of the black.

In chapter three, I engage a scene from my mother's childhood, in which her appendix ruptures. In this chapter I turn to the flesh, first to elaborate on the ways in which flesh can betray itself in the body. Discursively, I meditate the relationship between nutrition and digestion as indexing the external and the eternal, and nutrition and waste as indexing life and death, what is absorbed and what is discarded. I use these scenes and ideas to think paradigmatically about blackness inside and outside, in the world in itself. I then turn my attention to wounds and ruptures, exploring how the break between discrete systems (rupture) compromises the whole; it interrupts integrity. I give special consideration to the healing process of open wounds, wounds that cannot be sutured, and how whatever healing happens from the inside out. I posit here that black faith in its doing attempts a form of wound care that encourages healing from the depths to the surfaces. Still and always that process is never a guarantee.

In chapter four, I turn to my mother's desire for an additional child and the hemorrhaging that makes a pregnancy untenable. Thinking discursively, I take up black dolor as a hemorrhage that nullifies fecundity. Here I consider the shedding of blood as both sacrifice for another, but also as the death of the one suffering from the hemorrhage. I turn then to the prayer meetings my mother and the women in her family had, and how healing emerged within those circles. I read my mother's narration of healing alongside Judith Casselberry's *Labor of Faith* to show how black women's practices of prayer and speaking in tongues (glossolalia) register an alternative grammar that is both within the parameters of speech but also exceeds them as divine language. I argue here that transformative fidelity emerges as the presence of God amongst the one or two who gather in God's name. I conclude this chapter with a brief reflection on Luke 8:43–48, Jesus' encounter with the woman with an issue of blood, to show how touching, laying on hands, and intramurally can index healing in the face of touch that indexes social death.

In the final chapter, I take up a poem by Traci Dant and argue that black faith enables black-on-black care that produces a second-naming. The task of second-naming can be extended across all black socialities as a way to mark a relation of love in a world that does not love the black. I then consider briefly how such commitment might function hermeneutically in black preaching and worship.

Chapter 1 – A Black Formation

A (non-Be)ginn(ing)

The Transatlantic Slave Trade and all the violence, death, pain, suffering, and grief — physical, psychological, ontological, and spiritual—that have followed and continue to follow in its wake structure black life and death in all directions. Within an incalculable black grief, black faith emerges. As a transformative catalyst, black faith provokes black care. And while black care does not, and possibly cannot, definitively end the black grief and sorrow this world causes *ad infinitum*, black faith and care can sow a mode of inhabitation that is *in* this world but not *of* it.⁹ In this project, I argue that black faith, enlivened by Spirit, yet emerging within the depths of black pain and suffering—what I call *black dolor*— incubates and inculcates means and modes of *black-on-black care* that testify to God’s solidarity with blackness against the violence of this world. Black faith discerns a Holy Trace, an indeterminacy even, perhaps exceeding and undermining the antiblack god of this age, that is, the State and its antiblack regime.¹⁰

Black dolor—a term I use to capture the World’s production of black pain and suffering— structures black existence within the afterlives of slavery. As Saidiya Hartman suggests, “the afterlife of slavery—[amounts to] skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment.”¹¹ The question at hand is then: What does black faith do for and in black people? How does black faith overcome the

⁹ This *in* but not *of*, harkens to Jesus’ words to his disciples in John 15:19, where he says the world hates them because they do not belong to the world.

¹⁰ Stephen C. Finley and Biko Mandela Gray, “God *Is* a White Racist,” *Journal of Africana Religions* 3, no. 4 (September 1, 2015): 446, <https://doi.org/10.5325/jafireli.3.4.0443>.

¹¹ Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*, First edition (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), 6.

world, or if it does at all? How does it discern care in the face of violence and subjection, and pain from within and without? What resources and practices does black faith summon and issue that enable black people to contend with the world, and commune with God and each other? How might we understand black faith as an alternative mode of being in the world? These questions drive my inquiry, not because solutions are readily at hand, but because black grief and the need to care require it.

While antiblackness has no solution that unequivocally destroys its ubiquity, black faith recognizes this world of Humans as a realm of suffering that is not born of individual choice or will. In so doing, black faith requires an analytic that does not start with what is visible in human narration, but with the darkness itself. Said differently, instead of thinking of the Spirit's fidelity to blackness as a means of liberation *into* the theo-onto-political antiblack world of the human, the Spirit tarries in abyssal darkness and orients those within the hold of that darkness towards embodied practices of intramural care. Through such care, faith ruptures the World's fictive coherence. Black faith as fidelity towards *black-on-black care* embodies a kenotic praxeological intent and not a recapitulation of ontological claims that animate Western notions of political subjectivity and human-beingness. As such, black faith diagnoses the world's sin, or as Kierkegaard would suggest, its sickness unto death. Antiblackness and its targeting of all those born black do not testify to the goodness of humanity but to its depravity. Black-on-black care does not center the human's redemption. Instead, it centers the human's victim and what remains possible otherwise. This project tarries with grief to discern care, with darkness to discern clarity, with violence to discern mystery, with death to discern birth, and with my mother, Delores, to discern faith.

Delores - Our Lady of Sorrows

Delores is my mother.¹² When I knew I was going to be writing about black pain and suffering and black faith, I thought about my mom, her name. As I am wont to do, I called her and asked her if she knew what her name meant. She told me she'd looked it up once, but could no longer remember what it was. I told her that Delores (or Dolores) is a Spanish name coming from Latin meaning "sorrows and pains." "Sounds about right," she chuckled, and returned to cooking for my dad and for her sister who was staying with them while she recovered from surgery.

Her name—obliquely the focus of this dissertation—comes to the English language from the Latin *dolor*, meaning grief and pain, and the verb *dolere*, which means to be grieved, afflicted, sorrowful, filled with pain. In Coles' English-Latin dictionary, several idiomatic expressions appear under *dolere* and *dolor* that point to grief and suffering as both felt in the body and social dislocation. *Dolent oculi* my eyes are sore. *Doleo vicem tuam*—I pity your case. *Dolere caput*—to have a headache.¹³ In Latin, *dolor* is clearly experiential and corporeal. Another Latin scholar, deVaen, connects *dolor* to a proto-Indo-European word *dhel*, meaning "to chop," evoking the feeling of being torn apart.¹⁴ In this register, *dolor* emerges from a severing, a separation. *Dolor* testifies to what has happened *to* or *upon* the one experiencing pain. My mother's proper name grammatically refers to her person, and the common noun from which the name derives is the outcome of the experience of being chopped or severed. A question remains:

¹² The English variant of the Spanish *Dolores*

¹³ Elisha Coles, *A Dictionary, English-Latin and Latin-English Containing All Things Necessary for the Translating of Either Language into the Other ... / by Elisha Coles ...* (London, England: Printed by John Richardson for Peter Parker ... and Thomas Guy ..., 1679), 381, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2248513213/citation/57C2B229F1684292PQ/1>.

¹⁴ "Dolores | Etymology, Origin and Meaning of the Name Dolores by Etymonline," accessed May 22, 2023, <https://www.etymonline.com/word/dolores>.

What is or was severed/chopped that yielded the pain and sorrow that is dolor or its compounding that is its plural dolores? Dolores indexes pain, and begs the question of the nature of that pain. And if the pain is the result of a chopping, a severing, a separation, what remains and what is lost? Dolores is a problem for thought as it bears witness to an outcome without clarification of its production. Whatever dolores is, it is the remainder of what was not severed. It is what is left behind. It is pain. It is grief. It is sorrow.

Still, before we can surrender this interrogation of dolores to these philosophical questions, we should acknowledge that dolores enters the common lexicon as a woman's name through the veneration of Mary the mother of Jesus—*Mater Dolorosa*—Grieving Mother; *Maria de los Dolores*—Mary of the Sorrows; *Nuestra Señora de los Dolores*—Our Lady of Sorrows: all these situate dolores in a theological discourse on pain and suffering. As early as the thirteenth century, religious communities and practices formed around devotion to Mary, or *Maria de los Dolores*, Mary of the Sorrows. Mary's sorrows—the Roman Catholic Church identified seven—were inextricably linked to her issue, her offspring, and her child, Jesus. If we consider dolor's relation to severing, Mary's severing and pain are ostensibly connected to her offspring—the child of God and of her own *flesh*. Her seven sorrows included: the prophecy of her child's destiny and its piercing of her heart, migration under the threat of state violence, losing her child in a large crowd, seeing her child on his way to his execution, witnessing his execution, receiving her child's lifeless body, and finally burying her child.¹⁵ Mary's sorrows emerge as she witnesses a world that cannot care well for her child and as she recognizes her inability to protect him from the world's wrath. Sorrow is then both a witness of and labor against the world's

¹⁵ Ann Ball, *Encyclopedia of Catholic Devotions and Practices* (Huntington, Ind. : Our Sunday Visitor, 2003), 525, <http://archive.org/details/encyclopediaofca0000ball>.

vitriol. Sorrow is not the solution to resolve a problem of its creation but a means of account that refuses denial of dolor as the indication of the problem. In this register, sorrow heralds a capacity to love and care, even when death is certain. Even as Mary's son, Jesus, on the cross, charged his heavenly father with forsaking him, he turned to his mother and offered her care as she faced his execution.¹⁶

My mother's name provides an intersection at which faith contends with the troubles of the world and the violences that chop and sever. Theologically, sorrows do not provide the relief of resurrection, even when that hope is presumed. Instead, the sorrows are the pushing and pulling forces that break faith and strengthen it. Our Lady of Sorrows *Dolores* invites us to tend to the ways in which sorrow and faith emerge through and with fleshly bodies: in this project, black bodies. To be an issue (or child) of *dolores* is to recognize pain and sorrow as one's mother. To be an issue of *dolores* is to trouble the powers, principalities, and forces that require ruins for foundations. The humble hope of this treatise is to affirm that it is worthwhile for black people to care for and with each other, not because we are all the same, but because we are all born of dolor, and as evidence that by faith the diabolical forces that would sooner rend us asunder have failed.

A Black Spiritual Formation, A Mystical Black Faith

Delores Peterson (née Simmons) was born on March 6, 1953, at Homer G. Philips Hospital, the colored hospital on the Northside of St. Louis, MO. In the mid-1960s, my maternal grandmother, who had been raised Baptist, found something distinctive and compelling in

¹⁶ In John 19:26-27, Jesus tells John to take care of his mother, ensuring that in his absence, Mary would be taken care of and not left destitute.

Pentecostal worship that she had never experienced before. She was baptized and received the gift of the Holy Ghost with the evidence of speaking in tongues.¹⁷ As the Civil Rights movement took center stage nationally, my mother's family made its way from the inner city into the inner suburbs¹⁸ of St. Louis. Whites moved further north and west, and blacks filled the houses they left behind. Blacks' storefront churches purchased the historical worship houses white congregations left behind as their members moved out of the city, into the outer-burbs.

My mom's church, Bethesda Temple Church of the Apostolic Faith, moved into a former synagogue in what had been a predominately Jewish neighborhood on the north side of the city. The church grew as the surrounding neighborhood became increasingly black. The lively, ecstatic worship and vibrant singing could be heard throughout the entire neighborhood when the stained-glass windows were open. Like many churches, males dominated in official leadership roles. They were pastors, ministers, deacons, and trustees. Women led missionary projects that aided the poor, religious education geared towards children and youth, and sometimes the music ministry. The youth choir Golden Voices of Youth was one of the church's most successful undertakings. From the 1960s well into the 1990s, the choir averaged between 80 to 100 youth from the ages of 5 to 18. Participation in the choir required youth to be baptized in Jesus' name and the baptism of the Holy Ghost with the evidence of speaking in tongues.¹⁹ The youth choir gave youth who wanted to live holy lives a spiritual and social outlet. It was primarily women of the church who led the choir. The choir drew kids from the neighborhood into the church and in some cases off the streets. Because Holiness Pentecostal churches like Bethesda did not support

¹⁷ Speaking in tongues, within Pentecostal tradition, is the material evidence of receiving the Holy Spirit.

¹⁸ In St. Louis, the inner-burbs refers to those small towns and hamlets in St. Louis County that share a border with St. Louis City.

¹⁹ Within Apostolic Pentecostalism salvation requires baptism in Jesus' name, not a trinitarian formulation, and it requires the baptism of the Holy Spirit which is singularly evidenced with speaking in tongues.

going to the movies, school dances, drinking, smoking and other *worldly*²⁰ practices, the church had to provide alternative activities and programs for youth in particular. Frequent and sustained interactions with the church women nurtured the children's spiritual formation and gave these women spiritual authority albeit without official titles. Moreover, it was not uncommon for groups of women who lived close to each other to gather in each other's homes for impromptu prayer and fellowship.

For as long as I can remember, I have known the women of my family to be praying women. My parents grew up in the same church, and both of their mothers were active in the life of the church. My paternal and maternal grandmothers regularly led and hosted prayer meetings in their homes for women in the church and neighborhood. So by the time my mother was in high school in the late 1960s, and her mother received a breast cancer diagnosis, like clockwork the women of the church showed up to help whenever and however they could. For the next thirty-plus years my grandmother went in and out of remission until her death in 1997. The pain and suffering she endured from the cancer itself and the treatments took their toll on her body, and at times they rocked her faith. But throughout it all, she knew that God was with her. So it was little surprise that when I started playing piano in middle school, one of the first songs I wanted to learn was my grandmother's favorite, "I Go to the Rock."

Where do I hide till the storms have all passed over?
 Who do I run to when the winds of sorrow threaten?
 Is there a refuge in the time of tribulation?
 When my soul needs consolation, I go to the Rock

I go to the Rock of my salvation
 I go to the stone that the builders rejected
 I run to the mountain and the mountain stands by me
 When the earth all around me is sinking sand

²⁰ Worldliness within the Holiness Pentecostal tradition is primarily associated with fleshly activities deemed sinful and or ungodly. Later in the dissertation, I will re-appropriate the tradition's disavowal of worldliness as a disavowal of the (antiblack) World.

On Christ, the Solid Rock, I stand

When I need a shelter, when I need a friend, I go to the Rock.²¹

The faith my mother inherited was informed by her mother's faith, born in the face of sickness and bodily trauma. I know for sure that my grandmother's struggle with cancer shaped much of my mother's faith and confidence in what God can do, because she was not expected to live six months from her initial diagnosis. But she lived another three decades, and even though her health was never perfect, her living gave her time to care for and encourage others in their trials and tribulations. She endured a double mastectomy, hysterectomy, chemotherapy, radiology, and blood transfusions. And through it all she turned to her solid rock and her praying friends to manage.

Then, in the spring of 1997, my grandmother gathered her three daughters and told them she would not be around for the holidays. They did not understand what she meant because at this point she had been in remission for quite some time. She was not due for any scans or evaluations for a few months. Given that she had always been a woman of dreams and visions, she shared with them what the Lord had revealed to her in a dream: that the cancer was in her body now, but the doctors cannot see it, and when they do see it, there will be nothing they can do. Still, my mother and her sisters took my grandmother to the doctor and got the scans, and indeed, they revealed nothing amiss. She reiterated what had been revealed to her in the dream and continued to get her affairs in order. From April till her passing in October, she met and prayed with folk, consoled and encouraged the sick, she gave people the things she wanted them to have, and all the while no one knew what was going on in her body but her daughters. On

²¹ *Dottie Rambo - "I Go to the Rock"* on *A Dottie Rambo Choral Concert Of Love*, 1978, <https://www.discogs.com/release/13661355-Dottie-Rambo-A-Dottie-Rambo-Choral-Concert-Of-Love>.

Sunday, October 26, 1997, while the family sang, laughed, and cried, she reached her hand out to her Maker and crossed to that other side.

Healing, by my grandmother's witness, did not mean the permanent absence of illness. The testimonies of healings, visions, miracles, signs, and wonders in the air in my family spoke to God's capacity to interrupt certainty. In another register, healing was an orientation towards the mystery and ambiguity of God's will. Faith was how my grandmother, and subsequently my mom, discerned both the dolor peculiar to this life and the God who makes a way out of no way.

In my family, black dolor includes both the hate the world gives, but also the way our own black bodies in all their fragility turn in on and attack themselves. It is the legacy of cancer across at least four generations in my family, myself included. It is inexplicable infertility, uncontrollable hemorrhaging, and ruptured appendixes, brain tumors, and lupus. It is dementia and hypertension. It is as if the black body itself is antiblack, proliferating malignancy and thus making it impossible to live.

Thinking black faith in an antiblack world within a black body that can turn on itself is no small feat. This project therefore contends with the prepositional relationship to being, as opposed to a definitive relationship established by an article—*a* being or *the* being versus *on* being. The definitive relation, dislocated from being, pairs with issue. In this project, I read issue as offspring; issue as problem; and issue as broadcast or declaration. The next clause is genitive—of Delores. The clause of possession allows me to claim kinship with my mother Delores: I am her child even though antiblackness and social death are not obligated to recognize such a claim. In another way, I am also acknowledging how the world of sorrow and pain claims me because of my blackness.

The witness of black faith in my mother's body is also a witness of suffering—of ruptures, wounds, scars, hemorrhages and healings. Just as my mother's body and embodiment creates, blesses, and graces, so too black dolor wounds, consumes, and destroys as if in preparation for new forms of destruction. Delores' issue (as in problem) is the antiblackness that attends her. Delores' issue (as in offspring) are her children. Delores' issue (as in declaration) is her faith. Issues move across times, spaces, registers, and vulnerabilities. Dolor is everywhere. In this world, *Dolores* is both the birth canal and the tomb. But in my lived experience with my Delores, that dolor is a gift of faith. And though that faith may not resolve black dolor and antiblackness, it does help me to tarry in the abyss, as Calvin Warren suggests, until this world is no more.

Delores is the black woman who, despite hemorrhaging, desired to carry me in her womb. She is the woman whose birthing pains and labor made my life possible. For as long as I can remember, her faith, trust in God, praying, travailing, and caring have oriented me towards hope. This humble hope does not find its fulfillment in the world as such. *This earth ain't my home, I'm just passing through.* Her faith points her toward an eschatological hope of rapture, or perhaps more accurately to what I would call *rupture*, a severing from this world, where this world and the black dolor endemic to it will be no more. As a faith claim, there is a recognition that one cannot make the end come, indexing the wisdom from the Prophet Zechariah, “‘not by power, not by might, but by my Spirit,’ says the Lord Almighty.”²²

²² Zechariah 4:6

The Holy Spirit and the On-going Failure of Wholeness²³

My faith orientation towards the mystical emerges from my family's Pentecostal spiritual heritage.²⁴ As a second-generation Apostolic Pentecostal black woman, my mother's faith embraces the move of the Spirit and God's ability to intervene in human affairs, to change the situation,²⁵ or at least to get her through it. Heterodox within Christianity, Oneness Christians affirm the fullness of God in Christ, making them explicitly non-trinitarian.²⁶ The Azusa Street revival inspired an egalitarian vision of the church, a church in which the Spirit had truly fallen on all flesh. Early Pentecostals, and especially Oneness Pentecostals, believed in the unity of the

²³ Here I am combining wholeness and holiness as a nod to theological privileging of integration that informs Christian orientations toward the individual and the collective. Hospitality and reciprocity are central to the sense of wholeness and holiness, see Jeannine K. Brown, Carla M. Dahl, and Wyndy Corbin Reuschling, *Becoming Whole and Holy: An Integrative Conversation about Christian Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 83–109.

²⁴ An important distinction between my uptake of Black Pentecostalism from Crawley's lies in my desire to elaborate on Pentecostal spirituality as a theological orientation. Crawley's takes up Pentecostalism as a secular grammar of aesthetics. In this way, Crawley is interested in how the performance, articulation, expression, and phenomenology of Pentecostal inhabitation, what he calls *breath*, functions apart from the theological claims from which they emerge. Crawley theorizes Pentecostalism to denature it of theology, because of its anti-blackness in failing to embrace the black queer artisans who birth the very breath/aesthetic upon which black Pentecostalism relies. Generally, my engagement with black Pentecostalism focuses on the spiritual discernment germane to the manifestation of God's presence amongst and within black flesh. For more on Crawley see Ashon T. Crawley, *Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility*, 1 edition (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016).

²⁵ See Lewis Ricardo Gordon, "Bad Faith and Antiracist Racism: A Study in the Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre" (Ph.D., United States -- Connecticut, Yale University), accessed May 31, 2023, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/304052891/abstract/CD60E1B2B0D447B0PQ/1>. Gordon defines situation as "confrontation with those aspects of our condition over which we seem to lack some control." (20) By this he affirms situation as the facticity of blackness, elaborating on Fanon's insights. Gordon contrasts this situation of enslavement with a "conscious of beyond." (21) Here, Gordon points to an opening towards a desire of transcendence, but given the exigencies of day to day living remains elusive for blacks. It is important to note that Gordon's sense of freedom is squarely within the realm of the political and social. Gordon is not making a theological claim, even as his terms can open up to such, which I am attempting to do here.

²⁶ Oneness theology affirms the full-deity of Christ leaning heavily into the high Christology intoned in Colossians 2:9–

14 Christ hymn. For an apology of Oneness theology and doctrine see David K. Bernard, *The Oneness of God*, Series in Pentecostal Theology, v. 1 (Hazelwood, Mo: Word Aflame Press, 1986). and David S. Norris, *I Am: A Oneness Pentecostal Theology* (Hazelwood, Mo: Word Aflame Press, 2009).

church across race, gender, culture, and class. These early hopes did not persist. Factions developed along racial lines and white Oneness believers separated themselves from the rest. I note this because much remains unthought concerning the durability of white supremacy and antiblackness with the Holy Spirit poured out on all flesh. The failure of sustained racial unity in the Pentecostal church, even when folks had radical, demonstrable experiences with each other and God, reveals a fundamental commitment to whiteness and the riches it bestows.²⁷ The fact that white Pentecostals, filled with the Holy Spirit, can maintain ideologies and practices awash with antiblackness, points to a level of ubiquity and durability in antiblackness that is apparently essential to white identity formation as we know it. In short, my Black mother's religious heritage has grounded her in a tenacious faith that recognizes and welcomes the will and power of God's Spirit on the earth in an antiblack world. I, too, harbor reservations about the ability of institutional churches, and the world at large, to reckon with the *longue durée* of black suffering, the black dolor that was, is, and is to come. The faith that I have inherited and continue to nurture is a black faith that welcomes the mystical power of the Spirit, realizes the fact of blackness, and wrestles for hope in the chasm between divine mystery and black death.

I entered graduate school plagued by questions of how, given so many centuries of Christian formation, theology, and practice, white supremacy and antiblackness could persist. The paucity of existing theological responses to racism, racial unity, and the full and equal inclusion of Black persons in Christian theology left me wanting more. Theological attempts to

²⁷ For a historical account of the rise and fall of interracial fellowship in early Oneness, see Talmadge L. French and Allan H. Anderson, *Early Interracial Oneness Pentecostalism: G. T. Haywood and the Pentecostal Assemblies of the World* (Pickwick Publications - An Imprint of Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2014). Hollenweger and MacRobert offer a detailed account of race relations in early Pentecostalism and the persistence of white racism, see Walter J. Hollenweger and Iain MacRobert, *The Black Roots and White Racism of Early Pentecostalism in the USA* (Springer, 1988). Additionally, St. Louis holds an interesting position within the world of Oneness Pentecostalism as the headquarters of the predominately white Oneness body the United Pentecostal Church (UPC).

unify the Christian church across the black and white color line must claim a shared humanity.²⁸ This universal humanism cannot account for how slavery and its present afterlives transform the color line into an ontological chasm.²⁹ So, unity requires blacks to forget the grotesque violence that produces black as a (non-)entity in the first place. Racial reconciliation and racial justice, as practical theologies of redress, recognize the asymmetrical existence between blacks and others, but cannot tolerate a diagnostic of paradigmatic paralysis that refuses a solution.³⁰ Without the world itself being at stake in redressing black sorry and pain, racial reconciliation and anti-racism practices, Christian inspired and otherwise, will continue to produce white people who need to see themselves as good and virtuous more than they need or want to create a world in which whiteness and its antiblackness are no more. As projects grounded in the logic of uplift, or what Saidiya Hartman calls *integrationism* anti-racist practice and praxis imagines moving black people out of their unpreferred social position to having a “seat at the table.” Integration and justice are a “step up” for black people.

²⁸ Anti-racism and Christian unity constitute a large body of research since the sixties, covering institutions from intentionally integrated communities in the south like Clarence Jordan’s Koinonia Farms, in Americus, GA, to the Antioch House led by Spencer Perkins in Jackson, MS. See Spencer Perkins and Chris Rice, *More Than Equals: Racial Healing for the Sake of the Gospel*, Revised edition (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP, 2000). See also, Robert Hamblin, *Preacher in Overalls: Poems: The Story of Clarence Jordan and Koinonia Farm* (Independently published, 2023). More contemporary projects in anti-racism focus on various forms of cultural exchange and competence, with the hope that awareness and contact will mitigate racial strife and bring unity to the Christian church. See Jemar Tisby, *How to Fight Racism: Courageous Christianity and the Journey Toward Racial Justice* (Zondervan, 2021). Also, Kerry Connelly, Bryana Clover, and Josh Riddick, *Wait Is This Racist?: A Guide to Becoming an Anti-Racist Church* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2022).

²⁹ This contention emerges from Afropessimist and radical black feminist thinkers. I will take up this line of thought more directly later in this chapter.

³⁰ It is worth noting that the terms anti-racism and anti-black racism are not synonymous. While racism encompasses a discrimination in all directions across all ethnic and otherwise designated people groups, anti-black racism explores the particular forms of discrimination that attend black people. Anti-black racism, still, however, can be differentiated from antiblackness, where the latter term points to the structuring function of blackness, not as a discreet recognized culture, but as the ground upon which all human identities cohere. Frank Wilderson puts forth this idea in his texts, see Wilderson, *Red, White & Black*.

This ascent to the standing afforded the modern liberal human subject, whose icon is the property-owning white man, is ultimately an invitation to extend in all directions the project that got us here. In the tritest way, I read these various anti-racism treatises and interventions as saying we should all afford each other the respect and consideration the world has privatized to white men because that represents what is best and ideal for the human being. To me, that is like saying: We should all be white men. This is not satisfactory to me: Why would I want an identity that is based entirely on the violence that renders me dead in the world? Furthermore, this project is not about elaborating on the limitations of anti-racist praxis in the present moment. Instead, I want to outline how black dolor persists across the spectrum. *I want to sit in that dolor and figure out what it can and may need to mean for black faith.*

How I Fell(ed) into Black Study

When I first left my black enclave for a predominately white small liberal arts college in Pennsylvania, I fantasized that I would move from taking rare summer trips to holidaying regularly with my new college friends. I was certain that economic deprivation was the primary issue plaguing black folk. After all, during my childhood years, money had always been a point of conflict at home. We never had enough of it and so always had to decide which bill, which note, which utility was the most important. College, I thought, was going to be my saving grace, my blessing!

I entered college excited to start the path to becoming a medical doctor. In my first meeting with my advisor (a full professor in the philosophy department), he told me bluntly I wouldn't make it through the pre-med program, because my (read: black, poor, and underperforming) school hadn't prepared me adequately. Such a candid assessment from someone who knew nothing about me besides the little he had on paper caught me off guard. But

allegedly he knew my end on the basis of my beginnings and was just giving me a heads-up about what lay ahead for me. In truth, he did know things about the structure of the pre-med program that I did not. He knew it was designed to weed out students quickly who lacked the best science education in high school. He knew that my school and its resources had not put me on a level playing field with other students. He also knew that the school rather insidiously lured in talented and ambitious students by touting its near perfect track record at getting students accepted to top medical schools, only to feed many of them to the wolves of organic chemistry and physics at the front end of the program, long before they could declare a major and affect the school's statistics.

I ignored his prophecy and enrolled in all the recommended pre-med courses. When, in my second semester, I started getting grades in general chemistry that were lower than my age in years at the time out of a possible 100, I saw the writing on the wall: I was indeed not going to make it through the program.

As I resigned myself to pursuing something other than medicine, a new opportunity arose. For years, black students had petitioned the faculty to create a recognized program in Africana Studies. By the time it was my turn to declare a major in my second year, the faculty had approved a major and a minor in Africana Studies. I really did not know what Africana studies entailed, but what I did know was that the program needed validation. The program needed majors and I volunteered tribute, frankly out of duty more than discernment.

Still, aspects of the program were a natural fit: My interests had always moved across disciplines, so the interdisciplinary nature of the program appealed to me. On a phone call that weekend, I broke the news to my parents that pre-med was no longer an option. My GPA had already sunk, and my intellectual confidence was at a low ebb. I told them I was going to major

in Africana Studies instead. My father's response rings in my ear to this day. He dropped the phone from his mouth and hollered through the house to my mom, Delores, using his pet name for her: "LoLo, you won't believe this," he said. "We paying all this money for that boy to be up there at that rich white school and he talking about he gonna study black people. He gonna study *africanas*." Beside himself with consternation, he told me: "Boy, if you wanted to know about black people, you could've stayed here and talked to your grandparents. You better major in something practical. I'm not paying all that money for you to get a degree and not get a job. You can major in your *africanas*, but you gonna need to major in business too."

A few weeks later, I was officially a charter member of the Africana studies program. I was also among the droves of other ex-wannabe pre-med students who now were also going to major in business. My father could not understand what a white school could teach me about blackness and how what I learned would be useful in finding a job. Even if he could not clearly articulate it, he was suspicious about how blackness would be taught at a place that had neither accountability nor real commitment to the black community.

The blessing in my Africana Studies major was how it oriented me to think about the humanities and social sciences "blackly." By this, I mean that the history classes, the literature classes, the sociology classes, and the anthropology classes I took all centered blackness in some way, shape, or form. College helped me to recognize that black thinking was wide and deep. And necessary.

My senior project enabled me to combine approaches to knowledge production from both my majors. Grounded in sociological methodology and business marketing (and of course in my personal experience, still fresh), the project probed the issue of recruitment and retention of black and Latino males at predominately white colleges. It aimed to establish a correlation between

this population's expectations of the quality of their experience before enrolling with the quality of experience after arriving on campus. My research showed that the students who had the least enjoyable experiences were those who had the highest expectations, and that the students who had lower expectations were less likely to be disappointed by their experience. I find resonances between that work some twenty years ago and this project.

I think black people want to be hopeful for this world. They want to and sometimes need to believe that the world will be good to them, welcoming. We want to believe in progress and see the results of that progress. To this end we set our faith towards political agendas, protests, and civil discourses that demand we be treated with the dignity, respect, and accord due all citizens—indeed all persons. Black people have fought and died in every war the United States as fought, and the labor of our enslaved ancestors and their dishonor served as an economic basis for the country and as a political means of power.

To give up on America is to give up on ourselves because we have by choice and circumstance invested so much in this country. This project does not undercut or dismiss the efforts and victories black people have won in this society. But it does invite us to consider the efficacy of our faith by a different measure. It is the chief aim of this project to emphasize and explore how black people caring for and with black people amid an antiblack world is the work of black faith. If the ubiquity and persistence of antiblackness structures the world's general operation, is it feasible for black people to hope for an end of antiblackness that is separate from the end of the world? And if black people cannot hope for an end of the world's antiblackness, for what can they hope? In this project, I want to consider what intramural possibilities exist as black people privilege care for the other blacks who likewise are targets of antiblack violence. The general thesis of this project is that black faith is born in intramural recognition, and that

likewise for it to be transformative a black practical theology must be grounded in black kinship, black fidelity. Two underlying interests guide this project. The first is to recalibrate our (black people's) expectations of the world, to augment our hopefulness that the world will be less antiblack. My hope here is not to produce resignation or desensitization. Instead, my hope, is to affirm black faith and care, though steeped in dolor, as worth having and giving, and even risking and heralding. This is my claim of black faith: that it ruptures the world. But not on the world's terms, through violation in all directions, but through what I call *intramural black care* or *black-on-black care*. Black faith orients black aspiration and inspiration toward a *transformative fidelity*. By transformative fidelity, I point to a moving across the fields of black experience and black dolor, tarrying in it, discerning each other and God in our midst. *Transformative fidelity* is the *seven* beside dolor: it is the possibility of creation, blessing, grace, charity, and perfection; not in the world, but in blackness—parallel to those seven sorrows of Mary.

To situate transformative fidelity within the field of black thought and theology, I engage methods, modes of inquiry, and analysis across three general bodies of literature: Conean Black Liberation Theology, Black Practical Theology, and a critical field of black inquiry generally called Afro-Pessimism and Black-Optimism. As an interdisciplinary project emerging with black experience in the world, my primary aim is to speak into a black theological discourse that overestimates black integration into the human category as the aim of liberation. The fundamental conviction guiding my project is that black faith's best work is being a sanctuary for black people in fields of black care and fostering and forming them in a black mysticism that recognizes the vapidness of this world's political obsession and leans into hopes and endings that only the Spirit can make possible.

Constellations of Black Thought

Black Liberation Theology and Political Subjectivity

Black theology across its variations and segmentations embraces the black provincial like no other theological project this is emerging within Western Christianity. Simply put, Black theology always and in all places contends with the exigencies of what it means to be black in the world and what God's interest is in black faith. How black theologians understand black existence, and the constructive and prescriptive claims they make from those understandings, informs what they believe black faith does or should do. Because black realities are so structured by antiblack violence, above all black faith has an obligation to help black people to hope in the face of such harsh conditions. There is no theological category that Black theology has failed to address. There is no black experience that black theologians have failed to consider for theological reflection.³¹ Amid the distinctions, disagreements, critiques, and elaborations of black theology is a desire to consider carefully the welfare and well-being of black bodies and souls in a (white) world that thrives on black dolor.

A leading theological voice that spoke directly to the condition of black suffering and oppression over the last half century was the late James Hall Cone. Born in the late 1930s in Bearden, Arkansas, a town midway between Little Rock, Arkansas and Shreveport, Louisiana, Cone found "nurturing support" in Macedonia A.M.E Church and across the state as a young preacher.³² Now recognized as the father of Black Liberation Theology, Cone's writings, lectures, interviews, and sermons have fundamentally determined the terrain of black theology. In Cone's earliest works we find his most strident critiques of race and articulations of black

³¹ Dwight N. Hopkins, *The Cambridge Companion To Black Theology* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), xiii. Additionally, the proliferation of black theologies ranges from discourses about gender and sexuality to discourses on ecology and climate.

³² James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, Reprint edition (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013), ix.

dolor. Those resonate deeply with the work I am trying to do in this project. How did the early Cone recognize the plight of blackness in the world, especially in the United States of America?

Black Theology & Black Power, Cone's first book-length manuscript, was published in 1969 as a "product of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements."³³ In it, Cone recognizes two distinct challenges: the failure of white Christianity and the black church's need to embrace a radical theology to redress the social, political, and economic issues plaguing black people in civil society. For Cone, Black Power as a political and social undertaking is neither heretical nor anti-Christian, but indeed the central message in American Christianity. The hope of Black power, says Cone, is the

the complete emancipation of black people from white oppression by whatever means black people deem necessary... Black Power means black freedom, black self-determination, wherein black people no longer view themselves as without human dignity but as men [sic], human beings with the ability to carve out their own destiny.³⁴

Cone's black liberation theology concerns itself with the dignity of black people. The claim of Black Power is both a critique of white power and a prescription for it. Cone notes that, in the absence of material power, oppression, humiliation, bondage, and subjection persist. Black Power is a "humanizing force because it is the black man's attempt to affirm his being, his attempt to be recognized as 'Thou,' in spite of the 'other,' the white power that dehumanizes him."³⁵ Power is how humanization or dehumanization manifests in society. For the black to claim a humanity that others recognize, he must have power. For Cone, the problem with white power is that by denying black humanity, it manifests as oppression.

³³ James H. Cone, *Black Theology & Black Power*, Reprint edition (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), vii.

³⁴ Cone, 6.

³⁵ Cone, 7.

