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RENDING THE VEIL: BLACKNESS AS DIGNITY CONSTRUCTED THROUGH THE WORKS OF FREDERICK DOUGLASS AND W. E. B. DU BOIS

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FOSTER JAMES PINKNEY

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Introduction

"And the sun was darkened, and the veil of the temple was rent in the midst. And when Jesus had cried with a loud voice, he said, Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit: and having said thus, he gave up the ghost. (Luke 23:45-46, KJV)."

"...I am standing puzzled, unable to decide whether the veil is really being lifted, or lowered more firmly in place; whether I am witnessing a revelation or a more efficient blinding."[1]

My mother noticed the police car following us almost immediately. It was a dark night with few cars on Agler Road in Columbus, Ohio. This was a ten-minute drive that I knew as well as I knew anything when I was that age. Ten minutes from my poor neighborhood of Mifflin to the public library in the better-off section of town called Gahanna. I spent hours in that library growing up–their chess section was sub-par, but they always had the latest science fiction and fantasy. The Gahanna library also had a deep and well curated mystery section for my mom to consume. My mother would read a book a day, always starting at the end to see if the reveal was worth reading the beginning of the book. If a mystery was compelling enough, she would finish the book then turn back to the first page to read it all over again.

On this particular night, the lights on top of the car began to strobe on the bridge across Big Walnut Creek. Big Walnut Creek is an arm of the Scioto River. The Scioto River flows southeast until it connects with the Ohio River which defines the southern border of the state of Ohio. Mark Twain and Abraham Lincoln, at various points, navigated up the Ohio River then up through the Scioto to reach Columbus. Slaves used to refer to the Ohio River as the Nile as it held emancipatory potential as they crossed over into Cincinnati. All of these thoughts crashed

[1] Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1995), 36.

through my mind as I was taken from the car and frisked. I could see my mother out of the corner of my eye bent over the hood of the car. They took her cane and propped it against the rear-view mirror. I was thirteen and terrified. But I could see the fear in my mother's body as she began to shake violently, as she walked slowly on her locked arthritic knees to the back of the police car where I would soon join her.

The officers thoroughly searched the grey station wagon. Even checking my eldest sister's wheelchair in the back for paraphernalia. They soon came and back to their car and sat in the front seat, filling out paperwork and talking quietly to each other. My mother was given a citation for a cracked taillight.

We sat silently in the car on the bridge as the police pulled off. Then my mom began to sob from the terror and stress held in her body. I remember all of my mother's copies of Watchtower and Awake! scattered at our feet after the officers had upended her meeting bag. I remember my seething anger and shaking hands as I witnessed the helplessness of someone I loved.

I had already been given The Talk. Keep your hands visible. Say, "Yes sir," and "No sir." Keep your eyes downcast and do not make any sudden moves. Just survive the stop, whatever trouble comes can be handled as long as you are alive. Black children are given this talk as a rite of passage. As soon as a boy is tall enough to present a threat and as soon as a girl is self-possessed enough to protest their treatment, they are taken aside and told the stakes of a stop. That in the face of arbitrary authority, supplication and obedience are the best strategies to live to the next day. Make them feel safe. Make them feel in control. Make them feel powerful so that your life is not forfeit to their panic.

To be Black is still to be a problem. When we were pulled over, I only vaguely recalled the events in Los Angeles in 1992. That was the first time I was given The Talk. But that talk never included my mother's gulping tears or the humiliation I would feel as I scraped and remained silent before white supremacy. The problem of Black existence, to always consider the way your body is held in space and the threat that such a black body may pose, is a proprioceptive reality which works to call you out of your self into a veiled existence. You become a single Black person on both shores of the Ohio River; viewing oneself as both existing as freed and just another Black man trod under the heels of a life-taking power.

The Problem

The Negro Problem, as investigated by Frederick Douglass and W. E. B. Du Bois, has two distinct, yet connected, valences: the first problem is to uncover the Black self from the dehumanizing lens of enslavement and the second is recreating self-hood, the emergent idea of blackness, through the prism of racialized hatred, humiliation, and dehumanization. In this dissertation I apply hermeneutical philosophy and Black theology to compare and contrast the thought of Douglass and Du Bois concerning the theme of the dignity of Black lives and, subsequently, of all human persons. Yet I also contend, as a project in Black Theological Ethics, that the uncovering of the Black self and the creative conceptualizing of blackness hold radical possibilities for our moral conception of the human person. These possibilities center on the ethical duties owed to every person and to structures of liberation both within the self and within society.

