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A BLAXICAN THEOLOGY: MESTIZAJE, BLACKNESS, AND THEOLOGY AS MEANING-MAKING

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Preface

Since my time as an undergraduate student in theology at Wheaton College, I've wrestled with providing a definition of theology, its relationship is to churches, publics and other communities. Theology is interpreted differently across time, space, and tradition. So, claiming that theology is a "discipline of the church, for the church, etc." does not work unless you are talking about Christian theologies, and even then that definition can be pushed back on. I focus on contemporary mostly USA Christian theologies from the 1960s onward. All sorts of theologies attend to social location: queer theologies, liberation theologies, feminist theologies, womanist theologies. Sometimes those social locations converge upon one another, as is the case for Blaxican people. Are we to understand ourselves as Latine or as Black? As Afro-Latines or as something else?

Being raised by a Black mother, having a Spanish last name, and being racially ambiguous has made me aware from an early age about the meaning and contingency of race. Moreover, it made me especially aware of the human capacity for *meaning-making,* generally. That is, I became interested in how humans collectively agree on how phenotype, last names, language, religion and performance are encoded in racial meaning. We assign meaning to these racial categories and we are expected to live and perform within these meanings.

Many theologians have explored the historical contingency of race and racial meaning. Perhaps the most important text regarding Christian theology and racial hybridity is Brian Bantum's *Redeeming Mulatto*. The term *mulatto* is "a Spanish-derived term to classify a child of African and European parentage," that signified the emergence of the classification processes of race in the American colonies. Bantum writes that, "[a]s early as the mid-seventeenth century,

colonies in the Americas began to distinguish between Africans and mixed-race children. The process of classification was not straightforward. Mulatto children were more commonly described as Negro, thus clouding the actual population of mixed- race children."[1]

Bantum claims that the "mulatto is one that confounds classification, and as quickly as it was identified, it slipped into light or dark to raise havoc within the walls of purity erected for self-preservation." [2] Moreover, "mulatto/a bodies and the performance of race through these bodies should be understood as intensely and inherently political. They disrupt because they *are*."[3] The mulatto body is not simply a challenge to white people who hold onto a racial scale (knowingly or unknowingly), but to the ways in which the hierarchization of race operates within the black community itself. Bantum demonstrates the intra-racial hierarchies that persisted within enslaved communities and those practices of classification that were adopted by those African descent:

> Delineations between high yellow and brown skin, house slaves and field slaves, all mark the internal distinctions such transgressions manifested among slaves in the South and free blacks throughout the United States. Such mulatto/a bodies formed "in-between" societies among themselves, or had to navigate often-tenuous relationships among their black brethren.[4]

The significance of the mulatto body, for Bantum, is a challenge to the creation of the racial classification system which sought to organize bodies along a saved/reprobate continuum, from whiteness to darkness.[5] Bantum rightfully demonstrates that the mulatto body ruptures the colonial

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[1] Brian Bantum, *Redeeming Mulatto: A Theology of Race and Christian Hybridity* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010), 6.

[2] Brian Bantum, *Redeeming Mulatto*, 9.

[3] *Redeeming Mulatto, 43.*

[4] *Redeeming Mulatto*, 24

[5] *Redeeming Mulatto,* 111-12. "The mulatto/a bodies of the modern world, children born of the slave ship and whose lives resisted the power of knowledge and classification bore witness to the ambiguity of modern racial classification.

paradigms of racial classification. Moreover, his historical analysis demonstrates the historical contingency of race and racial meaning. Nevertheless, it is its own important history that cannot capture the experiences of other racially hybrid people. For example, Bantum's reliance on the white/nonwhite parentage paradigm for hybrid rupturing cannot adequately capture the dual-histories of oppression that render Blaxican histories of indigenous and African resistance justice. For example, many *mulattos* of African and European descent are still rendered 'Black' by the enduring racial construct of 'one-drop' hypodescent, whereas this form of racial identification is more complicated with Blaxican people. This is not to suggest that racial hierarchical logics do not persist and render colorist privileges to those within various stations and gradients of the racial hierarchy. However, Blaxicans living within the United States signal and embody race differently depending on the complexity of their skin. As the American blues artist Big Bill Broonzy states: "If you white, you're alright; if you're brown you can stick around; but if you're black, get back."

Categories of race differ across the Americas and have their own histories that bear on the present of these particular communities. This dissertation explores two categories of racial difference—*mestizaje* and *Blackness*—alongside one another and their theological significations. The term "Blaxican" disrupts our ready-made assumptions about hybridity or "mixed-race" identity. It is neither a racial category that derives from the Spanish *casta* system nor an agreed-upon term by practitioners or ethnographers. It is also not clear where our communities first learned these terms. As a young person, it is not clear to me how the term became part of our everyday lexicon or how it emerged among those of us who were raised in Black and Mexican households.

Caught between the seemingly endless claims of white or black and everything in between we can neither find Jesus in ourselves, nor can we more accurately theorize his person within the confines of creedal confession. Jesus is a body that confronts us and the assumptions we make about ourselves, each other, and the world."

Racial categories abound and they continue to expand in a globalized world. Throughout Mexico, for example, one will be surprised by how frequently another racial term, "Whitexican," is deployed to describe the race/class nexus. The term "Whitexican" has become a catchword in Mexico, with Instagram and Wikipedia pages devoted to exploring its meaning in word and images. A Whitexican, in short, is a term to define a white-skinned Mexican who prefers the cultures of European and American societies and leans into their white racial privilege. Whenever I have told my darker-skinned Mexican friends that I am Blaxican, I am usually greeted with a smile, and told "I love that so much." They recognize that being Blaxican is *el opuesto de ser Whitexican* (tr., the opposite of being Whitexican). Identity-formation for Blaxicans is complicated given their concurrent identification with two minoritized cultures vying to survive in a white supremacist environment of erasure.

This dissertation explores how Black and Mexican theology responds to this environment of racial erasure. *A Blaxican Theology* reflects on the importance of *meaning-making* in theology, appealing to stories that shape our conceptions of what we mean to the world in which we live as human beings. In this sense I will be taking my cue from John Wesley de Gruchy's *Being Human*, who says "stories shape who we are, informing our values and directing our paths."[6]Many of the stories that I tell in the following chapters are general histories of racial categories. These histories are meant to provide context to the more personal stories that I tell in the following chapters. My story as a Black man, a Mexican man, and a Christian are all interwoven with other stories of resistance and liberation. Two important questions driving *A Blaxican Theology* are: How do we create sacred spaces for ourselves that are otherwise unseen? And how is It possible for the most

[6] John W. de Gruchy. *Being Human: Confessions of a Christian Humanist* (SCM- Canterbury Press, London: 2006), 5.

radically ethical aspects of our theologies to critique and hold accountable those inherited biases in our evaluative systems?

A Blaxican Theology addresses this question in a variety of ways. As an Afro-Latino man, who has been enriched by the theological traditions of liberation theology, I have learned how to embrace being both a Black and Mexican theologian. Black theologians rarely engage Mexican or Mexican-American theology. Typically, when they have engaged Latin American theology, it has almost exclusively been through Salvadoran or Peruvian theologians. This has always been peculiar to me, given the remarkable proximity that exists between Black Americans and Mexicans. Bridging this gap through my body and theology has been a life-giving exercise, and an act of meaning-making I take to be a gift from God.

Yet, many of the stories that we tell ourselves reinforce the strict separation between Black and Latine theologies. According to popular legend, liberation theology emerged out of Catholic institutional religion. *Rerum Novarum* (1891), as its quintessential prototype, blazed a trail that made its way towards Vatican II (1962-1965), through Medellín (1968), and synthesized onto the pages of *A Theology of Liberation* (1971) by Gustavo Gutierrez. As it continued to develop, so the story goes, its utopian impulses were deeply influenced by and relied upon European radicalisms (e.g., Marx and Marxism), arousing the condemnations of the Vatican in *Instruction on Certain Aspects of the 'Theology of Liberation*.' Some variation of this narrative can be gleaned from theologians in western and nonwestern hemispheric regions. For example, Christopher Rowland writes that, "liberation theology refers to that way of engaging in theological reflection pioneered in Latin America and associated with the work of Gustavo Gutierrez" and is "related methodologically" to other forms of theology, including "feminist theology, black theology and

various other kinds of contextual theology."[7] The Palestinian liberation theologian Naim Ateek also claims:

> In 1971, Gustavo Gutiérrez, a Peruvian priest and the father of liberation theology, published his seminal work, A Theology of Liberation. The theology he describes came from his experience of witnessing poverty and suffering in South America. The book emphasized the need to prioritize the poor, the exploited, and the oppressed, and to reject those who use power to maintain unjust systems at the expense of the most vulnerable... While liberation theology was first articulated in South America, its principles have been applied to unjust systems around the world.[8]

While the currency of this narrative has gained steam, the origins of liberation theology are actually more difficult to pin down. In terms of publication, James Cone published his first two books *Black Theology and Black Power* (1969) and *A Black Theology of Liberation* (1970) before Gutierrez published *A Theology of Liberation* (1971). However, the historical tributaries which culminated into the theologies of Cone (the liberation spirituals) and Gutierrez (Rerum Novarum; Vatican II; Medellin) are difficult to identify and date. Does liberation theology need to be self-consciously liberation theology? Must the content explicate the theological meaning of the term? A much more modest claim regarding liberation theology's origins is that it began independently around the world. The first generation of liberation theologians did not have contact with one another, so the manifestations of each were expressed differently. In Latin America, for instance, Marx and Marxism were considered legitimate sources for the first generation of Latin American liberation theologians, arousing the condemnations of the Vatican in *Instruction on Certain Aspects of the 'Theology of Liberation*.' To the north (in the USA), James Cone published his first

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[7] Christopher Rowland, "Liberation Theology," in *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 634.

[8] Naim Ateek, *A Palestinian Theology of Liberation: The Bible, Justice and the Palestine-Israel Conflict* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2017), 1.

two systematic accounts of liberation theology, identifying the ministry of Jesus Christ as "essentially one of liberation."[9]

Moreover, Black (USA) and Latin American liberation theologies are said to emphasize different histories of oppression requiring different axes of struggle, namely an antiracist or an anti-capitalist one. These methodological differences came to a head in August 1975, when African American and Latin American theologians met at a conference in Detroit to discuss liberation theology. Dwight N. Hopkins notes that the meeting was initially fraught by the exclusion of African American theologians from the planning, especially since Black and Latin American theologians had begun to strengthen their bonds of solidarity at the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT). Moreover, Latin American and Black theologians disagreed on the axis upon which struggle should be waged for liberation, racial or capitalist oppression. Hopkins writes:

> Because blacks at the conference did not use Marxism as a tool of social analysis and did not advocate socialism as the goal of the black theology and black church struggle, Latin Americans wanted to know if black theology was simply a supporter of bourgeois monopoly capitalism. This larger system created cultural, political, economic and racial discrimination. Oppressed based on race, therefore, was fruit from the tree of capitalist exploitation. To stop it from bearing poisonous fruit, the Latin Americans said, the tree had to be cut down.

Just as the 'origin' stories of Black and Latin American theologies are difficult to pin down, so are the methodological approaches. One of the insights of a *Blaxican Theology* is that it disabuses us of the notion that Latin American liberation theologies focus exclusively on class while Black theologies focus exclusively on race. Black and Latin American theologies are whole worlds that represent separate histories, cultures, and languages.

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[9] James Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (New York: Seabury Press, 1969), 35.

"Latin America" itself is too expansive of a geography, comprising of two continents, twenty-one countries, and 150 years of cultural formation. Culturally, the region has three major European languages, thousands of indigenous languages, diverse economies, cultures, and societies. This focus of this dissertation will not be—and certainly cannot be—a comparative work on Black and "Latin American" theologies. Instead, I will focus on Black USA and Mexican (-American) categories of racial difference.

Of course, the term 'Mexican' is just as ambiguous as "Latin America." The "United Mexican States" signifies the nation-state, Mexico, which is comprised of 32 federal entities (31 states and one federal district, Mexico City) with their own histories, geographies, cuisines, and forms of self-governance. But to speak of Mexico is to speak of more than a specific geography located south of the US border. The specific indigenous histories (e.g., Mexica-Aztec, Zapotec, Mayan, Rarámuri), languages, and cuisines represented in Mexico bears witness to the plurality of Mexican cultures. While the Mexica-Aztec empire is arguably Mexico's most notable indigenous culture, Mexico is comprised of a variety of indigenous histories and cultures that have persisted since the pre-Colombian era. Moreover, the convergence of these indigenous histories and cultures with Spanish history and culture bears witness a broader *mestizo* culture manifested in Mexico. In short, to speak of Mexico is to speak of history, geography, culture, religion, and race. Suggesting that "race" has something to do with Mexico might sound confusing to those (often with the best of intentions) who insist the term "Mexican" is simply a national marker, signifying a citizen of the United Mexican States. However, the term "Mexican" as a racial identity has a long and complicated history, with a variety of different meanings. One way to describe Mexicans as a 'race' considers Mexicans both within and beyond the Mexican borders; a way of describing the

common bond shared between Mexican nationals and the diaspora. The philosopher and theorist, Gloria Anzaldua, defined *mexicanos* this way:

"we say *nosotros los mexicanos* (by *mexicanos* we do not mean citizens of Mexico; we do not mean a national identity, but a racial one). We distinguish between *mexicanos del otro lado* and *mexicanos de este lado.* Deep in our hearts we believe that being Mexican has nothing to do with which country one lives in. Being Mexican is a state of soul – not one of mind, not one of citizenship. Neither eagle nor serpent, but both. And like the ocean, neither animal respects borders." [10]

Although Anzaldua's notion of *mexicanidad* aims at disrupting the boundaries between Mexicans north and south of the US border, it also runs the risk of flattening difference into a singular "Mexican" race. Thinking of Mexicans in this way can contribute to the erasure of, for example, darker skinned Afro-Mexicans who have historically been erased from Mexico's national census. While I acknowledge this potential exists, I do not believe that should lead us to conclude that nationalities cannot become racialized markers themselves, often attached to phenotype.

In a more general sense, to speak of "Mexicans" as racial subjects also means that Mexicans are racialized as 'other,' especially in relationship to the United States and ideologies of white supremacy. Relying on the work of political theorist, Cedric Robinson's notion of 'racialism,' Cristina Beltran has shown how the racialization of Mexican immigrants entering the United States emerged in the confluence of settler expansionism and the violent displacement of indigenous populations in the context of Herrenvolk democracy. Beltran claims that "[r]ace shaped the boundaries of American citizenship" and that the transition from the Jim Crow era has made it unlawful for certain racist practices to be enacted. However, there are opportunities within the

[10] Gloria Anzaldua, *Borderland: The New Mestiza = La Frontera* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 2012), 84.

current order for nativists to *relive, reenact,* and *revisit* Herrenvolk democracy. She writes, for example, that "citizens revisit practices of whiteness and racialized standing through their participation in the activities of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and the U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP)."[11] She also writes, "for those in search of meaning and community, right-wing paramilitary groups operating along the U.S.-Mexican border offer nativists the opportunity to reenact particular forms of frontier freedom."[12]

These forms of *revisiting* or *reenacting* bring nativists back to a form of *lawful* violence. She writes "Unlike other Herrenvolk practices that are now legally prohibited, aggressive immigration enforcement can be witnessed and enacted by a liberal polity whose citizens and policing apparatus can legitimately claim that its actions have been democratically approved as lawful, necessary, and authorized."[13]

Beltran's description of the racialized violence towards Mexicans in the context of Herrenvolk democracy and onward shapes my own understanding of Mexicans as racialized subjects. Glimpses of the racialized meaning of *mexicanidad* can be gleaned in US popular culture, too. On an episode of *The Office,* "Diversity Day," the manager of the office, Michael Scott (played by Steve Carrell) asks his coworker, Oscar Martinez (played by Oscar Nuñez): "is there a term besides Mexican that you prefer? Something less offensive?" Michael assumes that the term "Mexican" carries negative connotations in everyday speech (including the workplace). As a racialized signifier, "Mexican" has become synonymous with "immigrant," "illegal," or anyone

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[11] Cristina Beltran, *Cruelty as Citizenship: How Migrant Suffering Sustains White Supremacy* (Baltimore, Maryland: Project Muse, 2020), 95.

[12] Ibid, 93.

[13] Ibid, 92.

south of the US border, regardless of nationality. However one thinks of the relationship between *mexicanidad* and race is up to them. My point is, simply, that the relationship exists.

Mexican and Mexican-American theorists thought deeply about race. In fact, the idea of *la raza cósmica* (tr. "the cosmic race") became a central theme in the work of Mexican-American theologian, Virgilio Elizondo. I chart a trajectory from former Mexican Presidential candidate and philosopher, José Vasconcelos and his idea of the *cosmic race* to an erasure of Blackness in the contemporary racial and theological imaginary of the *mestizo*. The idea that Latin American theology is exclusively focused on class while Black theology focuses on race is the result of reducing both Black and Latin American theologies into single, non-diversified entities. I hope that is one of the many takeaways that this dissertation brings to the field, while also inspiring entirely new directions for liberation theology itself.

Introduction: Problem, Model and Method

The Problem: Authenticity?

Christian theology is a meaning structure made possible by God, the Giver of Life. Life is not possible without meaning, and human beings bear God's image by creating and assigning value to and in the world. The word 'meaning' word in this two-part word (i.e., "meaning-making") relates to a being's (e.g., a human or God, the ultimate Being) disposition towards evaluation. As a meaning structure, theology is not simply analytical, but evaluative. Theology evaluates external phenomena by rendering it relevant or irrelevant to a preexisting thought-world. In doing so, it attempts to cultivate a meaning structure that is holistic and comprehensive. Meaning structures must be adaptable, alterable, and ready to incorporate new categories or correlate external phenomena into the existing meaning structure. The process of integration, of seeking continuity among the various domains of life, is what Jewish theologian Michael Fishbane refers to as 'theological integrity.' The theologian seeks to make sense out of posited claims and external phenomena by making it continuous with one's life, a life understood and made possible by God.

In order to make sense of 'theological integrity,' consider Delores Williams' self-narration of her emergence into *womanism*. Williams recalls being invited to a church in order to deliver a lecture on feminism and its relevance to black women. After her lecture, one of the churchwomen approached Williams and said to her, "this feminism doesn't fit me… and if I try to make feminism fit me, will I still have the same thing?"[14] So according to Fishbane, Delores Williams' coming

[14] Harvard Divinity School, "Religion and the Feminist Movement Conference- Panel IV: Delores S. Williams," YouTube Video, 17:00, June 9, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hltJgzbXPFI&t=854s.

into womanism would be considered *theological integrity*. It takes seriously the world in which black women live, the meanings that are given and changing, and the self who assesses whether it all 'fits' authentically.

Black theologies have examined external phenomena by making conscious use of sources that are best equipped to interpret the particularity of their experiences. For example, in James Cone's *God of the Oppressed,* he relies on *spirituals, gospels, blues, tales, humor,* and *art* as constitutive sources of the Christian meaning structure.[15] Cone's meaning structure is more capable of interpreting and accommodating black life and experience than, say, the Church Fathers. However, the meaning structure is never static and those who belong to any black religious community are accountable to revising it in ways that are meaningful to all members of the community.

The process of integrating external phenomena, however, is not that seamless and "traces of revision are nevertheless discernible in the sources."[16] For example, one might see traces of black religion in Cone or of feminism in Delores Williams. But Fishbane insists that "the ongoing process of adaptation or clarification attests to the vitality of living theology." If theology is not a *process* of honest integration, then it is dead. Cone and Williams close the gaps between the seemingly irreconcilable thought worlds through their own unique interpretations. Cone closes the gap between black religion and theology to contribute to *black* theology; and Williams closes the gap between black feminism and black religion and contributes to *womanism.* Since "womanist

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[15] See James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997).

[16] *Sacred Attunement: A Jewish Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 4.

theology is organically related to black male liberation theology," [17], Williams also contributes to black theology. Therefore, Williams revises the theological meaning structure of James Cone, black liberation theology, by resurrecting the biblical figure Hagar (cf. Gen. 16.1-16; Gen. 21.9-21) to incorporate themes of black *women's* experience into the meaning structure of Black theology. Williams challenges the dominating theme of 'liberation' in black theology by focusing on *survival* and quality of life. Both of them contribute to the creation of thought-worlds, discourses, or meaning structures.

In short, theologians select and deselect salient aspects of their experience and the external world to incorporate into their meaning structures. These experiences can include black experience (Cone), or motherhood and survival (Williams). Furthermore, experiences take on meaning *intersubjectively,* not simply subjectively. In other words, theologians' ideas are integrated into meaning structures after they have been verified by a community, not simply by themselves. For example, Williams' experience of motherhood is no longer simply her own, but now defines a collective experience which the community has verified as meaningful. In this instance, ideas take on new meaning by black church people who verify Williams' experiences as their *own* experience. These experiences are then encoded into *womanist* theology, which is often encoded into *black* theology.

It should be noted that this does not mean that these experiences cohere to create a one-size-fits-all meaning structure. Rather, black theology incorporates a variety of experiences from verbal or experiential verification which allows its members to construct their own meaning structures. But the meta-structure, black theology, is a repository of art, words, and other

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[17] Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness 20th Anniversary Edition* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2013), xvii.

experiences that allow for the creation of black *theologies.* Discourse communities grant access to participate in the creation of its meaning structure in a variety of ways. One can participate, for example, through publication. Others, for example, can participate through engagement with Black, white or Latinx [18]churches. Still others can shape a meaning structure informally (i.e., through relationship with parishioners).

This gift of meaning-making (i.e., theology) is bequeathed to humans by God, the Meaning-Maker. God created order out of chaos and saw all that was made and declared it to be good; Eve saw that the fruit was good for food and pleasing to the eye. The '*making'* word in this two-part word relates to a being's (e.g., a human or God, the ultimate Being) capacity for *creativity*. God created the world through the divine Word. Adam *names* the animals in the garden. In other words, human beings bear God's image through meaning-making. I say more about this in chapter four, but Genesis describes the human being as an evaluative species who speaks and sees. The two acting agents of meaning-making are sight and words. However, sin tainted these two agents and gives way too all sorts of evaluative matrixes that plague theology today. Contemporary theologians have recognized that our theological matrix is more complicated than a single-issue analysis can adequately describe.

What we take to be foundational to our theologies (e.g., the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, the Word, etc.) often turns out to be far more founded upon racial, gendered, and capitalist evaluative matrixes than we'd like to admit. Theologians from the underside of society have sought

[18] Throughout this dissertation, I will use the terms *Latinx, Latine, and Latino* interchangeably. *Latinx* has become the more popularized term used by scholars to make space for women, trans, and nonbinary people of Latin American descent. As a gendered language, removing the masculine 'o' or the feminine 'a' with an 'x' allows the term to become gender-neutral. However, Latinx is not easily articulable among Spanish-speaking people. Some are using the term *Latine* as a replacement. Latino, however, is still popularly used among ordinary citizens and that also signifies a significant reason to use the term. For these various reasons, the terms will be used interchangeably.

to identify those relationships through genealogical approaches to theology.[19] Those relationships, however, have been difficult to define by these theologians. Some maintain that we are principally weighed down by capitalist exploitation, identifying race as an epiphenomenon of the material order. Others aim to identify the greater significance of cultural productions of race. Still others maintain that all these matters are best understood under the theological category of sin and that social analysis of these phenomena are meant for anthropologists, not theologians.

"Nowhere to Rest Our Heads": Authenticity in Blaxican Theology

Jesus replied, "Foxes have holes and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to rest his head."

(Matthew 8.20)

The quest for theological integrity – for communal languages, symbols, and experiences that adequately represent one's life and faith – is a matter of life and death. Friedrich Nietzsche is right when he says that "we have arranged for ourselves a world in which we are able to live - by positing bodies, lines, planes, causes and effects, motion and rest, form and content; without these articles of faith no one could endure living![20] Those who adopt meaning structures can experience crisis when the meaning structure can no longer adequately integrate or correlate relevant external

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[19] By genealogy, I am referring to a method of identifying a historical rupture that charts a specific trajectory. In many respects, I am influenced by Friedrich Nietzsche's genealogical method in *On the Genealogy of Morality* (OGM). In the preface to OGM, Nietzsche writes that this twofold assignment will be to answer: "under what conditions did man invent the value judgments good and evil? *and what value do they themselves have?* Have they up to now obstructed or promoted human flourishing?"[19] Contemporary theologians have undergone similar approaches, asking themselves, "under what conditions did racial and capitalist logics fuse with Christian judgments about persons, the natural environment, and the divine?" and "what value do these theological value-systems have?" See Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, Ansell-Pearson, and Carol Diethe. *On the Genealogy of Morality* (Cambridge, UK ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), Preface § 3.

[20] See Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche,1929-2003 Bernard Williams, Josefine Nauckhoff, and Adrian Del Caro. *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in German Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001). From here throughout, I will abbreviate the *Gay Science as* 'GS' and the *Genealogy* as 'OGM,' citing their specific aphorisms or paragraphs. GS, §121

phenomena into its preexisting system. When this happens, those who have once found the meaning structure *meaningful* tend to follow the very path of disillusionment that Paul Tillich describes in *The Courage to Be:*

> A belief breaks down through external events or inner processes: one is cut off from creative participation in a sphere of culture, one feels frustrated about something which one had passionately affirmed, one is driven from devotion to one object to devotion to another and again on to another, because the meaning of each of them vanishes and the creative ethos is transformed into indifference or aversion. Everything is tried and nothing satisfies.[21]

The dissolution of a belief system can break down, for example, when *Blaxicans* are not seen as legitimate contributors to either Latine or Black theological meaning systems. What if Latine theologians cannot see (or refuse to see) someone who has grown up in a Black home, speaks with a Black tongue, and identifies strongly with their Black roots? Or, what if a Black community expects one to 'choose' between being Black or Mexican because identifying with the latter is seen as anti-Black? This is my Blaxican dilemma. I am often policed in how I perform *Blackness* and *mexicanidad* because I am not seen as either 'authentically' Black nor Mexican. Authenticity policing is the result of routinely disassociating Mexico as a geography from Blackness. Although Black theology is a global discipline, and Afro-Latinidad is recognized as an expression of Black theology, Mexico is noticeably absent in these discussions. I discuss this erasure in the following chapters, but suffice it to say that the disassociation of Blackness with Mexico poses a significant challenge to the construction of a *Blaxican Theology* as an *authentic* Black or Latine theology. One of the challenges of developing a *Blaxican* theology through authentic integration is the notion of 'authenticity' itself.

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[21] Paul Tillich, *Courage to Be. 3rd edition.* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 45.

In her ethnographic work on Blaxicans in Los Angeles, sociologist Rebecca Romo identifies "authenticity policing" as a recurring theme that emerged in the testimonies of the Blaxicans she interviews. She claims that "Blaxicans encounter authenticity policing, or social interactions that occur when an inside member of a racial/ethnic group challenges another's claim to authenticity and belonging through assumptions about their race, class, and gender."[22] Blaxicans are seen as inauthentically Black and Mexican, despite the historical significance of the one-drop rule, the USA racial myth that claims one drop of "African blood" makes one Black in the United States.

Inauthentically Catholic, Inauthentically Protestant

Racial boundaries and the policing of those boundaries provide a window into the way religious boundaries are patrolled as well. Even as charismatic forms of Protestantism are emerging across the Latin American world, 78% of Mexico's 120 million inhabitants still identify as Roman Catholic, according to the 2020 Mexican government census.[23] According to the Pew Research Center, two-thirds of Black Americans (66%) identify as Protestant.[24] Since Blaxicans are caught between two theological worlds (one predominantly Catholic; another predominantly Protestant), their standing or sense of 'belonging' within various theological guilds is seen as inauthentic as well. Their attention may divided between "Latin American theology" and "Black

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[22] Rebecca Romo, "You're Not Black or Mexican Enough!" in *Red and Yellow, Black and Brown: Decentering Whiteness in Mixed Race Studies,* ed. Joanne L. Rondilla, Rudy P. Guevarra Jr. and Paul Spickard (Rutgers University Press: 2017), 130.

[23]U.S. Department of State, *International Religious Freedom Report*, (Washington, D.C.), 2021. https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/MEXICO-2021-INTERNATIONAL-RELIGIOUS-FREEDOM-REPORT.pdf

[24]Pew Research Center, "Faith Among Black Americans," February 16, 2021. https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/02/16/faith-among-black-americans/

theology," a scholarly boundary that reinforces the racial divisions between Black and Latin American, and obscures the overlapping histories of Africans, Europeans, and indigenous people of the Americas.

A Blaxican Theology is not merely the product of theological or philosophical analysis but more essentially of my experience as a Blaxican man in America who struggled for meaning—namely, how to make sense of my racial worlds: one Mexican-American and the other Black American. I began my schooling at St. Thomas More Elementary on Chicago's southside, my earliest intellectual formation taking place while attending mass, learning from Catholic Sisters, and being taught that God was at the center of our academic pursuits. It allowed me to make sense of my paternal *abuela's* faith, a pious Catholic and first-generation Mexican immigrant from Monterrey, MX.

On occasion, her spirituality would make its way into our home: praying votives showing up around the holidays, a rosary with which I never quite understood how to pray with, and images of the *Virgin of Guadalupe*, the Mother of God, on articles of clothing and religious symbols. My grandparents raised my father and his siblings in the historically Mexican-American neighborhood of Chicago, South Chicago, where the first Mexican parish, *Our Lady of Guadalupe* (OLG), was the community's anchor. Our Lady of Guadalupe was the place my Mexican family attended for spelling bees and for funerals; it was at the center of everything in South Chicago, not only religious activities. As a young person, these vivid memories of mourning and celebration at OLG and the relationship between culture and religion in South Chicago taught me that being Mexican also meant being Catholic. Coincidentally (or providentially), my first job as an adjunct instructor of Theology was at Dominican University, a Hispanic Serving Institution (HIS) devoted to celebrating Hispanic culture while embodying and teaching the best of the Catholic tradition.

Living in Mexico City for the past year and making friends with lay Catholics, former Catholics, and even non-religious people who openly deride Catholicism has demonstrated to me the strange entanglements that still exist between Catholic and Mexican identities.

Nevertheless, Black Protestant theology also became an essential tributary in my theological formation. My maternal grandmother, Big Mom, was a pastor's wife from Paris, Tennessee. When my mother's family moved north to Chicago's South Shore neighborhood, they rooted themselves in Black Protestant churches: Bryn Mawr Community Church and Trinity United Church of Christ (a bit further southwest). During my time at Wheaton College, I started the Black Theology Group, and became an avid reader of Protestant Black liberation theologian James H. Cone. As a graduate student at The University of Chicago, I would go on to deepen my roots in Black Protestant thought, studying under second-generation Black theologian, Dwight N. Hopkins and organizing a mini conference on Black liberation theologian, James H. Cone.

As a Blaxican man, I've also realized that much of my theological formation was racial formation. Not only had these communities been divided along racial and religious lines, but they interpreted race and difference differently. These theologians found *spiritual* significance in their Black, mestizo, gendered, and class identities. *Blaxican Theology* explores how categories of difference in the Americas – especially *mestizaje* and *Blackness* – were interpreted by Black and Mexican liberation theologians and what they mean to Blaxican people.

Mexico and *mexicanidad* (tr. "mexicanness") are routinely disassociated from Blackness. Black and Mexican theologies are likewise disassociated from one another . Black and Latine theologies are taught and understood as distinct theologies departing from different standpoints, emphasizing unique histories of oppression and resistance. To be Latine is understood as being

something other than Black. Their symbols are also recognizably different: the Virgin of Guadalupe is the paradigmatic religious symbol of Mexican theology while the Black Christ represents Black theology. Black Mexicans, or *Blaxicans,* like myself are acutely aware of the strong distinction that exists between "Latin American" theology and "Black Theology."

Because of my experiences as a Blaxican person, I grew up interested in the multiplicity of racial logics in the Americas and how liberation theologians deployed them for theological purposes. And I've asked myself: what would it look like to interpret Blaxicanness this way? What would it look like for Blaxicanness to be understood theologically? Since Blaxicans are mixed-race people, and our religious communities are tied to theological discourses of Blackness and *mestizaje* identity, how would one think through the relationship between Blackness, *mestizaje*, and a Blaxican theology? In this dissertation, I will forge a constructive synthesis of both Mexican(-American) sources and Black American sources into a novel theological concept of Blaxican theology.

The Model of Blaxican Theology: A Counterpublic Model

Before outlining the sources that make up the method that will contribute to my thesis, it is important to define the model this theology will take. Whereas the thesis is the basic claim of a theological topic, and the method is the approach to justifying that claim, the theological model is the *conceptual framework* of a theological system. It allows us to render the claim intelligible by filtering it through the internal logic of theology. For example, if we return to the claim "God is a Liberator," we can buttress this claim through a theological method (i.e., by marshalling sources and a norm that advances this claim). We can, however, *make sense* of our theological method when we understand for whom theology is accountable and whether the norms and sources are

reliably consistent to the thought-world of theology's task itself. In other words, a fundamental question for theologians constructing their theologies is: what communities or systems of thought justify your method in the first place?

For Blaxican theology, the question is even more pointed: to whom is *Blaxican* theology accountable? Is *Blaxican* theology simply an identity-focused theology for a small, niche community of people who happen to stand at the intersection of Black, Mexican, and Christian identities? Since there is no historic *Blaxican* church that can adjudicate the theological claims of a Blaxican person, it is incumbent upon any preliminary Blaxican theology to make legible the criteria and communities to which it will be held accountable for its claims about God or Christian practice. The model that *Blaxican* theology offers is a model that can be adapted to any theology of liberation: a *counterpublic* model.

Blaxican theology can be understood as a theology that emerges from and is responsible to *specific* publics. But what constitutes its 'publicness'? To situate Blaxican theology in relationship to the public sphere, it will be important to highlight two models that clarify their own position with unparalleled clarity: the liberal and postliberal models. Two of the most prominent contemporary schools of thought exploring the relationship between theology and the public sphere are the liberal and postliberal schools, of which David Tracy and George Lindbeck are among its chief proponents. By exploring the liberal and postliberal models of theology, it will help clarify where Blaxican theology stands in relationship to both models. It is to their articulations we now turn.

The Liberal 'Revisionist' Theology of David Tracy

To engage the plurality of voices within the public arena, Catholic theologian David Tracy claims that revisionist theology must adapt a *critical correlational* method that subjects claims from the Christian tradition (scripture, doctrine, etc.) *and* secularity to "the mutual illuminations and corrections, the possible basic reconciliation between the principal values, cognitive claims, and existential faiths of both a reinterpreted post-modern consciousness and a reinterpreted Christianity." Indeed, for Tracy, revisionist theologians must be "committed at once to a contemporary revisionist notion of the beliefs, values, and faith of an authentic secularity and to a revisionist understanding of the beliefs, values, and faith of an authentic Christianity."[25]

In this sense, churches cannot offer an interpretation of scripture that is unavailable for examination by a broader public. He claims that the interrogation is warranted since the church and the broader public share the same, universal secular faith and a common human experience. For Tracy, Christianity and secularity both affirm and point to our shared human existence and ultimately affirm its worthwhileness. Both Christian and secular faith situates human beings with interpretations of our common human existence within the world. As human beings, we *experience* the world before we can name it. Signification of the phenomenal world is always the second step to life in the world, and a pluralistic society is filled with religious languages that attempt to give expression to our common human experience. The critical correlational method is therefore an attempt at repetition and confirmation from those within the public realm to make sense of our common human existence through shared and foreign idioms (i.e., secular and other faith languages, respectively).