Because power is both about recognition in the world and a determinant of how one can show up in the world, a theology of liberation is necessarily a political theology. Black Power's agenda is to overcome the negations of blackness. In Cone's early writings, he describes Black power as the instrument that affirms the humanity of black people in the world. Cone elaborates on the ways in which the white superiority complex functions as supra-human in terms of theological, social, political, and cultural matters.³⁶ In all of this, Cone's aim is to situate the problem of black oppression not as a problem within black people, but as a problem of and with whiteness and the societies whites and whiteness controls. Cone insists that black people have to be willing to fight and even to die to ensure they have their human dignity. In this way, Black Power is also the clarion call for black liberative political action.

The promise of God's solidarity strengthens black people as they fight for their human rights. In *A Black Theology of Liberation*, Cone says "the meaning of God's activity in the world [is so that] the community of the oppressed will recognize that its inner thrust for liberation is not only *consistent with* the gospel but *is* the gospel of Jesus Christ."³⁷ Black Power not only affirms black humanity and black liberation, it also affirms God's will for and relation to blacks, the oppressed. "The sole purpose of God in black theology is to illuminate the black condition so that blacks can see that their liberation is the manifestation of God's activity."³⁸ Black liberation, black humanity, black power, and black theology align in Cone's thinking to end black oppression. The telos of Cone's theology of liberation is that whites finally recognize blacks as their equals, as their fellow human beings.

³⁶ Cone, 16.

³⁷ James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 40th Anniversary edition (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010), 1.

³⁸ Cone, 90.

Still Cone recognizes that white theology and its inability to recognize its hand in black oppression renders it a false theology that is not worthy of emulation. Cone's black liberation theology resists a white theology that does not see the problem of black oppression as central to the message of the Good News. The paradox of white freedom, emergent through and with the Transatlantic Slave Trade and colonialism, is its total reliance on the power to oppress. White freedom in the new world is built on forms of exploitation that over the last five centuries have left the entire planet Earth on the brink of utter destruction. Consequently, when Cone says, "authentic liberation of self is attainable only in the context of an oppressed community in the struggle for freedom," he presumes there will be an actual site, a location, an earth in which this liberation will materialize. Cone's commitment to a rival, even if liberative, politics does not change or challenge the essence of a politics that is inherently oppressive. Underneath Cone's optimism is theological anthropology that inextricably links humanness to the right—or at least the call—to freedom. Cone talks of "God's word as Spirit who empowers persons to be who they are—fully human in search of the highest beauty, love, and joy."³⁹ These sentiments do not seem far from the ideals ascribed to in the Constitution of the United States. Cone's embrace of liberalism as a political theology does not emerge as a simple appeal to the nation-state, but as a charge against Christians. The nature of his political theology lies in the way he sees liberation as emerging in and as recognized by the State. Oppression is the result of Christians' failure to recognize how God works in history as a liberator. One of Cone's greatest contributions is that he challenges the normativity of thinking theology from a non-black position. And instead, Cone invites us to center the black experience, even black pain, as the site from which to theologize.

White Theology and Black Oppression

³⁹ James H. Cone, *For My People* (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1984), 152.

Cone calls white Christians to solidarity. They must “become oppressed” in order to inhabit an authentic liberation. For Cone, it is not the case that the oppressed are not-human so much as that others treat them inhumanely. Inhumane treatment is the nature of the oppression. Whites who fail to see this oppression as a problem and its end as the call of the gospel and the very purpose of salvation have a false Christianity. Jesus’ life bears witness to what solidarity entails: that he lived, served, cared for, and journeyed with the poor and oppressed is testimony to his commitment to liberation. “Only those whose existence (and thus consciousness) is defined by the liberation of people from social, political, and economic bondage can understand the dialectic of oppression and freedom in the practice of liberation.”⁴⁰ Quoting Leroi Jones (or Amira Baraka, as he is now called), he affirms that “a slave cannot be a man.” He goes on to say:

The liberated, the free, are the ones who define the meaning of their being in terms of the oppressed of the land by participating in their liberation, fighting against everything that opposes integral humanity. Only the oppressed are truly free! This is the paradox of human existence. Freedom is the opposite of oppression, but only the oppressed are truly free.⁴¹

Cone’s deconstruction of oppression positions freedom on the side of the oppressed. Freedom is then the cessation of oppression and so the oppressed are free because their existence does not rely on oppression even though they suffer from it. When liberation does not assert its value from the perspective of the oppressed, then it fails to account for the ways in which oppression and violence work to create a false freedom for the oppressor. Liberation is an act of repossession by the oppressed. Black freedom qua black humanity must be taken from the hold of white supremacy, and when it is taken, the black and those who join in solidarity with them can at last live integral human lives. This full humanity means a “[separation] from everything

⁴⁰James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, Rev Sub edition (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 136.

⁴¹ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 92–93.

that is evil, everything that is against the ‘extension of the limits of humanity.’”⁴² For Cone, whiteness does not model or signify fully human status, even though it has power to determine realities for itself and the oppressed. God does not intend humans to live under these asymmetries of power that deny full humanity. God does not intend or condone white theology and its indifference to black suffering.

Cone thinks astutely about relations of power, and how power itself positions, determines, and calcifies modes of theological reflection. He recognizes that white Christians consistently fail to see God in blackness and consequently God in authentic liberation. The obstacle which hinders whites from joining in solidarity with blacks and doing the real work of Christian witness is their disregard for black suffering. In his critique of Reinhold Niebuhr, Cone says, “there is too little empathy regarding black suffering in the white community,” and that “leading [white] religious spokespersons ignored race in their interpretation of the Christian faith.”⁴³ Cone concludes that “moral suasion alone would never convince whites to relinquish their supremacy over blacks.”⁴⁴

Cone’s critique of white paucity in the face of black suffering and oppression is the heart of his argument in *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*. The paradox he investigates in Christian thought is between the cross as symbol of God’s “supreme love for human life,” and the lynching tree “as the most terrifying symbol of hate in America.”⁴⁵ The inability to reconcile the suffering Christ with the suffering of blacks testifies to white supremacy’s durability and

⁴² Cone quoting Petrović, a Marx scholar. Cone, 93.

⁴³ Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 57.

⁴⁴ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 58.

⁴⁵ Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 70.

obstinacy. The detachment of Christ's suffering from those who suffer now misappropriates and indeed ignores the Christian gospel.

For Cone, this is theological bankruptcy. In his most strident register, Cone says things like, "The sin of whites is in the definition of their existence in terms of whiteness... Whites, because they are white, fail to perceive this as the nature of sin."⁴⁶ This unperceived white sin takes on an even greater challenge when considering black sin. For blacks, their sin is "a desire to be white. It is the refusal to be what we are. Sin, then, for blacks is loss of identity. It is saying yes to the white absurdity—accepting the world as it is by letting whites define black existence."⁴⁷ Cone ardently resists the caricatures that white society associates with blacks and uses to justify black oppression. Letting whites define black existence is consequently both a political concern and a psychological concern. For blacks to reclaim their humanity is to accept and celebrate all that God has made them to be. Still this positive identity is tied to the liberalism that characterizes freedom and identity in the modern nation state and as such may very well be a black liberation *into* the very contexts that reproduce antiblack violence as opposed to a liberation *out from* it.

Liberation Challenges and Opportunities

While Cone concedes indirectly that whites determine the world as it is, it seems to me that he makes some slippages. What does it mean that whites can make worlds and simultaneously not perceive their sin in it? If black sin is a desire to be white, and white makes the world as it is, then black sin is the replication of the world that produces black oppression. If that is the case, then black liberation has to be something that is *not of this* world. It has to find

⁴⁶ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 114.

⁴⁷

its coherence not as a re-making of the world, but as a fundamentally different conception of world. If white sin is immutably tied to this world and white's capacity to remain oblivious to sin, *then black identity has to come from a place where whiteness is not*, a place whiteness refuses to recognize.

And where is that place? Cone says it is in the God who suffers—the God who is black. Cone's Christology and theology proper recognize that the issue with black oppression is an issue of sovereignty. The idolatry of white theology and the world it supports is the failure to imagine and recognize a God who is black and who chooses solidarity with those who suffer by participating in their suffering. False theology and false sovereignty cause suffering and abandon those who suffer. For this project, this is where Cone's theology is most helpful. That God chooses a side and by choosing identifies the powers that impersonate the Sovereign is most definitely a matter of faith. Nevertheless, God's solidarity and recognition among the oppressed is only a means to an end, and that end is liberation. For Cone, God's interest in liberation structures God's fidelity to the oppressed. And the cessation of this oppression is the task of black faith in action. Cone intends a theology that will provoke action and push black people and their white supporters to demand that the nation treat them as full citizens. It is the severing from political standing and full recognition and protection by the civil state that Cone's understanding of dolor addresses. If God is on the side of the oppressed, then the oppressed are empowered to protest, resist, and demand that their concerns and issues be addressed, and inequities redressed. Some humanist liberation theologians, like William Jones, challenge Cone's position as giving a pass to the problem of theodicy, by suggesting that black suffering does not and should not cause one to question altogether the claim that God is loving and benevolent. For Jones, black people's task is to stop looking to God for solutions and be their own solutions.

In many respects, Jones has a realized eschatology that sees the work of humans together as the solution to black oppression.⁴⁸ Instead of more faith in God, says Jones, black people need more faith in each other, political organizing, and better use of resources. While Jones turns to humanism as a solution for black oppression, he does so without problematizing the very framing of what it means to be human. While theological concepts allow Jones to challenge God's goodness and compassion, he does not raise a similar charge against humans. Even though his book's title asks whether God is a white racist, he does not effectively address the fact that humans are white racists who act as gods. To turn uncritically to humanism is to miss the way in which humans feign their alleged divine right to use violence toward others.⁴⁹ Consequently, Jones and Cone together help us to register the problem of black experience as the problem of white racism and its self-positioning as divine agency. Still missing from Cone and Jones is a recognition and sensitivity towards black women's experience of black dolor and what it means that Christ's suffering indexes liberation and salvation.

A Womanist Critique of Black Liberation Theology

In *Sisters in the Wilderness*, Dolores Williams exegetes the Hagar-Sarah texts in Genesis and Galatians, and notes that "the oppressed and abused do not always experience God's liberation power."⁵⁰ She notes that there is in the biblical witness also a "non-liberating" thread

⁴⁸ Anthony Pinn has also written extensively about black oppression and the pitfalls and insights of black liberation theology. See the following for his most complete treatment of black humanism and religion, Anthony Pinn, *The End of God-Talk: An African American Humanist Theology* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2012), https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0195340833/ref=dbs_a_def_rwt_hsch_vapi_tpbk_p1_i3; Anthony Pinn, *Terror and Triumph* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 2003). Throughout his work, Pinn consistently points to the way in which black religion aims to articulate a complex subjectivity for black folks in a world that de-humanizes black people. His black humanism generally calls for black people to address their faith resources to the hard and tedious work of justice-making, freedom fighting, and coalition building.

⁴⁹ William R. Jones, *Is God a White Racist? A Preamble to Black Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998), 3–23, 79–97.

⁵⁰ Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*, Anniversary Edition edition (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2013), 128.

that indicates that God's primary occupation may not be with liberation as conceived by Cone and other black theologians. Williams wants to caution black theologians about the way they appropriate biblical texts while failing to tend to the breadth of issues *in* black faith communities. Williams thus privileges intramural black concerns over appropriation of both biblical concepts and traditional Christian theological claims. This womanist hermeneutic—which Williams calls *identification-ascertainment*—is a tripartite mode of analysis: subjective, communal, and objective. The subjective tends to the interpreter's personal response to the text and attention to where they see themselves in the biblical witness. The communal, which emerges most often in the sermonic and musical, identifies where the community sees itself in the biblical text. And finally, the objective is concerned with who the biblical writers identified within the texts and those the biblical writers left out. She is convinced that such an openness to listening with those whose voices are silent or marginal even within the biblical text will help us to see how the biblical witness is indeed contending with asymmetries of power and privilege. Williams' womanist hermeneutic opens up a way for black theologians to consider more carefully the way violence functions in scripture and it complicates a simple conclusion of liberation.

Williams' charge to black (male) theology is to recognize "women's re/production history...[as] more than women birthing children, nurturing, and attending to family affairs. Though the events and ideas associated with these realities do relate, 'women's re/production history' has to do with whatever women think, create, use and pass on through their labor for the sake of women's and the family's well-being."⁵¹ Whereas Black liberation theology has focused on the horizontal relations between whites and blacks, and the vertical relation between Blacks and God, and the way these relationships produce ways of knowing and transformations,

⁵¹ Williams, 140.

Williams invites black theology to consider intramural relations as women's *labor for the sake of* their families, friends, and communities.

For Williams, consideration of black women's experiences in understanding the black experience writ large might be better understood as a wilderness experience. For the wilderness experience refuses the logics of "androcentric bias" and is "suggestive of the essential role [of] human initiative (along with divine intervention) in the activity of survival, of community building, of structuring a positive quality of life for family and community."⁵² While Williams' articulation of wilderness experience speaks to agency, creativity, and action, I am most compelled by the parenthetical articulation of divine intervention.

As a parenthetical note, one can read the divine intervention as subordinate to human initiative. Here, divine intervention is not the standard but the exception, not the norm, but the incidental. In a slightly different register, the parenthetical emerges as support to the main clause of the sentence. In Williams' articulation, we might think of the Divine as an *along with* form of intervention. This intervention is dynamic in that it emerges with and *alongside* black initiative. While Williams does not intone the divine as causal, those whose labors move toward forms of kin that support life, even in the wilderness, or maybe especially in the wilderness, do recognize the divine's presence and intervention.

That divine intervention is in service to some form of life in family and community, a recognition of kinship along with those who are also in the wilderness experience, poses a different binary than oppression/liberation. The binary of living/dying requires a different accounting of the divine resources and black initiative because it acknowledges as a primary concern the need to tend to the most intimate of responsibilities. As Williams' work with the

⁵² Williams, 141.

Hagar-Sarah texts demonstrates, under the conditions of enslavement the denial of parental rights and the denial of necessary resources for parenting pose a particular problem for the slave mother Hagar. Hagar epitomizes vulnerability. She is at the mercy of her master and his wife. She is at the mercy of the wilderness. She is also at the mercy of God. While her situation is impossible, her initiative, desire for survival, and divine make a way where there appeared to be none.

Black Suffering, Black Survival

The state's liberation, or self-narration of freedom, dilates black suffering. It is the power to make blackness the signifier of suffering. The world's liberation *to be* externalizes suffering onto blackness, normalizes black suffering, and faults blacks for their plight. The world transubstantiates black flesh into capital across social, political, theological, and libidinal economies.⁵³ Nevertheless, Cone does not distinguish political liberalism from liberation as theological. In fact, his understanding of liberation thoroughly surrenders the theological to the political. For Cone, the political is the real. Whilst Cone recognizes the limits of conceiving liberation within white theological imagination and its narrow politic, it evidences a failure to see God as black. Ultimately Cone's liberation challenges the lived experience of blacks, while underestimating the paradigmatic relation between blackness and the Human. Cone's desire is for black folks to have a recognized and realized subject position, like their white contemporaries.

With Cone, Black survival, and at times thriving, testifies to an "immanent presence of a transcendent revelation...[that] gave [blacks] an inner spiritual strength to cope with anything

⁵³ Carter takes up this concept following Denise Ferreira da Silva J. Kameron Carter, "The Excremental Sacred: A Paraliturg," in *Beyond Man: Race, Coloniality, and Philosophy of Religion*, ed. An Yountae and Eleanor Craig, Black Outdoors (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), 156–57.

that came their way.” Cone’s high regard for black faith and incarnation are a wider opening for me than his appeals to a universal liberal humanism. Others have let down the Black community one too many times. Consequently, whatever is possible for Blacks is because Blacks recognize and participate in God’s fidelity. Most clearly, Cone’s treatment of the blues and spirituals speaks to the presence of God amidst black dolor. Unlike whites, God’s love marks his descent into creation and, subsequently, in Jesus, death at the hands of that creation. Whatever the nature of God’s power, it is first demonstrated in God’s sustaining presence within black dolor. For me, this seems to be a more productive telos for black faith than a return to the terms of this world, which require the asymmetry of power for legibility, even if we claim that God is with us. Nevertheless, because Cone does not want black people to lose sight of liberation, God’s presence in the midst of the storm keeps us safe until all is right. His realized eschatology maintains that a different world is possible and that we are not waiting till heaven to get our *peace* of the pie. Black people must risk the work of liberation in the here and now and not settle for white world domination. For Cone, this is the historical orientation of the black church. And it needs to be its present and future orientation, if blacks truly desire liberation.

Still, for centuries now, Blacks have been fighting and dying for rights that many Western nations consider inalienable. The juridical and political foundations of Black progress in the United States occur as amendments—that is, as modifications to that which was previously constituted. According to the original Constitution, the slave who is Black does not have self-evident inalienable human rights, but instead rights that are taken and given, taken and given, ad infinitum. This is, in part, the bind in which Black Faith finds itself. It emerges in these conditions, perpetually contends with this argument, and does not undermine Slave/Black resistance actions or practices of refusal. Whatever a Black liberation is, it is only that because

Blacks have determined for themselves the nature of their freedom and liberty. Nevertheless, that Blackness is never without a defensive posture within the world speaks to the underlying need of Black faith—how to tarry in an antiblack world.⁵⁴ If anything can be said of black religious thinking, it is simply that it recognizes that there is a force outside of black people that governs so much of what happens with and to black people. In the most expansive sense, thinking about sin in black theology entails first thinking about the very construction of black existence. Cone's critique of a quiet piety and Williams' critique of black surrogacy both recognize the ways in which black religious thinking must interrogate the categories of lived experience it has been handed. A collective concern for black people in this world need not mean the flattening of a black experience to one thing. A collective concern can be a refusal to accept the theological convictions and priorities of others as those most pertinent for black people. Forasmuch as antiblackness has given us a body of work that portrays black people as the world's problem, it is more accurately the case that the world is the problem for black people. Because the world chops and severs black bodies, spirits, and souls, black religion and black faith have to instantiate practices that help black people address the wounds this world causes and affirm within

⁵⁴ While my engagement here reads Cone as a primary text in relation to the project I'm undertaking, a plethora of scholarship engages the question of blackness and Christianity. For a trajectory of black religious thought highlighting the contributions of black theologians from Benjamin Mays to Delores Williams, see, Mark L. Chapman, *Christianity on Trial: African-American Religious Thought Before and After Black Power*, Reprint edition (Wipf and Stock, 2006). For an elaboration of Cone's humanist orientation, see second generation black liberationist, Dwight N. Hopkins, *Being Human Cloth: RaceCulture and Religion* (Fortress Press, 2005). For an overview of key thinkers in black liberation, see Dwight N. Hopkins, *Introducing Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999). For a comprehensive introduction to academic black theology, see Hopkins, *The Cambridge Companion To Black Theology*. For the most strident critique of Cone and black liberation theologies, see William R. Jones, *Is God a White Racist? A Preamble to Black Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998). For additional humanist approaches to black liberation, see Anthony Pinn, *The End of God-Talk: An African American Humanist Theology* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2012). For a womanist critique of black liberation's sexism and embrace of black suffering, see Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*, Anniversary Edition (Maryknoll, NY : Orbis Books, 2013).

blackness what the world cannot and will not affirm. Black faith then begs deeper consideration of practice and habit.

Practical Theology: Thinking, Acting, Reflecting

Cone's critiques of white Christianity trace the critical gap between theology as confession and theology as praxis. Seeing chasm between what white Christian theology holds to be true about God and God's mission in the world and how white Christians—and more broadly white people—participate in black oppression, Cone exposes the disconnect. In tending to this issue, Cone by way of critique, is engaged in a practical theology methodology. His line of inquiry is consistent with what Schleiermacher tried to address in his definition and approach to practical theology. Writing nearly two centuries before Cone, Schleiermacher, a German reformed theologian and biblical scholar whose work heavily influenced Cone's primary interlocuter in his early work, Karl Barth, recognized a bifurcation in academic theology that increasingly separated theological reflection from its practice.⁵⁵ Schleiermacher's *A Brief Outline of Theology* proposed a theological unity across the academic disciplines of theology. Robert London Smith, Jr., via Ed Farley, notes Schleiermacher's call for a unity of theology as two-pronged: a teleological solution and a content solution. Summarizing Schleiermacher, Smith notes:

⁵⁵ Wilhelm Gräb, "Practical Theology as Theology of Religion. Schleiermacher's Understanding of Practical Theology as a Discipline" 9, no. 2 (December 12, 2005): 181–96, <https://doi.org/10.1515/ijpt.2005.9.2.181>. While Cone did not sustain engagement with Barth's liberative theology across his entire body of work, his dissertation was on Barth's theological anthropology. See James H. Cone, "The Doctrine of Man in the Theology of Karl Barth" (Place of publication not identified], publisher not identified, 1965). The uptake of liberation theology in other black contexts too show the relationship between Cone and Barth. See Gruchy John W. De, "The Reception and Relevance of Karl Barth in South Africa - Reflections on 'Doing Theology' in South Africa after Sixty Years in Conversation with Barth," *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 5, no. 1 (December 2019): 11–28, <https://doi.org/10.17570/stj.2019.v5n1.a01>. Also, Barth's lecture series on Schleiermacher remains one of the most extensive treatise of Schleiermacher's thought, see Karl Barth, *The Theology of Schleiermacher: Lectures at Göttingen, Winter Semester of 1923/24* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 1982).

Schleiermacher's teleological solution was to suggest a paradigm based on the argument that theology was a *positive* science rather than a *pure* science. As a positive science, theology is a *culturally determined form of experience* having to do with specific religious communities.⁵⁶

This claim that theology is a positive science unequivocally affirmed theology as action in the world. Moreover, Schleiermacher contended that the contextual nature of theology should always have as its telos in praxis in the community. In the context of formal theological education, this meant first, that the unifying point in training church leaders was to ensure relevance for their *social situation of clerical praxis*.⁵⁷ Schleiermacher's content solution, addressing the material unity of Christian theology, called attention to the essence of Christianity—the primacy of redemption—and concern for the human condition. When held together, other theological disciplines were expected to work out their telos in terms of the practical.⁵⁸

Unfortunately, Schleiermacher's vision never materialized. In most institutional contexts, practical theology has tended to focus on clerical training for ministerial duties.

My interest in Schleiermacher lies in his underlying assumption that the normative claims of theology were not already taken up in praxis. To be fair, he is more explicitly addressing the divisions that emerge in the academy as disciplines. But thinking more broadly, there is something to be said about how we come to expect that thinking theologically can be separated from doing theology. Said differently, if we take up Schleiermacher's claim that the telos of

⁵⁶ Robert London Smith, "From Strength to Strength: African American Church Praxis and the Changing Black Thematic Universe" (Ph.D., University of Aberdeen, United Kingdom), 43.

⁵⁷ Smith, "From Strength", 44.

⁵⁸ Smith, "From Strength", 44.

theology is praxis, starting with praxis and moving back may tell us more about the unity of theology. I think this is where Cone's critique of white Christian theology and church is salient: Cone does not start with a normative abstraction; he starts with praxis and then evaluates white theology as something other than what it confesses in its textual productions.

Another aspect that escapes direct attention in Schleiermacher's thinking is the way in which power functions to obfuscate contradictions between confessed belief and practiced faith, or at least an evaluation of how one can tend so expansively to the abstract and normative claim and not attend to actual realities on the ground. On one hand, this appears as a complete decontextualization of theology. On the other, it is evidence of the sedimentation of the power to think theologically apart from equal interrogation of one's practice. Carried to the extreme, this means one thinks theologically only as a way to justify the practices one desires to sanctify. We need look no further than the many volumes of theological texts and treatises produced to valorize slavery, subjugate women, legitimize the despotic, and justify genocide. Here we clearly see Schleiermacher's teleological solution at work and perhaps a perversion of his content solution. That Schleiermacher calls our attention to context and directs us to consider practical theology as the point at which Christian faith and witness is materialized, is vital.

As black theologians have taken up an interest in practical theology, it appears they have also wanted to realize a vision like Schleiermacher's. Their concern, however, has centered less on disciplinary distinctions within the academy and more on the chasm between what black theologians and black churches, black churches and the black community, and black theologians and the black community think and do. No team of scholars has been clearer in tackling these issues than Robert London Smith and the late Dale Andrews.

In *Practical Theology for Black Churches*, Andrews describes practical theology as “an engaging process between theology, theory, and practice, with each one feeding back upon the others.”⁵⁹ This circular and complementary approach to thinking theology and praxis ensures that neither one drift far from the other, as if the other does not matter. Andrews insists that theology and praxis should inform each other, and that theory should inform them both and vice versa. This threefold approach holds theology to be the tradition which the community of faith inherits, and that that theological tradition establishes the normative claims of God’s work and interest in the world. Theory helps us to gain a better critical insight into our historical and lived theology’s blind spots. Theory is thus a tool to help us reflect on what the tradition perpetuates. And the third prong, for Andrews, is praxis, which differs from practice because practice can emerge without a clear intention or aim, just from habit. Praxis is action that has some intention and thought behind it. Praxis describes the community of faith in action. It is where what we confess becomes what we do. Andrews’s primary concern is what he considers to be a chasm between black liberation and academic theology, the black church, and the black community. Andrews notes a nascent point of interaction between the black church and the black community, which he calls *religious folk life*. His use of this term is historical, in that he notes how all historical forms of black sociality include the interweaving of themes religious, social, and otherwise. Religious folk life in some respects resisted the false dichotomy between the secular and the sacred. While Andrews never states this explicitly, his appeal to religious folk from the outset situates black theological thinking within the lived experience of the community, which is not the case in the dominant (white) discourse. His recognition that black religious thinking and action emerged

⁵⁹ Dale P. Andrews, *Practical Theology for Black Churches: Bridging Black Theology and African American Folk Religion* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), (Kindle Location 30), Kindle.

together, with each other, means that Andrews situates his present intervention of black theology as a re-emergence of the church's origins in hush harbors and clearings.⁶⁰

At the heart of the institutional black church that emerges from the invisible institution is a commitment to black communities of care. This care recognizes both the forces that assail black life, that are detrimental to black life and thriving, and the skills that black people have developed under the weight of oppression to make meaning of their own lives. For Andrews, this care is what drives both pastoral practice and the witness of black religious ecclesiology. Between black religious folk life and the black church is a commitment to the care of black people as a collective.

Andrews describes the disintegration of the institutional black church as an institution designed for the collective betterment of all black people, irrespective of class, gender, sexuality, and other points intramural difference. For Andrews, black preaching plays a unique role in the black pastoral care matrix, for it names the collective concerns of the people and organizes the community's hope and agency, however limited, around collective care. His close reading of Ed Wimberly's black pastoral theology notes in recent times the problematic displacement of black preaching as a means of care of and for the black community. For Andrews, preaching should highlight God's reconciliation with humankind, and God's desire for humans to reconcile with each other. At the heart of Andrews' intervention is this concern for the integrity of relations, divine and human. Yet that concern is primarily one for the integrity of relations within the black community and the black church, not society at large. Consequently, Andrews understands "Preaching and corporate pastoral care [as] shap[ing] church praxis into communal ministries and ecclesial traditions. A communal ecclesiology develops, which conveys both sacred identity

⁶⁰ Andrews, Chapter 1, Kindle.

and sacred mission.”⁶¹ Such a task registers as prophetic in his writings, for it counters the order of the day. “The prophetic task of black theology is the ‘re-conception’ of the faith, but within African American religious folk life.”⁶² This re-conception is ongoing and requires the church and its leaders constantly to do the critical work of evaluating practice, understanding the issues shaping black life, and discerning how God intervenes against relational dis-integration.

Integration does not mean sameness in all black lived experience, as much as it means the ubiquity of antiblackness. Andrews’ intention is not to speak as if to a black monolith, but again to recognize the ways in which black fates are interconnected through anti-black racism that integration can present as not an issue or not much of an issue. Conversely, Andrews’ sees the uptick in individualized capitalist-centric prosperity preaching within the church and nihilism without the church as the on-going problem requiring black faith’s attention.

The proliferation of the prosperity gospel and its uncritical sanctification of capitalism’s creed and materiality is the most dis-integrating expression of black religious faith. While Andrews does not tease apart how the black church came to embrace the prosperity gospel in the latter part of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first centuries, he challenges the church primarily for its privatization of faith and its celebration of the individual above all else. For, he says, such an individualistic orientation to faith undermines not only the origins of the black church, but the fundamental orientation that black religious folk life had to the welfare and well-being of all people, to the community. Moreover, the spirit of individualism and its institutional skepticism seeded divisions between black academic theology, the black church, and black communities. Wherein, black academics were critical of the church’s conservatism, and black

⁶¹ Andrews, Kindle Location 357-358, Kindle.

⁶² Andrews, (Kindle Location 79-80).Kindle.

church's skeptical of black theologians trained in modes and methods of theological critique mostly animated in predominately white institutions, while the black community, particularly the black poor and rural, felt worlds apart from elite black academics and the petit bourgeoisie concerns of the black church.

As class differentiation increased following the civil rights movement, the black church became a site at which to work out black middle-class commitments, while black ghettos continued to go to waste. Meanwhile, black academics, upon welcoming new analytical tools from social and critical theorists, offered political and theological views that were at odds with the more conservative ones of local churches. These dynamics led to different blocks of the black community speaking past each other or not hearing one another.

As black theologians lost their connection with and investment in institutional black churches, and as black churches lost their connection with and investment in the urban black communities bearing the brunt of anti-black oppression through class-warfare.

Yet God's intentions, God's liberation and hope for black communities, is not for their disintegration, but for their collective health and vitality. Andrews' call to back black pastors and preachers is therefore a call for them to reclaim a prophetic orientation, one which resists the narrow ascendancy of the individual and instead shows concern for the collective in the face of collective injustice and oppression. One might say that at root such concern is about reconciliation, intramurally, existentially, and socially. It is about bridging the chasms, intentional and otherwise, that have arisen over the decades. This bridging, this reconciliation, is best thought comprehensively, with a concern for wholeness emerging from a deep spirituality. The task of care manifests as a constant discerning of the community's context and God's word amidst it. For a truly "prophetic practical theology speaks from the tradition but struggles from

within the dynamics of faith operating in religious folk life to reorient the Church toward its calling as an ‘intentional alternative community.’”⁶³ Note first that Andrews articulates the prophetic not just as “speaking truth to power,” but as a means of reconciling theology with praxis, of reconciling black folk across class lines. For the prophetic is itself a praxis and not just a mode of proclamation. And note second that Andrews’ prophetic call to be reconciled, though it includes all humans, is primarily and unapologetically concerned with a practice that tends to the exigencies of black life in a world where racism is still very much alive.

In his later work, Andrews, along with Robert London Smith, fleshes out a methodology in black practical theology that, from the outset, embodies the intramural overtures of Andrews’ earlier work. Smith’s dissertation, which became his first book, addresses a practical theology on behalf of the black church. Smith’s work, in relationship to Andrews’, focuses heavily on thinking through a methodology for black practical theology that requires and even welcomes critical feedback between sites focused on practice and those focused on elaborating the context of Christian tradition and doctrine. Smith lands on the mutual critical correlation method. This method:

Aims to correlate the issues and concerns of contemporary experience with the normative positions of the Christian story in a way that is dialectic and mutually critical. By drawing together issues and concerns that are of importance in the contemporary social context with the ‘Christian fact,’ a degree of relevance may be realized that traditional theological methods have not enjoyed.⁶⁴

One hears in the method a natural Hegelian dialectic, in which the tradition functions as the thesis, the contemporary challenges and issues as an antithesis to the tradition, and the work of practical theology as the synthesis. Here, the character of the tradition remains even as it adapts

⁶³ Andrews (Kindle Location 1457-58), Kindle.

⁶⁴ Smith, “From Strength to Strength,” 74.

to accommodate the new terrain in which faithful witness finds itself. It echoes the sentiments of the Wesley hymn, “A Charge to Keep,” when it says, “to serve the present age, my calling to fulfill, may I all my powers engage, to do my Master’s will.” One can also hear in Smith’s methodological approach a Tillichian conviction that the task of theology is to respond to the existential threats which living in the world presents. In short: the task of theology is always to address the present age, and to do so recognizing God’s hand in and across history. In this way, continuity and critical appraisal are working not in opposition to one another but in tandem to strengthen Christian witness among Christians and for the world.

Smith follows Don Browning’s articulation of a methodology for practical theology, affirming the idea that one’s living out of the faith is the site at which the church’s mission is clarified. Without the feedback and appraisal that emerges from the context in which the church is to be the church, the church becomes severed from its mission. The goal of practical theology is then to help the church self-correct, reappraise, adjust, modify, and recalibrate her course.⁶⁵

Drawing from these sources, Smith’s methodology certainly has an appreciation for tradition. But it does not privilege tradition to the place of universal applicability. Of specific concern for Smith is the way in which social location, particularly that of black people, forms a fundamentally different orientation to Christian tradition. Smith notes how the universal claims of dominant Western theology have readily excluded black people and have therefore failed to be universal. Smith does not see this as cause for black churches to abandon the faith—which they have not—but he recognizes that this does mean that their theological priorities are already conditioned by their situation of oppression and occlusion in the church and in the world. Recognizing both the value and the limitations of Browning’s critical correlation model, Smith

⁶⁵ Smith, 78–83.

sees an opportunity, from a black perspective, to hold Christian tradition or historical theology in critical tension with other sources, specifically black experience. In this way Smith's methodology allows for an appraisal of praxis in light of both black experience and Christian theology. While this may seem to make black experience an authority, that is not Brown's intention, primarily because the arc of black experience emerges as oppression and suffering at the hands of both the church and the world, and yet it maintains identity as Christian. Smith's orientation to praxis is in service to black faith communities and not in service to a practical theology whose aim is to help the larger church work through its issues with blackness.⁶⁶ Holding all this together, Smith proposes that

Practical theology is an ongoing process of *critical and reflective inquiry* into the praxis of the church in the world and God's purposes for humanity. Its inquiry is carried out in light of Christian Scripture, tradition, and *other sources of knowledge* and seeks the *critical awareness* of contemporary social issues and events that shape human experience. Practical theology facilitates the recovery and creation of essential forms of *phronesis for faith* communities as they seek out ways to live faithfully in the world. As a theological discipline, it seeks to ensure that the church's praxis in the world is authentic, relevant, and *constructive*.⁶⁷

With Andrews, Smith co-edited *Black Practical Theology*, which expanded both an articulation of black practical theology and methodology. In that book, they affirm their shared desire to “deepen, clarify, and explore the issues that shape black consciousness through a theological lens.”⁶⁸ As a project grounded in and constructed for black religious folks, Andrews and Smith proposed a methodology they call *trialogue*—a constellation of voices in conversation. As they seek to investigate the questions and challenges facing the black

⁶⁶ Smith, 85.

⁶⁷ Emphasis mine. Phronesis is a Greek term referring to practical wisdom, or what in black vernacular we might call *mother wit*. Smith, 68.

⁶⁸ Dale P. Andrews and Robert L. Smith, eds., *Black Practical Theology* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2015), 3.

community writ large and the black church, they invite critical conversation and engagement between black scholars in biblical studies, theology, and ethics, along with black scholars in practical theology fields, and finally with church and parachurch leaders who are working on the frontlines in churches and the community. Their aim was to situate praxis across the academic task of writing and the communal need of planning and plotting black faith communities. At the heart of their methodological approach is an ecclesiological intramurality that gets stakeholders to engage each other and not speak past and across each other. Built into such a model is an orientation toward humility, accountability, and mutuality. This “hearer response criticism,” as Andrews calls it, “proposes a broad paradigm for black practical theology...[that] reflects the prophetic campaign of the black theology project of the mid-to-late twentieth century into the present.”⁶⁹ The occasion to bring interpretive and re-interpretive resources from the human and social sciences to strengthen praxis and its intonation as the prophetic is what guides Andrews and Smith’s project.