I use the term "dignity" to signify the constellation of duties, rights, and autonomy owed to persons, but also as a term of attestation to one’s humanity and as a state of being which must

be realized both individually and communally. In a sense, dignity is both something a person has and is something which must be attained through the exercise of one's humanity toward others. As pointed out by George Kateb:

> If we want to think about human dignity we should not remain content with a definition of the term or a short account that fails to acknowledge the idea's difficulty. The idea is difficult, even though it is rather casually used in many kinds of ceremonial or more substantial public speech, especially when such speech involves praising human rights.[2]

For Kateb, dignity is a status which is endowed to humanity as "the greatest type of beings...and that every member deserves to be treated in a manner consonant with the high worth of the species."[3] Humanity is seen as distinct and unique in the order of being and "Since nature has no telos, the human species is at its greatest when it breaks out of nature."[4] The telos of humanity is simply living into its status in personal and communal achievement. There is also a Kantian slant to Kateb's reasoning as it is distinctly undignified to treat other humans as property: "When, as in the *Dred Scott* decision, there is no distinction between a person of the black race and a piece of property, human dignity is completely effaced, just as it is when categories of human being are treated as if they were subhuman–a thought not far from the *Dred Scott* decision–or noxious vermin."[5] So in Kateb's account, there is something in the human telos, in our particular status as persons, which both demands dignity and must bestow all others with a similar dignity–humans are part of class of their own which demands this bestowal of status.[6] For Michael Rosen

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[2] George Kateb, *Human Dignity*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), ix.
[3] Kateb, *Human Dignity*, 3-4.
[4] Kateb, *Human Dignity*, 140.
[5] Kateb, *Human Dignity*, 74.
[6] See Michael Rosen on Kant in *Dignity: Its History and Meaning*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 21-31.

speaking of Pico della Mirandola, it is important that choice be preserved as intrinsic to human dignity: "human beings do not simply fulfill a pre-ordained role. On the contrary, man *chooses* his own destiny, for God has given him the capacity to shape himself according to a range of possibilities not available to other creatures."[7] Notice in this account, the break with nature is still present as humans are distinct in their being from other creatures. But, it is important that one chooses to live into the capacity to contain dignity–it is both bestowed by the Creator and achieved through one's will toward dignity.

> Jürgen Moltmann gives a more capacious account of what human dignity is:
>
> ...human dignity exists only in the singular. Therefore, the dignity of human beings takes precedence over the many rights and duties which are bound up with being human. The dignity of humanity is the one indivisible, inalienable, and shared quality of the human being. The different human rights portray a wholeness because the human being in his or her dignity is a totality.[8]

In this description, status is decentered and the preceding authority of human dignity, before even choosing or achievement, is asserted. Moltmann continues, "the dignitiy of human beings consists in this, that they are human and should be human. Their existence is a gift and task simultaneously. It presents them with the task of actualizing themselves, their essence, and thus coming into their truth."[9] The humiliation of denying persons this sort of dignity is the spiritual and social reality that a Christian ethical perspective must account for. Black theology gives me the language needed to understand how blackness relates to the Christian message of redemption

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[7] Rosen, *Dignity*, 15.

[8] Jürgen Moltmann, *On Human Dignity: Political Theology and Ethics*, trans. by M. Douglas Meeks, (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1984), 9.

[9] Moltmann, *On Human Dignity*, 10.

through liberation–of humanity coming to actualize itself toward its truth. My conception of dignity will clarify the ethical conclusions which are entailed in fundamental assumptions of blackness as both an epistemology and state of metaphorical being. Blackness is a new way of knowing emerging from the Middle Passage, the slave coffle, the humiliation of Jim and Jane Crow, and the continued struggle to perceive a Black future of meaning and liberation. Kateb continues, "I do not give an objective account. It is impossible to defend or attack such a charged idea as human dignity without commitment, whether it is a moral commitment of a theoretical commitment of some kind. The aspiration is to work with a commitment that is warrantable."[10] This dissertation is committed to blackness as an epistemology.