[25] David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago: 1996), 32-33.

In short, Tracy's critical correlational method is a logical extension of Tracy's belief in theology as a *public* discipline. Its publicness necessarily lends itself to outside examination within a pluralistic society. Tracy claims that his model addresses the "need to focus in theology on an ever-increasing pluralism; the need to develop a genuinely public theology—available, in principle to all intelligent, reasonable, responsible persons; the usefulness of some form of a correlational method as a heuristic guide for theology."[26] Tracy thinks that all religious claims within the public domain can be adjudicated on the distinguishing basis of critical reason as they attempt to provide adequate language to human life within the world. Claims which are subjected to critical reason will need to be revised in light of ongoing, competing evidence and counterclaims. Tracy's revisionist theology emphasizes primordial sameness, an existence within the world that precedes the linguistic ability to name its various dimensions. Tracy's approach to plurality begins with sameness and proceeds with critical dialogue within a domain where we all can adopt a common tongue and reason to adjudicate the various claims.

Public engagement in a pluralistic environment piqued Tracy's theological interest throughout his academic career. In *On Naming the Present,* he maintains that "our deepest need, as philosophy and theology in our period show, is the drive to face otherness and difference."[27] Otherness and difference, however, cannot be properly engaged with a *single* – namely, bourgeoise – center. Indeed, he claims, "there is no longer a center. There are many." Tracy's polycentric model allows for the great religious traditions as well as the "the repressed histories of the

[26] *Blessed Rage for Order*, xiii.

[27] David Tracy, *On Naming the Present* (Orbis, Maryknoll, N.Y.: 1994), 4.

oppressed"[28] to equally participate as equals within the public domain, thereby allowing previously ignored claims to stand under the critical assessment of reason among others.

The 'Postliberal' Theology of George Lindbeck

Whereas Tracy emphasizes *common* human experience that allows theological language to be revised by critical reason within the public domain, Lindbeck approaches plurality by emphasizing Christianity's cultural and linguistic *difference* from secularity. The Christian faith has its own thought and ethical worlds that are understood *intrasystematically*[29]. That is, Christian claims cannot be understood within a public domain since the latter lacks the discursive system to understand it.

To make sense of Lindbeck's *postliberal* model's approach towards a nonChristian public, his treatment on interreligious dialogue should suffice. For Lindbeck, interreligious dialogue should be established on terms that do not allow religious communities to compromise their own commitments. So, suppose one wanted to construct an idea of solidarity upon which one might be able to make sense of the interconnectedness of religious faiths. For Lindbeck, one would need to be specific about the kind of vision for solidarity they are attempting to construct. For Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, Jews, Hindus, and other faiths to find reasons for their meeting, discussing, and approach towards solidarity, each community would need to find the intellectual and spiritual resources within their communities which compel them to so as not to dictate the terms of discussion. In his account, Christian theologians could do nothing but construct Christian

[28] *On Naming the Present,* 4-5.

[29] George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Westminster John Knox, Louisville: 2009), 50-51.

theologies of solidarity, drawing on the language most familiar to their traditions. “In other words, different religions are likely to have different warrants for interreligious conversation and cooperation.”[30] Lindbeck claims that these do not foreclose on the possibility of interfaith cooperation and do not impose standards of inter religious dialogue on other faith communities.

In the cultural-linguistic model, religious practices and beliefs are discursively produced, where stories and/or myths shape adherents *externally,* or from the outside. He claims that “religions are seen as comprehensive interpretive schemes, usually embodied in myths or narratives and heavily ritualized, which structure human experience and understanding of self and world.”[31] Within the Christian religion, the Bible is understood as a story with a beginning, end, and narratival arc. “To become a Christian involves learning the story of Israel and Jesus well enough to interpret and experience oneself and one’s world in its terms.”[32] Once the narrative, tradition, or grammar of a particular community has shaped the individual who interiorizes it, they uniquely experience and enact upon the world differently than communities with other interpretive schemes.

This way of understanding religion goes against a Tracian understanding of religion as beginning from a common, universal core of experience which exteriorizes itself in a variety of different ways. For Lindbeck, unless “we acquire language of some kind, we cannot actualize our specifically human capacities for thought, action and feeling.”[33] Therefore, whereas Tracy begins by identifying a common *interior* experience, that moves outward towards signification; Lindbeck

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[30] *Nature of Doctrine,* 41.

[31] *Nature of Doctrine,* 18.

[32] *Nature of Doctrine,* 20.

[33] *Nature of Doctrine,* 20.

begins from the opposite direction. “A religion is above all an external world, a *verbum externum*, that molds and shapes the self and its world, rather than an expression or thematization of a preexisting self or preconceptual experience.”[34] Lindbeck summarizes his disagreement with a liberal/revisionist model by stating that “the crucial difference between liberals and postliberals is in the way they correlate the visions of the future and of present situations. Liberals start with experience, with an account of the present, and then adjust their vision of the kingdom of God accordingly, while postliberals are in principle committed to doing the reverse.” [35]

Blaxican Theology and the Counter-Public

Catholic theologians Leonardo and Clodovis Boff have referred to liberation theology as “public and prophetic theology,” that “has spread the boundaries of the church and today is in the public domain.” For them, liberation theology’s spread into the public domain can be discerned through the influence it exerted in civil society (i.e., the media, universities, etc.) and the political domain (i.e., through its notoriety in political spheres among leaders and institutions).[36]

However, Blaxican theology is a public theology insofar as it does not accommodate itself to either bourgeoisie publics or religious corners. Unlike liberal and postliberal theologies, Blaxican theologies derive the sources necessary to construct their theological methodologies from *counterpublics,* or ostracized publics which emerge on the outskirts of the public sphere.

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[34] *Nature of Doctrine,* 20.

[35] *Nature of Doctrine,* 112.

[36] Boff and Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology*, 85–87.

It is important to emphasize that claiming Blaxican theology is a counterpublic model is slightly different than saying that ideas emerge from particular social contexts. Cone, paraphrasing Karl Marx, suggests that "ideas do not have an independent existence but are from beginning to end a social product."[37] In a counterpublic model, however, theologians are not simply interested in the ideas that generate from particular social locations, but with *spaces that grant access* to those socially determined ideas; not with presuppositions, but with the space for *converting* them. Social locations generate myriad ideas, but only a few of them are legitimized by liberal publics by gaining access to its sphere. Ideas may be rendered 'too radical,' 'unrealistic,' or 'absurd' in light of the existing structures of legitimation. Nevertheless, counterpublics emerge as spaces to debate the 'unreasonable,' the ludicrous,' and the impossible.

Talal Asad has demonstrated that the foundations of the modern public sphere differ greatly from other forms of public criticism that exist within non-liberal states. He writes, "[e]ven in a nonliberal state such as Saudi Arabia, then, there is a tradition of social criticism that is open and institutionalized. The most important form in which this tradition finds expression is the Friday sermon (khutba) delivered in the larger mosques, but it is also practiced in the form of theological lectures in the Islamic universities."[38] Asad names *nasiha*, an Islamic theological concept that emphasizes the *duty* of public criticism that differs sharply from the Enlightenment notion of criticism as a *right.* Public criticism, as Asad notes, is not exclusively allowed within a domain operated by the state that disallows religious conviction and thought. The formation of state power

[37] James Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1971), 38.

[38] Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore: 1993), 213.

in the contemporary Middle East and its institutionalization of criticism, relies on completely antiliberal foundations.

Evidently, then, nasiha and da'wa together stand in a conceptual world quite unlike that of the Enlightenment. For unlike the former, the latter world is inhabited by individuals aspiring to self-determination and dispassionate judgment, whose moral foundation is universal reason, not disciplined virtues. In each world, the individual articulates a different motivational structure in which reasoning has a distinctive place. Thus, in the world assumed by Za'ayr, particular personal virtues must already be in place before practical reasoning can be properly carried out; in the Enlightenment world, practical reasoning yields an ethical maxim only when it is universalizable as a general law.[39]

Similarly, the political theorist Michael Dawson has argued that wherever the black counterpublic was institutionalized, a variety of black (often excluded) ideologies – radical egalitarianism, disillusioned liberalism, Black Marxism, Black conservatism, Black feminism, and Black nationalism – vie for their approaches as the best and most appropriate to achieve Black freedom. In other words, Black social location generates different approaches to achieving Black freedom. Those approaches are debated within black counterpublics, not within liberal publics. Indeed, Dawson maintains that the "the black counterpublic sphere is the product of *both* the historically imposed separation of blacks from whites throughout most of American history (which was associated with exclusion from the 'official' public sphere) and the embracing of the concept of black autonomy as both an institutional principle and an ideological orientation."[40] The liberal public is not interested in debating the best pathways towards Black liberation; it is instead interested in a *common* (read: white) good that may include the betterment of Black people, but on strictly liberal terms. Therefore, Blaxican theology differs from liberal theology which understands

[39] *Genealogies of Religion,* 219-220.

[40] Michael C. Dawson, *Black Visions: The Roots of Contemporary African-American Political Ideologies* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago: 2001), 27.

Christian theology as a *public* discipline insofar as that discipline is adjudicated by the contested notion of 'reason.'

Both Asad and Dawson demonstrate that secular and the religious domains within these nonliberal publics are decidedly different than the liberal public which separates the two. Asad argues that public criticism is issued *theologically* while Dawson argues that "[t]he most important organization during each historical epoch, always intimately tied to the black counterpublic, has been the black church."[41] Furthermore, one of the salient antiliberal tendencies within the black counterpublic "has been the consistent demand that *individual* African Americans take political stands that are perceived by the *community* as not harming the black community."[42] Avoiding harm and pursuing good for the oppressed is critical for understanding the problems laden in a *postliberal* cultural-linguistic model. Unlike the *postliberal* model, a counterpublic model is not beholden to the grammar of privatized churches because it recognizes the need for liberation from *racialized, capitalist,* and *gendered* theological grammar.

To better understand what I mean here, consider the example of Dr. Larycia Hawkins and Wheaton College. In December 2015, in response to rising Islamophobia, Dr. Hawkins, then an Associate Professor of Political Science at Wheaton College celebrated Advent by (1) writing a love letter to Muslims on Facebook and (2) committing herself to dawning a hijab at Wheaton until Christmas. Dr. Hawkins cited (1) our common referent of worship (i.e., the God of Abraham – claiming Muslims, Jews and Christians "worship the same God") and (2) Jesus Christ's embodied solidarity as theological warrants for her Advent devotion. Within five days of her post, Hawkins

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[41] *Black Visions,* 35.

[42] *Black Visions,* 31.

was placed on administrative leave by Provost Stan Jones and summoned by the Wheaton College Board of Trustees to deliver a theological clarification on her Facebook post, specifically her claim that Muslims, Jews and Christians "worship the same God."

Dr. Hawkins and Wheaton College eventually "parted ways" with one another, and the entire ordeal generated widespread interest and was the subject of much commentary from theologians, anthropologists, bloggers, insiders, and outsiders. Theologian Miroslav Volf, for example, claimed the debacle was merely a result of evangelical islamophobia; others maintained that it was about racism; others claimed this was about sexism. Still, others, maintained that this was simply a matter of theological concern, completely unrelated to racial, gendered or donor-based concerns. In many respects, the Hawkins ordeal demonstrates how all these forms of difference can become enmeshed with our own theological concerns. However, how do we disentangle the theological from the racial, gendered, or nontheological evaluative matrixes so that we can see them clearer? In the chapters that follow, we will see how theologians have sought to disentangle categories of difference from theology by *imbuing them with theological significance*.

This model takes the sinfulness of our meaning structures seriously and recognizes that neither the public sphere nor the religious corner is the place God has called one to. George Lindbeck claims that postliberals are committed to interpreting the world in light of the Bible. However, such an idea would suppose that one's faith discourse lies at the foundation of one's theological lexicon. Historically within the American racial order, race has played a critically determinative feature in one's faith grammar that regulates both practice and belief within one's community. In the following chapters, I will demonstrate how Black and Mexican theologians have reinterpreted racial language *as* Christian language, and how they've have added these terms to their own theological lexicon. I examine the two most important racial categories in liberation

theology of the Americas—*mestizaje* (tr. mixedness) and *Blackness*—alongside the capacious notions of class and gender to determine how they have been deployed in theologies of liberation. By exploring the meaning of *mestizaje* and Blackness as theological terms, "A Blaxican Theology" renders inadequate a *postliberal* model that sees a deracinated faith grammar as the determinative matrix for judging Christian thought and practice.

Blaxican theology does not seek legitimacy nor relevance within bourgeois publics (Black, white, or Mexican), but instead locates itself within counterpublics. This methodological decision is also a theological one. It pursues the spaces discredited as absurd and unrealistic. Moreover, in its pursuit it finds the requisite resources for constructing a proper theology of liberation. Publics provide the space for debating and constructing the pathway for an esteemed *good.* Liberals and postliberals may consider a perceived good to be the clarification of the relationship between Christianity and its meaning within a broader liberal public. However, a counterpublic model distinguishes and differentiates among publics and sees the liberation of an oppressed community as its desired good. This intended, conscious aim motivates one's gathering of the sources necessary to carry out its task. Those sources are pursued and given epistemic authority (not infallibility) in light of their exclusion. A liberation theological model sees the exclusivity of liberal publics and opts for arenas where the practices for struggle are vied for and the resources are made available. Blaxican theology is not a public theology, but a counterpublic theology; it is not always legitimated by 'critical reason,' and gathers sources from spaces where "unrealistic" or "irrational" ideas abound. In a racist USA society, those sources must be gathered from among its two most historically oppressed racial/ethnic groups: Blacks and Mexicans.

The Sources

The method of this dissertation will be comparative and constructive. It is comparative insofar as it compares and contrasts the specific histories and themes of USA Black and Mexican (and Mexican-American) religious thought. I gather sources from Black American and Mexican sources to develop *A Blaxican Theology*. Historically, theology in the west has drawn almost exclusively on European and American philosophy. However, Blaxican theology integrates a variety of sources—religious and nonreligious—that contribute to its formation. In the following chapter, I make sense out of this approach to theology. I refer to it as a "counter-public" model to theology. It does not engage a generalized public, but instead speaks to specific audiences. These audiences are racialized audiences, and the mode is through a liberation theological tradition. The second half is constructive insofar as it will selectively interpret salient themes of those specific histories as well as unique histories that arise as a result of their convergence. As a theologian, I am especially interested in the constructive project. That is, I am not simply interested in these categories of difference as an intellectual exercise. I am interested in how categories of difference have been theologized in harmful and meaningful ways. I am especially interested in what they mean for people who find themselves at the intersection of two historically marginalized racial groups. *A Blaxican Theology* is interested in participating in the life of God, the Meaning-Maker, by critically analyzing the racial and theological meanings given to me as a Blaxican person and redefining them. In short, I am interested in Blaxican theological integrity .

I develop a method that explores a major source of our *inauthenticity*: racial difference. Black and Mexican theologies of liberation have theologized categories of racial difference and have thereby created a theological boundary that separates Black from Mexican. My project examines categories of difference in liberation theologies of the Americas—*mestizaje* (tr. mixedness) and *Blackness*—alongside the notion of class to construct a Blaxican theology of

liberation/abolition. The project puts Black liberation theologian, James Cone in conversation with Mexican-American theologian Virgilio Elizondo to analyze and evaluate their usage of categories like race and class Blaxicans. The task of their respective chapters is twofold: the first is analytical; the second is an evaluative one. The first task will entail unpacking the historical, social, and theological meanings of the categories of difference they deploy in their works. The second is an evaluative assessment of these meanings for Blaxican theology. In other words, are these theologies of difference representative and/or *meaningful* to our lives as Black Mexicans? My dissertation argues that theology has the power to abolish racist meanings and imbue racial categories with divine meaning, reflecting the divine redemptive power to represent ourselves authentically to one another. Conversely, I also argue that insofar as these meanings instantiate new hierarchies, they will be rejected. To construct my argument, I will draw on a variety of theological, historical, and theoretical, and experiential sources to construct *A Blaxican Theology.*

Theology

Although this work engages both histories and theories of race, it is a *theological* work. I do not suffer from that peculiar form of academic insecurity that needs to remind everyone that they are not a theologian and don't do what theologians do. I have met many scholars of religion who speak as if theology an antiquated discipline, stuck with a dogmatic mission of catechizing the world. I agree that this form of theology represents many conservative understandings of its task. Others, however, understand the task to be more *ethical* in its orientation.

I argue that making meaning is what theology is all about. Meaning-making is peculiar to humans as an evaluative species, but people do it in all sorts of ways. Some people form meaning out of race to create hierarchies and justify mistreatment towards others. Others challenge those

hierarchies by creating discursive worlds that dismantle them. Racial meaning is historically contingent, but the gift of meaning-making is fundamental to human existence. Theologians are tasked with a responsibility to imbue those markers of difference that have been "other-ized" with divine meaning, to render what has been considered "bad" "good."

The theological sources I will draw on range from models, theologians, and theological concepts. I will draw on liberal and postliberal theological models to construct a "counterpublic" model of Blaxican theology. I will compare and contrast the liberal and postliberal models, identifying where each one fails to take into consideration alternative publics that exist outside of the church and the "broader" public. From there, I will discuss the model I propose for a Blaxican theology that takes these alternative publics into account: the counterpublic model. I will also draw on two theologians, Virgilio Elizondo and James Cone, and identify how they integrate racial language into their theological systems. The two racial terms I will isolate are *mestizaje* and Blackness, two terms that are central to their respective theological corpuses. I will also draw on the Bible, and specifically, the Book of Genesis to make sense of how both racial language and theology emerge: from the gift of meaning-making. I will conclude with a constructive theological vision of *Blaxican Theology* that draws on Protestant theological concepts like grace and sin to make sense of the theology that has been built up in the previous chapters.

Theoretical Sources

I also make use of theorietical sources to construct a *Blaxican Theology*. For example, I rely on ethnographer, Rebecca Romo's concept of "authenticity policing" and Gloria Anzaldua's *new mestiza* concept to think through authentic representations of oneself and self-definition. Romo's concept of "authenticity policing" speaks to a crucial aspect of Blaxican experience—the

experiencing of routinely feeling "inauthentic." Blaxicans are people who are rarely seen as "authentically" Black or "authentically" Mexican. These experiences force us to think through how we name ourselves and create discursive worlds for ourselves through the gift of meaning-making. To think through the concept of meaning-making more deeply, I also rely on the existential philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche whose work uncovers a basic human impulse towards meaning-making in the world, a capacity that he sees as one that allows us to live.

Histories

In the following chapters, I frame much of the theological discussions around particular histories of race. In the chapter on *mestizaje,* I explore the emergence of *mestizaje* as a national ideology across Latin America with its own particular history in Mexico. Mexico's foremost theorist, José Vasconcelos, envisioned a world where former categories of racial difference would be rendered obsolete and make way for a newer, "cosmic" race. These histories, I argue, relied on the eradication of Blackness and indigeneity and those particular remnants of *mestizaje* found their way into Chicano theory and Mexican-American theology. The subsequent chapter examines Blackness as a racial and theological category. By exploring the work of scholars like Anna More, Willie Jennings and Colin Kidd, I identify the original connotative meaning of Blackness and the trajectory that followed up until the antebellum period. From there, I explore how Blackness became reinterpreted by Black theologians to invert its negative meanings.

Exploring the relationship between race and theology in an increasingly globalizing world is especially important today, as many Blaxicans can attest to. Blaxicans are racialized subjects, but we are internationalists and abolitionists. By internationalists, I simply mean that we recognize that the liberation of Black people is tied to the liberation of Mexicans and vice versa. We are a

people who are in search for liberation and our struggles are tied by our concurrent struggles against state violence—violence that is enacted upon us by police, whether they are local police or the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (I.C.E.). We are internationalists because we believe that the systems that exist are not permanent and that we can create a better future together. As Blaxicans, we sing with Tupac Shakur and (later) Nipsey Hussle "Black love, Brown bride," and imagine worlds where Black love and Brown pride can be the norm of the universe.

Experience

Like all academics, our central research questions are autobiographical. Mine is no different. I became interested in both Black and Latin American theologies because of my own heritage and upbringing. My mother is a Black American woman, and my father is Mexican-American. Growing up, I became accustomed to being asked the following questions repeatedly:

"So, are you Mexican or Black?"

"Do you identify with one more than the other?"

"So, you're basically just Puerto Rican or Dominican, right?"

Throughout my life, I have been summoned to prove that I am "authentically" Black and Mexican(-Americans); that I belong, and that I am just as much a member of the community as another. I remember a specific instance in which a family member of mine reprimanded me for actively protesting in Black Lives Matter demonstrations. She told me, "Why don't you stand up for Mexicans when they're attacked? You're Mexican and your last name is VEGA!" On other occasions, I have been asked why I would "feel the need" to bring up the fact that I am Mexican.

This person insisted on psychoanalyzing me, suggesting that I claim my Mexican heritage to distance myself from my "Blackness."

I have had to navigate a world that has been defined by the legacies of racial meaning, meanings that tell us how to orient ourselves to others based on their phenotypes and nationalities. These experiences shaped my decision to explore race and racial meaning as an undergraduate student in Theology at Wheaton College, where I first encountered James Cone and Gustavo Gutierrez, the so-called "fathers" of liberation theology. What captured my attention was the way they re-interpreted race and class symbols theologically. Liberation theology helped me reinterpret the significance of the gospel and Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. Cone taught me that the heart of the gospel was liberation from oppression, and he drew parallels between the cross that killed Jesus and the lynching tree that killed Black people. Cone believed that Jesus was Black, and therefore there was something *divine* about Blackness, something I hadn't given serious thought to before. Gutierrez helped me recognize that God was with poor people, regardless of their color. Neither of them disagreed with one another, even if their foci were slightly different. They both believed that a better world was possible, and that if we struggled for that world, we would be aided by God's grace.

Cone and Gutierrez drew me further into "Black" and "Latin American" theologies of liberation, and helped me recognize the plurality that existed within these theologies. Black theologians also emphasized class oppression, and Latin American theologians spoke about race and racism. A great deal of my graduate degree courses focused on USA Black theology, antebellum slavery, and the internationalist implications of Black theology. By the time I became a doctoral student, I shifted focus southward. I began exploring Mexica-Aztec cosmologies, the Spanish conquest of Tenochtitlan, Colonial "New Spain," and spiritual writings of Mexican and

Mexican-American authors. As I sit here staring out the window of my studio apartment in Mexico City, I feel acutely aware of these and dozens of other histories that have shaped this great country.

This is why a significant source I draw upon is the body, which becomes the departure point for many of the following chapters. Many of the chapters hone into many of my own specific experiences as a Blaxican person, then moves backward in time to recall how the body became interpreted as such and how it later became spiritually imbued *through* and solidified themselves *within* Christian theology. Whereas traditional Christian theology looks inward and sees sin, reason, or the knowing self, Blaxican theology looks at the body and sees a history of human beings desperately searching to define themselves. The answer to the theological question, "from whence did we come?" has more than one answer in Blaxican theology. The standard answer traditional theology is prepared to give (i.e., from God our Creator) is already assumed in Blaxican theology. The additional answer (i.e., from a racialized world) is explored in this dissertation: a racialized world.

Since many Black and Latin American theologies have assumed ideas of what each one looks like, Blaxican theologians are currently theologically homeless. *Blaxican* theology seeks to make meaning out of social loneliness by bringing together the stories and sources of Black American and Mexican religious thought and practice. Blaxican theology destabilizes the fixed and arbitrary borders humans make between Black/Mexican and Catholic/Protestant. Many Blaxican people are those on a quest for theological integrity, meaning they wish to integrate their experiences of Mexicanness and Blackness into a relevant theological meaning structure that speaks to *their* experiences. Those specific experiences are a crucial source in this dissertation.

Contribution of Knowledge

This dissertation will contribute to multiple fields: Black theology, Latin American theology, liberation theology, and race and religion. First, it will add to the discourse of Black theology by exploring new contexts of Blackness and their theological expressions. There is currently no theology *of* or *from* someone identifying as "Blaxican." Second, it will contribute to the international literature of Black Theology and will join the chorus of Black theologians in Latin American contexts. Third, it will expand the global literature of liberation theology that recognizes liberation as the norm for determining how one reads the Bible and theological sources. Fourth and finally, this dissertation will add to the field of 'race and religion,' by exploring how the two are enmeshed in peculiar ways in the lives of hybridized people who embody two (supposedly) racially and religiously distinct cultures.

Finally, there is a rapid-growing field exploring the relationship between race and theology through a wide variety of methods. One might explore the historical origins of modern conceptions of race and their connections to Christian theology, as Willie James Jennings does in *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race*.[43] *A Blaxican Theology* also explores the historical connections between theology and race, but a crucial difference is that my project assumes that ideologies of race differ across the Americas and I show how they've been theologized and the effect that they have on Blaxican people. A *Blaxican Theology* examines the category of *Blackness* in Black theology alongside the category of *mestizaje,* an important racial category in Mexican-American theology.

A Blaxican Theology is also a contribution to the discursive tradition of liberation theology, generally, and Black liberation theology, specifically. As a scholar of Black theology, my research

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examines the historical and theoretical implications of Black theologies of liberation when they are contextualized and situated within an international perspective. My research challenges the notion that twentieth-century Black theology is parochially concerned with U.S. politics, especially civil rights matters. My concluding chapter reflecting on Blaxican Theology and the genocide against the Palestinians in Gaza demonstrates my own commitment to this international feature of liberation theology.

Conclusion

In short, the thesis of a *Blaxican Theology* is that theology is a meaning-making discipline that can redeem or abolish the racial meanings humans have created about race. The method that I take in this dissertation is to show how this is done. In Chapters two and three, I explore two racial categories distinct to the Americas that are important to Blaxican racial identity: *mestizaje* and Blackness. I explore *mestizaje* as a Latin American racial ideology that emerged in the early twentieth century, primarily through the work of Mexican theorist José Vasconcelos, and especially his work *La Raza Cósmica* (the Cosmic Race), that foresaw the emergence of a new race that would render old racial distinctions obsolete. Vasconcelos would have an enormous impact on Chicane, Mexican and Mexican-American theorists and theologians. I conclude my chapter on *mestizaje* by integrating the best phenomenological and theological insights by the thinkers of *mestizaje* into a Blaxican theology. In my chapter on Blackness, I begin by recounting my own experiences with freedom and unfreedom and relate them to histories of Blackness. I begin by unpacking the emergence of Blackness in the transatlantic slave trade, and how it became synonymous with slavery and powerlessness. I follow by exploring abolitionist thinkers who reinterpreted Blackness and connected liberation with abolition, a theme that I draw to integrate into a Blaxican theology. The following chapter begins the constructive aspect of *A Blaxican*

Theology. I relate the previous two by exploring the relationship between theology and race, arguing that racialized thinking is a form of meaning-making that is a misuse of the divine gift from the Creator. Meaning-making is a form of creation, meant to endow the world with goodness. However, it is tainted by sin and is often used to create racial hierarchies. I argue that the redeemed gift of meaning-making can be gleaned through theology which is life-giving, rather than life-destroying. The final chapter puts meaning-making into practice and continues the constructive approach by exploring particular themes of *A Blaxican Theology*—namely, abolition and its approach to the themes we've discussed. I conclude *A Blaxican Theology* by returning to many of the themes and summaries outlined in the following chapters.

Chapter 1:

Blaxican Theology and Mexican-American Theology

Introduction

All theology emerges from particular social, historical, cultural, and linguistic contexts. These contexts make legible what is at stake in a theologian's argument. Moreover, making them explicit defogs the spurious notion that theology is disinterested speech, done from an objective standpoint. The term "Blaxican" in Blaxican Theology makes explicit the social context of its methodological departure point. "Blaxican" is a portmanteau term that brings together two racial categories— "Black" and "Mexican"— to denote two overlapping social and cultural histories.

Blaxicans are mixed-race people. Our parent cultures represent Black-American and Mexican (-American) ethnicities, histories, traditions, and ways of life.[44] Theologically, Blaxicans straddle two theological parent cultures: one Mexican-American Roman Catholic, the other Black American Protestant. This chapter explores how *mestizaje* appears in Roman Catholic Mexican American theology of liberation. What makes Mexican-American theology especially interesting to Blaxican identity is its concomitant interest in racial identities of hybridity. Mexican-Americans are people who straddle two distinct identities-- Mexican and American—and Mexican-American theology explores that liminal space of separateness and unity through the hybrid category of *mestizaje* (tr. Mixedness).

Since Blaxicans are Black and Mexican-American, this chapter will explore the relationship between Blackness and *mestizaje* identity. It should be noted that I will not treat or

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[44] I parenthesize (-American) to indicate the possibility of Blaxicans having parents born and raised in Mexico or parents who are diasporic Mexican people (Mexican-American).

survey specific histories of Mexican-American and Black American contact, strife, collaboration and/or solidarity. While those histories are of great interest to Blaxican political life, this chapter is narrower in its scope. Furthermore, this chapter will not explore the early modern Spanish *casta* system, with its racial categorizations. Relatedly, this chapter will not explicate the hybrid category of *mulatto*[45]. The significance of the mulatto body, argues theologian Brian Bantum, is a challenge to the creation of the racial classification system which sought to organize bodies along a saved/reprobate continuum, from whiteness to darkness.[46] However, Bantum's exploration of a white/Black hybrid category, *mulatto,* cannot adequately capture the Black/Mexican category of Blaxicans. Instead, this chapter will explore the modern meaning of *mestizaje* and argue that because of *mestizaje's* erasure of Blackness and its impact on Mexican-American theology, it is not a theology of *mestizaje.* Instead, it is a theology of solidarity and unity.

To claim that Blaxican theology is a Latin American theology but not a theology of *mestizaje* might sound like a contradiction. Latin American theology, especially in the USA, takes *mestizaje* as both its methodological departure point and a central theme. The historical theologian Justo Gonzalez is one scholar among many who emphasize the significance of *mestizaje* in Latin American theology. He claims that *mestizaje* is "[o]ne of the characteristic themes of Latino/a theology—and of the social and ecclesiastical experiences that forms its context."[47] This chapter

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[45] See Brian Bantum. *Redeeming Mulatto: A Theology of Race and Christian Hybridity*. Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2010.

[46] *Redeeming Mulatto,* 111-12. "The mulatto/a bodies of the modern world, children born of the slave ship and whose lives resisted the power of knowledge and classification bore witness to the ambiguity of modern racial classification. Caught between the seemingly endless claims of white or black and everything in between we can neither find Jesus in ourselves, nor can we more accurately theorize his person within the confines of creedal confession. Jesus is a body that confronts us and the assumptions we make about ourselves, each other, and the world."

[47] Justo L Gonzalez. *The Mestizo Augustine: A Theologian Between Two Cultures*. Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, an imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2016, 3.

argues that if Blaxican theology is to be both *authentically* Black and Latine, it cannot a theology of *mestizaje*, and that given the long history of Black erasure in national ideologies of *mestizaje*, Blaxican functions as its own self-sufficient category of hybridity.

Mestizaje to the South: The Modern Meaning of *Mestizaje* and José Vasconcelos's *La Raza Cósmica*

The Modern Meaning of Mestizaje

Discourses of *mestizaje* became significant in the early part of the twentieth century as a response to scientific theories of race and positivist thought that dominated the intellectual mainstream of Latin America at the end of the nineteenth century. Ben Vinson III noted that "[s]ocial theorists in the nineteenth century strongly reinforced the notion that there were some basic, fundamental variations in humans, plainly visible in the form of race" and that "by the mid nineteenth century, it had become common for scientists in the West to assert that intermixture's effects varied according to how distant one human group was from another."[48] By the twentieth century, intellectuals throughout Latin America challenged these ideas regarding racial mixture by arguing that Latin America's mixture was part of its rich identity. The turn from scientific racism to national discourses on Latin American nation-states as "racial democracies" became especially crucial for defining themselves in relationship to the Anglo-American USA of North America. The Anglo-American United States, these theorists of "racial democracy" argued, was not as racially inclusive as the Latin American nations to the south. Alejandro de la Fuente and George Reid Andrews noted that the shift towards discourses on "racial democracies" articulated a vision of

[48] Ben Vinson. *Before Mestizaje: The Frontiers of Race and Caste in Colonial Mexico* (Cambridge, New York: 2018), 21–22.

national identity whose contributions were "neither African nor European in form or content." They claimed that whereas

> the scientific racists had either rejected the notion of black contributions to national life, or had treated those contributions as almost entirely negative, writers and intellectuals associated with new ideologies of racial inclusion—Gilberto Freyre in Brazil, Fernando Ortiz in Cuba, José Vasconcelos in Mexico, Juan Pablo Sojo in Venezuela—acknowledged the role of Africans and their descendants in creating new, distinctly Latin American national cultures, societies, and identities.[49]

The connotative meaning of *mestizaje* shifted as it became central to national ideologies that spread across Latin America, this shift due in large part to the Mexican philosopher and Mexico's first secretary of education, José Vasconcelos. The legacy of Vasconcelos' notion of *mestizaje* (articulated in his essay *La Raza Cósmica*) is important to explore given its transnational impact on the Latin American diaspora, especially Chicana theories of race, and Mexican-American theology.

José Vasconcelos: La Raza Cósmica

Mestizaje was important to Latin American nation-building, and it was especially important in Mexico following the Revolutionary period (ca. 1910-1917/1920). The Mexican Revolution meant different things to different people, resulting in a decade-long civil war that rotated through several dictatorships at the beginning of the twentieth century. By 1917, the divided and war-torn Mexico had finally put forward the most democratic constitution Latin America had seen. Nevertheless, the project of constructing a unified nationalist identity continued to remain a challenge given the various ideological visions throughout the country. Shortly after

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[49] María Rosario Jackson "Profile of an Afro-Latina: Black, Mexican, Both," in *Afro-Latin American Studies: An Introduction*, eds. Alejandro de la Fuente and George Reid Andrews, eds., (Cambridge, New York: 2018), 434-438.

the Revolution, the philosopher and statesman José Vasconcelos (1882–1959) published his 1925 groundbreaking text, *La Raza Cósmica* (tr. The Cosmic Race) to theorize and consolidate Mexico's national/racial identity.

For Vasconcelos, Mexico (and all of Latin America) was a geography typified by contact between various racial groups (i.e., African, Indigenous, and European). Vasconcelos prophesied that Latin America would be the place where the culmination of the four major races —the Black, the Indian, the Mongol, and the White—would fuse into a fifth "cosmic" race.

> The white race has brought the world to a state in which all human types and cultures will be able to fuse with each other. The civilization developed and organized in our times by the whites has set the moral and material basis for the union of all men into a fifth universal race, the fruit of all the previous ones and amelioration of everything past.[50]

Although Vasconcelos emphasized the role that the "white race" had in bringing about this period of history, he believed that there were key characteristic differences between the two European subcultures—Anglo-Saxon and Latin—regarding their relationship to miscegenation and racial inclusion. As the United States began to emerge as a world power, Vasconcelos was eager to identify both those aspects of Anglo-Saxon culture he believed were key to its success and those that distinguished it from the Latin American geographies to the south.[51] He claimed that the Anglo-Saxon cultures were unified, while the countries of Latin descent were divided by nation and that the "English kept on mixing only with the whites and annihilated the natives."[52] Like the empires of the past, "the Yankees," he said, were committed to "building the last great

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[50] Jose Vasconcelos and Didier Tisdel Jaén. *The Cosmic Race: A Bilingual Edition* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 9.

[51] For example, Vasconcelos claims that "our age became, and continues to be, a conflict of Latinism against Anglo-Saxonism, a conflict of institutions, aims and ideals" Ibid, 10.

