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CONSIDER THE LILIES:

Consulting the Beauty and Comprehending the Grotesque in Our Mothers' Gardens
– A Theological Aesthetics for Black Experience –

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Abstract

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Beauty, ugliness, and the aesthetic are deeply formative realities in African American experience, yet have been little analyzed as such theologically. In this thesis, I undertake this work, approaching aesthetics as a double-edged sword that has been used to substantiate and subvert the historical construction of blackness as a liability of being. Taking my cue from Alice Walker's womanist writings, I argue that theological aesthetics is a vital interlocutor for black theology, and find in the grotesque the conceptual scaffolding to construct a theological aesthetics that accounts for both the beauty and ugliness in black experience.

In chapter one, I consider the epistemological weight of aesthetic encounters and explore beauty and ugliness as twinned arms of revelation. In chapter two, I focus on ugliness. Examining literal and figurative instantiations of ugliness in black experience, I show how the beauty of the Cross and the genre of the grotesque enable this theological aesthetics to yield a theodicy of the nothingness of evil. In chapter three, I investigate the relation between justice and beauty. Using personal narratives of beauty from the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements, I demonstrate how this theological aesthetics entails an eschatological ethics of hope.

My approach employing literary, historical, and phenomenological analysis for constructive theological ends probes the boundary between aesthetic experience and theology. The distinctive encounter with the aesthetic in African American experience highlights the confrontation of ugliness and the irruption of beauty as phenomena for theological work. This thesis is as much a constructive theological aesthetics as it is a meditation upon aesthetics in and through theology.

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For the Quilters

“Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith?”

Matthew 6:28-30, NRSV

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–S. D. G.

CONTENTS

Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1: God Don't Like Ugly.....	13
Chapter 2: Good Hair.....	25
Chapter 3: Making A Way Out of No Way.....	62
Conclusion.....	89
Bibliography.....	94

Introduction

“As purple to lavender.”¹ Alice Walker’s 1983 definition of “womanist” stands as a thematic frontispiece to her nonfiction collection *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose*. It includes this analogy of color as its fourth and final entry: “Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender.”² *Purple*. Depth. Tonality. Richness. A shade more deeply encompassing of a variety of hues.

Purple. Grasping this color as portending more than winsome womanist bunting, I claim that the color-*full* content of Walker’s definition functions substantively, serving not as literary ornamentation nor as mere symbolic shade and rallying cry, but as the *stuff* and *shape* of knowledge itself. In this fourth entry defining “womanist,” I do not merely *see* purple; I *read* it. Walker centers the aesthetic as both the means and content of knowledge, the way we come to know and what we come to know. A wide-ranging realm of life broadly including art, beauty, sensation, embodiment, and imagination, the aesthetic enlivens knowledge with singular intensity. Rather than the didactic tone of etymological diagnosis that usually desiccates and dissects in definitions, poetry guides comprehension and brings it to life in “womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender.” Meaning unfolds *through* analogical comparison and *in* a tonal differentiation of hue, a saturation of depth. Through this fourth and final entry that pivots on *purple*, Walker directs our attention to the aesthetic as a way of knowing.

¹ Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1983), xii.

² *Ibid.*

In this paper, I argue that theological aesthetics is a vital and fruitful interlocutor for African American experience, womanist theology, and the wider body of black liberation theology. While African American theological scholarship has long claimed aesthetic resources to build accounts of black experience and tradition, and has long recognized the aesthetic meanings of race and racial oppression, there has yet to be sustained engagement of the discourse of theological aesthetics.³ Womanist and black liberation theologies have drawn extensively on aesthetic materials as sources and hermeneutical tools, engaging Negro spirituals, blues tradition, literature, folklore, and established practices of homiletic and rhetoric as deep wellsprings of tradition for black religiosity.⁴ Embodiment and other related themes that engage the aesthetics of race have also been privileged and used to deconstruct and construct doctrines and theological frameworks.⁵ However, the theological import of this aesthetic epistemological scaffolding has not been widely explored in a way that turns to theological aesthetics as

³ Several womanist and black liberationist scholars have incorporated theological aesthetics in their writings: M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010); M. Shawn Copeland, "The Critical Aesthetics of Race" in *She Who Imagines: Feminist Theological Aesthetics*, ed. Laurie Cassidy and Maureen H. O'Connell (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2012), 73-85; Cheryl A. Kirk-Duggan, "Quilting Relations with Creation: Overcoming, Going Through, and Not Being Stuck," in *Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society*, ed. Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2006), 176-190; Anthony B. Pinn, "A Beautiful *Be-ing*: Religious Humanism and the Aesthetics of a New Salvation," in *Black Religion and Aesthetics: Religious Thoughts and Life in Africa and the African Diaspora*, ed. Anthony B. Pinn (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 19-35. Anthony Pinn engages theological aesthetics directly, making a marked contribution with this volume and his essay; however, following his focus on black humanist theology, and not black Christian theology, his engagement elides the specifically Christian tradition of theological aesthetics.

⁴ See Kelly Brown Douglas, *Black Bodies and the Black Church: A Blues Slant* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); James H. Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991).

⁵ See Anthony Pinn, *Embodiment and the New Shape of Black Theological Thought* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2010); M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010); Eboni Marshall Turman, *Towards a Womanist Ethic of Incarnation: Black Bodies, the Black Church, and the Council of Chalcedon* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

an important conversation partner. The possibilities contained within a theological aesthetics for black experience have been neither imagined nor substantively assessed. In other words, the profundity of *purple*, theologically apprehended, has not been mined.

This thesis can be seen as an incipient effort to this end. Approaching the aesthetic as a salient aspect of African American experience that holds theological meaning, I claim theological aesthetics as a powerful discursive mode for black theology. Returning to Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*, I find that theologically reading the essays in this collection provides a guide for womanist and black liberation engagement with theological aesthetics. Walker depicts the import of artistry and creativity in black experience, and pinpoints the formative and deforming role of beauty and ugliness in construing black humanity. My reading of Walker excavates her emphasis on creativity, beauty, and ugliness, and appropriates these as foci for black theology. In so doing, I begin to build a theological aesthetics that is located within established tradition. By connecting Walker's insights with larger themes in black experience, and linking these to doctrine, I identify the contours of a theological aesthetics for womanist and black liberation theology.

Structure

In Chapter One, I offer a grounding and setting for the entire paper. By demonstrating how both beauty and ugliness can be accounted for within theological aesthetics, I show how theological aesthetics provides a discourse that is complex and comprehensive enough to engage what I see as the double-edged sword of aesthetics in black experience. I locate the dual presence of beauty and ugliness in black experience as a base from which to identify three themes for a theological aesthetics of black

experience, which are explored throughout the rest of the paper: the beauty of the Cross, beauty as eschatological, and beauty as also, finally, justice.

Chapter Two considers ugliness in African American experience and connects it to the beauty of the Cross. As established in Chapter One, the interpretive grasp of theological aesthetics does not have mere beauty as a horizon, but reaches out to envelop and encompass ugliness as well, analytically, powerfully—and *crucially*, in the full and root sense (*-crux*) of the word. In theological aesthetics, as is arguably the case in the whole of Christian narrative, the Cross is central as a locus of meaning and basis for truth. Hans Urs von Balthasar’s claim that “the transcendent ‘beauty’ and ‘light’ of God...must embrace also ‘the abysmal darkness into which the Crucified plunges’” captures the Christocentric structure in my thesis.⁶ There is a Christological filtering at work in the theological aesthetics I am building for black experience. While affirming that beauty is found in God and throughout Creation outside the event of the Crucifixion, I contend that this beauty is not separate from the Crucifixion but is rather understood in its light. Christ is the One in Whom all things hold together.⁷ The beauty of the Cross is thereby encompassing and definitive: the Cross categorically demonstrates God’s economy and Being, and the beauty therein. As others have done before me, I connect the Crucifixion with pain, evil, and suffering—experiences devoid of meaning—in black experience, considering the phenomenological opacity of blackness, lynching, and

⁶ Richard Viladesau, “The Beauty of the Cross,” in *Theological Aesthetics after von Balthasar*, ed. Oleg Bychkov and James Fodor (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008), 137.

⁷ “He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.” Colossians 1:17.

double-consciousness.⁸ However, I consider these experiences in light of theological aesthetics, where meaning, inflected by the lens of divine beauty, bends the vision to perceive the paradox of beauty that is the grotesque. Within a theological aesthetics where the grotesque is crucial—that is, cruciform—the ugliness and horror in black experience takes on a different weight and bearing. It *is* nothingness.⁹ By connecting the beauty of the Cross to the grotesque in black experience, I show how beauty as eschatology and beauty as justice ensue from an aesthetic reading of the Cross.

These ethical and eschatological findings are developed more fully in Chapter Three. In this chapter, I make and develop two related claims: that the nature of beauty is eschatological, and that beauty is also, finally, justice. I interpret and explain these claims in African American experience using personal and communal historical narratives from the Civil Rights and Black Power eras. I show how the Civil Rights Movement and the cultural transformation of ‘self and beauty’ black people underwent in the twentieth century demonstrate a theological understanding of beauty as eschatological and deftly interwoven, closely allied with, the ethical. I approach an established debate in black theology about the place and utility of eschatology, heaven, and related soteriological themes. Though some scholars question the appropriateness of the idea of heaven and a final, salvific climax of history as the eschaton in black theology, I here urge it, finding it

⁸ James Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011); M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010); and JoAnne Marie Terrell, “Our Mothers’ Gardens: Rethinking Sacrifice,” in *Cross Examinations: Readings on the Meaning of the Cross Today*, edited by Marit Trelstad (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 33-49 are examples of the many works that theologically wrestle with pain, evil, and suffering in black experience by connecting them to the Cross.

⁹ The “nothingness” of evil is a theologically technical concept that I engage later in this thesis, using Karl Barth’s explication of this concept as a foundation. See Karl Barth, “III. Nothingness,” in *Church Dogmatics*, ed. Helmut Gollwitzer (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 134-147.

vital and necessary to a full-bodied theology that embraces, with unabridged aim, the goodness of God.¹⁰ Drawing out the eschatological rooting of beauty and linking it to justice is in line with that view of ultimate justice captured within the Civil Rights Movement, asserted by prophetic speech, and proclaimed by Jesus.

Each chapter is titled with a phrase from African American daily life, a piece of vernacular folk wisdom that I see as theologically meaningful. Along with “making a way out of no way,” a phrase that has attained a near canonical status for womanist and black theological scholarship, I engage “God don’t like ugly” and “good hair.” Part of my aim in this paper is to posit theological aesthetics as discourse that clarifies and expounds, in theological terms, the beauty and insight of truths already known and firmly held within black experience. I thus also find that black experience expands theology. The engagement of theological aesthetics and black experience is a two-way exchange of mutual benefit: doctrine theologically deepens black experience, as black experience theologically deepens doctrine. In this engagement, I protect and assert these vernacular phrases in African American experience as loci of truth. There is deep knowing in “God don’t like ugly,” “good hair,” and “making a way out of no way.” The integrity of language is important, for language is not just conduit, but is maker, of knowledge.

¹⁰ See Delores Williams, “Black Women’s Surrogacy Experience and the Christian Notion of Redemption,” in *Cross Examinations: Readings on the Meaning of the Cross Today*, edited by Marit Trelstad (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 19-32; and Anthony Pinn, “A Beautiful *Be-ing*,” in *Black Religion and Aesthetics: Religious Thought and Life in Africa and the African Diaspora*, edited by Anthony B. Pinn (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009). Pinn summarizes that black and womanist theologies reject eschatological situatings of justice, stating: “Clearly neither theological camp is interested in talking about heaven or the Kingdom of God as anything more than a metaphor for a transformed and historically situated reality...An argument is made against otherworldly orientations...In the words of the spiritual, ‘You can have all this world, just give me Jesus.’ To this sentiment, Black and Womanist theologies say ‘no—hell, no!’” Pinn, “A Beautiful *Be-ing*,” 22.

Methodology

Two methodological notes inform my argument. The first concerns my expansive understanding of the aesthetic that transgresses traditional treatments of theological aesthetics as “religion and the arts.” With Edward Farley, I locate the aesthetic within the “sights, colours, occurrences and sounds of everyday life... [from] the smell of the Kentucky river at dawn [to] the sweet sadness evoked by certain strains of music.”¹¹ It is in the moments and manifestations of beauty, ugliness, sensation, and evocative meaning that the aesthetic resides and can interpretively be taken up for theological analysis.¹² In this paper, I therefore identify such moments and manifestations broadly, in historiographic account and political movement in addition to the more traditional sites of literature and art. Affirming that aesthetic manifestation can “be the object of theological reflection, a source for understanding culture and faith, and it [can] be a sacramental means through which the depths of the religious life [are] experienced,” I analytically engage aesthetic phenomena as source and as sacramental means.¹³ I particularly claim the categories of beauty and ugliness as sacramental means “through which the depths of [black] religious life” have been experienced, and use phenomenological analysis to ground a theological reading of the aesthetic as source *and* channel to the Divine.

¹¹ Edward Farley, *Faith and Beauty: A Theological Aesthetic* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2001), vii.

¹² Significantly, the identification of beauty, ugliness, sensation, and evocative meaning comes through interpretation. Thus, as will be apparent in this thesis, I do not claim that certain events, texts, and figures have inherent aesthetic meaning; rather, I claim that we can read them as such.

¹³ Wilson Yates, “Homage to JLA: A Theologian and His Love of the Arts,” in *The Grotesque in Art & Literature: Theological Reflections*, eds. James Luther Adams and Wilson Yates (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), xxi.

My second methodological note concerns beginnings. Each chapter begins with a writing from Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* and uses it as an entrée to theological themes. Following Catherine Keller, I assert Edward Said's differentiation of "beginning" from "origin" to clarify the meaning of my beginning with Alice Walker: "Whereas an origin centrally dominates what derives from it, the beginning... encourages nonlinear development."¹⁴ "Beginning" indicates a starting point that is not determinative, but rather initiatory, a starting point from which difference—unexpected and unprecedented newness—can follow ("Like writing," Keller thoughtfully adds).¹⁵ It is in this sense that I assert Alice Walker's writings and womanist vision as a starting point in this paper. Aware of other starting points for womanism, I do not claim that Walker's womanist vision provides the only frame for womanist imaginings, but rather assert its priority based on its standing as tradition and its particular fruitfulness for my endeavor.¹⁶ Though recognized as an appropriation of Walker's work, womanist theology is marked by decades of a sustained intellectual debate concerning the primacy of place Walker deserves in it.¹⁷ Joining my voice to the chorus in support of her prominent inclusion,¹⁸ I assert Walker's continuing relevance from the perspective of theological aesthetics.

¹⁴ Catherine Keller, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2003), 158.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Layli Phillips, "Introduction—Womanism: On Its Own," in *The Womanist Reader* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006), xix-l.

¹⁷ Cheryl J. Sanders et al., "Christian Ethics and Theology in Womanist Perspective," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 9, no. 2 (Fall 1989): 83-112.

¹⁸ Melanie Harris, *Gifts of Virtue, Alice Walker, and Womanist Ethics* (New York, New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010). Several essays in the anthology *Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society* explicitly draw on Walker's genealogical primacy in delineating the meaning of "womanist" and differentiating womanism from black feminism: Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas, "Introduction—Writing for Our

There are other benefits to Walker's presence as a principal source for this field. As a self-avowed non-Christian, Walker presents an opportunity to embrace religious pluralism, an issue of particular concern for womanist theology and the study of black religion.¹⁹ Though some rebut that Walker's identity as a non-Christian should bar her significant engagement in theology, to protect her integrity and to keep Christian theological scholarship appropriately Christian and theological, I claim that we can engage Walker without doing violence to her spiritual biography or to ours. Walker unfolds certain truths in black experience that are theologically meaningful, not in terms of reading her as a theologian, but rather in terms of what these truths yield once read interpretively through a theological lens. This affirmation of religious pluralism

Lives: Womanism as an Epistemological Revolution," *Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society* (New York, New York: New York University Press, 2006), 1-16; Carol B. Duncan, "From 'Force-Ripe' to 'Womanish/ist': Black Girlhood and African Diasporan Feminist Consciousness," *Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society*, ed. Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas (New York, New York: New York University Press, 2006), 29-37; Karen Baker-Fletcher, "A Womanist Journey," *Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society*, ed. Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas (New York, New York: New York University Press, 2006), 158-175; Cheryl A. Kirk-Duggan, "Quilting Relations with Creation: Overcoming, Going Through, and Not Being Stuck," *Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society*, ed. Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas (New York, New York: New York University Press, 2006), 176-190; Traci West, "Is a Womanist a Black Feminist?," *Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanist Approaches to Religion and Society*, ed. Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas (New York, New York: New York University Press, 2006), 291-295. See also Patricia Hill Collins, "What's in a Name? Womanist, Black Feminism, and Beyond," *Black Scholar* 26, no. 1 (Winter/Spring 1996): 15.

¹⁹ Melanie Harris, "Womanist Humanism: A New Hermeneutic" in *Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society*, ed. Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas (New York, New York: New York University Press, 2006), 211-225; Monica Coleman, "Must I Be Womanist?," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 22, no. 1 (2006): 85-96. Debra Mubashshir Majeed, "Womanism Encounters Islam: A Muslim Scholar Considers the Efficacy of a Method Rooted in the Academy and the Church" in *Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society*, ed. Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas (New York, New York: New York University Press, 2006), 38-53. The theological over-determination of the study of black religion, and the lack of recognition of religious diversity beyond Christianity, are issues scholars have recently engaged and issues I aim to hold in view while pursuing black theology. There is a need to recognize black religious experience as not primordially Christian, for such views occlude and flatten portraits of black personhood, understandings of black identity, and accurate grasps of the historical record. As demonstrated by Curtis J. Evans, Dianne M. Stewart, Tracey E. Hucks, the failure to make such recognition implicates black religious studies (theological, historical, and other) as complicit in imperial structures and epistemologies of worth and being. See Curtis J. Evans, *The Burden of Black Religion* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2008) and Dianne M. Stewart and Tracey E. Hucks, "Africana Religious Studies: Towards a Transdisciplinary Agenda in an Emerging Field," *Journal of Africana Religions*, vol. 1, no. 1 2013 (Pennsylvania State University, PA).

demonstrates a model for the larger principle of inclusivity that womanist theology champions.