Black epistemology is a way of knowing developed from the experience of enslaved persons in America. It is a dynamic and, I will show, important point of view from which to challenge what it means to be fully human, what it means to be liberated as a human person, and what it is to create a narrative identity from the fragments of memory and experience. Black epistemology views the second-sightedness of Black experience as a way to understand the hegemonic and malforming forces of white supremacy which effect how we relate to one another and live in community. Blackness as a way of knowing seeks to rend the veil of racialized interpretations of who we ought to be.

The thesis of this dissertation is that blackness–"What I am" in relation to "Who am I and How should I live"–is a site of ethical and social creativity in which a subjectivity emerges from humiliation into personhood and ethical responsibility, and, thereby, constitutes a form of human dignity. The creative dimension of a person's dignity is made manifest when it is reclaimed from

[10] Kateb, *Human Dignity*, xi.

a communal experience of exploitation and pain. The conception of human dignity, as I will develop it, has wide-ranging applications to concrete modern ethical situations. The ethical problem is how to think of blackness as a hermeneutic reclamation that constructs a shared moral universe based on the inherent dignity of the human person. In pursuit of the overarching hermeneutical claims of this dissertation, I use fiction, poetry, and other forms of the written word to highlight the metaphors I find at work in Douglass's and Du Bois's exploration of blackness. Both writers are committed to narrative as a way of connecting with history and ideas. In other words, the challenge is to develop a conception of blackness as a prism through which to grasp the dignity and liberation that ought to be available to all human persons.

Modern Christian ethics, for the most part, accepts that there is a sacred core to each person, endowed by the Creator, which must be taken into consideration when making ethical choices. There are, then, limits and intentions which must be inherent in ethical actions if one claims that there is a sacred nature of the human person. A set of moral responsibilities to other people results from this interpretation of human dignity which, I argue, expands this set of moral responsibilities to include the social and spiritual capabilities of persons to construct the interpretive nature of their lived experience. Human dignity requires a revaluation of what kind of life is owed to persons and our responsibility in enabling that life to flourish. Unlike in a human rights discourse, flourishing is not defined by legal precedent, but by the ability of the individual to envision their fulfillment beyond the bounds of jurisprudence and procedure. One's capabilities are not wrapped up in where one happens to be born or in what kind of culture one finds oneself, instead humans are permitted and encouraged to envision new orders of being which hope to escape from the tragic history of humanity. Douglass and Du Bois give us a creatively philosophical, historical, and comparative backdrop in which to consider these

problems and concerns and through their work to develop necessary concepts, such as blackness, to address foundational ethical questions.

Methodology

I contend that closely examining and comparing the works of Douglass and Du Bois will provide the foundation for a constructive Black theological ethics. This is partially a project of excavation and reclamation: excavating the epistemological and narrative roots of blackness and reclaiming the theories of personhood associated with the works of Douglass and Du Bois. Through Douglass's speeches and the narrative changes of Douglass's life presented in his autobiographies, we can trace the differing iterations of the response to the problematic situation of the Black soul held hostage, though not determined, by a savage white supremacy. Douglass considers the Negro Question through the hypocrisy of the Southern Religion of his day tied to the realities of racial hatred which views the bodies and souls of the enslaved as inherently stained by blackness. Douglass's reaction to this racial hatred through his speeches and through the narrative construction and reconstruction of his life is a rich rhetorical milieu in which to explore complex issues of blackness, personhood, and value.

Du Bois, for his part, opens up the psychological and socio-political concerns of the double-consciousness that distorts the Black person's conception of and response to the world. This double consciousness is how Du Bois continues and restates the Negro Problem, that is, the problem of the color line which not only shapes the political but also the internal positionality of Black persons. The shadow of the veil becomes a powerful way to understand both the creative capabilities of a Black epistemology and the limits of what can be achieved across the border of a realized self opposed to the self extant in the ontological nothingness of a white supremacist

social-cultural epistemological privilege. The veil is the primary metaphor shaping Black self-understanding and propels the discourse started through the life and speech acts of Douglass.