[52] Ibid, 19.

empire of a single race, the final empire of White supremacy."[53] Herein lay the characteristic difference between Anglo-Saxon culture and Latin culture: "The one wants exclusive dominion by the Whites, while the other is shaping a new race, a synthetic race that aspires to engulf and to express everything human in forms of constant improvement."[54]

Vasconcelos believed that "even the most contradictory racial mixtures can have beneficial results."[55] He maintained that the goal of history is to fuse everyone, and that the European peoples of Latin descent had ushered in this destined epoch that would render Black, European, and Indigenous cultures obsolete. He believed the Latins (meaning Spaniards) to be the elect, the ones chosen to accomplish this "divine mission" of human history. Why? "[B]ecause they have been more faithful to the divine mission in America, are the ones called upon to consummate this mission."[56] Spaniards were the hope for civilizing all other cultural and racial forms. Indeed, the "Indian has no other door to the future but the door of modern culture, nor any other road but the road already cleared by Latin civilization."[57]

Mestizaje, for Vasconcelos, was a manifestation of sympathy, love, and development. He claimed that the "advantage of our tradition is that it has greater facility of sympathy towards strangers," and that this facility means that "our civilization, with all [its] defects, may be the chosen one to assimilate and to transform mankind into a new type; that within our civilization, the warp, the multiple and rich plasma of future humanity is thus being prepared." This, he claimed,

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[53] Ibid, 20.

[54] Ibid, 19.

[55] Ibid, 17.

[56] Ibid, 18.

[57] Ibid, 16.

is rooted in the “abundance of love that allowed the Spaniard to create a new race with the Indian and the Black, profusely spreading white ancestry through the soldier who begat a native family… Spanish colonization created mixed races, this signals its character, fixes its responsibility and defines its future.” Vasconcelos was convinced that this transmission of white ancestry towards the world occurred out of a “fecund love” that would result in an “improvement of all the human races.”[58] In other words, the divine mission assigned to them by history motivated Iberians, who have in response gone forward to realize it.

If you are overhearing the sinister connection here between white ancestry and white supremacy, you are not alone. In *Eugenics Beyond Borders,* Alexandra Minna Stern argued that “Vasconcelos's trajectory and dreams of an Iberian super-‘race’ led him to proto-fascism and support of Nazism during the 1940s, a position which he amply documented in his own journal *Timon*.”[59] Indeed, after the first publication of *La Raza Cósmica,* Vasconcelos regularly contributed as the director of *Timon,* a German Nazi propaganda magazine that ran editorials

> favorable to German, take for granted that Hitler will defeat the Allies, and foresee in German victory the best opportunity for Mexico to free itself from U.S. imperialism. They rejoice over Franco's success in Spain, belittle "el sector judio que a Roosevelt" for Jewish uneasiness over the Nazi military advances in Europe, and lament the failure or incapacity of Latin America ("pobre zona olvidada de la cultura occidental") to take an active part in the World War. The fifteen articles signed by Vasconcelos, like the editorials, are predominantly political and, in their inimitable way, sociological, i.e., racist.[60]

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[58] Ibid, 18

[59] Alexandra Minna Stern, “Eugenics Beyond Borders: Science and Medicalization in Mexico and the United States, 1900--1950,” PhD diss., (University of Chicago, 1999).

[60] Peter G. Earle, review of *La revista “Timon” y José Vasconcelos*, by M. Itzhak Bar-Lewaw, *Hispanic Review,* Vol. 45, no. 3 (Summer 1973): 583-585, https://www.jstor.org/stable/472241

This aspect of Vasconcelos' history and intention was first uncovered by the work of one of his biographers, M. Itzhak Bar-Lewaw (H. Ernest Lewald) in the early 1970s. Of particular interest to Bar-Lewaw was an editorial published by Vasconcelos in which he praised Adolf Hitler, arguing that he was "a thousand leagues from Caesarism." In this editorial, claiming Hitler's strength does not derive

del cuartel, sino del libro que le inspiró su cacumen. El poder no se lo debe Hitler a las tropas, ni a los batallones, sino a sus propios dis- cursos... Hitler representa, en suma, una idea, la idea alemana, tantas veces humi- llada antaño por el militarismo de los franceses, la perfidia de los ingleses. En contra de Hitler, es verdad, se hallan combatiendo «Democracias» gobernadas por civiles. Pero son democracias de nombre.

(tr. from the barracks, but from the book that inspired his cacumen. Hitler owes power not to the troops, nor to the battalions, but to his own dispositions... Hitler represents, in short, an idea, the German idea, so often moistened by the militarism of the French, the perfidy of the English. Against Hitler, it is true, they are fighting "democracies" governed by civilians. But they are democracies in name)[61]

Vasconcelos' support of Nazism comes as no surprise to anyone who has read his treatise on *mestizaje.* In it, he had prophesied that the white race would be the 'bridge' to *la raza cósmica* and those elected to transmit their ancestry to the world. As mentioned earlier, Vasconcelos' theory of *mestizaje* was a repudiation of the scientific forms of racism that dismissed the contributions of African culture. And although Vasconcelos saw potential in these cultures, he only saw them insofar as they contributed to something greater or beyond themselves, not for themselves as such. For Vasconcelos, the Blacks who were "intoxicated with dances and unbridled lust," the Mongol, whose "slanted eyes who sees everything according to a strange angle," and the "clear mind of the

[61] Cited in Bar-Lewaw M., Itzhak, "La revista 'Timon' y la colaboración de José Vasconcelos," *Actas del Cuarto Congreso de la Asociación Internacional de Hispanistas : celebrado en Salamanca, agosto de 1971*, Salamanca, Universidad de Salamanca, 1982, pp. 151-156.

White"[62] could "create that Protean, malleable, profound, ethereal, and essential tissue"[63] of the fifth race.

But he went further than this. He believed that contact specifically with the white *Christian* was indigenous people's gateway to civilization. He claimed that the "decline of the Asiatic peoples can be attributed to their isolation, but also, and without doubt, primarily, to the fact that they have not been Christianized. A religion such as Christianity made the American Indians advance, in a few centuries, from cannibalism to a relative degree of civilization." [64]

Vasconcelos' essentialist views of phenotypical conceptions of race, along with his Christian supremacist ideas, absolutely cannot be accepted by Blaxican people. Blaxicans are people who love themselves—their Blackness, *mexicanidad*, and European and indigenous heritages—in all their individuality and unity. Blackness does not become purified through intimate contact with someone or something else. Such beliefs contribute to the fetishization of mixed-race children ("mixed race children are the most beautiful!") or anti-Black racism among mixed-race people who distance themselves from their Blackness ("I'm not Black, I'm mixed"). These discourses of *mestizaje* can sever intimate ties with our parent cultures—as Rebecca Romo found in her ethnographic work on Blaxicans in California: "[a]nti-Black sentiment coming from Latinas/os was a common theme in the interviews that I conducted with forty Blaxicans, or

[62] Jose Vasconcelos, *The Cosmic Race,* 22.

[63] Ibid, 20.

[64] Ibid, 5.

individuals with one African American parent and one Mexican or Mexican American parent in the United States."[65]

The sting of Latino anti-black racism demonstrates that *mestizaje* is not a gateway towards Black inclusion, but a pathway towards its erasure. This form of erasure can be gleaned in popular media today. Sofia Niño De Rivera, a popular Mexican stand-up comedian in Mexico and throughout Latin America, is a textbook example of this. In her second Netflix stand-up special, *Sofía Niño de Rivera: Selección Natural,* Rivera recalled the remarkable time she saw a Black person in South Africa. This moment had an impression upon her because, as she opined, *"en México tenemos todo tipo de piel: tenemos blanco, tenemos gris, tenemos sepia pero no tenemos negro. Entonces cuando vemos a uno es como es muy exótico es muy bonito."* [66] (tr. "In Mexico we have every shade of skin: we have white, we have grey, we have sepia… But we don't have Black. So when we see one [a Black person] it is very exotic, very pretty.")

The pioneering Afro-Brazilian intellectual, Abdias do Nascimento, made a similar critique of Black erasure in his critique of Gilberto Freyre's notion of Brazilian *mestizaje.* Gilberto Freyre, a leading Brazilian theorist of *mestizaje* in the 1930s*,* presented a vision of a 'racial democracy' in Brazil by claiming that Indians and Blacks were relatively well integrated into the political classes during their industrial period. He argued that the best artists and scientists of Brazil are Blacks and Indians; that the foundation of Brazilian culture is African, and that even the geography and climate of Brazil is much more hospitable to the African than to other members of Brazilian society. Furthermore, Freyre noted that a number of former slaveholders from the U.S. South migrated to

[65] Rebecca Romo, "You're Not Mexican Enough or Black Enough!" in *Red and Yellow Black and Brown,* 127.

[66] Raúl Campos and Jan Suter, *Sofía Niño de Rivera: Selección Natural*. Netflix, 2018. https://www.netflix.com/title/80183197. Sofía Niño de Rivera's comments begin at the 27 minute mark.

Brazil after the U.S. Civil war (slavery continued in Brazil until 1888), and their inability to profit as they had in the US demonstrated the success of Brazil's racial inclusion. Moreover, he claimed, many former US slaveholders were surprised to see a political dignitary of African descent in Brazil shake hands with a visiting U.S. President. For Brazil to remain a global competitor, Freyre insisted, Brazil had considered importing Chinese workers ("coolies") to provide essential quasi-enslaved labor. However, Brazilian dissent caused a retreat from this labor strategy, in opposition to the industrialized societies in the North Atlantic who didn't want to compete with unfree labor[67]

Abdias do Nascimento challenged this rosy vision of 'racial democracy' in Brazil through his damning critique, *Brazil: Mixture or Massacre*[68]. Nascimento believed that Freyre relied too heavily on the notion that ending racial animus would happen through miscegenation and the creation of a Brazilian *mestizaje*. Nascimento exposed laws, journals, and statements of dignitaries who admitted that the aim of the program or ideal of *mestizaje* is not simply to create a new Brazilian identity, but specifically to whiten the Brazilian people. The techniques they employed to carry out this aim came through anti-immigration laws that did not permit people of Asian or African descent access to Brazil while simultaneously incentivizing Europeans' migration to Brazil.

Another technique aimed at whitening the population was through miscegenation—not to darken the population, but to erase Blackness. Mestizo (and whiter-skinned) Brazilians, Nascimento claimed, never demonstrated an impulse to create families with people of African descent. The mulattos (people of African and European descent) of Brazil were simply "a product

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[67] Gilberto Freyre, "Ethnic and Social Conditions in Modern Brazil," in *New World in the Tropics: the Culture of Modern Brazil* (Vintage Books, a division of Random House, 1963).

[68] Adias do Nascimento, "Genocide: The Social Lynching of Africans and Their Descendants in Brazil" in *Brazil: Mixture or Massacre,* second edition, tr. Elisa Larkin Nascimento (Dover, Massachussetts: The Majority Press, 1989).

of prostitution and concubinage of Black and mulatto women, and not of legitimate marital unions." [69] The emergence of a mestizaje, mixtured people, therefore was not in any way a solution to solving the problems of racism since underlying this notion of mestizo was still a deeply antiblack prejudice.

Nascimento also challenged Freyre's claim that Brazil's race relations were different from those in the US, and that the racial disparities that existed in Brazil were merely remnants of slavery. While Freyre argued that the persistence of deeply African cultural artforms in Brazil demonstrates its acceptance of African culture, Nascimento critiqued this notion, arguing that "African forms of worship and celebration survived *despite* constant police persecution, legal restrictions and manipulation by the white European elite... the only legitimation granted them is their commercial value as tourist commodity."[70] Even though Freyre and others acknowledge Black cultural artforms, societies, and identities as a contributing feature of *mestizaje*, Nascimento claimed that "they left aside questions of racial inequality or discrimination, largely accepting the argument that Latin America's historical experience of racial and cultural mixture had eliminated racism and prejudice and produced societies that offered equal opportunity to all." [71]

Nascimento demonstrates the political nature of *mestizaje* discourses. They tend to cover up anti-Blackness by promoting an ideology of inclusion and universality. Blaxican theology also recognizes the political nature of *mestizaje* within theology. However, for Black Latin Americans within the US, it is important to explore how *mestizaje* has taken on life within the US borders. To

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[69] Ibid, 66-67.

[70] Ibid, 70.

[71] Ibid, 71.

that end, in what follows I explore how *mestizaje* has been theorized in both Chicana theory and USA Latin American theology.

Mestizaje to the North: Gloria Anzaldua and Virgilio Elizondo

Gloria Anzaldua: "The New Mestiza"

On the other side of the Mexican-US border, Gloria Anzaldua was the most important theorist of *mestizaje.* Vasconcelos' influence on Anzaldua is evident in her famous chapter, "La Conscienzia de la Mestiza" (tr., the *mestiza consciousness)* of her now-classic text, *Borderlands: La Frontera,* which begins with an epigraph from *La Raza Cósmica* and an ode to José Vasconcelos. Anzaldua writes:

> José Vasconcelos, Mexican philosopher, envisaged *una raza mestiza, una mezcla de razas afines, una raza de color—la primera raza síntesis del globo.* He called it a cosmic race, *la raza cósmica,* a fifth race embracing the four major races of the world. Opposite to the theory of the pure Aryan, and to the policy of racial purity that white America practices, his theory is one of inclusivity. At the confluence of two or more genetic streams, with chromosomes constantly "crossing over," this mixture of races, rather than resulting in an inferior being, provides hybrid progeny, a mutable, more malleable species with a riche gene pool. From this racial, ideological, cultural and biological cross-pollenization, an "alien" consciousness is presently in the making—a new *mestiza* consciousness, *una consciencia de mujer.* It is a consciousness of the Borderlands. [72]

But whereas Vasconcelos theorized *mestizaje* as a distinctively anti-Anglo project, Anzaldua's conception of *mestizaje* recognized the role that Anglo-Saxonism played in racial mixing. Anzaldua wanted to complicate the alleged bifurcation of USA histories, economies, and cultures with their Mexican neighbors by emphasizing how the two are in fact interwoven and

[72] *Borderlands*, 99.

connected.[73] This recognition became the basis for her new theorizing of *mestizaje* within US borders, and her claim that Chicanos "are a synergy of two cultures with various degrees of Mexicanness and Angloness."[74]

Already, we can begin to see here the theoretical creativity of Anzaldua. For her, the conceptual category she relies on is *mestizaje,* but she redefines it to develop a new consciousness or way of being, what she refers to as *mestiza* consciousness or *the new mestiza.* One of the most significant features of Anzaldua's *new mestiza* is its creative attempt at courageously building identity anew by negating old borders and expressing oneself boundlessly. She claimed, "I am cultured because I am participating in the creation of yet another culture, a new story to explain the world and our participation in it, a new value system with images and symbols that connect us to each other and to the planet."[75]

The *new mestiza,* Anzaldua argued, is a way of being that transgresses the static meanings of *Indian* and *white* in relationship to one another and, especially, their diasporic manifestations. Moreover, the *new mestiza* adopts "a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity" and "has a plural personality, [operating] in a pluralistic mode—nothing is thrust out, the good the bad and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned. Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else."[76]

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[73] For example, Anzaludua writes about the migration patterns of indigenous groups from the south to the north; the annexation of Texas, and her claim that "currently, Mexico and her eighty million citizens are almost completely dependent on the U.S. market." 32

[74] *Borderlands,* 85.

[75] *Borderlands*, 103.

[76] *Borderlands* 101.

Mariana Ortega has interpreted this aspect of Anzaldua's phenomenological account of the *new mestiza* as an anthropology of *multiplicity* and *oneness.* She writes, "For Anzaldua, being an 'I' is always connected to other selves and to the rest of the world in its material and spiritual manifestations."[77] She claims that Anzaldua's account should be recognized as a journey or exercise, where Anzaldua begins with her embodied experience and experiments with conceptual frames to find or create one that fits. Anzaldua's phenomenological account of the *new mestiza*, therefore, is "paradoxical but meant to capture the lived experience of border dwellers—a self that is best understood as a *mestizaje* of both multiplicity and oneness. As multiple, the self has various social identities; as one, the self has a sense of being an 'I,' an existential sense of ownness but also a sense of being a totality."[78]

For Anzaldua, *mestizaje* also takes on religious significance. While Anzaldua explored the phenomenological aspects of *mestizaje*, or existence with the "borderlands," she also recognized how *mestizaje* produced a syncretic form of Catholicism that integrated indigenous Nahuatl religious ideas into institutional Catholic forms. For her, the Virgin of Guadalupe is the paradigmatic religious symbol of mestizaje. "*La Virgen de Guadalupe,"* Anzaldua claims, "is the symbol of ethnic identity and of the tolerance for ambiguity that Chicanos-*mexicanos,* people of mixed race, people who have Indian blood, people who cross cultures, by necessity possess."[79]

Her phenomenological account of the self is an important window into the lives of Blaxicans, who also find themselves straddling a sense of self marked by ambiguity, ambivalence,

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[77] Mariana Ortega, *In Between: Latina Feminist Phenomenology, Multiplicity, and the Self* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2014), 44.

[78] Ibid. 46

[79] *Borderlands*, 52.

and contradiction. At times, Blaxicans are "Black"; at other times they are "Mexican"; and at still other times, they are both. This sense of plurality and totality is an important feature for those who exist on the 'borderlands.' Anzaldua examines how identities are forged in the "borderlands," or the boundaries that are constructed to determine what counts as in or out, authentic or disingenuous, and exposes the arbitrariness of these seemingly fixed borders. Anzaldua puts forward a category of hybridity that emerges from the borderlands space, the *new mestiza* who defines herself in relationship to these seemingly contradictory identities.

Nevertheless, Anzaldua's account of the *new mestiza* does not take into consideration the experience of anti-Blackness experienced by Blaxicans within many Mexican(-American) communities. On the one hand, one might attribute the absence of anti-Black racism in her accounts to her own embodied existence as a phenotypically Brown woman. In other words, one can argue that her account of the *new mestiza* is merely an account of her own experience, one that does not include Blackness. On the other hand, however, Anzaldua's *new mestiza* is also an attempt to resist the shortcomings and binaries within Mexican communities on both sides of the border. She names sexism, queerphobia, language ability, and other shortcomings within their communities that need to be overcome, but anti-Blackness is not one of those shortcomings. Moreover, when Anzaldua speaks of *mestizos* in general, she names the common Spanish and Indigenous (not African) ancestry they share. She claims that "*En 1521 nació una nueva raza, el mestiza mexicano* (people of Indian and Spanish blood), a race that had never existed before. Chicanos, Mexican-Americans, are the offspring of those first matings" and that "continual

intermarriage between Mexican and American Indians and Spaniards formed an even greater *mestizaje.”*[80]

Neither does Anzaldua acknowledge the possibility of her own African ancestry or how her identity has been shaped through contact with Black people. As Anzaldua reckons with Mexican interaction in the Anglo American north, she laments that she is not seen as her full self, which would be “an accounting of all three cultures—white, Mexican, Indian.”[81] Moreover, when Anzaldua aspires to develop a voice unashamed of who it is and how it speaks, she argues that “I will no longer be made to feel ashamed of existing. I will have my voice: Indian, Spanish, white.”[82]

In Anzaldua’s own theorization of the new *mestiza*, a theorization evidently closed based on her own experience, she elides the existence of Black people on both sides of the Mexican-US border and their potential integration into *mestizaje*. On one occasion, Anzaldua seems to recognize Black people and the possibility of them belonging to the category of *mestizo.* She claims, “When not copping out, when we know we are more than nothing, we call ourselves Mexican, referring to race and ancestry; *mestizo* when affirming both our Indian and Spanish (but we hardly ever own our Black ancestry).”[83] Even when Anzaldua identifies the distinctively US contributions to mestizaje, she names ‘white’ or ‘Anglo’ as the diasporic manifestations of Chicana mestizaje. Evidently for her Chicanx theories of mestizaje can integrate whiteness into the hybrid category of mestizaje but not Blackness.

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[80] *Borderlands,* 27.

[81] *Borderlands,* 44.

[82] *Borderlands,* 81.

[83] *Borderlands,* 85.

Although Anzaldua aims to reintroduce Mexicanness as something that transcends the US/Mexico border, and although she makes comments about 'owning" one's Black ancestry, *Borderlands* still imagines Mexicans as brown or light-skinned, distinctively characterized by their indigenous and Spanish ancestry. It rarely notes Blackness. Of course, this elides the possibility of Blaxicans as a *mestizo* group since the erasure of Blackness seems to persist from Vasconcelos' theorization of *mestizaje* up until the *new mestiza.* This is not to suggest that Anzaldua adopts an explicitly eugenicist view of *mestizaje* or Blacknesss but that for her Blackness plays either a peripheral or nonexistent role in *mestizaje.* In Vasconcelos' theorization, whiteness is the primary driver and ingredient of *mestizaje.* In Anazaldua's theorization of *mestizaje*, Blackness plays a peripheral role, if any role at all.

Virgilio Elizondo: The Spirituality of Mestizaje

Mestizaje is not simply a category specific to Mexican-American theories of race and liminality, but also to Latin American theology, and particularly to Virgilio Elizondo's theology. Widely regarded as the father of USA Latino theology and once named by Time Magazine as one of the most innovative spiritual leaders, Elizondo spent much of his career as a theologian explicating the theological significance of *mestizaje*. One can glean the centrality of *mestizaje* in Elizondo's work through a cursory glance at the titles in his corpus. After having completed a 500-page dissertation entitled *Mestizaje: The Dialectic of Cultural Birth and the Gospel*, he added to his corpus *Meztizo Worship,* and *The Future is Mestizo.*

His friend and colleague, Justo Gonzalez, noted Vasconcelos' influence on Elizondo: "Elizondo took the insights of Vasconcelos as a way to name the experience of someone in the

overlap among several cultures and political and social entities."[84] For Elizondo, he says, *mestizaje* "is simply the mixture of human groups of different makeup determining the color and shape of the eyes, skin pigmentation, and makeup of the bone structure."[85] It operates as a catch-all term for "mixedness."

Even as a catch-all term for "mixedness," *mestizaje* has historically referred to the lives of Latinx people who can trace their heritage back to the sixteenth-century experiences of conquest, colonization, and sexual violence. Today, *mestizos* exist in a borderlands space of oppressed and non-oppressed communities.[86] This contributes to their "painful and devastating reality of the identity of cultural/racial nonbeing and nonbelonging." This divided identity results in an existential crisis of self, in which their sense of belonging to either community—that of the oppressed or the oppressor—becomes even more tenuous. Indeed, the colonization of the "New World"

> had given rise to a biological and cultural *mestizaje* with all its painful consequences of trying to live with two or more distinct souls: one Western, the other native; one powerful, the other crushed; one oppressor, the other oppressed; one white, the other brown; one Christian, the other rooted in native religions. As a result of this, the racially mixed people had no proper soul, no proper body, no proper space where they could truly be at home.[87]

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[84] *The Mestizo Augustine,* 16.

[85] Virgilio Elizondo, "Mestizaje as a Locus of Theological Reflection," in *Mestizo Christianity: Theology from the Latino Perspective*, ed. Arturo J. Banuelas (New York: Orbis Books, 1995), 9-10.

[86] Elizondo writes, "the children of the sexual union of oppressed and oppressor were especially affected by this self-denigration… they were neither purely the oppressed nor the oppressor, neither a native nor a foreigner—for they were actually both and neither at the same time." Virgilio Elizondo, *Guadalupe: Mother of New Creation*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), 105.

[87] *Guadalupe*: *Mother of New Creation*, 105-107.

While it is certainly a category specific to the citizens of Mexico, whose parent cultures reflect both indigenous American and European ancestry, Mexican-*American mestizaje* is unique. "The Mexican-Americans," Elizondo wrote, "are a people twice conquered, twice colonized, and twice mestized. This is our socio-historical reality!" [88] The dual aspects of Mexican-American existence can be traced back to what he refers to as the "two *mestizajes"*: "the first one came through the Spanish conquest of Mexico beginning in 1519 and the second one started with the Anglo-American invasion of the Mexican northwest beginning in the 1830s."[89] Despite the violent historical origins of *mestizaje,* Elizondo believed there are positive qualities to cultural and ethnic hybridity. Appealing to biology, Elizondo claimed that "it is through race mixture that new genetic pools are introduced, thus strengthening and giving more vitality to the newly produced generation," and that race mixture is "the natural way of perfecting and uniting the human being."[90]

In addition to historical and scientific analyses of *mestizaje,* Elizondo believed that the theological significance of Mexican-American *mestizaje* could be explicated Christologically. By Christology, I simply mean how one understands the person and work of Jesus Christ. Who is Jesus? Who was he? And what is his significance for Mexican-American Christian theology? For Elizondo, the added Christological question was, "What was the racial-cultural identity of Jesus? What did others think of when they first saw or heard of him… before they even heard him speak or saw his actions?"[91] Elizondo's answer to this Christological question is that Jesus was mestizo.

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[88] Virgilio Elizondo, "Mestizaje as a Locus of Theological Reflection," in *Mestizo Christianity: Theology from the Latino Perspective*, ed. Arturo J. Banuelas (New York: Orbis Books, 1995), 9.

[89] Ibid, 10

[90] This personal anecdote can be found in a footnote to *Galilean Journey*, 135.

[91] Virgilio Elizondo, "Mestizaje as a Locus of Theological Reflection," in *Mestizo Christianity: Theology from the Latino Perspective*, ed. Arturo J. Banuelas (New York: Orbis Books, 1995), 18.

He argues that "in his human appearance, as viewed by those who knew him only in a worldly way and not through the eyes of faith, he certainly appeared to be of mixed origins."[92]

The primary evidence Elizondo draws upon to support his Christological claim is the population that inhabits the region of Galilee, where Jesus was raised. Galilee was a site of cultural contact and racial mixture and Elizondo understood Jesus as, "not simply a Jew, [but as]a Galilean Jew." That Jesus' apostles were Galileans, that the majority of his public ministry took place in the Galilee, and the frequency with which the New Testament mentions this region all suggest the theological importance of the region. Galilee was a region typified by diversity, what Elizondo refers to as a "natural, ongoing biological and cultural *mestizaje*."[93] In Jesus' day, claims Elizondo, this *mestizaje* was seen as a sign of impurity. He argues that "Galilean Jews" were looked down upon by "Jerusalem Jews" as inauthentic and uneducated in Jewish customs. Elizondo therefore suggests that both the Jews of Jerusalem and the Greeks of the Galilee would have considered Jesus to be inauthentically Jewish and Galilean. He claims that

> [t]he image of the Galileans to the Jerusalem Jews is comparable to the image of the Mexican-Americans to the Mexicans of Mexico. On the other hand, the image of the Galileans to the Greco-Romans is comparable to the image of the Mexican-American to the Anglo population of the United States. They were part of an despised by both.[94]

Jesus' predilection towards Galilee, despite its rejected status, mirrors God's identification with the marginalized and rejected, says Elizondo. Moreover, Jesus being rejected in Jerusalem, his insistence that a "prophet is not welcome in his hometown," and his experience of loneliness summed up in his recognition that "the son of Man has nowhere to rest his head" is a paradigm for

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[92] Ibid, 19.

[93] *Galilean Journey*, 51.

[94] *Galilean Journey*, 52.

understanding mestizo experiences. *Mestizos* "always appear deficient by the norms of both parent groups and therefore never fully acceptable to either." Moreover, Elizondo claims that "*mestizaje* is the worst type of human rejection because it brings with it a *double* alienation and margination." This leads to the mestizo's feeling of homelessness, where they are "not allowed to feel at home anywhere."[95] A sense of double alienation, homelessness, and the desire to be seen as fully human are distinctive markers of mestizo experience.

Although these experiences marked Jesus' own life and ministry, his presence with the abused of history testifies to his own ability to make a place for himself. Jesus' public ministry reflects his unwillingness to remain captive to any social group or category. Elizondo claims that Jesus "appears to be quite free from being 'socially acceptable' to any of the in-groups of his time," and that "he freely mixes with all!" [96]

Moreover, Jesus is the inaugurator and actualizer of the new human race, *la raza cósmica.* Elizondo believed that "the full potential of *mestizaje* will be actualized only in and through the way of the Lord, which brings order out of chaos and new life out of death. It is in the Lord's way that the salvific and liberating role of our human mestizo way finds its ultimate identity, meaning, direction, and challenge." Mestizos, for Elizondo, represent the theological category of "the new creation" Jesus inaugurated which bears witness to the deterioration of social and racial markers of division. Jesus' aim was to bring together historically divided peoples and bring to bear a new humanity of universality. And "[a]s *mestizos* of the borderlands between Anglo America and Latin America, Mexican-Americans can be instrumental in bringing greater appreciation and unity

[95] *Galilee Journey*, 98-99.

[96] *Galilean Journey*, 59.

between the peoples of the two Americas."[97] The very lives of Mexican-American people represent the breakdown of these borders.

Our Lady of Guadalupe

While Elizondo explicated the Christological significance of Jesus' own rejection and identification with mestizos, he claimed that the 'new creation' of the European and indigenous people happened at a different historic moment—namely, at Tepeyac in 1531. The story of Juan Diego's encounter with the Virgin of Guadalupe at Tepeyac occurred roughly a decade after Hernan Cortez's conquest of Tenochtitlan, the Mexica-Aztec capital. The colonization of the New World was one of the most complete, transformative horrors in human history, marking both the fateful encounter between the Spanish and the Nahuatl people of Tenochtitlan and consequently "the beginning of the condemnation to hard labor, humiliation, destruction, sickness, enslavement and mass death."[98]

This human horror provides context for the Virgin's revelation to Juan Diego. Elizondo believed that the religious myth of Mary's apparition to the indigenous Nahuatl man, Juan Diego, on the Hill of Tepeyac carried religious significance of *mestizaje.* For Elizondo, *mestizaje* received its theological significance precisely through the Virgin of Guadalupe, to whom he refers as "the new woman from whom the new humanity will be born, *la raza cósmica de las Americas"* or simply "*la Mestiza."*[99] Elizondo recalls visiting the Basilica of Guadalupe in Mexico City with a priest, Father Aguilera, and that it was there that the significance of the miracle she performed,

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[97] Ibid,

[98] *Guadalupe: Mother of the New Creation*, xiii.

[99] Galilean Journey, 43-44.

giving birth to the mestizo people, became impressed upon him in a new way. He claimed that this experience was

> the beginning of a real rebirth for me, a coming to grips with the innermost reality of my being and that of my people. I immediately realized that what had appeared as 'nonbeing' was in reality the beginning of new being. The carnal and spiritual borders of identity and belonging had been pierced, the geographical/historical being of 'the other' had been penetrated, and a new being had been conceived and born who would be fully both and something new.[100]

Despite the context of "New World" colonization, Elizondo read the story of the Virgin of Guadalupe as a rebuke of the conquest of the Americas. While *mestizaje* carries the shameful reminder of the conquest, Guadalupe redeems *mestizaje's* significance. Juan Diego, an indigenous Nahuatl man, is the one who received the revelation of *La Mestiza*. Moreover, Guadalupe placed him in a position of religious authority by sending him to charge the bishop with the task of building a basilica in her name. This inversion of religious authority is a repudiation of the power structures of New Spain, and the methods of conquest, realizes Elizondo. "Whereas the *mestizaje* of the conquest was destructive of everyone, the *mestizaje* of Guadalupe is reconstructive of everyone." [101]

In what ways is this so? Elizondo suggests that the Virgin's presentation of herself as 'virgin' is not to be read as a religious ethic of sexuality, but a repudiation of the sexual violence that marked the conquest of Tenochtitlan. He claims, "La Virgen is not against sex; she is against domination through the sexual violation of the defenseless. Because she is one of the violated people, she can understand brokenness; because she is of God, she can completely rehabilitate

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[100] Spiritual writings of Father Virgilio Elizondo, "*the mestizo soul.*"

[101] Guadalupe: mother of new creation, 112.

those who have been abused."[102] Her miracle of unifying the European and the indigenous is a testament to her as "the great evangelizer of the church and of the Americas and then as the protector and liberator of the poor, the downtrodden, and the disenfranchised."[103]

With Elizondo's conception of *mestizaje* in mind—its historic, scientific, and theological conceptualizations—we turn now to consider what it makes of Blaxican theology. Elizondo recognizes *mestizaje* as a borderlands space which transgresses the oppressor/oppressed binary and thereby transgresses social and existential markers, "one white, the other brown."[104] Blaxicans, however, represent what Mexican-American sociologist Rebecca Romo refers to as the "dual minority," or those whose "experiences may differ starkly from majority-minority multiracials, particularly if they belong to two racial and ethnic minority groups that have historically been at odds with one another." Romo claims that the "significance of 'mixed-race' has not been adequately examined within the sociological literature on racialization" and that "research on race/ethnicity has concentrated on the Black/white color line with lesser attention paid to other racial/ethnic formations." Since Blaxicans do not have "one white, one Brown parent," Romo claims, "Whiteness is not an option." Since "choosing both is less likely to be viewed as trying to climb the racial hierarchy, and therefore appealing, Blaxicans choose both as a way of embracing a non-hierarchical valuation of one group over the other."[105]

Elizondo's description of *mestizos* as those who straddle both the "oppressor/oppressed" and "white/brown" borderlands space is another demonstration of Black absence. Later on in life,

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[102] Guadalupe: mother of the new creation, 67.

[103] cite

[104] cite

[105] "You're Not Black or Mexican Enough!" in *Red and Yellow Black and Brown,* 129.

Father Virgilio Elizondo confessed that he had not given due attention in his work to the rich aspect of African culture in Mexico. Modern Mexico has African roots, and Afro-Mexicans are an often-forgotten part of their national narrative. Mexico's second President was Afro-Mexican, and in 2015 Mexico finally recognized its Afro-Mexican population on its census. Afro-Mexicans also make up a large part of the diaspora in states like North Carolina. To be a Black Mexican should not be an oxymoron. However, discourses of *mestizaje* have contributed to the erasure of Black Mexicans in the broader racial imaginary.

We Blaxicans also recognize the significance Our Lady of Guadalupe. Many of our families belong to Roman Catholic communities and traditions, and have her image in our homes, on our praying votives and clothing. My grandparents raised my father and his siblings in South Chicago, the historically Mexican-American neighborhood of Chicago, where the first Mexican parish, *Our Lady of Guadalupe* (OLG), was the community's anchor. As a young person, these vivid memories of mourning and celebration at OLG and the relationship between culture and religion in South Chicago taught me that being Mexican also meant being Catholic.

However, given the strong relationship between Guadalupe and *mestizaje,* Blaxicans must make sense of her significance for their own lives. For Blaxicans, the Virgin of Guadalupe myth, like Scripture, is about belief in the disbelieved. After Our Lady of Guadalupe reveals herself to Juan Diego, she charges him to deliver a message to the bishop to build the church on Tepeyac. However, "[w]hen the bishop heard all his words, his message, it was as if he didn't give it much credibility."[106] owed by the bishop's authority, Juan Diego internalizes the bishop's belief in the incredibility of his testimony. He begs the Virgin to find someone "one who is respected and

[106] Virgilio Elizondo, *Guadalupe*: *Mother of the New Creation*, 9.

esteemed, to come by and take your message and your word so that he may be believed."[107] The religious authorities of New Spain did not trust Juan Diego's testimony, and he had learned from people like the bishop not to trust himself.