I take up this principle of inclusivity in extending my investigation to approach black experience, unqualified by gender, and the larger body of black liberation theology. The import of Walker's writings in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* often extend beyond gender in a way I find instructive for black liberation theology more broadly. My analysis follows accordingly, beginning with Walker's womanist writing and expanding to black experience, reflecting fractal-like within each chapter the argument of the paper as a whole that, identifying the aesthetic in womanist theological tradition, claims its import for black liberation theology. In beginning with Walker womanism and then broadening my purview to the larger body of black liberation theology, I seek to demonstrate the theoretical model that womanist theology articulates in which the priority of black women engenders, rather than prohibits, an unfolding inclusivity.

Acknowledgement

I include in this paper accounts of horror and desecration done to black people. I pause to acknowledge the gross negative potential in reprinting these accounts. Such reprinting threatens a mimetic harm that must be named, especially in light of my aesthetic focus. The reproduction of image, through visual and narrative means, is an operative key in ugliness. It is only in effort to emphasize the injustice of this ugliness, and not in service to voyeurism, that I include the accounts herein.

I also pause to acknowledge the paucity of words in struggling with the reality of these accounts. Language fails in apprehending and comprehending the fullness of terror, horror, sorrow, and pain. The incommunicability of pain is ultimately tackled only by God and God's Word, and not by any human speech. It is in light of this truth that I commence.

Consequence

The divergent usage of cartographic language by theologians Serene Jones and Anthony Pinn forms a matrix for this thesis and its intended consequence.²⁰ Like Jones, I endeavor to theologically articulate experience with doctrine, using doctrinal categories to chart a theological aesthetics for black experience. Like Pinn, I recognize that the cartography for black religiosity extends far beyond a primordial experience of Christianity, and so use phenomenological analysis of aesthetic experience as a basis from which theological interpretation can follow. In this paper, I seek to chart a cartography that presents a broad landscape of black religiosity, one that shows the variety of vistas traversed by the aesthetic in black experience, and yet one whose terrain remains lit by doctrine, and by the Divine. In asserting the importance of the aesthetic for black liberation theologies, I connect it to both the "black" and "liberation" halves of these theological frameworks. I claim the aesthetic as crucial to both black experience and liberative vision.

²⁰ See Serene Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology: Cartographies of Grace* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000) and Anthony Pinn, "Introduction," in *Black Religion and Aesthetics: Religious Thought and Life in Africa and the African Diaspora*, edited by Anthony B. Pinn (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 1-15.

While all these and more are various intended consequences, goals, and designs of this paper, ultimately, my aim is this: I desire to unfold the beauty of God in black experience, and yield a deeper appreciation for the color purple.²¹

²¹ “I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don’t notice it.” Shug Avery’s statement provides the title for *The Color Purple*. Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (New York, NY: Washington Square Press, 1982), 178.

Chapter 1

God Don't Like Ugly

“What did it mean for a black woman to be an artist in our grandmothers’ time? In our great-grandmothers’ day?”²² The driving question in Alice Walker’s essay “In Search of Our Mothers’ Garden,” this bone-chilling query seizes upon the twinned reality of beauty and ugliness in black experience. In the anthology *Beautiful Ugly: African and Diaspora Aesthetics*, Sarah Nuttall recognizes this reality and centers it as an object of focus. She and other contributors use the ideas “that, firstly, beauty is to be found at the limits of the ugly...and secondly, that beauty always stands in intimate relation to ugliness, both in Africa and elsewhere” to establish a paradigm for an aesthetic investigation of black experience.²³ This paradigm, I find, is reflected in the portrait Walker paints in “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens.” As Walker shows, beauty in black experience has existed in the midst of deep ugliness, and persisted in spite of and subversively through it.

In this chapter, I use Walker’s essay to explore how the manifestation of beauty and ugliness is theologically viable and revelatory. This exploration is significant not just for this single essay, but also for black experience and womanist and black liberation theology at large. As the title essay to Walker’s eponymous collection, “In Search of Our

²² Walker, “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens,” in *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1983), 233.

²³Sarah Nuttall, ed., *Beautiful Ugly: African and Diaspora Aesthetics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

Mothers' Gardens" heralds beauty and ugliness as key themes in Walker's womanist ethos. Theologically interpreting it therefore offers a grounding for a womanist theological engagement of aesthetics that uses Walker womanism as a basis. By showing how theological aesthetics provides a vantage point and perspective comprehensive enough to engage beauty and ugliness in black experience, I establish a foundation for the inquiry undertaken in this paper as a whole.

I begin by examining beauty as it appears in Walker's essay, and then turn to ugliness. I show how Walker's framing can be theologically read in such a way that finds both beauty and ugliness as sites of revelation. It is from this theological analysis of the beauty and ugliness in Walker's essay that I identify the themes that will be engaged in Chapters Two and Three.

Beauty as Revelation

The woman for whom "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens" is named is the primary example in it. Alice Walker's mother represents the majority of black women who, "more often than not [,] anonymously handed on the creative spark" in unseen, unrecorded, and unremembered ways.²⁴ Walker's focus in this essay is not just beauty and artistry generally in black women's experience, but its survival—how black women passed down a heritage of beauty and creativity, and today can claim it as legacy. She demonstrates the persistence and power of the aesthetic heritage of black women, and answers her driving question about the artistry and beauty of black foremothers enduring oppression. In Walker's depiction of her mother, we see the full meaning of beauty and

²⁴Walker, "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," 240.

artistry in the lives of black women, and begin to identify resources for a theological aesthetics:

“The artist that was and is my mother showed itself to me only after many years. This is what I finally noticed: . . . I notice that it is only when my mother is working in her flowers that she is radiant, almost to the point of being invisible—except as Creator: hand and eye. She is involved in work her soul must have. Ordering the universe in the image of her personal conception of Beauty.”²⁵

In theologically apprehending Walker’s portrayal of her mother, we find revelation of theophanic proportions, recalling the Creation narrative in Genesis. Reverberations of Divinity echo in this depiction of Creation, one in which Beauty is the productive ethic. In the light cast by this Creator “She,” worlds are made, brought into being not by declarative fiat but by Beauty and a desirous soul. The aesthetic shines bright as it is Beauty that sets the coordinates of the calculus establishing the Tempo (Time itself) for the rhythm of Being. Beauty and creativity do not merely claim human dignity, but manifest as an imaging of the Divine. In her Beauty of Creativity, Walker’s mother images the Divine Creator.

Significantly, this imaging does not only affect Walker’s mother but also engages Walker herself. Walker recalls that her “memories of poverty are seen through a screen of blooms,” indelibly affected by her mother’s garden.²⁶ Her experience of lack was offset by her mother’s ministrations of beauty. Praising “the woman who literally covered the holes in our walls with sunflowers,” Walker draws attention to the reach of beauty as

²⁵Ibid., 240-241.

²⁶ Ibid., 241.

expansive, extending beyond the one who employs it (or creates it, or in whom it manifests) to engage others.²⁷

The relational power of beauty is a theme contained in early Christian writings on the beauty of God. Basil the Great and other patristic writers used the trope of Moses' luminous countenance following his descent from Mount Sinai to assert beauty as a way to, and a sign of, encountering God.²⁸ Basil writes that, like Moses, who was "made resplendent in face by receiving some share of beauty when he held converse with God," we too, by "gaz[ing] steadfastly at the splendor and grace of [beauty], [can] receiv[e] some share from it, as if from an immersion, tingeing [our] own face[s] with a sort of brilliant radiance."²⁹ Beauty is of God, and imparts something to us, something of "the divine and blessed nature," when we perceive it.³⁰

This impartation of beauty connotes justification, and while that theological concept would be developed in a later era and a different context, a similar sense of justice, of being put to right through the grace of God, lies within patristic conceptions of beauty. Commensurate with Elaine Scarry's phenomenological investigation of beauty, patristic conceptions frame beauty as a *happening*, a dynamic reality that manifests rather than an inherent, static characteristic.³¹ Basil's remarks come after explaining that only

²⁷ Ibid., 242.

²⁸ Exodus 34:29-35. See Basil, from *On Psalm 29 (Homily 14)* in Gesa Elsbeth Thiessen, *Theological Aesthetics: A Reader* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2005), 23-24. Citation in Thiessen: *The Fathers of the Church, Saint Basil, Exegetic Homilies*, trans. Agnes Clare Way, CDP, Washington, The Catholic University of America Press, 1963.

²⁹ Basil, from *On Psalm 29 (Homily 14)*, 23.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).

the person who has “purified his mind” can perceive and contemplate beauty.³² The impartation of beauty, a “sharing in” the beauty of God, follows from its contemplation and results in a brilliant radiance that shines forth from the person. Beauty is understood as a relational, two-way mediating structure that communicates revelation leading the person to God and affecting the person by God. Notably, this encounter with beauty follows from the cultivation of virtue. It is the culmination of the ethical way itself, the final justice that the individual receives from God and radiates out into the world. Beauty, connected with the Divine, is caught up in the final justice encountered intimately in God.

Significantly, these notions of beauty as dynamic and beauty as justice are live and active within Walker’s portrayal of her mother. As Walker writes, the encounter of the beauty of her mother is something she “finally noticed,” as if by epiphany. Beauty manifests as revelation that *occurs* and *happens* and *engages*, rather than as static characteristic that is simply observed. Memories of poverty seen through a screen of blooms is not sentimental but is nearly salvific, as the presence of flowers does not merely alleviate but fundamentally changes the meaning of the scene. Such is the justice of beauty: it is one that goes deep, changing the very meaning of things as it rights the wrong that threatens to overwhelm the whole of a scene, a system, a situation, or a person. The understanding of justice as related to beauty that I invoke and employ throughout this paper is one of ultimacy, in which fundamental meaning, significance, and being abide.

³² Basil, excerpt from *On Psalm 29 (Homily 14)*, 23.

The shine on Moses' face, the almost blinding radiance of Walker's mother as Creator, the beauty of her garden that so suffuses Walker's memories as to capture poverty within its grasp—these together portray a beauty that is of the Divine, with ethical and eschatologically triumphal import. The three themes explored in Chapters Two and Three are latent here, implicit in this understanding of beauty. The idea that beauty is not merely a characteristic of God but is of the very nature of God—God is not just beautiful, but is the Beautiful itself—implies that the Beauty of God is manifest in revelation, and thus in the supreme act of revelation in Christ on the Cross. The ethically rooted construction of beauty as the beatification given as the *telos* of the path of virtue connects beauty with justice in a foundational and structural way. The encounter with beauty manifests as a form of justice, a final justice found in God. In this, the beauty of God and the justice of God are eschatological.

In intimating these themes of justice and eschatology, the shine on Moses' face, the radiance of Walker's mother, and the triumphant beauty of her garden reflect the vernacular saying and title of this chapter, "God don't like ugly." A familiar phrase in many African American families and communities, "God don't like ugly" uses language of beauty to convey ideas of morality. Homiletician Teresa Fry Brown calls the phrase a "socioethical presupposition" that admonishes Christ-like behavior as part of good home training.³³ Significant for my purposes here, "God don't like ugly" tells about right living by using notions of God's relation to beauty. The beautiful is equated with the good, and the aesthetic is revealed as a channel to and manifestation of the divine, a way of

³³ Teresa L. Fry Brown, *God Don't Like Ugly: African American Women Handing on Spiritual Values* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2000), 88-89.

knowing to goodness and God. The epistemological significance of beauty shines through this. Though the theme of Moses' radiance is a trope particular to patristic writings, the underlying idea of beauty as a means to and manifestation of divine revelation is an underpinning theme throughout theological aesthetics.

The epistemological significance of beauty is particularly beneficial to womanist theology. Even without the many pointers to the aesthetic in Walker's essay, the assertion of beauty as a means for revelation in theological aesthetics coheres with the structure of womanist theology as an experience-based epistemology. Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas writes in the introductory essay to *Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society* that womanism is an "epistemological revolution... a paradigm shift... [that] ushered forth a new epistemology... that took the experience of Black women as normative [and] redefined the term epistemology as the unction to search for truth."³⁴ The epistemological bases of womanist theological reflection established "frames of thinking and ways of being that took Black women[']'s] agency as the norm and held Black women's "self-actualization" as principle. In this epistemological revolution, experience was asserted as central to epistemology generally, with Black women's experience as central in particular. This centrality of experience in epistemology is characteristic of the broader body of black liberation theology as well. I enter here to assert that the aesthetic—beauty, sensation, imagination, artistry, and embodied experience—is an area and mode of life that supports womanist and black theologies' experience-based

³⁴ Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas, "Introduction: Womanism as an Epistemological Revolution," in *Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society*, ed. Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2006), 1, 3.

epistemology. “God don’t like ugly” claims the aesthetic as a way of knowing and being in African American experience.

Ugliness as Revelation

“God don’t like ugly” also, of course, tells us about ugliness.³⁵ The saying asserts God’s dislike of, and implied opposition to, ugliness. While at first glance this dislike may seem to reject ugliness in the effort to know God and the good, a second look reveals ugliness as still revelatory: negatively, it provides knowledge of God. In revealing what God does not like, ugliness is a site for divine revelation. Following the ethical nature of the saying “God don’t like ugly,” we can understand ugliness as equated with the opposite of goodness and justice: badness and injustice. Evil. In a theological aesthetics where beauty is morally freighted, ugliness is evil, the antithesis to God and the good.

For womanist theology, an understanding of theological aesthetics that not only provides a way to read beauty but also provides a way to read ugliness is crucial. Ugliness interposes in the lives, experience, and history of black women with disquieting frequency and disturbing ease, as the oppressions of racism, sexism, and classism provide multiplying and layered points of access. They collude to infringe on black female being in the world, threatening this being with ugliness. Looking to Walker’s essay, we see that the threat of ugliness is asserted as real and as compelling. Its realness can be read, at a base level, as the provocation behind Walker’s central question: “What did it mean for a black woman to be an artist in our grandmothers’ time?” Significantly, though it is a real

³⁵ Teresa Fry Brown explains that “[s]ome complete the saying with, ‘and He ain’t too happy ‘bout pretty,’ meaning that we are called to a higher standard of behavior regardless of what society upholds as acceptable.” Another way of reading this completing phrase is as meaning that the beauty of the world may still be ugliness, insofar as God is concerned. Fry Brown, *God Don’t Like Ugly*, 29.

and present threat, Walker shows that ugliness does not manifest as an inherent characteristic whose hold and presence cannot be dislocated, but rather manifests as an obscuring occlusion of beauty. It is a secondary covering that disguises and disturbs a more primary and preexistent reality. Like barnacles on the side of a pier, ugliness threatens to block the beauty of being and make it appear as if ugliness is all there is, was, and will be.³⁶ While Walker indeed asserts the beauty of black women, her depiction of the oppression black women have endured takes pains to show how much the ugliness has intruded into black women's lives, threatening their very persons. Their beauty and creativity is framed against the presence of ugliness, producing a pathos that oscillates between admiration and horror at the juxtaposition of good and evil in black women's lives.

Walker presents this ugliness in "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," describing how black women have suffered unimaginable horrors, with many succumbing to the "muzzling" and "mutilating" of body, spirit, and soul that relentlessly insisted they be sub-human, unacknowledged "except as the 'mule of the world.'"³⁷ They and their beauty were abused, she finds, cast like "exquisite butterflies trapped in an evil honey."³⁸ While their heritage of beauty and artistry was preserved and passed down, this passing down oftentimes occurred under and in horrific circumstance and death-dealing environs. Citing women so mistreated and unseen by those around them that they became

³⁶ The inverse eschatological functioning of ugliness here is significant, and will be drawn out in Chapter Two.

³⁷ Walker, "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," 232.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

abstractions even to themselves, Walker reveals this in Phillis Wheatley, who, alongside Walker's mother, is a primary example in the essay.

The first African American woman published, eighteenth-century poet Phillis Wheatley is an exemplary figure in "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," though one whose beauty is a complicated matter. She is revealed as a grotesque figure, whose creativity survived by being conveyed through the horrors in her biography and evolving historiographic appraisal. A poetic prodigy whose talent took her across the ocean to perform before English nobility, Wheatley issued preludes praising white women as the epitome of beauty. Walker, using a phrase from Virginia Woolf, diagnoses Wheatley's condition as one of "contrary instincts."³⁹ Though her creative gift was tried and true, it was twisted by her biography of kidnapping and enslavement, held captive to her experience as African and black in a world that was Western and white. She had a "bewildered tongue."⁴⁰ Though twentieth century black critics and commentators rejected Phillis as a sellout, Walker recuperates her, recovering the value of her aesthetic expression by rerouting estimation to the inestimable worth of her creative powers. "It is not," Walker writes to Phillis, "so much what you sang, as that you kept alive, in so many of our ancestors, *the notion of song*."⁴¹ Walker deepens this portrait of Phillis generationally by imagining memories lost to history of a woman "in Africa over two hundred years ago [who] perhaps [also] sang...*sweetly* over the compounds of her village...[who] perhaps...was herself a poet—though only her daughter's name is signed

³⁹ Ibid., 235-236.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 237.

⁴¹ Ibid.

to the poems that we know. Perhaps,” Walker continues, “Phillis Wheatley’s mother was also an artist. Perhaps in more than Phillis Wheatley’s biological life is her mother’s signature made clear.”⁴² By contextualizing Wheatley with her biography and her mother, Walker reclaims her as a black woman who received and passed on an inheritance of creativity and artistry, furthering its life and not its death. Wheatley ultimately serves to show that black women’s heritage of beauty and artistry, however scarred, however attacked, is one that persisted, one that survived. Yet, and significantly, this heritage *was* scarred, and relentlessly attacked; and, as seen in Wheatley, its beauty was conveyed through that scar. This “scarred” nature of reality is significant in Walker’s anthology, as seen in the dedication to the anthology as a whole: “To my daughter Rebecca / Who saw in me / what I considered/ a scar / And redefined it / as / a world.”⁴³ The scarred, risen Christ adds theological weight to our understanding of the import of scarring here, deepening our understanding of divine beauty.

Returning to Walker’s mother, we see that her beauty exists in this light. While her mother’s usage of flowers to literally and figuratively screen poverty for Walker and her family is a manifestation of beauty, it is also, contextually, intensely not beautiful—ugly. Images of poverty seen through a screen of blooms, sunflowers covering holes in the wall—these are scenes that horrify, even as they cheer. As with Wheatley, beauty shines through the ugliness: it is in and through the context of poverty and deprivation that the beauty of Walker’s mother’s flowers are apparent. With the perspective asserted by negative theology, both the beauty and ugliness can be read as revelation pointing to

⁴² Ibid., 243.

⁴³ Ibid., ix.

God. The beauty of the flowers demonstrate justice by capturing poverty within their gaze; the ugliness of the poverty that prompts a covering with flowers is, negatively read, injustice. As reflected in my two-tone interpretation of “God don’t like ugly,” both beauty and ugliness can be read to feature powerfully in a theological aesthetics. Though beauty is asserted as the pathway to, and manifestation of, the Divine, ugliness too can, read as negation, yield knowledge of God, by way of what God opposes and overcomes.