In the first step of this dissertation, I will explore the conceptual hermeneutics, the meaning embedded in a latent humanity, of blackness. My dissertation will, then, closely analyze the works of Du Bois and Douglass and compare and contrast their conclusions and theoretical foundations. The resulting analyses will be positioned against arguments for Afropessimism[11] and certain strains of thought surrounding ontological blackness.[12] Using narrative hermeneutic theory and Black theology, I will, in the second constructive step of the dissertation outline a Black theological ethics that takes human dignity as its core concept. This human dignity constructed from the creative possibilities of blackness will outline a new way of approaching the concerns of Christian ethical responsibility. Blackness in this dissertation is both a personal and communal identity constructed out of a shared history of traumatic experience and a particular epistemological positionality resulting from enslavement.

My methods are rooted in a hermeneutics of reclamation: a fundamental component of responsibility is in retrieving and interpreting the narratives that form our conceptual understandings of the human person and their inherent value, that is, dignity. Liberation is understood as the ability to freely respond to the call toward other persons and toward

[11] Afro-pessimism takes the historical reality of anti-blackness and enslavement as the political and ontological roots of Black reality. In this understanding of Black subjectivity, it is impossible for Black people to become fully humanized within a white supremacist social sphere. Afropessimism also suggests that the Black experience cannot be analogized and, therefore, is useless for establishing normative claims.

[12] Ontological blackness asserts that certain Black discourses essentialize race–in effect centering whiteness as the force which created and maintains blackness as state of being. Such an essentializing discourse, as will be argued by Calvin L. Warren and Victor Anderson later in this dissertation, harms the subjectivity of Black persons through reducing their humanity to struggle and rebellion while ignoring important differences within Black experience.

transcendent ethical norms. It is in this response that we become ethical beings in our full humanity. Systems of oppression work to degrade the dignity of the human person through the loss of autonomy, that is, through the loss of the ability to answer the call of ethical responsibility imposed on us through our care for others. Oppression thereby seeks to dehumanize a person by destroying their existence as moral beings and agents. A full humanity can only be formed in response to the recognition of others. Domination refuses this formation– such that it is a denial of human capacities and possibilities leading to the ultimate humiliation of the loss of self. Stated boldly, I want to show how a proper conception of blackness derived from a hermeneutical analysis of Douglass and Du Bois enables one to interpret and articulate how moral responsibility is basic to human dignity itself.

One of the core conceptual aims of my dissertation is the reclamation of the concept of human dignity. Human dignity, recognized as the holistic recognition of the intrinsic sacrality of the human person and their worth, is broadened to include the freedom of the individual to delineate their own capabilities and possibilities irrespective of social, civil, and historical inequities. Dignity is not a mere analysis of how one is regarded and comports oneself in the public sphere. Nor is it a question of extrinsic value tied to social position or function. The conception of dignity reconstructed in relation to blackness at the heart of this dissertation allows persons to define their connection to others and claim authority over the ethical response to the needs of other persons. These connections and responsibilities act as a way to expand the meaning of community within the framework of mutual recognition and *ubuntu*.

Chapter Outline

The first chapter considers Douglass's original response to the Negro problem as an outgrowth of religious controversies. Douglass's response to the duality imposed on blackness will be used to structure an examination of Douglass's three major autobiographies: *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, and *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*. Through tracking the changes of emphasis and focus of these works, we can trace the intellectual and social needs of Douglass's encounter with the abolitionist movement and the Jim Crow era. Douglass's work also provides a space to explore how the concept of blackness can creatively engender a new way of knowing. Blackness as an epistemology can help to form emergent spiritual and social force leading to the reclamation of human dignity as an ethical demand for the newly emancipated and every oppressed person.

In the second chapter, I will discuss with the "Gift of Second Sight" as explored through Du Bois's veil of double consciousness in *The Souls of Black Folk*. We will explore the psychological and social dimensions of Du Bois's concept of the human person emerging from the conditions of enslavement. Importantly, this chapter will be used to understand self-regard involved in double-consciousness and the theological and ethical concerns implied through the metaphor of the veil. I will argue that as the enslaved gained autonomy and possibilities for human flourishing, they emerged into a new way of interpreting the world called blackness. Blackness becomes a powerful epistemological force requiring an expansive religious and ethical framework. The definitions and ideas of Du Bois will be used to reveal the social binary and theological issues at stake in Douglass's arguments dealing with the original discourse surrounding the Negro problem.