Nevertheless, the Virgin vindicated Juan Diego's words with the miracle of flowers on his tunic. This epistemological priority is consistent with the Gospel writings. For example, New Testament scholars and exegetes remind us that the testimonies of women were not credible sources in the Greco-Roman era. Yet, their testimonies were the first to bear witness to the resurrection of Jesus. Christian faith is about belief in the disbelieved. In many ways, faith in Jesus is belief in a God whose testimony was disbelieved by the powerful. When Jesus tells Pilate that the reason he "was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth" and that "everyone on the side of truth listens to [him]," Pilate mockingly responded, "What is truth?" and left (John 18.37–38). Jesus was mocked during his arrest, flogging, and crucifixion as a lying imposter.

We Blaxicans recognize what it is like to lack credibility. Our contributions to discussions on Latine matters lack credibility because many people do not recognize us as authentically Latine. Given the long history of Black erasure in discourses of *mestizaje,* many within the Mexican-American community cannot see (or refuse to see) someone who was raised by a single Black mother, speaks broken Spanish, and proudly acknowledges their African roots. Blaxicans are often policed in how we perform *Blackness* and *mexicanidad* (Mexicanness) because we are not seen as either 'authentically' Black nor Mexican. Romo also identifies "authenticity policing" as a another theme that emerged in the testimonies of the Blaxicans she interviewed. Authenticity policing refers to "social interactions that occur when an inside member of a racial/ethnic group challenges

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[107] Guadalupe, mother of new creation, 10.

another's claim to authenticity and belonging through assumptions about their race, class, and gender."[108] Authenticity policing happens in Black and Latine religious and academic spaces as well. I know this for myself. I have been asked, "Do you consider yourself a *Black* theologian or a *Latine* theologian?" Or, in more subtle ways our authenticity cards are checked: "Do you know *this* theologian? Or *that* theologian? Or *this* Latinx theorist? Or *that* Latinx theorist?" My inability to speak fluent Spanish, have learned traditional Mexican customs (e.g., dance, food, etc.), or to have maintained contact with international family members render my inclusion into Mexican-American communities more difficult. Moreover, the experience of antiblackness that pervades many Mexican-American communities has made me recognize that even if I were seen as "Mexican," it would come with the erasure of my Blackness.

Blaxican Theology: Self-Naming, Liberation, and Solidarity

Naming Ourselves: Self-Naming and Liberation

Although Romo does the corrective work of identifying anti-Blackness within Latine communities, she unhelpfully ties Blaxicanness to *mestizaje.* She draws on Anzaldua, who "calls for a new 'mestiza' consciousness that embraces the contradictions and ambiguity of those who live in more than one culture." Romo sees this existence in Blaxican identity, arguing that they "encompass tolerance for contradictions, ambiguity, and the juggling of two cultures consistent with what Anzaldúa articulates as the new mestiza consciousness. Anzaldua argues that the new mestiza turns ambivalence, or the state of having simultaneous conflicting feelings, into

[108] Rebecca Romo, "You're Not Black or Mexican Enough!" in *Red and Yellow, Black and Brown: Decentering Whiteness in Mixed Race Studies,* ed. Joanne L. Rondilla, Rudy P. Guevarra Jr. and Paul Spickard (Rutgers University Press: 2017), 130.

'something else.'" For Romo, that "something else" is Blaxican, a 'borderlands' space that embraces the duality of Blackness, Mexicanness, and 'bothness.'

I agree with Romo's impulse to relate Anzaldua's phenomenological aspects of "borderlands" identities to Blaxicans. However, given the erasure of Blackness in Mexican and Mexican-American conceptions of *mestizaje*, I recognize "Blaxican" as its own self-sufficient category of hybridity. Mestizaje erases Blackness and centers whiteness. Many of us have experienced anti-Blackness through discourses of mestizaje. When I became consciously proud of my Blackness, I recall the experience of discomfort it elicited from family and friends. They insisted that I, like Puerto Ricans and Dominicans, am *mestizo* and not Black. These specific instances of intending to erase my Blackness were directly tied to discourses of *mestizaje.*

However, instead of erasing Blackness, the term "Blaxican" itself foregrounds Blackness (i.e., *Black*+xican) in ways that *mestizaje* does not. As a self-sufficient category of hybridity, "Blaxican" is a term many Blaxicans use to name their distinct experience of Blackness and *mexicanidad. Blaxican* disrupts the meanings of Mexican, Black and *mestizo* and thereby occupies what Anzaldua and others have called the "borderlands space," or a way of being that transgresses fixed social categories.

When people of Black American and Mexican-American descent name ourselves, they may not be content with the term "Blaxican." María Rosario Jackson, for instance, refers to herself as "Mexican," as "African American," as "Afro Latina," or even "an African American Mexican

woman."[109] When someone asks her how she identifies racially, she claims her answer depends on the context,

> on who is asking and why. For me, sometimes the two cultures are very distinct and sometimes there is confluence. I think it's important to recognize that there is integrity in both distinction and confluence. I also think it is important to remember that racial and ethnic labels are tools that can work for or against social justice.[110]

The terms that we use to define ourselves depends on the situations we find ourselves in. For me, my racial identity as a Black person is heightened whenever I'm around Mexicans speaking negatively about Black people. Moreover, people have accused me of being opportunistic, leveraging the racial identity that makes the most sense for me in a different situation that I am in. Like Rosario Jackson, "as I have grown older I have felt less need to explain myself, and that has been liberating for me." [111]

One of the most exhausting experiences of dual-minority life is explaining how, why, and when we emphasize one aspect of our racial identity in certain places. This is why I have come to reject *mestizaje* as a satisfactory racial category, even though I am Mexican-American. Naming myself as "Blaxican" is liberating given the ease with which I can communicate my "borderlands" identity, but it is also liberating knowing that it is a racial category I've decided on. It generates the space necessary to tell the stories that are important to who I am, stories that transcend the racial categories handed down to us from modernity. In other words, telling someone that I am "Blaxican" generates conversation and creates a space for a conversation about race and theology.

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[109] cite

[110] 438

[111] 438

"What is the difference between Afro-Mexican and Blaxican? Which do you identify with more? Are your parents Catholic? Protestant? Which do you identify with more?"

Naming ourselves is not merely (or even mostly) a matter of theological or existential analysis but telling our stories with the few resources available for meaning-making. There is very little ethnographic work done on Blaxicans; there is no such thing as an historically "Blaxican" Church. For Blaxicans to make meaning out of our lives, we must tell our stories with the best and most accessible sources of information – Black, Mexican, European—to render visible who we are. To be a human is to struggle for meaning, and telling stories is part of that struggle. Blaxican theology is a reflection on the importance of *meaning* for the human being, appealing to stories that shape our conceptions of what we mean to the world in which we live as human beings. In this sense I agree with the South African theologian, John Wesley de Gruchy, who says "stories shape who we are, informing our values and directing our paths."[112]

Solidarity

Recall that Vasconcelos believed *mestizaje* gestured towards sympathy, love, and development. For him, Iberians were moved by love and sympathy towards the other, and it was through their ancestry that civilization could develop. In Blaxican theology, however, solidarity and liberation are key themes. We yearn to emphasize and imagine what unites Black Americans and Mexicans in solidarity. Kurt Bayertz argued that the idea of solidarity, which was initially understood as 'universal fraternity' was "taken up and made binding by Christianity during its two-thousand-year-long cultural dominance within the Western world" and that "the idea of a

[112] John W. de Gruchy. *Being Human: Confessions of a Christian Humanist* (SCM- Canterbury Press, London: 2006), 5.

fraternity of all human beings as the children of God was undoubtedly the historical foundation for *ethical universalism."*[113] Therefore, to speak of solidarity and liberation is not to speak of something post-Christian, but *fundamentally* Christian.

Many theologians, like M. Shawn Copeland, have sought to give theological clarity to solidarity, which she claims, "denotes the empathetic incarnation of Christian love." [114] Within theological anthropology, Copeland notes that solidarity "presents a discernable structure with cognitive, affective, effective, constitutive, and communicative dimensions."[115] In other words, Copeland is suggesting that solidarity entails a holistic attachment between the two parties in solidarity with one another. They recognize, feel, and are invested in the other's wellbeing. She writes that "solidarity is a task, through which responsible relationships between and among persons (between and among groups) may be created and expressed, mended and renewed."[116] Solidarity is a process, whereby the groups involved are deeply invested in the dynamics of each other's lives.

This theorization of solidarity becomes the basis upon which Copeland argues for a *eucharistic solidarity,* the practice which orients one "to the cross of the lynched Jesus of Nazareth, where we grasp the enormity of suffering, affliction, and oppression," where we are taught to "imagine, to hope for, and to create new possibilities."[117] One of the concerns Blaxican theology must register to this conception of solidarity is precisely what role an "incarnation of Christian

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[113] Kurt Bayertz --, et al. *Solidarity*. (Dordrecht ; Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1999), 5.

[114] M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*: *body, race, and being* (Fortress Press, Minneapolis: 2010), 93.

[115] Ibid, 94

[116] Ibid, 94-95

[117] 128

love" means. If incarnational or eucharistic solidarity denotes an event by which one takes up the other's alterity and subsumes it in their own life, then this form of solidarity must be rejected. Theories of *mestizaje* have implied the negation of Blackness by subsuming it into the life of mixedness, and theories of solidarity must be mindful of this as well.

Jon Sobrino also defines solidarity theologically. For Sobrino, solidarity for the Christian is an act of charity *exclusively* for the oppressed churches. He writes that, "solidarity has been set in motion when some churches help another church that is in need because it has taken on solidarity with the poor and oppressed among its own people." As the helping church engages with the impoverished one, the helping church becomes illuminated by God with the knowledge that the helper is in fact receiving help. "What they receive is of a different and higher order; they usually describe it as a new inspiration in faith and help in discovering their identities in human, ecclesial, and Christian terms and in relation to God." In other words, the helping church receives a *greater* measure of spiritual blessing; a renewal of faith and a rejuvenation of spirit. Throughout this symbiotic relationship, both communities become aware of their mutual dependence on one another and "make the discovery that in principle it is essential that a local church be united to another church and that in principle this mutual relationship embraces all levels of life, from material aid to faith in God."[118]

What is foundational for Sobrino is that solidarity does not merely imply one individual in relationship with another, irrespective of each other's social conditions. For Sobrino, solidarity for the Christian is an act of *kenosis* – from one church with the means of helping to another who needs help. "The church's turn toward the world of the poor, whether in the universal church or in

[118] Jon Sobrino and Juan Hernández Pico. *Theology of Christian Solidarity* (Orbis Books: Maryknoll, NY: 1985), 2-4.

a particular local church, is the basic solidarity of the church, that with which it carries out its mission and maintains its identity."[119]

Sobrino's vision of solidarity implies the union of *non-oppressed* communities with *oppressed* communities. This is not the case with Black and Mexican solidarity, as Black (USA) Americans and Brown Mexican(-American) communities are victims of racial subordination. Both Black Americans and Brown Mexicans strengthen their bonds of connection because of their shared struggle against US State violence. As Blaxicans in the United States, we are keenly aware of the racial markers of 'nigger,' 'illegal,' 'wetback,' or 'thug' that mark one for violence. Blaxicans live with multiple senses of vulnerability (physical, emotional, and/or psychological), and are therefore attuned to the need for a unified front against the state. This is why solidarity is integral to Blaxican theology. Blaxicans can turn on the TV and learn that someone who looks like their *tío* has been ripped away from his children, has been locked in a cage, and has been deported to a country to which he has no immediate connection. Conversely, they can turn on the TV to learn that someone who reminds them of their auntie has been shot by police while sleeping peacefully in her bedroom. These terrifying realities make real the sense of urgency, commitment, and investment we feel for Black and Mexican liberation. These affective attachments to the other's wellbeing aligns with what Copeland refers to as *eucharistic* solidarity, and the *kinetic* vision of total investment found in Sobrino.

Liberation

The aim of solidarity is liberation. So, while Black Americans and Mexican Americans can point to common histories or experiences of suffering, what connects them most is their shared

[119] Ibid, 12

vision for a better world. In our liberation theological traditions, prophesying freedom in historical conditions of unfreedom is the call one must respond to. One of the defining features of the Black American and Mexican (-American) theologies of liberation is the steadfast refusal to accept the given order as a fixture of human life. They've understood that state violence, labor and land expropriation, and white supremacy all stand beneath God's judgment. They are not "realists" who tell us what is possible within the legal strictures of their daily lives. If one side of the gospel is tragedy, the other is possibility. These two categories are often called *sin* and *grace.* Humanity is weighed down by callousness, but grace levitates us. Our existence is one of *gravity* and *grace.*[120] Grace is the impossible made possible by God. It is life overcoming death, democracy overcoming xenophobia, and cooperation overcoming competition. The liberation theologies of the Americas bring to bear visions of the transcendent and the impossible—a vision of the Kingdom of God where peace, love, and justice is the soil upon which community is built.

Freedom from state violence is merely one form of liberation, but to be freed from the markers which make us vulnerable to violence is another form of freedom. María Rosario Jackson's feeling of liberation from the need to explain her racial identities gestures towards this kind of freedom. She was not advocating for a colorblind society or politics. In fact, she participated in Black and Chicano movements and was very comfortable shifting from a variety of racial categories to define herself. Instead, what she was suggesting was that race—phenotypical, performative, and/or cultural—never completely defines who we are, even if it determines much of our social positioning.

Conclusion

[120] Cite Simone Weil.

Although Blaxicans are mixed-race people, Blaxican theology is not a theology of *mestizaje.* Since modern ideologies of *mestizaje* have historically erased Blackness, Blaxican foregrounds Blackness in its hybrid identity as a corrective to that erasure. However, Blaxican theology is deeply influenced by the phenomenological accounts of theologians and theorists of *mestizaje* who identify the borderlands space as one of unity and distinction. I am a unified whole (Blaxican) with a multiplicity of identities (Black, Mexican, mixed). At its best, *mestizaje* aims at describing a life marked by ambiguity, and a comfort with contradiction. Virgilio Elizondo recognizes the theological significance of that homeless space, and rightly names Jesus and Juan Diego as those who make space for themselves where there is none. Although, the "Son of Man has nowhere to rest his head," he creates a space where all might rest theirs. However, Blaxican theology takes this cue from Mexican-American theology by emphasizing solidarity instead of inclusion and universality. And like Mexican-American theology, a central theme for theological explication is liberation. Solidarity is rooted in the deep investment Blaxicans feel towards the liberation of Mexican people on both sides of the US/Mexico border and the Black diaspora. Black and Mexican theologies of liberation have yearned for a world free from the social, racial, and political constrictions of their daily lives. Now that we have considered the theme of *mestizaje* in Mexican-American theology of liberation, we may now turn to consider the role of Black theology of liberation in a Blaxican theology.

Blaxican Theology and Blackness: Power, Freedom, and Abolition

In the previous chapter, I discussed *mestizaje* as a racial and theological term in Mexican-American theology. This chapter explores the emergence of *Blackness* as a category of social difference in the Americas, and how it became reinterpreted by Black theologians. Probing the theological significance of Blackness is important for Blaxican theologians because Blaxican theology is intrinsically a Black theology. The term *Blaxican*, rather than diminishing Blackness or adding to it, is a specificity of Blackness. Just as Black Americans, Afro-Colombians, and Afro-Brazilians are Black, *Blaxicans* are also Black. We are not simply people of Iberian and indigenous ancestry. We are Black. We are Mexican. We are Afro-Mexicans. Hence, I use the term *Blaxican* to specify the particular geographical context of our racial hybridity. Blaxican and Afro-Mexican can be used interchangeably, but most people who refer to themselves as Blaxican are people with one Black USA parent and one Mexican or Mexican-American parent.

This chapter examines and draws upon USA Black theology as a source for Blaxican theology. Rather than discuss every theme, method, source, and iteration of Black theology and how it pertains to Blaxican theology, here I focus on the themes of *power* and *freedom,* particularly within the theology of first-generation Black theologian, James Cone. I show how Blackness emerged as a theological concept closely associated with powerlessness and servitude. Both slavery and the racist theologies that accompanied slavery justified this meaning of Blackness. As a result, Black radicalism, religion, and theology redefined Blackness as power and freedom. Black radicals argued that liberation is *inherent* to the Black experience and that Black radicalism emerged out of the religious impulses of African religion. First-generation Black theologians (especially Cone) redefined the content of the gospel as liberation, consistent with Black radical thought, and organized a theological method around the themes of power and freedom as well. I

explore how the modern context of slavery shaped the content and method of first-generation Black theology in the late 1960s, particularly that exhibited by the content and method of James H. Cone, and trace the methodological shift between the first and second generation of Black theology and theologians, and how it poses an issue for Blaxican theology. I argue that the turn towards *indigenization* does not appropriately match Blaxican theological method the way an emphasis on *power* and *freedom* does. I conclude by arguing that Blaxican theology is an *abolitionist* theology, as the themes of power and freedom that emerged in black radical preaching were synonymous with a call for abolition. As such for Blaxican theology to be authentically itself, it must also be an *abolitionist* theology.

A Testimony of Unfreedom: The Criminal Injustice System and Blaxicans

How is the history of Blackness, power, and freedom in Black theology relevant to Blaxican people today? Black, Mexican, and Blaxican people today, many of whom grow up in America's poor, racially segregated neighborhoods, know what *un*freedom looks like. Since the publication of Michelle Alexander's groundbreaking text, *The New Jim Crow*, many Americans well outside of such neighborhoods have finally also become aware of the United States' lockup craze and its institution of unfreedom: the prison and criminal "justice" system. Observes Alexander:

> The United States now has the highest rate of incarceration in the world, dwarfing the rates of nearly every developed country, even surpassing those in highly repressive regimes like Russia, China, and Iran. In Germany, 93 people are in prison for every 100,000 adults and children. In the United States, the rate is roughly eight times that, or 750 per 100,000. The racial dimension of mass incarceration is its most striking feature. No other country in the

> world imprisons so many of its racial or ethnic minorities. The United States imprisons a larger percentage of its black population than South Africa did at the height of apartheid.[121]

These striking numbers provide a meta-view of mass incarceration and its systemic effect. However, it is important to know that each of these numbers represent individual people; people who are somebody and somebody's world. To draw this reality into sharp relief, it is important to share my own testimony of unfreedom and powerlessness. I am convinced by Ta-Nehisi Coates' admonition to his son to remember that "the sociology, the history, the economics, the graphs, the charts, the regressions all land, with great violence, upon the body."[122] Moreover, it is important to recognize that even though mass incarceration is framed as a continuation of *anti-Black* institutions, its violence is inflicted on the bodies of both Black and Brown people. For example, Virgilio Elizondo has shared how he criminal justice system enacts violence on Mexican-Americans in his home state of Texas. He wrote:

> thousands of persons watch their loved ones be taken away, accused of some crime, condemned, and sentenced by the "justice of the powerful"—and all they can do is stand silently by them to the very end. I have myself met many such men and women in the jails of San Antonio. They do not even know why they are there. Some just happened to be standing by when a crime was committed. Their family has no money for bail. They do not know their way around. All they do [is] pray and patiently wait and hope that something would be worked out.[123]

Such state violence is not theoretical to me. I was arrested three times before I was a legal adult, the first time when I was fifteen years old. I had stolen a pair of magnetic stud earrings from

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[121] Michelle Alexander, *Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New Press; Distributed by Perseus Distribution, [Jackson, Tenn.]New York : 2010) *5-6*

[122] Ta-Nehisi Coates. *Between the World and Me*. (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015), 5.

[123] Galilean Journey, 42.

Claire's, hoping to emulate Tupac Shakur's nose-ring look. The store clerk noticed what I was doing and notified a local police officer who waited for me as I left the store with stolen jewelry. The officer and store clerk led me to the back room where I submitted information to the police officer for processing. I was sent to the Aurora, Illinois police station where I was fingerprinted, photographed, and kept in a holding cell until my mom could pick me up.

After my first brush with the police, I was arrested twice more, once for stealing, and another for a fistfight in high school. I have also been stopped and frisked repeatedly. When I was sixteen, my brother and I stopped at a pawn shop located across the street from our old housing complex. While my brother went into the store, I went to greet some friends. When I returned, a police officer stopped me, asked me to put my hands against the car and frisked me. When my brother rushed out of the shop, asking me what was going on, I pleaded in tears for him to believe that "I didn't do anything." When the officer found nothing in my pockets, he said he thought he had seen me interact with a known drug dealer.

On another occasion, a police officer stopped me after claiming he had seen me throw up a gang sign. Years later, I shared this story with an attorney friend of mine, insisting that I had merely flicked someone off. He stopped me in my tracks: "Matt, I believe you," he said. "But even if you *had* thrown up a gang sign, that is not probable cause for an officer to stop and frisk you." However, as a young Black and Brown boy, I had believed that I had no power to stop this interaction from happening.

Perhaps the most striking stop-and-frisk moment of my life happened at a local softball field in a southeast suburb of Chicago. Our softball game was abruptly stopped when several plain clothes police officers surrounded the field in SUVs, and rushed to the diamond, their badges

hanging from their necks. We were accused of holding a "gang meeting" in the park. The officers lined us up while they patted us down, searching for contraband. They searched coolers, cars, and everything we had with us. In addition, they made us remove our shirts to check us for "gang tattoos." One cop even swatted the hat off a friend's head because it was tilted, and he told his partner to "lock this one up for disorderly conduct" as he shoved him toward the police car. They made no arrests that day, but we felt powerless to take them to court for harassing us.

If there is one person in whom a young Black man should be able to confide about these brushes with law enforcement it is his father. I never told my dad about these experiences because he was a cop, and he had made it clear that his loyalties were to other cops, not to his family. As a child, I wanted to be just like my dad: a selfless hero who catches criminals. The idea that people could be divided into two categories, good and bad, shaped my beliefs about myself and the world for years to come. In time, however, I would realize just how much "criminality"— the so-called *bad* side of this binary—was synonymous with "Black" or "Brown."

Theology was key in cementing these beliefs in my mind. Yet eventually, theology would also be my salvation. I became a Christian while I was on probation, and legally prohibited from leaving the house except for certain activities. It was something like house arrest, but without an ankle bracelet. I was allowed to leave my home in the evening for work, church, or activities approved by my probation officer. Restive seventeen-year-old that I was, I accepted the invitation of a classmate to attend an evening Christian youth service. During the service, I was overwhelmed with messages of repentance and redemption. Deep down, I wanted to repent of my badness and redeem it with goodness. I relayed my experiences with the police to the other youth service members with a great deal of guilt. Had I not been bad, I told them, I wouldn't have deserved to be harassed by police. This was my testimony, and I believed it wholeheartedly.

If growing up with a cop for a father planted the seeds of goodness and badness in my mind, Christian theology fertilized and watered them. Christian theology reinforced the belief that I was a bad guy; that my conversion marked a "Road to Damascus" experience in which I was on a path of destruction before I met Jesus. I wasn't. I was simply another Black and Brown child undeservedly harassed by police. Yet I did not know that at the time. I had internalized the belief that police (appropriately) had the power to do as they see fit to powerless young Black and Brown boys like me.

While studying theology at an evangelical liberal arts school, I encountered James Cone and Black liberation theology. Cone reinterpreted the significance of the gospel and Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, arguing that the heart of the good news or gospel was liberation and power. He drew parallels between the cross that killed Jesus and the lynching tree that killed Black people. Cone believed a better world was possible, and that if we struggled for that world, we would be aided by God's grace.

My experiences of powerlessness and unfreedom were directly tied to a belief that it is appropriate that the good guys are the white cops or vigilantes who capture (render unfree) the bad (Black/Brown) guys. As my own internalization of these beliefs demonstrates, our inner selves are held captive, too. It is now public knowledge that Black parents have "the talk" with their children about how to behave when they interact with police. Many parents understand that certain freedoms are not given to young Black and Brown boys like me. Our bright personalities are imprisoned by teachers, neighbors, and strangers who police our bodies on a daily basis. The alternative high school I attended as a teenager was held in an old factory building where dress codes and silence were strictly enforced. Before we were allowed to enter, we had to take off our shoes, turn them upside down and clap them together before we were checked up and down by a

security guard with a metal detector. This was the same procedure I endured to visit family in prison.

The legacies of slavery persist even today. Their aim is to render Black lives powerless and unfree. Slavery determined a social, political, and theological orientation towards Black people that persisted through Reconstruction, Jim Crow, and continues in the present era of mass incarceration. It continues to enact violence disproportionately and unjustly upon the lives of Black and nonwhite peoples. Black religion scholar, Vincent Lloyd is right when he claims:

> Anti-Black racism is not just about bad choices, or about people who failed their diversity exam. It is at the center of everything, for everyone. It leads to police violence but also to odd looks from colleagues; it leads to mass incarceration but also makes Black bodies especially vulnerable to disease. And it makes Black people confused about who we are. All of this grows out of the primal scene of slavery.[124]

Lloyd claims that the world of antiBlackness emerged from the historical context of slavery, which provided theological justification to the antiBlack systems of powerlessness and unfreedom that render harm to Black and Brown bodies. As my own story demonstrates, I internalized two sorts of belief systems: the first was a theology that emerged from enslavement, connecting Blackness with powerlessness and servitude. The second was a liberative theology; one that empowered me to abolish these theologies of powerlessness and unfreedom.

Blackness as Powerlessness and Servitude: Slavery

It is important to situate all Black theologies in the aftermath of the transatlantic slave trade. Indeed, the social meaning of "Black" and the emergence of the Black theologies that would

[124] Vincent Lloyd, *Black Dignity: The Struggle Against Domination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022), xi.

emerge in the 20th century are all responses to the transatlantic slave trade. The fifteenth century marked the emergence of the international slave trade in the West, beginning in 1441 when Christian Portuguese sailors landed on the coast of Africa, and returned to Portugal in 1444 to offer enslaved Africans as gifts to Prince Henry. Dwight N. Hopkins writes that "we can symbolically, if not substantively, specify 1441 as the beginning of, perhaps, the largest displacement, forced migration, and genocide in human history – the European slave trade in Africa."[125] Historian of early modern Iberian colonialism Anna More claims that 1444 was the first instance where color differentiated and justified racial subordination. "In 1444, on a field outside the southern Portuguese port of Lagos, slave raiders divided 235 Idzagen men, women, and children into five groups and sold them, reserving one fifth for the Infante Henrique, who had subsidized the expedition."[126]

The return to Portugal with African slaves establishes the scene for Willie Jennings' book, *The Christian Imagination*,[127] in which the theme of *displacement* takes up the first part of the text. Jennings understands colonial modernity to have displaced humans from themselves and the land, transforming the former into a racialized self and the latter into a commodity. Yet Jennings' search for the origins of race is not "a historical account that moves through all the complex realities of churches and colonialist nations, indigenes and slaves, land and commodity forms, racial formation and social imagination, nation and ecclesial dispute, all from the fifteenth century through the twentieth." Instead, he writes that his particular goal is "to paint a portrait of a theological problem

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[125] Dwight N. Hopkins, "General Introduction," in *The Cambridge Companion to Black Theology,* ed. Dwight N. Hopkins (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012) 3-4.

[126] *Necroeconomics, Originary Accumulation, Racial Capitalism,* 75.

[127] Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race,* (New Haven: Yale University Press), __.

in order to suggest a way forward."[128] For Jennings, the theological problem begins at the slave auction of 1444, reported by Prince Henry of Portugal's chronicler, Zurara.

As Zurara watches the horror unfold in this nascent slave economy, as he watches families crying as they're torn apart from each other, he acknowledges that what is happening is against natural law, but recognizes that there must be an exception to it. Zurara interrupts his own chronicle with a personal lament, asking God how to make sense of the suffering of the African. Jennings interprets Zurara as seeking "from God the kind of interpretation that would ease his conscience and make the event unfolding in front of him morally palatable."[129] Anna More claims that whereas religion was the language of exception, now people use phenotype or race to justify their enslavement of other people. Indeed, "race emerged as a language of exception to justify the novelty of the market in enslaved Africans," and therefore "race, understood as the confluence of phenotype and geographical origin, would become the language that naturalized this exception."[130] This exception, she writes, "is not naturalized through an appeal to the invisible hand of the market, as it will be in [Adam] Smith, but through the language of racial guilt, obligation, and Christian compensation. This theopolitical justification is a necessary counterweight to what Zurara describes as an inherently violent separation of families."[131]

For Jennings, race and the colonial encounter are t*heological* problems quite simply because they sever human possibility for relationship to God, the natural world, and humans.

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[128] Ibid, ___.

[129] Ibid, 18.

[130] More, 76.

[131] Ibid, 87

Indeed, this creation of phenotypical conceptions of race becomes the architecture or undergirding framework of (white) Christian theology moving forward. Zurara's theological innovation created a 'racial scale,' whereby darkness corresponded with reprobation and whiteness to salvation. Jennings perceives this as a violation of God's intention for intimacy, and as bringing into being a world where our selves are reduced to single, easily identifiable fragments (such as color, race, gender, ability) instead of the vast worlds of possibility God intended for those selves. The solitary fragment of race, especially *whiteness,* feigns self-sufficiency, and thereby denies God's hand the ability to create us anew.[132] That denial is the performance of idolatry, a prostration to whiteness.

Of the many justifications that attended slavery, British historian Colin Kidd maintained that interpretations of "Genesis ha[ve] played a very large role in the cultural construction of race,"[133] and that "the reliance of most early modern and some modern ethnological theories on the irrefutable historical testimony of the Old Testament transmutes the concept of 'race' into the neighbouring, but qualitatively distinct, category of 'lineage.'"[134] The formation of the racialized African slave gained its power among white slaveholders and society thanks to its theological interpretation.

One of these theologies that sprouted from the racial soil of the colonial encounter was the Curse of Ham. White interpreters considered African slaves to have descended from the line of Cain, who was cursed as a servant of Japheth in Genesis 9. As descendants of this cursed man, all Black (or more expansively, non-white) persons are likewise cursed. In this Genesis text, Ham

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[132] Willie James Jennings, *After Whiteness.*

[133] *The Forging of Races,* Colin Kidd. 19

[134] Ibid, 21.

finds his father, Noah, lying drunk and naked in his tent. He shames his father by failing to cover up his nakedness, and therefore his descendants, Canaan, are cursed to perpetual servitude to his brothers, Shem and Japheth. Lineage became a theological lynchpin that justified the enslavement of African people in many parts of the American south. From the theological justifications of Zurara to the Curse of Ham, Blackness became synonymous with powerlessness, unfreedom, and servitude.

Blackness as Power and Freedom: Black Theology, Black Religion, Black Radicalism

As a response to the theological interpretations of Blackness as powerlessness and unfreedom, Black radical preachers emphasized power and freedom as central theological foci. Some of its most powerful expositors were Black radical preachers like Henry Highland Garnet, who argued that "neither God, nor angels, or just men, command you [slaves] to suffer for a single moment. Therefore it is your solemn and imperative duty to use every means, both moral, intellectual, and physical that promises success."[135] Black liberation theologian, James Cone argued it was Black abolitionist preachers like “Henry Highland Garnet, David Walker, Henry McNeil Turner, and others like them, who helped young black radical preachers articulate a black version of the gospel. It differed from an appeal to integration, love, and nonviolence, and thus, to everyone’s surprise, was quite similar to the message of black power in the 1960s.”[136]

While the modern context of Black theology itself existed far before the twentieth century, the first public articulation of an explicitly Black theology was published July 31, 1966 in a *New York Times* op-ed. Indeed, this public *black* theology had powerlessness and unfreedom in mind

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[135] https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4h2937t.html

[136] James Cone, *For my People*, 60.

when the clergy who wrote it claimed "powerlessness breeds a race of beggars" and that "the same old problem of power and race has faced our country since 1619."[137] The clergy addressed multiple audiences, while explicating a theological meaning of power in their statement. The publication of their statement should be situated within the hailstorm of the Black Power controversy since it is the rallying cry for "Black Power!" which inspired the theological response from clergy who authored the *NYT* piece.

The call for black power took place on June 16, 1966 during a march co-led by Martin Luther King, Jr. and Stokely Carmichael in Greenwood, Mississippi. Having recently assumed leadership of the youth wing of the civil rights movement, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Carmichael gave voice to a disenchanted generation that had lost faith in nonviolent resistance. The cry for 'Black Power' also represented a break from King's method of nonviolent resistance. While speaking to a reporter in Greenwood, King maintained his faith in nonviolence. Carmichael, instead, claimed: "We have been saying 'freedom' for six years. What we are going to start saying now is 'Black Power!' Since members of the press were present, the cry for 'Black Power!' became an international controversy among the white press and the white public. What did it mean?, they wondered, alarmed. Communism? Revolutionary armed struggle? The radical theorist and auto worker, James Boggs, captures the mood and persistent theme of power which emerged during this era:

> Black Power. Black Power. This is what is being written about and talked about in all strata of the population of the United States of America… Liberals and radicals, Negro civil rights leaders and politicians, reporters and editorial writers—it is amazing to what degree all of them are fascinated and appalled by Black Power.[138] **[3]**

[137] Hopkins, "General Introduction," 19.

[138] (James Boggs, "Black Power: A Scientific Concept Whose Time Has Come", *James Boggs Reader*171)

The (white) press called upon Black people—and clergy, especially— to condemn black power or to apologize for it. However, on July 31, 1966, just weeks after Greenwood incident, 48 Black clergy signed a "Black Power Statement" and published it in the *New York Times.* The statement addresses four particular publics: the leaders of America, white churchmen, Negro citizens, and the mass media. It summoned each of its addressees to reflect on the theological meaning of power. The clergy claimed that from "the point of view of the Christian faith, there is nothing necessarily wrong with the concern for power." Moreover, they critiqued (white) American power, and argued that the "Negro Church was created as a result of the refusal to submit to the indignities of a false kind of 'integration' in which all power was in the hands of white people." They maintained that love and power go hand in hand, but that love "should be the controlling element in power, not power itself."

This statement is foundational to black liberation theology in general, and to James Cone's theology in particular. Indeed, the *Black Power* statement became the seedbed from which Cone's later exposition, *Black Theology and Black Power* emerged.

Power, Freedom, and International Solidarity

James Hal Cone, widely regarded as the father of Black liberation theology, challenged white supremacy on theological grounds, damning it as blasphemy before a God who stands in solidarity with the abused of human history. Cone's earliest publication, *Black Theology and Black Power*, built on the *New York Times* op-ed, but was itself a unique theological contribution to the discussion of Black Power.

Black Theology and Black Power emphasizes the connection between power, freedom and the gospel of Jesus Christ as a corrective to the historical entanglements between Blackness, powerlessness and unfreedom. Indeed, Cone claimed that his goal was "to show that the goal and message of Black Power, as defined in Chapter I and articulated by many of its advocates, is consistent with the gospel of Jesus Christ."[139] Cone believed that both "Black Power and Christianity have this in common: the liberation of man!"[140] Here, Cone not only identified the goal of Black Power as liberation, but also the central message of the gospel of Jesus Christ as liberation in what is arguably the first published liberation theology. Of course, the paradigmatic biblical text and vision for liberation is the book of Exodus and the God's action within history to free slaves from bondage in Egypt toward freedom in the Promised Land. Cone claimed that the message of the gospel itself is liberation, premised on the God "who emancipated [Israel] from Egyptian bondage and subsequently established a covenant with her at Sinai."[141]

Yet Cone's emphasis on Black Power and freedom is not merely about liberating Black people. Indeed, Cone maintained that "when blacks hear about any injustice, whether it is committed against black or white, blacks know that their existence is being stripped of its meaning."[142] It is this broader understanding in Cone's theology that later becomes an important feature of Blaxican theology.

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[139] James Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*.

[140] James Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power,* 39.