Conclusion

In asserting this dual reading of both beauty and ugliness within a theological aesthetics, this chapter has laid the groundwork for this paper. Methodologically, I have suggested the coherence of theological aesthetics with the experience-based epistemology in womanist and black liberation theologies. Theologically, I have established a framework for reading aesthetics in black experience. Both beauty and ugliness are revelatory, as affirmation of God’s justice and as indication of injustice, respectively, in this framework. In the next chapter, I will examine the ugliness in black experience more closely and engage it with the beauty of the Cross. A theological aesthetics where beauty and ugliness are operative is deeply useful for black experience, where these notions form a double-edged sword with the negative edge—the edge of ugliness—cutting deep.

Chapter 2

Good Hair

I was one of three children, brought up by grandparents. There was a bright child and a black child which I am. I always feared adults and keep to myself. My grandmother love her bright child, seem to had only hate for me.

—Mrs. D. M. T.

...My mother raised her family to work for what they wanted, and to be honest, proud of your color, to go to church, and school and do the right things. She taught us a white person wasn't no better than a black person, a man was just a man, no matter what color he is. My mother said the reason we are black is this: a curse from God.

—Mrs. G. S.

—Alice Walker, “But Yet and Still the Cotton Gin Kept on Working...”

In her 1970 essay “But Yet and Still the Cotton Gin Kept on Working...,” Alice Walker describes her experience working with older, mostly African American women in Mississippi in the late 1960s. The above-quoted recollections are some of the autobiographical statements Walker gathers from these women. I begin with them to introduce the theme and focus of this chapter: ugliness.

In this chapter, I turn to the ways in which blackness and black being have been apprehended, drawn, made, implicitly understood, explicitly understood, beheld, identified, and treated as ugly. Ugliness appears as a constitutive element of race: blackness as race has been formed (de-formed) through the makings of ugliness. The impact of this aesthetic formation is visual, visceral, moral, and spiritual: as shown by

these recollections, race is manifest as a matter of hue, but not only. Like skin, that total horizon of being which stretches to encompass and embody flesh, race strives with a purposive, delimiting aim to hem in and enclose human being, flattening and reducing that which can be neither flattened, nor reduced. Race, like skin, materializes with depth, slyly belying notions of superficiality and cosmetic construction with its many layers of manifestation (visual, visceral, moral, spiritual, and so on). Contrary to appearances, race is never simply color (and thus color-blindness helps no one). As reflected in Mrs. G.S.'s statement, the ugliness of *black* is more than skin-deep.

In this chapter, I begin to probe this ugliness. As with any aesthetic perception, the ugliness of blackness implies a perceiver and a perceived. After using Walker's essay to introduce salient themes, I explore ugliness in black experience as it has been construed by the perceiver (the view from the Other, the white gaze), and as it has been and can be understood and engaged by the perceived (the view from the Self, black people beholding the ugliness that is seen and made by the Other). I carry out this excursus through historiographic and phenomenological means. I find that the category of the grotesque provides a lens through which black people can *see* ugliness, and reject it. Implicit in my argument is the conviction that this *seeing* of ugliness is vital: to refuse to do so would be delusive, and likely fatal—it would indeed imperil one's being in the world.⁴⁴ However, as I show, such *seeing* does not imply *believing*. The perspectival politics of the grotesque enable a shift to occur whereby the *seeing* of ugliness is a *dissenting* from it that launches a powerful challenge to it. Identifying these dynamics of

⁴⁴ Were black persons not to see the ugliness that is projected as blackness, they would endanger their wellbeing, mentally and literally. Not to see such ugliness is to divorce one's engagement with reality in a destructive way. Not only would it close one's eyes to the death, the dead, and the dying in black history and present, but it also would close one's eyes to the dangers threatening oneself.

the grotesque as present within the beauty of the Cross, I show how this challenge is, when taken up by God, fundamentally a denial. On the high stakes level of ultimacy, the beauty of the Cross reveals the impotence and utter vapidness of ugliness, and of evil. By asserting and employing the beauty of the Cross, I offer a way to theologically apprehend and account for the ugliness in black experience.

The Meaning of Ugliness, as Introduced by Alice Walker

Walker's encounter with Mrs. D. M. T. and Mrs. G. S. occurs in the context of the classroom. Walker had been hired one summer in the late 1960s as a consultant for Friends of the Children of Mississippi, a Headstart program that sought to provide black history classes to children throughout the state. As most of the volunteer teachers of these classes were themselves unfamiliar with black history, Walker was brought on to teach week-long workshops introducing black history materials to them. Her students, these volunteer teachers, were ninety middle-aged and older black women who had worked as public schoolteachers, maids, and fieldworkers. Walker came onto the job with a sense of excitement and intimate regard: "These were women I identified with, women who'd do anything for the good of black children...I felt, on my first day before my class, as if the room were full of my mothers."⁴⁵ However, her enthusiasm soon became tempered with a disquieting realization. Early into teaching the weeklong workshops, Walker found that they were functioning not only as an introduction to black history, but also as an

⁴⁵ Walker, "But Yet and Still the Cotton Gin Kept on Working..." in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1983), 27. Walker's usage of "mother" recalls the title essay "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," and signals the import of her comment. In this thesis, "mother" functions as a subtle thread connecting the insights of my first chapter with those I now develop in the second. This thread is picked up again in Chapter Three, where "mother" appears with marked significance in the Alice Walker essay examined in that final chapter.

introduction to history itself—to dates, facts, and the concept of a narrative of the past and its significance for their lives:

“[H]istory,” to my students, was a total unknown. Many of them were extremely poor readers, and of course how were they to relate to the history that was never written? *Q.*—“When was the period of slavery?” *A.*—“Around 1942?” And how could I underestimate the value of that answer, although it did not offer the class perspective, which we very much needed.⁴⁶

Walker was confronted with the significance of the women’s ignorance, and with the need to remedy the situation not just for their future students, but for the women themselves. For, as Walker shows, the absence of a sense of historical perspective did not entail neutral understandings of self, family, past, and future. Rather, the absence of a sense of their own history was accompanied by a deep belief in the insignificance of that history:

How *do* you teach earnest but educationally crippled middle-aged and older women the significance of their past? How do you get them to understand the pathos and beauty of a heritage they have been taught to regard with shame? How do you make them appreciate their own endurance, creativity, incredible loveliness of spirit? It should have been as simple as handing them each a mirror, but it was not.⁴⁷

In this passage from Walker, the contours of her subject begin to come into focus. The value of history emerges as aesthetic. Through this phrasing from Walker, we see that the significance of history is conveyed through aesthetic categories: pathos and beauty. And, importantly, such pathos and beauty does not reside in a narrative abstracted from day-to-day life but resides in the women themselves. Teaching the women the beauty of their past “should have been as simple as handing them each a mirror” but, as

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

Walker finds, it was not. The obscuring of beauty hints at the presence of ugliness, a hinting that intensifies when Walker continues,

Try to tell a sixty-year-old delta woman that black men invented anything, black women wrote sonnets, that black people long ago were every bit the human beings they are today. Try to tell her that kinky hair is delightful. Chances are she will begin to talk “Bible” to you, and you will discover to your dismay that the lady still believes in the curse of Ham.⁴⁸

The ugliness of blackness comes into full view as Walker uncovers the distorted perspectives of themselves, of black people, and of blackness shaping the women’s understandings. Walker begins to salve these injured historical understandings, and the lack of a sense of history, by having the women write autobiographies. Her desire, she explains, was “to give them... a knowledge of what history itself *is*... in order that they see themselves and their parents and grandparents as part of a living, working, creating movement in Time and Place.”⁴⁹ In this effort to bring history to light as a beautiful narrative, however, Walker confronts the reality of the truth that healing often involves hurting that, as found in Chapter 1, leaves scars. The recovery of the women’s memories, while beginning to build a history of beauty, also displays its ugliness.

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The utility of Walker’s essay for my purposes here lies in its depiction of history, memory, and self as realities that manifest aesthetically. Delineating these as levels on which beauty and ugliness materialize, Walker’s engagement of history, memory, and self points to “a field mined with shards of memory (*Geschichte*) and history (*Historie*)...spawned by modernity [and] the European Enlightenment” as the breeding

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 28-29.

ground for notions of ugliness, race, and racism.⁵⁰ Ugliness manifests in black bodies, infiltrates into black minds, and pervades within the societal structures constricting and construing black existence (history, knowledge, religion, and state). Aesthetic judgement penetrates deeply, and dangerously. Walker begins her essay with a woman's memory of lynchings. The fact that she uses lynching to open her essay on a distorted and marred memory, history, and self draws a connection between these foci and ugliness. The aggregate of the distortion in memory, history, and self together present Du Boisian double-consciousness; thus, lynching and double-consciousness appear as definitive instances of ugliness in black experience. I engage both in this chapter.

Among Walker's reflections demonstrating the women's distorted self-understandings, we find an example of double-consciousness—an instance of ugliness—that gives this chapter its title. “Try telling them that kinky hair is delightful.”⁵¹ The phrase “good hair” captures with spectacular precision what Walker encountered in the women's autobiographies and what I engage in this chapter: the deadliness in the debased view of self drawn by racist aesthetics. There is a death element in ugliness that seeks to utterly kill. “Good hair” archetypally demonstrates this, capturing the potency, perversity, and fatality that ugliness threatens regardless of scale. The story behind the 2009 comedic documentary *Good Hair* expresses these dynamics. While *Good Hair* humorously depicted the lengths to which black women (and men) were willing to go in pursuit of “good hair,” what provoked producer Chris Rock to make this film is no laughing matter.

⁵⁰ M. Shawn Copeland, “The Critical Aesthetics of Race,” in *She Who Imagines: Feminist Theological Aesthetics*, ed. Laurie Cassidy and Maureen H. O’Connell (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2012), 74.

⁵¹ Walker, “But Yet and Still the Cotton Gin Kept on Working...,” 28.

In the documentary, Rock explains that he was prompted to make this film when his 3-year-old daughter Lola asked him one day why she did not have good hair.⁵²

The internalization of racism by a toddler, who examined herself and found herself lacking, quietly captures the obscene violence of ugliness, and the optics therein, that I confront in this chapter. It shows the deaths, little and large, social and psychic, that occur as a constitutive element of ugliness. Like the women Walker encountered in 1960s Mississippi, Lola saw not just herself, but also herself through the Other's eyes. In turning to the ugliness perceived and projected by the Other, we can begin to comprehend the deformation of Self that occurs in ugliness; we can see the "crushing objecthood" with which black people have had (and still have) to contend.⁵³ This is the phenomenological opacity of which Charles H. Long writes; it is the insidious evil that normalizes the morality of hair.⁵⁴ Conceived and cast by the Other, this ugliness is a production of the white gaze.

Ugliness: the view from the Other

Investigating the historical roots and manifestation of the white gaze in nineteenth-century America, Linda Frost writes that "[b]y midcentury, white Americans had become accustomed to the idea of the African American as a kind of spectacle."⁵⁵

⁵² Chris Rock. *Good Hair*, DVD. Directed by Jeff Stilson. New York, NY: Chris Rock Productions, HBO Films, and LD Entertainment, 2009.

⁵³ Quoting Nigel Gibson, M. Shawn Copeland writes that the racialized others in the white colonial racial gaze are sealed into "a crushing objecthood." M Shawn Copeland, "The Critical Aesthetics of Race" in *She Who Imagines: Feminist Theological Aesthetics* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2012), 74.

⁵⁴ See Charles H. Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), esp. chapter 11, "Perspectives for a Study of Afro-American Religion in the United States."

⁵⁵ Linda Frost, *Never One Nation: Freaks, Savages, and Whiteness in U.S. Popular Culture 1850-1877* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 57.

Subject to “a blinding white gaze,” black being was construed with the categories of exhibition and display, inviting visual (and literal) dissection.⁵⁶ Though Frost’s account focuses on the mid- to late nineteenth century formation of racial image, her investigation has clear historical precedent that reveals the development of the modern West, and not just late nineteenth-century American popular culture, as the stage for the formation of blackness-as-spectacle.⁵⁷ Claiming the consciousness of Western modernity as originating context and frame, Charles Long writes that in the encounter with Western civilization, an objectified status of sub-humanity was projected onto black people.⁵⁸ Aesthetically read, this projection is manifest as ugliness.

Thomas Jefferson’s comments reveal the paradigmatic influence, and political and historiographic implications, of the idea of blackness as ugliness in the modern West.⁵⁹ In 1781, Jefferson began with ugliness when explaining why emancipated black people could not remain within the United States, writing that “The circumstances of superior

⁵⁶ Ibid. For the construction of blackness through the categories of exhibition and display involving literal dissection, see Harriet A. Washington, *Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Americans from Colonial Times to the Present* (New York, New York: Random House, 2006), esp. chapter 5, “The Restless Dead: Anatomical Dissection and Display.”

⁵⁷ The early nineteenth-century exhibition of Saartjie Baartman in continental Europe and Britain also emphasizes the spectacle of black being as a Western, and not just American, phenomenon. The events in Saartjie Baartman’s life occurred outside the context of chattel slavery in the continental United States. Forcibly removed or lured (accounts are unclear) from current-day South Africa and taken to Europe by British men, Baartman was marketed as an exhibit and scientific spectacle in Europe in 1810. Notably, these events were coincident with the high point of abolitionist sentiment in Britain, which outlawed the slave trade in 1808, approximately two years before Baartman was taken and exhibited. In this timing, we see that notions of racial spectacle occurred alongside abolitionist outrage. This presents a more complicated view of abolitionist Britain.

⁵⁸ Charles H. Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 177.

⁵⁹ For a wide-ranging consideration of this theme, see Sarah Nuttall, ed., *Beautiful Ugly: African and Diaspora Aesthetics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

beauty, is thought worthy attention in the propagation of our horses, dogs, and other domestic animals; why not in that of man?"⁶⁰ Having evaluated "the black man's" talents and deficiencies, as they appeared to him, and deduced that blacks were 'inferior to the whites in the endowment both of body and of mind,'" Jefferson claims a fundamental incompatibility between black being and the nation. This incompatibility rests on the assessed inability of blacks to meet adequate standards for human being as existing within the modern nation of the United States.⁶¹ Jefferson's assessment has as much to do with the body politic of the United States of America as it does with the physical bodies of black people. It has as much to do with understandings of modernity and of the American present and future as with the flesh of black being. Aesthetics as a measure is operative for both, and defining for one in relation to the other. This basic incompatibility thus reveals a judgment of natural black ugliness to lie in close proximity to the political philosophy and historiographic narrative of the United States as democratic archetype of the West. Connecting to Western visions about past and future, this juxtaposition and its central notion of ugliness connect to Western constructions of history itself. The ugliness of blackness, thus, is implicated in the very structures of Western historiography.

⁶⁰ As quoted in Maxine Leeds Craig, *Ain't I a Beauty Queen? Black Women, Beauty, and the Politics of Race* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2002), 12. A leader in the Enlightenment who articulated and established foundational political philosophy for America and the West at large, Jefferson is often painted as a contradictory figure with conflicting ideals and practices regarding race, slavery, and liberty. However, in this quote, we see that he is perhaps not so contradictory at all. Beauty emerges as enabler that allows his political philosophy and racism to hold together without confusion. The role of aesthetics in mediating racism and political theory and movement in the modern West is engaged in Chapter 3, "Beauty along the Color Line: Lynching, Form, and Aesthetics," of Russ Castronovo, *Beautiful Democracy: Aesthetics and Anarchy in a Global Era* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2007).

⁶¹ Leeds Craig, *Ain't I a Beauty Queen?*, 12.

Harriet Washington's findings in *Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Americans from Colonial Times to the Present* demonstrate this historiographic location in a way that highlights its potential theological meaning.⁶² Washington uncovers theories of black primitivism and of black extinction within Western intellectual history. Taken together, I find, they reveal the basic problematizing of black being that lies within Western consciousness. Nineteenth-century white anthropologists, physicians, historians, and others often claimed that black people had no history, no culture, and no civilization.⁶³ If historicized at all, black people were drawn as the primitive stage of the evolution of "Man" that culminated with the West.⁶⁴ As the primitive stage, they had no history; they *were* the history.⁶⁵ Later in the nineteenth and into the twentieth centuries, other anthropological, medical, and scientific professionals developed theories of black extinction. Black people, they claimed, were so biologically and socially degenerate that they had no future. U.S. Census superintendents,

⁶² Harriet A. Washington, *Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Americans from Colonial Times to the Present* (New York, New York: Random House, 2006).

⁶³ See Washington, *Medical Apartheid*. Discussions of the primitivism of black peoples anatomically and intellectually pervade the cases Washington considers; see pp. 41, 79, and 157 for examples. See also M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010), 39: "slaveholders and nearly all whites assumed that [black people] were incapable of the human functions of intellectual reflection and critique, culture-making, and cultural refinement."

⁶⁴ The 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago demonstrates how, if historically recognized at all, Africans were construed with only a primitivized status; African Americans were completely left out of any anthropological timeline of the evolution of Man. Journalist, suffragist, and anti-lynching activist Ida B. Wells protested this exclusion of African Americans from an accounting of the world's cultures. She stood outside of the fair's gates and distributed copies of a pamphlet she wrote, with contributions from Frederick Douglass, Irvine Garland Penn, and Ferdinand Lee Barnett, entitled *The Reason Why the Colored American Is Not in the World's Columbian Exposition*. See Patricia Turner, *Crafted Lives: Stories and Studies of African American Quilters* (Jackson, MI: University Press of Mississippi, 2009), 103-104. See also "The Reason Why the Colored American is Not in the World's Columbian Exposition: The Afro-American's Contribution to Columbian Literature," in the Digital Library Project - University of Pennsylvania, <http://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/wells/exposition/exposition.html> (accessed April 10, 2015).

⁶⁵ Charles H. Long's concept of the "second creation" connects with the historiographic re-creation of black people in the West. See Charles H. Long, *Significations*, 166.

life insurance companies, and others predicted and operated on theories of black extinction by the year 2000.⁶⁶ These denials of both history and future converge to problematize the present and temporally negate black being.