A comparative analysis of Du Bois and Douglass will be the project of the third chapter. The theoretical and hermeneutical differences at stake in the examination of the Negro problem

will be used to fully develop the concept of blackness at the heart of the dissertation. The differences in their respective interpretations and methodologies will highlight the ethical responsibilities derived from blackness and the new way of knowing resultant from new forms of inter- and intrapersonal recognitions. I will make a positive argument for blackness as the hermeneutical framework needed to come to terms with the humiliation of the slave coffle and the possibilities of the concrete and transcendental event that creates discourse.

In the fourth chapter, I will examine two major arguments against the theorization of blackness as the lens used to frame human dignity in this dissertation: Afropessimism and the modern criticism of ontological Black humanity. Through these arguments, the use of blackness as a creative means to conceive of human dignity will be challenged. The autonomy reclaimed from the experience of blackness featured in this dissertation assumes the possibilities implied in a shared ethical universe and sense of inherent human value. What happens when blackness itself is seen as inherently othering in a sense that makes liberation from dehumanization an ontological impossibility? What happens when the excavation of meaning from the experience of blackness in America leads to a rejection of the narratives used to create a new concept of what is owed to the other? The resultant pessimism and ontological terror that are possibilities of the Black experience must be encountered.

This chapter responds to the encounter with nonbeing through a deep dive into how the idea of human dignity outlined in this dissertation interacts with the core concepts of` Black theology. I use Black theology and narrative hermeneutics to position blackness and human dignity against the challenges of Afropessimism and Black ontological terror.

The fifth chapter will be used to further outline the constructive possibilities of black epistemology and human dignity. The response to the needs of other persons and the community

which results from mutuality will be the main focus of this examination. The sense of self which emerges from the examination of the works of Du Bois and Douglass create the conditions for the possibility of emergent forms of vicarious representative action based in mutual recognition and the call of ethical responsibility toward others.[13] Kelly Brown Douglas's notion of social-cultural epistemological privilege provides the theoretical foundation for the analysis of the possibilities derived from a Black existence. The aim is to end the dissertation on a sense of what is possible through the embrace of blackness as a place of ethical creativity and the dignity extrapolated from a God of love who cares for the human condition. This dissertation hopes to make a significant contribution to Black theology, theological ethics, and the ongoing debate on the conceptual status and use of human dignity.

[13] See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "History and Good [1]," in *Ethics*, trans. by Ilse Tödt, Heinz Eduard Tödt, Ernst Feil, and Clifford Green, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009), 219-245.

Prelude

A Further Word on Methodology

"Some of us do not want to be all dominance and assertion. We are free to reject any predetermined pattern, whether laid down by God or by Nietzsche. To value self-creation is not necessarily to think that it is the only object in life, which has to override everything else."[1]

A prelude is usually understood as an introductory piece leading to a fuller thematic exploration of an event. In music, the prelude often introduces the key themes that will be on display in the larger work. In the sense used in this dissertation, a prelude introduces some of the key themes of the work while also elucidating key movements that will be repeated in the deeper work of understanding the creation of a Black self out of the dehumanizing project of racialized violence.

Black Boy by Richard Wright is a useful hermeneutical tool to explore the methodology used in this dissertation. *Black Boy* is a controversial narrative work which, while representing itself as an autobiography, freely uses the conventions and tools of fiction in order to give its story meaning. In *Black Boy*, conversations witnessed by a six-year-old boy are related as if in verbatim. The autobiographical subject is given omniscience to explain the motivations, thoughts, and intentions of others. Time is held loosely in the narrative as Wright injects a lifetime of experience and critical thought into the experiences of a young boy at the dawning of the 20th Century.

I find such works fascinating. It can be said that all autobiographical works in the manner of *Black Boy* straddle the line between fiction and nonfiction in filling the gaps of memory and experience with the emplotment inherent in the act of imposing a narrative on a fragmented

[1] Jonathan Glover, *Humanity: A Moral History of the Twentieth Century*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), 17.

existence.[2] Emplotment is the act of taking a series of historical events and imposing order and meaning onto them–the act of creating a plot or crafting a narrative. In this Ricoeurian sense, narrative is meaning as it both witnesses and shapes the self through time.[3]

Ethics works in much the same way as narrative. In ethics, we seek to impose meaning on often fragmented decisions and actions taken in the null intentionality of uncritical living. Ethics insists that there is meaning, that our actions and choices comprise an ordering on the chaos of life that not only contains consequences but also expresses what we hold dear about the world and who we are. The way we craft a narrative self through time is an ethical choice because it says something about what we value and our relations to others as well as ourselves.