[141] 44

[142] 25

An often overlooked aspect of Cone's theological project is his internationalism—that is, his emphasis on the connectedness of US struggles with those elsewhere around the globe. Blaxican theology inherits Cone's internationalist vision and builds upon it as an expression of solidarity with Third World theologians who make 'liberation of the oppressed' the bedrock of their expression of solidarity. The internationalist vision of *Black Theology and Black Power* offers a model theological vision of global solidarity with all people, including with Mexican and Mexican-American people struggling for freedom.

In *Black Theology and Black Power*, Cone highlights the solidarity blacks share with other oppressed peoples who struggle across the world stating, "the black man is assuming that there is a common value which is recognizable by all as existing in all people, and he is testifying to that something in his rebellion. He is expressing solidarity with the human race." For Cone, black liberation was not exclusive to Black Americans or the Black Diaspora in general. Liberation for black people meant liberation for everyone fighting for freedom. Of course, this was a common feature of the Black Power movement and it was particularly integral to the thought of Stokely Carmichael and Malcolm X, whom Cone cited frequently in *Black Theology and Black Power*.

In addition to emphasizing the interconnectedness of such struggles, black internationalists have insisted on making connections with other freedom struggles around the world, claiming that the struggle for liberation is connected to powers both within and outside of the United States.[143] Throughout *Black Theology and Black Power*, Cone connects the Black Power movement to

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[143] "Mandela's political emergence occurred within the context of an internationalism that always urged us to make connections among freedom struggles. These international solidarities were not only among people of African descent but with Asian and Latin American struggles as well, including ongoing solidarity with the Cuban revolution and solidarity with people struggling against US military aggression in Vietnam." Angela Davis, *Freedom is a Constant Struggle* (Haymarket), 53.

contemporary and historical struggles as a precedent for fighting white racism. For example, Cone connects the oppression of indigenous people to Black Americans, arguing "genocide is the logical conclusion of racism. It happened to the American Indians, and there is ample reason to believe that America is prepared to do the same for blacks."[144] Cone also draws connections between Germany, Vietnam[145], and identifies black theology "with the religionists of the Third World."[146]

Black internationalism is not an afterthought in Black theology. Aside from Cone's nod to international solidarity with other oppressed people, black internationalist thought is central in Dwight Hopkins' *Black Theology USA and South Africa*.[147] Womanist theologian Jacquelyn Grant likewise foregrounds it in *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus.* After her sweeping history of the feminist movement within and without the church, Grant notes that the trifold departure point of race, class, and gender is based on a more international solidarity with oppressed people than white Christology. Thus, she writes that

> it is in the context of Black women's experience where the particular connects up with the universal. By this I mean that in each of the three dynamics of oppression, Black women share in the reality of a broader community. They share race suffering with Black men; with White women and other Third World women, they are victims of sexism; with poor Blacks and Whites, and other Third World peoples, especially women, they are disproportionately poor. To speak of Black women's tri-dimensional reality, therefore, is not to speak of Black women exclusively, for there is an implied universality which

[144] 75

[145] 82

[146] 135

[147] Dwight N Hopkins. *Black Theology USA and South Africa: Politics, Culture, and Liberation*. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1989.

> connects them with others… likewise with Jesus Christ, there was an implied universality which made him identify with others- the poor, the woman, the stranger[148].[149]

Each of the writings by and about Black men, Black feminists, and womanists suggests that Black liberation aims towards the liberation of all people, regardless of race or nationality. The internationalist vision of *Black Theology and Black Power* continues in Blaxican Theology, which recognizes that the liberating Black Jesus is at work to liberate all people who are burdened and heavy laden.

Freedom and Resistance: Black Religion and the Black Radical Tradition

While power, freedom, and internationalism are important features of the first generation of Black theology, they are also important features of Black radical thought. *Black Power*, the Black radical conversation partner of Black theology, likewise emphasized freedom, power, and internationalism. Angela Davis maintained that "the Black radical tradition is related not simply to Black people but to all people who are struggling for freedom."[150] This tradition of black radicalism has consistently maintained that liberation is an involved, cooperative, and international praxis. Black radical thought has long recognized that liberation for black people is not confined to a struggle within one particular nation's borders.

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[149] Jacquelyn Grant. *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response* (Atlanta Ga.: Scholars Press: 1989), 216-217.

[150] Angela Davis, *Freedom is a Constant Struggle.*

Black radicalism is a critical orientation towards the political order of things as they currently are, one that helps us imagine ways of organizing ourselves and treating one another in more just and humane ways. The term "Black radical tradition" has recently become popularized through the writings of the late political theorist, Cedric Robinson. In chapter 7 of his now-classic text, *Black Marxism,* and especially his chapter "The Nature of the Black Radical Tradition," Robinson claims that the African metaphysics and culture brought from Africa to the so-called New World were critical inspirations for rebellion in the colonies. He referred to the black radical tradition as an "ideologically based" and "epistemologically coherent" tradition of radicalism rooted in African religious beliefs and practices.[151]

> It is not a variant of Western radicalism whose proponents happen to be Black. Rather, it is a specifically African response to an oppression emergent from the immediate determinants of European development in the modern era and framed by orders of human exploitation woven into the interstices of European social life from the inception of Western civilization.

Robinson is saying that Black resistance was not inspired by Marx or Western radical thought. Instead, Robinson believed (as Robin D.G. Kelley summarizes) that "African resistance to New World slavery was profoundly shaped by the influence of slaves' West and Central African roots."[152]

This is a strikingly similar claim made by first-generation Black theologian and historian, Gayraud Wilmore, in his groundbreaking text *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*. Wilmore believed that African religion was the fountainhead upon which black radicalism later developed

[151] *Black Marxism,* 72.

[152] Black Marixm, xx.

and which influenced figures like Du Bois, Malcolm X, and Marcus Garvey. Like Robinson, who argued that "African labor bought the past with it, a past that had produced it and settled on it the first elements of consciousness and comprehension,"[153] Wilmore believed that African retentions, including African Christianity, reached the plantation; they were never stripped from the enslaved African. He writes that "despite the ignorance, prejudice, and repression of white Christians, African spirituality found refuge in the religion of the slave—until freedom came and the essence of that ancient spirituality could reassert itself [in] the great African American churches of the twentieth century." He further claims that "Black folk religion contained a definite moral judgment against slavery and a clear legitimation of resistance to injustice."[154] Black folk religion was infused with a power to resist servitude and to pursue freedom.

This is similar to Robinson's claim that revolt lay at *the* source of African retentions.[155] Wilmore claims that black religion laid the groundwork for multiple demonstrations of radicalism, for example, pan Africanism and black religion:, and for "Garvey, Padmore, and others of the twentieth century who were less dependent upon the institutional church."[156] In short, Wilmore and Robinson both believed that African retentions became the seedbed in which greater and contextually-specific expressions of black radicalism emerged between the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries. One of those contextually-specific expressions of black radicalism is Black theology.

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[153] *Black Religion and Black Radicalism,* 122.

[154] Ibid, 48.

[155] Black Marxism, 164.

[156] Black Religion and Black Radicalism, 135.

Black Theological Method: Freedom and Power

Cone's Method: Freedom and Power

We have already seen how the forty-eight clergy who co-authored the *New York Times* op-ed on Black Power interpreted power and freedom theologically, and how Cone's *Black Theology and Black Power* explicated these terms with greater clarity. However, Cone's theological *method* was likewise shaped by the twin themes of freedom and power. Theological method has to do with the sources and norms one uses to construct one's theology in order to make a theological case. In other words, the method is how one demonstrates one's theological argument. For example, if a theologian said, "God is a Liberator," how would one test that claim? It cannot be verified scientifically since God's character cannot be sequestered in labs and test tubes nor demonstrated through causal explanations. Therefore, to defend the claim that "God is a Liberator," theologians have traditionally relied on theological sources to prove their claims, specifically on scripture, tradition, experience, and reason. If a theologian wanted to prove that "God is a Liberator," they could cite passages of scripture on liberation (e.g., Exodus), appeal to traditions (e.g., catechisms, teachings of the church fathers, other theologians), experience (e.g., how God has been a liberator in their own life), and reason (e.g., how and whether all the sources and evidence cohere or connect in a logical manner). Theological method concerns how one goes about defending, proving, or constructing theological claims or systems.

In his earliest text, *Black Theology and Black Power*, Cone does not provide an explicit list of sources used to construct his Black theology, so it is difficult to define his method in the traditional sense. However, one can glean his sources through a close reading of the text and from its title. Besides his heavy reliance on Black radical thought—namely, Malcolm X and Stokely

Carmichael, Cone also cites the work of the Swiss theologian, Karl Barth, to theologize "freedom" and that of his contemporary Paul Tillich to theologize "power."

In his subsequent 1979 companion text, *A Black Theology of Liberation,* Cone is much more explicit about the sources he uses to construct his theology. Cone maintains that there are six sources which comprise black [liberation] theology: *black experience, black history, black culture, revelation, scripture,* and *tradition.* Cone deals with each of these at considerable length, but for the purposes of this chapter, here I synthesize Cone's treatment of sources through his most succinct statements of each one. He writes that black experience is "the experience of carving out an existence in a society that says you do not belong." Regarding black history, Cone writes that black history is a history of "black persons saying no to every act of white brutality," citing Nat Turner, Denmark Vesey, and Gabriel Prosser as examples. Furthermore, he claims that "black culture consists of creative forms of expression as one reflects on history, endures pain, and experiences joy. It is the black community expressing itself in music, poetry, prose and other art forms." Cone devotes an entire chapter to the *meaning* of revelation, which he claims is "God's self-disclosure to humankind *in the context of liberation* (emphasis his)." With respect to Scripture, Cone claims that its words are not to be read *literally.* Rather, Scripture should be a signpost that points "beyond itself to the reality of God's revelation—and in America, that means black liberation." Tradition, for Cone, deals primarily with the black church in America, including figures like Richard Allen, Daniel Payne, and Henry Highland Garnet. Each of these *black* sources is imbued with meanings of *power* and *freedom.*

Many of the sources that Cone names in *A Black Theology of Liberation* reappear in greater detail in his 1972 text, *The Spirituals and the Blues*. However, Cone also introduces less

conventional "sources," that include slave testimony, songs, and folk wisdom. Indeed, the *Spirituals and the Blues* is packed with extra-source material through which Cone explores the central themes of love and power.

Recall that Cone regards black experience, history, and culture as three of his sources in *BTL*. In *Spirituals & The Blues,* he devotes an entire chapter to *t*he black spirituals and black experience. Within this experience, slaves are carving out an existence for themselves within an oppressed society, as he claims in *BTL.* This experience of affirming one's being despite the ever-present threat of nonbeing is also a feature of *black history*, one of Cone's sources in *BTL.* Indeed, Cone writes, "black history is also a record of black people's resistance, an account of their perceptions of their existence in an oppressive society." Indeed, Cone goes so far as to claim that "black history is a spiritual!" ("Obviously!," I'd respond.) If black culture, as expressed in music, poetry, and art, is important for constructing black theology, then exegeting these important artifacts is likewise important to that task. Though many of the sources in *BTL* have returned in *Spirituals*, these are not the only sources that return. Cone also claims that "the message of liberation in the spirituals is based on the biblical contention that God's righteousness is revealed in [the] deliverance of the oppressed from the shackles of human bondage," thus appealing to both *revelation* and *scripture* as sources. Therefore, Cone believes that there is self-evident continuity between the sources of *his* theology and the theology embedded in the spirituals and (sometimes) the blues. So, while Cone introduces new sources into *Spirituals*, rather than abandoning prior sources when extracting theological meaning from these songs, he provides more concrete detail when describing them. The continuity that one finds in his entire corpus is a belief that Black history, culture, experience, and theology is imbued with the *liberating power* of power and liberation.

Black Theology's Turn towards Indigenization

In the latter half of the twentieth century, Black theologians expanded, challenged, and reinterpreted theological methods by *indigenizing* their approaches to God-talk. They argued that theology cannot be done authentically without integrating nonwestern sources into their method. For example, when Black theologian J. Deotis Roberts critiqued James H. Cone's theological method, he did so on the grounds that it wasn't indigenized, claiming that "Cone will need to break with Barthianism if he is to enter into meaningful dialogue with African theologians who are taking seriously their precolonial religious traditions." Roberts noted that the "Christocentric view of revelation drawn ready-made from Barth will not foster the transatlantic conversation between black American and African theologians who together are seeking a decolonized expression of theology." Looking to Latin American theologians as exemplars of indigenizing their theology, Roberts suggests that "indigenization is a key concept for black theology as it is for all socially conscious programs in theology."[157] In short, Roberts was urging Cone to develop an authentically Black theology by drawing on sources of African history, culture, and tradition, rather than on European ones. Such a process of integration would entail the indigenization of one's theological method.

The second generation of Black theologians (from the late 1970s/early 1980s to the late 1990s) also sought a more authentic method to Black theology. Black theologians like Dwight N. Hopkins compared Black theology in South Africa with Black Theology in the USA, interpreted the liberation spirituals, and integrated West African sources into his black theological anthropology. As Black theology was taking on a more Africanist approach, Black theologians

[157] J. Deotis Roberts, *Black Political Theology* (Louisville, KY: WJK, 2005), 20.

from the USA were comparing their theological methods with other Third World theologians, who were indigenizing their own theological methods.

How then should Blaxicans indigenize their theological method? Should they turn to the ancient cosmologies of the Nahuatl people, to West African sources, or should they selectively appropriate sources that work for them? Indigenous cosmologies are important troves of knowledge from which we can glean wisdom, but we should not make the mistake of appropriating the sacred knowledges of others to prove our own authenticity to anyone. For it would be dishonest to pretend that Nahuatl or West African cosmologies directly inform the religious thought of Blaxicans. Instead, as a Blaxican theologian, I emphasize the important themes already latent in black radicalism, black religion, and black theology: liberation and power.

Blaxican Theology and Black Theology

For like Black theology, Blaxican theology is a theology of liberation and power. It is motivated by the same important impulses of freedom in Black religion that the first-generation of Black theologians identified. Indeed, the central message of the Black radical tradition and Black theology is the same: liberation! As Cone demonstrated through his method, the kernel of black liberation theology, of the spirituals, the blues, and religious impulses towards freedom, is precisely freedom. Liberation, understood theologically or politically, is primarily concerned with one's freedom to resist. One can resist either structures of oppression or definitions imposed by white theologies (such as powerlessness and unfreedom). This understanding of liberation is consistent with the Black abolitionist calls for freedom in the antebellum south. Black abolitionist preacher, Henry Highland Garnet urged the enslaved of the United States of America to resist:

> Let your motto be resistance! *resistance!* RESISTANCE! No oppressed people have ever secured their liberty without resistance. What kind of resistance you had better make, you must decide by the circumstances that surround you, and according to the suggestion of expediency. Brethren, adieu! Trust in the living God. Labor for the peace of the human race, and remember that you are FOUR MILLIONS.[158]

Garnet recognized that there is huge power in numbers, and together with that recognition, that when one trusts in the living God for deliverance, freedom is possible. This understanding of God as the Liberator found its most substantial expression in the Black Theology that emerged in the latter half of the twentieth century.

Cone's Christology: Jesus is Black

A Christian theology of liberation must account for the role, activity, and personhood of its central figure, Jesus Christ. Indeed, a cornerstone in black liberation theology is Christology. Who is Jesus Christ? What do the Gospel writers (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) tell us about Jesus? Do Jesus' historic actions bear on the present? Recall that for Elizondo, Jesus was *mestizo.* His claim that Jesus was *mestizo* was based on his historical reading of Jesus' upbringing. He claimed, essentially, that Jesus grew up in a culturally diverse region (e.g., the Galilee), and that this experience gave him the ability to move in and out of seemingly opposite spaces: the culturally Greek Galilee and the culturally Jewish Jerusalem. Jesus' decision to be a cultural outsider, according to Elizondo, reflects God's own predilection to be with those who are not welcome anywhere.

Cone's primary Christological claim was that Jesus is Black. But what did he mean by that

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[158] https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4h2937t.html

claim? Did he mean that Jesus is Black *phenotypically?* Did he mean that Jesus is Black *culturally*? Cone was not the first to claim that God or Jesus was Black. Albert Cleage, a Black nationalist minister and author of *The Black Messiah*, had claimed in 1968 that Jesus was literally an African zealot revolutionary who belonged to an oppressed black nation. J. Deotis Roberts, another Black theologian, maintained that affirming Jesus' Blackness satisfied a black cultural need—that Black people needed a Jesus that was like them, so they created a Black Jesus to satisfy their cultural and psychological need. Cone's argument differed from those of Cleage, Roberts, and Elizondo. When he published his systematic theology, *God of the Oppressed*, he made it clear that the basis of his Christological claim that "Jesus is Black" has nothing to do with "some cultural or psychological need of black people, but because and only because Christ really enters into our world where the poor, the despised, and the blacks are, disclosing that he is with them, enduring their humiliation and pain and transforming slaves into liberated servants." His method for understanding this activity of Jesus is based on an historical and existential reading of Jesus. Cone believed that to understand Jesus' Blackness, one must understand who Jesus was, who Jesus is, and who Jesus will be.

So who was he? Cone believed that the most important aspect of Jesus' historical person was his Jewishness. He claimed that to be Jewish is to be connected to a covenant people whom God delivered from bondage in Egypt; that the story of the Exodus and God's liberative activity is foundational to the formation of the people Israel, to God's character, and to Jesus' own self-understanding. And so, for Cone, Jesus and the Exodus are critical for understanding who Jesus was.

> I begin by asserting once more that Jesus was a Jew. It is on the basis of the soteriological meaning of the particularity of his Jewishness that theology must affirm the Christological

> significance of Jesus' present blackness. He is black because he was a Jew. The affirmation of the Black Christ can be understood when the significance of his past Jewishness is related dialectically to the significance of his present blackness. On the one hand, the Jewishness of Jesus located him in the context of the Exodus, thereby connecting his appearance in Palestine with God's liberation of oppressed Israelites from Egypt. Unless Jesus were truly from Jewish ancestry, it would make little theological sense to say that he is the fulfillment of God's covenant with Israel. But on the other hand, the blackness of Jesus brings out the soteriological meaning of his Jewishness for our contemporary situation when Jesus' person is understood in the context of cross and resurrection.[159]

Cone assumed that there was self-evident continuity between Jewish suffering and black oppression. These aspects of Israel's history also demonstrate why the Black religious tradition has argued that Jesus *is* with them in their suffering. Drawing on the exodus narrative, Al Raboteau noted that "freedom was frequently [the slaves'] object of prayer," and that slaves would ask God to free them as he had the children of Israel. The *isness* of Jesus (the One who suffers with others), according to Cone, demands an *existential* exploration into Christology:

> The Christological significance of Jesus is not an abstract question to be solved by intellectual debates among seminary professors. The meaning of Jesus is an existential question. We know who he is when our lives are placed in a situation of oppression, and we thus have to make a decision for or against that condition. To say no to oppression and yes to liberation is to encounter the existential significance of the Resurrected One.[160]

In other words, Cone believes that one knows who Jesus is because of who Jesus was, and the oppressed know who Jesus *is* because they recognize his presence with them in their suffering. The historical Jesus belonged to an oppressed community himself, and the biblical narratives of his birth; baptism and temptation; his ministry; and his death and resurrection all attest to this.[161]

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[159] James Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Orbis: Maryknoll, New York:1971), 134.

[160] A Black Theology of Liberation Fortieth Edition, Orbis: Maryknoll, New York: 126.

[161] Ibid, 120-124.

Jesus' *past* historical situation compels us to affirm Jesus' *present* solidarity and identification with the poor and oppressed. Jesus' predilection towards and identification with the least is consistent with his explicitly stated mission in the synagogue of Nazareth, echoing the words of the prophet Isaiah:

> *"The Spirit of the Lord is on me,*
> *because he has anointed me*
> *to proclaim good news to the poor.*
> *He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners*
> *and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free,*
> *to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor*."(Luke 4:18–19)

Cone believed that Jesus' past, present, and future are the bases for determining his Blackness. "Jesus is Black because he was a Jew." There is a basis for affirming Jesus' Blackness because of who Jesus has claimed to be and who he has always been for. Therefore, Cone believed, one can confidently affirm who Jesus *always will be.* For that reason, Cone wrote that Jesus "was with the, [the oppressed] in Pharaoh's Egypt, is with them in America, Africa and Latin America, and will come in the end of time to consummate fully their human freedom." Therefore, Jesus' *will-be-ness* adds a degree of contingency to the claim that Jesus is Black. For Cone, Jesus is *literally* Black now because Blackness is a signifier of oppression in an anti-Black world—but that can change the moment the oppressed of the land change.

Cone maintained an anxiety about reducing a transcendent God to any human cultural phenomena, and therefore emphasized that God cannot be reduced to Black, Brown or any other cultural experience but that God, in God's grace, identifies with all oppressed people in situations

of injustice. This initiative of God's is somewhat of a paradox: although God is different, strange, and Wholly Other, Jesus Christ reveals himself as the one who is also exclusively identified with the oppressed. This is why, in a Conian formulation, it is completely plausible to say both things at once and without contradiction: Jesus is Black and Jesus is Mexican. For Cone, the most important aspect of Jesus' person and ministry is his power to liberate.

The Afterlives of Slavery: Freedom and Power as Abolition

Slavery determined a social relation between Black and white people that persists to this day. White people believed and perpetuated the notion that enslaved people—more broadly, all non-white people—are spiritually destined for powerlessness and servitude. They justified the transatlantic slave trade by this precise theological reasoning (as we saw in Zurara's chronicle), and gave it more theological heft and rationale in the antebellum period by appealing to the curse of Ham.

The significance of slavery reaches into the present and can be gleaned from the paradigm of Black liberation theology (e.g., the Exodus) and from titles such as *Slave Religion* by Al Raboteau, *Down, Up and Over: Slave Religion and Black Theology* by Dwight Hopkins, and *Religion of the Field Negro* by Vincent Lloyd.[162] Slavery is the starting place of anti-Blackness, which oriented all forms of political, social and theological relations. The significance of slavery can also be gleaned in the new institutions of powerlessness, control, and unfreedom (the so-called "criminal justice system") that ensnares and enacts violence upon Blaxican people. Indeed, we are

[162] The situation of slavery and the quest for freedom made the Exodus narrative a paradigmatic motif of liberation for Black Christians. The first systematic explication of a black theology of liberation was published by James Cone in 1969. Unsurprisingly, Cone argued that the message of the gospel is liberation, premised on the God "who emancipated [Israel] from Egyptian bondage and subsequently established a covenant with her at Sinai." *Black Theology and Black Power,* 44.

heirs of a past from which we need liberation, but it is unclear how to attain liberation or what precisely it entails.

Cornel West recognized the need to achieve clarity about the meaning of liberation precisely driven by many theologians's seeming constraint of the fight for freedom to the United States. In *Black Theology and Marxist Thought*, West claimed that if Black theologians "remain uncritical of America's imperialist presence in Third World countries, its capitalist system of production, and its grossly unequal distribution of wealth," then Black theology "roughly equates liberation with American middle-class status," leaving these systems of domination intact. "If this is the social vision of Black theologians, they should drop the meretricious and flamboyant term 'liberation' and adopt the more accurate and sober word 'inclusion.'"[163]

West claimed that Black liberation theology and Marxist thought share (1) a similar dialectical methodology, (2) an aim toward liberation, and (3) a trenchant critique of liberal capitalist America. Regarding their shared dialectical method, West claims that both Marxist thought and Black liberation theology negate, preserve and transform. Black theology, he claims, "begins by negating White interpretations of the gospel, continues by preserving its own perceived truths of the biblical text, and ends by transforming past understandings of the gospel into new and novel ones."[164] Marxist thinkers share these same features, but "they do so consciously and their subject matter is bourgeois theories about capitalist society." Moreover, Black theologians "all

[163] *Black Theology: A Documentary History,* 413.

[164] Black Theology, *A Documentary History*, 411.

agree that Black liberation has something to do with ameliorating the socioeconomic conditions of Black people." [165]

West's insistence that Black liberation theology plays a significant role in negating white interpretations of the gospel is consistent with what we've stated already – namely, that Black theologians identified the relationship between powerless and unfreedom created by European slaveowners, and inverted the naturalizing interpretations it created. Moreover, his analysis of Marxist thought and black liberation theology is useful as a way of critizing the reductionist belief that Black theology is singularly focused on analyses of race. Black theology, relying on Marxist thought, explores the necessary connections between cultural productions of race and religion and the capitalist mode of production.

As Blaxican theology demonstrates, liberation must be a multinational struggle that takes seriously everyone's liberation, and their liberation from all manner of constraints and powers, not only White oppression, but capitalism and consumerism. This, I've argued, is inherent to Cone's black theology and is a consistent feature of *black internationalism.*

West noted that liberation's multivalence makes it vulnerable to co-optation. Its polyvalence can be good, since the multiplicity of liberation theologies attest to the gospel's ability to speak freedom into all unfree situations. Nevertheless, I propose a rule of adjudication for Blaxican theology here: as a Black theology, it must aim to negate the white supremacist order or it cannot rightly be called a liberation theology. In other words, Blaxican *liberation* theology must simultaneously be an *abolitionist* theology. Blaxican theology must call into question the very

[165] Ibid, 411.

existence of the asphyxiating institutions themselves. In what follows, I make three important claims about power, freedom, and abolition: (1) that Black liberation theology emerged *as* abolitionist under the slavery regime, (2) that negation and creation are co-constitutive ingredients of the meaning of both liberation and abolition, and (3) that Black liberation theologies have consistently pointed towards abolition.

Cone claimed that "liberation" should be understood as the "freedom to resist." If this is so, then liberation struggles emerged the moment that the wretched of the earth rebelled. Edward Antonio has made a similar argument about the colonial and the "postcolonial." He claims that the two terms cannot be disentangled even though postcolonialism emerged out of the discourses of people yearning for possibilities after emancipation. He likewise claims that whenever Black people responded to their colonial situation through rebellion, insurrection, and fugitivity, they were imagining a postcolonial world.[166] Similarly, theological reflection on freedom and power cannot be divorced from abolition since they belong to the same traditions condemning the racial capitalist institutions of their own day. In early America, it was slavery; today it is the prison. There were always two forms of religious critique: reform and abolition.

Eighteenth-century evangelical revivalist George Whitefield is a textbook example of the reformist tradition. In his letter *Concerning the Negroes*, he levels a critique against slaveholders' brutal mistreatment of slaves. In colorful language about slavemasters' cruelty towards slaves, Whitefield laments the "unrelenting scourges" enslaved people have had to endure, as well as their lack of access to life-sustaining meals. Whitefield appeals to the enslaved person's humanity, arguing that their humanity is equal to their white slavemasters.' Whitefield's report on the

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[166] *Cambridge Companion to Black Theology,* "Black Theology and Postcolonial Discourse." Edward Antonio.

condition of slaves even evokes worry about God's judgment upon the slave holders, suggesting that should an insurrection occur "the judgment would be just."[167] However, Whitefield unfortunately did not argue against the *inherent immoral status* of slavery, only against the excessive abuses of slaves. In short, Whitefield was a missionary reformist of slavery, *not* an abolitionist in any sense. (In fact, to finance his famous Bethesda orphanage, Whitefield purchased a plantation and expropriated slave labor to fund it.)

The theology that emerged as a response to slavery did not argue for reform of its racial capitalist institutions. Instead, Black theological calls for freedom called for abolition of the institutions of the colonial order. In early America, liberation and abolition were understood conterminously. There was no such thing as liberation from slavery that didn't call for its abolition. It was not enough to "steal oneself" back or to purchase oneself. "Freed" Blacks were always in danger of being brought right back into the system of slavery. The very existence of unjust institutions means that someone must be brought into them. From its origin, then, liberation in the modern context is tied to abolition.

Negation

Political prisoner and activist, Mumia Abu Jamal claimed that: "Abolitionists are...those beings who look out upon their time and say, 'No.'"[168] Vincent Lloyd and Joshua Duber claim that the "will to negation… drives abolitionists' passion," and that "in its moralizing heat, its revivalist alacrity, and its mulish refusal to accept the fallen world as finished, abolitionism necessarily

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[167] Jeffrey Robert Young. *Proslavery and Sectional Thought in the Early South, 1740-1829: An Anthology* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 2006), 70.

[168] Cited in Dubler and Lloyd, *Break Every Yoke*

resonates in a *religious* key."[169] In other words, Dubler and Lloyd both claim that the "will to negation" connects abolition and religion. Abolition is itself a term of negation (i.e., to *abolish*) and its object of negation has ranged from the slave plantation to the modern prison. Abolitionists of all eras, writes Angela Davis, adopted "the radical stance of announcing the obsolescence of these institutions."

The will to negation appears throughout the Judeo-Christian traditions as well. In the *Epistle to the Romans,* for example, Karl Barth claims that the basis for the divine "No!" is that "the burden of sin and the whole curse of death still press heavily upon us." For Barth, sinfulness becomes the basis upon which God stands *against* humanity before God gives God's "Yes!" to it. God never blindly endorses projects done "in God's name." God will allow neither wrongdoer nor victim to get away with doing harm. Barth claims that "the 'No' which we encounter is the 'No'— of God. And therefore our veritable deprivation is our veritable comfort in distress… Precisely because the 'No' of God is all-embracing, it is also His 'yes."[170] Barth believed that "it is the 'No' which meets us so far as we do not affirm it; it is the protest pronounced always and everywhere against the course of the world in so far as we do not accept the protest as our own…"[171] In other words, Barth claims that God stands as a "Halt!" to the course of the world's proceedings, to humanity's sinfulness. This "No!" is God's love for us and is, in fact, an affirmation of humanity against its own sinful inclinations. This "No!" is a negation of our own desires.

[169] Vincent Lloyd and Joshua Dubler, *Break Every Yoke: Religion, Justice and the Abolition of Prisons* (New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 2020)*,* 46-47.

[170] Karl Barth, *Epistle to the Romans.* 38

[171] Ibid, 42.

Jewish theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel also sees God as standing as a “Halt!” to the destructiveness that tragically takes course in human history. He writes that “unless history is a vagary of nonsense, there must be a counterpart to the immense power of man to destroy, there must be a voice that says NO to man… the never-ceasing outcry of “No” to humanity.” [172] The tradition which screams out “No!” must challenge the power of human beings to destroy.

The will to negation is, in theological parlance, an iconoclastic impulse. The highest ideals of love and compassion have never been embodied in slavery, so it cannot be reformed to be a compassionate institution. Likewise, the most virtuous ideals of love and justice have never been embodied in the so-called “criminal *justice* system,” even though they are still treated as the ordained distributors of “justice.” Overcoming the illusive equations of police, prisons, and justice requires a new mode of thinking, of imagining, and of hoping. However, to imagine anew is difficult when we’ve fixed these institutions in our imaginations as permanent and sufficient to deal with the problems of right and wrong, good and evil, law-abiding and transgression. When we challenge the very moral substance of the criminal justice system, we hold tightly onto it, asking in bad faith, “What are we going to do with the serial murderers or heinous criminals?”

In his landmark text, *Black Theology and Black Power*, James Cone recognized that it is dangerous to associate the institutions of the state with the work of God. He argued:

> The work of the state can never be identified or confused with God's Word. In Hitler's campaign against the Jews, an alien god dominated Germany; men were being slaughtered on the altar. It was no time for caution or lofty "objectivity." When Barth said "Nein!" - no natural theology, no blending of the Word of God and the word of man - the political

[172] Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism,* 171.

> implication was clear: Hitler is the Antichrist; God has set his face against the Third Reich.[173]

Humans are prone to believe that the institutions of justice we create are sufficient, and that with a few good reforms our creation will continue down its course of executing justice. Nevertheless, the cycled reforms of providing more body cameras, implicit bias training, and nonwhite police officers have not solved the issue of police violence. Police continue to operate with impunity, as they did in my childhood. Critical theorist, Jackie Wang writes:

> this case lays bare the fallacy of believing that body cams will curb antiblack policing. Not only does this 'solution' expand the surveillance state, it also seems more likely that the footage captured by body cams will be used against the people who are being policed and not against the police officers who are *legally* given discretion to shoot people.[174]

The Black radical preachers who prophesied a world without slavery believed something better was always available. As a Blaxican Christian, I believe in more for our world and more for the police who put on the uniform. I do not believe they are reducible to his work, so I reject the notion that abolition is antagonistic towards the person in the uniform. Instead, it chooses to see a more just life for people like them who believe that what they are doing is just. Indeed, the best of us or in us has not yet been actualized; and there is grace available for us to see anew.

Nevertheless, God always sends prophets to paint new visions of unseen worlds — a gift of divine grace — and humans always reject them. We know what we have is unstable, but we've grown to love it. Saint Augustine identifies this form of emotional attachment as disordered love, arguing that our loves/wills are in disorder because we have supplanted our love for God with our love for self. This love of self is the highest expression of our sinfulness, which now weighs down,

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[173] James Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power,* 87.

[174] Jackie Wang, *Carceral Capitalism,* 94.

and to which we are now oblivious, “deafened.” He writes, “I have been deafened by the clanking of the chains of my mortality, the punishment for my soul’s pride, and I wandered farther from you, and you permitted me to do so” (2.2.2). This deafening, this lack of awareness of our tragic sense causes us to rely more heavily on ourselves and to love our own wickedness. In the second book of the *Confessions*, Augustine tells the story of how he steals fruit from a tree (an allusion to the Creation/Eden story) with his friends, and how he “was being gratuitously wicked, having no inducement to evil but the evil itself.” He continues, “it was foul, and I loved it. I loved my own undoing. I loved my error—not that for which I erred but the error itself. A depraved soul, falling away from security in you to destruction in itself, seeking nothing from the shameful deed but shame itself” (2.4.9).

This conception of necessary *bondage* is an act of our own, as much as it is a history which we inherit. It is also a necessary bondage freed by God’s grace. In Augustinian thought, we cannot save ourselves. To experience deliverance from this history of bondage is to receive God’s grace to turn to God and cooperate with God in freedom (Romans 7). Similarly, our attachment to vengeance, punishment, and human caging can be supplanted by grace to help us see afresh—a just world founded upon compassion, generosity, and mercy. The prison is an idol, but God is an abolitionist. Blaxican faith is belief in the impossible, of hoping unto reality. This means that while it seems impossible to imagine new modes of justice that don't rely on enforcement, harassment, and punishment, grace can make it possible. In faith terms, it means we must rely on God’s grace.

Creation

Abolition that emphasizes negation without creation is destructive. Conversely, abolition that emphasizes creation without negation is indifferent to the existing oppressive structures. Robin

DG Kelley reminds us that without “new visions we don’t know what to build, only what to knock down,” and that dreaming focusing on the negative aspect of knocking down makes us “forget that making a resolution is not a series of clever maneuvers and tactics but a process that can and must transform us.”[175] But it is important to emphasize that it is impossible to create anew without first having a vision of the future. And it is impossible to envision the future when the given order is all that we know. The creative side of our faith enables us to begin that mode of imagining—of seeing new realities of love and justice. Blaxican faith is abolitionist faith: it is a faith that sees freedom on the other side; a free world where love and justice are the laws of the land.