With the foregoing analysis, I have expanded and spelled out the meaning within Albert Memmi's totalization of difference as applied by M. Shawn Copeland to racism. Racism, as totalized difference, "penetrates the flesh, the blood and the genes of the victim [and] is transformed into *fate*, *destiny*, and *heredity*."⁶⁷ I have shown how the meanings of both past and future, the totality of being (fate, destiny, and heredity), lie enclosed within the determinative vise of ugliness. What I interpret as historiographic mapping of the ugliness of black being has theological meaning: these views assert that there is fundamentally no hope for black people, because black *being* itself is a problem. We can add this analysis to Jefferson's comments to see that this gaze that claims the ugliness of black being does not just problematize black people politically or civically; ugliness problematizes black people fundamentally, as human beings existing in space and time. This ugliness is a denial of personhood. Interpreted theologically, this denial of personhood entails, in its temporal scaffolding of no past and no future, a denial of eschatology and ultimacy.⁶⁸ The denials of past and future combine to fundamentally

⁶⁶ See Washington, *Medical Apartheid*, 152. Echoes of such views are latent in twentieth and twenty-first century recurrent debates in political and sociological discourse about the "pathology" of black families and black people.

⁶⁷ Albert Memmi as quoted in M. Shawn Copeland, "The Critical Aesthetics of Race," in *She Who Imagines*, 81, my italics. Citation from Copeland: Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 185, 189.

⁶⁸ Julia Kristeva identifies a similar gravity to the denial of temporal reality and meaningfulness in her essay "Women's Time." She cites the barring of women from participation in linear time, from *history*, as part of their dehumanization and oppression. Julia Kristeva, "Women's Time," in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1987), 187-213.

problematize the present and reveal, in the structures of Western consciousness, that blackness as ugliness asserts a basic negation of being. “In a negrophobic society...*blackness* mutates as negation, nonbeing,” “othered” to such an extent that black “humanity is discredited.”⁶⁹ It is seen as no longer viable; or rather, never having been viable to begin with, it is *not* viable, asserting antithesis and opposition of the strongest degree.

This negation of being thus problematizes present existence and implies a solution of total eradication. As seen in my theological expansion on its historiographic manifestation, ugliness construes black being as a problem and presupposes a denial of eschatological reality. A final eradication, a total annihilation is the “final solution” to the problem of a people with no past and no future. Death, in this sense, is an extermination that doubles back onto life and denies its basis in meaning. There is an important distinction here: death is not simply an end to life, but *is* asserted *as* the nature of black existence. One black Mississippian recalled in the 1930s that, back in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, whites would say: “‘N——s jest supposed to die, ain’t no damn good anyway – so jest go an’ kill ‘em.’”⁷⁰ Theories of black extinction also display this clearly—these people will die out, inevitably. Thus, we see that this view of ugliness tries to destabilize life at the core of black existence, and assert death in its place. For, after all, the life itself is a problem to begin with. It is a misconstrual, for it *is* ugly. Utter

⁶⁹ M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 19.

⁷⁰ Cited in Leon F. Litwack, “Hellhounds,” in James Allen, *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* (Santa Fe, NM: Twin Palms, 2003), 12, 13. I excise the word ‘nigger’ to both disrupt and draw attention to its implication in the annihilative force of ugliness.

and total negation of being is the at the heart of the ugliness viewed and beheld by the Other.

This ugliness, understood as a temporal negation and ontological problematizing of black being, is manifest physically in lynching. The leap from the ugliness of black being to the killing of black being is not a leap at all—as captured in the phrase above, killing follows as a logical consequence. Lynching is one of the strongest assertions and enactments of the white gaze beholding black being as ugly. Spectacle and negation become en fleshed reality, as the death element at the heart of ugliness is displayed, revealing unadulterated fatality as its fantasy and its real teleological end. The tangible, visceral implications of aesthetic judgement—of ugliness—are excruciatingly clear in this linkage.

The constitutive actions of lynching—torture, killing, and desecration of the body—capture the annihilative core at the heart of ugliness. The lynchings of Sam Hose, Mary Turner, and William Turner characteristically demonstrate the aesthetics of exhibition, disintegration, and destruction that are en fleshed in lynching, directing its violence to the end of utter annihilation. Sam Hose, whose 1899 lynching in Newnan, Georgia stunned a nation, was dismembered, chained to a tree, and then burned alive, after which his body parts were auctioned.⁷¹ Mary Turner, who was eight months pregnant when she was lynched in 1918 in Valdosta, Georgia, was hung upside down by her ankles, doused with gasoline, and set on fire. After her clothes were burned off of her

⁷¹ Edwin T. Arnold, *“What Virtue There is In Fire”*: Cultural Memory and the Lynching of Sam Hose (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2009). See also M. Shawn Copeland, *En fleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being*, 118-119.

body and while she was still alive, her abdomen was cut open with a knife used for killing hogs and her unborn child was cut out of her womb and stomped to death by the lynch mob.⁷² Her body was then riddled with bullets by the lynch mob. In 1921 in Helena, Arkansas, 19-year-old William Turner was lynched, after which his body was dragged through the streets as a moving shooting target for white men in the town. It was then burned. August Turner, William's father, was made to collect and remove the burnt remains of his son's body.⁷³

These characteristic acts of lynching—dismembering, lighting on fire, dragging a person's body through the streets, selling parts of the body—reveal the force of meaning asserted in the act of lynching. Death in lynching is not simply an ending of life. It is annihilation, an eradication of life. This is a denial of existence in the strongest sense that seeks to displace life with death. The act of killing in lynching seeks to “double back” and negate not only the life that is, but the life that was. As reflected in the vicious killing of Mary Turner's unborn child, the force of meaning in lynching seeks to obliterate black existence from the annals of history itself and keep it from ever having *happened* at all.

Alice Walker's essay “But Yet and Still the Cotton Gin Kept On Working...” gains its title from a lynching that chillingly demonstrates this erasure of *being*, a denial of the life that was alongside the life that is. Reprinting a letter shared with her by a

⁷² Leon F. Litwack, “Hellhounds,” in James Allen, *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* (Santa Fe, NM: Twin Palms, 2003), 14. See also Julie Buckner Armstrong, *Mary Turner and the Memory of Lynching* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2011).

⁷³ M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being*, 119. The lynching of William Turner recalls the June 1998 lynching of James Byrd in Jasper, TX. Byrd was abducted and beaten by three white men, before being chained to the back of a truck and dragged until he died and his body was partially dismembered. See Josh Rosenblatt, “Long Road out of Jasper: A Documentary Chronicles James Byrd Jr.'s Life and Tragic Death” in *Texas Observer*. July 25, 2013. Accessed April 12, 2015. <http://www.texasobserver.org/long-road-out-of-jasper/>.

friend that describes several lynchings in Amite County, Mississippi, Walker lets the words of the letter stand on their own:

Another man by the name of Herbert Lee, was shot down at the cotton gin by one of the Representatives of Amite County and he laid there about four hours before any one paid any attention to him. But yet and still the cotton gin kept on working. There were four in the gin, they made three of the Negroes who witness forget what they saw but when they made Louis Allen say he didn't see anything he wouldn't. Later he was killed because he was going to testify against the sheriff. He was shot with buckshots at his gate three times. His brain was piled up under the truck.

So this is most of the histry that I can recall, if you sure you want it, and I hope it will help the little children who are enroll in Headstart.

–Yours truly, B.E.F., Amite County, Miss.⁷⁴

This recounting from “B.E.F.” captures the utter and total negation of black humanity that is asserted in the attempts to manifest ugliness. We see the erasure of being through the leaving of Lee’s body on the floor—“but yet and still the cotton gin kept on working”—and through the forced dis-remembering (dismemberment) of the surrounding community.⁷⁵ Like Sam Hose, Mary Turner, and William Turner, Herbert Lee as a person was negated through the killing, the treatment of his body after his death, and the denial of his right to life through memory. The one man who refused to make manifest this denial, the Louis Allen who refused to dis-remember, wound up similarly treated: literally de-humanized, with his integrity of being dissected and disintegrated through violence (his brain was *piled up under a truck*).

⁷⁴ Walker, “But Yet and Still the Cotton Gin Kept On Working...,” 23-24.

⁷⁵ The leaving of a dead black body on the floor for four hours recalls Michael Brown, the teenager slain by police in Ferguson, Missouri on August 9, 2014. After being killed, Brown’s body was left on the asphalt in the summer sun for four hours before it was removed. See Julia Bosman and Joseph Goldstein, “Timeline for a Body: Four Hours in the Middle of a Ferguson Street,” *New York Times*. August 23, 2014. Accessed April 9, 2015. http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/24/us/michael-brown-a-bodys-timeline-4-hours-on-a-ferguson-street.html?_r=0

That Walker uses this letter and its topic of lynching to introduce an essay about double-consciousness, and the recuperative efforts she takes against it, is significant. As mentioned in my analysis of her essay, this framing draws a connection between the dynamics of lynching and of double-consciousness. Both are assaults of negation, volleys of a force that seeks to destroy the integrity of self within black being. This annihilative force, aesthetically lobbied, claimed, and enacted, is the view of ugliness asserted by the Other.

The Grotesque: the view from the Self

Franz Fanon's recollection of his encounter with the ugliness of blackness captures the confrontation of this annihilative force as experienced by the Self. Fanon writes,

My body was given back to me sprawled out, distorted, recolored, clad in mourning in that white winter day. The Negro is an animal, the Negro is bad, the Negro is mean, the Negro is ugly; look, a n—, it's cold, the n— is shivering...shivering because he is cold, the little boy is trembling because he is afraid of the n—...I sit down at the fire and I become aware of my uniform. I had not seen it. It is indeed ugly. I stop there, for who can tell me what beauty is?⁷⁶

Important for my purposes here, Fanon is describing a literal encounter with ugliness. He is not merely describing a physical or social assault upon black being that can be connected to ugliness, such as segregation; he is describing an aesthetic encounter with the white gaze that beholds black being as ugly, and with himself seen as ugly. In that encounter, language of death and negation permeates—a body “sprawled out” and “clad in mourning.”⁷⁷ The annihilative force of ugliness is comprehended and felt by Fanon as

⁷⁶ Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York, NY: Grove, 1967), 113-114, as cited in M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being*, 16.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

he looks upon himself as *ugly*. However, a significant perspectival difference is latent, and then comes to full force, within his comprehension. Though Fanon sees and feels the annihilative force of ugliness, he experiences and comprehends it as *distortion*. This view of distortion facilitates a crucial and fundamental dissent. With his statement, “It is indeed ugly. I stop there, for who can tell me what beauty is?,” Fanon *dissents* from the claim of negation that is made in ugliness. In describing his encounter with the ugliness as a *distortion* that then provokes his *dissent*, Fanon reflects the grotesque as a genre that offers powerful resources for black people’s self-reflective encounter with ugliness.

The grotesque is an aesthetic genre that portrays ugliness as distortion and, in so doing, simultaneously facilitates dissent. The grotesque depicts the abysmal, the horrific, and the monstrous. It portrays a dissolution of wholeness, of integrity, and of meaning. A seeming disintegration, and utter failure of any *thing* at all (*nihil*, total meaninglessness), lurks in the grotesque. The grotesque thus fully captures the annihilative force of ugliness. It presents negation. However, it presents negation as *distortion*—as perversion, deviation, and aberration from normality. Theologian James Luther Adams writes that

The authentically grotesque is something that deviates from the normal in a monstrous way...It is a mirror of aberration. In order to present [this], the artist of the grotesque...depicts a world where ‘natural physical wholes’ are disintegrated and ‘the parts’ are monstrously redistributed. He aims to project the full horror of disorder, the terrible and the terrifying, even the bestial, elements of human experience.⁷⁸

A definition of the grotesque from former director and curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art Robert Doty expands Adams’ description:

⁷⁸ An excerpt from James Luther Adams’ essay “The Grotesque and Our Future,” as quoted in James Luther Adams and Wilson Yates, “Preface” in *The Grotesque in Art & Literature: Theological Reflections* (New York: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), xiv.

First, the rejection of reason, its benefits, protection and institutions. Second, immersion in the subconscious and its offspring, such as fear, passion and perversity, which often elicits a strong interest in sex and violence and not infrequently a commingling of the two. Third, a clash of elements, an obsession with opposites which force the co-existence of the beautiful with the repulsive, the sublime with the gross, humor with horror, the organic with the mechanical. Fourth, emphasis on ridicule, surprise and virulence, through caricature, the deformation and distortion of salient characteristics. The grotesque threatens the foundations of existence through the subversion of order and the treacherous reversal of the familiar and hostile. Its value and vitality stem from the aberrations of human relationships and acts and therefore from foibles, weakness and irresistible attractions.⁷⁹

We thus see that the grotesque is premised upon distortion, and at the heart of distortion lies contradiction. Distortion, perversion, and aberration are fundamentally repugnant, and threaten the horror of meaninglessness, because of their contradiction-based structure. This contradiction-based structure presenting distortion is what enables the grotesque to manifest as an aesthetics of dissent.⁸⁰ The horror and meaninglessness threatened in the grotesque occurs *through* the clash of elements—through the existence of the beautiful alongside the repulsive. It does not occur through merely the depiction of the repulsive alone. Such would be the presentation of ugliness, not the grotesque. The grotesque thus fully depicts the negation that is threatened in ugliness; however, it frames that negation as distortion, and thus also dissents from it. The grotesque depicts horror and simultaneously *dissents* from the horror and the looming negation it depicts. The grotesque completely changes the meaning asserted in the encounter with ugliness.

⁷⁹ From Robert Doty's catalogue for an exhibit on the grotesque at the Whitney Museum of American Art: *Human Concern/Personal Torment: The Grotesque in American Art*, as cited in James Luther Adams and Wilson Yates, "Preface" in *The Grotesque in Art & Literature: Theological Reflections* (New York: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), xv.

⁸⁰ James Luther Adams: "A special form of dissent can be observed today in the revival of what for centuries has been called 'the grotesque.'" Wilson Yates: "[Adams] saw such art both as a new creation speaking against the created order, often as 'an art of protest against oppression.'" Both citations from Wilson Yates, "Homage to JLA," in *The Grotesque in Art & Literature: Theological Reflections* (New York: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), xiii and xxi, respectively.

Applying this to black experience, we see that the grotesque offers a powerful rebuttal to the ugliness asserted and enflashed by the view and actions of the Other. Theologically, this rebuttal exemplifies a way to contend in theological anthropology with double-consciousness, lynching, and other forms of oppression. The grotesque recognizes the presence of such ugliness and oppression in the construction of black being, but through that recognition, *refuses* it. The grotesque provides a way out of a seemingly impassable and ontologically flattening binary.⁸¹ As seen in Fanon's recollection, the grotesque enables full comprehension of the negation in ugliness, but frames that negation as distortion. The category of the grotesque captures what happens in lynching and double-consciousness as an aberration and contradiction, a *clash* of elements, whereas the category of ugliness asserts no clash of elements. The grotesque sees the lynched body of a black person as the "coexistence of the beautiful with the repulsive" because it sees the black person (beautiful) assaulted by horrific violence and hate (repulsive); it sees an irreducible sign of life (a black person) assaulted by death (lynching, torturing, killing, desecrating).⁸² The perspective of ugliness does not see this clash. It does not see lynching as an obscene and blasphemous combination of life and death but instead, as explained above, sees the black body as only and ever and always a signifier of death. The view of ugliness displaces life within black being and claims death

⁸¹ My harnessing of the grotesque in light of theological anthropology approaches a debate on the proper place of oppression in theological accounts of black being. While I agree with the resistance to ontologize suffering in black being, as demonstrated by Victor Anderson and Eboni Marshall Turman, I find that such resistance need not (and, given the reality of the intrusion of oppression in black life, cannot) excise oppression from theological accounts. The grotesque demonstrates resistance and refusal *through* confrontation. See Victor Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness* (New York, NY: Continuum, 1995) and Eboni Marshall Turman, *Toward a Womanist Ethic of Incarnation: Black Bodies, the Black Church, and the Council of Chalcedon* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

⁸² Robert Doty as quoted in James Luther Adams and Wilson Yates, "Preface," xv.

in its place; the view of the grotesque recognizes the life that is present as something that can never be removed, nor overcome. Both ugliness and the grotesque perceive an annihilative force and attendant meaninglessness—both perceive negation. However, the grotesque, premised on distortion, claims such negation as irregular and outrageous. A view premised on distortion creates an interval that facilitates dissent in the confrontation with ugliness. A view framed by distortion reveals a disjunction in this experience whereby subversion becomes possible. Distortion de-naturalizes the negation asserted by ugliness and roots a fundamental resistance to it: in comprehending ugliness as distortion, the annihilative claim of ugliness is itself resisted. The power of the grotesque lies in its comprehension of the negation asserted in ugliness, and its simultaneous rejection of that negation. Though both the grotesque and ugliness display annihilative force and negation, ugliness portrays this as inherent, whereas the grotesque perceives it as contradiction.

An example will help to clarify this distinction. The distinction I am asserting is that between Mamie Till Mobley's actions and those of lynching photographers. Both lynching photographers and Mobley beheld, and encouraged others to behold, lynched bodies. However, lynching photographers took and disseminated photos of lynched black bodies as ugly. Lynching audiences, photographers, and those who bought and circulated lynching postcards and related memorabilia proclaimed the negation of black being through creating and circulating the perspective of ugliness.⁸³ Mamie Till Mobley, the

⁸³ James Cone writes that lynching postcards are a sort of pornography. In addition to cohering with Linda Frost's finding on the presence of the pornographic in the white gaze beholding black being, the category of pornography in lynching postcards uncovers the culpability of those who participate in the *seeing* of black being as spectacle. Those who attended lynchings, bought and circulated postcards, or otherwise promoted the seeing of black people in the frame of lynching were complicit in the creation of lynching as an aesthetic production that denied in the strongest possible sense (that extinguished) black being. See Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 98 and Frost, *Never One Nation*, 62, 79-85. See also Chapter One,

mother of Emmett Till, also promulgated the viewing and photographing of lynched bodies, but did so with an entirely different perspective and intent. Mobley, I find, utilized the perspective of the grotesque. She fought for the recovery of her son's lynched body and forced the unsealing of his casket when it arrived in Chicago from Mississippi. She held a three day viewing of his broken body and encouraged the reprinting and dissemination of images of it, "so that the world can see what they did to my boy."⁸⁴ For Mobley, the meaning of the lynched black body is the grotesque—not the promotion of ugliness, but the dissent from it. As she "looked at that horribly mangled monstrosity" that was her son, she said, "Darling, you have not died in vain."⁸⁵ Her words are a fundamental assertion of beauty and being in the face of ugliness and violent negation. Till remained her beautiful son, her "darling," even in the annihilative force heaped upon him. Even in death.⁸⁶

"On Looking," in Dora Apel, *Imagery of Lynching: Black Men, White Women, and the Mob* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 7-45.