Another outcome of that project is their term *praxiological intent*, by which they mean the way in which communities of faith make tangible their “theological judgments” in daily and communal practices. For Andrews and Smith, an effective practical theology does its work in prophetic praxis—mining the tradition and folk ways, carefully assessing the issues needing theological consideration, and providing constructive feedback—that can show up in the world as informed praxis. This interdisciplinary, interinstitutional, and intercommunal approach is no doubt laborious. At least two considerations are of note with this approach: first, everyone has to buy into the methodology for it to work; and second, the project relies heavily on epistemological orientations that prize the written word. Particularly for non-scholars, the need to

⁶⁹ Andrews and Smith, 6.i

articulate in a scholarly fashion how things work on the ground can appear to be a waste of resources. This does not mean that community leaders and pastors are not willing and able to engage in critical and intramural reflection. It just means that the task of writing tends not to be a priority in their praxis.

Nevertheless, a methodology such as Andrews and Smith outline must accommodate other means and modes of producing knowledge in service to practice. The urgency of such a project persists, because the need to engage theologically “the many crises that continue to strangle black communities and congregations” persists.⁷⁰ Andrews and Smith, as scholars in the field of practical theology, intend to explicate a methodology of doing black practical theology and a constructive theology that directs the faith activity of black churches. The blackness of that practical theology lies in its inclusion of multiple black voices, and its praxeological intent to improve black’s lived experience. As such they organize their text to address six areas of crisis within black sociality: 1) youth and intergenerational issues; 2) education, class, and poverty; 3) gender, sex, and race; 4) globalism, immigration, and the diaspora; 5) health care, HIV/AIDS, and poverty; 6) mass incarceration and the justice crisis. For each crisis area, they invite three contributing writers to engage. The first speaks to the theological or ethical concerns the crisis raises, the second (a practical theologian) proposes a way to consider an intervention within the life of the community, and the third (a pastor or community parachurch leader) reflects on the insights from the other scholars and the situation on the ground. That third respondent also provides feedback on how the praxis looks on the ground and suggestions that the previous writers might want to re-engage. What I appreciate most about their project is how it privileges the needs of the black community and the black church in the community throughout.

⁷⁰ Andrews and Smith, 301.

Though their interest in lived faith is a guiding light for practical theology, I think Andrews and Smith could have gone further if they had made it possible for the theological interlocutors to engage lived communities apart from through the writing of theological texts. I would have liked the project to include other modes of delivery and engagement. Doing so recalls the work of organizations like *WomenPreach!*, which bring scholars to where the people are and get them to engage in this critical dialogue in real time. Yet black theology must do both—scholarship and practical engagement—and do it at the source.

For this project, my interest and engagement with practical theology and black practical theology strives to synthesize black social theory with a black theology of spiritual care. I do this as one grounded in Christian tradition, more specifically of the black Christian tradition. I do, however aim to recast the primary work of black faith as care for and of black people. This care is not best understood as a political orientation, so much as a spiritual one. Moreover, I am interested in bringing the critical intellectual work of black scholars in a discipline called Afropessimism to complexify the diagnosis of black oppression. While this intervention might appear to be too abstract for practical theology, I think it is a valuable tool to help us understand better what the issues are in the world. Engaging Afropessimism can also prompt us to reassess our practices, what they mean, and what forms of redress they offer, if any.

Though I will not be using Andrews and Smith's threefold methodology, the spirit of that approach will inform this work. I also embrace the critique concerning the privileging of the written text as the epistemological norm. For the goal of this project is not ministerial instruction. Rather, it is to imagine a black practical theology of care as a mystical practice, which is consistent with the prophetic praxis to which Andrews speaks throughout his work. This does not mean that the ministerial arts do not appear in this project. In chapters 3 and 4 in particular I

consider the ministry of prayer, and in chapter 4 I briefly consider black preaching. Nevertheless, the primary interest of this black practical theology project is to reconsider how we understand blackness in the world—its function and purpose, as well as its means and modes of being and doing. The prophetic praxis which this project highlights is black-on-black care or intramural black care—black people caring for black people—as evidence of a fidelity made possible by God’s incarnation and presence in black dolor. God’s incarnation embraces the heterodox as lived out through Christian witness of Apostolic Pentecostalism. For I am convinced that the Spirit works within but also exceeds the grammars, epistemologies, and cosmologies that govern the world as given. Chapter 3 considers this heterodox Christian praxis more fully.

Like Cone, my exploration of this aspect of practical theology is an attempt to understand and theorize the praxis of anti-blackness, what I am calling *black dolor*. By my estimation, black dolor is the product of the World’s practical theology, to say the least. It is, in the Schleiermachian sense, the world’s unified and integrated theology, for there is anti-black integration across all spheres of society. For as much as practical theology has concerned itself with praxis, it has not adequately theorized how praxis requires certain relations of power in order to live out one’s implicit theology in the world. To tease out the world’s practical theology of anti-blackness, I turn to a constellation of black radical thinkers under the banner of Afropessimism.

Black Radical thought and Afropessimism

Black theologians have not been the only ones to try and make sense of what it means to be black in this world, and in particular in the US. Already at the turn of the twentieth century, the black sociologist W. E. B. Du Bois had committed himself to probing the problems that

structured black life.⁷¹ His notion of double consciousness, presented in his epoch-making work *The Souls of Black Folk*, speaks to the way in which blacks have to see themselves in the world's grammar, although they also have a grammar that is intramural. This dualism, which he describes as a mask, points to both performance and ruse, but also pragmatic necessity. From Du Bois' standpoint, for the black person to disclose what is known in the interior means to welcome directly the violence to which one is prone but which one doesn't desire. The double consciousness performs one function in the world, and another function intramurally. For the kind of work I hope to do here in thinking about Black intramural care and fidelity, the space that Du Bois recognizes as a black interior is essential. What is more, the presence of that interior is decidedly not committed to recognition in the World, even as it resists the World's perpetual violence. Black interiority does not have to solve the world's problem with blackness, so much as it has to wrestle in the world a mode of care that reflects God's fidelity to black inhabitation.

Fred Moten proposes that we "think outside the desire for a standpoint," and therefore imagine blackness as prior to the "logistic and regulative power" that seemingly made blackness what it is and prior to ontology.⁷² For Moten, black mysticism is an embrace of impossibility's exhaustion. As a way of life or sociality, exhaustion yields a "fundamental theoretical reason" not to accept social death.⁷³ Moten's mysticism thus functions as a paranorm, a norm outside the regime of social death by way of distinction between transcendental subject and transcendental aesthetic. One might describe the miraculous, within Moten's frame, as the act of discerning and

⁷² Fred Moten, "Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh)," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 112, no. 4 (October 1, 2013): 739, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-2345261>.

⁷³

perhaps naming the kind of opening his black aesthetics yields—a black mysticism that is the “paraontological interplay of blackness and nothingness, [an] aesthetic sociality.”⁷⁴

In this way, blackness can be understood as the convergence of absolute nothingness, a gesture towards the afropessimist claim of social death, and “the radical immanence of things that is not disavowed so much as it is unimagined in that same elaboration.”⁷⁵

As I imagine in this work, the black mystical is less a claim to a black sovereignty or worldmaking aesthetics, as Kevin Quashie proposes.⁷⁶ Instead, it represents a willingness to read for filth the Western World’s collapsed relation between antiblackness, politics, and theology. I am not claiming that theology, as a category of meaning will save black people, but I am suggesting that it can play a vital role in discerning the limits of this world’s capacity for justice making while also supplying black people with an interest in caring for those who are born black in this World. For as much as political and social concerns touch all aspects of our lives, they do not control everything.

Here we might note a distinction that can be made between *total* and *all*. Whereas *total* adheres within the logic of an equation, meaning it is bound by what lies on the other side of the equal, *all* exceeds total by being open to other equations and even reconfigurations of the current equation. If we hold the condition of blackness as totalizing, we need not elide that into *all*. This may make more sense as a theological claim than as a materialist or even ontological claim. I lead with that in order to say that the way in which this project differs from certain strains of Afropessimism (AP) is that it holds black theological thinking as a form of social life within

⁷⁴ Moten, “Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh),” 755; Moten, “Black Op,” 738.

⁷⁵ Moten, “Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh),” 751.

⁷⁶ Kevin Quashie, *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture*, None edition (New Brunswick, N.J. ; London: Rutgers University Press, 2012). And Kevin Everod Quashie, *Black Aliveness, or a Poetics of Being*, Black Outdoors: Innovations in the Poetics of Study (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021).

social death.⁷⁷ I want in this project to use AP to challenge our optimism about the world's capacity to be anything other than antiblack, dolor on all sides, even social death. But I also want to honor black intramurality and divine engagement that may not be bound to the ontological strictures of this world, even as its phenomena happen in the world. From a theological perspective we might say that blackness is *in* the world, but not *of* it. At the outset this poses a challenge for the way in which AP mediates a problematization of ontology for blackness. In this project, I am not centering a black intramurality on Africanicity— that is, trying to retrieve a pre-Middle Passage African identity or some general African positivity. I am grounding this not in an existential engagement with the divine and what that means for black sociality—to take up an aspect of Fred Moten's terminology. Whereas Moten ties a black sociality to aesthetics (and this is even taken up and extended in Ashon Crawley's work), my overture to sociality intends to establish an ontological modality that functions from a grammar that operates in the black religious imagination as mystery and the Holy Spirit.

By appealing to a fidelity that transcends while it is also fully constituted within the coordinates of blackness in an anti-black world, my goal is neither to claim an *a priori*, a *tabula rasa*, or imply a point of cohesion *sans* rupture. Instead, my aim here is to demonstrate a distinction between *total* and *all*. Though the grammars put into play with AP do not allow for such an interjection, nevertheless I find that the presence of Spirit informs black praxis and black interiority in ways that are substantive and impactful. This recourse to the “consolation of transcendence”⁷⁸ does not mean the cessation of dolor or its ubiquity. It does, however, note a

⁷⁷ Jared Sexton, “The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism -,” *InTensions*, no. 5 (Fall/Winter 2011), <http://www.yorku.ca/intent/issue5/articles/jaredsexton.php>.

⁷⁸ Quoting Brandon Wagner in Jared Sexton, “Afro-Pessimism: The Unclear Word,” *Rhizomes: Cultural Studies in Emerging Knowledge*, no. 29 (2016), <https://doi.org/10.20415/rhiz/029.e02> paragraph 8.

means by which to engage the very truths AP narrates about this world. This is the work I set out to attend to in chapter 3. Still there are a few major contours in afropessimist thought that are worthy of attention.

Historical Sociologist, Orlando Patterson, provides perhaps an urtext for afropessimist thought. In his tome, *Slavery and Social Death*, he argues that the practice of slavery across the wide span of human civilization should not be reduced just a condition of forced labor. The function of the slave in society is paradigmatic, in that the slave provides a means by which the non-slave is able to articulate their personhood. Patterson's collective summation of enslavement starts with an argument that slavery is first a placeholder for death. Because slavery is first a question about death, or the right to kill, it is necessarily a discourse about power and sovereignty. Patterson narrates this as a relation of domination saying, "slavery is one of the most extreme forms of the relation of domination, approaching the limits of total power from the viewpoint of the master, and of total powerlessness from the viewpoint of the slave."⁷⁹ This structure of dominance requires various forms of violence. There are three distinct means of violence that Patterson identifies that produce the social death of the slave. First, the slave experiences natal alienation. Patterson says that the slave functioned as a "genealogical isolate," that is, the denial of "all claims on, and obligations to, his parents and living blood relations but, by extension, all such claims and obligations on his more remote ancestors and on his descendants."⁸⁰ This isolation served the function of making the slave totally reliant on the master for all means of sociality in the world. Without the master, the slave was nothing. The

⁷⁹ Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study, With a New Preface*, 2 edition (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2018), 1.

⁸⁰ Patterson, 5.

nature of such condition made the slave “totally flexible,” able to serve as the workforce for capitalistic interests or be “used as the perfect noncapitalistic retainer, concubine, or soldier.”⁸¹

The second aspect of social death is general dishonor, Patterson offers:

What the captive or condemned person lost was the master’s gain. The real sweetness of mastery for the slaveholder lay not in immediately in profit, but in the lightening of the soul that comes with the realization that at one’s feet is another human creature who lives and breathes only for one’s self, as a surrogate for one’s power, as a living embodiment of one’s manhood and honor. Every slavemaster must, in his heart of hearts, have agreed with Nietzsche’s celebrated declaration: ‘What is good? Everything that heightens the feeling of power in man, the will to power, power itself. What is bad? Everything that is born of weakness. What is happiness? The feeling that power is *growing*, that resistance is overcome.’⁸²

General dishonor speaks to the form of sociality germane to the position of slave. The slave’s subordination as a reflection of the captor’s power is only such because the captor’s equals or as non-slaves recognize and affirm it as such. Recognition is always a communal enterprise and so recognizing the slave as one without claim to oneself is to the owner’s benefit.

The third component is domination by violence. Again, to quote Patterson at length:

More tragic than the victim’s outward acceptance of blame as part of the dynamic of interaction with the master was his tendency to express psychological violence against himself: the outward show of self-hatred in the presence of the master, which was prompted by the pervasive indignity and underlying physical violence of the relationship...What slavery really meant: the direct and insidious violence, the nameless, and invisibility, the endless personal violation, and the chronic inalienable dishonor.⁸³

The key insight here has to do with the way anyone can enact violence and violate the slave. In the master/slave dynamic the slave’s self-harm can be at the pleasure and discretion of the master’s will and desire. With gratuitous violence nothing is off limits and effective domination

⁸¹ Patterson, 33.

⁸² Patterson, 78.

⁸³ Patterson, 12.

requires violence to be an ever-evolving technology. It is important to note that violence was not just brutal labor. Patterson notes across many societies how slaves held what would widely be considered positions of power and authority over others. Still, no matter how much power they wielded over others, none of that changed the fundamental relation of domination between the master and the slave. The elite slave, one who functioned with a wider span of the master's authority, "was always structurally marginal, whether economically or socially politically or culturally. His marginality made it possible for him to be used in ways that were not possible with a person who truly belonged."⁸⁴ The violence of not belonging in the World where one's blood sweat and tears makes possible the capacity for others to belong.

Across all of Patterson's insights we can trace the fungibility of the slave's non-position. That the slave can function in contradictory roles and do so without fracturing the World's social cohesion demonstrates the World's capacity to legitimate, extend, and imagine untold forms of violence and subjection. While Patterson's theory speaks to the category of slavery writ large across time and space, afropessimist take up his concept of social death and read it exclusively as the situation for slaves who are made black.

Frank Wilderson, a critical film theorist, has been chief in taking up Patterson's notion of social death and considering what that means for the slave who is black. His consistent argument across the body of his work is that blackness is paradigmatic. Meaning, the antagonism structuring black existence is not between black and white, but between black and Human. Taking Patterson's notion of the parasitic to its end, Wilderson hold that blackness is the ground from which the Human emerges. He says:

Black slavery is foundational to modern Humanism's ontics because 'freedom' is the hub of Humanism's infinite conceptual trajectories. But these trajectories

⁸⁴ Patterson, 332.

only appear to be infinite. They are finite in the sense that they are predicated on the idea of freedom from some contingency that can be named, or at least conceptualized. The contingent rider could be freedom from patriarchy, freedom from economic exploitation, freedom from political tyranny (e.g., taxation without representation), freedom from heteronormativity, and so on. What I am suggesting is that first political discourse recognizes freedom as a structuring ontologic and then it works to disavow this recognition by imagining freedom not through political ontology – here it rightfully began – but through political experience (and practice); whereupon it immediately loses its ontological foundations... I contend, in allowing the notion of freedom to attain the ethical purity of its ontological status, one would have to lose one's Human coordinates and become Black. Which is to say one would have to die.⁸⁵

Wilderson's intensification of Patterson's notion of social death illuminates the distinction between freedom as experience and freedom as ontology itself. The challenge for the black who intends to think liberation is one of claiming ontological standing. Said differently, freedom for the Human *is* the experience of the slave's exclusion from the very possibility of "life." For Wilderson, the issue with freedom is not the ability to practice or embody culture and aesthetics, but instead the capacity to wield political power, and essential to this wielding of power is the articulation of position over experience. The black can never be "disaggregated from social death"⁸⁶ because social death is not an experience but an ontology. As such, the end of black social death is the end of the World. Wilderson's narration of the ubiquity of social death emerges from his understanding of politics as the ground for *being* in the World. Black non-being is the necessary condition for the possibility of political coherence for the world. The heft of Wilderson's argument means little space to imagine black practices as effective interventions thwarting social death.

Still, Wilderson sees value in some form of intramural solidarity, if not for political means, then for nothing other than experiencing a form of sociality that gives black life meaning

⁸⁵ Wilderson, *Red, White & Black*, 22–23.

⁸⁶ Wilderson, 95.

and care. This is most readily demonstrated in Wilderson's latest work, *Afropessimism*, where he writes about his estrangement and reconciliation with his mother following her death.

I told the story of what she [his mother] did when we walked out of the restaurant on the precipice in California, ow she placed her hand on my heart and said she was proud of me; how that changed our relationship in a way that I could never have imagined possible. How we said, 'I love you,' to each other for the first time in forty years. Then I read a poem I had written for her.⁸⁷

After the poem, Wilderson goes on to end his text with the note he wrote to his mother while mid-air returning home from her funeral services.

Dear mom,
I don't know if you're in heaven with your Jesus, or sailing the cosmos with Shango, or if your soul has gone to rest in the consummate hands of gifted musicians. But wherever you are please wait for me, that we might spend eternity as we spent the last ten years. I miss you so much.
With all my love,
Your son, Frank.⁸⁸

Wilderson's demonstration of intramural solidarity and care through his relationship with his mother may not intervene upon social death as the political fate of black people, but it does speak to what Jared Sexton calls the social life of social death. For Sexton, *Afropessimism* needs black optimism, not as a solution but as another side that gives space to acknowledge what lies beyond solely thinking the political. For me, it's the way Wilderson's work largely focuses on these intramural relationships he has with other black people and how those relationships help him see his own practices of antiblackness and endeavor to undermine his own negrophobogenesis.

Wilderson's focus on his relationship with his mother signals a key opening for how black men, even in this radical orientation, might consider how the relationships to black women, and those who have black mothers, inform what is prioritized both in our descriptive and

⁸⁷ Wilderson, 338.

⁸⁸ Wilderson, 339.

prescriptive work. Whereas Wilderson's scathing critique is of the World and its antiblackness, his most tender narration arises in the most foundational of relations – family. It has long been the case that black women have had to think not only about social death, but also the care and protection of others in the hold. Said differently, to move from the abstract to praxis, we might consider directly the way black women navigate subjection in the World and responsibility issuing from their own bodies. It is worth considering a few of these radical black feminists and theorist for their contributions to black thought and praxeological intent of this project.

Hortense Spillers in her epoch-making essay, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" shows the peculiar function black women play in the proliferation of antiblackness. While Spillers does not identify as an afro-pessimist, her analysis of the situation of blackness is taken up by afropessimist. Considering Wilderson's reconciliation with his mother, and to some extent what I'm trying to do in this project – it remains important to hear and build from and with black women as thinkers.

Afropessimists and radical black thinkers are a diverse crowd from those who are skeptical of and pessimistic about liberal social projects. They range from those who disavow the political all together to those who focus more on intramural concerns and ways of being otherwise in the world. The disavowal of the political tends to be the rub for most critics of AP. The rebuttal offered is an appeal to progress. Liberal humanists insist that conditions are less bad than they were under slavery. The metric used to make such a determination always requires the absence of certain forms of evidence. Secondly, critiques of AP miss that the function of such a nuanced and sustained focus on antiblack violence is not to tear down black people, but to show how fundamentally committed whiteness as human as the political construction of modern nation-states remains parasitic upon blackness. The absence of a political prescription does not

render the diagnosis null and void, but means we have to consider ways of thriving that do not rely solely on the rouse of political liberalism. Part of what makes AP intolerable is its refusal to offer a program of solution—it is the consummate diagnostic, informing us that antiblackness is a sickness unto death for black folks, but also a death-dealing world. If we consider Afropessimism's *urtext*—Patterson's *Slavery and Social Death*, —we can track the *private determinants* of how the slave's use determined her material conditions. Some *human beings* acquired slaves for prestige,⁸⁹ others for the purposes of fleshly delights,⁹⁰ and still others acquired for physical manual labor. The nature of slave labor was not just the monetary economy, but also the political economy—3/5ths clause in the Constitution; the libidinal economy—consider miscegenation and master's having children with their black property; as well as religious economy—from the refusal of Christian baptism to the acceptance of it to produce a docile slave class.⁹¹ All these forms of labor and subjugation emerged from the private interest of the master. Our default image of slavery as field labor misses how domination and subjugation for the slave happened indiscriminately. Because of the asymmetries of power, the material conditions and even how those material conditions provided for physical comfort and seeming privilege. Because the asymmetry at power could change on a whim at the full discretion of the master. It was not just the whip and the lash that were violent, but the constant

⁸⁹ Stephanie McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning: Power and Politics in the Civil War South* (Harvard University Press, 2012), 3, 172-173.

⁹⁰ For a comprehensive look at the way enslaved black men were sexually violated, see Thomas A. Foster, *Rethinking Rufus: Sexual Violations of Enslaved Men* (University of Georgia Press, 2019). For a recent work looking at the intimate violence black women faced, see Alexandra J. Finley, *An Intimate Economy: Enslaved Women, Work, and America's Domestic Slave Trade* (UNC Press Books, 2020).

⁹¹ For insightful and problematic take on the slavocracy from a White scholar's perspective, see Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, *Life and Labor in the Old South* (Univ of South Carolina Press, 2007). Phillips text is sympathetic to white concerns but makes arguments about how important slavery was for civilizing and converting black people – slavery was a mutually beneficial institution even as it was structured by violence and exploitation.

threat of their use. Furthermore, it was also the case that the community surrounding the master knew the power of the threat, because they could share in it.

As a practical theologian, I engage AP as a critical framework for understanding politics in a way liberation theology has not. Consequently, my articulation of black faith, black-on-black care, and transformative fidelity, does not concede the heft of their value to their political expediency. As Calvin Warren has argued—antiblackness is a spiritual problem needing a spiritual antidote.⁹² This project meditates in that direction. Whereas AP generally resists transcendence because of the ways its narration is fraught with antiblackness, my project welcomes the transcendent as seen in and by the witness of my mother Delores and her faith and her prayer. The transcendent is not panacea or the answer that solves the problem of blackness in the world: it is one means by which black people can invest in intramural concern and fidelity as divine witness. Afropessimism helps me identify the troubles of the world, while theological convictions invite me to reflect on the practices that shape black faith⁹³ and emerge from black dolor.

⁹² *Addressing Anti-Blackness in White Evangelicalism: Critical Race Theory and Pentecostal Spirituality*, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KD6FIKkRSWU>.

⁹³ Lewis Gordon, in his dissertation introduces the term *bad faith*, by this he means the denial that takes place through antiblack racism and the self-denial that black people internalize. “I must convince myself that a falsehood is in fact true; therefore in bad faith, I lie to myself.” See Lewis Ricardo Gordon, “Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism: A Study in the Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre” (Ph.D., United States -- Connecticut, Yale University), 9, accessed May 13, 2023, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/304052891/abstract/CD60E1B2B0D447B0PQ/1>.

Chapter 2: Black Dolor, An Inescapable Matrix

Dolor quibusdam non dimittit.

The pain follows some to their graves.⁹⁴

Faith is born out of suffering, and suffering is faith's most powerful contradiction.⁹⁵

Introduction

The World is not hospitable to the slave who is black. Structured by the *longue durée* of "stark horror,"⁹⁶ "expenditure and dissolution—bodies exhausted and restored, broken and unsovereign, anguished and redressed."⁹⁷ The slave's experience in and of the World is lived as a social death.⁹⁸ Historical sociologist Orlando Patterson characterizes social death as: natal alienation, general dishonor, and violent domination. By natal alienation, the enslaver deems the slave to have neither a claim to birth rights nor kinship ties that require recognition. It is the

⁹⁴An example under the entry for 'dolor' in a Latin dictionary. It translates as "the pain follows some to their graves." Elisha Coles, *A Dictionary, English-Latin and Latin-English Containing All Things Necessary for the Translating of Either Language into the Other ... / by Elisha Coles ...* (London, England: Printed by John Richardson for Peter Parker ... and Thomas Guy ..., 1679), 315, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2248513213/citation/57C2B229F1684292PQ/1>.

⁹⁵ Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, x.

⁹⁶ Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, 1st edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 13.

⁹⁷ Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, 2 edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 133.

⁹⁸ Sexton, "The Social Life of Social Death."

"incapacity to make any claims of birth or to pass on such claims."⁹⁹ Second, the slave experiences general dishonor. The enslaver deems the slave to be his or her property, and as such the master's will determines the slave's value. The function of the slave is to strengthen the master's position in the world. It is the slave's dishonor that gives the master freedom and liberty with meaning in a slave society. "The dishonor the slave was compelled to experience sprang instead from that raw, human sense of debasement inherent in having no being except as an expression of another's being."¹⁰⁰ Third, the enslaver violently dominates the slave. Patterson's notion of violence unfolds across multiple registers—mental, physical, metaphysical, psychic, and spiritual. Maintaining the slave/master relation requires violence and because slavery is an alternative to death, the slave's death is the master's to determine. Violent domination is best understood, per Patterson, as a relation of parasitism, where "the slaveholder fed on the slave to gain the very direct satisfactions of power of another, honor enhancement, and authority... [all while camouflaging] his dependence, his parasitism, by various ideological strategies."¹⁰¹ Following Patterson, afropessimists social death as a political non-ontology for blackness. The World is established by the paradigmatic relation between black and Human, which is exemplified best by whiteness but also inclusive of non-blacks. As Frank Wilderson argues, blackness is "the always already available prey of civil society and the state."¹⁰² As such, "the more the political imagination of civil society is enabled by the fungibility of the slave metaphor, the less legible the condition of the slave becomes."¹⁰³ Throughout this project, I refer to social death and the

⁹⁹ Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, 8.

¹⁰⁰ Patterson, 78.

¹⁰¹ Patterson, 337.

¹⁰² Wilderson, *Red, White & Black*, 124.

¹⁰³ Wilderson, 22.

"afterlives of slavery"¹⁰⁴ as *black dolor*. Neither abolition, emancipation, Civil Rights, nor any other form of social or political intervention redress the fundamental relation between blackness and dolor opposite the Human and freedom. Said differently, *black dolor* is the inextricable political and social material condition of (non)being blacks and blackness in the World. To speak of black dolor is to speak of the World as antiblack. My taking up of social death in this chapter is to show its persistence even in the abolitionist project, by analyzing the work of British abolitionist William Wilberforce.

In the first section of this chapter, I offer a close reading of William Wilberforce's early arguments in the House of Commons advocating for the abolition of the Transatlantic Slave Trade (TST) alongside his writings as a lay theologian. Held together, we can see how Wilberforce's theology and his politics function as an *activity* and a *method* of practical theology. As Bonnie Miller-McLemore suggests, following Don Browning and Kathryn Tanner,

Practical theology either has relevance for everyday faith and life or it has little meaning at all. These constitutive activities of daily life are also sites where faith breaks down and people struggle. [As Browning suggests], theological deliberation arises when problems that demand practical reasoning occur. Or, as Kathryn Tanner observes, it arises "to meet problems that Christian practices, being what they are, inevitably generate."¹⁰⁵

Wilberforce's writings demonstrate the nature of his theological convictions and how he sees politics as the proper site to materialize his praxiological intent. Still, the generally regarded assumption holing abolition as a sign of human progress¹⁰⁶ cannot be collapsed into a narrative of progress for blackness in the World. The necessary caveats for "better off," must bracket entirely

¹⁰⁴ Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, 6.

¹⁰⁵ Bonnie Miller-McLemore, "Introduction: The Contributions of Practical Theology," in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, ed. Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore and Wiley-Blackwell (Firm), Wiley-Blackwell Companions to Religion (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 7.

¹⁰⁶ Paul Goodman, *Of One Blood: Abolitionism and the Origins of Racial Equality* (University of California Press, 1998).

the nature of slavery's afterlife. I challenge the presumption of a black progress by showing how Wilberforce's practical theology to abolish the slave trade and even slavery do not differ from the logic of black subjection and inferiority that establish slavery in the first place Wilberforce's rhetoric and praxis extend the slave as an object in service to British imperial interests even after the end of the TST. Notions of humanitarianism and liberty are ultimately Intra-European concerns that do not, and possibly cannot, regard the slave who is black as an equal. Saidiya Hartman sums it up this way: "the enduring legacy of slavery was readily discernable in the travestied liberation, thwarted agency, coerced labor, interminable servility and blameworthiness of the free individual."¹⁰⁷ Wilberforce's ethical commitment could not see or render legible a black humanity as equal to his own, as agentic, powerful, or comparable to his own. In absence of such equanimity, he could only imagine the position of the slave as a position he could never desire for himself. The sum of Wilberforce's practical theology is the refusal of kenosis beyond a thought experiment to provoke emotion. Wilberforce's pragmatic political commitment requires him to appease his opponents' economic concerns, which he does by representing black bodies as figures in tables and charts. This practice continued on in abolition, re-capturing black people in ledgers and court proceedings to determine bounties and payouts strengthening the British economy and political reach across the globe.¹⁰⁸

As we shall see, Wilberforce's solution extends the concept of natal alienation by suggesting "natural increase" instead of the slave trade to supply black bodies for enslavement. This solution exemplifies what Hortense Spillers posits:

Slavery did not transform the black female into an embodiment of carnality at all... She became instead the principal point of passage between the human and

¹⁰⁷ Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 7.

¹⁰⁸ Kenneth Morgan, *Slavery, Atlantic Trade and the British Economy, 1660-1800*, New Studies in Economic and Social History (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 97.

the non-human world. Her issue became the focus of a cunning difference—visually, psychologically, ontologically—as the route by which the dominant modes decided the distinction between humanity and "other."¹⁰⁹

Wilberforce's practical theology of abolition does nothing to upend this structural function for black women. The black woman's condemnation is too the condemnation of her issue, her offspring. It is therefore important that we analyze what Wilberforce's practical theology produces in the World.

When British Naval forces capture the Spanish slaver *Dolores* and prevent the arrival of the cargo to auction blocks in the Americas, it does not provide a return to a life outside Western interest. *Dolores*'s issue remains trapped in a political, judicial, and economic antiblack matrix, or as Hartman describes, "an asylum of inequality."¹¹⁰ British dominance across the Atlantic (Ocean and world), and subsequently the coasts of West Africa, (re)lease *Dolores*'s issue into emergent scenes of subjection. The archives yield a table of names and hasty physical descriptions of *Dolores*'s black cargo, demonstrating a disinterest in complexifying their identities or seeing them as worthy of claiming a self-bounty. The workings of the Court of the Vice-admiralty in Sierra Leone render no justice for the (re)leased slave. Instead, the Court established in service to the crown and those parties able to influence the Crown offer little reprieve for *Dolores*'s black cargo. A critical reading of a maritime postcard depicting the capture of the *Dolores* guides our inquiry in this section. By tending to both what is (in)visible and what remains opaque in the image, what is depicted and what is not, I argue that blackness in the World can only tell the stories the world wants to hear, using blackness as the narrative foil. Secondarily, I am interested in what can be imagined in the blackness that is non-descript, the

¹⁰⁹ Hortense J. Spillers, *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 155.

¹¹⁰ Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 354.

blackness that escapes the grammar of the image. By tending to the image's opacity as it relates to the *Dolores's* black cargo, I register both foreclosure and possibility simultaneously. The presumptive message of saving slaves from the TST may testify to Wilberforce's positive intervention, but the absence of the slave's own narration in the image, undermines the inclusion that abolition feigns. While the world needs a story of British valor and humanitarianism, blackness needs a story of faith in the (im)possible, a God who is incarnate in the belly of the ship, in the hold, and as such makes possible for blacks a different orientation to and within the world. Black redemption does not belong to this World's project. Whatever black redemption is, which I cannot resolve in this project alone, it may very well emerge from and within the very dolor to which blackness is conscripted. It is here that I situate black faith as constituent with black dolor.

In the final section of this chapter, I turn to the opacity of blackness, the remainder unaccounted for, and I argue that in this (non)space¹¹¹ blackness tarries with Spirit in service to black faith and ultimately what I call *transformative fidelity*. Having made a case for the material world's antiblackness, I then consider the world's hatred of Spirit. Subsequently, the space of black foreclosure is also the space of Divine expulsion. In black dolor, black and God tarry together as fungible objects for the World's political coherence and elaboration. God's sovereignty, in black, is not demonstrated in God's power to dominate as the World prefers, but to fruitfully inhabit the spaces and places the world has deemed unfit for honor, care, and recognition. The practical theological task, then, of black and theology is to discern God's presence in black dolor and from there to consider how intramural care, what I call *black-on-*

¹¹¹ This (non)space is not to be understood as privacy, especially along the ways we think of religious practice as emerging from private devotion and practice. This (non)space is best understood as vestigial. I will elaborate more on the vestigial in Chapter 2.

black care, —however fraught and undermined by the world—gives black life meaning and belonging.

With that, I turn our attention to Wilberforce's early call for abolition in the British Parliament and his theological writings.

A British Case for Abolition

By starting this project with abolition, I aim to interrogate how the progressive move from mere status, or more precisely, object, to *human being*, even and especially when orchestrated by *the Human*, is an impossible proposition because it fails to disrupt the logic that establishes one representation of humanity over another. Consequently, abolition as a practical theological intervention upon the institution of slavery, cannot effectively intervene upon the representation of humanity, so long as its agentic orientation relies on the logic and reason of those who see themselves as *the Human*. My argument is that Wilberforce is bound by a humanist logic that finds its bearings in the very antiblackness it intends to assail via abolition. It is the case, then, that the ex-slave does not become a proper human being through abolition and liberation, but persists as *available equipment*.¹¹² By interrogating the logic and rhetoric of abolition, we can see how the European —ostensibly British— notion of the slave's *-isness* or being grounds a paternalism from which the slave cannot escape in the Word. While Wilberforce and his colleagues may maintain that the abolition of slavery is their ultimate goal, their articulation of the abolition of the slave trade reveals and conceals their power over the slave as

¹¹² Taking up Heidegger's Terminology from *Being and Time*, Warren argues that the slave's "African existence" is destroyed and the emergent Negro serves as "available equipment... for the purpose of supporting the existential journey of the human being." Calvin L. Warren, *Ontological Terror: Blackness, Nihilism, and Emancipation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 27.

an object. British humanitarianism does not free the slave from object status. Abolition of the TST in fact perpetuates gratuitous violence, natal alienation, and dishonor, even in the absence of institutional slavery. For the afterlife of slavery maintains asymmetries of power. The existential moral crisis to which abolition speaks is not the social death of the slave, but merely an intramural concern to lay hold of enlightened notions of freedom and liberty. Consequently, abolition elaborates and perpetuates the slave as object, even as it marks a "point of transition"—however one *sans* self-determinacy.¹¹³ Black dolor persists because the World as it is requires the slave, even if interventions like abolition imagine otherwise.

What follows first is a detailed recapitulation of the exchange between Wilberforce and other members of British parliament when Wilberforce successfully brought abolition legislation to the floor. While his first attempt was unsuccessful, it is instructive in helping us to understand how slavery functioned in both the British legal imagination and its subsequent rhetorical expressions.

*Tuesday, May 12, 1789*¹¹⁴

William Wilberforce, a twenty-nine-year-old member of the House of Commons, ardent leader of the Anti-Slavery Society, and key member of the Clapham Sect,¹¹⁵ stood before his

¹¹³ Specifically, Hartman is speaking to emancipation in the USA, but the notion of transition holds. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 16.

¹¹⁴ I provide the day of the week to intone the precision with which we can track, in the archives what Europeans, s proper Human subjects, say and do. The archives, however, lack precision and make impossible a cohesive narration of Black experience. The following calculator was used to determine the day of the week for the historical events chronicled in this section “Day of the Week Calculator,” accessed August 11, 2022, <https://www.calculator.net/day-of-the-week-calculator.html>.