In Wright's case, *Black Boy* serves to construct a self out of the mire of physical and emotional depravation, abuse, and racism that comprised the America of his youth. Wright writes in a long parenthetical passage:

> After I had outlived the shocks of childhood, after the habit of reflection had been born in me, I used to mull over the strange absence of real kindness in Negroes, how unstable was our tenderness, how lacking in genuine passion we were, how void of great hope, how timid our joy, how bare our traditions, how hollow our memories, how lacking we were in those intangible sentiments that bind man to man, and how shallow was even our despair. After I had learned other ways of life I used to brood upon the unconscious irony of those who felt that Negroes led so passional an existence! I saw that what had been

[2] For a deeper discussion of the controversies surrounding *Black Boy* and the conventions of autobiographical narrative please see, William L. Andrews, "Richard Wright and the African-American Autobiography Tradition," *Style*, Vol. 27, No. 2, African-American Poetics (Summer 1993): 271-284. https://www.jstor.org/stable/42946041

[3] Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey, (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 143.

> taken for our emotional strength was our negative confusions, our fights, our fears, our frenzy under pressure.
>
> Whenever I thought of the essential bleakness of black life in America, I knew that negroes had never been allowed to catch the full spirit of Western civilization, that they lived somehow in it but not of it. And when I brooded upon the cultural barrenness of black life, I wondered if clean, positive tenderness, love, honor, loyalty, and the capacity to remember were native with man. I asked myself if these human qualities were not fostered, won, struggled and suffered for, preserved in ritual from one generation to another.[4]

Wright, the grandchild of enslaved persons, is relating his experience of emerging from the void of Black life in the postbellum south. Wright describes a people relearning the habits of humanity often denied them through the brutality of the whip and the arbitrariness of life lived as chattel. According to Wright's analysis, Black's lived a hollowed and timid existence whose grasping for joy and connection were often mistaken as unchecked passions. Bleakness is the essential aspect of Black life–a poverty so crushing and so complete, that it estranges Blacks from important aspects of their own humanity. What is assumed to be civilization or culture are habits of mind passed down through generational learning and self-reflection. The Black habit of humanity had been severed through the process of enslavement. Wright prefigures the more pessimistic modes of Black thought encountered in this dissertation when he implies that the lack of habituated notions of love, honor, and loyalty cuts off Black persons from a full encounter with Western civilization. But in Wright, there is a deeper sense of the struggle *to* humanity

[4] Richard Wright, *Black Boy (American Hunger): A Record of Childhood and Youth*, (New York, NY: Harper Perennial, 2023), 37.

rather than a void composing the creation of blackness–blackness is a struggle, but it is a struggle of humans toward full participation in humanity.

In this dissertation, Wright's understanding of struggle is seen as blackness creating itself through a discourse which bridges the Middle Passage and the newly gained autonomy of post enslavement. I use the lives and works of Frederick Douglass and W. E. B. Du Bois to contextualize and explore this discourse. You will notice in these pages a mixture of poetry, fiction, philosophy, slave narrative, and Black folk tales beginning and ending most chapters– this is done purposefully to challenge the boundaries separating narrative styles and ways of being that are freely juxtaposed or purposefully ignored in the works of Douglass and Du Bois. Du Bois begins each chapter of *The Souls of Black Folk* with poetry and a line of musical notation from the Sorrow Songs. He writes, "They that walked in darkness sang songs in the olden days–Sorrow Songs–for they were weary at heart. And so before each thought that I have written in this book I have set a phrase, a haunting echo of these weird old songs in which the soul of the black slave spoke to men."[5] Du Bois is asking us to compare, contrast, and finally to meld the meanings of high-minded poetic thought with the theology and yearning of Black spiritual striving. Douglass wrote his life story three times and recounted it to rapt audiences countless times. Douglass crafted his self-narrative into a call for emancipation as master rhetorician and author. Can we say that Douglass's understandings of his own life were free of narrative conventions meant, too often, to impose meaning on fragmented memories? My answer would be that to Douglass, and to the business of understanding Black self-creation, such

[5] W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Souls of Black Folk," from *W. E. B. Du Bois: Writings,* ed. Nathan Huggins, (New York, NY: The Library of America, 1986), 536.

questions miss the point of the use of narrative as a tool of self-making and interpretation. I contend that blurring narratival lines is part of the work of blackness as a new way of knowing.