⁸⁴ Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 66. Cone writes that Mamie Till Mobley's efforts enabled 600,000 people to view her son's broken body in person, and millions more through the images printed by *Jet Magazine* in the September 1955 issue. For a consideration of the lynching of Emmett Till and role of photography, see Chapter Five, "Mass Media, World War II, and the Cold War: The Lynching of George Dorsey and Emmett Till," in Dora Apel, *Imagery of Lynching: Black Men, White Women, and the Mob* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 165-188. For more on the lynching of Emmett Till, see Christopher Metress, ed., *The Lynching of Emmett Till: A Documentary Narrative* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2002).

⁸⁵ Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 67.

⁸⁶ I find that Mamie Till Mobley can be powerfully seen as a pietà figure. In this light, she connects to Kathe Kollwitz, a German artist who, when her son was killed in WWI, created series of pietà sculptures that used this religious imagery to protest the German state's rhetoric encouraging mothers to sacrifice their sons. In the grotesqueness of Kollwitz's art and of Mobley's aesthetic strategies, mourning and grieving appear as a powerful protest to injustice. The gruesomeness of these women's aesthetics, and of their own experience, reveals a dimension of protest within the pietà that connects this religious art tradition to the grotesque. These connections allude to the cruciform grotesque found in the beauty of the Cross, and reveal the power of the pietà. See Jayme M. Hennessy, "Kollwitz: The Beauty and Brutality of the *Pietà*," in *She Who Imagines: Feminist Theological Aesthetics*, ed. Laurie Cassidy and Maureen H. O'Connell (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2012), 37-50.

Fanon's comments and Mamie Till Mobley's aesthetics capture the dynamics of the grotesque as a strategic possibility for black people's self-reflective encounter with ugliness. Using the grotesque, which claims distortion and thus contradiction, *dissent* from the horror and meaninglessness asserted in ugliness becomes possible. Unlike ugliness, which manifests as a force that tries to eclipse *any* meaning within black being (trying to make, claim, and show as fundamentally *empty* its integrity and existence), the grotesque provides a subversive category that allows black being to resist and move beyond the meaninglessness asserted in ugliness. Ugliness seeks to situate simple and utter ugliness as the only reality that was, is, and will be in black being; seeing distortion, the grotesque asserts the persistence of beauty in black being, despite the intrusion of ugliness through attempts to deny and kill it. Through its two key elements of distortion and dissent, the grotesque reveals "a way out of no way," a way to move beyond the confrontation of negation encountered in ugliness.⁸⁷

In so doing, I find that the grotesque demonstrates and patterns a central, established concept in theological aesthetics: the beauty of the Cross. Significantly, however, the beauty of the Cross displays the dynamics of the grotesque with stronger assertion and fuller implications: in the beauty of the Cross, *dissent* becomes *denial*. The annihilative force in ugliness is ultimately rejected as, in the beauty of the Cross, the contradiction of the repulsive with the beautiful is shown to be a defeat of the repulsive *by* the beautiful. By turning to the beauty of the Cross, we gain a theological accounting for the confrontation with ugliness that reveals its annihilative force—the portending

⁸⁷ Though "making a way out of no way" is the title of Chapter Three, I employ it here to identify a conceptual thread stitching together the narrative that I am weaving throughout this paper. Its usage here intimates themes later explored in Chapter Three.

negation—as utterly vapid, and as nothing. By turning to the beauty of the Cross, we gain a sturdy grounding that articulates the ethical power of the grotesque for black experience.

The Beauty of the Cross

M. Shawn Copeland writes that the “cross of Jesus of Nazareth demonstrates, at once, the redemptive potential of love and the power of evil and hatred.”⁸⁸ Aesthetically rendered, this contradiction is the combination of beauty and ugliness. Gesa Thiessen explains that the Cross is both the “utter distortion of divine-human beauty and yet its complete fulfilment.”⁸⁹ This paradox, she goes on to say, “is the basis of Christian faith and cannot be overlooked, not even and especially in a theological aesthetics.”⁹⁰ The Cross thus displays the same clash of elements, the “co-existence of the beautiful with the repulsive,” that is characteristic of the grotesque.⁹¹ Importantly, this paradox is central to theological coherence.

However, whereas in my reading of the grotesque to this point, its “clash of elements” manifests as a contention, a contest between two competing claims that includes a powerful *dissent* and objection to ugliness, in the grotesque as displayed in the Cross, this *dissent* becomes *denial*. The clash is present, but it is a clash in which there is no contest. The beauty of the Cross, an established concept in theological aesthetics,

⁸⁸ M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 124.

⁸⁹ Gesa Elsbeth Thiessen, “General Introduction,” in *Theological Aesthetics: A Reader* (London, UK: SCM Press, 2004), 6.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ Robert Doty as quoted in James Luther Adams and Wilson Yates, “Preface,” xv.

proclaims that the paradox of ugliness and beauty is also, always, ultimately, and ever the triumph of beauty. Beauty overwhelms and cancels out its opposition by virtue of its very being in the confrontation with ugliness that occurs in the Cross. By exploring the beauty of the Cross and drawing out its implications for theodicy, we see how the beauty of the Cross claims a conclusive triumph against ugliness. Importantly, this triumph occurs through the grotesque.

Richard Viladesau writes that “when we speak of the ‘beauty’ of the cross we are speaking in a purposively paradoxical way.”⁹² Viladesau identifies the paradoxical depiction of the Cross found in the New Testament. The crucifixion of the Johannine Jesus is his glorification – this Jesus gives himself up freely and without voiced objection.⁹³ Contrastingly, the synoptic gospels portray Jesus’s protracted agony in the garden, which is emphasized and furthered by the claim in Hebrews that Jesus learned obedience from his suffering.⁹⁴ Though there are various reasons for their divergent theologies, taken together these depictions present a theological tension and basic paradox: whether the cross is the work of human evil, or of divine plan. Aesthetically, whether it is ugly or beautiful.

Traditional theological assessments hold that it is both: that the cross is the “evil work of humanity [and] the resurrection is God’s triumphant response of victory over evil. The whole is the realization of God’s ‘plan.’”⁹⁵ In this assessment, evil does not

⁹² Richard Viladesau, “The Beauty of the Cross,” in *Theological Aesthetics after von Balthasar*, ed. Oleg Bychkov and James Fodor (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008), 135.

⁹³ John 12:20-33, John 10:18.

⁹⁴ Matthew 26:36-46; Mark 14:32-42; Luke 22:39-46; Hebrews 5:7-9.

⁹⁵ Viladesau, “The Beauty of the Cross,” 136.

feature as a tool God makes and uses: there is no assertion that God is the author of evil. Rather, the evil and suffering of the Cross are used by God and transformed by God into good through the Resurrection. Thus, God defeats evil and saves creation not by “miraculously taking evil out of the world, or by sparing his beloved from [evil], but by using [evil].”⁹⁶ Viladesau clarifies that it is “in this sense (and only in this sense) [that] the cross can be willingly accepted, and can be the symbol of salvation—even while being rejected as the symbol of sin and alienation.”⁹⁷ The Cross, then, depicts the confrontation between God and evil as one in which God defeats evil by transforming it into good. Evil occurs in the event of the Cross, but in that occurrence is also ultimately defeated, nullified, and neutralized (reduced to nothing), as its manifestation leads to the Resurrection.

The beauty of the Cross expresses this aesthetically. Along with Karl Barth and Hans Urs von Balthasar, Viladesau recognizes that speaking of the beauty of the Cross is “speak[ing] in terms of a ‘converted’ sense of beauty.”⁹⁸ This beauty is, substantially, the very Being of God and therefore manifests as the revelation of God. As Christ is “precisely in the event of the cross [,] the supreme revelation of God’s being,” Christ in the Crucifixion supremely displays the form, glory, and beauty of God.⁹⁹ The Cross demonstrates God’s way. As such, it reveals God’s beauty. The beauty of the Cross comprehends, expresses, and asserts this as true.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Viladesau, “The Beauty of the Cross,” 137.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

Significantly, in proclaiming the Crucifixion as beautiful, the beauty of the Cross speaks from an eschatological vantage point that sees and celebrates God's triumphant and conclusive defeat of evil *through* the Cross. The Cross is beautiful only, always, and ever in this light. The meaning of the Cross "must be seen always in the light of the resurrection...[for] the cross has beauty only as the expression of an act of love; and love is 'beautiful,' theologically speaking, precisely because it is finally not defeated, but victorious."¹⁰⁰ It is an eschatological understanding and affirmation of the beauty and victory of love that perceives and claims the beauty of the Cross. This understanding and affirmation is at work in Christian visual art depicting the beauty of the Cross, most of which, Viladesau finds, only expresses the meaning of the Cross by "visually combining two 'moments,' representing the cross in the aura of the resurrection."¹⁰¹ In so doing, this art eschatologically comprehends and depicts the beauty of God in the Crucifixion. The beauty of the Cross is thus a proleptic proclamation of the persistence and prevailing of God's Beauty in and through the ugliness that tries to snuff it out.

Because of its comprehension holding the Cross in light of the Resurrection, Viladesau finds that the beauty of the Cross "is already a kind of 'theodicy': it shows evil overcome, transformed into good."¹⁰² He writes that the cross

is beautiful only insofar as it represents Christ's ultimate faithfulness and self-gift to God, even to the point of death, and insofar as this act is given eternal validity by God's overcoming of death itself. That is, the cross only has beauty as the expression of an act of love; and love is "beautiful," theologically speaking, precisely because it is finally not defeated, but victorious.¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 143.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 143-144.

¹⁰² Ibid., 144.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 144.

He notes that there are dangers with this presentation. As with any theology that seeks to answer the problem of evil, the theodicy in the beauty of the Cross that proclaims “evil overcome” problematically risks short-circuiting the problem of evil, providing an answer in which “the negative moment is simply overlooked or is not felt with its full power.”¹⁰⁴ Nonetheless, he affirms its beauty.

While Viladesau’s language of self-sacrifice raises an alarm in light of the critique of surrogacy by womanist theologians, I find that there is a way to read the beauty of the Cross as meaningful for black experience.¹⁰⁵ Following and yet diverging in an important way from Viladesau’s argument, I claim that the theodicy in the beauty of the Cross intimates resources for perceiving the endurance of beauty, and the dissolution of ugliness. The eschatological frame asserted in the beauty of the Cross presents a powerful theodicy that connects to the grotesque in black experience.

I see the eschatological vantage point of the beauty of the Cross as locating and claiming beauty in the event of the Crucifixion—in the Cross itself. The eschatological vision in the beauty of the Cross, I find, does not simply claim the Cross as beautiful because good and beauty came after, in the Resurrection. It is not saying that the goodness and beauty of the Resurrection, which comes later, overwhelms the evil and ugliness of the Crucifixion. The Cross is not beautiful in hindsight. The Cross is beautiful proleptically, which I find means that the Cross is beautiful in its own event from an eschatological vantage point.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ See Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenges of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 60-83.

This understanding thus shifts the way in which we are to speak of and understand the Cross, its beauty, and relation to the Resurrection. With this viewpoint, I am rejecting temporal or normative “time-line” theodicies that proclaim the triumph of good over evil because good “has the last word.” Locating beauty proleptically in the event of the Cross itself, I reject notions that claim “having the last word” as the sole defining measure of success and power. The reality of the eschatological necessarily alters our understandings of triumph and time, of progression, finality, ultimacy, and end. As the end of *history*, the eschatological is a reality outside of time that irrupts as wholly different from our understanding and experience of being. The eschatological and proleptic beauty that is manifest in the Cross thus is not reasoned by a timeline, temporal rationale that makes it contingent upon the Resurrection. The two are essentially of a piece and cannot be separated, and both shine with the beauty of God that proclaims integrity, vibrancy, and basis in ultimacy. Though seen and understood “in the aura of the Resurrection,” the beauty of the Cross is not found only in the Resurrection—the Resurrection is not the correcting good to the problem-posing evil of the Crucifixion.¹⁰⁶ Rather, the Resurrection reveals, matches, and unfolds the beauty of the Cross, just as the beauty of the Cross establishes, prepares, and readies for the beauty of the Resurrection. There is a correlative beauty in both events whereby they mutually enhance and display the glory of God.

The question then arises what this viewpoint makes of the horror of the Crucifixion, the pain and suffering that manifest as ugliness and powerfully assert an annihilative force that, indeed, climaxes in death. Is this to be regarded as beautiful? This

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 143.

question sharpens in intensity and urgency when one understands that my rejection of “timeline” theodicies reject schemas that temporally accord some measure of final meaning to ugliness and evil. For example, this viewpoint I am claiming rejects Viladesau’s aforementioned fear of the risk of theodicy, not because I have resolved the risk but because I resist the temporal framing. His fear that “the negative moment is simply overlooked or is not felt with its full power” is not valid in my viewpoint because, ultimately, there is no “negative moment.”¹⁰⁷ Insofar as we experience it as temporal beings in a temporal reality, overwhelmingly yes, there is a negative moment. But, insofar as it presents as something that must needs be answered on the level of ultimacy, I find that, no, there is no negative moment. The beauty of the Cross denies any measure of finality to ugliness and evil. Importantly, it does not deny *reality* to evil and ugliness, but *finality* (ultimate reality)—ultimately, it is *not*. Locating the beauty of the Cross fully in the Cross, I identify and claim ugliness and evil as foundation-less and nothing. Ugliness and evil, pain and suffering, is not beautiful in the beauty of the Cross because, fundamentally, that beauty holds that it is *not*. I see the theodicy presented in the beauty of the Cross as one that asserts the nothingness of evil.

An understanding of paradox helpfully and relevantly introduces the nothingness of evil and ugliness. I earlier established contradiction as a functional structure in the grotesque that enables its dissent from ugliness. Geoffrey Galt Harpham identifies paradox, a particular type of contradiction, as relevant to and revealing for the grotesque. He writes that the grotesque is essentially similar to paradox in that paradox turns

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

language against itself by asserting both terms of a contradiction at once. Pursued for its own sake, paradox can seem vulgar or meaningless...pursued for the sake of wordless truth, it can rend veils and even, like the grotesque, approach the holy. Because it breaks the rules, paradox can penetrate to new and unexpected realms of experience discovering relationships syntax generally obscures. The sense of revelation accompanying a sudden enrichment of our symbolic repertory accounts for our experience of depth: it is very nearly synonymous with *profound*. But while we are in the paradox, before we have either dismissed it as meaningless or broken through to that wordless knowledge (which the namelessness of the grotesque image parodies), we are ourselves in “para” on the margin itself. To be in “para” then is a preludial condition which dissolves in the act of comprehension: like the grotesque, paradox is a sphinx who dies once its riddle is solved.¹⁰⁸

The analytical yield of paradox is thus that it shows meaning made *through* the presenting meaningfulness of contradiction. The seeming intractability, the arresting appearance of “no way out,” the initial and apparent meaningfulness that presents in paradox ultimately dissolves, as it is through the very structures of contradiction that meaning resumes, and resolves. Understanding paradox aesthetically, the apparent meaningfulness is the grotesque. It is the repulsive that threatens alongside the beautiful and seeks to eliminate beauty; it is the ugliness (violence, lynching, crucifixion) that seeks to eradicate the beauty (Christ’s body, black bodies). Though the perspective of the grotesque, like paradox, facilitates a comprehension that rejects the negation of ugliness, on some levels the efficacy of this rejection appears inconclusive. It is effective on the level of meaning and understanding, but does not necessarily translate to the level of materiality. The perspective of the grotesque is a dissent. As such, it can object, and that objection registers powerfully, but the concrete output may not match. The dissent Mamie Till Mobley voiced in beholding the lynched body of her son as grotesque

¹⁰⁸ Wilson Yates, “An Introduction to the Grotesque: Theoretical and Theological Considerations,” in *The Grotesque in Art & Literature: Theological Reflections* (New York: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), 32.

materialized as a powerful objection to the finality of ugliness in defining her son (he remained her “darling boy”); and yet, Emmett himself was still overcome by the annihilative force asserted against him. He was killed.

The beauty of the Cross enfleshes and realizes the functioning of paradox in a full and ultimate way. In the Cross, the *dissent* against meaninglessness becomes a total *denial* of meaninglessness, mimicking the structure of paradox wherein meaninglessness evaporates as meaning is made *through* contradiction. In the Cross, the meaninglessness encountered in horror (the annihilative force of ugliness) *happens within* the body of God. Meaninglessness and ugliness (evil) happen within God, the site of the fullness of meaning and beauty. God (Being) takes evil (non-being) into God’s Self. Through this paradoxical event, meaninglessness is captured within Meaning and thus Meaning is made out of it. Through this manifestation, non-being is made to Be. The annihilative threat of evil and ugliness, the negation that they menace, is fundamentally death; in the Cross, in Christ’s body, it is wholly and utterly destroyed. The language of the scriptures in expressing this point is striking and profound: 1 Corinthians 15:54, “Death has been swallowed up in victory.” Isaiah 25:8, “He will swallow up death forever.” The swallowing up of death, a defeat that happens *within* God, expresses this paradox-based rendering of theodicy that the beauty of the Cross proclaims.

Evil in this theodicy appears as fully and fundamentally rendered null and void—it is, as Barth terms it, “nothingness.”¹⁰⁹ God’s taking of evil (death, non-being) into God’s Self (Life, Being) reveals its total dissolution and destruction within God. In the

¹⁰⁹ Karl Barth, “III. Nothingness,” in *Church Dogmatics*, ed. Helmut Gollwitzer (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 134-147.

encounter with evil, God “involv[es] Himself to the utmost.”¹¹⁰ Significantly, this total dissolution is revealed as an inherent characteristic of evil. As “that which God does not will,” evil has as its inherent ontological reality a negation by the Author of all that is.¹¹¹ In the most fundamental and foundational way, it is *not*. Ever “rejected and overcome,”¹¹² evil *is* only insofar as it is its own “self-annulment.”¹¹³ I again emphasize a non-temporal understanding of this existence. It is not just that evil “contains the seeds of its own destruction,” growing over time into a bush that chokes itself to death, or cuts off its water supply, or somehow inhibits its own vitality. Though the phrasing of evil containing the seeds of its own destruction affirms the notion that evil is a “bad egg” from the get, it still gives evil a dose of meaning by structuring it and its demise diachronically. “Containing the seeds of its own destruction” implicitly claims that evil is, and *then* it is not. The nothingness of evil, by contrast, is such that it *is not*. “Not” fully encapsulates what evil is. Evil exists ultimately as “the eternal past, the eternal yesterday,” and thus, from the viewpoint of ultimacy and eschatology, its temporal reality is only ever an inverse negative that has no weight of finality.¹¹⁴ The “resurrection [of Jesus] disclosed the limits of evil” that were set and established on the Cross.¹¹⁵ For this Cross, beauty is defining, for beauty is all that *is*.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 137.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 140.