¹¹⁵ The Clapham Sect was a group of young Evangelical Reformers who organized around Anti-Slavery and centered the discourse in the public square. There is an extensive amount written about the Clapham Sect and its various members. This volume does a lot to frame their work as vital for thinking the relationship between theological conviction and political practice in service to freedom. Ernest Howse, *Saints in Politics : The “Clapham Sect” and the Growth of Freedom* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019).

colleagues in the Commons on this day in May 1789. Despite his concerns regarding his persuasiveness, he "marched forward with a firmer step in the cause of justice, of humanity, and of freedom."¹¹⁶ For Wilberforce, ending the Slave Trade was a matter of "national humanity," "and [in] the best interests of the country." His goal was to convince his peers to support his motion to abolish the Slave Trade. He recognized that in order to persuade them he would have to appeal to their reason, passions, and morals. While we can never know the depth and breadth of his motivations, what we do have access to and what we can examine are his rhetorical strategy and his commitment to "accuse no one," but to provide a "remedy" for the dreadful practice.

Wilberforce acknowledged before his colleagues that the Africans caught in the Trade were "sold as goods... and conveyed away... by owners of British vessels."¹¹⁷ Because of the British involvement, they had moral duty to respond, he insisted. Narrating a report from a Privy Council, Wilberforce described the "country" of Africa as divided, riddled with despotic kings and governments who willingly ravaged their own country and established courts where "many poor wretches who were ignorant were condemned." All this they did to meet the Slave Trade's ever-growing demand for Black flesh, he said. Wilberforce noted that the information he shared was "recorded in every history of Africa, and was now verified" by the report he presented. According to Wilberforce, "the kings in Africa did not engage in war like the kings of Europe, for glory": rather, they engaged in war for the "purpose of obtaining what we" [Europeans

¹¹⁶ This document does not read as pure transcription because the narrator/transcriber frames the reader's position within the discourse. My interest in this source is to get a sense as to how the argument for abolition took shape. This genre of parliamentary transcription was popular in its time period, so even that reality is instructive for how this narration shows up in the British world. Great Britain Parliament House of Commons, *The Speeches of Mr. Wilberforce, Lord Penrhyn, Mr. Burke, ... Mr. Pitt, ... &c. &c. on a Motion for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, in the House of Commons, May the 12th, 1789. To Which Are Added, Mr. Wilberforce's Twelve Propositions* (London: Printed for John Stockdale, 1789), 6.

¹¹⁷ Commons, 6.

generally and the British specifically] “had made their necessities.” British slavers, he said, benefited from conflicts between African villages and actively encouraged disputes for the express purpose of enslaving them all.¹¹⁸ According to Wilberforce, the slavers who carried out these clandestine missions and the members of Parliament who continued to support and justify the Slave Trade were guilty of putting the inhabitants of Africa in a worse fate than that of the most barbarous and savage nation; they had destroyed what ought to be the bond of union and safety; they had rendered the whole country one general scene of discord and anarchy; they had set kings against their subjects; and set subjects against each other; had rendered every private family miserable, and created one general scene of disunion and despair.¹¹⁹

After narrating details of the scene on the ground, Wilberforce turned his focus to the transatlantic passage itself, noting that some Africans entered the ships thinking that in their new destination their suffering would end, that and they would receive treatment as “human beings.” Obviously, that was not to be their fate. Instead, the ship would bring

so much misery condensed in so little room, so much affliction added to misery, that it appeared to be an attempt by bodily suffering to deprive them of the feelings of their minds...with pestilence, disease, and despair, in such a situation as to render it impossible to add anything more to human misery.¹²⁰

In graphic detail, Wilberforce painted a picture of the “miseries of the passage.” The purpose of this exposition was to show how the horrors of the passage produced a mortality rate that made the Trade less profitable across the board. In Wilberforce's estimation, ending the trade would save lives—and potentially make the colonies more profitable. Furthermore, changing the conditions of the colonies by making “good usage” of the slaves there would reduce the need for

¹¹⁸ Commons, 7.

¹¹⁹ Commons, 8.

¹²⁰ Commons, 8.

importation. He posited in his twelve propositions that if the conditions of slaves were better on the plantations, then they would have a "natural increase of population."¹²¹ Nevertheless, Wilberforce conceded that the "universal dissoluteness of [the Slaves'] morals"¹²² was also the cause for their sad condition in the colonies.

Speaking to the concern that the British removal from the Trade would create unprecedented opportunity for their European rivals, Wilberforce argued that his aim was to have the Trade recognized as "so disgraceful to human nature" that it would be "totally abolished and destroyed." Ending the Trade would position the British morally ahead of the French and consequently force them to consider their "honour and character, as a great nation." Continuing his argument, Wilberforce drew an analogy, comparing Africans with barbaric Europeans, epitomized by the Irish, who were enslaved and who sold their children into slavery. He said that the Africans "were now as much enlightened as the Irish were four centuries back." He concluded his remarks by drawing attention to the moral stakes of the situation. He wanted his colleagues to be aware of the magnitude of the Trade and that it was their duty to "apply an adequate and immediate remedy," and that "they owed it to Africa as much as to their own moral characters."¹²³

In addition to his speech, Wilberforce distributed his twelve propositions, summarized below:

- I. That the number of Slaves carried from the African Coasts had generally decreased by nearly half by the time the ships landed in the British West Indies.

¹²¹ Commons, 30.

¹²² Commons, 10.

¹²³ Commons, 13-14.

- II. That the "manner in which these persons have been made Slaves" was through being captured in war, sold for debt, and sold for profit, which are all "acts of oppression, violence, or fraud," made possible by despotic African kings and Europeans.
- III. That European nations "encourage acts of oppression, violence, and fraud, and obstruct the natural course of civilization and improvement in [African] countries."
- IV. That the financial losses of ending the Trade could be offset by "extensive commerce with Africa... so as to at least afford a return for the same quantity of goods as has annually been carried thither in British vessels"; and secondarily, that such an undertaking would improve civilization on the continent.
- V. That the Slave Trade was deadly for British seamen.
- VI. That the ships produce "grievous sufferings," which regulations cannot fix, and the conditions on the ship and in the receiving ports exacerbate disease and increase mortality rates amongst the Slaves.
- VII. That within three years of arrival a "large portion" of the "newly imported Negroes" die.
- VIII. That the lack of male and female slaves in proportion, the "general dissoluteness of manners," and absence of "proper regulations for the encouragement of marriages, and of rearing children" undermine a "natural increase of population."
- X.–XII. That census data on the changes in Slave population in the British West Indies support the argument that improving the conditions for the Slaves in the colonies will aid in their natural reproduction.

Reactions to Wilberforce's speech and propositions from both his supporters and detractors illuminate how these men saw themselves in relation to each other and in contrast to the slave.

The first response came from Lord Penrhyn (a Welsh slave-owner with considerable plantation success in Jamaica),¹²⁴ who accused Wilberforce of intentionally misrepresenting the population of Slaves in the West Indies to support his propositions. Because it was already late in the evening, he did not want to take up the House's time, but when the time came, he intended to challenge Wilberforce's entire argument.¹²⁵

Mr. Gascoyne (representing Liverpool, the most prominent slaving port in the commonwealth) responded next, noting that Wilberforce "displayed great ingenuity as well as eloquence" as he coyly rested his facts on carefully curated sources. Concerned about the number of sailors that abolition of the Trade would leave unemployed in Liverpool, Gascoyne was convinced that the "Slave Trade might be made a much greater source of revenue and riches to this country."¹²⁶

Supporting Wilberforce, Mr. Burke noted that a trade so horrible in every aspect made it impossible to provide a single argument in its favor. Speaking to the financial concerns of ending the Slave Trade, Burke asserted that any good capitalist who saw an opportunity close in one industry would turn their efforts towards another. Because the slave trade was "disgraceful to the nation, [and] shocking to humanity," the House had to take responsibility to end it, and capitalists had to take responsibility to find new ways to make money. Burke went on to address concerns about how ending the Trade would create opportunities for their European rivals to amass profits. Registering the Slave Trade as a moral issue, Burke warned his colleagues that

¹²⁴ "The Welsh Slave Owner and Anti-Abolitionist MP Richard Pennant," Black History Month 2023, February 14, 2008, <https://www.blackhistorymonth.org.uk/article/section/history-of-slavery/the-welsh-slave-owner-and-anti-abolitionist-mp-richard-pennant/>.

¹²⁵ Commons, *The Speeches of Mr. Wilberforce, Lord Penrhyn, Mr. Burke, ... Mr. Pitt, ... &c. &c. on a Motion for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, in the House of Commons, May the 12th, 1789. To Which Are Added, Mr. Wilberforce's Twelve Propositions*, 14–15.

¹²⁶ Commons, 15.

failure to abolish the Trade would mark "humiliation, and the degradation and disgrace of the nation in the eyes of all Europe." Ending the trade would require the British to "pay the price of their virtue." Summoning the testimony of Admiral Barrington and Shakespeare, Burke elaborated directly on what it meant to be a slave.

Nothing made a happy Slave, but a degraded man. In proportion as the mind grows callous to its degradation, and all sense of manly pride is lost, the Slave feels comfort. In fact, he is no longer a man. [Quoting Shakespeare, Burke said] "Man is a being, holding large discourse, looking before and after." A Slave was incapable of either looking before or after.¹²⁷

That is, a slave had no claim or recognition of history and its forward progressive movement. After these words, Burke announced the start of his concluding remarks. Having spoken at length already, his colleagues found this announcement humorous, and laughter spread throughout the chamber.

Mr. Pitts followed Burke and noted his full support for Wilberforce's propositions. Grounding abolition in "humanity and national honor," Pitts went on to argue that the British would need to do everything in their power to prevent other European nations from supplying their colonies with slaves and to protect the British Isles.¹²⁸

Sir William Young spoke next and called his parliamentary colleagues' attention to the many planters who would be left financially destitute and unable to pay their mortgages if they did not have enough Slave labor to keep their operations afloat, especially if the natural conditions (hurricanes and the like) on the islands were not favorable for Slaves' survival.¹²⁹

¹²⁷ Commons, 19.

¹²⁸ Commons, 21–22.

¹²⁹ Commons, 22.

Mr. Fox started his comments by stating "never had [he] heard a debate with more satisfaction than the present."¹³⁰ He noted how he had always been optimistic when they discussed the Slave Trade in hopes that they would find it "not only inhuman but impolitic...there was as little policy as humanity in the Trade." Fox was of the mind that the British acting in this way would inspire other European nations to do the same and that would be a gain for humanity. "A trade in human flesh was so scandalous, that it was to the last degree infamous to let it be openly carried on by the authority of the Government of any country."¹³¹

The House Speaker, Mr. Grenville, shared his delight in Wilberforce's eloquence and noted Wilberforce as worthy of the honor and thanks of the House, the British, Europe, and future generations. He said that the House would have to assert its rights to govern and ensure that no Trade happened in their colonies.¹³²

Mr. Newnham argued that his concern was for the City of London. He felt the abolition would cause the men of London to suffer as much as the "poor Africans." He wanted the chamber to "take care, that while they were giving way to the goodness of their hearts, they did not contribute to the ruin of the mercantile interests of their country."¹³³

Mr. Martin celebrated that he was "more proud of being an Englishman, than he had ever been before," after hearing Wilberforce's propositions and the work they were setting in motion. Martin hoped that the citizens' full "public spirit" would assent to the greater human good over private interests.¹³⁴

¹³⁰ Commons, 22.

¹³¹ Commons, 24.

¹³² Commons, 24–25.

¹³³ Commons, 25.

¹³⁴ Commons, 25.

Mr. Dempster, speaking to the charge to abolish the Trade on a "principle of humanity," said, "undoubtedly they owed humanity to all mankind; but they all owed justice to those who were interested in the event of the question, and had embarked their fortunes on the faith of Parliament." The growth and success of the Slave Trade was because the house had enacted laws and policies that enabled its profit and proliferation. To abandon that cause now would require them to do a full account of its impact and provide adequate support for those who invested fully in what the body had made provision to support.¹³⁵

Lord Pynrhyn, adding to his initial rebuttal, challenged the idea that sugar could be made cheaper with paid labor and expressed concern that by giving up the trade they would "give up the dominion of the sea at a single glance."¹³⁶

Mr. Smith, affirming Wilberforce, stated that "total abolition" was "necessary and proper." After Mr. Pitt and Mr. Sawbridge noted that they would not be able to move to a vote that evening, the Chairman closed the meeting at 11:00 PM.

January, 1790

Wilberforce was granted approval to create a Select Committee to consider the slave trade and examine evidence for its abolition.

Monday, April 25, 1791

Wilberforce introduced the first official bill for the abolition of the Slave Trade. It was defeated by a vote of 163 to 88.¹³⁷

May, 1791

¹³⁵ Commons, 26-27.

¹³⁶ Commons, 27.

¹³⁷ R. Thorne, ed., "William Wilberforce (1759-1833)," in *The History of Parliament: The House of Commons 1790-1829*, accessed February 13, 2023, <https://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1790-1820/member/wilberforce-william-1759-1833>.

Following the publication of an article in favor of abolition by Granville Sharp, Wilberforce decides to introduce a motion in favor of abolition at every session of Parliament.

March, 1792

By this point, over 200 petitions against the Slave Trade had been submitted to Parliament.

April, 1792

Abolition bill defeated in House of Commons.

February, 1793

Abolition bill defeated in Parliament

Friday, January 1, 1796

Wilberforce re-introduced a bill for the abolition of the Trade. It was again defeated.

1799

Slave trade regulation act passes, establishing standards for slave-trading vessels.

1804

A bill for the abolition of the trade passes in the House of Commons but fails in the House of Lords.

1805

An abolition bill fails on second reading, blocked by House of Lords.

1806

An abolition of trade bill passes that prevents British subjects from trading with the French.

January 31, 1807

Wilberforce publishes "A Letter on the Abolition of the Slave Trade."

Tuesday, February 3, 1807

Parliament approved a bill for the abolition of the Slave Trade.

Wednesday, March 25, 1807

King George III ratified the Act for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, granting success to Wilberforce and his supporters' efforts. The Act officially ended the Slave Trade throughout the British Empire and imposed fines on those vessels seized with African Slaves aboard. In 1811, King George III ratified the Slave Trade Felony Act, which imposed harsher penalties on vessels participating in the Slave Trade and further deputized and financially incentivized British naval officers, privateers, and sea merchants to seize and capture any vessel engaged in the slave trade within the Atlantic.¹³⁸ Between the passages of these two Acts, the British established a Vice-Admiralty court in Sierra Leone with the express purpose of adjudicating seizures violating the various abolition acts. Between 1808 and 1819, the Sierra Leone court oversaw the manumission of over 15,000 Africans.

Abolitionist Rhetoric – Towards a Practical Theology

My intention in providing such a detailed account of Wilberforce's proposition and its reception in the House of Commons is to show how he and his colleagues understood the urgency of the issue of the slave trade. Still, Wilberforce's commitment to his cause does not function as simply political grand-standing, but as a conviction born from his religious convictions. To get a better understanding of Wilberforce's theological interests, let us turn to two of his most extended work on theology and Christianity. It is worth noting that Wilberforce

¹³⁸ Great Britain Parliament House of Commons, *A Bill (as Amended by the Commons) Intituled An Act for the Abolition of the Slave Trade* (London: publisher not identified, 1807). Great Britain, *Extracts from an Act for Rendering More Effectual an Act Made in the Forty-Seventh Year of His Majesty's Reign, Intituled, "An Act for the Abolition of the Slave Trade" : May 14, 1811* (Liverpool: J. Smith, printer, 1811).

never considered himself clergy or a religious authority, so his insights and observations may very well reflect something other than the official interest of academic or clerical theology.

Wilberforce's tome, *A Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System of Professed Christians: in the Higher and Middle Classes in this Country, Contrasted with Real Christianity*, over the life of his public career saw over ten editions released of this multi-hundred-page work. From the title alone, one can discern Wilberforce's interest in Christian praxis, especially among those with standing in civil society. As a practical theologian interested in analysis and construction, I note that Wilberforce addresses what he sees as the indifference and general sloth of the upper- and middle-classes as it pertains to religious fervor and practice. Let me quote him at length, here:

Now when we look back to the picture which was formerly drawn of the natural powers of man, and compare this his actual state with that for which, from a consideration of those powers, he seems to have been originally calculated, how are we to account for the astonishing contrast! Will frailty or infirmity, or occasional lapses, or sudden surprisals, or any such qualifying terms, convey an adequate idea of the nature, or point out the cause of the distemper? How, on any principles of common reasoning, can we account for it, but by conceiving that man, since he came out of the hands of his Creator, has contracted a taint, and that the venom of this subtle poison has been communicated throughout the race of Adam, every where exhibiting incontestable marks of its fatal malignity? Hence it has arisen, that the appetites deriving new strength, and the powers of reason and conscience being weakened, the latter have feebly and impotently pleaded against those forbidden indulgences which the former have solicited. Sensual gratifications and illicit affections have debased our nobler powers, and indisposed our hearts to the discovery of God, and to the consideration of his perfections; to a constant willing submission to his authority, and obedience to his laws. By a repetition of vicious acts, evil habits have been formed within us, and have riveted the fetters of sin. Left to the consequences of our own folly, the understanding has grown darker, and the heart more obdurate; reason has at length altogether betrayed her trust, and even conscience herself has aided the delusion, till, instead of deploring our miserable slavery, we have too often hugged, and even gloried in our chains.¹³⁹

¹³⁹ William Wilberforce, *A Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System of Professed Christians : In the Higher and Middle Classes in This Country, Contrasted with Real Christianity*. By William Wilberforce, ..., The seventh edition. (London: Printed for T. Cadell, Jun. and W. Davies, 1798), 25.

At least two things are noteworthy here. First, Wilberforce has a general conception that man is in a fallen state. The nature of that fallen state is reflected in man's ability to fail to use his powers of reason, but instead surrender to sensual gratifications. This dichotomy Wilberforce recognizes between practices of reasoning and the fleshly embodiment, attest to a Christian imagination that has already collapsed holiness and righteousness into the West's preferred forms of reason and rationality. We hear in Wilberforce a line of thinking taken up and extended by the German philosopher, Immanuel Kant, who argues that "that human reason gives itself the moral law, which is our basis for belief in God, freedom, and immortality."¹⁴⁰ Such an orientation determines the end of morality from the beginning of human reasoning. A narrow conception of what constitutes human reasoning is affirmed by how one perceives the "other." In Wilberforce's configuration, the other who lacks reasoning, and lacks moral character, is one whose "understanding grows darker." We cannot but notice how coloration marks a decent from an ideal expression of humanity and subsequently Christianity. This "moralistic hermeneutic"¹⁴¹ sets the stage for Wilberforce to collapse his version of morality as a political project into the primary mode by which to think of morality.

The second thing we can glean from this extended quote of Wilberforce is his interest in provocation. That is, his strategy for calling Christians to action leads with images that they would likely find unappealing and perhaps offensive. Because Wilberforce's practical interest is in moving his readers to a "real" Christianity he has to present their popular Christianity as insufficient. We can attend to this by noting the contrasts Wilberforce offers—power/infirmity,

¹⁴⁰ Michael Rohlf, "Immanuel Kant," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Fall 2020 (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2020), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2020/entries/kant/>.

¹⁴¹ Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven [Conn.]: Yale University Press, 2010), 121, <http://proxy.library.emory.edu/login?url=http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/j.ctt1np8j2>.

hand of Creator/malignant Adam, and perfections/evil habits. By the end of this section, Wilberforce is drawing clear markers between slavery and the state of those who are not following a real Christianity. This hermeneutical maneuver actually uses the image of slavery and the binary that is at work within larger public discourses to provoke in his hearers a certain disavowal: they should not want to see themselves as those in bondage. We see in Wilberforce's thinking what J. Kameron Carter notes writ large about Kant's thought which emerges just prior to Wilberforce's public career in the late eighteenth century. Carter notes that "Kant put in place the rudiments of a critical-rational theology of modern civil society...Kant presents Christianity as the ultimate expression of Western culture and civilization—ultimate because it represents them as teleologically complete."¹⁴² Wilberforce in the section quoted above offers groundwork for narrating the practical problem of Christianity as something that is not in service to the fruit of rationality and civility.

Wilberforce goes on to say:

The word of God teaches us, that though such of the doctrines and precepts of Christianity, as are coincident with worldly interests and pursuits, and with worldly principles and systems, may be professed without offence; yet, that what is opposite to these, or even different from them, will be deemed needlessly precise and strict, the indulgence of a morose and gloomy humour, the symptoms of a contracted and superstitious spirit, the marks of a mean, enslaved, or distorted understanding. That for these and other reasons, the follower of Christ must not only make up his mind to the occasional relinquishment of worldly favour, but that it should even afford him matter of holy jealousy and suspicion of himself, when it is very lavishly and very generally bestowed.¹⁴³

Here we see Wilberforce's conception of worldly as a morose humor, engaging in superstition, and a distorted understanding. Such orientations are not only incompatible with Christianity but also discordant with civil society. The effect of Christianity is then to aid in the "species' self-

¹⁴² J. Kameron Carter, *Race: A Theological Account*, 1 edition (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 113.

¹⁴³ Wilberforce, *A Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System of Professed Christians*, 154.

making out of heteronomy into autonomy.”¹⁴⁴ For Wilberforce, the Christian “makes it therefore his continual care to preserve those just and enlightened views, which through Divine mercy he has obtained... He will not be “totus in illis,” he will not give up his whole soul to [temporal pleasures], they will be habitually subordinate in his estimation to objects of more importance. So even as Christianity points to reason, for the real Christian, it is not the case that all pleasure is disavowed, but that it is first subordinate to enlightened views and secondly those things deemed more important than temporal pleasures. This increase the urgency not only to awaken the moral conscience of the general populous, but also to understand the plight of the African as one in need of intervention by those who are further along on the Christian scale of civility and advancement. It is here that we can start to see a clear overlap between Wilberforce’s conversation in the House of Commons and his Christian theology of practice.

The limitation in Wilberforce’s Christian imagination lies with his inability to problematize the West’s growing understanding of civilization as a fiction made possible through violence and not the virtue of reason. While Wilberforce recognizes the violence, it is only to the extent that he can figure it out as rational and as advancing his own conception of humanism and civility. For Wilberforce, the slave is nearly a double victim—lacking the wherewithal to understand the importance of civility, and being made to suffer in ways that are obviously problematic and death dealing.

As a practical theologian, Wilberforce recognizes the problem as his fellow Britons not taking seriously their role to lead the cause of humanitarianism and civility as part of their Christian duty and privilege. We can gather from Wilberforce’s writings that he is addressing people who experience creature comforts, and as such may be lulled into a passive indifference

¹⁴⁴ Carter, *Race*, 107.

about the workings of society because of their social comfort. He does not want to abandon social comfort, but he also imagines social advancement as a possibility. Real Christianity is then never being satisfied with temporal comfort but instead with the furtherance of Christianity's end—civilization, liberty, and freedom.

Wilberforce's abolition *is* a practical theology—a form of faith *activity* emerging from a religious/theological conviction.¹⁴⁵ Wilberforce's praxiological intent is to extend and strengthen their understanding of humanity and civil society. This interest in human dignity and liberty is not merely a political concept, but essential to how Wilberforce and many of his supporters understand the call of faith. For Wilberforce, abolition *is* faith in action, and politics is the field that allows him to move his faith from personal conviction to national formation. Wilberforce's intervention intends to save and transform the heart of a nation into its highest ideas which intertwine political and theological convictions and outcomes.

Having established that Wilberforce's political rhetoric is theopraxis, we can analyze the articulation of such a practical theology of abolition by both its intent and its outcome. More specifically, I am interested in an analysis that privileges those whose presence is necessarily silent in the discourse—the slave/black. The purpose of such interrogation is to show that even as practical theology attempts an intervention, it can be bound by logic that remains opaque to the paradigm established by the problem the practical theology seeks to address in the first place. To augment what Audre Lorde suggested regarding using the master's tools to dismantle the master's house, what we find in Wilberforce is the master perfecting his tools to strengthen the house on one hand, even as it narrates and claims progress for the subjugated on the other. First, we turn to

¹⁴⁵ Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, "Five Misunderstandings about Practical Theology," *International Journal of Practical Theology* 16, no. 1 (August 1, 2012): 20, <https://doi.org/10.1515/ijpt-2012-0002>.

the theological underpinning of Wilberforce's conception of abolition and its necessity. Then we explore how the political articulation of abolition (re)configures the black/slave in the matrix of black dolor.

With abolition, Wilberforce and his colleagues, and by extension Britons, demonstrate a fundamental commitment to structure black existence in all directions. Simply put, their theological imagination and subsequently intervention cannot disavow them of an agency to determine and delimit the role, function, purpose of black people. In this way, the function of the slave/black in abolitionists' rhetoric, as a practical theology, is to affirm the progressive arc of Enlightenment humanism through deepened subjection of black flesh to its matrixes of power. Wilberforce's practical theology of abolition centers the need for the British to see themselves as heralding what is a task of those God has entrusted with reason, and subsequently civility and morality. Wilberforce's intervention misreads the problem of the slave trade and slavery as primarily the horrors of the voyage and savage violence of the traders. It lacks completely any ability to see the underlying presence and power of the West as the root of the problem.

Saidiya Hartman's argument rings true, here: "the slave is the object or the ground that makes possible the existence of the bourgeois subject, and by negation or contradistinction, defines liberty, citizenship, and the enclosures of the social body."¹⁴⁶ The paradox, then, of Wilberforce's understanding of abolition is the way in which it affirms the position of the slave as problematic for humanism and not the position of the British Empire writ large. Wilberforce can only see the bourgeois subject's position as responsible to act within and from the very logics that produced the trade in the first place. The zeitgeist of the British Empire in the late eighteenth century helps us to understand how such a worldview finds traction.

¹⁴⁶ Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 104.

In *Britain's Slave Empire*, historian James Walvin posits that we must consider the contexts from which abolition emerges as a receptive discourse. He argues that both the humiliating loss of the US Colonies in 1783 and the taste for political change prompted by the French Revolution of 1789 made it possible for British abolitionists to "capitalize on the mood for reform."¹⁴⁷ Walvin also notes how the British abolitionist movement was influenced by the Enlightenment philosophy of Charles de Montesquieu, which focused on ideas of liberty, property, and commerce. These ideas structured how both sides of the abolition debate framed the problem of the slave trade. It was the concept of liberty that gave rise to religious pluralism and that enabled Quakerism, Quakers being the earliest proponents of abolition with a network of friends across the country. The Quaker orientation towards non-conformity and evangelism along with its national networks, says Walvin, made possible the spread of abolitionist propaganda. This abolitionist propaganda in the British metropolises made abolition a political issue. Subsequently, Walvin argues, young politicians recognized in abolition an opportunity to make a name for themselves. "It was part of their goal to establish in the British mind that they and their followers were the personification of the drive to end slavery... They secured for themselves a position of unapproachable moral invincibility."¹⁴⁸ Walvin's work illuminates the intramural concerns that shape how abolition functions with regard to the abolitionists' personal political interests, the social tolerance for change, and the expanding discourse on what it means to be a free human being.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁷ James Walvin, *Britain's Slave Empire*, 1. publ (Stroud: Tempus, 2000), 70.

¹⁴⁸ Walvin, 67.

¹⁴⁹ Wilberforian hagiography was fairly prominent up until the work of Eric Williams in 1944 who argued that it was less the religious fervor of the abolitionists that brought about abolition but the general decline in the profitability of the slave trade. This approach opened up the avenue for more critical approaches to analyzing abolitionism. See Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*, 1st edition (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1994).

In *Moral Capital*, historian Christopher Brown summarizes the debate, noting that "the campaign for the abolition of the slave trade demonstrated and proved that civilized peoples, like the British, could achieve moral progress. British primacy in the war against barbarism reaffirmed the nation's place at the apex of refinement and virtue."¹⁵⁰ While Brown is speaking to the abolitionist movement as a whole, his observations reveal how abolitionism bypasses a true reckoning with the world which slavery built. British concerns are primarily with liberty, rule of law, nobility, honor, and Christian duty. It is the proper duty of the human to redress his moral concerns even as moral concerns find their question in the negation of Black subjectivity.

The political project of abolition of the slave trade does not end slavery: it intervenes as a way to move humanism forward in relation to the slave as object. This movement is a means by which the slaves' general dishonor supplies the white humanitarian Wilberforce (and his allies) with honor. Abolition as a humanitarian endeavor does not upend a world made by slavery, but narrates a contentious move forward, a progression of a British humanism in service to British honor. For after all, the conditions of slavery and the logics of trade persist, even as a victory for humanism is sought and later declared. Humanitarianism in abolitionist thought synthesized Christian convictions around the salvation of souls, especially the enslaved, and liberal humanist political views consistent with evolving ideas of modernity. While the discourse *seems* to center on the slave and her increased welfare as a result of abolition, what we really witness is the slave's continued subjection to support a discourse affirming and extending the British Empire. After all, the slave still has no rights. Furthermore, the abolitionists' responsibility is articulated as being not *to* the slave but *for* the slave. Their responsibility is *to* the project of empire and to

¹⁵⁰ Christopher Leslie Brown, *Moral Capital : Foundations of British Abolitionism* (Chapel Hill: Published for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg, Virginia, by the University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 5.

their preferred self-narration intramurally with those they recognize as peers. James Cone says it best when he charges, "whites have learned how to use less offensive language, but they have not changed the power relations between blacks and whites in the society."¹⁵¹ A failure to change the power relations leaves the slave who is black in the same paradigmatic position as before.

Because Wilberforce gives so many details concerning the violent horrors of the slave trade by noting how many slaves die in the passage, how many die at port, and how such significant casualties are not fiscally prudent, it would seem that the problem with slavery is ultimately a problem of managing violence in service to profitability. In short, it appears that Wilberforce's challenge of violence is contingent on profitability. He believes that the violence that slaves suffer makes the trade and plantation less profitable. Wilberforce does not, and, as a free White man perhaps cannot, account for the psychic and libidinal desires that structure violence against the slave who is black. Wilberforce's use of charts and field reports attests to the impersonal treatment of antiblack violence. Wilberforce's discourse refuses to rupture the world which slavery builds, and instead urges reform of the institution of slavery so that it conforms to the emerging national and Enlightenment sense of liberty and humanitarianism. That is, Wilberforce wants to maintain or establish an influential moral high ground. And so, while there is a salvific overtone to Wilberforce's interest in the condition of the slave, ultimately, it is his and his nation's own self-image that is saved by this intervention.

Frank Wilderson (following Hartman) suggests that Wilberforce's is a "fantasy that replaces the body of slaves with [white bodies]."¹⁵² Rhetorically, Wilberforce's gaze intends to provoke in his fellow British parliamentarians an imagination of their own bodies as the site of

¹⁵¹ Cone, *Black Theology & Black Power*, x.

¹⁵² Wilderson, *Red, White & Black*, 89.

such violence, making their outcry then not for the slave who disappears under such narration, but for themselves. Wilberforce's rhetorical move was so effective that Mr. Burke said that a trade so horrible in every respect made it impossible to find a single argument in favor of it—despite the British having supported the slave trade for over 120 years and at some point having found plenty of arguments in favor of it! Moreover, while Wilberforce invoked African kings' despotism in providing slaves, he did not also invoke the British Crown's approval to trade and do commerce with such despots. Here, the pot is calling the kettle black, pun intended. In short, Wilberforce is not accurately remembering and accounting for the prehistory and its role in supporting the present moment. In this way, violence and inhumanity is always figured as external from the chamber that now makes the decision. It is the despotic kings, the greedy merchants, and the mean planters who are the problem with slavery and human decency, not Britons today, let alone parliamentarians. But if we hold that Wilberforce's aim is to extend the British humanitarianism's self-narration, then responsibility for the trade and its horrors must in fact be placed on the few. The trade only indicts everyone involved, everyone who benefitted from it, even if the legislature fails to recognize the humanitarian moment, but the history and legacy of the trade does nothing to undo the possibility of claiming humanitarian concern.

This critique of Wilberforce is exactly that which some of his opponents levied against him when they called his appeal to humanitarianism *stagecraft*. This stagecraft is also present in the narration above, as so many of Wilberforce's colleagues find his speech-making skills exemplary. That nearly all of the remarks are on how competent he is as a speechmaker and that even he seems primarily concerned with whether his speech will further or dampen the cause speaks to the pragmatic political concerns that disappear the slave. Practically, an interdiction on the slave trade is ultimately about Wilberforce's persuasion and his colleague's reception. His

interest in abolition, then, is not governed by the terms and interests of those held captive, because they have no power in the apparatus to wield change. Wilberforce can only frame the conversation about abolition in ways that are coherent for his colleagues.

His propositions demonstrate this coherence, which, when taken together, argue that the slave trade is costly, profit-diminishing, dehumanizing, and deadly. The alternative Wilberforce proposes further calcifies the slave into the matrix of dolor through the black woman's womb. Wilberforce suggests instead that planters might make the conditions favorable for "natural increase." Simply put: end the trade, but make conditions such that slave women can have more (slave) offspring. This makes the one bearing the weight of this so-called humanitarian British abolition effort the black woman. Her womb would enable the profitability of slavery to advance unencumbered and the horror that is the trade to cease. The two problems preventing this from happening are first, the general disregard that the slaves have for moral-producing institutions like marriage, and second, the violence on the plantation that renders any slave replaceable.

Wilberforce cannot see the gratuitous violence in his call for what is essentially breeder women. And, in a similar vein, his second intervention upon the possible economic concerns is to pillage the African continent for the resources needed to make the goods the British want and to which they have become accustomed, such as sugar. This is a clear overture to colonialism and its functioning as an after-life of slavery. Wilberforce says that Africa has most of the natural resources in which the British are interested anyway. Both of his solutions to the concerns raised by his opponents depend on continued subjection and objectification of blackness. Make the women in the colonies breeders, he says, and instead of taking human resources from Africa take all the other natural resources. With this initial frame in motion, we can see how when abolition

of the slave trade is in action it actually does little to change the structural ontology, or lack thereof, of the black who is a slave.

To establish a stronger theoretical grounding in this critique of Wilberforce, I want to illuminate a few concepts from two theorists within the field of afropessimism, Saidiya Hartman and Frank Wilderson, whose work I have engaged only sporadically above. In *Scenes of Subjection*, Hartman posits that "the savage encroachments of power that take place through notions of reform, consent, reciprocity, and protection" show how "the mutuality of social relations and the expressive and affective capacities of the subject augmented and fortified violence."¹⁵³ Hartman helps us to understand how the presence of the slave in the halls of Parliament does not affect a remedy for rhetorical suaveness but instead actually extends the violence that structures the slave's existence. Abolition is still the fruit of *savage encroachments of power*, even as it narrates to itself and the world a message of human dignity and concern. There is a deep irony in the way the British establish superiority in moral authority by way of a discourse on abolishing the slave trade. Tending to the slave's fate is a way of tending to the master's, and more generally to British redemption and sustainability. As stated earlier, in the recorded speeches there is no interest or even thought about what is owed to the slaves by way of humanitarian concern, because whatever kind of human the slave is, it is only to support however the master's needs to see himself as a human. Expressed theologically, the slave is a living sacrifice.

The parliamentarians' laughter and the concern about how late it was getting in the evening strike a general tone of sport and non-urgency about the subject being discussed. Note that Speaker Mr. Grenville commented that Wilberforce was worthy of honor from his

¹⁵³ Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 5.

colleagues in the chamber, the country, the continent, and future generations—for making a speech. Again, it was apparently inconceivable to these men to ascribe honor to the slaves themselves, for their labor, or for the lack they endured to produce the conditions for such honor to be bestowed on Wilberforce. That a speech can do so much to make one human worthy of gratitude for future generations, while no account registers the many generations whose living deaths made possible the success of the British Empire and all its distinguished cultural institutions, is abominable.¹⁵⁴ Nevertheless, Mr. Grenville was not the only one to offer praise. Mr. Fox noted that he had never been more proud to be a Brit than he was upon hearing Wilberforce. How ironic that pride in British identity could be so closely aligned with the reality of the slave trade. Mr. Fox's excitement for Wilberforce again shows how the discussion on abolition was not calling their attention to the social death of the slave, but instead was using slavery to shore up their social life and standing, and their self-narration. Mr. Fox went on to talk about the trade as scandalous and about how he could not fathom how any government could ever side with it. His incredulity again refuses an accurate account of British participation in and perfection of the Trade. The scandalous government he critiques is his own. A mere discussion, it seems, remedies the moral bankruptcy of said government. That talking and hearing themselves talk is cause to celebrate is masturbatory and affirms that the only honor that matters is their own amongst each other.