Narrative as Connection

Jonathan Glover's *Humanity: A Moral History of the 20th Century* helped me to formulate how to compose this dissertation and the sources I would use to further the main arguments presented. Glover writes, "I have tried where possible to draw on first-person account by participants, victims or observers. So the book is often a bit like a pointillist painting, in which the larger picture emerges from many small dots...The hope is that this practice makes for vividness and insight. But the reader should ask questions about how representative the small dots are."[6] In the third chapter of this dissertation, I compare and contrast the dualisms explored in the works of Du Bois and Douglass. I use a poem of William Blake to open the chapter. When a version of this chapter was presented at a conference a few years ago, I was accused of claiming that Blake should be considered a racist–that his depiction of claiming that the little Black boy is made white as snow in heaven, should not be seen through modern eyes and sensibilities. Nothing could be farther from the truth in terms of how the poem is used in the chapter and the conclusions drawn from its imagery. Like Glover, I am trying to use a small narrative instance to point to larger expressions of Black self-hood emerging from certain conceptions of what it means to be otherized through racial understandings of the human person.

The Clansman is used in Chapter 4 for a different purpose. In that case, Thomas Dixon's work is used to explore race as a distortion of the moral imagination. In the main text of this

[6] Glover, *Humanity*, xvii.

dissertation, I will take time to explore how the moral imagination is distorted through hegemonic white supremacist discourse which shape how we see the world and who is deserving of humanity. I will also take various moments to explore how the narrative identity is used in this dissertation and how differing modes and genres contribute to the overall concept of self. I use Dixon to reach differing conclusions than I use Blake, even though both are narrative discourses involving blackness as a key signifier of evil and sin. Again, it is the larger picture that is being sought in individual instances. The connections drawn from these differing works are used to frame disparate discussions with points which intersect but remain distinct. This is another feature of Glover's methodology in *Humanity* which I find useful in this dissertation: by examining how these narratives are used to bring clarity and meaning to difficult questions, we can begin to explore how such narratives are used for their *interpretative* powers. Meaning is not only applied to past understanding, but to present actions and ways of knowing along with future intentions. Blake and Dixon helped to shape the minds of their readers in particular ways which led to long-lasting interpretations of the meaning of blackness. Glover continues, "The account presented here is that the moral restraints fail sometimes by being neutralized or anesthetized, and sometimes by being overwhelmed, by other factors."[7] I would go further than Glover on this point. Moral restraints fail at times because they are disfigured in a way which counters what we would consider normal ethical human responses. This is why the slave coffle was routed around major cities, if whites were exposed to such visceral displays of suffering it is doubtful that their distorted moral imaginations could survive–I will discuss this in depth in Chapter 3 of this dissertation.

[7] Glover, *Humanity*, xix.

The narratives used to bring meaning to events, works across time. Our disparate selves are in constant communion with themselves as they are impacted by events, others, and new discourses. Narrative acts as a way to connect selves. Glover's methodology is so powerful because it relies on a common humanity that is called to through the stories and meanings of others. John W. De Gruchy writes, "this is not primarily about origins or where we come from however important that is, but more about how we should live today as we journey together into the future...an ongoing conversation with others past and present whereby we find the ideas, words, images, and narratives that give structure and meaning to our lives."[8] I believe that this is what Douglass demonstrated through the story of his life and what Du Bois was aiming for when he named race as a common problem affecting all of humanity. We are connected to enslaved Blacks through a continuing discourse and participation in the United States of America. My methodology was chosen to illustrate these connections.

The Self and *Ubuntu*

According to Paul Ricoeur, narrative identity mediates between the persistent self through time and who (or what) I am.[9] This is the sort of identity that Douglass strived to construct out of the brutality of enslavement. And this is the sort of identity hidden behind and occluded by Du Bois's veil. Douglass is a study in narrative identity as he created himself over a lifetime of story telling. Like *Black Boy*, Douglass is vulnerable to the charge of mixing narrative types in his quest to persuade and condemn Southern Religion and the slaveocracy. Ricoeur writes that the

[8] John W. De Gruchy, "A Christian Humanist Perspective," *The Humanist Imperative in South Africa*, ed. John W. De Gruchy, (South Africa: Sun Press, 2011), 58.