¹¹² Quoted from abstract to chapter. Barth, “III. Nothingness,” 134.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 141.

¹¹⁵ M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 124.

It is from this standpoint of finality that the beauty of the Cross has meaning for a theological aesthetics for black experience. For, from this standpoint, evil, pain, and suffering (ugliness) is asserted as real, but not finally so: as seen in paradox and in the grotesque, ugliness is real only insofar as it is *not*. The perspectival claim of ugliness, that of negation, is denied in the beauty of the Cross. Through the cruciform grotesque of the beauty of the Cross, a theological aesthetics for black experience entails a powerful theodicy with several components.

First, this theodicy demonstrates God's Personal solidarity with the oppressed and the lynched, with those assaulted—even and especially to the point of death—by ugliness and its annihilative force. God “involv[es] Himself to the utmost” in the confrontation with evil.¹¹⁶ Meaninglessness made tangible is the incommunicability of pain.¹¹⁷ In the Cross, we see this very incommunicability of pain become consecrated, in a way that denies the facile resolution of redemptive suffering and instead emphasizes and intensifies the threat of evil that makes the Cross a sacrifice, not *to* the holy, but *of* the holy. Evil and suffering are real in their opposition to goodness and to God, and in their intrusion into life.

However, in that precise reality, in that very opposition and intrusion, evil and suffering are shown in the beauty of the Cross to have no real finality. They *are*, only insofar as they are nothing. The beauty of the Cross makes this claim from its

¹¹⁶ Barth, “III. Nothingness,” 137 and cf. Jacquelyn Grant's articulation of God as co-sufferer in *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1989).

¹¹⁷ I make this claim as an extension of Elaine Scarry's finding that “pain is the equivalent in felt-experience of what is unfeeling in death.” Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 7. As quoted in James A. Noel, *Black Religion and the Imagination of Matter in the Atlantic World* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 64.

eschatological vantage point perceiving evil and ugliness as nothingness. In the Cross, the incommunicability of pain (meaninglessness) and the very being of God (Meaning) collapse in time, space, and unified existence to capture evil within the ineffable Divine. The theodicy of the beauty of the Cross thus affirms that “God giv[es] [black] people meaning beyond history” that ultimately denies the assaults of ugliness and negation encountered in this life.¹¹⁸ Significantly, this eschatological grounding is not an otherworldly escapism, but is a response to the present invoking Christ’s denial of ugliness in and through the Cross. In holding an eschatological vantage point, the beauty of the Cross asserts an ultimate and eschatological justice, goodness, and reality for black being.

I recognize potential pitfalls of this view, particularly for black experience. To the critique that such talk of nothingness lapses into metaphysics in the face of real and present danger, I, with Copeland, hold that there is no getting around metaphysics of Christianity.¹¹⁹ The only possible answer to evil is Christ, who is metaphysical and incarnate, proleptically and powerfully Victor as the Crucified. That the beauty of the Cross is only seen from the vantage point of eschatological being claims that the only meaning to be asserted in the face of evil is ultimately God’s triumph in love, an eschatological reality.

Another critique is that this talk of finality denying reality to some part of temporal experience creates a chasm between Creation and God that maligns and

¹¹⁸ James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 26.

¹¹⁹ “Yet, even if problematic, the ‘implicitly metaphysical’ character of Christianity cannot be dismissed.” M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 4.

diminishes the reality of created existence. I respond to this critique by claiming that created existence is fundamentally upheld in God and God's ultimacy. There is a scaffolding of support, not a gap between realms. The beauty of Creation follows from the beauty of God; the ugliness in Creation—lynching, double-consciousness, and other assaults in black experience—are oppositional to God as what God does not will. Following Barth's insight that both what God wills *and* what God does not will manifests as meaningful, the nothingness of evil *is* in this negative regard.¹²⁰

This theodicy does not simply present the view that ugliness does not have the last word in black experience; it presents the view that, given the cruciform grotesque, ugliness ultimately has no "word."¹²¹ The theological aesthetics of the Cross allow us to see from the standpoint of Being and Beauty that is rooted in ultimacy. Reading this eschatologically, the voice of evil is silenced before it can begin to sound. The finality of

¹²⁰ "Nothingness has no existence and cannot be known except as the object of God's activity as always a holy activity. The biblical conception, as we now recall it, is as follows. God elects, and therefore rejects what He does not elect. God wills, and therefore opposes what He does not will. He says Yes, and therefore says No to that to which He has not said Yes. He works according to His purpose, and in so doing rejects and dismisses all that gainsays it. Both of these activities, grounded in His election and decision, are necessary elements in His sovereign action. He is Lord both on the right hand and on the left. It is only on this basis that nothingness 'is,' but on this basis it really 'is.'" Barth, "III. Nothingness," 140. Catherine Keller's explanation of decision and actualization in light of Creation is helpful here: "Any actualization takes the form of a decision, a choice for this and not some other possibility...the medieval philosopher Nachmanides claims that the *bara* of Genesis 1.1—'to create'—means "'to cut away' (*ligzor*) or 'set a boundary' (*velehum gvut nigzar*)." 'Decision' [means] in 'its root sense [,] 'cutting away' (*de/cisere*, as 'scissors')." Catherine Keller, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2003), 160.

¹²¹ Barth's comment that "If Jesus is Victor, the last word must always be secretly the first, namely, that nothingness has no perpetuity," serendipitously connects to the phrasing I have employed in this discussion. However, his phrasing allows for some words to be voiced by evil, though they are neither the first nor the last and thus have no lasting meaning. While this may be the better phrasing for describing the reality and nothingness of evil as met in our temporal experience (the temporal nature of language poses intriguing implications here), my phrasing stresses the final vapidness of evil, displaying it as ever and always—ultimately—rendered mute. Barth, "III. Nothingness," 147.

the thud of ugliness, the weight of the offense of evil, is always and ever usurped, as in a vacuum. *Nothing* is the remainder in God's justice.

That justice is thereby revealed in aesthetics brings us back to Alice Walker's essay that began this chapter. "But Yet and Still the Cotton Gin Kept On Working..." examines the ugliness in black experience as, ultimately, the injustice in black experience. The ethical meaning and import of aesthetic valuations of blackness is the pressing presenting issue in Walker's essay connecting double-consciousness to lynching. In closing this chapter, I return to this essay and find in it support for the eschatological theodicy I have argued to be revealed in the beauty of the Cross.

The letter from B. E. F. that begins Walker's account in "But Yet and Still the Cotton Gin Kept on Working..." contains a reference to Job. In introducing the lynchings that have plagued her community, B. E. F. writes, "I have to say that we are in a mean world down here in Amite County. It makes me say like Jose, the Lord giveth and the Lord taketh, so blesseth be the Lord."¹²² This reference to Job is not insignificant. James Cone cites that Job is one of the biblical figures black people have connected with most intimately, in light of his biography of suffering and his questioning *why*.¹²³ However, it is not the questioning of Job that B. E. F. echoes, but the answering—the faith that functions as answer to the pressing question of why. I read B. E. F. as invoking a Joban theodicy. While the theodicy B. E. F. presents posits God as the Author of evil (of the "taking away"), I find that her larger framing point is that both good and evil ultimately

¹²² Walker, "But Yet and Still the Cotton Gin Kept on Working..." 22. "Jose" is Job; B. E. F. references Job 1:21.

¹²³ James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 19, 20, 68, 123.

testify to the Being of God. This frame fits with the theodicy I sourced in the beauty of the Cross where evil and ugliness testify to God in their very nothingness, as that which God does not will. This frame also fits with the Joban theodicy recounted in the lyrics of the commonly sung gospel song, “He’s an On Time God.” These lyrics proclaim: “He’s an on time God, yes He is / Oh oh oh oh / On time God, yes He is / Job said, ‘He may not come when you want Him, but He’ll be there right on time, I tell you He’s an on time God, yes He is.’” The understanding of theodicy expressed by this song is one that champions “God’s time” as “on time,” compared to our own. It asserts this in the strongest way possible by putting these words in Job’s mouth. Like the Cross, it proclaims the triumph of eschatology not just over history, but *in* it, as God will “be there right on time.” That eschatology is the proper vantage point for theodicy grounds eschatology as the basis for justice and for beauty. The eschatological nature of beauty and justice is asserted in the theodicy of nothingness I extrapolated within the beauty of the Cross; it is to these themes that I turn next.

Chapter 3

Making a Way Out of No Way

In “The Civil Rights Movement: What Good Was It?,” Alice Walker responds to a common criticism heard in the late 1960s that asks, challengingly, if it would have “been better . . . to leave the Negro people as they were, unawakened, unallied with one another, unhopeful about what to expect for their children in some future world.”¹²⁴ Citing the lack of socioeconomic change and the rise in conservative political leaders after the Civil Rights Movement, this criticism argues that the Movement was ineffective, and did more harm than good. Walker powerfully rebukes the challenge, and dismantles the understanding of justice on which it rests. Identifying the good done by the Civil Rights Movement as material, *but not only*, Walker presents her understanding of justice as akin to the beautiful. The good gained from the Civil Rights Movement, she explains, can be neither quantified nor reversed. It is not a utilitarian ethic by which we grasp the justice of the Civil Rights Movement, but an aesthetic one. The changed understandings of self and world that black people gained through the Movement are, she declares, its justice.

In this chapter, I explore the justice of the Civil Rights Movement as Walker portrays it and connect it to a contemporaneous, related cultural movement regarding notions of beauty among black people. Though the “Black is beautiful!” political movement emerged in full force as part of the Black Power Movement, widespread

¹²⁴ Alice Walker, “The Civil Rights Movement: What Good Was it?,” in *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1983), 121.

changes in how black people understood their beauty occurred throughout the twentieth century, especially during the Civil Rights era and later.¹²⁵ I find that the same understanding of justice Walker identifies within the Civil Rights Movement exists within the cultural movement surrounding black beauty. By claiming the ethical force of the Civil Rights Movement as aesthetic, and claiming the impact of the movement around black beauty as ethical, I bring to the surface two themes threaded throughout this paper—the relation of aesthetics and ethics, and beauty as eschatological—and explore them in black experience.

The Civil Rights Movement: A Beautiful Justice

Alice Walker opens her essay on the Civil Rights Movement by describing “an old black lady from Mississippi,” who, when told that “the Civil Rights Movement was dead,” replied that “the Civil Rights Movement was like herself, ‘if it’s dead, it shore ain’t ready to lay down!’”¹²⁶ For this woman, Walker writes, “the Civil Rights Movement will never be over as long as her skin is black.”¹²⁷ This statement is not an effort to exclude non-black people from the persistent spirit of the Civil Rights Movement, but rather a point to introduce the meaning of the Movement that she asserts in this essay: deeply personal, and deeply connected to the meaning and material fact of blackness. With this materiality, Walker does not claim blackness as an ontologically essential reality, but emphasizes blackness as indelibly shaping one’s experience in the world. As

¹²⁵ See Maxine Leeds Craig, *Ain’t I a Beauty Queen? Black Women, Beauty, and the Politics of Race* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2002).

¹²⁶ Walker, “The Civil Rights Movement: What Good Was It?,” 119-120.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 120.

stated in Chapter Two, race is not only color, but color is inseparably bound up with it. The melanin difference *matters* when it comes to personal experience of the Civil Rights Movement in 1960s America, and beyond. To explain, Walker offers her autobiography as narrative data.

Walker's mother again features centrally in this narrative; this time, however, she is not moral exemplar of beauty but is the juxtaposed subject against which Walker makes her moral and aesthetic claims. Having gotten used to watching afternoon soap operas in the house where she worked as a maid, Walker's mother saved and scrounged to purchase a television set in 1960 to enjoy during her days off. "Nothing," Walker writes, "could satisfy her on days when she did not work but a continuation of her 'stories.'"¹²⁸ These "stories" were dramatic tales of the stylish, wealthy, and white. Walker recounts the rapt attention, desire, and fantasy with which her mother watched the soap operas, picturing herself as one of them and never as one of the near-invisible black maids who stood at the margins of the screen:

She placed herself in every scene she saw, with her braided hair turned blond, her two hundred pounds compressed into a sleek size-seven dress, her rough dark skin smooth and *white*. Her husband became "dark and handsome," talented, witty, urbane, charming. And when she turned to look at my father sitting near her in his sweat shirt with his smelly feet raised on the bed to "air," there was always a tragic look of surprise on her face. Then she would sigh and go out to the kitchen looking lost and unsure of herself.¹²⁹

Walker's depiction of her mother reveals and resists not just her fantasy, but the way her fantasy intruded onto reality. "Once," Walker writes, "[my mother] asked me in

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 123.

a moment of vicarious pride and despair, if I didn't think that 'they' were 'jest naturally smarter, prettier, better.'"¹³⁰ Walker expresses painful irony at the fact that her mother, "who never got rid of any of her children, never cheated on my father, was never a hypocrite if she could help it, and never even tasted liquor," believed that "she did not exist compared to 'them'"—the "Beautiful White People" (so-termed by Walker) who, in her soap operas, lived lives of "pregnancy, abortion, hypocrisy, infidelity, and alcoholism."¹³¹ Her mother, "a truly great woman who raised eight children of her own and half a dozen of the neighbors' without a single complaint," saw herself as *less than*.¹³² The incongruity is blatant and indicates double-consciousness, as does the continuum of morality, intellect, and aesthetic as a racialized measure of being. Beauty, conveyed along certain lines of hair color, skin color, wealth, and dress size, mediates an intellectual and moral superiority as the mark of "true" humanity. This superiority, in turn, is "natural," normalized by a beauty whose pretensions to normalcy hide its own fictitious construction in the extreme.

It is against such a backdrop that Walker experiences the justice of the Civil Rights Movement. She writes that after "half-heartedly watching [her] mother's soap operas and wondering whether there wasn't something more to be asked of life, the Civil Rights Movement came into" her life.¹³³ Encountering on television Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. getting arrested for marching in Alabama, Walker speaks of an immediate

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Ibid., 124.

transformation through which she “began to be alive.”¹³⁴ Until that time, she had no sense of the “creative possibilities” of herself, of others, and of life.¹³⁵ But after encountering the Movement, “[t]he influence that [her] mother’s soap operas might have had on [her] became impossible.”¹³⁶ Describing the impact and change, Walker uses language of birth, miracle, transformation, of being “called to life,” having her “soul stirred,” “[f]alling] in love,” and becoming.¹³⁷

I have fought and kicked and fasted and prayed and cursed and cried myself to the point of existing. It has been like being born again, literally. Just “knowing” has meant everything to me. Knowing has pushed me out into the world, into college, into places, into people.¹³⁸

Walker’s conversion language is unmistakable and, along with her description of the process of “being born again,” expresses the deep religious and spiritual meaning of this experience. The content of her transformation, the substance of the change she experienced, was the knowledge of something more. It was not the *achievement* of equality that transformed her life, but the *knowledge* of the *possibility* of fighting for it. It was not the success of Dr. King’s struggle for freedom that changed her, but the sense that there was a struggle to be had in the first place. Knowledge and awareness, “an awakened faith in the newness and imagination of the human spirit,” enabled possibility and *this*, she explains, was the justice of the Movement she experienced:¹³⁹

¹³⁴ Ibid., 122.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 124.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 122, 129, 124.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 125.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

If knowledge of my condition is all the freedom I get from a “freedom movement,” it is better than unawareness, forgottenness, and hopelessness, the existence that is like the existence of a beast. Man only truly lives by knowing; otherwise he simply performs, copying the daily habits of others but conceiving nothing of his creative possibilities as a man, and accepting someone else’s superiority and his own misery...Part of what existence means to me is knowing the difference between what I am now and what I was then...To know is to exist: to exist is to be involved, to move about, to see the world with my own eyes. This, at least, the Movement has given me.¹⁴⁰

The justice of the Movement for Walker is awareness, knowledge, and possibility. It is, in a word, hope.

Walker claims for black people at large this understanding of the justice of the Civil Rights Movement. While those who challenge whether the Civil Rights Movement did any good cite “statistics supposedly showing...advanced segregation,” “point to a gain in conservative politicians,” “speak of ghetto riots [and] [racist] policemen,” and declare general social fragmentation, they do not examine the personal lives of black people.¹⁴¹ They are blind to the “human attitudes among Negroes that have undergone terrific changes,” the “changes in personal lives because of the influence of people in the Movement.”¹⁴² They do not see the inability of “Negroes [to] rever[t] to their former *silent* second-class status.”¹⁴³ They miss the fact that, whereas “[b]efore, there had seemed to be no real reason for struggling beyond the effort for daily bread [;] [n]ow there was a chance at that other that Jesus meant when He said we could not live by bread

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 121-122, 125-126.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 120.

¹⁴² Ibid., 120-121.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 121.

alone.”¹⁴⁴ *This*, Walker professes over and against the critic, is the justice of the Civil Rights Movement.

Walker’s description of justice as knowledge, transformation, and animating, life-giving change illuminates it as aesthetic—as beauty. Elaine Scarry’s phenomenological exploration of beauty in *On Beauty and Being Just* supports this finding. Scarry identifies knowledge (an awakening to error), transformation (initiation into unprecedented newness), and life-giving force as among the defining characteristics of beauty.¹⁴⁵ Her analysis allies the structural manifestation of beauty, its nature as phenomena, with justice. Transformative, salvific, and awakening to error, the justice of the Civil Rights Movement for Walker can be counted as beauty.

The background against which Walker’s narrative unfolds, her mother’s misplaced adoration of the “Beautiful White People,” further clarifies this understanding of justice as beautiful. In casting her mother as juxtaposition for her experience of beautiful justice, Walker casts light on the ugliness of the judgments guiding her mother. She draws a contrast between her mother’s experience and her own to argue for the aesthetic goodness of the Movement as she experienced it. The Movement, she argues, is beautiful because of its justice. It is just because of its beauty. Its unquantifiable and lasting goodness—its justice—is not of material things, but of virtues: courage, dignity, freedom, purpose, and being.

What Dr. King promised was not a ranch-style house and an acre of manicured lawn for every black man, but jail and finally freedom. He did not promise two

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 125.