Nevertheless, in Wilberforce's opponents we find clearer distinctions between the slave and the masterclass. Mr. Newnham's concern was that the abolition of the trade would call the merchants in London to suffer just as badly as the "poor Africans." In these comments, we trace the antagonism between the British and Slave by seeing that the slave's violence is not proper for

¹⁵⁴ Tea party, sugar, alcohol, China – all these are tied up with the slave trade and exploitation of black flesh.

the British subject and that if any relief is given to the slave that causes discomfort to the non-slave class, then we cannot privilege the slave. It mattered more to Mr. Newnham that the trade continued to provide social life for the British subjects, to whom he was obligated, than did any form of recognizable rights or privileges to the slave. In Mr. Newnham's mind, the abuse of slaves was not worth causing white men to suffer by losing their jobs. Similarly, Mr. Young was clear that his concern was for the many planters who had already suffered loss of their labor force because of the weather, and who would stand to lose even more if they didn't have easy and ready access to the Trade. As he saw it, parliament could not justify sending so many into foreclosure and bankruptcy; moral to claim a virtue. "To be recognized as a subject of law did not remedy subjection or position the slave outside the reach of slavery's terror, but, to the contrary, strengthened its clutch and enabled another order of violence unfold."¹⁵⁵ In this iteration, there is no freedom for the slave in the rhetorical approach and its rejection or acceptance in the House of Commons.

We can hear in some of the rebuttals to Wilberforce a concern for how changing the terms of the slave trade would be detrimental, violent even, to those planters and merchants who placed their entire livelihoods in a practice which the laws had previously made possible and even encouraged. This rebuttal, hyperbolic or not, reveals the way in which slavery grounds the Empire's ontology—the slave and trade are necessary for *being*. Still, Mr. Burke's response is all the more telling. He suggests that when one opportunity dries up, a true capitalist seizes another. But financial impacts were not Burke's primary interest in support of abolition; instead, he recognized the need for Britain to lead the pack in naming slavery as the moral issue of the day. Even if there was an economic impact, what they lost in money they would acquire in return, he

¹⁵⁵ Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 137–38.

insisted. Nevertheless, he appears to have no capacity to imagine the virtue of the slave, because, in his schema, a slave *de facto* has no virtue. The slave's rhetorical function is to supply the virtue of the British with meaning and import. "Black fungibility catalyzes a heteropath[ic] chain-reaction that allows a White subject to inhabit multiple sites of suffering."¹⁵⁶ The irony here is the way in which the discourse is an argument on whose suffering the government is obliged to mitigate. Wilberforce and his proponents can imagine how the capitalists' suffering is mitigated: they simply move on to another capitalist project. But the suffering of the slave is only imagined through the cessation of the trade, here. Both Wilberforce and his opponents imagine they are brokering a relationship to the slave that establishes the value of their particular interest. Wilberforce desires relations that will suffuse the narration with humanistic values that he considers valuable, and his opponents desire to maintain in some way the economic value that slavery currently produces. Neither of these is as an actual position of abolition of the slave trade, but an elaboration and extension of trade in all directions. Shall we trade the slave for the claim of moral superiority, or shall we trade the slave for financial gain?

The moral duty of which Wilberforce speaks is not a form of surrender or subordination to slave or black self-narration. In the exchange narrated above, the reality of the slave trade and its horrors emerges merely as a rhetorical strategy articulating what is necessary to achieve moral humanism. No one ever questions whether they—the British, or anyone else—have the power and capacity to enslave, trade, or abolish: they assume it. Their conversation *about* the slave must keep the slave as an object whose summoning is always in relation to the performance of a rhetorical, political, and social discourse in which the non-slave (here, the British parliamentarians) is entitled to participate. The Slave as a vested party in this discourse is

¹⁵⁶ Wilderson, *Red, White & Black*, 89.

necessarily absent from the conversation about the Slave. The parliamentarians' humanist duty and right forecloses the possibility of any Slave/Black sovereignty enabling the Slave/Black to speak in the discourse, let alone as an equal. The slave is reduced to an illustration in the conversation. Abolition's logic, teased from the previous section, *re-leases* Blacks into the same matrix where abolition claims to intervene. The slave remains available to be traded.

If we were to work backward to discern the practical theology undergirding Wilberforce's abolition, we might see the problem like this: Wilberforce's and his colleagues' perception of the human's moral standing of slavery is anathema to the concept of liberty, appropriate to civil society. Because the slave is not an equal to the British, but because slavery need not be so brutal. The point of praxis then synthesizes the human's supremacy and the human's capacity to treat the slave with less vitriol and violence. The failure of such a theology is clear if one approaches the whole situation from the perspective of the slave. Nevertheless, there is no sign of the parliamentarians' inability to problematize reflexively the power the British must maintain over the slave even to have such a discourse. The danger we blacks still suffer today is how this praxis cements the arc of human progress as incremental adjustments toward treating the slave less badly. To be honest, it does not even have to be less bad, it need only be different from what can easily be narrated as problematic in relation to the moral ground the human claims for himself. Said differently, the calculus for determining human morality is not in the hands of the victims of human action but in the human himself. Accountability downward remains unconsidered.

To intone an aspect of Patterson's configuration of social death, we can see in the rhetoric that Wilberforce employed a negotiation of violence that would further suspend the slave's death. The intervention offered does not actually sever the slave's relationship to death, merely

encourages its suspension *as a demonstration of humanness* of humaneness. The slave remains attached to death; the issue is only how and when death will occur. Wilberforce even has the audacity to suggest that making conditions more hospitable for longevity would support a natural increase of the slave population through birth. Wilberforce offers a praxis of violence that reifies the master's power over death as benevolent, extending slavery forward in all directions.

Wilberforce sees the plight of the Africans as analogous to the plight of Europe prior to the Enlightenment. Just as the Irish engaged in acts they would now consider deplorable as they have grown into civil society, so too Wilberforce appeals to colleagues on behalf of the Africans. The only problem is that his solution of abolishing the trade requires black women to maintain a status that does not allow for being. It is the dishonorable position of a breeder woman.

The entire enterprise in both slavery and abolition of the trade subordinates black *being* in the World to slave *status* for the World. Dolor is the vessel making the Black Slave and the world into which an emancipated lack is *re-leased*. The pain follows some to their graves.

Abolition in Practice: Dolores Captured

Superficially, the story of abolition presents as a story of progress, in which good people come to recognize their horrible treatment of others and do what they can, and what they must, to correct it. Popular narrations of abolition heroize leaders like Wilberforce for challenging their colleagues and an entire Empire to purge itself of the dreadful trade. Abolition moves with a praxiological intent in at least two distinct ways. First, proponents present abolition as a necessary condition to further preserve the theologically informed notions of morality that ground Western ideals about humanity and civil society. Second, abolition as a religiously informed practice requires faith to move into the public sphere in ways that direct the political in service to the theological. This second point might be striking for American ears, for which the

notion of a separation between church and state persists. Nevertheless, in the British context, the head of the state is the head of the church, and so the space between a religious imagination and a political agenda is less distinct than in the American context.

While the praxiological intent of abolition appeals to a widened understanding of human rights and civility, its impact, as a juridical reality continues to fail blacks. For *Dolores*, a slave ship, and her issue, recently acquired human property, even in abolition, the widened ground of humanity does not support their arrival nor return. They are victims of slavery's afterlife without ever arriving on the American or European shores, simply by the extension of capture and delivery across European nation-states.

Dolores and her issue go from being "African Slaves" to those "given liberated African status."¹⁵⁷ Whether as slave or liberated, the reality of a made or given status persists.

Subsequently, the dolor—the pain, grief, sorrow—that made the slave through the trade economy is part of the same structuring logic as the enterprise that emerges with abolition.

While the British abolished the Slave Trade for their Empire, other European nations' merchants persisted in the lucrative yet dangerous undertaking. To avoid direct conflict with the British, some traders shifted their departures from their Western European coasts to their slave colonies in the Americas. Places like Suriname for the Dutch, Brazil for the Portuguese, and Cuba for the Spanish boomed economically as departure ports for the trade. In response to the British Abolition Act, many merchants instead recognized and took advantage of clandestine opportunities to smuggle slaves from within the various colonies in America. Eventually, Cuba

¹⁵⁷ "People of the Atlantic Slave Trade - Database," accessed February 11, 2023, <https://www.slavevoyages.org/past/database>.

and Brazil excelled in building and fitting slave-trading vessels destined to travel within the Americas and to Africa.¹⁵⁸

Tuesday, October 24, 1815

A Spanish merchant brigantine named *Dolores* sets sail from Havana, Cuba, heading east to a coastal region between present-day Togo and Equatorial Guinea. Outfitted with a pivoting long-range cannon, four naval long-guns, and two shorter-range canons and a thirty-seven-member crew, plus the captain, though sailing as a merchant cargo ship *Dolores* is armed as a war vessel and is well prepared to defend her owners' assets.¹⁵⁹ Under the leadership of Captain Jose Carbonell, *Dolores* successfully anchors in the Bight of Biafra. On Friday, March 19, 1816, with 276 African slaves in her hold, *Dolores* sets sail for Cuba.

Thursday, April 4, 1816,

Thirteen days into her journey, *Dolores* encounters a British naval vessel. Recognizing the stakes, her captain fires the long-range canon, killing one and injuring two. The British vessel does not cower. Though battered, the British persist. After a scrimmage lasting over three hours, the British brig prevails, and *Dolores* strikes her colors and surrenders. The British captured *Dolores*.

Monday, May 13, 1816,

The Vice-Admiralty Court of Sierra Leone decrees that *Dolores* and her African slave cargo be condemned as "good and lawful forfeiture."¹⁶⁰ The court "gives" the remaining 249

¹⁵⁸ Zeuske, "Out of the Americas," 103-104.

¹⁵⁹ John Marshall, *Royal Naval Biography...*, vol. 4 (London: Printed for Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1823), 275, <http://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CY0103429341/SABN?u=emory&sid=zotero&xid=a58b414f>.

¹⁶⁰ John Dodson, *Reports of Cases Argued and Determined in the High Court of Admiralty: Commencing with the Judgments of the Right Hon. Sir William Scott* (Edinburgh: W. Green & Son, Stevens & Sons, 1815), 413.

African slaves liberation. Their names, ages, sex, and body markings are written into a ledger. As for the twenty-seven persons who died between embarkation and arrival in Sierra Leone, they remain nameless.

Pain follows some to their graves. The black dolor of fictive abolition persists as Delores can never escape condemnation. In all directions she is condemned to *transubstantiate* black death for life. She is the world's consecrated host whose "sacrificial death [maintains] the colonies as a consumable or assumable substance or resource or capital to maintain the life of the body politic."¹⁶¹

Tuesday, May 12, 1789,

So far, I have tried not to center the physical pain and suffering of the slave, but to show how civil logic and humanitarian efforts subject the slave to onto-political non-being as essential to slavery and its afterlives—especially the political ontology of race. As an elaborated scene of subjection, abolition of the Slave Trade remains the tale of a “society so invested in its “inherent goodness” and moral superiority.”¹⁶² Abolition extends the mechanism of anti-blackness through centering the interest of non-blacks in the courts, commerce, military, and colonial projects. The "given status" stabilizes the power of those who give and the subjection of those marked to receive a given status. Whether that status be slave or liberated slave, it does not mark an end to black dolor or of *Dolores'* issue in this World.

With that, I embark on a close reading of nineteenth-century painting depicting *Dolores'*s capture by His Majesty's sloop-of-war *Ferret*.

¹⁶¹ Carter, “The Excremental Sacred: A Paraliturg,” 164.ca

¹⁶² Dionne Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging* (Toronto: Doubleday Canada, 2001), 128.



Figure 1 Painting of Dolores's Capture by the H.M.S. Ferrett

A Visual Description of Dolores's Capture

The artist sets the scene with bulbous clouds in light shades of blue and white and blue billowing seas with white-crested waves sweeping diagonally across the lower portion of the image. In the foreground and most visible are the tall sails stretching across most of the vertical and horizontal planes. When I first saw the image, it appeared that there were three ships to me, but upon closer inspection, the image shows only two. The larger one appears to be split, so the sails on its two large masts appear perpendicular. The larger ship holds the middle-ground and right side of the image. Furthest to the right is the flag that indicates the ship is a Spanish vessel. One of its sails is brushing up against the water, and it appears water is swamping the ship. Its sails, however, still appear white and almost unphased by the events taking place. On the left side of the image, the ship with the British flag is most forward. Its two tall masts and sails are not as voluminous as those of the other ship and are visibly battered and darkened. Given that the

image depicts the broad port side of the ship, you can see that the ship is smaller. Still, a captain is visible from the quarterdeck with his hand pointing to the Spanish vessel. The British ship does not appear to be incapacitated, even as it seems the underdog between the two ships. Only a portion of the Spanish vessel's starboard side is visible. The entire rear of the ship appears damaged and whited-out. The Spanish vessel's bowsprit is at half mast, as is its Spanish flag. While there are figures on the deck, they remain undifferentiated and indecipherable. The white mist covering the rear of the ship is so thick that the main mast and mizzen appear to float above the water. The artist positions the ships as passing each other, moving in opposite directions. The flags atop the masts indicate that the winds are coming from the direction the British vessel is traveling. So even though the wind works against the direction of the British vessel, it still persists in overcoming the larger vessel that has the wind in its favor. The postcard's subscript or caption explains the image. It reads:

Capture of the Spanish Slave Vessel Dolores by H.M. Brig Ferret, Capt'n James Stirling. (B)In. Lat. 3.° South Long 15°40" West. 4th April 1816.¹⁶³

Perspective-wise, the artist situates the viewer perpendicular to the movement of the ships. This allows the viewer to get broadside views of the vessels and their engagement with each other. No land is visible, only sky and sea. While it is daylight, we cannot ascertain whether it is morning or afternoon. Neither can we determine ordinal directions, even though we know from the record that the British naval vessel was heading from St. Helena and the Spanish vessel from the Gulf of Biafra.

The Aftermath of Dolores' Capture

¹⁶³ Alamy Limited, "Capture of the Spanish Slave Ship Dolores by H.M. Ship the Ferret, Capt'n. James Stirling, circa 1816 G.F. Lambart after William J. Huggins Stock Photo - Alamy," accessed January 20, 2023, <https://www.alamy.com/stock-photo-capture-of-the-spanish-slave-ship-dolores-by-hm-ship-the-ferret-captn-104952896.html>.

His Majesty's Ship (HMS) *Ferret* was not initially the property of the British Crown. The ship's beginnings were as an American privateer ship called *Rapid*. *Rapid* was captured by the Royal Navy in 1812,¹⁶⁴ during the War of 1812, a conflict over the British violation of United States maritime rights.¹⁶⁵ The British Vice-admiralty court in Halifax condemned *Rapid* and re-commissioned the ship as His Majesty's ship *Nova Scotia*. At some point between 1813 and 1814, the ship was recommissioned as HMS *Ferret*. In 1815, the *Ferret* was one of the ships responsible for delivering Napoleon to St. Helena, where he was to live in exile. Returning to England from St. Helena, *Ferret* encountered *Dolores*. *The [Havana] Times* reported on June 16, 1816, that *Dolores* was captured off the coast of Sierra Leone and landed at that port.¹⁶⁶

Saturday, June 24, 1815,

British Court of Vice Admiralty at Sierra Leone, under the leadership of Chief Judge Robert Thorpe condemns *Dolores* and her cargo of 249 Africans. Because of the abolition of the slave trade, any ship British forces captured in the Atlantic engaged in trade became the property of the Crown. The Crown then paid a bounty for each slave aboard. The captured slaves were officially enslaved to the Crown. The Vice-admiralty court in Sierra Leone positioned the British well to intervene upon any happenings in the Western Atlantic. Legal historian Padraic Scanlon says, "the Court of Vice-Admiralty was perhaps the most important institution in Freetown... [as it was] the first court in the British empire with a mandate not only to manumit individual enslaved people, but also to emancipate shiploads of captives."¹⁶⁷ While invested with so much

¹⁶⁴ "HMS *Nova Scotia* (1812)," in *Wikipedia*, November 24, 2022, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=HMS_Nova_Scotia_\(1812\)&oldid=1123548779](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=HMS_Nova_Scotia_(1812)&oldid=1123548779).

¹⁶⁵ "War of 1812 | History, Summary, Causes, Effects, Timeline, Facts, & Significance | Britannica," accessed May 29, 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/event/War-of-1812>.

¹⁶⁶ "Capture Of A Spanish Slave-Ship," *The Times*, June 18, 1816, The Times Digital Archive.

¹⁶⁷ Padraic X. Scanlan, *Freedom's Debtors: British Antislavery in Sierra Leone in the Age of Revolution*, The Lewis Walpole Series in Eighteenth-Century Culture and History (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 98.

power to turn slaves into ex-slaves, the court did not “systematically keep track of “captured Negroes” until after 1815,” and even after that their tracking was mostly ledger entries that had names, ages, and physical descriptions of those condemned to the courts. “The court applied to people the same legal processes that it applied to the capture of contraband cargo.” Showing that the logic of abolition had not moved (ex)slaves into the proper category of Human but were still objects like bottles of rum, cloth, sugar, and other material goods. Scanlan goes on to argue that the Court handled the capture of slave ships as a legal analogy of piracy—concerned primarily with property rights, bounty, and the re-selling of condemned ships.

More than tracking the afterlives of those caught up in the trade, the archive tracks the flow of money. The Slave Trade Act, according to Scanlan, “made slave ships into lawful ‘prizes,’” where auctions proceeds could be returned to the capturer in transactions not terribly different from the slave trading markets in the Americas.¹⁶⁸ “Vice-Admiralty Courts turned captured property into money quickly, with little attention to procedure.”¹⁶⁹ The more captured Negroes aboard a ship, the greater the bounty. Still, most of the prize money came from renovating and repairing captured slave ships to sell at auction.¹⁷⁰ Basically, the humanitarian interest in releasing slaves from the horrible trade, did little to change the lives of those captured – they were not given prize money. In fact, many of them were re-enslaved to the Crown to help establish the new economic market developing around the abolition of the slave trade. In time, Sierra Leone became a trading post where most of the goods bought sold, and condemned, besides black bodies, were cultivated elsewhere in the world.¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁸ Scanlan, 100.

¹⁶⁹ Scanlan, 102.

¹⁷⁰ Scanlan, 108.

¹⁷¹ Scanlan, 112.

One of the largest slave trading ports, the Bight of Biafra, along the coastal region of present-day Nigeria, Benin, Cameroon, and Equatorial Guinea, transferred millions from the African interior to the slave trade. While the British had in 1807 abolished the slave trade in their colonies, other European nations were still invested in the trade. It would not be until 1817, by signing a treaty with the United Kingdom, that the Spanish would abolish the transatlantic slave trade too.

What I have tried to illuminate in the narration of these events and these institutions is the inevitable failure of abolition to change the structural function, or *status*, of the Black Slave. From the ship to the Parliament, and from the court to the colony, *Dolores* and her issue are mere objects of trade. *Dolores* is both a world and what makes the world. Her issue is not merely oppression in this world, but the perpetual pain and sorrow that makes this world possible. Liberation for *Dolores* cannot be hope for the world alone: it must be the cessation of the conditions that make her possible in the first place. To think of *Dolores*'s liberation is to achieve the impossible of having, of never having been born. Never to have been born does not rest on the logics of reformation or re-birth, but instead refuses the very possibility of any status of existence. Abolitionists, too, maintained a financial and theological interest in the region, often trading favors in hopes of getting missionaries established in West Africa. The irony of the town's name—Freetown, is not lost on me. Most of the Africans who came through the Vice-admiralty court, in addition to being manumitted, could also be released into the Royal African Corps, which was not different from the brutality of slavery itself. It should come as no surprise that the conditions the former slaves found themselves in after condemnation left little opportunity other than crime. Crime served as another frontier that gave the courts power to once again extend the abjection of slavery to the criminal. Because the records are not thorough, we

have no idea how many captured Negroes landed in the Royal African Corps or the particulars of their lived experience.¹⁷²

The archive picks up on *Dolores*, a few years later, in 1819, when the Vice-Admiralty court has to settle a dispute between Captain James Stirling and Rear Admiral George Cockburn. Cockburn was suing Sterling, claiming that as a flag officer, he was entitled to an eighth of the bounty. While Cockburn did not direct Stirling to capture *Dolores*, the fact that the *Ferret* was on an assignment given by Cockburn, according to the courts, affirmed his claim. The court records refer to the captured negroes as slaves condemned under the abolition act, stating:

It is well known that the act, instead of giving the slaves to the seizors, gives them to the Crown; the Crown giving the captors a certain stated value, commonly called (perhaps not quite correctly) a bounty. It is in this bounty (which resents the property sized) that the flag share is claimed. He was entitled to a percentage of the bounty.¹⁷³

In the end, Cockburn was entitled to an 1/8th of the proceeds. The remaining 7/8ths would be divided between the captain and crew of the *Ferret*. The “slaves” would see none of this money.

In the world of Humans, *Dolores*’s issue, her captive Negroes or slaves are the means by which the courts, merchants, and traders continue business as usual. *Dolores* is the fertile mother whose issue is the savior of the world, the lamb slain for the foundation of the world. Sorrow gives birth to the slain, the ones whose unborn hopes die. The sovereign god of this world enthroned in Enlightenment ideals and juridical authority, the father of blackness, as Spillers reminds us, is that mocking figure whose heritage and inheritance we can never claim because his honor requires the dishonor of *Dolores*’s

¹⁷² Scanlan, 120–27.

¹⁷³ Dodson, *Reports of Cases Argued and Determined in the High Court of Admiralty*, 416.

issue. Abolition does not abolish a trade; it only opens new routes and pathways to split *Dolores* in half, pillage her insides, and capitalize on her condemnation. Black dolor persists, even as the British Empire prospers financially and through its self-narration of moral capital.

Seizing Black Faith

If black faith is to be anything in this world, it has to contend with the heft and nature of this World's violence. Dwight Hopkins says, "black faith is public talk about God and the human struggle for a holistic salvation, liberation, and freedom."¹⁷⁴ Manning Marable, reflecting on WEB Du Bois's work argues that DuBois notion of black amounted to "a belief in his people."¹⁷⁵ Speaking specifically to DuBois' understanding of the shout in black worship, Marable suggests the shout was "a purgation of the believers' anxieties, fears, and doubts created under slavery and segregation; it was a catharsis, the expression of transcendence, a cry of faith and hope, a physical and collective explosion which was necessary for a people wedged in the permanent vise of social anxiety and frustration."¹⁷⁶ Ashon Crawley, in his work, registers the shout as a hermeneutic that critiques the history of theologies and philosophies that bifurcate black flesh.¹⁷⁷ Black faith and consideration for the flesh has played an important role in articulating, understanding, and living out black faith. Beverly Eileen Mitchel reminds us that Black Christians during enslavement recognized the inconsistency between what Genesis 1:27 said

¹⁷⁴ Dwight N. Hopkins, *Black Faith and Public Talk: Critical Essays on James H. Cone's Black Theology and Black Power* (Baylor University Press, 2007), 2.

¹⁷⁵ Manning Marable, "The Black Faith of W. E. B. Du Bois: Sociocultural and Political Dimensions of Black Religion," in *The Past Is Not Dead: Essays from the Southern Quarterly*, ed. Kenneth Watson, Peggy Whitman Prenshaw, and Douglas B. Chambers (University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 149, <https://doi.org/10.14325/mississippi/9781617033032.003.0012>.

¹⁷⁶ Marable, 154.

¹⁷⁷ Ashon T. Crawley, *Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility*, 1 edition (New York: American Literatures Initiative, 2016), 107.

about being created in God's image and their lived experience in the Word of Humans.¹⁷⁸ Across all of this brief selection, we find a way of understanding black faith as a critique of this Word as antithetical to both black flourishing and God's desire for creation.

It is worth noting that much of black theology takes up this critique as a demand to be received into the human family. As I argued in the introduction, such an appeal for inclusion does more to strengthen the category of human than to effectively include black people in it. As the inside outsider, black people and subsequently black faith, is ambivalent about its standing in the world. Black faith is stuck trying to discern what is its purpose and desire in the World and what does it actually do for black people. If black faith's telos is simply recognition as a proper human subject, then black faith is nothing short of a political project. But if black faith understands its task as revealing the limit of the political, and its idolatry, violence, and reliance on antiblackness, then faith opens black people up to realities that only God can make possible amongst black people, and miraculously, in the World.

The question is, then, how do we discern what is rendered invisible by the World? It is here that the postcard depicting *Dolores*'s capture is instructive. *Dolores*'s issue is not visible in the image save the caption that simply calls the ship a slaver. Here we see where the text points to something that is there but not depicted. The failure to emerge from the surface as an interested party, or more acutely, the failure to be recognized as a party of interest, characterizes the black (non) position. I posit, that this non-position, this suffering, is both the contradiction to black faith, as Cone suggests, and witness of it. We do not know the particulars of *Dolores*'s issue once the court's condemnation unfolds the archives maintain the opacity depicted in the

¹⁷⁸ Frederick L. Ware, Antonia Michelle Daymond, and Eric Lewis Williams, eds., *T&T Clark Handbook of African American Theology* (London, UNITED KINGDOM: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2019), 9, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/emory/detail.action?docID=5825610>.

image. But if we hold that the opacity is itself darkness that yields only the necessary pre-condition for Divine engagement, then what cannot be seen with the physical eyes becomes evident in the eyes of faith.

I submit black faith is a seed that perceives a total rupture from the World's bowels – it is apocalyptic. If black faith is anything, it has to be the sentience that emerges only in the abyss, the womb that is both the frigid grip of grief and sorrow and the nourishing breast of a mother. We might also take note here of Spillers' recognition of the 'romanticized irony of ships bearing the gendered female names while the very acts in which the ships were engaged were "a counter-narrative to the domestic and the generative. Following Freud, Spillers considers suspension in the "oceanic" as marking an undifferentiated identity.¹⁷⁹ I think in this particular case the naming of the ship *Dolores* itself reveals as much as it conceals. It both reveals the vessel as the site of pain and suffering, even as its black cargo remains undifferentiated beyond ledger marks and headcounts. There is as much detail published about the guns on the ship's deck as about the African cargo in her hold. The romanticized irony takes on a more sinister spin when we see that her capture as a slave vessel results in the vessel's condemnation. Her cargo, accounted for the purpose of bounty, is likewise condemned, and transferred from one scene of dolor to another. And as our image indicates, this scene of intervention is likewise a scene in which black bodies and flesh are undifferentiated in identity and not even captured in the frame. There is no recognition of and accountability regarding that which is already and still cargo. To be an issue of *Dolores* is to remain in a "figurative darkness that *exposed* their destinies to an unknown course." Here, Spillers is describing the way in which slave ships could often not navigate to a

¹⁷⁹Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," in *Afro-Pessimism: An Introduction* (Racked & Dispatched, 2017), 105.

precise location; given the lack of engine power, the ships depended on wind and the crew's navigation skills. This impression is only elaborated through the British abolition of the Slave Trade and Britain's policing of the Atlantic. That slave ships landed in Sierra Leone did not ensure in any way that Africans on them would be able to return or make their way "home." The unknown course and its darkness are likewise the peculiar black dolor that persists within and despite abolitionist logics. Abolition only interrupts the mileage between ports of departure and ports of condemnation. It does not change the primacy of racial capitalism, violence, and ontic fungibility which are the substance of black dolor in the World. In this World, blacks must have faith, not for the world, but for what the world cannot stand to live with or survive living without.

In the wear and tear and size of the British vessel depicted, the painting reveals the alleged tenacity and underdog status of the British naval forces—the material witness of the World's faith, even if born through a Christian theology of practice. The Spanish *Delores* is formidable, and across the background, her sails appear far larger and more elaborate than those of the *Ferret*—representing the nemesis of *Ferret's* humanitarian cause. Intoning aspects of the animal after which it is named, the *Ferret* is nimble clever, and small. The *Ferret* did not capture *Delores* because the *Ferret* was bigger or more mechanically capable, the painting says, but because of the naval superiority of its crew and captain. The image trains its viewers to have faith not in what God makes possible through blackness, but what Humans make possible through sloops of war. The image's framing intends to communicate the superiority of the British Navy over the Spanish. It does so by visualizing the lack of an upper hand, of taking a beating, and refusing to quit. The valorization only makes sense as the British intend an intramural

conversation about the kind of humans they want to see themselves as and others as not. National virtue is at stake for the British and the growing economy emerging out of Sierra Leone.

None of this is designed to work in service to black thriving and flourishing. Black dolor is caught up in the narratives that the world's nations want and need to tell themselves about who they are and for what they stand. To return to Patterson, we see here an elaboration of dishonor. The slaves' invisibility supplies the pre-text for the foregrounding of the British vessel and the British flag. It mattered more in the image to depict the particulars of Dolores' sails and her enormous size than a real consideration of her issue, under the horrors of a Spanish slaver and British canons. In the image, the place of Delores' rupture is simply depicted as a blinding white cloud, whether it is smoke from the canons or mists from the sea, with the whiteness obfuscating any sign of her human cargo.

To consider black dolor is to consider the ways in which blackness in the world is always conscripted into another's project, to fashion another's identity, to supply another's political interests, to affirm another's theological anthropology. Black is never just there, *for* herself, but always available for Humans. The World of Humans is both disinterested in and not built to honor or regard on its own terms Dolores's issue, her black flesh. As far as the world is concerned, Dolores's issue has no terms worthy of recognition, no birthrights to demand, and no escape from violence. Following Spillers again, the image's silence, that is, its total lack of consideration of Dolores's black cargo, is "the nickname of distortion, of the unknown human factor that a revised public discourse would both undo *and* reveal."¹⁸⁰ In the image, this distortion is intended to reveal the vitality of the British humanitarian efforts even as it undoes the humanity of the black cargo through silence. There is nothing to see as regards the black cargo.

¹⁸⁰ Spillers, 107.

The likeness and kinship noted in the image is distinctly between the recognized national flags. The image affirms them as equals in kind through the signifier of national identity. Moreover, there is kinship recognition by virtue of the two seafaring vessels' build. While the British vessel is smaller, as noted above, both vessels are of the same type: they are both brigantine vessels commanding the vast oceans in service to or under the authority of two nations that recognize each other as such. For *Delores's* issue, the lack of visual reference to personhood, nationhood, or any other kind-ness or likeness, intones a certain level of incapacity or indeterminacy in the possibility for kinship apart from being slaves/cargo. So black faith, as a source of hope, cannot surrender whatever good it does to the logic of Worldly recognition, it must privilege and prioritize intra-mural care that tells the truth about the world's violence and its constant assault against blackness.

Chapter 2: Delores Wounded

Negroes affected with scrofula, or king's evil, confirmed hypochondriasm, apoplexy, diseases of the liver, kidneys, spleen, stomach, and intestines, bladder and its appendages, diarrhea, dysentery, etc The highest cash price will be paid, on application as above.

– *Chadeston Mercury* October 12, 1838¹⁸¹

(Test)imony

As on any other day, the child Delores (later my mother) left the house with her younger siblings in tow and made her way to school. They preferred getting to school a little early to spend time with their friends on the playground. Somewhere on the walk to school, Delores decided that she was going to sneak off and skip school soon after her arrival. She figured she would leave before the first bell while her siblings were distracted.

Her plans took a drastic turn when she started to feel herself getting sick. It was a feeling she had never had before. So, instead of sneaking off to skip school, she was making her way home. When she got home, she was surprised to see her mother still there and not already gone to work, but Delores told her that she wasn't feeling well, and her mom sent her to lie down. The pain grew worse by the hour. Any movement at all hurt. She thought God was punishing her for

¹⁸¹ Spillers, 97.

planning to skip school. She prayed for forgiveness in hopes that it would stop the pain. After she uncharacteristically ate nothing for dinner, her mother started paying closer attention.

Early the next morning, her mother took her to the doctor. He concluded that the pain was likely pre-menstrual cramping. He advised her mother to give her some over-the-counter medicine and show her how to use a pad because she was becoming a woman. As for Dolores, she had never felt any pain like it before and wouldn't wish it on her worst enemy. And if that's what it meant to become a woman, she didn't want it.

That evening when her mother returned from work and found Delores pale and feverish, her mother knew the cause was not menstruation. The pain had her in a choke hold. She could barely speak. Her mother rushed her to the hospital while her father stayed home with her siblings. When they arrived at the hospital, the doctors were immediately struck by how bad the girl looked, and her pain radiated across her abdomen. After a basic physical exam, the doctors concluded she was probably suffering from appendicitis. When they pressed into the lower right of her abdomen and she screamed for life and death simultaneously, they knew they had to act quickly. A nurse wheeled her into an operating room for emergency surgery, where doctors discovered just how close to death she was.

The way my mother tells it, her appendix had gone from a state of inflammation to full rupture. The rupture caused such a build-up in her abdomen that the medical staff had to scoop fluids out. She went into septic shock. Poison filled her belly. Doctors were able to remove her appendix, but they could not yet suture her wound closed. For days she lay in the hospital with an open wound, her body surrounded by ice to control her fever, fighting for her life. When the fever finally broke and she could keep liquids down, medical staff trained her mother how to care for her daughter's wound. They showed her how to change the dressings and watch for

infection. Dolores remained bedridden for weeks. In time, though, keloids or scar tissue bridged the chasm between the unstitched folds of skin. The scars spilled across her belly like the protruding roots of a Southern Live Oak, remaining as evidence of both what nearly killed her and what she survived. The scars testified to an intervention upon an internal rupture that would have killed her.¹⁸²

The previous chapter explored black dolor as the condition of blackness and black people in the world. Abolition, even as a humanist intervention, offers no salvation for the black female body and her issue. She remains a breeding ground that ensures the viability of the world made by the institution of slavery. Both the abolitionists' gendered solution to supply slaves through natural birth, and the gendered vessel *Dolores*, whose issue—her black cargo—land condemned in the vice-admiralty court continue black dolor as subjection reconfigured.

As we move forward, how might we rethink the structuring of the black female body as a site of trauma within and without? My mother's story of a ruptured appendix invites us to consider the internal workings of antiblackness and what that means for tending to ruptures, infections, incisions, and wounds. It is a direct engagement with black suffering, black pain, and the responses that speak to black faith and black care. My mother Delores' body does provide us with a theological heuristic, perhaps a grammar from which we can recognize an aspect of black dolor as an afterlife of slavery and a response that helps us understand the role of black faith and black care under such circumstances. Like the picture of the sailing vessel *Dolores* in the previous chapter that is rendered split but illegible, Delores the child too experiences an

¹⁸² While I do not go into this here, it is noteworthy that black children are more than 38% more likely to have their appendix rupture because of lack of access to healthcare and proper diagnostics. So, the black dolor of poor healthcare persists as an afterlife of slavery. See, Kathleen A. Jablonski and Mark F. Guagliardo, "Pediatric Appendicitis Rupture Rate: A National Indicator of Disparities in Healthcare Access," *Population Health Metrics* 3, no. 1 (May 4, 2005): 4, <https://doi.org/10.1186/1478-7954-3-4>.

abdominal rupture. As such, her breach marks both a wound and an opportunity for care, both a closure and a scar. This chapter explores woundedness in various registers and provides a clear articulation of my definition of *transformative fidelity* and *black-on-black care*.

Blackness, Vestigiality, and the Vermiform Appendix

A double bind in blackness is trying to think what a black person *is* apart from the negation that is antiblackness. Because blackness is the thing that is made by and in the Transatlantic Slave Trade and its afterlives, its history is tied to those coordinates. This bond or binding is a social, political, economic, physiological, and theological bind. In "The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-pessimism and Black Optimism," Jared Sexton wrestles with this very challenge. He asks: "What is the nature of a *human* being whose human *being* is put into question radically and by definition, a *human* being whose *being* human raises the question of *being human* at all?"¹⁸³ Whatever black was before the events of the Transatlantic Slave Trade¹⁸⁴ can only persist in a vestigial form within an antiblack world. By vestigial, I mean present but meaningless, a remnant from a time that is no more. Trying to make sense of the vestigial is nearly impossible, because the time of the vestige's relevance is no more and is no longer accessible.