Conclusion

In this chapter I set out to respond to the following questions: “How did *Blackness* manage to become what it is today? What are the ghosts of the past that haunt theology in the present?” and “how do these answers contribute to the *authenticity* of Blaxicans?” I have argued that Blackness emerged as a theological concept associated with servitude and powerlessness. I have also argued that Black radical preachers and theologians imagined new worlds for Black people; worlds that were marked by freedom and power. They were abolitionists who were unconvinced that the idols of their day—whether slavery or prison—were sufficiently apt expressions of God’s love and justice. Just as Black theology emerged as a theology of power and freedom, so too does Blaxican theology. As a Black theology, Blaxican theology is interested in rendering visible otherwise unseen worlds that accommodate the most forgotten. Impulses towards freedom and the creation of new worlds are also important features of Blaxican theology. For Blaxican theology, it

[175] Robin D.G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2002), xii.

is the divine grace of God that helps us to imagine again and again what freedom, justice, and power look like for all the worlds that we create. [176]

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Chapter 4: Blaxican Theology and Meaning Making

Now that we have explored two peculiar histories of race, we are ready to examine what makes race and theology possible: meaning making, and eventually how Blaxican theology makes meaning. For this I turn to the insights of nineteenth-century existentialist philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche, and the Book of Genesis. I choose these two conversation partners as they both identify historical ruptures that chart a specific trajectory. In many respects, the two previous chapters are influenced by Friedrich Nietzsche's genealogical method in *On the Genealogy of Morality* (OGM). In the preface to OGM, Nietzsche writes that this twofold assignment will be to answer: "under what conditions did man invent the value judgments good and evil? *and what value do they themselves have?* Have they up to now obstructed or promoted human flourishing?" The previous chapters have undergone similar approaches, asking "under what conditions did racial logics fuse with Christian judgments about persons, the natural environment, and the divine?" and "what value do these theological value-systems have?" Nietzsche's theoretical insights on human beings as meaning makers derive from his genealogical account on the origins of noble and slave morality. He argued that slave morality was born from a sociological context of oppression and a psychological context of resentment. The Book of Genesis, I argue, also highlights the peculiar feature of meaning making in the human being. I will suggest that the fundamental gift God that has given to the human person is the gift of making meaning, and that its two aspects (sight and words) make possible life-giving discourses *and* oppressive racist ones. The Fall of the human person led to the harmful forms of meaning making I have explored in the previous chapters. This important gift is significant to my dissertation's argument insofar as meaning-making allows us as Blaxicans to see ourselves as authentically as God does—as beautiful creatures, who are not defined by legacies of racism.

Nietzsche's Account of Noble and Slave Morality

The Sociological Context of Good and Evil: Oppression

For Nietzsche, the value judgments *good* and *evil* are not the same as deeming someone or something *good* and *bad.* These distinct evaluative binaries had two separate sociohistorical points of origin. The value judgments *good* and *bad* emerged from the context of 'nobility' or "the noble, the mighty, the high-placed and high minded." The sociohistorical conditions in which the value judgments *good* and *evil* emerged were ones of oppression.[177]

The noble, mighty, high-placed, and high-minded "saw and judged themselves and their actions as good" and "claimed the right to create values and give these values names." In other words, the aristocrats understood themselves and their lives as "good" in contrast to what was lower, plebian, and lower-classed—or "bad." This good-bad binary gave the nobleman a sense of superiority, though his aristocratic values were often entirely egoistic, and unashamedly so. The latter (the "plebian") responded to their context of oppression through a "slave revolt" and created the judgments *good* and *evil*. This "slave" valuation derived from the Jewish people under the context of oppression as a way of "taming" the masters.

The ongoing sociohistorical context of Israel's political domination marks the starting point for the creation of the good-evil binary in Christianity and any largely Christian society. Israel is held in bondage to pharaoh; God delivers them by way of a political leader, Moses, and then God punishes the Egyptians by swallowing them up in the Red Sea.[178] Political domination and emancipation reappear for centuries throughout Israel's history, from the Babylonian and Assyrian

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[177] OGM 1, §2.

[178] See Exodus 1–20.

exiles of Northern Kingdom Israel and Southern Kingdom Judah (722 and 586 BCE, respectively) to Alexander the Great's conquest and eventually the Roman occupation of Jesus' day. Nietzsche claims that:

> This Jesus of Nazareth, as the embodiment of the gospel of love, this 'redeemer' bringing salvation and victory to the poor, the sick, to sinners—was he not seduction in its most sinister and irresistible form, seduction and the circuitous route to just those very Jewish values and innovative ideals? Did Israel not reach the pinnacle of her sublime vengefulness via this very 'redeemer,' this apparent opponent of and disperser of Israel?[179]

For Nietzsche, however, the act of God dying on a cross is far from being the embodiment of love. For him, it is an expression of vengeance and hatred towards the domination of Israel's oppressors. Within the context of oppression, it makes perfect sense that one's god should embody the weakness of the dominated group while secretly desiring that their dominators be destroyed. The psalmist, for example, bemoans the oppressor of Israel "crushing" Israel to the ground and making them "dwell in the darkness." The psalm ends by equating the "love" of this God with the destruction of one's enemies:

> In your unfailing love, silence my enemies;
>
> Destroy all my foes,
>
> For I am your servant (Psalm 143: 12, NIV)

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[179] OGM 1, §8; See also GS §353, "… Jesus (or Paul), for example, discovered the life of the small people in the Roman province, a humble, virtuous, depressed life: he explained it, he put the highest meaning and value into it—and thereby also the courage to despise every other way of life, the silent Moravian brotherhood fanaticism, the clandestine subterranean self-confidence that grows and grows and is finally read to 'overcome the world' (i.e. Rome and the upper classes throughout the empire."

According to Nietzsche, this ongoing political domination, culminating in the Roman occupation of Judea, is the social context for the development of the evaluative binary good-evil. He writes of its

> priestly people, which in the last resort was able to gain satisfaction from its enemies and conquerors only through a radical revaluation of their values, that is, through an act of the most deliberate revenge [durch einen Akt der geistigsten Rache]. It was the Jews, who, rejecting the aristocratic value equation (good = noble = powerful = beautiful = happy = blessed) ventured, with awe-inspiring consistency, to bring about a reversal and held it in the teeth of the most unfathomable hatred (the hatred of the powerless), saying: 'Only those who suffer are good, only the poor, the powerless, the lowly are good; the suffering, the deprived, the sick, the ugly, are the only pious people, the only ones saved, salvation is for them alone, whereas you rich, the noble and powerful, you are eternally wicked, cruel, lustful, insatiate, godless, you will also be eternally wretched, cursed and damned![180]

In other words, the revaluation of the values that derived from the 'noble' is an act of what Nietzsche calls "*the slave revolt in morality.*"[181] This revaluation did not originate on its own: it was a response to oppression.

The Psychological Context: Ressentiment

The psychological context in which good and evil emerge is that of *ressentiment*, or resentment. While much has and could be said about this internal phenomenon, this dissertation will give special attention to the *creative* aspect of *ressentiment*. Since the evaluative binary—good/bad—is an "invention," and since Nietzsche's stated purpose is to discover under what

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[180] OGM 1, §7

[181] OGM 1, §7

conditions man invented the value judgments of good and evil, it seems appropriate to pay special attention to this inventive agency which Nietzsche attributes to *ressentiment* when he writes:

The beginning of the slaves' revolt in morality occurs when *ressentiment* itself turns ***creative*** and gives birth to values: the *ressentiment* of those beings who, denied the proper response of action, compensate for it only with **imaginary** revenge… slave morality first has to have an opposing, external world, it needs, physiologically speaking, external stimuli in order to act at all,— its action is basically a ***reaction*** [bold face emphases are mine].

Here, Nietzsche suggests that resentment is a creative and imaginary agent, able to create or revaluate various moral concepts in its revolt against the masters. Resentment is a pathological force that creates, within man, the concept of evil.[182]

This makes the man of *ressentiment* a "clever" man, able to construct an entire moral apparatus to hold the masters accountable and to render them 'evil.' In order for the masters actually to be held accountable, the slaves need to introduce the concepts of responsibility and agency, concepts connected with will and willing and one's ability to resist the evil and egoistic passions of the soul.[183] For the noble, the egoistic drives were not a cause of shame and certainly had no metaphysical value assigned to them (i.e., "sin"). To dominate, destroy, and take as one's

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[182] OGM 1, §10. Here Nietzsche writes " "When *ressentiment* does occur in the noble man himself, it is consumed and exhausted in an immediate reaction, and therefore it does not *poison*, on the other hand, it does not occur at all in countless cases where it is unavoidable for all who are weak and powerless. To be able to take his enemies, his misfortunes and even his *misdeeds* seriously for long—that is the sign of strounge, rounde natures with a superabundance of a power which is flexible, formative, healing and can make one forget… actually '*love* of your enemies' is also possible here and here alone—assuming it is possible at all on earth. How much respect a noble man has for his enemies!— and a respect of that sort is a bridge to love… for he insists on having his enemy to himself, as a mark of distinction, indeed he will tolerate as enemies none other than such as have nothing to be despised and a great deal to be honored! Against this, imagine 'the enemy' as conceived of by the man of *ressentiment*—and here we have his deed, his creation: he has conceived of the 'evil enemy,' the '*evil one'* as a basic idea to which he now thinks up a copy and counterpart, the 'good one'—himself!"

[183] For example, the famous passage is in the Epistle to the Romans, otherwise known as the "abyss of the will" where Paul states: " I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do." (Romans 7:15 NIV)

own was what the strong did, and they did it without moral judgments of regret weighing down their souls. Forgetfulness originally brought great joy to the master's mental state. It "shut the doors and windows of consciousness"—and presumably conscience. For Nietzsche, such forgetfulness was a mark of strength.[184] Responsibility, on the other hand, finds its origins in memory (a trait of the weak). And the development of conscience finds its roots in the patron-client system that started with physical punishment when one was unable to pay one's debt and eventually turned inward towards self-destructiveness. [185]

It is important here to reiterate that for Nietzsche, the "moral" agent came about in the slave revolt in order to hold the masters accountable. If the masters could have done things differently than they did, then they can be held responsible for their actions. If the masters can be held accountable for their actions, then that means they actively chose evil. If this is the case, then it makes sense that the masters are evil. However, Nietzsche believes that the masters should not be shamed or held responsible for being who they are. He writes,

> There is nothing strange about the fact that lambs bear a grudge towards large birds of prey: but that is no reason to blame the large birds of prey for carrying off the little lambs. And if the lambs say to each other, "These birds of prey are evil; and whoever is least like a bird of prey and most like its opposite, a lamb,— is good, isn't he?,' then there is no reason to raise objections to this setting-up of an ideal beyond the fact that the birds dof prey will view it somewhat derisively, and will perhaps say: 'We don't bear any grudge at all towards these good lambs, in fact we love them, nothing is tastier than the tender lamb.'—It just as absurd to ask strength to not to express itself as strength, not to be a desire to overthrow, crush, become master, to be a thirst for enemies, resistance and triumphs, as it is to ask weakness to express itself as strength.[186]

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[184] OGM 2, §1

[185] OGM 2, §16

[186] OGM, 1 §13

The creative aspect of *ressentiment* is the ability to "tame" the masters by making them feel ashamed of who they are, by constructing notions of responsibility, compassion, justice,[187] and the universal worth and equality of all human beings. At its core, says Nietzsche, Christianity is a slave/priestly morality, driven by envy and hatred of the powerful. It is characterized by the impotent person's inability to assert their will,[188] the awareness of their inability to do so, and the turn towards the creation of an "evil" person out of this unattainability.[189]

Nietzsche's Evaluation

It is in the Preface that Nietzsche already identifies Christian morality as oppressive, shortly after making clear the twofold task of the *Genealogy*. Indeed, the genealogical recounting is supposed to prepare the way for Nietzsche's evaluative assessment, for us to see the *valuelessness* of these values; to understand "morality as result, as symptom, as mask, as tartuffery, as sickness, as misunderstanding; but also morality as cause, remedy, stimulant, inhibition, poison."[190] Each of these representational images of morality cannot be treated fully here, but it is worth assessing the more obvious *negative* images of morality and what Nietzsche believes they ultimately accomplish.

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[187] OGM 2, §11

[188] GS, 347 Nietzsche writes "Faith is always most desired and most urgently needed where the will is lacking; for will, as the affect of command, is the decisive mark of sovereignty and strength. That is, the less someone knows how to command, the more urgently does he desire someone who commands, who commands severely – a god, prince, the social order, doctor, father confessor, dogma, or party conscience."

[189] OGM 1, 7

[190] OGM, Preface §6

In order to understand morality as mask, hypocrisy, and sickness, it is important to recognize that Nietzsche believes that the *strong* are not meant to condescend so as to regard themselves as equal to the weak. Christianity and its secular descendants (social democracy, egalitarianism, and humanism) have relegated both the weak and the strong to the same level although nature itself does not attest to this equality in any way; in nature, some are weak and others are strong. Nietzsche sees this sickness manifested in the European who disguises himself in morality:

> The European disguises himself with morality because he has become a sick, sickly, maimed animal which has good reasons for being 'tame'; because he is also a monstrosity, something half, weak, awkward. It is not the ferocity of the beast of prey that needs a moral disguise, but the herd animal with its deep mediocrity, fear and boredom with itself. Morality dresses up the European —let's admit it! —into something nobler, grander, goodlier, something 'divine.'[191]

For Nietzsche, the weak mask themselves with morality to disguise their mediocrity and weakness. In this sense, their morality has a creative element for themselves as well: to them, it seems they become nobler, while relegating the noble to a status equal to their own. The strong, however, should not dress themselves up in morality because they have no need to be greater than what they already are. This morality is *dangerous* because it "stunts and levels" the European man, which has become manifest in him no longer desiring

> to expand, [and therefore] we suspect that things will just continue to decline, getting thinner, better-natured, cleverer, more comfortable, more mediocre, more indifferent…, more Christian… [I]n losing our fear of man we have also lost our love for him, our respect for him, our hope in him, and even our will to be a man.[192]

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[191] GS, §352

[192] OGM, 12

Two thousand years of Christian morality have told man that his egoistic passions and desire for domination and conquering are *sinful*, and its entire moral apparatus of agency, compassion, and justice has poisoned the soul of the strong by causing him to feel bad about who he is, while telling the weak that they are better for their weakness. In doing so, the different species of men have been leveled, mankind has lost an important sense of who it is, and society has not advanced in the ways it did prior to the evaluative conception of *good* and *evil*. These *ascetic* ideals betray man's deep hatred of life, of how things are; for they have transformed man into something that man is not, says Nietzsche.

For Nietzsche, this transformation and denial is tantamount to hatred of life, to nihilism. While the ascetic ideals gave *meaning* to the inevitability of suffering that man encountered daily, it also tormented man and brought about the internal suffering of shame and guilt that had previously not been seen. Christian morality brought about a hatred of man's passions, a rendering of the entire world as evil, and an overall pessimism toward life that brought about its own end, the end of its credibility with modern man.[193] In other words, "the Christian decision to make the world ugly and bad has made the world ugly and bad."[194]

Nietzsche's evaluative stance on *ressentiment* is predicated on his commitment to inegalitarianism. Resentment is poisonous because it levels the playing field with its "universal" demands, totalizing claims, and transformative power to render the 'good' and 'noble' man into an *evil* one. For Nietzsche, this is unacceptable on account of the apparent and *natural* difference

[193] OGM 3, §27 AND 28

[194] GS, §130

that exists among humans: some are 'birds of prey,' others are 'lambs'; some are 'masters' and 'nobleman' —*Übermenschen*—and others are weak and ordinary.

Moreover, Nietzsche does not give us a sense of *ressentiment*'s origins nor its ability to have this creative agential capacity. He simply sees it as a natural sort of reaction. In his genealogical account, Nietzsche concedes that that this morality "won out"[195] with animal-man turning inward and against itself. This inward turn of self-destructiveness (conscience/shame) is a "contradiction," an "unexpected spectacle" that makes man exciting, because it arouses hope and tension in a "divine audience."[196] Nietzsche does not seem to consider the possibility that this "contradiction" and "unexpected spectacle" might be an inevitability precisely to level the playing field. Is it possible that when the oppressed can no longer bear the weight of oppression, resenting their oppression can play a role in "taming" the strong to keep them from trampling over others? Nietzsche locates the origin of morality in *ressentiment*, but he doesn't seem to ask "why" *ressentiment* exists or whether the word "resentment" itself actually encapsulates the power of the psychological *will* to resist oppression.

For Nietzsche, language itself also has a creative capacity. Human beings are meaning-makers and give meaning to the world around them through symbolic (e.g., linguistic) representation. He says that

> we have arranged for ourselves a world in which we are able to live—by positing bodies, lines, planes, causes and effects, motion and rest, form and content; without these articles

[195] OGM, §9

[196] OGM 2, §16

> of faith no one could endure living! But that does not prove them. Life is not an argument; the conditions of life might include error.[197]

Elsewhere—for example in the *Gay Science*—Nietzsche maintains that language itself is only a surface-level representation of the unconscious. Human beings give meaning to the world through language to represent what they experience within themselves and within the world. Nietzsche stresses this point clearly when he says:

> man, like every living creature, is constantly thinking but does not know it; the thinking which becomes conscious is only the smallest part of it, let's say the shallowest, worst part—for only that conscious thinking takes place in words, that is, in the communication symbols; and this fact discloses the origin of consciousness.

Given the apparent *originlessness* of *ressentiment*, Nietzsche is easily able to render its value as "dangerous," "harmful," and "poisonous." But what if *ressentiment* were called the "humanizer"? What if the "humanizer" were seen as a "balm," not a poison, as well as an inevitable consequence when the "masters" exploit and dominate the "weak"?

Given the connotative meaning of the symbolic word "resentment" itself and the fact that Nietzsche stops his origin at the level of psychoanalysis, Nietzsche is taking an evaluative stance from the outset. Why stop at psychoanalysis and why not pursue a genealogy of resentment itself? In a pursuit for a *genealogy* of *ressentiment* one has the possibility to ask: Is it the case that envy is rooted in the weak's *own* desire to assert its will, like the masters? Why are the masters so psychologically prone to *believe* the morality of the "slaves"? Nietzsche's *Genealogy* is an attempt to dig deep into what's "really" going on in the slave—not their anger with *injustice*, but their

[197] GS, §121

anger, full stop. The imposition of one's will onto another has no metaphysical or moral weight *despite* the fact that it arose inevitably. Is it error or destiny? Given his commitment to the distinction of slave and strong, Nietzsche opts for the latter and his genealogy is established from the outset.

A Blaxican Critique of Nietzsche

I agree with Nietzsche that our worlds are discursively produced—that is, how we understand our worlds is tied to the moral discourses we ascribe to them. I have already shown that both *mestizaje* and *Blackness* were historically contingent racial categories that opened up completely different worlds. These discourses could produce violence or liberation. *Mestizaje,* for example, could be understood as a racial ideal to which human history aspired. If it was understood this way, however, it would render both Black and indigenous cultures obsolete by subsuming them under the "superior" European cultures. If it were understood simply as a heuristic for interpreting life within a multiplicity of cultures, it could be liberative. If Blackness were understood as a powerlessness and servitude, then it could be used for harm. If it were understood as freedom and power, it could support abolition and liberation.

Where Blaxican theology differs from Nietzsche's genealogical account is (1) how one categorizes the different sorts of discourses, and (2) how we understand the direction of their *revaluation.* In Nietzsche's account, the competing discursive traditions are the "noble" and the "slave." In the Blaxican theological tradition, the competing discourses are the *liberative* and *anti-liberative* ones. In the Nietzschean tradition, those who were once considered "noble" and "good" now become evil. In Blaxican theology, we recognize that the history of racism in the Americas is brought upon the nonwhite who is first rendered evil and who re-evaluates those racial categories

by imbuing them with divine meanings of goodness. This act of revaluation—or making a new meaning–is an act of redemption, for it recognizes that that which was once considered "good" by God has been corrupted by the sin of racism. To demonstrate this point, I will turn to two stories that illustrate this point: my mother's story and the Creation story.

My Mother's Story

Tyran "Romp" Reynolds, a Black woman from 69th and Stony Island, just south of the University of Chicago, raised me. Romp raised all of us six children on Chicago's south side before moving us to Illinois' next largest suburb, Aurora. It's hard to distill—or even know—precisely what moments or persons have most definitively shaped our sense of self and what it means to be a human being. Yet, if I were to locate one individual who has shaped my sense of what it means to be human it would be my mother—Romp. Romp taught us that to be a human being entailed being virtuous: humble, compassionate, and generous. To be humble meant we never regarded anyone with less or with more to be better or worse than ourselves. To be compassionate meant we were routinely mindful of the challenges we'd overcome and deeply concerned (to the point of action) with our fellow neighbors' own challenges. To be generous meant that we gave what we could to those who needed it.

Yet we lived with the shame of being poor and we were acutely aware of its sting. In many parts of America, being poor meant being regarded as "lazy." I didn't need people from the suburbs to make fun of me for being poor: my friends were already quite accomplished at it. My friends noticed if my shoes looked worn, if my hair wasn't lined up, if I smelled bad, or if I had worn the same pants all week. The sting of poverty kept us locked out of opportunity and for some reason also intent on poverty-shaming each other.

To avoid the incessant ridicule, I did anything I could to dress in more expensive attire. I would plead with my mom for a new pair of shoes, jacket, or fitted cap. However, if my mom spent money on new clothes, I knew she could be judged (by my teachers, fellow churchpeople, etc.) for not making "wise financial decisions." Even if these accusations weren't directed at her specifically, the politics of welfare created a fearful climate of stigmatization among many people of color, especially black women. We were always fearful that some detached bystander might sneer at my mom's "unwise" financial choice of "buying a new pair of Jordans," and might, even if subtly, appeal to the stigma of the irresponsible, poor, ghetto black woman.

In the previous chapter I discussed my former belief in, and then ultimate disillusionment with, a theology that connects goodness and badness with race. Those ideas were fertilized in the evangelical church setting to which I belonged until I became acutely aware of how race and theology work together. Over time, however, I've come to realize how race and theology intersect with class and gender as well. I recall a particular instance of this. I was heading to a fellow church family's home for an event. As I approached their home, I was taken aback by how large their home was for a modest-sized family. Throughout the event, everyone commented on how hospitable this friend was; and how *humble* they were for not having an ostentatious attitude about their home. It made me assume it must be difficult for those who have money not to sneer at others and not to live an extravagant lifestyle. Yet, to me the home screamed extravagance.

I came to recognize that an individual's wealth and their tendency to downplay it characterized theological virtue language—and that this excluded poor people from participating in the virtuous life itself. Over time, I realized how much "becoming a better person" was not only intricately connected with "becoming white," but also with being male and wealthy. Virtue always seemed to work for the rich white men. People gave them the benefit of the doubt when they

participated in microaggressions or had extravagant homes, deeming them to be *understanding, compassionate*, or *humble.* Yet if we voiced our frustrations, people perceived us as *uncharitable* or *rash*. When I dared to judge their virtue by externals—that is, by what they *did or had*—my church friends appealed to their hearts or intentions. The above example of my friend's home illustrates this, but virtue language extends to other areas of our lives in which we just can't seem to be charitable enough, humble enough, or generous enough. Others never considered my mother's "heart" for her kids when she bought us clothes outside her means. Instead, they deemed her to be irresponsible. The inability of white Christians to see virtue in my Black mother led me to recognize how they invisibilize the virtue it takes for many Mexican women and families to leave their homes and sacrifice their familiar lives for a more stable but strange one in the United States.

Many White Christians fail to consider Black and Mexican women's virtuous intent because, as Dwight N. Hopkins notes, they (and we) are "born into a priori circumstances of a male-centered, wealth-driven, and white skin-privileged universe."[198] This way of doing ethics racializes, genders, and "other-izes" virtue. It is a machination by which one ascribes "excellences of character" to [typically wealthy, white male] agents by defining them in their relationship to certain contexts of power. In this sense, it is a racist mode of meaning-making, entirely disconnected from any objective reality of the cross and the *Sermon on the Plain*. In theory, many white theologians might maintain that virtue doesn't have to be this way. They might suggest that "everyone" can be virtuous, even as they live in and practice a different world of virtue. It abuses

[198] Dwight Hopkins, *Being Human: Race, Culture and Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 8.

and misappropriates the divine gift of meaning-making for power. I learned that white Christians assume they have the authority to interpret Christian virtue as well as the Bible.

Since many white Christians have interpreted the Bible and particular virtues as intrinsic to *their culture, self, and race*[199] and have, in the process, rendered my mother virtue-less, I have come to reject virtues that have tacitly been defined as such:

> *Humility*:
>
> An individual is humble insofar as they are wealthy and do not flaunt it. Humility is wealth + humility. It is a concealment of one's power. In order to have humility, one must already have a certain degree of power to condescend.
>
> *Compassion*:
>
> Compassion is the act of one agent in a position of power condescending to a lower place to help the other. One could also attain humility as long as one conceals this act. However, should anyone find out about this act of condescension, the individual in a position of power has the chance to be rendered doubly-virtuous: compassionate + humble.
>
> *Generous:*
>
> Similar to compassion, generosity assumes one has access to money. The acquisition of money should not be interrogated. In other words, why this individual has access to this amount of money should not be interrogated; to do so is to be unappreciative of their act of giving it up. Being a generous person is having access to money in order to give it away freely.

Where did the meaning of these virtues come from? And why are they so closely connected with whiteness, maleness, and upper-class status? The Nietzschean diagnosis of all justifications for Christian morality argues that, at bottom, Christian morality is driven by resentment and the desire to restrain the powerful from domination. The genealogical analysis, however, does not take

[199] See chapter 1 of Dwight Hopkins, *Being Human: Race, Culture and Religion* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005).

into consideration the *Christian* theological justifications of domination demonstrated above. Again, the moral dichotomy between moral discourses that Blaxican theology makes is not between *slave* and *noble* morality, but between *liberative* and *anti-liberative.* Slavery, as an anti-liberative institution will generate discourses—Christian or otherwise—that will give rise to the blameworthiness of people deemed 'other,' those like my mother.

For Black women like my mother, blameworthiness is rooted in slavery and has a peculiar dimension connected to slaves perceived lack of agency. Recall that the emergence of the transatlantic slave trade in the West was the context for the emergence of Blackness. To justify the enslavement of African people, Europeans created a racial scale and subsequent theological justifications that rendered African people powerless and destined for servitude. The theological rationales became refined in various colonies where African enslavement was the norm, assumption, and precondition for maintaining the monocrop economies (e.g., of cotton, sugar, etc.).

However, it is important to emphasize that gendered and sexual violence was one of the most common horrors that mediated the slave economy. Since it was enslaved women (not men) who possessed the reproductive capacities to produce more laborers, their economic value was rendered greater than their male counterparts.[200] Therefore, white slaveholders were economically incentivized to rape their property, since sexual violence literally held the potential of generating more capital. In his now-classic autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, African American

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[200] This was not always the case. Stephanie E. Jones Rogers claims that some enslavers would consider "enslaved infants to be time-consuming financial burdens who prevented their mothers from devoting all of their attention to their white households." But for the most part, the reproductive capacities of enslaved women would strengthen their value and were considered economically beneficial because they could produce generational wealth. See Stephanie E. Jones Rogers, *They Were Her Property: White Women as Slave Owners in the American South* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 20.

abolitionist Frederick Douglass wrote, “My father was a white man, or nearly white. It was sometimes whispered that my master was my father.”[201] Saidiya Hartman has shown that “the enslaved could neither give nor refuse consent, nor offer reasonable resistance, yet they were criminally responsible and liable” to sexual violence.” The courts would only affirm the agency of Black women to find them criminally liable. Black women, so it was reasoned, could have resisted their masters but didn’t; or they had simply seduced them. The agency of Black women was conditioned upon their blameworthiness. “White culpability was displaced as black criminality, and violence was legitimated as the ruling principle of the social relations of racial slavery.” [202]

Theological Paradigms of Black and Mexican Women’s Autonomy

White negation of Black women’s agency is also enshrined in passages of Scripture, for example, as Delores Williams notes, in “Hagar ha[ving] no control over her body or her labor.”[203] Retrieving the biblical figure Hagar (cf. Gen. 16:1–16; Gen. 21:9–21) in theological discourse to highlight the striking paralleled themes of motherhood, survival, surrogacy, homelessness and poverty in black woman’s experience, Williams challenges the dominating theme of liberation in black theology by focusing on survival and quality of life. Williams’ first chapter covers Hagar’s story as “a route to black women’s issues.” After exploring the aforementioned themes, she turns to discuss the common tensions in motherhood, exploring tropes such as “mammy” and the sexism within the black community (e.g., Richard Allen, Langston

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[201] Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2003), 42.

[202] Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 82–83.

[203] Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2013), 54.

Hughes, James Baldwin, Richard Wright) that diminishes the strength of black women, their role in struggle, and that sees their religiosity as an impediment to black liberation.

Williams offers a different picture of black women and their religious experiences through the writings of Margaret and Alice Walker. She narrates a sweeping history of both forced and voluntary surrogacy (of the antebellum and postbellum eras) before moving to her theological voice in Part 2 (Womanist God-Talk). Among her many profound interventions in black theological discourse is her hermeneutic of ascertainment/identification that enables an interpretive community to reflect critically on how one identifies with the biblical characters in the narrative and to question the ethical import of said identification. It is important for readers within religious communities to reflect critically on with whom they identify and why. Why is it easy to gloss over the figure of Hagar and identify with, say, Moses or David? Does one identify Moses as a central figure of liberation because he is a male with agency? As black women find themselves in a world where they struggle to survive and sustain a favorable quality of life, Hagar becomes the exemplar par excellence of one who struggles to survive, fights for a favorable life, and depends on God.

Human beings make meaning in the world, and those meanings can be liberative or ensnaring. Blackness and *mestizaje* had theological significations that contributed in different ways to Blaxican identity, and especially to Blaxican theology. Blackness and mestizaje, for example, had Christological significations. Jesus was *mestizo,* argued Elizondo, insofar as he was culturally adept and homeless. Jesus is Black, argued Cone, insofar as God's initiative is always to be in solidarity with the oppressed of society. Those aspects of Jesus' personhood are selected as meaningful to the Blaxican person because they are liberative. The aspects of these racial categories are rejected when they contribute to the construction of further racial hierarchies. In

what follows, I argue that racial meaning is itself a distortion of God's intention for meaning making. To do so, requires a novel reading of the Scriptural story through a Blaxican lens.

Scripture

Whether one does traditional systematic theology, Black liberation theology, or *mujerista* theology, all of them recognize the value and centrality of scripture. Of course, scripture is a site of intrareligious contestation. Depending on which texts are employed, one can use them to promote women's subjugation (e.g., "submit to your husbands," "women are to be silent in the church") and proslavery politics ("slaves, obey your masters"). Likewise, Scripture can be used to promote women's liberation (e.g., deaconesses in the early Church, women as the first apostles, etc.) and antislavery resistance (e.g., the Exodus). Nevertheless, scripture is recognized as meaningful *in some sense* and is therefore a site of cross-cultural and cross-temporal debate and interpretation. It carries special significance as it discloses aspects of God's character and intention for the world through the collection of poetry, narratives, histories, biographies, letters (or epistles), apocalyptic literature, etc. recorded throughout the Bible.

Of course, scripture is not a politically neutral text so it is important to emphasize the human agency, variety of literary genres, and social, political, and geographical circumstances embedded in the biblical documents. The authors of these texts (or their scribes) were witnesses to God's acts in history, and recorded those events through human filters. Paul, Peter, and John may or may not have had direct access to the divine, but their transcription of the events are certainly not without blemish. Blaxican theology recognizes that human interpretation of the divine is always filtered through our own rubrics of power. Nevertheless, the Bible itself attests to these important aspects of human interpretation that have the power to both heal and harm.

Blaxican theology argues that theological justifications for oppression and human hierarchy are *ipso facto* misinterpretations. In Blaxican theology, a plurality of biblical and theological interpretations can be valid insofar as they do not instantiate human hierarchies. God is the Ultimate Meaning-Maker, who has given human beings the gift of making meaning. However, if human beings can make meaning out of their own lives, then doesn't this lead to a kind of relativism? Human beings are not as autonomous or de-historicized as crude Enlightenment thinking might suggest, for we inherit a life imbued with value and the moral valuations which we employ are not of our own. In other words, we exist within a world already latent with meaning, and we do so in community.

Human beings do not make meaning *ex nihilo*, but rather freely participate in meaning making as a subsidiary gift given by God, though now in a distorted manner. Meaning making (creation through sight and words) are subsidiary gifts from God. Indeed, it is precisely God's orientation to create and give value to a world without being that is the basis for the human being's meaning-making. God's will to create the world from nothing is an expression of God's boundless unmerited love—i.e. what some theologians call "prevenient grace"—towards nothings and nobodies.

The Book of Genesis gives us a glimpse into two beings: God, the Meaning Maker and the human creature who is graced with the gift of meaning making. It is important to emphasize the two agents active in this creation account: God's sight and God's words. In the beginning God created a perfectly balanced world: the light *and* the darkness; the waters above *and* the waters below; evening *and* morning:

> And God ***said***, “Let there be light,” and there was light. God **saw that the light was good**,and he separated the light from the darkness. God *called* the light “day,” and the darkness he called “night.” And there was evening, and there was morning—the first day.

> And God ***said***, “Let there be a vault between the waters to separate water from water.” So God made the vault and separated the water under the vault from the water above it. And it was so. God ***called*** the vault “sky.” And there was evening, and there was morning—the second day. (Gen. 1:3–8)

Divine speech brings order and meaning into Creation, and after God’s sight verifies its pleasant goodness, God continues to speak things into being and to bestow goodness upon the creations through divine sight (e.g., Genesis 1:9–10; Gen. 1:12–13, etc.). In the second creation account, God gives the human being the gift of *sight* and *speech.* After breathing life into Adam, God provided sustenance for Adam through the trees that were “pleasing to the eye and good for food.” (Genesis 2:9). God continues by providing wild animals from the ground for Adam to give meaning through speech:

> He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever man called each living creature, that was its name. So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds in the sky and all the wild animals. (Genesis 2:19–20)

Adam’s naming of the animals is the form of Adam’s participation in the divine will to create, much like the Creator—though specifically through *naming,* thus bestowing meaning through speech to the creatures. However, the plot begins to twist when the serpent misuses the gift of speech to tell a lie to Eve.

> “Did God say, ‘You shall not eat from any tree in the garden’?” The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; but God said, ‘You shall not

> eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.'" But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die…"

Having believed the serpent, "the woman **saw** that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye" (3:6) and ate from the forbidden tree. In other words, Eve rendered that which was *not* good '*for food' "good for food'* and bestowed consumeristic value upon that which God made a good in itself, thereby misappropriating the gift of sight for meaning making. For their disobedience, God issues respective curses to Adam and Eve, telling Eve specifically, "your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you" (Genesis 3:16). In this sense, patriarchy is a product of the Fall of humanity, not a God-ordained hierarchy bestowed with divine goodness.

Following the respective curses, "Adam named his wife Eve" (Genesis 3:20), thereby showing dominion over her without *seeing* her as *good* as God saw that which God named. Therefore, the Fall of humanity represents, among many other things, the clouding of these two important agents who originally *see* and *name* goodness and dignity in others. Where intimacy and relationality once defined the agents of sight and words in relation to the Other, now commodity and object linger as potential ends of these two active agents. Martin Buber, the twentieth-century existential thinker, wrote of the relationship of the Other in his book *I And Thou:*

> Whoever says You does not have something for his object. For wherever there is something there is also another something; every It borders on other Its; It is only by virtue of bordering on others. But where You is said there is no something. You has no borders. Whoever says You does not have something; he has nothing. But he stands in relation.[204]

[204] Martin Buber, *I And Thou* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 55.

The abuse and misuse of the gift of meaning making can be gleaned in the testimony given above about my mother, and how racist theologies misunderstand the meaning of virtue as purportedly portrayed in the gospel. In the modern era, white men can hoard and still be considered generous, while Black and Mexican women can be self-sacrificing and be considered "irresponsible." To be clear, Black and Mexican women are not *by nature* self-sacrificial, and these projected virtues often aim to keep them in a state of dependence and overwork. My argument is that the virtuous life is always seen as being out of reach for Black and Mexican women.