¹⁴⁵ Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).

cars for every family, but the courage one day for all families everywhere to walk without shame and unafraid on their own feet...He did not say we had to become carbon copies of the white American middle class; but he did say we had the right to become whatever we wanted to become.¹⁴⁶

Importantly, Walker does not assert this understanding of justice *against* a view of justice as socioeconomic and political, as the gain of safety and security through food, money, shelter, water, and political rights. On the contrary, she urgently links the two. She recognizes with chilling sobriety the reality of poverty—"I went to school with children who ate red dirt"—and of other evils forming the "treacherous world [in which Negroes] live."¹⁴⁷ She characterizes and confronts the world as one in which bodily, psychic, spiritual, and social harm form ever-present threats to black bodies, minds, and souls.¹⁴⁸ To forget these threats, even "for a minute [,] would be fatal."¹⁴⁹ It is because of, not in spite of, these real and present physical threats that she asserts a justice encompassing and exceeding the material.

Walker's invocation of the anthem of the Movement captures the force of her meaning and argument: "'We Shall Overcome' is just a song to most Americans, *but we must do it. Or die.*"¹⁵⁰ The "it" is not overcome and achieve justice on the plane of solely the political, socioeconomic, and material. That had not happened and, given the state of things in the late 1960s (or today) for black Americans, it was not likely to happen

¹⁴⁶Walker, "The Civil Rights Movement: What Good Was It?," 125.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 126, 127.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 127.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 128.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

anytime soon. The fact that this justice had not, and likely would not soon, happen does not pose the death that Walker fears, for the “it” in “we must do it, or die” is not the achievement of this justice. The “it” black Americans must do is overcome on a higher—or, rather, deeper—plane.¹⁵¹ They must achieve justice on the plane of being, of knowing, of existential *place* in the world. The “it” black Americans *must do* is hope.

Without hope, they will die. Without hope, they will, like Walker’s mother, *lessen* themselves. Buying the old, ugly lie of black ugliness, they will diminish the fullness of their own being and vainly reduce that which cannot be reduced (the irreducibility of black being remains, despite assaults from the Other and misguided acceptance of these assaults from the Self). Without hope, black people will illusively contravene both nature and truth, existing as Walker did before her call to life, living “innocuous lives that resemble death.”¹⁵² Sitting at the heart of this beautiful justice, hope emerges as salvific. Its saving power lies not in its profit of fantasy, but in its real and present expediency as an aesthetic category and an ethical virtue.

Black is Beautiful: An Ethical Beauty

I identify a similar dynamic within the transformation of self and beauty that occurred as a cultural movement among black Americans in the mid-twentieth century. Concurrent with the Civil Rights Movement and emerging in full force at the high water mark of the Black Power Movement, the “Black is beautiful!” transformation took shape in African American life through new hairstyles, forms of dress, naming traditions, and

¹⁵¹ See Catherine Keller, *Face of the Deep* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2003). Through her theomic theology, Keller theorizes a depth that evades the binaried heteronomy of transcendence and yet moves towards the ultimacy of being transcendence claims.

¹⁵² Walker, “The Civil Rights Movement: What Good Was It?” 122.

more. A new aesthetic, one that valorized blackness, was self-consciously embraced by many throughout black communities. In *Ain't I a Beauty Queen? Black Women, Beauty, and the Politics of Race*, Maxine Leeds Craig examines this evolution of beauty standards and collects oral histories recounting its personal impact. By considering the personal and communal narratives of transformation, we see that the ethical force of this aesthetic movement demonstrates a sense of justice similar to that which Walker identifies within the Civil Rights Movement. In this movement, justice was experienced, and achieved, through beauty.

The context for these first-person accounts is complex. As explored in Chapter Two, ugliness forms the backdrop for the very meaning of blackness in the West. A “widespread association of dark skin, kinky hair, and [perceived] African facial features with ugliness, comedy, sin, or danger” characterized the view from the Other, and thus inhabited the world in which blacks were forced to live.¹⁵³ As reflected in the title of Chapter Two, it did so malignantly, insidiously influencing the views black people had of themselves. This reality is strikingly apparent in the language used by some black women in the face of the changing understandings of beauty. In the late 1960s, generational and cultural contests ensued in many a black family and community over the appropriateness of new black hairstyles and dress. When *Ebony* magazine, a major mainstream black publication and one of the last to celebrate the new understandings of black beauty, featured models wearing Afros in a 1968 issue, readers sent letters to the editor that expressed their horror and disapproval. Shirley Drake wrote, “Each time I walk down the

¹⁵³ Leeds Craig, *Ain't I a Beauty Queen*, 24.

street and see another woman of my race wearing one of those hideous ‘naturals’ I am so humiliated I could cry.”¹⁵⁴ Another reader, Mrs. K. E. Williams wrote, “I am attempting to rear my children to be proud of their race...all the ‘naturals’ do is accentuate the negatives.”¹⁵⁵ The association of natural hair with “the negatives” is clearly seen, and consciously articulated, in this reader response. However, this response also reveals that black understandings of self prior to the “Black is beautiful!” movement were not without pride. Leeds Craig emphasizes that “[a]n older generation of women saw no contradiction between straightening their hair and racial pride.”¹⁵⁶ Indeed, the efficacy and power of the respectability politics that shaped black American life throughout the twentieth century, and led into the Civil Rights Movement, literally ran on pride. Thus, the context in which “Black is beautiful!” took root is one in which pride was present, and markedly so. However, these earlier forms of black dignity “incorporated elements that could not fit into later conceptualizations of black pride.”¹⁵⁷ One such element was shame at certain black features, such as hair. Though “[n]either uniform racial pride and resistance nor internalized shame adequately characterizes pre-civil rights era black communities,” as Mrs. Drake’s statement shows, there was strong sense of attendant shame directed at self.

This is the context in which the transformation of self and beauty in “Black is beautiful!” occurred. The oral histories Leeds Craig gathers demonstrate a powerful sense of movement and freedom of self gained in beauty. Uita Blackwell, a young woman in

¹⁵⁴ As quoted in Leeds Craig, *Ain’t I a Beauty Queen*, 36.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 162.

Lula Mississippi, recounts that SNCC volunteer Muriel Tillinghast “was the first black woman I saw with a nappy head smiling.”¹⁵⁸ Tillinghast and other young female Civil Rights activists who were wearing natural hairstyles impressed Blackwell with not just their hair, but their whole sense of self: their manner of speaking, their confidence, and their knowledge of black people of whom she had never heard. This new beauty “drew [Blackwell] into the movement and transformed her life and her world.”¹⁵⁹ She was changed, and ethically awakened and engaged, by encountering these women.

Juadine Henderson’s recollection also demonstrates beauty as a way of being related to powerful transformation. Henderson was fifteen when she went to participate in a voter registration workshop in Greenwood, Mississippi in 1963. Though she “wasn’t sure what the workshop was going to be about [,] [she] knew it was the movement and [she] wanted to do it.”¹⁶⁰ Like Blackwell, she was struck by the manner of being the young people leading the workshop exhibited. The second day of the workshop, those in attendance received news that Medgar Evers had been killed. A mass meeting was organized at a church that morning. Many people attended and Henderson describes that,

it was a tremendous feeling of being together with other people. It was like what I imagine Christian people talk about when they talk about being converted. All of a sudden you really did understand what the movement was about, what unity was about. What believing in yourself and other people was about.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 85.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ As quoted in Leeds Craig, *ibid.*

¹⁶¹ As quoted in Leeds Craig, *Ain’t I a Beauty Queen*, 86.

Like Walker, Henderson employs conversion language to describe not just what she felt in becoming a part of the Civil Rights Movement, but to describe what, through that, she came to see that the Movement was “about.” Its purpose, its unity, its product of believing in oneself and in other people, was “about” this transformation. Henderson goes on to describe how a changed understanding of self and beauty followed from this conversion:

I stopped straightening my hair as soon as I graduated from high school [three years after her induction into the Movement]...It was not the politics that it became later on. No, what happened is I had seen an album cover of Odetta. And it was amazing to me that her hair was really pretty. And I thought, that’s interesting. She doesn’t straighten her hair. Then somebody else came to Batesville with an Afro and I thought her hair looks really pretty. Just think, you can get it cut and you don’t have to do anything. You don’t have to get tortured by cousin Maude.¹⁶²

Henderson’s political engagement enabled her to see beauty differently; it facilitated a new aesthetic. Yet, in this linkage, Henderson emphasizes that the content of this new aesthetic was not just political. It was a personal realization of beauty for herself. Leeds Craig writes that when Henderson “adopted the natural style, she was simply enjoying being beautiful...[o]thers may have worn naturals to express political commitments, but Henderson wore hers to be beautiful.”¹⁶³ Henderson’s emphasis underscores the satisfaction of aesthetics, the personal delight in beauty that emerged and changed herself.

However, Henderson’s trajectory of experience, from political engagement to a new sense of beauty, demonstrates the political implications of her aesthetic

¹⁶² As quoted in Leeds Craig, *ibid.*, 86-87.

¹⁶³ Leeds Craig, *Ain’t I a Beauty Queen*, 87.

transformation. It is difficult, if not nearly impossible, to untangle the personal and the political, the aesthetic and the ethical. Thus, in Henderson's example, we see the political import and power of the aesthetic transformation of self and beauty. It is precisely in its manifestation and meaning as a personal experience, rather than a political statement, that Henderson's experience of beauty is revolutionary. Such personal transformation is its political power, and was realized as such by activists in the Civil Rights Movement. It is no accident that this widespread transformation of self and beauty among black people accompanied and bridged the Civil Rights Movement and the rise of Black Power. Leeds Craig writes that "themes of self-awareness, self-love, and self-esteem as political projects were present early in the literature inspired by the Civil Rights Movement, and their influence would continue to grow."¹⁶⁴ Personal transformation was understood as being so powerful that it challenged organized protest as the way to gain ground politically.¹⁶⁵ As such, links between the individual and the communal appear in this aesthetic movement. Another activist describes the transformation, noting its power and meaning as personal and communal: "We were like flowers, blossoming. We were finally coming into our own beauty. It was a common experience. In that sense it brought us together."¹⁶⁶ Leeds Craig writes that in these experiences, "vanity, the individual pleasure of self-acceptance, and a moral stance vis-à-vis the race converged."¹⁶⁷ In these experiences, the dissipation of old standards of beauty "felt magical. It was the kind of magic that removes a curse of a lie to reveal a form of goodness and truth that was both

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 89.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 90.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 92.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

personal and political.”¹⁶⁸ This goodness and truth, conveyed through aesthetics, was ethical on a mass scale, encompassing the whole of the black community as the “meaning of black had been thoroughly transformed by the revelation that black was beautiful.”¹⁶⁹ Manifest visibly in hair, “Black is beautiful!” had meaning that fundamentally changed outer appearances as well as inner realities.

Notably, Afros and natural hairstyles became less common just a few years later. In the waning years of the Black Power Movement and after, new hairstyles appeared, along with a marked and overwhelming return to hair straightening as norm in the 1980s and 1990s. Yet, I claim that this change was not a reversion. Leeds Craig notes that “although the natural lost its communicative power, the hairstyle, and other 1960s [accoutrements] of black militancy, were merely the decade’s shorthand for racial pride [and] were replaced by an ever-changing repertoire of black language, performance, and style that continue to be vehicles for a racial solidarity that transcends fixed expressions.”¹⁷⁰ In addition to this sociological interpretation, I make an aesthetic and ethical interpretation in claiming that the beauty that was gained from the transformed understandings of personal aesthetics was one that could not be taken away. I contend that the return to straightening was not an un-doing of the justice of beauty, for, like the transformation experienced in the beautiful justice of the Civil Rights Movement, this transformation could not be undone. The justice of beauty in the “Black is beautiful!” movement was akin to consciousness-raising, an embodied transformation of self gained

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 108.

through knowledge and experience. Its goodness, though tangibly manifest in physicality and form, could not be physically withdrawn. Like birth, that metaphor employed by Walker and others, this justice viscerally *mattered*, with a meaning included but went beyond the material.

Beauty, Justice, Transformation, and Hope: Eschatological Ethics

The foregoing accounts of the Civil Rights Movement and the cultural transformation of self and beauty reveal beauty and justice in black experience as linked, with transformation and hope as emergent and connected concepts. Both the beautiful justice, as depicted by Walker, and the ethical beauty, as depicted in the oral histories, rely on and facilitate a profound experience of transformation. In so doing, both produce a strong sense of hope. By investigating the connections between beauty, justice, transformation, and hope, I identify the eschatological nature of an ethics that results from a theological aesthetics for black experience.

As seen in both Walker's essay and in the personal histories shared by Leeds Craig, the justice that occurred for black people in the Civil Rights and self-and-beauty movements was fundamentally predicated upon transformation. The aesthetic quality of the justice Walker asserts in her essay contains within it as essential the experience of being transformed. Walker writes, "Part of what existence means to me is knowing the difference between what I am now and what I was then."¹⁷¹ Significantly, it is not just "being what she is now" that provides the justice of Walker. It is knowing and experiencing the difference between past and present reality—having an experience of

¹⁷¹ Walker, "The Civil Rights Movement: What Good Was It?," 125.

transformation—that provides the justice Walker claims. Similarly, in the Leeds Craig narratives, it is not simply “having beauty” that provides the goodness of the movement. If that were so, then white people and others who had a prior sense of beauty would have a similar claim to the justice described by the oral histories and by Alice Walker. Crucially, the heart of the justice Walker and Leeds Craig depict resides in the nature of the Civil Rights Movement and the “Black is beautiful!” movement as transformation. The language in both of an experience of coming alive captures the transformative nature of this justice. Theologically interpreted, this language of coming alive points to an eschatological justice. The sense of a move from death to life appears as a taste of God’s triumph that occurs archetypally in the Resurrection, proleptically in the beauty of the Cross, and fully and finally in the eschaton. The transformation that occurred in the beautiful justice of the Civil Rights Movement and in the ethical beauty of the “black is beautiful!” movement is thus eschatologically meaningful.

The transformation that occurred through beauty within both movements also produced hope. As Walker explains, the experience of transformation in the Civil Rights Movement “gave us hope for tomorrow. It called us to life. Because we live, it can never die.”¹⁷² So, too, in the “Black is beautiful!” movement did the experience of transformation in beauty yield hope, producing a new sense of the possibilities of self. In contrast to the shame sharply felt in the assault of ugliness, hope unbounded permeated being in the transformation that resulted from beauty. Jürgen Moltmann’s “theology of hope” grounds hope with an eschatological foundation.¹⁷³ Moltmann connects the vision

¹⁷² Ibid., 129.

¹⁷³ Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope* (New York, NY: SCM Press Ltd, 1975).

of God seen in the Cross with hope, transformation, and eschatological consummation.¹⁷⁴ The revelation of God in the Crucifixion leads to hope and transformation of self and world. In this understanding, the beauty of the Cross is radically affirmed with hope-full implications for our lives today. Hope is both proleptically living into the transformation that is eschatologically anticipatory, and it is a result of the eschatologically revelatory transformation in the beauty of Cross. Hope thereby emerges in relation to beauty as both the result of its justice, and the proleptic anticipation of it. As Walker states, “We must do it, or die.”¹⁷⁵ Theologically comprehending this statement, hope aligns with eschatology as the means by which we live, the *modus vivendi* by which we *are*.

Both transformation and hope, then, manifest as eschatological reality. The ethical yield of both hope and transformation frames justice as eschatological as well. The justice experienced through beauty is not one whose meaning is simply the the provision of material goods, or the awarding of political rights. These are essential components in the systems of justice we construct and uphold, but they do not exhaust justice, especially not in a theological understanding. As seen in Chapter One in the patristic formulations that perceived beauty as the teleological end of virtue, and as seen in Chapter Two in the theodicy revealed in the beauty of the Cross, justice appears as an eschatological reality. A spiritual M. Shawn Copeland cites and connects to the Eucharist affirms this notion of an eschatological justice: “He have been wid us, Jesus/ He still wid us, Jesus / He will be wid us, Jesus / Be wid us to the end.”¹⁷⁶ This spiritual reflects an experiencing of hope as

¹⁷⁴ “Jurgen Moltmann, from *Theology and Joy*,” in *Theological Aesthetics: A Reader*, edited by Gesa Elsbeth Thiessen (London, England: SCM Press, 2004), 334.

¹⁷⁵ Walker, “The Civil Rights Movement: What Good Was It?,” 128.

¹⁷⁶ As quoted in M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 6.

eschatologically powerful and meaningful. Copeland connects this spiritual to the Lord's Supper by finding that its eschatological hope is made tangible and nourishing in Eucharist. Reinforcing the links I have made in this paper, I locate the tangibility and nourishment of eschatological hope in beauty, invoking the beauty of the Cross and claiming the "breaking of body and pouring of blood" on the Cross as beauty that defeats and denies ugliness and evil. Crucially, this event is justice, too, as supported by a theodicy of nothingness. The Eucharist, justice, and beauty all come into view as the tangible realization of eschatological hope. The understanding of justice as eschatological is thereby not a denial of the possibility of justice in this world, but a deep affirmation of it. The righting of wrongs as we experience them have meaning and reality based in ultimacy, within the very Person of God.

The utility and urgent necessity of an eschatological understanding of justice for black experience was proclaimed and defended by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. In *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, James H. Cone recounts how, against Reinhold Niebuhr's theology of proximate justice, King pursued a vision of ultimate justice. Though both Niebuhr and King believed that love exists in society as justice, Niebuhr saw the agape love revealed in the Cross as "an unrealizable goal in history."¹⁷⁷ Niebuhr's realism informed a framework in which history was determinative and yielded a "proximate justice," a balance of power between different powerful groups as the most we can expect and hope to achieve in the world.¹⁷⁸ King, on the other hand, claimed and pursued an ultimate justice. Cone writes, "King never spoke about *proximate* justice or

¹⁷⁷ James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 71.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

about what was *practically* possible to achieve. That would have killed the revolutionary spirit in the African American community. Instead, King focused on and often achieved what Niebuhr said was impossible.”¹⁷⁹ Freedom—that which seemed impossible and certainly did not feature as a goal in any proximate system of justice—was the focus King’s fight. Eschatological vision lies clearly in “I Have a Dream” and “I Have Been to the Mountaintop,” and in the actions King took and the justice he pursued. Cone finds that this eschatological vision was also personally meaningful, as the eschatological promise that “God’s gonna take care of you” was one King returned to for strength in his darkest moments.¹⁸⁰ King’s example affirms an eschatological understanding of justice, life, and faith as vital for black experience.