Here we might find resonance between early understandings of the appendix as a vestigial organ and blackness as a vestigial human form? The vermiform (meaning worm-shaped) appendix transects the large intestines near the cecum, which is where the small intestine connects to the colon. As a part of the gastrointestinal tract, the appendix is connected to the

¹⁸³ Sexton, "The Social Life of Social Death," 6–7.

¹⁸⁴ Even the terms African or Guiné do not move us away from the nascent logics of antiblackness emerging from the middle ages drawing distinctions between Northern, Western, Eastern, and Southern regions of the continent. See, "Africa: What's in a Name? | South African History Online," accessed April 14, 2023, <https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/africa-whats-name>.

body's system responsible for transforming food into nutrition and heat and subsequently expelling the body's waste. Understood as vestigial, it was not clear what role, if any, the appendix played in digestion and waste management; it was just there.

The black person as a vestigial human form finds herself in a world where her form follows no function, or whatever function it had has long lost its usefulness. The vestigial in this way exists, but it lacks being. If being is what supplies existence with meaning by signing the productive relationship between form and function, then the black person as a vestigial human form is an appendix. As appendix, it is an afterthought, an adjacent, or Saidiya Hartman calls it, "the position of the unthought."¹⁸⁵ The unthought means it not only lacks integration but is not suited for an integrationist narrative. While the appendix is a part of a whole, its status as vestigial renders it un-whole. It lacks a positive integral function. It is also worth noting how its vermiform contributes to this general understanding. The wormlike form invites us to consider how worm, in its etymology, is connected to the creeping and burrowing animal, and in Old English it was leveled as an insult meaning "abject or miserable person."¹⁸⁶ Thus, to say that the appendix is both vestigial and vermiform not only describes an organ, but also describes a set of qualities that can readily be signed by blackness in an antiblack world.

While the vermiform appendix serves no positive use for the body as a vestigial remnant, it does present a liability. While also in the form of the colon, the appendix is an extremely narrow tube with a single opening, whereas the rest of the colon is a long tube with openings at both ends. As a liability, the vermiform appendix can become inflamed, infected, and ultimately

¹⁸⁵ Saidiya V. Hartman and Frank B. Wilderson, "The Position of the Unthought," *Qui Parle* 13, no. 2 (2003): 183–201. P.g. 185.

¹⁸⁶ "Worm | Etymology, Origin and Meaning of Worm by Etymonline," accessed April 16, 2023, <https://www.etymonline.com/word/worm>.

rupture. This organ, dormant in a positive function, becomes active as a problem for the rest of the body. The appendix can only mark its presence as a problem in the present. We can hear in this problem Du Bois's question about how it feels to be a problem, and Nahum Chandler taking black (non)being as a problem for thought. The problem has to do with the way consideration of the object at hand throws the entire structure, the human, into flux. When something happens with the appendix, it sends the body into panic. So the problem does not actually mean an exploration of the appendix on its own terms, but it means the appendix is the problem for the rest of the body. For when it ruptures, it causes a problem for the entire body, and the requisite medical intervention is to remove it by any means necessary. What the vermiform appendix lacks in meaning it makes up for in its ability to cause pain, disease, illness, and possibly death. The vermiform appendix as vestigial organ can only be accounted for as a problem for the integration of the body, and its presence is tolerated so long as it is not a problem. When it becomes a problem, it must be extracted, lest it destroy the whole.

We can track similar movement with the black in relation to the human. So long as the black remains dormant—that is, unexpressed, hidden, docile, and content—it remains within the presumed integrity of the whole. This is not because it is integral, but because it can be present and unthought simultaneously. But, when blackness becomes inflamed, rageful, ruptured, and a source of pain, it must be handled quickly and swiftly with removal. In the afterlife of slavery, this dynamic is the legal dynamic between blackness and criminality. Rupture and inflammation are sufficient to deem it necessary to remove and discard blackness altogether. In a paradoxical way, just as the colon is the last stop for waste to leave the body, the ruptured appendix finds itself wasted and expelled just like the contents of the system to which it is attached. The

vestigiality of the appendix and the vestigiality of the black makes them expendable when their presence causes a problem for the body's integrity.

Analyzing blackness along these lines, however, may very well tell us more about the interests, ideologies, convictions, and psychologies of those whose bodies are understood as integrous (that is, not black) than it tells us about what blackness is or can be as vestigial. If blackness for the world is an ongoing negation, a problem, then acknowledging what it negates reveals something about its antagonist. In the world, black thought cannot emerge as a positive position or culture.¹⁸⁷ And in relation to other oppressed people, black oppression cannot be assimilated. Like the vermiform appendix, the black the only one of its kind. For Afropessimist thinkers like Frank Wilderson, blackness does not reflect a "loss" so much as an "absence." Blackness does not have a relationship to violence that is contingent. Whereas the colonial subject, the worker, or any other entity whose recognition is not predicated on natal alienation from the category of Human, is entangled in contingent forms of violence, the black experiences objective violence.

In short, Blacks are not responding to the loss of something recognized, but instead responding to the absence of political ontology.¹⁸⁸ The black is a suffering and dispossessed Human subaltern.¹⁸⁹ As a vermiform appendix, there is no consideration of its health, only haste to remove it. Even if one considers how the appendix becomes compromised, it does not change the response: remove it! And it goes without saying that the removal is the death—the death that is delayed for the slave who lives social death.

¹⁸⁷ Hartman and Wilderson, "The Position of the Unthought," 185.

¹⁸⁸ Frank B. Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, 1 edition (New York: Liveright, 2020), 240-1.

¹⁸⁹ Wilderson, 246.

In some way, then, the appendix, the black, is doomed from the start. It must either be a silent nothing, or a sickly everything. Responding from within the foreclosure that is blackness at best tells us about the world around it. And from there we might raise questions about the interiority of the appendix, and about what enters the appendix that causes it to rupture. If we can tend to the provocation of the appendix as a sign for blackness that leads to rupture, then we might better understand the impossible position in which blackness finds itself in the human body.

Fecal Matter

Negrophobia, following Frantz Fanon's notion of disalienation, recognizes that the absence of a black political ontology (or standing in the world as a black human) is the problem for thinking black. Wilderson acknowledges that this condition is marked by "affective responses, sensory reactions, or presubjective constellations of intensities, as well as representational responses, such as the threatening imago of a fecal body that portends contamination."¹⁹⁰ What blackness signifies in its negation is recognizable to both the white who names the black and the black who interprets the signifier, thus confirming the semiotic loop. The violence exposed here materializes at least two things simultaneously. On the one hand, through universal recognition, it naturalizes black abjection, while on the other, it obfuscates the necessity of such an exclusion in establishing the political subject. Stated in the valence of fecal matter, it is the production of waste without an account of its production by way of extraction of

¹⁹⁰ Wilderson, 249.

nutrition. The fecal is the threat of contamination, even though its production is the result of consumption.¹⁹¹

The logic of contamination leaves the burden of guilt, the problem, with the contaminant. That which is contaminated does not have to prove its purity or value. The vulnerability of becoming contaminated justifies the use of violence and force to prevent contamination. The logic of contamination justifies from the outset the preemptive foreclosure of the contaminant. In Wilderson's phrasing, feces ensure contamination. Pursuing this line of thought a step further, we might ask: What do feces contaminate? In some ways that question doesn't matter because feces as such signify waste, disgust, foulness, unsanitariness, and shame. It is an inherent quality of fecal matter to contaminate any and everything with which it comes in contact. What's more, the fecal matter is a necessary byproduct of digestion. Feces are the end-result, the outcome of digestion. The feces must be expelled because they are of no more use to the body. Feces, however, do not come from nothing; they are not *ex nihilo*. Feces are in fact an internally produced waste product from an externally consumed food source. The body must produce (and expel) feces to survive. Their development in the digestive system is a complex process of extraction and accumulation. To get a better understanding of digestion, let us take a quick look at the human gastrointestinal tract and the digestive system as a whole.

The digestive system is the body's middle passage, taking food in on one side (the mouth, usually) and expelling waste out the other (the anus, usually). To survive, the human body must

¹⁹¹ Significant work has been done with regard to unpacking contamination through the language of miscegenation. Miscegenation had legal, social, and cultural implications following the end of slavery, as it often impacted how power, money, and land resources could be allocated, see A. Brah and Annie E. Coombes, eds., *Hybridity and Its Discontents: Politics, Science, Culture* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2000); Robin James, "Is the Post- in Post-Identity the Post- in Post-Genre?," *Popular Music* 36, no. 1 (January 2017): 21–32, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261143016000647>; Linda Alcoff, *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self* (Oxford University Press, 2005); Linda Alcoff, *The Future of Whiteness* (Cambridge, UK ; Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2015); Jared Sexton, *Amalgamation Schemes: Antiblackness and the Critique of Multiracialism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

consume other organisms (plants and possibly animals) and extract from those organisms the various compounds the body needs to function. Most food contains nutrients. The body's process of extracting nutrition is complex and violent. It can require the killing of animal flesh, chopping it up, cooking it in fire, boiling it in water, salting it, and a host of other means of preparation. The body's digestive system typically starts with the mouth. Here food is masticated so that it can more easily move through the passageway called the esophagus. The esophagus is connected to the stomach. Hydrochloric acid, digestive enzymes, and bacteria break down the masticated or chewed food in the human stomach. While the stomach does not absorb the food molecules it breaks down, it can absorb alcohol and pass it directly into the bloodstream.¹⁹² The bulk of nutritional absorption happens in the small intestine, a compressed tubular organ about twenty feet in length. As the emptied liquid content of the stomach passes through the small intestine, finger-like projections called villi (unless harmed by gluten, in celiac disease sufferers) absorb nutrients as smooth muscles move the contents through the tract. The liver supplies the small intestines with bile to break down the food and aid in storing fat. Food spends the most time in the small intestine because it is the primary center for nutritional absorption. Nutrients from the small intestine enter the liver where they can then enter the blood stream. The large intestine then receives what the small intestine could not absorb. Its primary function is to compact the waste that is both the remainder of the food that could not be absorbed (primarily fiber or roughage), and the various digestive enzymes used to break down the food, and the bile from the liver. In a

¹⁹² Here we might consider the relationship between the proliferation of alcohol made possible by sugar production through slavery in Latin America. And how planters' appetite for sugar-based alcohol increased their desire to consume black flesh. See, Trevor Burnard, "Tropical Hospitality, British Masculinity, and Drink in Late Eighteenth-Century Jamaica," *The Historical Journal* 65, no. 1 (February 2022): 202–23, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X2100025X>.

healthy human, the process that begins with eating ends with a so-called bowel movement through which the waste is expelled from the body.¹⁹³

If we take this biological process as central to the claim Wilderson makes about blackness as an absence and not a loss, then in digestion we witness a form of transubstantiation. In the most basic sense, we are identifying the transformation of one substance into another substance. Because blackness is without a history, there is no means by which to account for its substantiveness apart from its flesh and blood. As raw material, the human body consumes blackness, extracts from black flesh and blood nutrients necessary for its sustenance while bathing blackness in the depths of its acid and bile-laden bowels, only for blackness to emerge as the substance that is fecal matter, excrement—waste expelled from the body. The paradox lies in the way in which (black) fecal production and its necessity for human life is a direct product of the human body's digestion. Nearly 75 percent of human excrement is water, and the remaining 25 percent is mostly composed of bacteria from the digestive tract itself.¹⁹⁴ The actual left-over remnants of food make up the smallest part of feces. Considering this, blackness as fecal matter is less the left-overs of some originally consumed raw material, and more the accumulation of the human body's own bacterial infestation.

As the human's own bacterial infestation, blackness's contaminating power is the byproduct of the human's own gastrointestinal tract. To take it a step further, the unhealthier the Human system, the more vile its feces. It is worth noting that Human digestion, even as it is a violent process, happens via the parasympathetic nervous system. That is, it is part of the body's

¹⁹³ "Human Digestive System," in *Wikipedia*, January 18, 2023, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Human_digestive_system&oldid=1134404781.

¹⁹⁴C. Rose et al., "The Characterization of Feces and Urine: A Review of the Literature to Inform Advanced Treatment Technology," *Critical Reviews in Environmental Science and Technology* 45, no. 17 (September 2, 2015): 1827–79, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10643389.2014.1000761>.

automatic processes designed to counterbalance the activity of the sympathetic nervous system. The parasympathetic nervous system regulates everything from the functions of the heart, reproductive system, lungs, eyes, nose, mouth, and digestion. The parasympathetic nervous system governs the libidinal through autonomic—that is unconscious—processes. The body is designed to produce waste without ever having to think consciously about its production. Furthermore, the Human, in the register which Wilderson is using, recognizes the contaminating power of fecal matter, while failing to recognize it as evidence of its interior process.

Putting these ideas together, we might think of *Dolores* the slave ship as the Modern world's digestive tract, taking in the raw material of black flesh and blood from the coasts of Africa and through its narrow passages and bowels excreting the slave as waste in the New World. This is the issue of a political ontology for blacks in the World of humans. How can waste have a right to anything but removal, burning, burying, or storing on a ship. In a more sinister twist, the waste that is the slave in the New World is the manure given to the land to aid and abet its production in service to the Human's unfettered consumption. The transubstantiation of blackness unfolds simultaneously in two directions: on the one hand, it is the molecular substance of Human nutrition/being/political-ontology that is unaccounted for in the autonomic process. On the other hand, it is the fecal matter which the human, having no more internal use for it, defecates as a contaminant. Black dolor under these terms is perpetual consumption for human being which is not black. To deny the human its black fecal matter would also mean denying the human being its capacity to be.

We might call this cannibalism, but cannibalism is the eating of one's own species. Blackness, denied the ontological footing within the logic of social death, does not register as the same species as the (White) human. But if blackness in the end is nothing but fecal matter and

subsequently a part of human's own digestive production, then the Human is guilty of coprophagia. By modern medicine's own assessment, this condition reflects a psychiatric disorder that interrupts the parasympathetic nervous system's "natural" response to waste. The persistence of the White gaze is thus less about the sign that is blackness, which it attaches to contamination, and more about its own psychosis. In a grand reversal of the doctrine *partus sequitur ventrem*, we might consider how the Human passes on the birthright of coprophagia in which Humans extract their being from black excrement over and over again. Such an undertaking is the world's practical theology of blackness. The fecal in relation to the human, like the vermiform appendix, is acknowledged in its expulsion and repulsion.

So far, we have considered the fecal in relationship to the human. But we can also ask the question: What is fecal matter in relationship to the appendix? How might we think blackness as both the appendix and fecal matter?

This presents a very interesting dilemma, for if blackness is both the fecal matter and the appendix, then an appendix rupture may be imagined, along these lines, as blackness "causing" its own demise by way of blockage. Black blocking itself—what we might call intramural black violence—is the condition whereby black foreclosure in every respect folds in on itself, producing the conditions for its removal altogether. The end of the matter in both these considerations of black as fecal and black as vestigial, is a chain reaction that compromises the body's presumed integrity and removes the vestigial while maintaining the production of fecal matter. In this telling, the intramural conflict in these black valences leaves black people without so much as a remnant of some irretrievable past. The only thing remaining is the possibility of contamination. This marks another foreclosure. The case of black dolor is indeed formidable because the antiblackness is hearty and durable. In this last iteration we can see blackness folding

in on itself as a kind of black-on-black violence. As happens in the world, black-on-black violence expels black bodies to prisons and jails, graves, and probation, to places where the only thing that survives (from the world's perspective) is the prospect of contamination.¹⁹⁵

Given these problems, liberation remains an urgent concern. But the challenge of liberation is the challenge of feigning integration into the world of humans whose freedom is presumed to be a natural birthright. Liberation presumes the political has the capacity to intervene upon the condition of blackness, which is the raw material from which the political absorbs its meaning and value. The relationship is parasitic, as Patterson and Wilderson have argued. So can one imagine or think of liberation as a right that emerges not because one is born, but because the one born with it declares on paper "You now have it." The language of freedom is then too fraught. As Hartman says, the "language of freedom no longer becomes that which rescues the slave from his or her former condition, but the site of the re-elaboration of that condition, rather than its transformation."¹⁹⁶

If we want to consider what this may mean for thinking a theology alongside this condition, we are wise to think humbly about the aims of a theological intervention. Yet if we approach the theological intervention as *the* solution to the problem of blackness in the world, we undermine theology's greatest attribute: faith. By faith here, I mean what the Hebrews writer says

¹⁹⁵ For an extensive treatment of "black on black" crime as a political framework emerging out of the wars on drugs, poverty, and gangs in the late 80s-00s, see Khalil Gibran Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America, With a New Preface* (Harvard University Press, 2019); David Eitle, Stewart J. D'Alessio, and Lisa Stolzenberg, "Racial Threat and Social Control: A Test of The Political, Economic, and Threat of Black Crime Hypotheses*," *Social Forces* 81, no. 2 (December 1, 2002): 557–76, <https://doi.org/10.1353/sof.2003.0007>; Carver L. Anderson Rev., "Towards a Practical Theology for Effective Responses to Black Young Men Associated with Crime for Black Majority Churches" (d_ph, University of Birmingham, 2015), <https://etheses.bham.ac.uk/id/eprint/5977/>; Fred Smith, "Black-on-Black Violence: The Intramediation of Desire and the Search for a Scapegoat," *Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis, and Culture* 6, no. 1 (1999): 32–44, <https://doi.org/10.1353/ctn.1999.0008>.

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Hartman and Wilderson, "The Position of the Unthought," 185.

when they write the substance of things hoped for, evidence of things not seen.¹⁹⁷ Not that faith is beyond corruption, or invulnerable to exploitation. It is, however, a way to be oriented in a hostile world towards another way of *being*. If liberation is ultimately a recapitulation of the scene of subjection, then our best hope in faith is for it to disorganize our gaze and give us glimpses of what is not but could be. Faith in this register is a black grammar in search of a way out of the digestive system of this world altogether.

Food for Thought

Our need for critique acknowledges our need to understand the truth of the black condition. In the same way as the logic of salvation needs the singularity of sin, the logic of freedom needs the singularity of slave, and the logic of human needs the singularity of black. Knowing or pointing towards this, however, does not extricate us from the permanence of the paradigm. It is for this reason that the theological imagination is pertinent. Theology, not just as a project of reason but also as one of experience and mysticism, gives us a language for faith. And faith recognizes the chasm between the paradigms we live and experience now and our inability to extricate ourselves completely from them and their deadliness, while also pointing to an ideal beyond, a reality that only God can make possible.

That faith provides this sight beyond what we can see does not make faith invulnerable. In fact, it makes faith one of the greatest attributes to exploit in service to material comfort and libidinal satisfaction.¹⁹⁸ To co-opt faith to work against and perfect violence is to stay in the

¹⁹⁷ Hebrews 11:1

¹⁹⁸ Jean-Francois Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy* (A&C Black, 2004).

world of Humans. Yet it is necessary to maintain a sense of what exactly the doing is doing and what that doing holds as its theological imperative, and this is where critique comes in.

In the most basic sense, a religious imagination brokers the legibility of the binary between good and evil, whereby God is the force of good in the world and evil is that which antagonizes God's good. Humans in the world are the divine vulnerability, as we are the ones susceptible to evil (and good). The registers by which good is determined are likewise a matter of critique. This for quite some time remained the contention within communities of faith—what constitutes orthodoxy. The intramural disputes over what constitutes the proper way to be good or godly remain one of the first sites of power disputes within the church. Who gets to speak on God's behalf? And by what authority? That claim, itself, should sound familiar because in the gospels it is what animates concern about Jesus. So even if faith is a means to think beyond or across the realities of this day and age, it does not do so simply or without complication. Much like the world it seeks to overcome, faith is a messy undertaking.¹⁹⁹

Nevertheless, even beyond its abuse and misuse, faith remains an attribute that undermines (if nowhere but in the imagination) the totalizing, overwhelming, and overdetermining powers of darkness that govern the world.²⁰⁰ Apocalyptic faith, in particular, imagines redemption through destruction and abandonment, a new beginning through an end. While the apocalyptic is not wholly other than this world and reality, from the beginning, it sees the end, and in seeing the world's end, orients the imagination, by faith, towards detachment from the world—hence the Christian axiom of detachment as being *in* but not of, as in Jesus'

¹⁹⁹ A. J. Swoboda, *Messy: God Likes It That Way* (Kregel Publications, 2012), 13.

²⁰⁰ This is one of my primary points of departure from Fred Moten and black aesthetics. Whereas Moten's aesthetics intends a secularized, albeit mystical space for blackness, it does not account for theology's capacity to exceed rationality and reason, to even embrace the foolish as wisdom, as articulated in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians in 1 Cor 1:27.

prayer for his disciples in John 17:14–15, in which he says that just as he is not of the world, neither are his disciples, but just as he is in the world, so are they, and he asks his father to protect them from the evil one in the world. The irony is that Jesus says these things as he moves towards the cross where he will receive no protection from the heft of human deprivation and violence. So even as he is praying that his disciples won't be harmed by the evil one in the world, he is aware that to be in the world is to be always already susceptible to such things. To be in the world is to be vulnerable.

However, the challenge in the World is that not all vulnerabilities are the same. Power in the world makes it such that vulnerabilities—that is, capacities to be injured or harmed—vary across a plethora of distinctions. Some vulnerabilities are germane to existence on this globe. Even as we understand human impact on climate, we also understand how human control cannot fully govern climate.²⁰¹ The climate crisis is not a crisis for the climate but for those entities depending on certain climates for their existence. Influence upon the climate seems to move in one direction, making the earth itself inhospitable to life forms as we know them. But even before humans, the dinosaurs (who did not drive gas-guzzling and carbon-spewing SUVs) may have met their end because of meteors that hit the earth, causing climate changes inhospitable to their existence and survival. In short, despite our efforts of prevention and preparedness, natural phenomena still make us vulnerable to extinction and erasure.

More troubling in the human domain are the relations of power established across life forms, especially among those sentient entities we generally consider human.

²⁰¹ Whitney A. Bauman, “Climate Weirding and Queering Nature: Getting Beyond the Anthropocene,” *Religions* 6, no. 2 (June 2015): 742–54, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel6020742>.

Humans create in their social orders asymmetries of power and vulnerability.²⁰² Even as myth, religion, politics, science, history, and a host of other technologies of knowledge production naturalize these asymmetries, the asymmetries exist to make existence for some on this ball called Earth less vulnerable and more pleasurable while for others doing the exact opposite.²⁰³ While this is not a phenomenological observation or grand theory, it suggests a range of articulations. One of the first asymmetries of vulnerability has to do with food, eating. A primary site for vulnerability with the human is the need to sustain life by transforming other organic entities into energy and nutrition for the human's survival. We all learned this in elementary school as part of the four necessities of life, of which food and water are two. Access to food and water are the building blocks for sustaining human life. Controlling access to those things is a first way to control human life.

Second, it is not only access to those things that matter but how the body itself by design transforms organic objects like fruit, vegetables, and flesh into nutrition. The body itself has an appetite that is not satisfied internally, but that requires consumption. The body has cravings, and the body consumes. The etymology of that word points to a destruction "by separating into parts that which cannot be reunited, as by burning or eating." Its Latin origin *consumer* means "to use up, eat, waste." Here the Latin prefix *com-* points to an intensification of "taking under" (*sumere*).²⁰⁴ While consumption as a practice of survival is not unique to the human species,

²⁰² Katie Grimes, "Antiblackness," *Theological Studies* 81, no. 1 (March 2020): 173–75, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0040563920907614>.

²⁰³ Anu Koivunen, Katariina Kyrölä, and Ingrid Ryberg, *The Power of Vulnerability: Mobilising Affect in Feminist, Queer and Anti-Racist Media Cultures* (Manchester University Press, 2018).75-88

²⁰⁴ "Consume | Etymology, Origin and Meaning of Consume by Etymonline," accessed May 30, 2023, <https://www.etymonline.com/word/consume>.

human capacities to extend and elaborate, justify, and obfuscate, and systematize and export patterns of consumption are remarkable.

It is also worth noting that the body's own process of consuming does not work primarily at the level of human consciousness. It is the parasympathetic nervous system that governs the digestive system and the bowels. This means humans are not naturally designed to consider the destruction that sustains human life. Within the Judeo-Christian tradition, this issue of consumption and what it brings about in the human experiment—death—is the scene of the crime. The first humans, according to the Genesis narrative, made a conscious decision to consume what was forbidden. The result of that consumption was the opposite of what consumption intended for the human; instead of sustaining life, it brought about its death. Yet this was and is not because the forbidden was or is bad to eat, but because it was and is simply not to be eaten. From the start, therefore, we can recognize the human condition as decidedly inattentive to consumption, a set of desires and appetites that can be projected onto consumption but that will fail to deliver what those appetites promise.

The Genesis narrative invites us to consider how what is death dealing is nonetheless pleasing to the eye and good for food. Desire, appetite, destruction, and death all find their coherence in the first three chapters of Genesis around eating. And the question we must ask of every genesis is: What will be the food? Who will be the fruit? And more stridently we might consider how the greatest appeal lies with how the forbidden can be assimilated into the body as good, even when it is in fact the certainty and the promise of death.²⁰⁵ The fact of this consumption is that whatever it takes in will be destroyed to the point where reunification is not

²⁰⁵ Genesis 2:4-3:24 tells the story of the earth's first two humans eating from a tree God forbade. Eve sees that the tree is "good for food" and shares it with her husband. They realize they are naked and then try and hide their nudity. Christian theology generally narrates this story as the fall marking sin as alienation from God, creation, and each other.

possible, and whatever remains will be waste. The logic of consumption is the logic of waste production and management. If a forbidden consumption is the pathway for sin in the world, as Genesis suggests, then faith, and maybe even divine intervention, are those back-end responses that contend with both the death which the infraction promises, and the impossible re-constitution of what was consumed in the first place.

In the 1930s, Jewish composer and lyricists Abel Meeropol, under the pseudonym Lewis Allen, composed a song that became iconic in the repertoire of Billie Holiday. His song "Strange Fruit" was written as a protest against the lynching taking place in the United States. Lest we think that lynching was a just a practice in the Southern states, Meeropol was inspired to write the song after seeing a photo of the lynching of two black teens in Indiana in 1930. Initially a poem, Meeropol first published the piece in the *New York Teacher* in 1937. When he started performing the song with his wife, and the black singer Laura Duncan, Billie Holiday caught wind of it. Knowing the song's political message could affect her career, Billie nonetheless started singing the song and eventually made it the closing number in her set.

Across its three stanzas, the song is a genesis narrative. It is a song of consumption and of what remains irretrievable. Meeropol's lyrics go like this:

Southern trees bear strange fruit
 Blood on the leaves and blood at the root
 Black bodies swinging in the Southern breeze
 Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees

Pastoral scene of the gallant South
 The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth

Scent of Magnolias, sweet and fresh

Then the sudden smell of burning flesh

Here is a fruit for the crows to pluck

For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck

For the sun to rot, for the tree to drop

Here is a strange and bitter cry.²⁰⁶

While the lyrics do not explicitly narrate the fruit as forbidden, they note its strangeness. And while it doesn't speak of human consumption from the front end, it speaks of it from the back. The burning flesh is what has already been consumed, and even though it cannot be reconstituted, there is a recognition that it was something before its consumption—a black body. Moreover, the narrator helps us to see that the consumption is not just for those who grew the fruit, but for the whole cosmos to witness—the birds, the rain, the wind, the sun, and even the tree. The fruit, even upon consumption via combustion, remains consumable. At the meta level, the very origin of the song emerges from Meeropol's own taking up and ingesting the photo and trying through this poetic enterprise to say something about the strange, yet familiar, the digestion that goes unthought. He does so not because thinking about it is its salvation, but because thinking about it or at least trying to thematize it attempts to reveal what consumption wants to hide.

²⁰⁶ Songfacts, "Lyrics for Strange Fruit by Billie Holiday - Songfacts," accessed April 16, 2023, <https://www.songfacts.com/lyrics/billie-holiday/strange-fruit>.

Blackness as strange fruit does not move blackness out of the position of an object: if anything, it crystallizes blackness as an object of weird, strange, and bitter fascination. In this way, blackness is an aestheticized consumable, art rendered on a plate, a tree, a ship, a postcard, a grave, a jail, a coin. Or black consumables mass-produced and presented under bright lights as a buffet. As food, the use value of blackness is just that: use. So, even if blackness is a return to the Garden, a genesis by another route, it is not a return that redeems blackness from the vulnerability of human consumption, because consumption forecloses reconstitution to a prior state. It is a separation that cannot be rejoined.

Even the theological imagination cannot completely overcome that separation. For the biblical witness figures this separation as sin, and sin as the precursor to death. Death is that digestive reality in which every human will eventually find itself. It seems that if salvation is anything, it is not the erasure of death, but the inevitability of it. Even the grand concept of resurrection in the New Testament tries to wrestle with the consumption that is death, and from that consumption wrestles to defeat the causation. The paradox here may be the suggestion that only by fully entering the consequence, the belly of the beast, can one come out on the other side. But the legibility of what comes out on the other side is too fraught, for in most living things, we call it waste. But even in the economy of life, waste is just fuel for some other entity to transform into new life. In this way, we find the law of the conservation of matter at work: matter can neither be created nor destroyed, only transformed.²⁰⁷

²⁰⁷ “5.1: The Law of Conservation of Matter,” Chemistry LibreTexts, July 18, 2014, [https://chem.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Introductory_Chemistry/Basics_of_General_Organic_and_Biological_Chemistry_\(Ball_et_al.\)/05%3A_Introduction_to_Chemical_Reactions/5.01%3A_The_Law_of_Conservation_of_Matter](https://chem.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Introductory_Chemistry/Basics_of_General_Organic_and_Biological_Chemistry_(Ball_et_al.)/05%3A_Introduction_to_Chemical_Reactions/5.01%3A_The_Law_of_Conservation_of_Matter).

Consequently, whatever our hope is for blackness, its destruction at present is ultimately from one form to another. Maybe the best for which we black humans can hope and toward which we can live is a transformation that marks us as unfit for food.

Wound Care

How might we imagine a salvation that does not remove us from these conditions? What do we need to consider in thinking about a salvation for blackness? And how does that thinking take seriously the positionality of the black woman and her peculiar relationship to surrogacy as redemption for one not herself? Womanist theologian Delores Williams is again helpful here because she challenges the broad acceptance of suffering as redemptive within Christian theology. For the purposes of our discussion earlier, we might see her interdiction of the ubiquity of suffering of Christian thought as following along the same lines as Wilderson observes when engaging Fanon and elaborating on blackness as fecal matter. The consumption, use, abuse, and misuse of black flesh is not antithetical to the centuries-long Christian exploration of Christ's suffering as redemptive. While Cone charges that white Christians fail to see the cross of Christ in the lynching tree, Williams is charging Christian theology, and specifically black liberationist and white feminist theologies, for failing to consider what salvation might be from the perspective of a black woman, whose very womb is co-opted for expanding the power of white men and the world they run. The challenge, as Williams invites us to consider, is to "revalue value." Through this phrase, she invites us to consider how our commitments, based on our embodiment, position us to take up value in accordance with our embodiment. If we are to give consideration to an other, we will have to extend our thinking to include responses that privilege the least among the least.

What I find most helpful about Williams's intervention is her recapitulation of salvation away from atonement theories of the cross, particularly in considering the critiques that Wilderson and others make regarding blackness and antiblackness. Transubstantiation and surrogacy make it too easy to externalize the violence onto another body in service to the Human being.

Cone's transubstantiation works by elevating black suffering to the sacred order of Christ's, for the purposes of its broader legibility. The paradox here is that the regular practice of the church is still to consume and rehearse, over and over again, Christ's body being broken and his blood being shed. It is a ritual that requires perpetual practice. Even the biblical text requires that believers perform the Eucharist as often as they meet. So even if black oppression were to be considered on the order of Christ's, it would not necessarily lead to its end but rather to its identification as a parasymphetic liturgy's order. In short, what Cone perceives as an intervention may very well be inadvertent identification of the protracted nature of black dolor within the logics of normative Western Christian thought. Where an Afropessimist might critique Cone's endeavor is the way in which his analogy of black suffering with Christ's suffering is related to narrations of injustice and loss. Jesus lost his human dignity on the cross. It was denied him.

Wilderson might note that Jesus' suffering was contingent. It was, he might say, a result of the fact that he and the pharisees and Pontius Pilate did not share the same strategic rigidity, even if their tactics were different. First, Jesus was committed to pursuing his father's business, whereas the others had a different set of motives and commitments. While there was concern about Jesus' divinity, that concern only emerged because of his clear humanity—hence the charge at various points in the gospels, "Is not this Joseph the carpenter's son?" Thus, while the

denial of ontology might be at work for Jesus, it typically occurs with reference to his divine ontology rather than to his human ontology. Second, Jesus did not die and suffer as a non-being: he died and suffered as a criminal. Even if he was unjustly identified as a criminal, the nature of his death conformed to the order of "criminal" within that context. Justifying Jesus' death as a Jew was contingent on the charge that he claimed to be king of the Jews—which is blasphemy.

Black suffering, however (per Wilderson at least), is not contingent, like Jesus's death, but objective: it does not require or rely on a dispute because the black is not recognized as having any standing from which to dispute. The black *is* in human form—but lacks subject standing in the world of humans. Wilderson's non-positioned black is not terribly different from Williams' understanding of the black woman whose particular experience remains unthought in black liberation theology. To the black woman, general dishonor is rendered in her forced surrogacy. A notable particularity of suffering for black women has to do with their wombs and what they stand to produce for a world in need of slaves. While Williams is not trying to make a case for the ubiquity of black women's suffering, and while she prioritizes a constructive intervention on black liberation theology, her recognition of the inordinate suffering of black women and its uninterrupted continuation reflects a valence of objective violence. While neither Williams nor Wilderson in their analytics provides a prescriptive resolution, their analysis remains insightful.

Most illuminating for this project is how Williams' intervention does not seek to elevate the concern of black oppression through analogous association with Christ and his suffering. For Williams, the site for analogous connection with Christ is through Christ's ministerial mission, his actual living. It lies in the way his living affected relationships and created pathways for people to survive and thrive. For Williams, it is this which is the heart of salvation, this which

infuses Jesus' resurrection with potency. It is not how he died, but how he lived and how his living brought about his death that matters for salvation. Redemption does not lie in an inordinate focus on his suffering, but in giving careful attention to how he lived his life and what it meant for those who witnessed and shared that life with him.

This intervention allows us to consider black dolor, and the faith that emerges within the condition of black dolor as witness to a ministerial mission. In this way it is not the dolor that is valorized or deemed the catalyst for transformation, but one's orientation—fidelity even—to a ministerial mission at all costs. Elaborating on Williams' concept, I would suggest that the witness of transformation and even redemption within the crucible of black experience is demonstrated in one's fidelity to care within the constraints of blackness. The divine presence honors that faith witness through the black miraculous. The miracle of black faith in the day-to-day experience of blackness is the way in which black people learn to care, and risk caring for each other, in ways in which the world around them is incapable of doing (or at least unwilling to do).

I consider this black-on-black care as a witness to a *transformative fidelity*. Following Williams, if salvation is to mean something other than the events *of* the cross, then it must do so *by way of* Jesus' life. Thus, salvation is not the possession of the cross: instead, salvation is that which tarries alongside, that which travels with those who suffer. We might first think of Jesus' salvation for blacks in this world as the way his ministerial mission shows up in the *way of* black people. Second, if we recognize that the black situation is the situation of dolor, social death, alienation, and fungibility, then discerning salvation means identifying how Jesus lives and moves *by way of* these experiences of black life.