Blaxican theology re-examines many basic virtues and tenets of Christian theology—namely, sin and grace: identifying sin as a structural evil and grace as preferential option for the most vulnerable. Although these terms have been standard fare since the early church, their clearest definitions arose from in the late 1960s. I follow these articulations over the individualistic and pietistic definitions formalized in Euro-American theology. The preferential option for those on the underside of society is a consistent theological motif throughout the Bible. God's act to liberate the Hebrew people from Egypt, and the incarnation of Jesus, the Son of God, as a poor Palestinian Jew in the *anawim* class, and his acts of compassion towards outsiders is summed up in what Gutierrez calls God's "preferential option for the poor":

> The ultimate reason for commitment to the poor and oppressed is not to be found in the social analysis we use, or in human compassion, or in any direct experience we ourselves may have of poverty. These are all doubtless valid motives that play an important part in our commitment. As Christians, however, our commitment is grounded, in the final analysis, in the God of our faith. It is a theocentric, prophetic option that has its roots in the unmerited love of God and is demanded by this love. Bartolomé de Las Casas, who had direct experience of the terrible poverty and decimation of Latin American Amerindians, explained it by saying: "God has the freshest and keenest memory of the least and most forgotten." The Bible has much to say to us about this divine remembering, as the works of J. Dupont, among others, have made clear to us.

> This same perception was confirmed by the experience of the Christian communities of Latin America and reached Puebla via the document that the Peruvian bishops prepared for the CELAM meeting. Puebla asserted that simply because of God's love for them as manifested in Christ "the poor merit preferential attention, whatever may be the moral or personal situation in which they find themselves" (no. 1142). In other words, the poor deserve preference not because they are morally or religiously better than others, but because **God is God, in whose eyes 'the last are first** [emphasis mine].'"[205]

In short, God's preference for the poor is based on God's will and grace, not on the merit of any poor person. Poor and oppressed people are not morally pure and/or mystically righteous. It is because God is God, who is gracious in taking initiative to draw towards those from whom society pulls away. As Cone argued, God cannot be reduced to any particular situation of oppression, yet God is acutely sensitive to the cries of the oppressed and, in God's freedom, takes initiative to act and become one on their behalf. Karl Barth, the twentieth-century Protestant theologian, emphasizes this point of God's initiative in *The Humanity of God* when he asks:

> How could God's deity exclude His [sic] humanity, since it is God's freedom for love and thus His [sic] capacity to be not only in the heights but also in the depths, not only great but also small, not only in and for Himself [sic] but also with another distinct from Him [sic], and to offer Himself [sic] to him? [206]

Indeed, for Barth, "God has and retains in His [sic] relation to this other one the unconditioned priority. It is His act. *His* is and remains the first and decisive Word, *His* the initiative, *His* [the leadership." [207] The poor did not opt for God: God chose the poor, as Paul says in his First Epistle to the Corinthians:

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[205] Martin Buber, *I And Thou* (New York: Simon & Schuster. 1996), xxvii–xxviii.

[206] Karl Barth, *The Humanity of God* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), 49.

[207] Karl Barth, *The Humanity of* God, 50.

> God chose (ἐξελέξατο) the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose (ἐξελέξατο) the weak things of the world to shame the strong. God chose (ἐξελέξατο) the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, **29** so that no one may boast before him. (1 Cor. 1: 27–28)

Ethicist M. Shawn Copeland likewise writes that "to privilege suffering bodies in theological anthropology uncovers the suffering body at the heart of Christian belief."[208] Although the politics of welfare sees my mother as unintelligent, irresponsible, and undisciplined, Christ's suffering body identifies with black women in their stigmatization, invisibility, and objectification. Christ's solidarity with black women shows us what it means to be human. To be human is not to create dehumanizing virtues in ciphers to be interpreted by small, elite communities who define what happiness looks like. Instead, to be human is to participate in the gift of meaning-making that renders those whom others have misevaluated as beloved by God. Jesus shows us the way to do that in a society of hierarchies. Indeed, the *Sermon on the Plain* is Jesus' corrective to linking virtue with upper-class status.

"Blessed are you who are poor,
for yours is the kingdom of God.
21 Blessed are you who hunger now,
for you will be satisfied.
Blessed are you who weep now,
for you will laugh.
22 Blessed are you when people hate you,
when they exclude you and insult you
and reject your name as evil,
because of the Son of Man.

(Luke 6: 20–22)

[208] M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*: *Body, Race, and Being* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010), 1.

Christ's blessings (and woes) provide a necessary corrective to the sinful heart's inclination to privilege the rich. It is *not* a sacralization of poverty. It is the New Testament's corrective of the preference and sacralization of the rich found in the human heart and in many white theologies. For what civilization or culture does not know of social classification and hierarchy? In a discussion of *the gaze*, Copeland notes that "aesthetic value judgments leach into degradation of intelligence and morality that demand disciplining, restraining and controlling the body." [209]

The preferential option for the rich plagues the sinful, human heart of all civilizations and individual persons. Christ's solidarity with the poor is a gift of embodied grace; not a given that any human being can claim by their own merit or privilege. It is not that black women are more human than any other race or gender of people: it is that Jesus is the human from whom we take our cues, and we find Jesus dwelling among the most abused of any given society, lest we forget the humanity in the invisible and objectified. Again Copeland writes,

> any appeal to the empirical or visual in the effort to understand human being is never innocent, never ahistorical, and never divorced from power. As the adage would have it, 'Beauty is in the eye of the beholder'; but the eye must be tutored to see, coached to attribute meaning to line and curve.[210]

In this sense, Jesus is the Great Eye-Opener, tutoring us to see and give value to that from which society turns away in disgust. Through Christ, our eyes are able to see beauty and goodness and dignity in that which the sin of racism has clouded with bigotry and arbitrary standards of beauty. Christ gives meaning by *seeing* value and *naming* value. Christ reverses the curse of the Fall and compels us to see with fresh eyes the beauty of that which racist American society deems

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[209] Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 12.

[210] Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*,17.

undesirable. “Blessed are the poor!” and “Black is beautiful!” become aesthetic affirmations of the redeemed eye and tongue.

It is on the basis of this understanding of Creation and of Jesus’ redemptive work that Blaxican theology shows preference to Black and Mexican women’s bodies as an important point of departure. Black and Mexican women’s bodies are among the most vulnerable and exploited bodies within a USA context, in this making them akin to Jesus Christ, whose body was bruised and broken by the state. Iberian colonialism twisted the way in which labor was organized ,and entrenched in society racialized, gendered, and regional disparities[211] whose legacies persist throughout the region of Latin America. The introduction of the transatlantic slave trade within Anglo and Latin America also created gendered precarities on plantations and within other contexts of master-slave relations, including sexual violence, that exist to this very day.

The suffering body of Jesus links him precisely with the oppressed, regardless of gender, sexuality, nationality, or race. Jesus’ suffering body beckons all liberation theologians to be attentive to the way in which these forms of oppression link to multiply and create new forms of harm. In the case of Mexican women, one must be especially mindful of how documentation status, gender, and race come together to render undocumented women especially vulnerable to violence. And in Black Theology, the Christian must be especially mindful of how various forms of oppression render Black women doubly vulnerable.

Conclusion

[211] Brodwyn Fischer, “Thinking About Poverty and Progress in Latin America” (Lecture, The University of Chicago, March 31, 2021).

Throughout this chapter, I have argued that the human being is the meaning maker and that the act of meaning making is mediated by the agency of language and sight. What we see is what we value, and *how* we see it is shaped by *how* we value it. The Christian tradition looks to the Creator who spoke the world into existence through the divine word and rendered it good through divine sight. In a nontheistic sense, Friedrich Nietzsche also saw the human being as the evaluative species, giving meaning to the world through sight and language. Race is a byproduct of this act of meaning making, but it is an act of meaning making in an *anti-liberative* sense. Racial hierarchies as modes of meaning making are expressions of the Fall, since all of God's creatures were once seen and rendered good in their Edenic state. Christ, in God's grace, challenges these modes of meaning making by granting theologians new eyes to see the abundant beauty and goodness that exists among Black and Mexican people.

It is not that Blacks and Mexicans are morally or spiritually greater, but that the rich and white are not morally or spiritually greater. Christ's gracious pronouncement is a challenge to society to *see* us as *fully* human by giving preference to us. We are all—both poor and rich; woman and man; white and black; 'noble' and 'plebian'—simultaneously sinner and saint. The rich have told themselves they are fully saints, while effectively telling the poor they can merely strive to be like them in order to sanctify themselves. The poor, in turn, have told themselves that they are fully sinners and have thus cried out to God for restoration of their humanity.

The dehumanization of virtue has led to racializations of virtue, class-related conceptions of virtue, as well as sexual and gender conceptions of virtue. A humanizing theological anthropology then needs an intervention of various feminist and liberation theological anthropologies. To talk about being human invariably brings us to gender, say feminist thinkers like Michelle Gonzalez, and to race and class (like Grant, Copeland, Hopkins, and myself). There

is a natural connection between theological anthropology, virtue (which is always linked to *becoming* human in an Aristotelian sense) and various markers of race, class, sex, and gender. Centering Christ's broken body, therefore, and women's bodies (like my mother's) in theological anthropology is

> [n]ot a way of replacing male normativity. This methodological practice is instead a manner of "curing" the Christian tradition of its one-sided understanding of humanity and ultimately producing a more authentic, egalitarian, and Christian vision. Feminist theological anthropology, in its self-critical stance, does not seek to create a (falsely) universal depiction of humanity based exclusively on women's experiences.[212]

This act of "curing" is what I described earlier as a *necessary corrective* of the human heart's disposition towards the powerful (white, wealthy, cis-gendered male). It is Christ's grace, initiative, and will to draw close to the despised of society. Indeed, his Spirit-anointed mission was made clear by Jesus in the synagogue of Nazareth when he read from the writings of the prophet Isaiah, who proclaimed:

"The Spirit of the Lord is on me,

Because he has anointed me

to **proclaim good news to the poor**

He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners

And recovery of sight for the blind,

To set the oppressed free,

To proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." (Luke 4:18-19)

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[212] Michelle A. Gonzalez, *Created in God's Image: An Introduction to Feminist Theological Anthropology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2007), 108.

To be human is to follow Jesus, the Speaker of Life, the Eye-Opener. Jesus' proclamation of "good news to the poor" is a recapitulation of divine speech of evaluative meaning making. Christ's "recovery of sight for the blind" is the redemption of the dehumanizing gaze to see beauty beyond self-reference. It is to see life and goodness and dignity in the Other and to proclaim it with boldness before a world which narrates its own story of beauty, virtue, humanity and goodness. Being authentically ourselves—and making meaning in Blaxican theology—is living with our eyes wide open to see all the colors of the world radiating with goodness before our eyes and proclaiming, "It is good; very good."

Blaxican Theology, Protestantism and Abolitionist Thought

A Rundown

In the previous chapter I argued that human beings are given the capacity to create discursive worlds. This unique capacity is a gift from God, the Creator of all things. God created the world through the word, and human beings are given the same gift. This gift was initially meant to imitate the life-giving God: our words could create life, love, and liberation. Instead, they create discursive worlds of erasure, racism, and harm. In short, I explored how those religious meanings have had systemic and evaluative implications on Blaxican human beings. They justify subsequent systems of erasure in politics, art, and society.

Racial difference is tied to reason, values, and state violence. There are *reasonable* explanations given to justify racial inferiority. These discursive reasons shape our values (what we love and esteem) and provide justification for various forms of social control (i.e., the state). One of the ways to challenge these discursive traditions is to create our own, to participate in the gift that God gave to humans in the garden: meaning-making. In the previous chapter, I argued that meaning-making that supports racial subordination is a misuse of this gift.

The Following Approach: Abolitionist Theology from a Protestant Perspective

This chapter will tie together the themes of reason, values and state violence to Protestant thought to construct a Blaxican theology of abolition. By way of doing so, it will be important to clarify why this project draws on Protestant theology. First, I have been formed by Protestant churches and thus it is the particular religious locale in which I am doing constructive theological work. Insofar as its possible to set aside one's religious identity for the purpose of being more

universal, I suppose that is up for each interlocutor to decide. Personally, I do not believe this to be either possible nor intellectually virtuous. However, my connection to Catholic theology as a Mexican-American formed in Catholic spaces demonstrates that I remain grateful for and committed to ongoing engagement and cooperation with Catholic thought. I have judiciously marshaled theological sources from Catholic theology that have also challenged racial subordination and human hierarchy (e.g., Virgilio Elizondo and M. Shawn Copeland).

However, as I am unable to set aside my religious identity (Protestant) while attempting to construct an abolitionist theology, I recognize my contribution as a provisional one. Blaxican Protestants, like myself, can do nothing but construct Protestant theologies of solidarity, drawing on the resources most familiar to their traditions. Yet, I do not see these as necessarily foreclosing on interfaith or ecumenical cooperation. Secondly, this does not necessarily mean that Protestants set the terms for abolition qua abolition nor liberation. Rather, they are constructing their own visions of abolition which should be in conversation with other visions as well.

The Threefold Task:

The task of constructing a Protestant Blaxican theology of abolition is threefold: analytical, evaluative and constructive. The analytical task of this chapter will pursue the follow questions: (a) What makes Blaxican theology 'abolitionist'? Or, what are the features of it that make any theology abolitionist? (b) what makes Blaxican abolitionist theology 'Protestant'? Asked differently, what are the characteristically Protestant ideas, impulses and conceptual apparatuses that makes any liberation theology 'Protestant'?

The evaluative task asks the following questions: is Blaxican theology responsive to immediate concerns in America and/or abroad? Where are those persistent sinful, human interests

that plague theology and how can abolitionst theology respond prophetically to it? The constructive task builds on the analytical and evaluative work to render legible a model, method and possibility for Blaxican abolitionist theology.

Blaxican Theology and Protestant Thought

Reason, Affection, and Values

Since this work is an attempt to construct a Protestant Blaxican theology, then it is important to clarify (albeit in broad strokes) the persons and characteristics of Protestant thought that inform this vision. This is especially important given the plurality of Protestantism, both in its inception and in its current manifestations. By Protestant thought, I am referring to the movement of sectarian churches which emerged in the aftermath of Luther's break with the Catholic Church in 16th century Europe. Protestant theology, especially of the sort which emerged from Lutheran thought, emphasizes the creaturely interests embedded in human reason, affection and valuation and cautions one from adopting a belief that one can know, love, or value anything that is true, loveworthy, or valuable independent of God's grace.

For the Protestant reformers, the revelation of Jesus Christ through the proclamation of God's Word is the precondition for knowledge of God. For them, there is no knowledge of God that works outward from human reason (natural theology) or can be known through an analogy between God's being and the human being. Protestant theologians sought to hold *sin* and *grace* together in its relationship to salvation and thereby uphold the Creator/ creature distinction.

The fallen character of human reason was maintained with clear consistency by Martin Luther. Especially by the end of his life, Martin Luther identified the origins of human fallenness in humanity's distrust of God and its turn to reason. Of the many theological insights bequeathed

to contemporary Protestants by Martin Luther, Susan Schreiner maintains that Martin Luther's "real interest was in the *noetic* [emphasis mine] effect of sin in all its various ramifications."[213] For Luther, the fallenness of human reason violates the principle that one can know anything true independent of God's grace. Toward the end of his life, Luther's commentary on Genesis had enshrined in Protestant thought an interpretation of the Fall (Genesis 3) which locates Satan's manipulation of human reason in the Garden of Eden. Luther maintained that Satan manipulated reason in the garden by sowing doubt in Adam and Eve about what God's prohibition *truly* meant—but God never provided reasonable explanations for the prohibition, save for "lest perhaps you die."

Nevertheless, Satan litigated a reasonable case for how the first humans must have misinterpreted God and led them to distrust God's command and turn to reason. Luther emphasizes that Satan's "*word* against Word" establishes the root of all sin – namely, human trust in (human) will and reason. Luther's monogenetic account of sin stressed Adam and Eve's bequeathing of distrust and misevaluation of what is good, bad, and necessary for salvation. For Luther, reason has become an idol that leads one to question God's commands and to pursue its own interests. He maintained that this was the error of scholastic theology; that it had relied too much on human reason by establishing rational pathways towards garnering God's favor (e.g., 'do X and you'll receive Y'). For Luther, God's salvific work to justify the one with faith was irrational and depended solely on one's trust in God's promises.

Blaxican theology's suspicion of 'critical reason' and its pursuit of the 'unrealistic' is an inheritance of Protestant thought. For example, the emerging crescendo to "abolish prisons" or

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[213] Susan Schreiner, *Are You Alone Wise?:The Search for Certainty in the Early Modern Era.* Reprint Edition (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) , 58.

"abolish ICE" may seem *unreasonable* in light of a liberal public that demands public safety through incarceration and deportation. Moreover, histories of race that have provided "reasonable" justifications for enslavement, bigotry, state violence, and erasure have all demonstrated the dangerousness that reason can lead humanity towards. Blaxican theology also cultivates a sense of distrust in what the 'reasonable,' 'possible,' or 'realistic' is in light of the God who makes a way out of no way.

Calvin and Edwards: The Affections

John Calvin, the second-generation Protestant reformer of Geneva, also emphasized the "unrestrained nature of the fallen mind." However, Calvin emphasized that trust and certainty were assured by the Holy Spirit *affectively*. Like Aquinas, who refers to the will as "a rational appetite," Calvin believed that the will lied within the heart and mind, that the "testimony of the Spirit is more excellent than all reason" and that "certainty must be printed one one's heart."[214] William J. Wainwright locates a tradition of *affective* reasoning that is also realized in Jonathan Edwards as well, who shares "the Reformed tradition's distrust of humanity's natural capacities and its skepticism about natural theology."[215] Edwards, according to Wainwright, emphasizes that the converted heart allows one to *demonstrate,* not discover, the teachings of Christianity. One's heart must first be disposed towards God and the gifts of God (i.e., Scripture, God's goodness) such that one sees said gifts as 'beautiful,' 'sweet,' and 'pleasing.' One's heart-orientation is not one that is made through one's self-willing, but through grace. Once the heart has been converted,

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[214] Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 78–79.

[215] William Wainwright, *Reason and the Hear: A Prolegomenon to a Critique of Passional Reason* (Ithaca: Cornel University Press, 1995), 1.

Christian categories are brought to life and make sense. Without said conversion, said categories make as much sense to the unconverted as colors do to the blind.[216] The work of grace *sanctifies* reason and the passions from their corruption and turns them towards their proper object, namely being and God, the Ultimate Being.

Blaxican theology also holds that beliefs have emotional attachments. One believes what one *loves* to believe. Pharaoh did not heed Moses' word because he lacked sufficient evidence that God demanded he free the Hebrew slaves. There was undeniable evidence in the form of plagues. But the writer of Exodus claimed that Pharaoh's heart was hardened. For Calvin, the attribution of Pharoah's heart to Satan, God, or man should be distinguished by the *purpose* of the hardening of the heart. "Therefore we see no inconsistency in assigning the same deed to God, Satan, and man; but the distinction in purpose and manner causes God's righteousness to shine forth blameless there, while the wickedness of Satan and of man betrays itself by its own disgrace."[217]

Blaxican theology also emphasizes that what we believe is rarely, if ever, grounded on evidentiary bases. Belief is about our loyalties to the things we are emotionally attached to. For Pharaoh, that was power. One does not simply weigh the evidence that lies before one to judge whether it is true or false. Instead, one has a humanly criteria for judging things to be believable or not. What one chooses to believe or disbelieve is a matter not of the intellect, but of the heart.

Our hearts are shaped by histories of anti-Black, anti-immigrant, queerphobic, and sexist forms of violence. We have created an entire theological apparatus that has shaped our perceptions of the beautiful and love-worthy. As a corrective (made possible by grace), Blaxican theology

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[216] William Wainwright, *Reason and the Heart: A Critique of Passional Reason,* 19.

[217] Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 311.

inherits a posture of *affection* for the poor, oppressed, and dispossessed. Therefore, one adopts a preferential belief in their testimonies. Belief, for Blaxican theology, is belief in the disbelieved. As we explored in Chapter 2, the significance of Juan Diego's encounter with the Virgin of Guadalupe was the vindication of his testimony. He was disbelieved by the religious authorities because he was an indigenous man. When Mary Magdalene proclaimed: "I have seen the Lord!" to the disciples, it is maintaining a posture of belief in her testimony, despite the incredulity of most of her Greco-Roman contemporaries towards the testimony of women. Faith in the disbelieved rests on the faith that one places in a criminal condemned to death. Blaxican theologians asks themselves today: ought we believe women when they come forward? Ought we believe the 'authoritative' statements of police officers or those who claim they've been victimized? Blaxican theology rests on the notion that what we believe tells us about what we love, and that conversion of the heart makes possible our trust in the disbelieved.

Love is not the only affection with an attachment to Blaxican beliefs. From a theological point of view, rage finds its origins in God's character as well. Indeed, rage is rooted in God's divine wrath, and resenting social, cultural, and institutional violence inflicted upon the abused of the world, is a reflection of God's own emotional life. Of course, any human attempt at describing God's vengeance or wrath is always merely an approximation. That is, according to Jewish philosopher of religion, Abraham Joshua Heschel:

> All expressions of pathos are attempts to set forth God's aliveness. One must not forget that all utterances about Him are woefully inadequate. But when taken to be allusions rather than descriptions, understatements rather than adequate accounts, they are evoking our sense of His realness.[218]

[218] Abraham Joshua Heschel. *The Prophets* (New York: Perennial, 2001), 355.

Blacks, Mexicans, and those who know the humiliation and weight of racist violence are convinced of God's vengeance just as much as we are convinced of God's goodness. God is alive and present with those unjustly detained by local police authorities or federal ICE agents. God's presence is not one of detached observer, but one of gracious and unqualified identification. God was anguished when I was arrested and detained by police, and God is anguished when children are stripped away from their parents are placed in cages alongside the US-Mexico border.

Understood in this way, "Vengeance is mine" (Deut. 32.35) is not merely *eschatological* vengeance, as though God will exact justice *in the future.* "Vengeance is mine" also does not mean that God's anger and vengeance is indiscernible. No, the wrath and vengeance of those brutally suffered by the hands of white authorities is rooted in the vengeance of God *at the present moment*. Rage, understood in the context of oppression, approximates God's divine pathos. It is neither detached from nor *fully* manifesting the wrath of God, but all just emotions of anger towards oppression are rooted in divine pathos, including resentment.

Black and Mexican organizers, protestors, and parents who grieve become the vessels of God's rage against the systems of dehumanization. Although many American citizens are content with the world as it is—its laws, systems, and values—Heschel argues that there is qualitative difference between God's sensitivity to evil and the human being:

> Man's sense of injustice is a poor analogy to God's sense of injustice. The exploitation of the poor is to us a misdemeanor; to God, it is a disaster. Our reaction is disapproval; God's reaction is something no language can convey. Is it a sign of cruelty that God's anger is aroused when the rights of the poor are violated, when widows and orphans are oppressed?[219]

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[219] Ibid, 365

The obliteration of oppressors is not the concern for those under the sweltering iron of oppression; it is the obliteration of oppression itself and a restoration of right relationship (e.g., egalitarianism). Rage is the natural and self-respecting reaction of someone who has been reduced to the "illegal," the "nigger," denied claim to a better life, coerced at will, separated from family, or treated as a second-class citizen. A God of respectability—that is, a God overly concerned with the brutal masters' feelings—is a callous God, a God with preferential concern for victimizers. Anger, manifested in the resentment found in the context of oppression, is unconcerned with the feelings of tone policers. It is rooted in the fierce partiality of God, despite the fact that

> few passions have been denounced so vehemently by teachers of morality as the passion of anger. It is pictured as a sinister, malignant passion, an evil force, which must under all circumstances be expressed. The truth, however, is that these features are accretions and exuberances, not its essence. Admittedly, anger is something that comes dangerously close to evil, yet it is wrong to identify it with evil. It may be evil by association, but not in essence. Like fire, it may be a blessing as well as a fatal thing—reprehensible when associated with malice, morally necessary as resistance to malice. Both alternatives are fraught with danger. Its complete suppression, even in the face of outbursts of evil, may amount to surrender and capitulation, while its unrestrained drive may end in disaster. Anger may touch off deadly explosives, while the complete absence of anger stultifies moral sensibility[220]

The Protestants' concern for the affections is consistent with Blaxican theology, as it recognizes that the loves and affections of human creatures cannot be aligned with God apart from grace. Blaxican's rage against domination corresponds with God's hatred of oppression. It is resentful because it is personal, and it is an act of grace as God—in God's grace—has made Godself one with the oppressed. It is personal to God because "whoever mocks the poor shows

[220] Ibid, 360.

contempt for their Maker" (Proverbs 17.5), and it is personal to both the abused and the wrongdoer because it does not severs the real possibility of love and connection between the two.

Protestant Thought and Human Values

A consistent theme throughout this dissertation has been God's gift of meaning-making and of human valuation. As I have argued, meaning-making is a gift that has been tainted by human sin. This conviction is birthed from the Protestant belief that the human values and meanings (and especially our American racial values) we hold dear are always in dangerous of becoming idols.

Perhaps no one has illuminated the insights of the Protestant reformers for American society more than Reinhold Niebuhr, one of the most prominent theologians and social ethicists in the United States. Whereas Luther and Calvin emphasize the sinfulness of human reason and affection, Reinhold Niebuhr emphasizes the human being's sinful strive towards *meaning* apart from God's grace. For Niebuhr, human anxiety about creatureliness and their attempts to transcend their finitude expresses itself through value-systems that enshrine humanity as noble, praiseworthy, and permanent. However, for Niebuhr, "[t]rue religion is a profound uneasiness about our highest values." The strive for meaning is rooted in the human being's deep desire for a sense of security and pride which "the mystery of death still challenges"[221] (101). For Niebuhr, the quest for meaning and the "abyss of death suddenly opens before the proud modern and the peril of meaninglessness threatens his security." This form of security is the modern's pride, which gives them a false sense of security, and thus exacerbates their own insecurity. However, humanity's insecurity and anxiety can only be quelled by faith. The human being's attempt to become God, by ascribing temporal meaning to the realm of the universal and thus creating

[221] Reinhold Niebuhr, *Beyond Tragedy*, 101.

universal principles is a testament to the relationship the world has to God. "The world is, in other words, alienated from its true character. Men do not know their true relation to God." It is in one's contrition, their acknowledgement of their own pride, and the submission of oneself to faith in God, who stands above in judgment and yet who submitted Godself to historical contingency in his humanity. This is what faith is for Neibuhr: a contentment with one's creatureliness and a wholehearted dependence and trust in God. In Blaxican theology, one also recognizes the contingency of white values and rejects its hubris to position itself as having existed ad infinitum.

To get a sense for the Blaxican theologian's suspicion of human values, it is worth examining how the critique of meaning was taken up by James Cone. Cone's radical reworking of Protestant theology in the late 1960s can be discerned as another iteration of the Protestant suspicion of human interests embedded in theology. Whereas Luther, Calvin and Niebuhr were suspicious of the human interests embedded in reason, love, and values, Cone believed that the most palpable expression of human fallenness in the United States can be gleaned in the history of antiblack racism. Cone spoke of sin and human interests' through its concrete manifestation in white supremacy and antiblack racism. Cone was concerned that whiteness had become too closely aligned with God and that the 'infinite qualitative distinction' that Barth emphasized between God and humanity needed to be reasserted to reject sacralizing the white supremacist order. This, for Cone, established an entire meaning structure or evaluative apparatus that one had placed their confidence in. Cone's corrective, therefore, was to create a Black theology that aimed at negating the racist [affective, thought, meaning, and political] structures of his day. He claimed that "to

carve out a Black Theology based on black oppression will of necessity mean the creation of new values independent of and alien to the values of white society."[222]

Summary

In each of the previous chapters, we have seen an emergence of meaning structures that make theological sense of Blackness, *mestizaje,* women, and those considered "othered." Those values have been deeply ingrained into the white supremacist structures that we inhabit. We have interpreted virtue, race, and goodness in connection with these very systems. The Protestant reformers' emphasis on distrusting these values is another inheritance given to Blaxican theology.

Luther, Calvin, and Niebuhr caution human beings from relying on human reason, affection and valuation independent of God's grace. For Protestants, God is the one who illuminates the mind, activates the heart, and renders life meaningful. Blaxican theology emphasizes the infinite chasm that exists between Creator and creature; human reason, love, and symbol (meaning-making) with God's reason, love, and speech. For Blaxican theology, reason, love, and speech (meaning-making) must always remain accountable to Jesus Christ, Scripture, and the counterpublics (mentioned in chapter 1).

Blaxican Theology and State Violence

The Political Theology of Martin Luther

If Blacks, Mexicans, and those who have been subjected to histories of racial violence by both the state and white vigilantes, then what is Blaxican theology's relationship to the state? How does it reconcile the relationship between sinful human creatures, grace, its commitment to the

[222] James Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 127.

poor, and their protection? Does the state maintain the safety and security in times of distress? In order to clarify those relationships, it will be helpful to highlight – albeit in broad strokes – the legacy of Luther's famous treatise *On Secular Government* that will allow us to articulate the distinctive Blaxican liberation theological position.

Martin Luther's low theological anthropology necessitated a theology that rendered legible the organization of sinful human creatures, or the relationship between human creatures and the state. Martin Luther's basic paradigm for understanding the Christian's relationship to the state is by conceiving of two governments: the Kingdom of Man and the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of Man is the secular dimension of government, established by God to maintain peace, punish the wicked, protect the righteous, and admonish the recalcitrant to pay their taxes and advance government.[223] Although the spiritual government includes *only* Christians, the temporal/penultimate dimension of government includes everyone:

All who are not Christians belong to the kingdom of the world and are under the law. Since few believe and still fewer live a Christian life, do not resist the evil, and themselves do no evil, God has provided for non-Christians a different government outside the Christian estate and God's kingdom, and has subjected them to the sword, so that, even though they would do so, they cannot practice their wickedness, and that, if they do, they may not do it without fear nor in peace and prosperity.[224]

The jurisdiction of penultimate authority only extends to bodily life; faith matters and instruction of piety should not be breached by temporal rulers. However, the same principle applies

[223] Luther writes that the "sword is a great benefit and necessary to the world, to preserve peace, to punish sin and to prevent evil, he submits willingly to the rule of the sword, pays tax, honors those in authority, serves, helps, and does all he can to further the government, that it may be sustained and held in honor and fear." [Martin Luther, *Selection From His Writings* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1961.), 371)]

[224] Ibid, 370

for the spiritual kingdom, as the church should not interfere with the temporal authority that is given to it by God. In other words, there should be a clear separation between the church and state. This penultimate dimension is a necessary one; instituted by God for the welfare of and protection from sinful human beings. If the church breached its jurisdiction, teaching only spiritual piety and ruling without the sword, sinful human beings would slaughter one another.[225] Luther understands politics as a remedy for sin, which restrains human beings from annihilating one another:

Even so a wild, savage beast is fastened with chains and bands, so that it cannot bite and tear as its wont, although it gladly would do so; whereas a tame and gentle beast does not require this, but would without any chains and bands is nevertheless harmless.

It is important to emphasize that Luther's division of political realms is not a demarcation between church and world. Again, the jurisdiction of the penultimate authority extends to *everyone;* which means that Christians should see service to the political authorities as an expression of other-centered Christian piety.

…he also serves the State not because he needs it, but because others need it,- that they may be protected and that the wicked may not become worse… if he did not do it, he would be acting not as a Christian but contrary even to love, and would also be setting a bad example to others, who like him would not submit to authority, though they were not Christians. [226]

Therefore, for Luther, the refusal to participate in or advance one's government and its mission to restrain the wicked and aid the weak is to tarnish the Christian witness among the pagans. Moreover, it is not merely a bad witness to others but an extension of a poor reading of Scripture – for Cornelius (Acts 10), The Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8), and Sergius Paulus (Acts 13) were never commanded to leave their posts in civil governance once they had an inward conversion

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[225] Ibid, 370-371.

[226] Ibid, 373.

of the heart. Scripture itself speaks highly of Cornelius *before* his conversion – just as an individual who was faithful to his station to wield the sword on behalf of the government.[227] For Luther, a refusal to help advance the secular realm is a denial of the goodness of it. For "if it is God's work and creation, it is good, … [and so is] government, citizenship, protection and administration of justice."[228]

In short, Luther sees participation in secular governance as an act of service and an affirmation of God's decree that it is *good*, since political authority comes from God and is accountable to God. As it stands, state governments should be recognized as a restraint to the wicked and a protector of the upright.

Christian Realism: Niebuhr and Ramsey

One of the most prominent political theologies of the Protestant tradition is Christian realism, of which Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Ramsey are the most prominent of its representatives. Niebuhr and Ramsey rearticulate Luther's emphasis on humanity's sinfulness and the role of the state within the modern political order. Niebuhr distills some of his most characteristic ideas and themes in his 1940 essay, "Why the Christian Church is Not Pacifist."

Just as Luther's political theology was motivated by his concern for human sin*,* Reinhold Niebuhr offered a normative vision of Christianity which "measures the full seriousness of sin as a permanent factor in human history."[229] Contrary to certain pacifisms, Niebuhr argues that the

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[227] Ibid, 377

[228] Ibid, 377-378

[229] Reinhold Niebuhr, "Why the Christian Church is Not Pacifist" in *Christianity and Power Politics* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948), 3.

gospel cannot be reduced to a 'law of love,' but rather a realistic interpretation of love as an 'impossible possibility' and the persistence of sin within human history. To make sense of Niebuhr's critique of pacifism, it is important to make sense of the kind of pacifisms he has in mind: nonresistance and nonviolent resistance.

The former sort of pacifism gets some aspects of Christianity entirely correct: "Do not resist evil"; "Suffer voluntarily"; "Go the other mile." This initial sort of pacifism is an ethic of self-sacrifice. In Niebuhr's view, these are *hard* sayings of Jesus that place strenuous demands on the Christian conscience. These teachings are not to be relativized or specialized to suit the interests of its actors. Moreover, advocates of this sort of pacifism rightly understood that they could not rid the world of evil. Forsaking this messianic task, these pacifists (like Menno Simons) withdrew themselves from the world and became a symbol of the Kingdom of God, forsaking its attempts to achieve social justice in a world marred by sin.[230] And therefore, "… it is this kind of Christian pacifism which is not a heresy."[231]

Niebuhr associates the latter approach as an attempt to bring the kingdom of God on earth through measures that don't use physical force. However, these pacifists use other kinds of resistance and other kinds of coercion. They understand themselves as nonviolent and reduce the gospel to a sort of Christian moralism or "law of love." Moreover, they dilute the hard sayings of Jesus by making them palatable for strategy for social and political action. This sort of pacifism is

[230] Ibid, 4.

[231] Ibid, 5.

categorically similar to other forms of liberalism which believe conflicts can be sorted out through neighbor-love and an appeal to the best of the enemy[232]. Niebuhr thinks that

> this form of pacifism is not only heretical when judged by the stands of the total gospel. It is equally heretical when judged by the facts of human existence. There are no historical realities which remotely conform to it. It is important to recognize this lack of conformity to the facts of experience as a criterion of heresy.[233]

Although Niebuhr's critique of pacifism is constructed along realistic grounds, it is important to note that he does not dispense with the integral component of love in the gospel. On this score, Niebuhr claims that the pacifists are right. Love is "not some ultimate possibility which has nothing to do with human history." Rather, "the law of love therefore remains a principle of criticism over all forms of community in which elements of coercion and conflict destroy the highest type of fellowship." For Niebuhr, the love commandment demands intervention when it is necessary to defend one's neighbor. Both sacrificial love and justice, through means of war, are often wed together in their pursuit to stop human sinfulness. The options posed to human creatures within the circumstances of sinful human existence is tyranny or anarchy (war). To fight tyranny means to open up the door to some anarchy (war) within the international arena. This is the trade off, and if one is going to say no to tyranny, they will say yes to anarchy.