This affirmation of an eschatological frame for black experience approaches a debate in black theology regarding the place of eschatology. Some black liberation theologians resist eschatology, notions of heaven, and ideas of a final satisfaction beyond this life as having nothing of value to say for black experience.¹⁸¹ Aware of the ways in which notions of heaven have been used to pacify black people or have served as a means of escapism from the problems of the world, they deny validity to any theological focus on liberation beyond the material, historical reality of this world. Anthony Pinn writes,

A reasonable argument can be made for understanding salvation as socio-economic and political liberation in the contexts of both Black and Womanist theologies. Clearly neither theological camp is interested in talking about heaven or the Kingdom of God as anything more than a metaphor for a transformed and

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 72.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 78.

¹⁸¹ See James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 140; see pp. 21-22 in Anthony B. Pinn, “A Beautiful *Be-ing*: Religious Humanism and the Aesthetics of a New Salvation,” in *Black Religion and Aesthetics: Religious Thoughts and Life in Africa and the African Diaspora*, ed. Anthony B. Pinn (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 19-35.

historically situated reality...An argument is made against otherworldly orientations, suggesting that such efforts to overly spiritualize the Gospel of Christ and the interpretation of this message involve an oppressive posture that does damage to human dignity and integrity by not struggling against modalities of misconduct in this world. Clearly, according to these liberation theologies, from the early missionaries amongst enslaved Africans who used an otherworldly framework as a way to safeguard chattel slavery to twentieth century churches who use this framework to avoid sociopolitical involvements that might compromise their mainstream and middleclass status, a focus beyond this world has served a negative purpose...In the words of the spiritual, “You can have all this world, just give me Jesus.” To this sentiment, Black and Womanist theologies say “no—hell, no!”¹⁸²

While the concerns of theologians who oppose talk of eschatology are valid, the theological connections I have drawn illustrate the benefits of—and, in my view, the demands for—an eschatological framework that re-frames understandings of liberation, oppression, and justice. The eschatological framework I have drawn not only offers powerful resources to theologically account for oppression, but also offers powerful ethics to practice in the fight against it. Black experience demonstrates enactment of these eschatological ethics, as seen in King’s pursuit of justice, in Alice Walker’s experience of a beautiful justice, and in the experience of many in the “Black is beautiful!” movement of an ethical beauty. All of these examples demonstrate that the fuel needed for the work of justice and the fruit produced by this same work is hope. Hope thereby emerges as an ethical position. Walker demonstrated this clearly, as her essay was a response to the attitude that saw hope as a danger and liability for black experience. As I have endeavored to do through theology, she re-framed the conversation and showed how, rather than existing as threat or danger to life, hope is necessary as a powerful and vital source for life. Rather than contributing to illusions or unfulfilled fantasies that disregard

¹⁸² Anthony B. Pinn, “A Beautiful Be-ing,” 22.

this world, hope in black experience establishes eschatology as a firm foundation for attention *to* this world and the struggle for justice in it.¹⁸³

The saying that stands as title to this chapter, “Making a way out of no way,” reflects this posture of hope as eschatological affirmation. Monica Coleman uses this phrase to describe womanist approaches to salvation, writing that “‘Making a way out of no way’ is a summarizing concept for black women’s experiences of struggle and God’s assistance in helping them to overcome oppression.”¹⁸⁴ Examining the soteriologies of five womanist theologians, Coleman concludes that survival, wholeness, and quality of life are among the key themes in womanist conceptions of salvation. Delores Williams’ understanding of survival provides both the touchstone and point of difference for my interpretation of “making a way out of no way.”

Williams offers survival as an ethic that shifts conceptions of salvation from the expectation that God will liberate black women, to the expectation that God will sustain black women. As seen in the example of Hagar, this sustaining enables a subversive resistance whereby black women are able to have a quality of life and survive. Karen Baker-Fletcher connects “making a way out of no way” to the idea of “making do.”¹⁸⁵ Both “acknowledge God’s presence in providing options that do not appear to exist,” options which facilitate the survival of black women.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸³ Eschatology as a firm foundation for confronting reality is deemed as further relevant and supported by eschatologically-based doctrines of personhood. For an example, see Ian A. McFarland, *Difference and Identity: A Theological Anthropology* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2001).

¹⁸⁴ Monica Coleman, *Making a Way Out of No Way: A Womanist Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2008), 12.

¹⁸⁵ Karen Baker-Fletcher, as quoted in Monica Coleman, *Making a Way Out of No Way*, 33.

¹⁸⁶ Monica Coleman, *Making a Way Out of No Way*, 33.

While I agree with this presentation of Williams' concept, particularly in finding within it powerful potential for a womanist *creatio ex nihilo*,¹⁸⁷ I differ when Williams interprets "making a way out of no way" and the ethic of survival as a rejection of eschatology and notions of heaven. Coleman explains that Williams "has no need for salvation that focuses on heaven or any place outside of this world [because] salvation...is not about making it to heaven or defeating death. Salvation is about surviving, finding meaning and quality of life."¹⁸⁸ Williams states: "There is only the material world in which to work out a place of salvation for Black people and the Black community."¹⁸⁹ We thus see that, for Delores Williams, survival implies a lessened, or restricted, scope of vision for living. By "making a way out of no way," Williams asserts an attenuated understanding of salvation that is more honest to the historical and material realities of life.¹⁹⁰

Though I too affirm "making a way out of no way" and survival, I do so in a way that understands this phrase and attendant ethic as proclaiming the fullness, and not the dearth, of eschatological reality. I find that "making a way out of no way" and survival cohere strongly with the eschatological ethics of transformation and hope I articulate. Furthermore, I make this finding on the basis of Coleman's description of "making a way

¹⁸⁷ "Making a way out of no way" presents, I find, a powerful and compelling articulation of *creatio ex nihilo* that locates a doctrine of Creation in black women's embodied experiences of survival and resistance against oppression. My connection of a doctrine of Creation with eschatology is mirrored in Jurgen Moltmann's *Theology of Hope*, and portends its own significance that I do not explore in this thesis.

¹⁸⁸ Monica Coleman, *Making a Way Out of No Way*, 21.

¹⁸⁹ Delores Williams, as quoted in Monica Coleman, *Making a Way Out of No Way*, 21.

¹⁹⁰ Coleman notes that Williams "believes many young black people have given up on the promise of heaven and life after death" and that this contributes to her location of salvation in this world only. Monica Coleman, *Making a Way Out of No Way*, 21.

out of no way,” which seeks to build on Williams’ interpretation. In this way, I offer an eschatological reading of “making a way out of no way” that, though taking an opposing view, follows as part of a theological aesthetics for black experience and comes from within womanist theological tradition.

Coleman writes that “making a way out of no way” is a “weaving of the past, future, and possibilities offered by God.”¹⁹¹ It expresses that “the way forward was not contained in the past alone.”¹⁹² Coleman’s description of the temporal dynamics of “making a way out of no way” locate a reality beyond the historical as the source and site of salvation. As a “weaving” of what has already happened and what has yet to occur, I find that “making a way out of no way” intimates the eschatological as the plane from whence it springs. The dynamism in this weaving appears as almost aesthetic in manifesting as possibilities which, “felt as a call into the future,” are eschatologically operative.¹⁹³ Transformation and hope are the eschatological imprint of beauty and justice.

Coleman continues: “A way forward, a way toward life, comes from another source.”¹⁹⁴ This source, Coleman writes, is God: “God is the one who presents the way. A way is made more properly out of God than out of nowhere.”¹⁹⁵ This language is arresting as it recalls the eschatological theodicy and the nothingness asserted in the beauty of the Cross. In Christ, a way is made out of “nothing” (nowhere, no way) *and* out

¹⁹¹ Monica Coleman, *Making a Way Out of No Way*, 33.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, 34.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

of God, as in Christ, the nothing (nowhere, no way) manifests *within* God. The negation that confronts in “no way” is akin to that of meaninglessness, death, oppression, ugliness—the annihilative force of evil that proclaims no way out. The full content of this negation happens *within* God in the Cross: meaninglessness happens *within* the body of God (the site of the fullness of Meaning), and thus meaning (a way) is made. God as Arbiter of all that is, and of all that is not, dissolves negation to make a way where there was no way previously. “Way” appears out of “no way” by the very Being of God. The eschatological scope of God’s proleptic power over evil, injustice, and oppression—the very forces that collude to cry “No way out!”—is the meaning asserted in “making a way out of no way.”

Coleman explains that “making a way out of no way” also includes the ethical goal of justice. She echoes Jacquelyn Grant’s claim that “the eradication of all forms of oppression [facing black women and the world at large] is primary” and locates this eradication within the scope of “making a way out of no way.”¹⁹⁶ Justice and the dismantling of oppression facing black women and the world is indeed a structuring principle in womanist theology. Significantly, I contend that this justice invoked by womanist theologians is not Niebuhr’s proximate justice, but King’s ultimate justice. While “[m]aking a way out of no way is sometimes experienced as release and joy; other times it is experienced as resources in the midst of oppression,” it is fundamentally “the way of life that appears in situations that threaten death.”¹⁹⁷ As this is the very definition of the Resurrection, I find that this understanding can be read eschatological. It proclaims

¹⁹⁶ Jacquelyn Grant, as quoted in *Making a Way Out of No Way*, 35.

¹⁹⁷ Monica Coleman, *Making a Way Out of No Way*, 35.

God's full justice even "in the midst of oppression," for it ultimately proclaims that "a way is made where there was none previously." It is in this precise nature of circumstances less than fully liberative that "making a way out of no way" is seen as proleptic proclamation of God's eschatological triumph.

In this view of "making a way out of no way" as proleptic proclamation, we come to see that this phrase is a powerful declaration of hope. It is an assertion laying personal claim to the eschatological goodness of God that trumps "no way" to make "a way." "Making a way out of no way" is a declaration of hope that embodies an eschatological ethics and, in so doing, claims hope—and the eschatological plane towards which it travels—as necessary to survival.

Conclusion

That hope is necessary for survival is claimed by Walker when she writes of overcoming, "We *must do it*, or die."¹⁹⁸ Survival, the womanist principle that accompanies "making a way out of no way," appears to be less about living a constricted existence, and more about living a full one. The fullness of hope holding eschatological ultimacy as its horizon demands a scope of vision that sees beyond presenting realities—one that affirms beyond the appearance of "no way." In this way, the eschatological ethics of hope offer "a chance at that other that Jesus meant when He said we could not live by bread alone."¹⁹⁹ That "other" manifests as the hope, transformation, justice, and beauty that is eschatologically extant. That "other" claims *living* as the only way to

¹⁹⁸ Walker, "The Civil Rights Movement: What Good Was It?," 128.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 125.

survive. Survival as a womanist category takes on an aesthetic intensity of meaning, and emerges as tied to hope. As proleptic movement that veers not into an otherworldly realm, but rather claims God's eschatological justice as vital for this one, hope is identified as the ethic that follows from consideration of the beauty, and of the grotesque, in black experience.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have used historical events, narrative accounts, oral history, and literary works as landscapes through which a theological aesthetics for black experience may be charted. I have shown how the beauty of God enables engagement with a spectrum of aesthetic manifestations, from beauty to ugliness to the grotesque. Using the beauty of the Cross as a crux for this theological aesthetics, I have asserted a theodicy of nothingness that provides a rejection of oppression and evil from the eschatological basis of Divine beauty. I then examined the ethical implications of these theological insights, and identified hope as an ethical category. In making these links through aesthetic sites, my argument implicitly affirms a centrality of place for aesthetics within theology. Part of my aim in this effort has been to combat the “‘poetic poverty’ in modern theology”²⁰⁰ and demonstrate how “aesthetic insight, not necessarily from the fine arts but also from the natural world, [can play] an important role in building the very fabric of fundamental or systematic theology.”²⁰¹ I have aimed to show how the aesthetic is not just exemplary, but has a crucial and constructive role to play in the very task of theology. I have endeavored to offer an engagement that, as Shug Avery demanded, pays attention to the *purple*.²⁰²

²⁰⁰ Gesa Elsbeth Thiessen, “Introduction to the Early Church,” in *Theological Aesthetics: A Reader* (London, UK: SCM Press, 2004), 12.

²⁰¹ Oleg Bychkov, “Introduction” in *Theological Aesthetics after von Balthasar*, ed. Oleg Bychkov and James Fodor (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008), xii, my italics.

²⁰² “I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don’t notice it.” Shug Avery’s statement provides the title for *The Color Purple*. Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (New York, NY: Washington Square Press, 1982), 178.

Though my mapping of aesthetics in black experience has moved temporally, I do not wish to depict a chronological progression from ugliness to beauty in African American experience. Ugliness, beauty, and the grotesque are shifting and present realities throughout black experience. While the Civil Rights Movement and the “Black is beautiful!” transformation form landmark events, they are not the culmination of beauty and justice for black people. Rather, they are powerful iterations of both as ongoing realities. As Maxine Leeds Craig explains,

In the late 1960s, the words “black is beautiful” were an exuberant break from the past and the latest expression of something very old. Call it prepolitical resistance, self-love, early nationalism, racial pride, racial rearticulation, or common sense [,] ...African Americans since coming to these shores have been able to love themselves and their race despite the difficulty of their circumstances or the ways in which the race has been represented. Under the conditions of racial ascription and domination, self-love is a daily, person-by-person project of racial redefinition.²⁰³

In this statement, Leeds Craig captures the nature of the justice of beauty in black experience, and approaches the eschatological reference to beauty contained in the title and epigraph to this paper. Beauty and self-love are, in black experience as well as anyone else’s, a daily task. However, their import and effect is not denuded by such a temporal graining, but rather is expressed through it. Beauty, I have aimed to show, is the entrance of the eschatological into the temporal, and makes manifest the ultimate justice that the eschatological entails.

²⁰³ Leeds Craig, *Ain’t I a Beauty Queen?*, 161.

This beauty is what Alice Walker went in search of, and what she found, in her mother's garden. It is, I claim, what Jesus directs us towards when he tells us to "consider the lilies":

"Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith?"²⁰⁴

In this passage from Matthew, we see that Jesus is not only a site for beauty but that he *understood* beauty. Jesus's words on worry, materiality, and trust in God provide, I find, an illumination on his understanding of beauty. Jesus embraced beauty as a means of revelation and, in telling us to "consider the lilies," directs us to do the same.

What Jesus draws in the lilies of the field is a stark, unsettling picture: beauty, being, transience, and death. Yet, he gathers that this picture should comfort, rather than disturb. His perspective mirrors what I have argued in this paper: namely, that the grotesque is the interpretive reality through which meaning is made, and in which divine beauty shines. The coexistence of beauty, being, transience, and death are, in Jesus' view, elements that should yield faith, and not the absence thereof.

In the arresting beauty and expendability of the lilies of the field, Jesus finds saving meaning for humanity. Jesus's juxtaposition of humans and lilies connects with numerous scriptural references to humans as grass.²⁰⁵ These references assert the transience of human life, and the inexorable reality of death. Read in light of these

²⁰⁴ Matthew 6:28-30, NRSV.

²⁰⁵ 1 Peter 1:24; Psalm 103:15; Psalm 90:5-6; Psalm 103:15-16; Isaiah 37:27; and Isaiah 40:6-7.

scriptural references, Jesus's words are not a denial of death's reality, but of its finality. We, too, are subject to death. Yet, this reality should not contribute to our worries, but assuage them; it should not destroy our faith, but embolden it. For 'how much more' will God save.²⁰⁶ Jesus evokes the eschatological as the reality that gives cause for our comfort, and the triumph unseen, yet clearly perceived, that is the rationale for our faith.

Jesus tells us, in effect, to go in search of our mothers' gardens: to find beauty in the midst of oppressive reality, to see its salvific import, and to have faith as a result. Akin to hope, faith is not blind trust but is the eschatological—the reality beyond history, the eternity beyond time—grabbed hold of and realized in a moment. The quotidian temporality of daily acts of self-love and encounters with beauty forms the means by which ultimacy is experienced and claimed.²⁰⁷ Eternity is made manifest in a moment through the reality of beauty. This understanding drives the eschatological glimpse of

²⁰⁶ Cf. Matthew 6:30 NRSV.

²⁰⁷ Alice Walker expresses this understanding of eternity made manifest in a moment through the aesthetic in an interview with quilt documentarian Roland Freeman: "Time is all we do have...And there is nothing like quilting to help you appreciate that, because it's very slow...And it's wonderful because you are really there, and that's why, you know, we talk about all the reasons that people make quilts, but it's really because of that glimpse of eternity that people get. That's one of the greatest gifts—that glimpse of eternity—that fraction of eternity...eternity is only in the second that you have. That's the eternity. But once you really live in it, once you really know that you can have it, you will have it forever, and that's why there's no reason to be afraid of dying. And in quilting you have moments of that where you know that this is eternity. This very moment is eternity...[when] we look at a quilt...and we say "Oh, how beautiful!"...[we are] just seeing what's left. What's really amazing is what was going on when she was making the quilt...I mean, boy, when she was just whomever, doing her art, what a state of being!...And [quilting] is even higher because it's communal. It's one thing to get into eternity by yourself, but to get into it with five or six other people, all of them cooking and talking about whatever. It's really incredible. I mean, you're talking about some high states of being...People who take drugs are trying to get their eternity...But...you don't need drugs to get it. You need creative work to get it. You need creativity to get it. You need to create just like, whoever created all of this—the earth, the cosmos—needed to create." As quoted in Roland L. Freeman, *A Communion of the Spirits: African-American Quilters, Preservers, and Their Stories* (Nashville, TN: Rutledge Hill Press, 1996), 153-155.

beauty in the Cross and of the utter vapidness of ugliness in lynching, in death. This understanding is the comprehension of the grotesque.²⁰⁸

This, I find, is the powerful yield of a theological aesthetics for black experience, and is what Jesus directs our attention toward in considering the revelation of beauty. He call us to see that, in the lilies of the field and in the gardens of our mothers, beauty in the midst of oppressive reality is grotesque and, as such, is all the more beautiful. In a theological aesthetics where all that is, and all that is not, is ever conditioned upon Divine Beauty, we see that because God don't like ugly, ugliness dissipates into nothing, and a way is made where there was none previously.

²⁰⁸ I use “comprehension” emphatically and allude to the comprehension (recalling a sense of encompassing, subsuming, defeating, swallowing) named in the King James Version of John 1:5: “And the light shineth in darkness, and the darkness comprehended it not.” This sense of comprehension as overcoming lies at the core of the grotesque. In and through the grotesque, the incomprehensible is comprehended, as meaninglessness and nothingness (the central *nihil*) is given form. Cf. Wilson Yates’ introduction in *The Grotesque in Art & Literature: Theological Reflections*, edited by James Luther Adams and Wilson Yates (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1997), esp. his discussion of Francisco Goya’s *Saturn Devouring One of His Sons*, pp. 45-46.

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