Cone's Christology places black-on-black care squarely within a political discourse on liberation into the human family as human. Cone reads Jesus' solidarity with the marginalized as evidence of an agenda of liberation. In this way Cone's intervention and imagination of liberation is a telos more than a means. It is a justification of the cause, more than a particular tactic. It is a question about why divine solidarity is so essential to liberation. On the one hand, it has to do with the supremacy ascribed to God's ontology. If God is the most powerful entity, then having God on your side will ensure a particular end. Still, there is a subtler consideration that we can mine regarding divine solidarity with the oppressed. This solidarity is first a witness of fidelity, which is grounds for relationality between the divine and the oppressed. This foundation matters because if it is the divine power that initiates it, then at some level it is invulnerable to seizure and annihilation. That is, if God's choice is with the oppressed, then nothing can sever God from what God has joined to Godself. God's fidelity is transformative because it refuses separation. If God is on the side of the oppressed, then the oppressed cannot, from God's standpoint, be rendered profane or secular by any other entity claiming sovereign power. The heft of this relational conviction is the invitation and grounds of faith to believe in God's solidarity. And in this register, the liberation one might strive to recognize, and in which one learns to trust, is liberation from the threat of divine abandonment.

So, when we look at Jesus, we can see something more durable than a liberation into the human category as such: we see a solidarity with the sacred, even if the world finds that problematic. If Jesus had not cared enough to recognize the marginal and disenfranchised as sacred, then any opportunity to intervene would have been lost. The means of his care, as divine care, is first and foremost solidarity. Jesus as God in flesh, bears witness to God's capacity to transform downwards—kenotically. Taken a step further, Jesus descends into humanity, not to

save the human oppressed into the human religious imagination of the liberated oppressor, but to reorder their lives around the kingdom of God, a kingdom or way of being which is not of this world. Jesus's incarnation reorders the agenda of human being around fidelity downward. It makes his a commitment to the least and the lowly, to the forgotten and the outcast. Furthermore, Jesus' interactions are not simply paternalistic, but often a response to faith. Jesus sees faith, something that the world through its negation leaves as the only terrain of hope for the oppressed. Jesus' affirmation of faith is in service to breaking through the totalizing situation of sickness, marginalization, demonic possession, and even death. Faith is the oppressed people's response to God's fidelity demonstrated in Jesus' life and ministry. And even in a world in which these conditions will continue, faith remains the portal for divine rupture, which testifies to the fact that there is more to life than meets the eye. Faith in God's capacity and willingness to interject, interrupt, trouble, relieve, restore, and revive on behalf of the oppressed is necessary for life.²⁰⁸ The cross then symbolizes not just suffering as redemptive surrogacy, (which Williams cautions us against), but the ultimate challenge to faith itself: Can we believe that God works beyond death, hell, and the grave? As Paul suggests in his letter to the Corinthians, to believe in the cross as a means of salvation is foolishness and a stumbling block. And while such a perspective does not valorize suffering, it does affirm that God can work beyond the death and dolor that suffering produces.

²⁰⁸I am thinking about Jesus' interaction with the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15, who comes to Jesus because her daughter is demon-possessed. Jesus initially says he was not sent to Gentiles but to Israelites and that it's not fair to give the children's bread to dogs. The woman persists and claims that the dogs get crumbs. Jesus accounted her retort as faith and instantly her daughter was made well. Feminists and Womanist scholars have taken up these texts to challenge Jesus' paternalism and ethnocentrism. I think it testifies to the mother's transformative fidelity and commitment to care. She took a risk, she was bold, she was persistent, and Jesus did not liberate her from her dog-like status as a gentile, but he did honor her faith and make her daughter well. It was the mother's care for her daughter that moved Jesus in to action. It is also worth noting that this Seeing and Recognizing harkens back to Delores Williams' read of Hagar's *El Roi* – the God who sees.

Faith is, however, also its own wilderness experience, even as it navigates us through the wilderness that necessitates faith. In all registers, faith may be less about escaping the hold, and more about learning to persist in spite of it. For black women, Williams says, "God becomes the *element of necessity* in the emergence of black women's survival and quality of life strategies."²⁰⁹ Whatever survival and thriving will look like, they will require an *element of necessity* that is God's trans-formative fidelity, that is God's crossing beyond form to be in solidarity with and among those in need. And such a claim is held by faith and leaned into by faith.

This black solidarity with any entity has always been and remains a threat within, if not to, the antagonism between black/Human. Reading alongside Williams, we might recognize in Jesus' ministry a refusal to justify himself through language, and instead recognize an insistence on living out his ministerial/divine mission. Black solidarity as a divine mission may not overcome antiblackness once and for all. But it does speak to black sentience that refuses the totality of antiblack subjection. And if all we have is a sentience that testifies to this not being how things should be, that intuition, that hunch, is enough to do the work that is both diagnostic and prescriptive. Said differently, even in our failure to make it to a promised land (if such a thing exists) the daring to imagine such, even when vulnerability is the forever lot, is as much a waste as it is a necessity. Williams' reading of Jesus, then, invites us to consider the waste of ministry and the waste of caring and something of value behind an uncritical acceptance of normative political logics (such as Wilberforce's and his cronies). If politics is always and already a discourse on the strategic justification of force and power to create asymmetrical vulnerabilities on the one hand and immunity and invulnerabilities on the other in service to privation and possession, then oppression and suppression will always be the shadow side of the

²⁰⁹ Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 156. (emphasis mine)

enterprise. Williams' call to tend to surrogacy is a call to recognize that the first thing at stake in redressing the political is the way in which the body is split to undermine its own solidarity.

Essential to social death is the world's non-recognition of a slave's interior solidarity. The slave who is black in the afterlife of slavery maintains a tenuous relationship with ontology, the means by which one is recognized as a human *being*. Without standing as a human, care and grief can only arise in the world of Humans as care for an object, an *it*. For dolor's issue, blacks, transformative fidelity does not move toward a monolithic claim of essence, but toward a shared recognition of circumstance.²¹⁰ As such, care and grief within black dolor is the capacity to see others as *with* you in the inescapable matrix. The transformative capacity testifies to the refusal to see one's suffering as singular and isolated. It is to recognize that the hold, the belly of the ship, the bowels even, are the collection compressed together—the disparate made one, pressed down, shaken together, running over. The transformative capacity as negation, as black, is the intensification of black flesh rendered and bound together by force. As Christina Sharpe articulates, "Black intramural life and social and political work is redacted, made invisible, to the present and future, subtended by plantation logics, detached optics, and brutal architectures."²¹¹ This violent transformation makes a black fidelity indeterminable against the ontological holocaust.²¹²

²¹⁰ I'm thinking against Anderson's claim regarding ontological blackness and the need to resist a monolithic narrative of black suffering. While Anderson challenges the black suffering/liberation narrative along the lines of recognizing class, gender, and sexuality. While these intersectional identities intramurally are important to recognize, I do not think they fundamentally change how blackness lacks standing in the world as a proper political subject. Victor Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness: An Essay on African American Religious and Cultural Criticism* (New York: Continuum, 1995).

²¹¹ Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, Reprint edition (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2016), 114.

²¹² Warren, *Ontological Terror*.

Even as we, along with Wilderson, consider blackness as an absence, we still recognize that the black body was made, consumed, and digested into that—transformed into black. In thinking about transformative fidelity, I want to lean into the *across* movement of *trans*, the *way/means* intoned by form and the *doing* inflected by the *-ive* suffix. Together, transformative is an a(*cross way*) of doing. Transformative as *crossway* resonates with the clear sign of Jesus's ministry and suffering. It does so not for the sake of claiming redemption, but as a result of the forces outside pressing him into that form based on his care and witness in the world and his endurance of that form to undermine the finality of death itself. Fidelity, then, is about adherence, attachment with those in the crossway—dolor's issue. Together, we might consider *transformative fidelity* to be black togetherness in a *crossway*. To return to the ship *Delores*, the crossway on a ship—referred to as the transom—is a vertical reinforcement that strengthens the stern of the boat. The stern is the backside of the ship—the side that always faces the wake. Understood like this, transformative fidelity in blackness is strength to face the afterlife, the line of sight above the waterline that is a platform.²¹³ Black-on-black care, black-on-black grief, both testify to this intramural inhabitation as a platform that tends to the wake, that faces the trace of departure, that testifies to what lies behind, that refuses to prioritize forwardness. To extend the metaphor further, the transom (window) is also that small window above the door, a window whose purpose is to allow for cross-ventilation and light. While the door of no return remains such, there is something to be said about the possibility of fresh air and light. We know that these were the very things denied on the ship, and that they are still in short supply in slavery's afterlife. But in terms of embodiment, black-on-black care means being light for each other and

²¹³ “Transom (Nautical),” in *Wikipedia*, September 2, 2022, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Transom_\(nautical\)&oldid=1108169512](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Transom_(nautical)&oldid=1108169512).

fresh air for each other. Whether these practices emerge as aesthetic performances for delight, or as small gestures of recognition, they matter because they testify to another route, to portals. Regardless of their size, these portals, these practices, these gestures of recognition remind us that our current oppressed reality is not all there is.

What I am trying to get at are practices that privilege our recognition of each other as worthy of care, and not practices that demand the world's care. Sharpe calls this *wake work*, "a theory and practice of Black being in diaspora."²¹⁴ It is imagining "new ways to live in the wake of slavery... to survive (and more) the afterlife of property... [It is] a mode of inhabiting and rupturing... with our known lived and un/imaginable lives."²¹⁵ It is not that black-on-black care as wake work protects us from the realities of black dolor in this world. If anything, *transformative fidelity* and its insistence on black-on-black care together recast hope for black people against the background and foreground of antiblackness. Speaking in the register of practical theology, black-on-black care as a praxiological intent is an orientation towards critical reflection and application. This lateral care, as Sharpe calls it, yields to a *transformative fidelity* that recognizes, seeks, privileges, risks, and prioritizes concern for and care of, black folk by black folk.²¹⁶ This re-focusing on black-on-black care is not a mere abandonment of liberation, but a reassessment of urgency and treatment. And black-on-black care as treatment speaks to the world's refusal to care for black people. It is an indictment that, even if black people lack the means to enforce judgment against the world, they know by faith that that is something that remains in the hands of the Divine.

²¹⁴ Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 19.

²¹⁵ Sharpe, 18.

²¹⁶ Sharpe, 20.

Nevertheless, as a testimony against the world, it may testify to the world's end. This black-on-black care is transgressive in the world, even as Christ's witness in the world was transgressive. Here, I am thinking specifically about the ways in which religious leaders challenged Jesus, asking by whose authority and power he did the things he did. In other words, there was tension around the authority and power Jesus demonstrated as he showed care. Saidiya Hartman, among others, has chronicled with great detail the extent to which masters ensured distrust amongst slaves so as to prevent revolts. This is why within an antiblack world, and in the afterlife of slavery, black-on-black care remains transgressive and risky because it reflects a kind of authority that is not of this world. God ruptures the world, through black-on-black care. Such care is the crossway that gives air and strength to the work our existence requires.

A Mother Who Cares

To return to my mother's story: her issue, her dolor, became an additional means by which her mother could show and administer care. My grandmother nursed my mother back to good health. She was attentive, observant, careful, considerate, and kind. What she could do for her daughter—my mom—she did. To care in black-on-black is a means to making and strengthening kinship ties that, even if not respected and valued in the world, do wonders to support black aliveness, survival, and quality of life. In thinking about effective responses to the black situation of dolor, it can be easy to castigate Dolores' issue for its perceived docility and resignation, while failing to appraise adequately the immeasurable depravity and sinisterness it would take to produce and re-produce wounds that cannot heal. For this is the violence that makes the white world. This is the violence that the white world makes. The question then, now, and always, is not, "How do blacks sit idly by under such duress?" but instead, "How can one dare consider the

world to be humane or civil with a living dead witness to its insatiable brutality?" The black situation of dolor persists because its original architects and their beneficiaries cannot exist without it. While it might be tempting to think and imagine a grand black faith that upends its forced deprivation at every turn and opportunity, this project narrates the necessity of black faith and the witness of black faith as the horizon point (or in artistic and perspectival terms, the vanishing point) for this world. Because dolor persists, black faith persists, and because black faith persists, the world's limit is visible, even if only to those who have eyes to see and ears to hear.

In this chapter, I have attempted to show how the black situation of dolor lands on and in black flesh as rupture, infection, open un-suturable wounds, and (possibly) protracted healing. As wound care, this chapter understands Black faith as enabling diagnostics/diagnosis of dolor, as operative in redressing dolor, and as nursing the wounds that dolor inflicts.

Chapter 3: Hemorrhage, Healing, and the Holy Ghost

Now there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years; and though she had spent all she had on physicians, no one could cure her. She came up behind Jesus and touched the fringe of his clothes, and immediately her hemorrhage stopped.

Luke 8:43–48

(Test)imony

In the mid-1970s my mother became pregnant with her first child, Rodney. This pregnancy had additional risks because her childhood appendix rupture and surgery had unfortunately compromised her diaphragm and peritoneum. The strain of carrying a baby could result in injuries for her and the child. Thankfully, the birth occurred without incident. But two years later, she started hemorrhaging. Doctors could not identify what the problem was or how to fix it. Their only solution was to encourage her to get a hysterectomy. She knew she wanted more children; she did not want to end her ability to conceive altogether. But as the bleeding continued off and on for over a year, she felt her options narrowing.

She shared her concerns with her mother and asked her to pray. Her mother, who by this point had already survived cancer twice, was a prayer warrior and woman of great faith. She believed in God's healing power, and the church regarded her as an intercessor. Her mother

called together her band of praying women, which included my mom's sisters, her sister-in-law, and some other women from the church. They were in the habit of gathering regularly at my grandmother's house to pray, and to share about what the Lord was doing in their lives and the challenges they were facing. One day as they were gathering to pray, they felt the Spirit heavy in the room. As they prayed, spoke in tongues, and worshipped the Lord, my mother got a word from God that she was healed and that she needed to open her mouth and confess it. In recounting the story, my mother recalls that initially she was glad to hear the word of her healing from God, but that she became reluctant to open her mouth to confess that word to the women gathered in the prayer circle. As the other women continued to pray, she sat wrestling within herself about saying what the Spirit had told her to say. As her own inner battle raged on, she became aware of her one sister rebuking the devil and her sister-in-law singing a song of victory. As the women continued fervently with their praying and declarations, my mother felt her faith rising to her mouth, enabling her finally to proclaim that she had been healed. As her declaration gained in confidence, the other women's collective praise to God crescendoed.

Yet after the prayer time, after everyone had long gone home, my grandmother called my mother in a bit of a panic. As she had been tidying up the living room where the women had been gathering, she had noticed blood stains all over the chair on which my mother had been sitting. Had my mother been bleeding during the prayer time, she wondered? My mom said she hadn't been, and remarkably that there was no evidence of blood on her clothes.

Not being able to explain or make sense of the blood, the two women took it as a sign confirming the words my mother had declared about having been healed. The hemorrhaging stopped, she no longer needed a hysterectomy, and within a few months she was pregnant with her second child: me. She gave me the middle name Nicholas, meaning "people of victory." My

entrance into the world was confirmation of God's healing power and the Holy Spirit's ability to do what no other power can do.²¹⁷

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In what follows of his chapter, I establish the groundwork for a black mystical theology that leans into a certain kind of detachment from the world and its concerns. To work towards this mystical theology, I consider the physical and symbolic order of the circulatory system that moves blood. Then I examine Delores' presenting issue—hemorrhaging—as an issue of black dolor. In the final section, I explore how the Spirit circulates within black flesh and facilitates hemostasis as an expression of black mystical faith. I do so giving particular attention to prayer as a spiritual orientation and practice and to tongues—glossolalia—as transcendent phenomena that mark God's intervention as care/air.²¹⁸

The Circulatory System: Blood Matters

Unlike the digestive system, which moves in fairly linear fashion—food in one end and food waste out the other—the circulatory system moves continuously throughout the body, like an immense looping system of blood vessels. The system's primary function through the loops of blood vessels is to supply oxygenated blood to all the body's organs and tissues, and to its living cells (excluding the cornea). The blood vessels—veins, arteries, and capillaries—are the

²¹⁷ While black women have fewer incidences of atonic postpartum hemorrhages, when they do have them they are more likely to develop complications requiring transfusions and hysterectomies. Black dolor persists. For more, see, Oluwasemilore Okunlola et al., "Race/Ethnicity as a Risk Factor in the Development of Postpartum Hemorrhage: A Thorough Systematic Review of Disparity in the Relationship Between Pregnancy and the Rate of Postpartum Hemorrhage," *Cureus* 14, no. 6 (n.d.): e26460, <https://doi.org/10.7759/cureus.26460>.

²¹⁸ This conception of care/air emerges from the three major events taking place on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2. First, those gathering in the upper room experienced the rush of a mighty wind (air), giving them tongues of fire (glossolalia), and after Peter's preach, the community shared their goods to each as they had need (care). The transcendent was immanent in the way the gathered heard and shared amongst themselves.

infrastructure that make it possible for the blood to leave and return to the heart. The muscular heart drives the circulatory system by pumping nearly 15,000 pints of blood each day. The human body has about five liters of blood. So, each minute, the heart circulates the volume of the body's entire blood supply at least once, that is four to five quarts of blood traveling at three to four miles per hour.²¹⁹

The physical necessity and ubiquity of the circulatory system leaves no part of the body untouched. For in addition to supplying organs and tissue with fresh oxygen via red blood cells, the circulatory system also mobilizes white blood cells as part of the body's immune defense, and blood plasma, which delivers nutrients and collects waste at the cellular level. While not a part of the circulatory system directly, the endocrine system, through a series of glands around the body, releases hormones directly into the body's bloodstream.²²⁰ These hormones target specific cells to produce specific reactions in the body. Problems in the endocrine system can directly affect blood flow and cause systemic problems for the body. Endocrine diseases like diabetes affect kidney function, and the body's (in)ability to manage blood waste can cause circulation issues in the body's peripheral organs and eyes.²²¹ Other issues like polycystic ovarian syndrome (PCOS) occur when a female body produces abnormal amounts of male androgen

²¹⁹ "Our Bodies' Velocities, By the Numbers | Discover Magazine," accessed April 17, 2023, <https://www.discovermagazine.com/mind/our-bodies-velocities-by-the-numbers>. and Raheel Chaudhry, Julia H. Miao, and Afzal Rehman, "Physiology, Cardiovascular," in *StatPearls* (Treasure Island (FL): StatPearls Publishing, 2023), <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK493197/>.

²²⁰ Department of Health & Human Services, "Circulatory System" (Department of Health & Human Services), accessed January 30, 2023, <http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/conditionsandtreatments/circulatory-system>.

²²¹ Department of Health & Human Services, "Hormonal (Endocrine) System" (Department of Health & Human Services), accessed April 17, 2023, <http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/conditionsandtreatments/hormonal-endocrine-system>.

hormones, causing cysts on the ovaries that negatively affect ovulation and menstruation. Issues with the body's handling of insulin are present in both diabetes and PCOS.²²²

There are other organ systems that are important to the circulatory system and that affect its functioning. Hematopoiesis, the creation of blood, happens in the bone marrow where stem cells grow into mature blood cells and enter the bloodstream through blood vessels in and on the bones. Large bones like the pelvis, and long bones, such as those in the leg, are responsible for producing the bulk of the body's blood. The spleen and liver are organs that filter out deformed or aged blood cells. The spleen is also a reservoir that holds up to a cup of blood to release in case of an emergency. While the spleen is not a vital organ, it plays an important role in managing the blood.²²³ The kidneys are the blood's waste management plant. Processing about half a cup of blood a minute, the kidneys filter out toxins, excess water, and waste within the blood and empty it out of the body as urine via the urethra.²²⁴ Then there are the lungs, the blood's gas station, whose dual function is to take in fresh oxygen and push out carbon dioxide. The lung's vast structure of capillaries and alveoli exchange air at a rate of about ten to eighteen pints a minute, taking in and releasing as much as two pints of air a minute. Deoxygenated blood enters the lungs directly from the heart and oxygenate blood exits the lungs and returns to the heart. The heart, as pump, has four distinct chambers that receive and expel deoxygenated blood,

²²² I am using "biological sex" identifiers of male/female to note chromosomal and hormonal distinctions. I am not speaking gender identity and its social function in relation to sex assigned at birth. "Polycystic Ovary Syndrome (PCOS)," February 28, 2022, <https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/conditions-and-diseases/polycystic-ovary-syndrome-pcos>.

²²³ "What Does the Spleen Do? | Children's Pittsburgh," Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh, accessed April 17, 2023, <https://www.chp.edu/our-services/transplant/liver/education/organs/spleen-information>.

²²⁴ "Your Kidneys & How They Work - NIDDK," National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases, accessed April 17, 2023, <https://www.niddk.nih.gov/health-information/kidney-disease/kidneys-how-they-work>.

the right atrium and right ventricle respectively, and the left atrium and left ventricle which receive and expel oxygenated blood respectively.

The circulatory system is a vast network that transports oxygen, water, hormones, immune cells and fluids, throughout the entire body. Supplying both infrastructure and content, tending to the oxygen needs of the largest and smallest of organs, the circulatory system is a workhorse. While most of the system runs via the autonomic nervous system that I mentioned previously, the circulatory system uses and responds to the sympathetic nervous system as well. Consequently, when you run and your heart rate increases, you naturally start to breathe faster to get more oxygen to your body that's exerting itself and needs more oxygen via blood. Conversely, when you focus on your breath and intentionally slow your breathing, your body likewise responds to that, lowering your heart rate and the pace at which the blood moves through your vessels.

The infrastructure of this important circulatory system has a heart, lungs, and other organs (all known as vessels) and lithe tubing known as blood vessels, all designed to carry various chemical combinations (blood, air, urine etc.) from place to place in and out of the body. Etymologically, the term *vessel* was first associated with ships. You can hear in vessel its root *vas* (as in *vascular*) and from there recognize the resonance with ship as a *hollow container*. Blood, the substance transported by the vessels, and also supplying the vessels with the very thing they need to function as such, is the fluid circulating in the veins, arteries, and capillaries.

But historically, blood has been understood also in other ways. For example, during the Middle Ages, blood took on a wide variety of meanings, to refer to the "seat of passions" and "kinship and familial relations," among other meanings. To speak of blood in the symbolic register is to speak of so much more than a chemical compound.

Blood has long been associated with ritual practice and symbolic meaning. Cultural historian Melissa Meyer notes that, “humans have extensively symbolized and ritualized blood as one of the most powerfully meaningful and multivocal bodily substances.”²²⁵ Meyer traces this interest in blood to the observations that hunter-gatherer communities made upon witnessing what happened to and with blood of animals they killed: that blood plays a crucial role in life and death. They learned that certain wounds produce a great loss of blood, others not so much; that certain organs in the body seemed to have more blood than others, and that the beating heart was responsible for the blood’s movement around the body.

The symbolic power of blood in matters of life and death persists in human thought. Meyer notes that, “the most widespread metaphorical trope attributes life-giving qualities to blood, both in terms of procreation and agricultural fertility.”²²⁶ It may very well be the case that these connections and metaphors arose from observing the cyclical patterns of seasons and of female menstruation, and of the way in which blood circulates within the body. While these pre-modern societies lacked the scientific instruments we have, their familiarity with animal husbandry and the corpses of the animals they ate, with the animal and human processes of giving birth and dying, afforded them opportunities to make observations and connections that then enlivened their symbolic and ritual orientations to blood. That these rituals most readily cohere around the female (human and animal) and her body’s reproductive capacity to reproduce life, is noteworthy. But Meyer reminds us that for males, symbolic association with blood centers or centered on the hunt and its concern for ownership and distribution.²²⁷ Holding

²²⁵ Melissa Meyer, *Thicker Than Water: The Origins of Blood As Symbol and Ritual* (London, UNITED KINGDOM: Taylor & Francis Group, 2005), 9, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/emory/detail.action?docID=1619039>.

²²⁶ Meyer, 13.

²²⁷ Meyer, 29.

this observation alongside our understanding of the circulatory system, we might note that a properly functioning system aligns with the female symbolic, and that an interruption of the system, through trauma evokes the masculine. Said differently, we can track the feminine and the masculine by way of blood moving towards life vs. blood emptying away towards death.

And yet, even the logic of hunting and sacrifice, though both ending in death, are in service to some form of life. The hunter kills to consume, and the priest sacrifices to atone, honor, cleanse as a means of saving life. We see in the masculine, surrogacy at work. What the male cannot produce in his own body he feigns through the spilling of blood. Within the domains of patriarchy, the reversal of death to life, is also at work in the male's domination of the female, in which he perversely marks her natural flow of blood as a sign of uncleanness, impurity, even infection.

The place where this symbolic reversal of life giving and death dealing reaches its apogee is in kinship relations. Because the mother's issue—her offspring—is of her body and of her blood²²⁸, the maternity of a child is unquestioned.²²⁹ Precarity in a kinship-based bloodline thus lies with the father. The female's hidden ovulation and her capacity to have sexual relations with multiple partners without that necessarily being evident does not allow the male the certainty to “claim” offspring as his own. The cultivation of patriarchal kinship is thus an attempt to govern the female in service to uncertain patrimony.

Meyer draws a connection between this rise in patrimony and the logic of the hunt. The hunter who killed was the hunter who owned what he killed. His owning what he killed meant that the benefit (flesh, food) was his to control and distribute. For the female, because her labor

²²⁸ typically—unless it is through surrogacy or at times IVF

²²⁹ We know that the fetus has a circulatory system completely separate from the mother's, but it is still her blood, via the umbilical cord that supplies the fetus via the placenta with its necessary nutrients and waste management.

was ostensibly tied to the lengthy infancy of human babies, had little or no time to hunt, so her nutrition for both her offspring and herself was tied to some form of fidelity or relationship to the hunter. Meyer might go a bit far in this grand narrative about the transference of capture/killing and ownership of food to the concept of patriarchy as the possessing/owning of a family. Nevertheless, I think these observations make some important points for understanding how blood matters deeply for social relations.²³⁰

Still, we can glean helpful ideas from Meyer's work on the symbolic. Because birth, and its connection to the woman's blood and specifically her menstruation, establishes clear kinship ties to her family, the practice of patrilocal exogamy removed the woman from her family and placed her in the household of her husband's family. Meyer observes that the language to describe this kind of marriage was notably violent: instead of a woman choosing a partner/marriage, she was often forcibly 'taken away'; her membership in her husband's family was not settled until she had a child by her husband. "Bride capture" expresses a liminal space between a girl's or woman's removal from her family of origin to her acceptance within her husband's family. Furthermore, within her own family, the point at which she started to menstruate was the point at which she was deemed no longer to be under the influence of her father's "blood-sperm" but marked as an "outside blood woman." The belief here was that menstruation marked her body's departure from her father's line and her availability to be taken, captured, or bought (with a bride price or dowry).

In all of this we see how blood matters to a wide set of imaginations that in turn lead to asymmetries of power and relations, uses of force and coercion, and meanings that determine life outcomes and also deadly realities for women. Circulation attests to the ways these asymmetries

²³⁰ Meyer, *Thicker Than Water*, 42–44.

move systemically throughout all organs and cells of the body. Blood is both a life force and can be deadly. Having laid the groundwork for such imaginations by considering the body's natural processes and work, specifically by understanding both blood's physical and chemical function in the body and blood's symbolic function at the societal level, I turn now to posit some ideas about what this might mean for blackness, and antiblackness.

Black Circulation, Black Hemorrhage

To consider the inescapable matrix of black dolor is to recognize the circularity in which black existence is trapped and with which black faith has to contend. The exploration of the circulatory system highlights the necessity of this endless loop for the sake of life. The life blood of the World is blackness. This is the travesty of social death for the black person. It means that one's dead life is for the sake of Humanity's flourishing. Blackness circulates within the body of the modern world, where the waterways contain the vessels that move black bodies, like blood from one area of the body to another, from port to port, trading black flesh *ad nauseum* for the rest of the world's continued existence and flourishing.

Following Christina Sharpe, we might consider this black circulation or trading of Blacks as the "heart" of an "anagrammatical blackness that exists as an index of violability and also potentiality."²³¹ Being circulatory, blackness moves everywhere within and nowhere *but* within – its configuration can be flipped and reversed. It carries both what the body needs and what the body must expel. It is of practical and symbolic use. "To be Black is to be continually produced by the wait toward death; that the cradle and the grave double as far as Black flesh is

²³¹ Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 75.

concerned.”²³² This circulatory system is airtight when a knee or a noose (literal or metaphorical) is on a black neck. In the circulatory system, we see what it means to be in the body and to serve the body, to be vital to the body, and only have value as use – to be in the body, but not the center from which the body’s sense of self is defined. The blood is “typed” but does not speak to any particular quality that defines personhood. It is a total object; it does not have standing on its own: its meaning is only in service to giving a body its being/life - subordination. It is the source of vitality but not meaning. Just as blackness used, abused, seen and unseen is in service to something other than itself—subject to the world of Humans.

Whereas natal alienation through actual enslavement made the black woman’s womb the means by which to continue slavery and its profits for others in perpetuity, even in its afterlife (meaning after the official end to slavery) the black woman’s womb remains a problem because it produces the criminal, the unassimilable, the disturbance of the peace. To produce her own kind would produce liabilities against the social order. If in emancipation the woman’s issue, her offspring, were now as free as their white counterparts, then the privilege of freedom reserved for white children would be lost. That is why in slavery’s afterlife there is still such an interest in the black woman’s reproductive system, but in time it moves to stem her capacity to reproduce, in my mother’s case through a proposed hysterectomy. This, White society justified (and continue to justify) on two accounts: The first was the black woman’s alleged inability to raise a child—even though black women had been nursing and caring for white children (as well as their own) for centuries. The second was the presumption that her offspring would be a burden to the state and society because of her inability to provide care, a judgment based on her limited resources—even when she had been managing to eke out an existence and to love and care for

²³² Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 88.

them just fine for centuries. Blackness in the afterlife of slavery is allegedly a hemorrhaging—either a gushing or a slow and steady seepage that risks destroying the entire (White) system.

The liberated black allegedly leads to a problem society, because such liberation transgresses what should be shackled, contained, and instead gushes out, bursts forth. As agrammatical, black freedom as hemorrhage leads to the death of the body. And it need not be the hemorrhage of full-blown freedom; it can be one's mere menstruation that sets in motion this need to rid society of one's body and to be assigned a new set of non-relations, to be thrown into kinship instability until one can re-produce what the husband can claim as his own.²³³ Black hemorrhage is a rupture of the closed loop in which the symbolic order of blood around life/death is indexed. The White world cannot tolerate black menstruation; that world desires the reproduction of blackness in its crystalized form in service to sacrifice and surrogacy, rather than to life and the freedom to be. The world has this insatiable need to lay claim to black lives and constrain them—to hunt and to sacrifice them to satisfy the rest of the world's hungers. This is the world of the political, this is the world of antiblackness.

A paradox persists, because political antiblackness dangles progress like a carrot under the ruse of hope.²³⁴ For black the bar that constitutes progress is as low as possible. Progress can simply mean that the material conditions in which blacks, at present, find themselves in are not as bad as they could be, or once were. Black progress is often calculated along the axis of achievements and racial comparisons. Changes in the amount blacks lag behind others in various

²³³ Hartman takes up a similar notion from the inverse in her discourse on miscegenation and black blood as a contagion, see Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 328–29.

²³⁴ Calvin L. Warren, "Black Nihilism and the Politics of Hope," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 15, no. 1 (2015): 215–48, <https://doi.org/10.14321/crnewcentrevi.15.1.0215>.

social and economic measures is often the crux of narrating progress for black people.²³⁵ Given the reality of so much black dolor, it can seem futile to focus on anything other than direct head-on solutions to black suffering and oppression. My primary concern with such efforts is the heart of chapter one – they do more to intervene upon the extended narration of White humanitarianism and self-narration while never centering the possibility of blacks indicting the entire project of Western world-making. So, attacks that seek to reform or even revolutionize the political woefully under-estimate the necessity and plasticity of antiblackness, especially when antiblack violence can be taken up by anything, including black people. While my intention is not to disparage such efforts, I remain interested in a blackened theological orientation and its capacity to refocus *how* we intervene upon antiblackness. Tending to this route requires black people of faith to wrestle with how their experience of God can frame their experience of the world.

Meditating on Black Mystical Orientations

The black mystical grounds a conversation of black dignity and worth in an unquestioned exposure to God. Worth, purpose and power, emerge “only in the concreteness of God’s revealed love” which is a coming to oneself in the Creator.²³⁶ Katie Cannon, following the work of Howard Thurman, suggests that oppression instantiates a “spiritual quest for wholeness.”²³⁷ As such, we can read wholeness not as something that is squarely or even predominately a question of political subjectivity, even as it arises from oppression carried out by those with actual

²³⁵ These concerns are regular fodder for national publications. The New York Times published an article a week within the completion of this writing that uses these exact metrics for progress, see Matthew Thompson, “The Elusive Quest for Black Progress,” *The New York Times*, May 26, 2023, sec. Headway, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/05/26/headway/black-americans-racial-progress.html>.

²³⁶ Katie Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics*, Reprint edition (Eugene: Wipf & Stock Pub, 2006), 160.

²³⁷ Cannon, 161.

political standing. If a black mystical orientation does anything, it allows wholeness to register as and from spiritual work. Cannon goes on to suggest that “each person, divinely commissioned and led, unites her continuing quest for wholeness with the spatiotemporal realm of life.”²³⁸

Within this framework of mysticism is both the experience of God and an experience of the World. A mystical orientation, however, privileges the divine encounter *as* the lens by which to interpret the world and determine what possibilities yield wholeness. As Cannon goes on to say that wholeness requires some treatment of evil. Following Thurman, she suggests “the renouncement of evil deeds with a pronouncement of forgiveness for the doors of such deeds.”²³⁹

While I understand the moral appeal to forgiveness as reflective of a high Christian ideal, I think it misses the way antiblackness, as Gordon Lewis suggests, is expressly a form of self-denial. In this way, a necessary response to the evil of antiblackness is to forgive the internal and intramural evil that carries out antiblack intentions in hopes of escaping black realities or black dolor. I would suggest that the evil most need of forgiveness and divine support is black people forgiving themselves and each other. This is not to say that we blacks need not think through what it means to forgive a World and its proper agents, but instead allowing the world’s forgiveness and judgment to rest in the hands of God, while the work black souls must do is to learn to care for and with ourselves and each other. In this way, I am interested in a mystical orientation that circulates love and care within and between black people. I am interested in the hemorrhaging of death dealing forces, of principalities, rulers of darkness, and spiritual wickedness in high places.²⁴⁰ I am interested in a black faith that welcomes divine interruptions and disruptions that yield to healing and the miraculous.

²³⁸ Katie Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics*, Reprint edition (Eugene: Wipf & Stock Pub, 2006), 162.

²³⁹ Cannon, 165.

²⁴⁰ Ephesians 6:12

Holy disruptions – Towards a black mystical orientation

The Enlightenment period, emerging in the seventeenth century did much to challenge state, social, and economic power held by the Christian church. Enlightenment's conception of freedom and liberty largely resisted the church's hegemonic control over social, political, and religious life across protestant and Roman traditions.²⁴¹ The means of response to what was understood church's commitment to superstition was rationality and reason. The revival of skepticism, mostly aimed at the Church, gave rise to an intellectualism interested in other means and modes of advancing human happiness.²⁴² The persistence of religious wars and the Church's totalitarian civil rule left many disaffected with organized religion and its focus on obedience and submission over freedom and liberty.

The irony, to say the least, is that as Europeans were feeling angst from the Church's ruling with an iron fist and preventing the cause of freedom, these same nations were creating and laying the groundwork for the Transatlantic Slave Trade and an off-loading of all the existential concerns about oppression and suppression onto black bodies. The coterminous expansion of Enlightenment politics and the Middle Passage complicates the very understanding black people can have of what constitutes freedom and liberation. This is in part, as we explored earlier, because the proliferation of European freedom and opportunity is not possible with the subjection and exploitation of black flesh. Still, black people then and now, in the aftermath, are trying to make sense of how to respond to a World that governs black flesh with an iron fist. Moreover, how do we look beyond the liberation and freedom narratives given to us because of the ontocide they have intended for the last four centuries?