> That is why even the seemingly most stable justice degenerates periodically into either tyranny or anarchy. But it must also be recognized that it is not possible to eliminate the sinful element in the political expedients. They are, in the words of St. Augustine, both the consequence of, and remedy for, sin.[234]

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[232] See also: "if we believe that if Britain had only been fortunate enough to have produced 30 percent instead of 2 percent of conscientious objectors to military service, Hitler's heart would have been softened and he would not have dared to attack Poland, we hold a faith which no historic reality justifies." Ibid, 6.

[233] Niebuhr, *Christianity and Power Politics*, 6.

[234] Ibid, 22.

The Christian Realism of Paul Ramsey

Alongside Reinhold Niebuhr, Paul Ramsey is arguably one of Christian Realism's most prominent exponents. Ramsey sought to introduce the just-war theory to Protestants in the modern era and rejected the notion that it obsolete. Ramsey adopts a Christian realism paradigm, influenced by the just war tradition, in his approach to argue for government intervention in the Vietnam War.[235] Christian realism, for Paul Ramsey simply "means that there is no man, and certainly no collectivity, in which Cain exists no longer"; and one in which Abel has not been fully extinguished.[236] In other words, there exists no individual nor community in which both *sin* and the possibility for *charity* are not operative.

Sin is what Ramsey considers to be the *negative* aspect of Christian realism. Unlike Luther, Ramsey does not see the role of government as a remedy for and constraint of sin.[237] Instead, it is the *arbitrariness* of collectives, our inability to predict when collectives will behave sinfully, that makes the institutions vital. He claims that "structures serve to protect against the unpredictabilities of other collectives, not especially or not against their evilness (against Cain)[238]. The sinner/saint contradiction of human existence make flippant judgments of 'immorality' both irresponsible and presumptuous[239], given the task that governments and citizens play in the exercise of "political

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[235] Paul Ramsey, "Is Vietnam a Just War?" in *The Just War: Force and Political Responsibility* (New York: Charles Scriber's Sons, 1968), 497-512,. Ramsey believes this perspective to be a perspective sorely left out of discussions on Vietnam. For Ramsey it "is Christian realism or any other realistic theory of statecraft that has been most lacking in our discussions of Vietnam."[235]

[236] Ramsey, *The Just War,* 498.

[237] Luther writes that the "sword is a great benefit and necessary to the world, to preserve peace, to punish sin and to prevent evil, he submits willingly to the rule of the sword, pays tax, honors those in authority, serves, helps, and does all he can to further the government, that it may be sustained and held in honor and fear." [Martin Luther, *Selection From His Writings* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1961.), 371)]

[238] Ramsey, *The Just War,* 498.

[239] Ramsey refers to these judgments as utopian.

prudence" on a case-by-case basis. In the case of guerilla warfare, discrimination between combatants and noncombatants is close to impossible and US troops cannot be held solely responsible for unintentionally killing noncombatants. For the "onus of the wickedness of placing multitudes of peasants within range cannot be shifted from insurgency to counter-insurgency, any more than it could be called an indiscriminate act of war on the part of some enemy if in the future Omaha, Neb., or Colorado Springs, Colo., are tragically destroyed in the course of destroying the bases and command posts *we* located there."[240] These tragic outcomes are morally necessary. And they are the only ones we must expect on this side of the eschaton.

However, there is a *positive* aspect to the sinner/saint paradox of our existence. Indeed, "the darkness does not envelop that light. Neither does the light diminish, it rather throws, the shadows." And it is this positive side, the possibility for human charity, which is the thrust of Ramsey's concern: if no one will help the vulnerable, then *who* will? Ramsey argued there was a moral obligation to help the South Vietnamese. For "the Vietcong murdered 6,130 and abducted 6,213 persons, or a total of over 12,000.[241] To ignore the plight of the Vietnamese is to not act in charity. One has a duty to intervene. To not act is, essentially, to pass alongside of the road as the priest and Levite did in the parable of the Good Samaritan. Charity, however, demands that we see those who are suffering and act on their behalf, as the Samaritan did. It is one's duty. For would "it not then be a work of charity to resort to the only available and effective means of preventing or punishing the attack and resisting the injustice?"[242]

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[240] Ramsey, *The Just War,* 508-509.

[241] Ramsey, *The Just War,* 507.

[242] Ramsey, *The Just War,* 501.

Anxieties in Blaxican Liberation Theology: On Necessity and Grace

Ramsey, Niebuhr, and Luther emphasize the sinfulness of humanity that justifies state violence on this side of the eschaton. For Luther, the state is necessary to hold back the violent tendencies of human beings. For Niebuhr, state violence is a consequence of and remedy for humanity's sinfulness. In Ramsey, we see two aspects at work in his assessment – the negative and the positive, or sin and charity, respectively. Their theological anthropologies (i.e., the sinfulness of humans) entail the political arrangements that are necessary to manage the violent tendencies of humanity. My aim is not to dispute that sin leaves a discernible trace in human existence. I believe it is, and thinkers of various disciplines and vocations can name them however they'd like (e.g., egoism; self-preservation). However, naming sin is quite different from describing the political entailments of sin that require its management and it is precisely on this matter where Blaxican theology parts ways with traditional Protestant political theologies. *Does* our humanity entail a strong state to keep us in order (Luther)? *Is* it really unrealistic for the Church to be pacifist (Niebuhr)? *Does* the injustice in Vietnam entail U.S. intervention as an act of charity (Ramsey)? Is recourse to war *really* the only outcome we have as a consequence of sin? Are negotiations and other diplomatic efforts no longer viable options, thanks to *sin?* As we are seeing today with the genocide against the Palestinian people in Gaza, these categories do ideological work, namely, to make us believe that state violence is the necessary or *realistic* consequences of and demands to sin and charity.

Luther, Niebuhr and Ramsey may be right in their diagnosis of humanity, but their solutions (state violence) must not be interpreted as an inevitable consequence of the sinful world we live in. In other words, Blaxican theology takes exception to the aspect of *necessity* in their arguments. Especially when one considers the disproportionate state violence Blacks, Mexicans

and people of color across the globe, it becomes more difficult to treat state violence as necessary by virtue of our contradictory existence. If we insist on maintaining that possibility, decision, and judgment are not extinguished in political leaders as well as those they govern, we can hold them accountable and maintain that what they said was *necessary* was always what was merely chosen and justified by powerful human creatures.

Lastly, if in the theologies of Luther, Niebuhr, and Ramsey, state violence is the necessary agent of managing (not eradicating) sin, Blaxican theology emphasizes the grace of God to make new institutions possible. The grace of God makes possible the impossible. Although Christian realists may claim such an ideal is foolish, Blaxican theology claims with Paul that "the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength (1 Cor. 1.25)." Any creaturely institution that is rendered permanent and sufficient to mete out justice and goodness is in danger of having become an idol.

The theological justifications of state violence pose problems for theodicy, generally, and affirming the omnibenevolence of God, specifically. The Christian theistic notion of God affirms God's (a) omnipotence, (b) omnibenevolence, and (c) omniscience, or God's sovereign power, goodness and knowledge, respectively. The problem for theodicy then is explaining God's allowance of evil and suffering when God is all-good, all-powerful, and all-knowing. It is important to emphasize here that theodicy is not concerned with the *origin* of evil and suffering, but why it persists – and specifically, why God *allows* it to. Theodicies then, are attempts to reconcile this dilemma without compromising the omnibenevolence, omnipotence, or omniscience of God. This is not a simple task, as providing satisfactory theodicies without calling into question one of the three theistic attributes has troubled theologians for centuries. If God is all powerful, then God would be *able* to get rid of evil and suffering (unless God was evil and didn't *want to* or

God was incompetent and didn’t know how). If God was all good, then God would *want* to get rid of evil (unless God was incompetent or impotent). If God was all knowing God would know *how* to get rid of evil (unless God was evil or impotent).

If state violence hinges on the belief that the state is what God has ordained on this ‘not yet’ existence of history, then it casts the disproportionate victims of state violence (mainly poor and oppressed people) on the sacrificial alter. William R. Jones’ brought the problem of theodicy into sharp relief with his penetrating critique of James H. Cone and theologians who claimed that God stands with the oppressed. Jones argued God has not shown any interest in liberating Black people past or present, so liberation theologians who affirm God's *eschatological* vindication have no grounds to affirm God's action in history to Black people.

For Jones, God is the sum of God’s acts and God’s disposition can easily be interpreted as indifferent at best or malevolent at worst when one appeals to God’s acts in history. If one appeals to God's eschatological vindication of suffering, then (Jones argues) this leads to question-begging, given the 'multievidentiality' of God’s silence. For Jones, one can claim God’s silence can appeal to God's 1.) divine disfavor, 2.) God's divine favor, or 3.) some suffering-servant model that vindicates this wrongful type of suffering. Jones is agnostic on the proper theodicy, but he’s cautious of too-quick appeals to God’s allowance of evil. I share Jones’ concern about ready-made appeals to suffering, and it is especially prudent to do so in racialized America. Above all, Jones is concerned about the theological implications of maldistributed suffering. If suffering is a necessary aspect of human (and Christian) existence, then why does God allow that suffering the

be racially mediated? Furthermore, if God's remedy of said suffering is to inflict further racially mediated harm, then it is fair to conclude that God is a white racist. [243]

Cone's response to Jones is that suffering is not a theoretical issue to be articulated within a coherent system. Suffering is a real, existential problem. Therefore, the reality of evil summons an urgency to act and resist, not speculate. The cross and resurrection, for Cone, are *responses* to evil; not philosophical musings on its origin and allowance. He states suggests that the "classical theological tradition" and articulations by Euro-American theologians has

> …contributed to a political conservatism that locates the resolution of the problem of suffering either in the logical structure of the rational mind or in the interior depths of the human heart, and thereby negates the praxis of freedom against the structures of injustice and oppression.[244]

In other words, Cone is saying that when one structures the problem of evil as a rational one to be figured out, they are already creating a scenario in which their conclusions will be rational, not practical. By contrast, he argues, the black religious tradition draws upon an active hope that God will set things right. This active hope believes in a God who acts within history as they did with the Exodus and Daniel. Of course, this hopeful expectation was complicated over time and as the eschatological horizon seemed to shift further and further into the future and blacks moved from slavery to Jim Crow. Nevertheless, that hope was always one that demanded a response. In short, Cone suggests that the co-called "problem of evil" should beckon us to resist evil with the expectation that God will be enacting liberation through us.

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[243] For more on this see William R. Jones, *Is God a White Racist?: A Preamble to Black Theology* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1998).

[244] James Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1975), 163.

This notion of theodicy is inherited by Blaxican theology, as we've come to see our faith as a verb and a way of life and less as a set of propositional beliefs that one must ascent to. In other words, Blaxican theology is concerned with *orthopraxy* over *orthodoxy.* This is arguably the most crucial distinction between Reformed Protestant thought and Blaxican theology. Our beliefs have emotional and habitual attachments. When the writer of the Book of James writes that, "faith without works is dead." (James 2), he is arguing that our beliefs have actions attached to them. The Beloved Disciple John says the same thing: "Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen." (1 John 4.20) The Christian gospel repeatedly insists that what we believe will be shown by what we do. Our beliefs have habits attached to them. If we believe that suffering and evil are pervasive forces in the world that demand a response to them, then we will be inclined to resist them wherever they rear their ugly head. This is precisely where Blaxican theology extends itself beyond the realm of Black and Mexican communities.

Just as neither Black nor Mexican theology is an insular discourse, exclusively concerned with civil rights or strictly Mexican matters, neither is Blaxican theology a naval-gazing discipline. As a theologian steeped in the rich moral theological traditions of Black and Mexican Christianity, we must always be willing to share the disturbing truth about anyone's death-dealing campaign against a trapped population of women and children.

This admonition is especially so for anyone who stands in the liberation theological tradition and comes from a background of colonized, enslaved, and oppressed people. At the heart of *A Blaxican Theology* is an urgency to give theological expression to the history of race as it emerges in the present. By exploring Black and Mexican histories of racialization, how theologians

have responded to such histories, we are able to identify how racialization emerges in various (international) contexts as well.

The Current Moment: Blaxican Theology and Palestine

When I began writing this dissertation, I had no idea that I would be completing it during an ongoing genocide against the Palestinian people. Of course, I had known about Israel's crimes against the Palestinians for decades. I have visited the "Holy Land" four times in the last decade. During my last visit (in 2022), I was invited to speak on the connections between Black and Palestinian theologies at the Christ at the Checkpoint Conference in Bethlehem. In Bethlehem, the apartheid wall cuts Jerusalemites off from Palestinians in the West Bank, so I could see it clearly in the morning when I would wake up and when I went out at night. It was a reminder of protestors in Chicago shouting "From Palestine to Mexico—All Walls Have Got to Go!," especially in the wake of Donald Trump's insistence that the United States build a wall to keep Mexicans out. Palestinians have been telling the world for 75 years about various forms of violence visited upon them: ethnic cleansing (i.e., the 1948 *Nakba)*, occupation, apartheid, and a cruel blockade on the Gaza strip. Moreover, Palestinians been calling for an end to home demolitions, the bombing of hospitals, settler violence (backed by the IDF), the killing of journalists, the harassment of elders, home raids, and the quotidian humiliations they experience on a day-to-day basis.

As I write, the state of Israel has killed over 40,000 Palestinians in eight months. This figure does not include the 10,000 people who are still missing. Many of these missing might still be trapped under the rubble; others may have been buried alive or killed without due process, as some reports by emergency workers and experts are discovering mass graves. More than 15,000 of these casualties have been children and more than 80,000 have been injured. Israel has bombed hospitals,

churches, and universities, and nonprofit human rights organizations. They've targeted aid workers, journalists, religious leaders, women, children, the disabled, and the elderly.

The Many Blaxican Connections

Genocide

Black theologies have never been exclusively for Black people. Recall that James Cone claimed in *Black Theology and Black Power* that "genocide is the logical conclusion of racism. It happened to the American Indians, and there is ample reason to believe that America is prepared to do the same for blacks." In *Sisters in the Wilderness,* womanist Delores Williams also spoke of genocide, arguing that "black people are charging that white power structures in America are, and have been through the ages, committing genocide upon black people and their communities" (116). Revisiting the petition that William L. Patterson and Paul Robeson presented to the United Nations in 1951, Williams argued that all five conditions of genocide as outlined by the Geneva Convention had been met (117). Indeed, "black people have experienced genocide during every phase of their history in America" (118). Dwight N. Hopkins also dates the beginning of Black theology with the emergence of the international slave trade in the west arguing that, "1441 [is] the beginning of, perhaps, the largest displacement, forced migration, and genocide in human history – the European slave trade in Africa."[245] Black theology has always denounced genocide.

The modern context to Mexican theology was also genocide. The colonization of the New World was one of the most complete, transformative horrors in human history. The harrowing *Short Account of the Destruction of the Indians* by Bartolomé de Las Casas is one such account of

[245] Dwight N. Hopkins, "General Introduction," in *The Cambridge Companion to Black Theology,* ed. Dwight N. Hopkins (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012) 3-4.

the horror, chronicling the genocide of indigenous tribes and nations by the Spanish in places such as Hispaniola, its five kingdoms, Puerto Rico, Jamaica, and Cuba. This American holocaust reached modern-day Mexico as well. After the renegade explorer, Hernan Cortes, conquered the Mexica-Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan in 1521, the indigenous population suffered from successive new pathogens (which they had no immunity to) and forced labor arrangements that projected them towards extinction. Anthropologist Claudio Lomnitz claims that "there is no European parallel to Mexico's demographic crisis of the sixteenth century: the combination of violence, new modes of labor organization (including enslavement), resettlement, forced migrations, and devastating contagion makes even the Black Plague of the fourteenth century seem inconsequential in comparison."[246]

Francisco Pizzaro learned from Cortes' techniques of terror and conquest and applied them to his conquest of the Incas. Just as Cortes had kidnapped Moctezuma and kept him hostage to rule his Aztec subjects, Pizzaro kidnapped Atawallpa while European-borne microbes extinguished the Andean populations who had no immunity to said viruses. Anthropologist Alan Kolata writes that "[a]s early as the late 1530s, entire regions of the desert coast and highlands were virtually depopulated" and that by "the mid sixteenth century, the native population had declined by 25-90 percent, depending on the location and degree of isolation from European contact."[247] As indigenous labor atrophied in the Americas, African reserves supplied the Christian conquistadors with the necessary labor to transform the land into a monocrop economy to meet the demands of the Spanish motherland. Cedric Robinson claims that by "1570, Mexico contained over 20,000 Africans; by 1650, their numbers were believed to be closer to 35,000-by then, what amounted to

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[246] Claudio Lomnitz, *Death and the Idea of Mexico*, (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Zone Books, 2005), 69.

[247] Alan Kolata, *Ancient Inca* (New York, N.Y.: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 263.

a supplement to the more than 100,000 Afromestizoes of Black-Indian parentage."[248] The genocide of indigenous people in the Americas was immediately connected to the enslavement of indigenous people from the African continent.

Blaxican theology transgresses the carefully bordered divisions among these respective histories. This does not mean the respective legacies of slavery and dispossession should not be respected in their uniqueness. Instead, it treats the separability of their distinct legacies as deliberately and politically constructed. Historian Lisa Lowe has called into question the arbitrary separation between *Indigenous, African and Asian* studies, claiming that genocide, slavery, and indentured labor, were part of a single attempt of colonial management. After the indigenous labor of North America atrophied by the cruelty of microbes and new work arrangements, African reserves came in as a response. When the slave trade was abolished, new forms of labor were needed to build for Europe's settler colonies and Chinese coolies filled the gap for labor that the indigenous American and African once provided. For Lowe, the 'intimacies' of these four continents – Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Americas – were integral to and foundational of the European liberal stories of progress and their material gain. Moreover, indigenous and African peoples started maroons together, resisted together, and built futures together. Blaxican theology emphasizes the possibilities of unity, intimacy, and international resistance for freedom. Blaxican theology is an *internationalist* theology, that recognizes that while our freedom struggles may not be identical, they are all connected.

Theological Harm

[248] Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (University of North Carolina Press), 128.

The colonization and genocide of the Americas was spawned and justified by theological reasoning. In Chapter 3, we also noted how the Bible was used against Black people. Black people were believed to descend from the line of Ham and were thus destined to perpetual servitude. As a result, Black theologians later interpreted the Exodus narrative as the paradigm of their own liberation. Palestinians, indigenous people of the Americas, and African descendants share a tragic familiarity with what Palestinian liberation theologian, Mitri Raheb, refers to as "imperial theology," or "the violation of human rights… set within an ideological and theological framework."[249] Raheb maintains that empires demand religious justification for the violence they inflict upon their subjects. His impulse is similar to Cone's, who connects the theologies of the "state church of Germany during the Third Reich" with "the white church in America." Whether it is European racist theology or Christian Zionism, exposing and subverting the accompanying logics (read: theologies) of dominating forces are within the intersecting interests for Blaxican and Palestinian Christians. In any case, a Blaxican theology must remain critical of its sources and norms for constructing its vision to reach a holistic liberation.

This is important since the exodus narrative has been used as a weapon against Palestinians. The Palestinian liberation theologian, Naim Ateek, notes that within the exodus narrative Palestinians are often placed within the center of Christian Zionist mythology[250], the belief that

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[249] Mitri Raheb, *Faith in the Face of Empire: The Bible Through Palesitnian Eyes* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2014), 64-66.

[250] Naim Ateek writes, "The events of the biblical Exodus from Egypt, read in light of an uncritically primitive concept of God, have been transposed by many Jewish religious Zionists and Christian fundamentalists into the twentieth century. This is theologically unacceptable from a Christian point of view. For the Jews who came to establish the State of Israel, their journey to Palestine was an exodus from the different nations where they had been living and a return to the promised land. Obviously, for them the imagery has connected the ancient past and the present. This uncritical transposition, however, makes the Palestinians appear to represent the old Canaanites who were in the land at the time and who *at God's command* needed to be dispossessed." Naim Stifan Ateek, *Justice, and Only Justice: A Palestinian Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1989), 86-87.

God has a special relationship with the ethnic descendants of Abraham, whom are divine heirs of the land through covenant.[251] He claims that:

> The Exodus and the conquest of Canaan are, in the minds of many people, a unified and inseparable theme. For to need an exodus, one must have a promised land. To choose the motif of conquest of the promised land is to invite the need for the oppression, assimilation, control, or dispossession of the indigenous population. That is why it is difficult, in a Palestinian theology of liberation, to find the whole of the Exodus event meaningful.[252]

Of course, Black theologians have had a long discussion about the elements that emerge within the exodus narrative, including ethnic cleansing and genocide. The point here is not to litigate a case against the Exodus narrative, but to emphasize the histories of theological violence done to Blaxican descendants that could be of use to the current moment in Palestine. Racial difference is born through an erasure of another's past and an attempt to recreate it through theological justifications.

This was the case with Palestine and people of African descent, but it was also the case with Mexico. The colonization of the New World was a missionary endeavor. In Mexico, the success or failure of the mission relied on knowing the spiritual terrain, how the devil had deceived the Mexica and how to effectively translate the gospel within the already-existent religious rubrics. However, translation within New Spain ultimately amounted to deicide and epistemicide. The religious zeal of the Spaniards refused to determine how the animism of the Mexica-Aztec could be legible within the Creator/creature distinction embedded within Christian theology. For the Mexica, the universe was imbued with a vitalizing force known as *teotl.* Teotl is an ephemeral substance that generates, passes away, and regenerates. *Teotl* persists in *process*: permeating,

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[251] See: Gen 12:1-3, 13:14-17, 15:18-21, 17:7-9

[252] Naim Stifan Ateek, *Justice, and Only Justice: A Palestinian Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1989), 87.

encompassing and shaping the universe in an endless cycle of generation and regeneration. *Teotl* generated those aspects which Western ontological concepts render inanimate – namely, the heavens, earth, rain, etc.

Teotl's essential attributes are process, movement, becoming, transmutation and is best understood as ever-flowing and ever-changing energy in motion rather than as a discrete, static entity. Central to the Mexica-Aztec understanding of life was the notion of the evanescent—the recognition of life as fleeting and transient. Yet, it is important to emphasize that life was understood in dialectical tension with death; that duality and endless opposition of independent polarities are somehow also reliant on one another. Polarity, duality, and the alternating positions of domination between the two poles reach to the core of Aztec metaphysics and help to explain the ephemerality of the world humans live in. For the Aztecs, death and life were constantly in flux, as were other dualities such as being/non-being, order/chaos, light/darkness, masculine/feminine, wetness/hotness, action/passivity. Life receded into death, which eventually returned to life.[253] The ephemerality of *teotl* infuses nature with its own never-ending

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[253] Consider a sixteenth century Mexica song, that is cited in Inga Clendinnen, *Aztecs: an Interpretation*. Canto Classics Edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 302.

With flowers you write,

Giver of Life.

With songs you give color,

With songs you shade

Those who live here on earth.

Later you will erase eagles and tigers.

We exist only in your book

While we are here on earth.

metamorphosis, and it helps explain the Aztecs' relationship to their own ephemerality and contradiction. Life contains the seed of death, and life emerges from where the dead are buried. Death and life swallow one another in an endless cycle of competition. Therefore, the poet does not say 'earth is not our home' nor 'heaven is our home.' Rather, residence (and all being) is always short-lived, changing and in process. The Mexica's sense of the evanescent was also layered by a significant degree of vulnerability. As animists, the Mexica believed that the sacred was everywhere, and that the strong distinction between the ordinary and the spiritual was not a distinction that would keep the spiritual from expressing itself in the quotidian affairs of humans. [254]

The vitality of teotl concerned the Spanish who believed that the Mexica "exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator." (Romans 1.25) One of the earliest accounts of the Nahua people's religious animism is filtered through the prejudicial lens of the Franciscan Friar, Bernadino de Sahagún's *Florentine Codex.* Bernadino's spiritual anxieties attending to Nahua religion emphasized their collapsing of the sacred and 'inanimate.' "[T]he wood is good; it is required," Bernadino emphasizes. Nevertheless, he maintains, "it is God's creation. Many things are made of it: of it are made the houses in which we live, and of it are made the boats with which there is the gaining of a livelihood. For these reasons the wood of which is made what we required, what we gain our livelihoods with, is greatly to be valued."[255]

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[254]For a deeper explication of the sacred in Mexica-Aztec thought, I recommend Inga Clendinnen, *Aztecs: an Interpretation*. Canto Classics Edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

[255] Bernadino de Sahagun, *Florentine Codex: Book 1: The Gods,* 2nd edition (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press), 55-56.

For Bernadino, the natural environment's value rested in its twofold ability: (1) to serve the livelihood of human beings, to fulfill what Karl Marx would later call a commodity's 'use-value'[256] and (2) direct one's attention to the Creator God. Aztec animism, in the Spanish's estimation, "exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles." (c.f., Romans 1.23) One of the missiological aims of the New World was to excise aspects of indigenous metaphysics that could circumvent knowledge of the true God through the created order. Theology in New Spain served as a discursive disciplinary system that trained one's relationships to the (super)natural environment and one another. As far as Fray Bernadino was concerned:

> The people here on earth who know not God are not counted as human; they are only vain, worthless. For if men in their hearts, in their understanding, knew God's creations, from them they would have derived, they would have grasped, their knowledge of God. Because they esteem and know creatures they should have known that He existeth, that He is the Creator, the Creator of man – God, Who is not seen. [257]

A Commitment to Abolition

Since its inception, Black and Mexican theology has been concerned with the struggle and liberation of human beings. Like all theological categories (e.g., election, sovereignty, grace), much will depend on how the theologian either defines or assumes the meaning of the term "liberation." In a Blaxican theology, we recognize liberation and abolition as interchangeable categories. To achieve full liberation is to aim to abolish (evaluative, political, social, theological) systems which enact violence on others to maintain a hierarchy of being among persons. As we

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[256] For a direct reference to Marx's analysis of the commodities multiple forms, I recommend Karl Marx and Samuel Moore, *Capital: A Critical Analysis of Capitalist Production*, trans. Edward Aveling (Wordswith Editions Limited: Hertfordshire, England, 2013). I especially commend Volume 1 of Book 1 of Marx's *Capital.*

[257] Bernadino de Sahagun, *Florentine Codex: Book 1: The Gods,* 2nd edition (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press), 56.

discussed in Chapter 3, abolition is not simply a process of *negation,* but *creation.* That is, abolition is an act of the imagination as well. If we are have faith enough to believe that a new world is not only possible, but necessary, then the grace of God can carry us to create the worlds we imagine for ourselves.

Abolition is a dialectical process. By dialectic, I mean that abolition not simply thesis-proposing, but internally suspicious of the ideas proposed. If we believe that we can create worlds that do not rely on state and racial violence as a form of "justice," then we can imagine new possibilities for more just orders. But those ideas must be merely 'ideas,' not idols. From a theological point of view, abolitionism is a form of iconoclasm that destroys the idols we've become far too attached to: prisons, police, borders, and other carceral logics. The abolitionist process of process of negation and creation is ongoing because the moment one claims, 'we need to negate X and create Y,' we turn away and say 'ah, that won't work' and try again. Abolition is test-driven. It is the constant striving towards freedom and the recognition that freedom itself is a process, rather than a destination, within history. Everything abolitionist proposition must also be subject to opposition.

Conclusion:

Blaxican Theology is a theology of abolition. It draws on important Black and Mexican histories and Protestant theology to think through a world of abolition and solidarity. Its theological commitments are not meant towards the benefit of or construction towards a "Blaxican church," but towards the liberation of humanity. Christian theology recognizes the salience of 'liberation' as a theological category. In Blaxican theology, Christian grammar is not dispensed with but the emphasis on abolition provides more texture and clarity to the ambivalence of the term. As

meaning-makers within the world that God has soaked with meaning, we are able to use the gift towards the construction of discursive worlds where we might make life for our fellow human being a bit more free.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this dissertation, I argued that theology has the power to abolish racial meanings by reinterpreting racial categories with divine meaning, similar to how James Cone and Virgilio Elizondo have done. This, I argued reflects the divine redemptive power of meaning-making to represent ourselves authentically to one another. However, if those these meanings instantiate new hierarchies, they will be rejected. To that end, I explored the religious meaning of *mestizaje, Blackness,* and meaning-making itself.

In Chapter 2, I identified how *mestizaje* erased the precious histories of Black and indigenous people. Through a meticulous reading of José Vasconcelos' *La Raza Cósmica,* I showed how visions of *mestizaje* interpreted Blackness and indigeneity as something that would be overcome, that would be rendered obsolete over time. The Spanish, as the chosen ones, were given a divine mission to spread their ancestry throughout the world to complete this mission. I followed with an analysis of Gloria Anzaldua's concept of the *new mestiza,* and how it theorized a self who is a multiplicity of selves. I argued that this phenomenological aspect of hybrid identity is meaningful to Blaxicans, but the category of *mestizaje* itself is still too strongly connected with anti-Blackness that it cannot authentically represent Blaxican life. Both Anzaldua and Elizondo recognize the multiplicity of identities we each carry in our bodies, and the homelessness that arises when many of us are policed by those who judge whether we are *authentically* one or the other. This is the case for many Blaxicans like myself. We are policed by those who render us *not Black enough* or *not Mexican enough. Mestizaje* itself makes being a Black Mexican an oxymoron—if Mexicans are mixed, but *mestizaje* doesn't recognize our Blackness, then how can we be truly Mexican while at the same time being Black? I argue that "Blaxican" itself functions as its own sufficient category of hybridity and argued for a theology of solidarity that can emerge

from thinking through the relationship between Black and Mexican people on both sides of the USA/Mexico border.

In Chapter 3, I turned to another aspect of Blaxican identity to wrestle with this notion of authenticity: Blackness. I showed how Blackness emerged as a theological category synonymous with powerlessness and servitude. This can be gleaned in the curse of Ham, and its legacies exist to this very day. By the 1960s, I demonstrated how Black theologians reinterpreted Blackness as a marker of freedom and power. This can be gleaned most poignantly through a cursory glance at Cone's landmark text, *Black Theology and Black Power* where Cone defines the meaning of the gospel as liberation. These two understandings of Blackness still exist today and can be gleaned by how systems of state violence operate with the basic assumption that Black people are deserving of lives of powerlessness and unfreedom (i.e., prison). They can also be gleaned by the emerging crescendo of Black activists calling for the abolition of anti-Black and oppressive systems.

In the chapter that followed, I demonstrated how the capacity for meaning-making is a divine gift. By appealing to a novel reading of the Book of Genesis, I argued that Blaxican theology recognizes the human capacity for creating discursive worlds of freedom or unfreedom. God created the world through speech, endowed Adam and Eve with this particular gift, and its potential has been tainted by human interest. I made a theological case that the gift of meaning-making is bestowed by the Creator towards the human as a creative capacity. This aspect of meaning-making gives us the opportunity to authentically represent ourselves and others to the world.

In the last chapter, I attempted to demonstrate how the gift of authentic meaning-making can be done through the creation of a discursive world with Protestant theological sources. Furthermore, I argued that Blaxican theology's insights can extend beyond the parochial space of

Blacks, Mexicans, or those who identify as Blaxicans. Tying together the chapters before towards a construction of *A Blaxican Theology of Abolition,* I provided a case study of how one can go about creating authentic discursive worlds. And by extending it far past the community of Blaxicans, I attempted to demonstrate its relevance to our current historical moment: the genocide of the Palestinians in Gaza.

Future Projects

In addition to my current project, I would like to conclude by identifying a driving question behind *A Blaxican Theology* that will shape my future research projects, namely:

How do we create sacred spaces for ourselves that are otherwise unseen?

My previous work on the Miles Morales Spider-Man in the *Theology and Pop Culture* series put out by Fortress Academic and Lexington Books addresses this question. Miles, an Afro-Latino, whose narrative arch is substantially different from his predecessor, Peter Parker, learns how to be his own unique Spider-Man. I argue that he does so in a way that is reminiscent of Cone's own emergence as a Black theologian. Miles became his own *authentic* self when he integrated his own Blackness into his Spider-Man character.

My next book, tentatively titled *Theology and Black Radical Thought,* also addresses this question by bringing together my scholarship in racial capitalism with Black theology. My argument draws on the political theorist, Cedric Robinson and black theologian, Gayraud S. Wilmore's conception of the "Black radical tradition" to argue that the impetus in political theologies of antislavery in the Atlantic World were the imaginings of unseen free worlds that can be gleaned in the writings of Black radical theologians, David Walker and Henry Highland Garnet.

My work in the future will continue to engage the theme of liberation, the multiplicity of systems at work to create unjust worlds, and the grace that God provides us to resist those imaginings. I've attempted to explore their histories, but I have also tried to demonstrate how these systems are more than simply *racial* (as some wrongly suggest Black theologies exclusively emphasize) or *capitalist* (as many wronlgy suggest only Latin American theologies care about). The hybridization of Blaxican people is reflected in the hybridized method of Blaxican theology: a theology that emphasizes the abolition of *all* systems of oppression. This leads to another book project in the future, tentatively titled *An Abolitionist Theology,* where I unpack the theme of abolition in further detail. In that work, I will outline more clearly a methodology that moves past the 'class first' or 'race first' arguments that have divided the methodological approaches of Latin American and Black liberation theologians.

My future work will necessarily seek to take both axes seriously and attempt to define the relationship between the two. It will also need to explore other forms of domination (including patriarchy, homophobia, ableism, etc.) and do so without asking Marxists for permission to wed religious claims to radical analysis. Indeed, the idea that radical critique *must* go through Europe obfuscates the unique radical critiques that emerge out of Black and Latin American theologies themselves.

This dissertation and my future work is borne from a love and commitment towards the people and the world that God loves. The Apostle Paul reminds us that the church is like a body, where each member of it is indispensable. Blacks, Mexicans, and Blaxicans (Afro-Mexicans) have an opportunity to live in the grace that God has given us; to give witness to solidarity, to see one another's freedom as constitutive of our own. Coronavirus reminded us in the most sobering and

terrifying way that we are only as healthy as our neighbor. We are not self-sufficient. We need to rely on the grace of God and begin to cooperate with one another.

The practice of solidarity and reconciliation is not a pipe dream for those who trust in the miraculous work of God. Those with eyes to see can peak through the windows of eternity and catch glimpses of God's work in Black people standing up against the caging of children, or of Mexicans standing in solidarity with Black people against police violence; of Black American and Mexican-Americans looking one another in the eye and relying on their own unique histories to combat the genocide in Gaza and provide for comfort, solace and companionship to one another. It is visible in the work of Bethlehem Bible College, the Evangelical Lutheran Christmas Church, the Samuel Dewitt Proctor Conference, and the Poor People's Campaign. Martin Luther King, Jr. famously wrote that "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly." I believe that the single garment of destiny that weds Blaxican people with the world is a vision for a world where all of God's children can finally be free to laugh together, to walk together hand-in-hand, to bear each other's burdens, and to sing with one voice and in one's own language:

Jesus loves the little children,
All the children of the world
Red, brown, yellow
Black and white
They are precious in His sight
Jesus loves the little children
Of the world

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