²⁴¹ John Kent, "The Enlightenment," in *Companion Encyclopedia of Theology*, ed. Peter Byrne, 1st ed. (Routledge, 2002), 251, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203414033>.

²⁴² Kent, 252.

No easy answers exist for such questions. Nevertheless, I don't think that the black mystical provides us with some key skills and practices that are fruitful for our current situation. Specifically, I think there are some aspects of Pentecostal practice, emerging in the early twentieth century, that are instructive for this moment. These practices had little accord from nearly every sector of American religious, social, and political life. In this way Pentecostalism did not emerge as simply a philosophical or political resistance, but from re-centering faith on the possibility of God's inhabitation in earthen vessels. This inhabitation was not simply a recapitulation of God's initial inhalation in Genesis, but instead a means by which to discern and participate with the work of God in the world right now.

Pentecostalism as a Mystical Tradition

Daniel Castelo's work on Pentecostalism articulates a conception of mystical theology and practice that internally many Pentecostals would not name as such. Nevertheless, Castelo finds the category helpful for understanding Pentecostalism. A particular challenge for Pentecostals in relationship to other strains of Western Christianity has been the "ambivalence toward reflection in the theological task."²⁴³ The challenge with this presumption is that reflection has generally meant the kind of intellectual and academic reflection that produces written theological texts and treaties. As such, Pentecostal theology leans into the second order of reflection – where truth is not what Scriptures say, but it is also the experience one has of God. For Pentecostals, failure to experience God amounts to a dead religion. Because of Pentecostalism's reliance on experience and phenomenology it embodies a premodern orientation to theology. That is by its very nature it is less interested in the aims that shape the theological agenda in response to Modern

²⁴³ Castelo Daniel, *Pentecostalism as a Christian Mystical Tradition* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2017), 13.

concerns.²⁴⁴ Nevertheless, Pentecostalism falls victim to modernity as it is born in the world that Modernity and the Transatlantic Slave Trade created. Consequently, in Black Pentecostalism, we have not only a skepticism of modernity, but also a conundrum of how to reconcile the asymmetries that shape different forms of being and non-being along the racial axis. Said differently, how is it possible that even with a reliance on the Spirit and an awareness of the Spirit resting upon all flesh, how can antiblackness persist. Within the theological framework of Pentecostalism these are questions regarding sanctification and true holiness. Given the general resistance Pentecostals have to the world, we can imagine how antiblackness only amplifies the death-dealing nature of the world.

Following Harvey Cox, Castelo suggests, Pentecostalism speaks to the “spiritual emptiness of our time by reaching beyond the levels of creed and ceremony into the core of human religiousness...that largely unprocessed nucleus of the psyche in which the unending struggle for a sense of purpose and significance goes on.”²⁴⁵ So if the world only offers emptiness, then where is one to turn? Within this mystical framework, one turns to God. Union with God yields to God-encounters and the Spirit’s embodiment in the lives of believers. Within this framework we can recognize a general pessimism for the world, not because of its political antiblackness but its spiritual torpor and vapidness. I hold that there is an analogous connection between the World’s violent antiblackness as a political undertaking, as Afropessimists articulate, and the World’s failure to find its spiritual grounding in the God of creation. Failure to find ontology in God is ultimately a rejection and denial of grace. “Knowing God is not a human achievement but a kind of participation in grace.”²⁴⁶

²⁴⁴ Daniel, 77.

²⁴⁵ Daniel, 41.

²⁴⁶ Daniel, 53.

Mystical within the frame of Pentecostal thought does not require a full on living into what can generally be understood as human potential, instead it welcomes a participation with God's grace. Pentecostal mysticism marks "God's power among poor and oppressed, and God's hope for a world suffering the stifling weight of its own self-destruction."²⁴⁷ The world's telos has already been set, the focus of the life of faith, is to live out the presence of God and cultivate a detachment from the world that enables one to live out the message of love and holiness that honors God. Such a radical relationship to the world requires evidence via experience that would make such an undertaking feasible.

The experience of speaking in tongues is one such form of evidence. Without rehearsing the debates around the initial evidence of the Holy Spirit through glossolalia, I do want to note that speaking in tongues recognizes God's ability to show up through what is primary in the human's agency – to govern the utterances that issue forth from the mouth. Even as gibberish, glossolalia testifies to the Spirit's fiery, but non-consumptive presence. The illegible gibberish of the Spirit inhabits the believer as witness of incarnation.

Judith Casselberry, ethnography of a group of black Pentecostal women, demonstrates how these women's black faith contends with antiblackness as born in the asymmetries of black women's health. Throughout her text, *Labor of Faith*, Casselberry shows how black women's spiritual practices function as labor for, in, on behalf of, and in spite of the black church and black community. While Casselberry tries to provide a reasoned ethnographic interpretation of what's taking place, she cannot help but acknowledge the ways the Spirit fills in gaps that are too agrammatical for the academic project. When one of the sisters of the church, whom the church and been fervently praying for a healing, dies, the women of the church rally around the

²⁴⁷ Daniel, 77.

deceased's family. They show up at the house and they clean and organize the house. They take care of the affairs at the funeral home. They manage children. They cook meals. And they sing. Casselberry relays the praise song one of the mothers lifted as the circle of women in various corners of the house cleaned. The song, per Casselberry, registered both a discernment to know that singing was necessary, but also, even in the midst of pain and confusion, a “thank you, Lord” was still appropriate. “During times of loss, the labor is intense and all-consuming, yet... the faithful expend tremendous amounts of spiritual, physical, and mental energy on a regular basis.”²⁴⁸ These expenditures across the terrain of spirit, mind, and body are a testimony of care and fidelity. It was not the case that these women stopped their sister’s death, or that they were able to make sense of it, but it was the case that in the face of it, all the ways that they could and needed to show-up they did. Their aim was not to surrender what Spirit helped them to discern to the agenda of some expedient political cause. They did not turn from the world’s death-dealing ways, but continued to gather, pray, give thanks, and trust in the Lord.

In a similar but different register, Calvin Warren might say it like this:

The important task for black thinking (philosophizing, theorizing, theologizing, poeticizing) is to imagine black existence without Being, humanism, or the human. Such thinking would lead us into an abyss. But we must face this abyss—its terror and majesty. I would suggest that this thinking leads us into the spirit, something exceeding and preceding the metaphysical world.²⁴⁹

While these women did not go so far as to actively proclaim blackness is nothing, what they did do was in the face of black dolor, they lived into their praxeological intent to care. And where their caring did not resolve their questions, they continued to tarry with God and each other in ways that affirmed their theological commitments and experience of God. The task of faith is

²⁴⁸ Judith Casselberry, *The Labor of Faith: Gender and Power in Black Apostolic Pentecostalism* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2017), 170.

²⁴⁹ Warren, *Ontological Terror*, 177.

then to persist, not with the goal of trying to assimilate into the World, or buy into the world's order of antiblackness, but to set one's on something other than the sinking sand of the national project. As Warren states, "there is only endurance... endurance is a spiritual practice with entirely different aims."²⁵⁰

Final thoughts

Until this world is no more, we live out our faith in the spiritual witness of black-on-black care. In a way similar to what Jesus tells his disciples when he promises the Holy Spirit in Acts Chapter 1 when their question persists about a kingdom, about standing as a nation, as a successful people on the earth, Jesus says, 'That is not your business. But you *can* have spiritual power to be my witnesses.' Hope for black people in the world may be less about this world's unfettered extension forward, and instead about looking for and hastening the coming of the Day of the Lord.

Prayer indexes a place where divine possibility exceeds the world's limitations, while still being in the world. It is the place where God's power bypasses the world's violent power. Even as we try and make sense of black death and the failure for black people to be healed of the sins of the world, we still pray because we trust God can and will make a way out of no way.

There are healings and there is death, faith wrestles with the mystery, the mystical. Black apostolic faith indexes as a grammar that does not find its coordinates in worldly ways of knowing but in intuition, intercession, in moans too deep for words. While these practices are often not registered as effective political strategies, they are practices that sustain black faith and embrace black-on-black care as a transformative fidelity.

²⁵⁰ Warren, 172.

(In)Conclusion – Second-Naming

A meditation on symbols starts from the fullness of language and of meaning already there; it begins from within language which has already taken place and in which everything in a certain sense has already been said; it wants to be thought, not presuppositionless, but in and with all its presuppositions. Its first problem is not how to get started, but, from the midst of speech, to recollect itself.

Paul Ricoeur

“What’s in a name?”

Juliet (Act II, Scene II)

Naming and Maiming

Between 1810 and 1837, at least twenty-four ships crossed the Atlantic bearing the name, or a derivative of the name, *Dolores*. *Bella Dolores* successfully completed four trips between 1816 and 1819, carrying nearly 1,500 black bodies from the Western coasts of Africa to the Americas.²⁵¹ Given that Spain and Portugal dominated the slave trade during its early stages, it is not surprising that many of the ships had Spanish names.²⁵² I am unsure how any of the thousands of vessels that made the journey could be construed as beautiful. And while we cannot know the motivations behind why such names for vessels were given, we can investigate how the power to name and the power to ascribe meaning and value through a name, and the symbolic import of naming persist in the afterlife of slavery. Nevertheless, if the trade marked anything, it was the power to name.

²⁵¹ David Eltis and Martin Halbert (eds), “Voyages: Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade - Database,” accessed May 23, 2022, <https://www.slavevoyages.org/voyage/database>.

²⁵² Rachael Pasierowska, “All Aboard the *King George* and *Happy Captive*: European Ship naming Practices in the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, 1750–1755,” *International Journal of Maritime History* 34, no. 1 (February 2022): 184, <https://doi.org/10.1177/08438714221079551>.

Proper names make claims upon things and reveal something about the one who names and the entity to which a name is given. Proper names/nouns denote particularity and distinction. Common nouns that name can denote categories of objects and establish associations between different kinds of objects. Philosophy of language, taken up by analytic philosophers, has long considered how a proper name relates to its referent. For consideration in this chapter, I want to take up Saul Kripke's argument regarding naming, and his refutation of the cluster concept theory.

In his groundbreaking monograph, *Naming and Necessity*, Kripke offers six theses to explicate the cluster theory, which attempts to make meaning of names and statements regarding existence and identity:

The Speaker is A.

- (I) To every name or designating expression 'X,' there corresponds a cluster of properties, namely the family of properties [*] such that A believes '[*]X'.
- (II) One of the properties, or some conjointly, are believed by A to pick out some individual uniquely.
- (III) If most, or a weighted most, of the [*]'s are satisfied by one unique object y, then y is the referent of 'X'.
- (IV) If the vote yields no unique object, 'X' does not refer.
- (V) The statement, 'If X exists, then X has most of the [*]'s' is known *a priori* by the speaker.
- (VI) The statement, 'If X exists, then X has most of the [*]'s' expresses a necessary truth (in the idiolect of the speaker).
- (C) For any successful theory, the account must not be circular. The properties which are used in the vote must not themselves involve the notion of reference in such a way that it is ultimately impossible to eliminate.²⁵³

The first thesis is a definition; Kripke affirms this as true. It is the subsequent theses with which he takes issue. The collection of theses is both indexical, meaning they find meaning within a

²⁵³Saul A. Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*, Revised and enlarged edition. (Oxford, Eng: Basil Blackwell, 1980), 71.

context, and idiolectic, meaning they reflect unique use by the speaker. Kripke sums up theses one to five with this example:

I want to name an object. I think of some way of describing it uniquely and then I go through, so to speak, a sort of mental ceremony: By 'Cicero' I shall mean the man who denounced Catiline; and that's what the reference of 'Cicero' will be. I will use 'Cicero' to designate rigidly the man who (in fact) denounced Catiline, so I can speak of possible worlds in which he did not. But still my intentions are given by first, giving some condition which uniquely determines an object, then using a certain word as a name for the object determined by this condition.²⁵⁴

Of note in Kripke's example is the identification of a specific characteristic to determine a discrete object or entity. The characteristic must then be unique enough to register, at least in the speaker's mind, as specific to the referent. This thesis is undermined by the fact that the characteristics that are unique can also be true of other referents who are not X. In light of those examples, the general acceptance and recognition of the characteristics and the name ascribed to X is circular and renders the second thesis false. While unique characteristics may be collectively agreed upon, they do not have to refer to X singularly. The third thesis, which just concentrates a collection of characteristics into a singular unique one, suffers from the same problem as the second thesis. In the fourth thesis, the cluster theory determines that X does not exist if the previous conditions are not met. That thesis falls apart, simply because the characteristics that are used to distinguish the referent are not conditions of possibility for the referent. Kripke uses the biblical character Jonah to prove his point. While biblical scholars believe Jonah really existed as a person, it is not because they believe that the characteristics outlined in the

²⁵⁴ Kripke, 81.

Bible—him being swallowed by a big fish or ever going to Nineveh to preach—are true. Yet Jonah as a referent still holds.

As a theory of meaning, the cluster theory, at least as Kripke references it and critiques it, “entails that any name is fully equivalent to a description and hence interchangeable with it *salva veritate* [does not change the truth] in all contexts (except where the expressions are not used but only mentioned).”²⁵⁵ Kripke’s critique teases out the need for rigidity in the designation. This rigidity would account for the fact that even if the events ascribed to Jonah are not true, it does not mean that Jonah did not exist, nor that Jonah does not refer to a specific entity. For Kripke, the proper name is the rigid designation, while the characteristics ascribed to and associated with the distinctness of a person function as non-rigid designators. Cluster theory does not have the means to differentiate the ascribed characteristics from what the speaker intends to reference. Naming engages in the practice of reference-fixing by description or exhibition. Speakers transfer the name without the original reference-fixing tagging along. “All proper names are rigid designators. Any descriptions...which can be at all plausibly thought of as fixing their references, given what the users of the names believe and intend... are accidental designators. So, such descriptions are not substitutable *salva veritate* for proper names.”²⁵⁶

Kripke’s insights offer us a way to register Black and Blackness as accidental designators that tell us more about the beliefs and intentions of the originators of the term. As afropessimists have labored to help us understand how blackness functions

²⁵⁵ Harold W. Noonan, *The Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Kripke and Naming and Necessity*, Routledge Philosophy Guidebooks (New York: Routledge, 2013), 58.

²⁵⁶ Noonan, 65–66.

paradigmatically in relation to the Human, they show that it does so by way of collapsing an accidental designator into the truth of a rigid designation. The name of the world's second largest continent, Africa, emerged in the sixteenth century alongside the dreadful trade. Medieval scholar al-Hasan ibn Muhammad al-Azan noted that the Romans called what is present-day Tunisia, Africa. Believing the term to be of Greek-origin, he suggested it meant, "without cold or without horror." As the Portuguese explored the Atlantic Western Coast of the continent, they called the region Guiné, a term borrowed from the Berbers meaning black or burnt skin. By the end of the seventeenth century, the term *Africa* was common amongst the European nations, and the region most populous with slave trading ports was called the Gulf of Guinea.²⁵⁷ In the case of the continent and her people, the proper name was synonymous with a description that those held to be true. In the symbolic order, the scripture was phenotypical, existential, ontological, and metaphysical. That is, the proper name was to be only the accumulation of its intended associations, negations, and degradations. Thus, to name the black girl child after the ship from which she was purchased, and the family name of her purchasers was again an act of rigidifying the accidental. This was the case for Phillis Wheatley whose name for the new world effectively described the new condition into which she was re-born by way of the slave trade.²⁵⁸ Even as her proper name in popular circulation yields a wider set of descriptors, the giving of her name makes rigid the accident of entanglement in the slave trade and its afterlife in the New World.

²⁵⁷ "Africa: What's in a Name? | South African History Online."

²⁵⁸ "Biography: Phillis Wheatley," National Women's History Museum, accessed May 12, 2023, <https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/phillis-wheatley>.

While Kripke draws a distinction between rigid and accidental, he does not account for the ways the speaker's power to attribute can overdetermine the referent's self-narration. When considering blackness and the institution of slavery and its afterlives as the proper name and description of black, the made and perceived facticity of the description feigns rigidity. The bind in which the person made black finds himself is first learning the name given in the New World, then understanding what the descriptor of that name means for one's social location, and third and finally contending with both the description and (forced into being) its referent.

Ronald Judy in *(Dis)Forming the American Canon*, helps us push this problematic forward as he theorizes what happened with Frederick Douglass as he learned to read. Both abolitionists, with their paternalism and slavers with their capitalism, were resistant to slaves learning to read because they insisted that reading was the necessary condition for thought. The description these Europeans had of those they named African could be summarized like this: "the underlying assumption that where there is illiteracy, there is no evidence of thought, which was one of the authoritative arguments for justifying the enslavement of Africans... they had no literacy, therefore could not be shown to have thought, which is an essential peculiar condition of humans, so they cannot be shown to be fully human."²⁵⁹ Here, we can see how Human intones a rigid designation that excludes blacks along the axis of thought as designated by literacy. Judy's theorization of Douglass' narration illuminates the fact that Douglass' thinking and, subsequently, his writing, do not affirm the description affixed to his person, but instead point to a thought, an act of naming even, that is agrammatic. Judy says:

²⁵⁹ Ronald A. T. Judy, *DisForming the American Canon - African-Arab Slave Narratives and the Vernacular* (University of Minnesota Press, 24), 104.

Here is [Douglass'] catachresis...In writing Douglass presents tongue-less thoughts, yet thoughts that are still in evidence only in the syntax of the graphemic text. It is writing that affects these graphemic thoughts; it transcribes them in relation to an "I" which cannot be in possession of them but can only be represented as a synthesizing identity, as apperception.²⁶⁰

Judy's observation of Douglass illuminates what Kripke notes as the problem with descriptivism.

Descriptivism holds the description as synonymous with its referent. From Judy's observations, the descriptors that are synonymous with the proper subject position denoted by I make it impossible for Douglass to ascertain said position as an identity. Here we have shifted the nature of Kripke's argument to the onto-metaphysical and epistemic. Kripke gives room for such consideration by noting the way in which an *a priori* informs the task of affixing descriptors to referents. Judy acknowledges this too with Douglass when he notes that Douglass did not have to be literate to know that his enslavement was amoral. What Douglass knew and what Kripke affirms is that what is meant by blackness is not synonymous with the *who* of those named black. And even if a proper subject position is not possible, it is not on account of those referred to as black being insufficient, but the durability of descriptivism to persist.

The slave trade was an "initial baptism" that affixed a description to black flesh and "by a chain, [passed] the name from link to link." Kripke goes on to say:

"If we imagine a hypothetical baptism of the substance, we must imagine it picked out as by some such 'definition' as '[Black] is the substance instantiated by the items over there, or at any rate, by almost all of them'... the identity in the 'definition' does not express a (completely) necessary truth: though each of these items is, indeed, essentially (necessarily) [black], [black] might have existed even if the items did not. The definition does, however, express an *a priori* truth, in the same sense as it *fixes a reference*... the substance is defined as the kind instantiated by (almost all of) a given sample."²⁶¹

²⁶⁰ Judy, 104.

²⁶¹ Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*, 135-6. Kripke is not talking about the slave trade here or blacks, but his analysis makes the connection tenable. Hist operating term is gold, black is my edition.

Kripke's articulation of baptism describes the work of instantiation and, subsequently, sedimentation through persistent identification. Yet it does not have to yield to permanence. Douglass then attempts to overcome the baptism into a referential, or philosophically speaking, ontological blackness, which is foreclosed from the benefits of humanity even as its articulation idiotically requires the construction of fixed descriptors to give meaning to what blackness is not—namely, ontologically Human. This transaction, even as it traffics in the realm of description and naming, represents what throughout this text I have called black dolor. While black dolor does not reveal what can be described of blackness apart from its function, it does mark the world's violence—its antiblackness—as contingent for its survival, its ability to pass a fixed description from link to link.

Similarly, Frantz Fanon says, “The colonist *fabricated* and *continues to fabricate* the colonized subject. The colonist derives his validity, i.e., his wealth, from the colonial system.”²⁶² Fanon helps us to see that the function of the naming is to give meaning and veracity to the colonists' own identity. The world of Humans is configured by a zero-sum logic where pain is situated alongside blackness and pleasure alongside whiteness. These binaries are not best understood as cultural difference and particularity, but as ontic, defining what is real beyond aesthetics and phenomenology.

Naming Black Religion

Alexander Schmemmann in *For the Life of the World*, teaches us that a preoccupation with baptism is a preoccupation with validity. This preoccupation then undermines fullness, meaning,

²⁶² Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox, Reprint edition (New York: Grove Press, 2005), 2.

and joy. Baptism, per Schmemmann, has lost its meaning and must return to the “*leitourgia* of the Church.”²⁶³ Schmemmann does not call for the cessation of baptism, but for a reconsideration of its present rigidity in service to validation and proper clerical administration. Instead, Schmemmann wants to situate the practice and work of baptism within the long-work of faith, even the fulfillment of a faith claim. Baptism, throughout the Church’s history, finds its anchor in the Paschal mystery, which moves counter-intuitively from death to life. While Kripke’s philosophical adoption of baptism in his causal theory of naming describes processes that explain how naming constructs meaning in the world, Schmemmann’s theological adoption of baptism points to a process that may be for the world but does not find its coherence in the world’s means of logical progression. Baptism in this liturgical orientation begins as apophatically as renunciation. “The actual baptismal service as it is celebrated in the Orthodox Church begins with what was in the apse the final act of the “catechumenate”: the exorcisms, the renunciation of Satan and the confession of faith.”²⁶⁴ Baptism is then first a confrontation with the end. Even the term *catechumenate* heralds the fact that the Early Church gathered in the catacombs, that is the tombs of church martyrs. My aim in exploring Schmemmann is not to glorify suffering and death but to explicate baptism as starting with and from a conception of death. Regarding death specifically, Schmemmann says:

The problem of death is central and essential in [Christianity’s] message, which announces Christ’s victory over death, and that Christianity has its source in that victory. Yet, on the other hand, one has the strange feeling that although this message has certainly been heard, it has had no real impact on the basic human attitudes toward death. It is rather Christianity that has “adjusted” itself to these attitudes and accepted them as its own. It is not difficult to dedicate to God—in a nice Christian sermon—new skyscrapers, and world’s fairs, to join—if not to lead—the great progressive and life-affirming forces of our “atomic age,” to make

²⁶³ Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy*, 2nd Revised & enlarged edition (Crestwood, N.Y: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1973), 82–83.

²⁶⁴ Schmemmann, 83–84.

Christianity appear as the very source of all that is hectic and life-centered activity. And it is equally easy, when preaching at a funeral or a retreat, to present life as a valley of suffering and vanity, and to present death as a liberation...for Christianity, death is not only the end, but the very reality of *this world*... The worldly man wants the minister to be an optimistic fellow, sanctioning faith in an optimistic and progressive world. And the religious man sees [the minister] as an utterly serious, sadly solemn, and dignified denouncer of the world's vanity and futility.²⁶⁵

For Schmemmann, death is neither something to fear nor something to laud. It is not the task of Christianity to reconcile death or make it palatable. Just as womanist Delores Williams reminded us with regard to atonement theology and the glorification of suffering *as* the mode of redemption, Schmemmann reads death as the “enemy to be destroyed, and not a mystery to be explained.” Death’s horror is not in it being an end of sorts, but it being the separation from the world and life, which Schmemmann holds as separation from God. Schmemmann’s interdiction on both contemporary religious and secularist approaches to death calls for faith in a God whose redemptive work is interested in life in this world. Death is the enemy of God because in this world God intends for people to live.

For the Christian, faith recognizes that another power has entered the world and disrupts the status quo, be it religious or secular, that readily accepts or denies death at all turns. Baptism as an act of faith affirms that the work of God in the world is to “face evil, to acknowledge its reality; to know its power, and to proclaim the power of God to destroy it.”²⁶⁶ For Schmemmann, the world is not figured as the summation of political and cultural boundaries and borders: the world is about the means of sustenance that God

²⁶⁵ Alexander Schmemmann, *O Death, Where Is Thy Sting?* (Crestwood, N.Y: St Vladimirs Seminary Pr, 2003), 90–92.

²⁶⁶ Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World*, 86.

provides through creation and the habitability of the land. World, understood his way, is not simply the world of Humans, as a political paradigm, but might be better understood as the earth and site of human inhabitation.²⁶⁷ It is clear that Schmemmann is not thinking particularly about blackness's position in the world of Humans and what that means for death. As the afropessimists have invited us to take the social life of social death seriously, that is, as the paradigmatic position of blackness in an anti-black world, it may very well appear that black thought might readily welcome the end of this world in hopes of a new and improved one. It can also be the case that blackness, given its structural position, might at every turn look for signs of life and hope in spite of this world's death dealing realities. In the realm of the ontopolitical, blackness embodies social death via the position of slave and its afterlives. If we take Schmemmann's considerations to heart, the challenge of black faith is to see the world as a gift and means of communion with God.

Returning to baptism, the problem of blackness is its seizure by the world of Humans, who baptize black flesh in the waters of the Transatlantic Slave Trade and obfuscate God's own intention in the world. The dolor to which blackness attests is the severing of God's sovereignty, via the violence of the political and the civilization of modernity, from the world God created. The god of this world, where blackness is abject, is a white racist. The project of statehood and its subjugation of black flesh is not of the God of creation. The mattering of black flesh, its naming, attests to the ways blackness is "a relation with something whose meaning is constituted out of that relation or set of relations—so much so that the erasure, exclusion, or elimination of something is still a

²⁶⁷ Psalm 24:1 – The earth is the Lords and the fullness thereof, the world, and they that dwell therein.

form of mattering.”²⁶⁸ Blackness baptized into the world of Humans is then also a movement that starts with death and stays there. This is the theodicean challenge that blackness has to face: First, how does one identify the world God created and differentiate it from the world of Humans? In the world of Humans, race as a category is ultimately a discourse on who is “supposed to live and who to die.”²⁶⁹ Furthermore, in the world of Humans civilization is the gift of grace, the god of this world’s act of benevolence. Blackness, within both the framework of race is antithetical to civilization, or as Calvin Warren suggests, it terrorizes ontology.²⁷⁰ Understood like this, Gordon is apt to claim, “blackness is the theodicy of European modernity.” In this configuration, the state functions as god, takes on the proper name of god, and is a white racist.²⁷¹

The question at hand for those affixed to the descriptor black is whether it is possible to dis-baptize, or to disavow one’s baptism in the world? The question is: Can blackness contend with the racist god of this world? And if so, what does that mean for the Christian God in whom Schmemmann calls for faith? The question of liberation in light of blackness is forever haunting because it can neither abandon this world nor fully retreat from it. Is freedom from this world possible in this world? Is there a mode of being for blacks that makes possible a different recognizable conclusion for what blackness was, is, and can be apart from what it has been, is, and will be for the world of Humans?

²⁶⁸ Finley and Gray, “God *Is* a White Racist,” 445.

²⁶⁹ Lewis R. Gordon, “Race, Theodicy, and the Normative Emancipatory Challenges of Blackness,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 112, no. 4 (October 1, 2013): 725, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-2345252>.

²⁷⁰ Warren, *Ontological Terror*.

²⁷¹ Finley and Gray, “God *Is* a White Racist,” 447.

Blood Power Revisited

I am not asking whether blackness can produce a recognizable culture, nor am I suggesting that culture is evidence of some inhabitation outside the antiblack world.

Whatever the church is for black people, it has to be something other than the church in the world of Humans, that is, the Church as an agent of the State. As J. Kameron Carter once put it, black religion is not simply a “cultural reflex.”²⁷² I am wrestling with what black faith does internally for black people and externally in the world. This internal/external consideration and tension shows up across this project.

Internally my mother suffered an appendix rupture. Externally, her emergency surgery left a scar. In hemorrhaging we find a breach marked by the transgress of the internal to the external. Hemorrhaging visibilizes an interiority even it compromises the body’s ability to sustain itself. Whatever a black interior is at the ontometaphysical level, or even at the ontotheological level (as Carter might want us to consider) it has to index something the world does not know, or understand, or assimilate to its logic of social death.

This was the nature of my mystical argument with glossolalia in the previous chapter. It is not that the speaking is inaudible, but that it refuses surrender to the exterior logics of the world even as interiorly it is the evidence and sustenance of faith in a God who inhabits black flesh. Consequently, if anything is theologically true of blackness, it very well may be what the world denies its public (exterior), namely that the divine exceeds in its black inhabitation.

²⁷² Carter, *Race*, 126.

The gospel hymnwriter, Andraé Crouch broaches this internal knowing

Christologically in the hymn, “The Blood Will Never Lose Its Power.” He pens:

The blood that Jesus shed for me
Way back on Calvary
The blood that gives me strength
From day to day
It will never lose its power.

It reaches to the highest mountain
It flows through the lowest valley
The blood that gives me strength
From day to day
It will never lose its power.

It soothes my doubts
It calms my fears
And it dries all my tears
The blood that gives me strength
From day to day
It will never lose its power.

On the surface, this hymn might be reduced and categorized as a substitutionary atonement hymn, and thereby misunderstand the surrogacy of Christ’s suffering for the world. But a closer reading of the hymn’s text might suggest to us less a substitution, as replacement, but more a fidelity. Crouch in these few words suggest that the externalization of Christ’s blood on Calvary as it is taken by those who sing this hymn, becomes life anew *in* them. The power of Christ’s blood is not the power to destroy the political, but to maintain its life force as it is incorporated into those who partake. That many black churches take up this hymn alongside the celebration of the Eucharist extends the subversive recognition of Christ’s blood power as cause to give thanks. Within a black mystical frame, the power of Christ’s blood is strength for today, comfort amidst pain and soothing amidst doubt. Mystical strength, through this reception, not

consumption, of Christ's blood is the seed of black gratitude, even as the *how* remains unthought, a mystery.

We might also consider in Crouch's hymn, how the verb shedding opens up greater nuance for an understanding of a black interiority grounded in a mystical encounter. Etymologically speaking the verb shed in Old English glosses, "Late Latin words in the sense "to discriminate, to decide" that literally mean "to divide, separate" (compare discern)."²⁷³ I suggest that we can hear in Crouch's hymn a theological declaration of Christ's preferential treatment, the discernment of shedding and the discernment of reception. That the blood is not about recompense for one's personal sins, but instead one's ability to handle the realities that happen upon the singer and within the singer reflects a discrimination against salvation as the remediation of moralistic sin. The mystical witness in Crouch's hymn lies in what it calls the singer's attention to as it pertains to Christ's shed blood. The blood reaches, flows, soothes, calms, dries, and never loses its power. Held together, the verbs given to the blood all do what social death in the World prohibits of black people. There is mobility instead of stasis, comfort instead of violence, and power instead of powerlessness. Moreover, the Lordship of Christ is not figured as domination and not even sacrifice, as the song is not explicit about Christ's death as the heft of the blood's work. Instead, Christ is the giver whose blood becomes a source of life within those who make this faith claim. As such, to receive this orientation to power is to order one's life by a different telos and establish an interiority grounded in Christ' power to reach in and beyond black dolor, we can turn our attention to the external aspect of a black mystical and transformative fidelity.

²⁷³ "Shed | Search Online Etymology Dictionary," accessed June 1, 2023, <https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=shed>.

Power in the Name

Names index individuation and collectiveness. This project tarries with names, words, worlds, and body systems as they make declarations, assertions, expectations, and assumptions. Perhaps it was from standing in the grocery checkout line and seeing one of those baby name books. Of course, I started my search by looking up what my own name means and then making my way through my family. The meaning of my name—Nicholas, or “king victorious”—is entrenched in European history. My older brother Rodney’s name is “a toponymic surname derived from the name of an unidentified place near the Somerset/Wiltshire border”—two counties in the south of England—according to Wikipedia.²⁷⁴ My father’s name, Keith, is likewise toponymic and likely of Scottish origin, referencing the Celtic word meaning “wood or forest.” My father and brother share the middle name, Edward, of Old English origin, combining the words for prosperity and riches with the word for guard. When my parents named us, my dad said he wanted us to have names so that people could not tell from our resumé’s that we were black and dismiss us outright. The paradox of our names was to disavow blackness because of my dad’s intimate knowledge of the World’s antiblackness. His pragmatism held a pessimism for the world’s ability to receive his black sons with honor. By giving us names that would allow us to pass for white on paper, my father only delayed the point at which our black male bodies and tightly curled hair would betray us in person. Ryan and Rodney are names *for* the world, avatars we can deploy on paper to forestall judgment, briefly. While my father’s hope was for our names to ensure that our resumé’s were not dead on arrival, he knew it would not undo the fact of our

²⁷⁴ Percy H. Reaney and R. M. Wilson, *A Dictionary of English Surnames*, 3rd ed. with corrections and additions (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 381, <http://catdir.loc.gov/catdir/enhancements/fy0725/95001633-b.html>.

blackness. He knew that white names would not save us, even if they attempted some level of intervention against our black flesh.

Poet and children's author Traci Dant exemplifies transformative fidelity in her poem, "A Twice Named Family." I share it in its entirety below.

I come
from a family
that twice names

its own.
One name
for the world.

One name
for home.
Lydi, Joely, Door,

Bud, Bobby, Bea,
Puddin, Cluster, Lindy,
Money, Duddy, Vess.

Yes,
we are
a two-named family

cause somebody
way back knew
you needed a name

to cook chitlins in.
A name
to put your feet up in.

A name
that couldn't be
fired.

A name
that couldn't be
denied a loan.

A name
that couldn't be

asked

to go
through anyone's
back door.

Somebody way back
knew we needed names
to be loved in.²⁷⁵

It may very well be the case that love does not destroy hate. If love does anything, though, it creates seasons, however brief or however long, of sanctuary. In a world in which black social life is always ensconced in black social death, intramural fidelity provides the conditions of possibility for us to twice-name our un(own)ed. It is a mystical kinship borne by Spirit and through dolor. Names to be loved in are those traces that redact and annotate the appendix's vermiform nature. Names that hemorrhage foreclosures and clot unending middle passages. Dolor is with us, and black is her issue.

In the introduction I talked about the names given in my family, and how this project was inspired by my mother's name and experiences that took place in her body. My mother is also twice-named. Her name in the world is Dolores, but somewhere, way back, whether it was a brother, a sister, a parent, or neighbor, folks started calling my mother Lois. In black vernacular talk, especially in a St. Louis accent, Delores can sound a lot like d'-LO' is, where the R is silent and short *e* takes on a short *i* sound. At some point the D falls away completely and all that remains is Lois. Interestingly enough, the name Lois enters English through Greek. The name means one who is honored or cherished. Those who know my mother, those whose lives cross paths with her and her inner life, know her as Delores, and by that name she is loved and

²⁷⁵ Traci Dant, "A Twice Named Family," in *The Ringing Ear: Black Poets Lean South*, ed. Nikky Finney (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007), 241–42.

cherished. This love and honor do not nullify anti-blackness, but as a mystical grammar—one modeled even in the early church when Joseph the Levite got a name change to Barnabas, the son of encouragement, in Acts 4.

Transformative Fidelity Against Distortion

Much of what I have tried to do in thinking about black-on-black care and black faith has resisted cultural claims made in Africanity in service to the “mystical and homogenizing.”²⁷⁶ Historians and theologians have well-documented black retentions and adaptations of African-derived aesthetics, expressive arts, and culture. Instead, I’ve tried to embrace a spiritual heritage that welcomes the care of black people by black people as evidence of and witness to God’s work in an antiblack world. Pastoral Theologian, Bishop Emanuel Larrey captures this well when offering a literal translation of an Akan axiom often translated as “many hands make light work.” Larrey says the literal translation is more like, “When all people carry God, no one person becomes hunched back.”²⁷⁷ With this, Larrey aims to note how the aim of the theological task is not to distort. The reality of black dolor, when left unchecked by a black faith yielding black-on-black care, is that it leaves the world’s distortion of black bodies and lived experiences unquestioned and unchallenged. If this meditation does anything, I hope it shows care by naming the distortions that plague us and offering care as a way to tarry with God for another way to be alive.

²⁷⁶ Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 126.

²⁷⁷ Emmanuel Yartekwei Larrey, *Postcolonializing God: An African Practical Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2013), 124.

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