[9] Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 114-115.

self persists despite "what seems to be its contrary in the domain of sameness-identity, namely diversity, variability, discontinuity, and instability."[10] The issues which seem to plague Douglass's process of self-creation are, in fact, an extremely intensified version of a feature of what it means to be a person with a persistent human identity. The idea of self is wide enough to encompass changes and multiple discursive conceptions within its narrative. This is especially important when we consider the discontinuity caused by the humiliation of enslavement.

Ricoeur continues, referencing the work of Wilhelm Dilthey, "For the moment, let it suffice to say that in many narratives the self seeks its identity on the scale of entire life...the *connectedness of life*..."[11] This is where the work of Du Bois is so important. As we will examine, the connectedness of life, the persistent self through time, is constantly challenged by the shadow of the veil. Part of Du Bois's mission is to convince the reader that Black people possess this selfhood, this soul, that persists through time and produces the narrative self which renders life meaningful. This is a reification of the emplotment mentioned earlier in this prelude. Each life is an instant of the Ship of Theseus. The problem is usually presented in this way: Theseus's ship, over time, has each part replaced as it is worn away. Every board, nail, and rope is eventually replaced until nothing of the original ship remains. Should this ship, which is all new, still be called that of Theseus? For Ricoeur it is the ships narrative self–the state of being referred to and acknowledged as Theseus's ship–which persists over time and connects the disparate parts of the ship to those of the past. This connection, according to Ricoeur goes beyond the bounds of oneself. In *Oneself as Another* Ricoeur suggests, "from the outset that the selfhood of oneself implies otherness to such an intimate degree that one cannot be thought of

[10] Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 140.
[11] Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 115.

without the other, that instead one passes into the other..." This conception holds startling insight into how Douglass and Du Bois consider the overall project of self-creation in that such a creation has implications for all humanity. The Ship of Theseus also speaks to the process of maintaining the narrative self through the systematic dismantling of one's humanity experienced by Black persons through the Middle Passage, enslavement, and the lynch mob.

In order to create self, we must envision others–our humanity is reflexive of the humanity recognized in the other. Envisioning others in a way which fully humanizes them, fully humanizes ourselves. If selfhood and creation are reflexive, then we must imagine a moral vocabulary of reflexivity. This is the philosophical and ethical basis of Ricoeur's conception of self and of the African philosophy of *ubuntu*. *Ubuntu* plays a large part in the ethical reality of a Black epistemology. In their essay, *Critical Issues for a New Humanism*, Drucilla Cornell and Kenneth Panfilio provide the following description of *ubuntu* which seems to echo Ricoeur's oneself as another, "in *ubuntu* human beings are intertwined in a world of ethical relations and obligations with all other people from the time they are born."[12] Douglass and Du Bois show us that these obligations and relations exist even before we come into the world because we enter into a reality already constructed along pervasive social, and inter-personal ways of knowing which influence how we come to interpret the world. Cornell and Panfilio continue:

> It is a profound misunderstanding of *ubuntu* to confuse it with simple-minded communitarianism or to think that it involves merely forgetting or forgiving the wrongs of the past. It is only through the engagement and support of others that we are able to

[12] Drucilla Cornell and Kenneth Panfilio, "Critical Issues for a New Humanism," *The Humanist Imperative in South Africa*, ed. John W. De Gruchy, (South Africa: Sun Press, 2011), 149.

> realise a true individuality and rise above our biological distinctiveness into a fully developed person whose uniqueness is inseparable from the journey to moral and ethical development.[13]

This sense of journey is similar to the understanding of emplotment suggested in this prelude. Journey also suggests the place of narrative to give meaning to fragmented events. Blackness, as a metaphor, helps to frame the journey from the void of the Middle Passage to the rending of the veil. This metaphorical journey encompasses those devoted to explicating a Black epistemology and those given to white supremacy–*ubuntu* troubles the ethical waters because it insists on a sense of humanity more fundamental than the superficial divisions which seem to construct human sociality. "*Ubuntu*, in a profound sense, encapsulates the moral relations demanded by human beings who must live together in complex arrangements of sociality. It implies both a fundamental moralisation of social relations, and this moralisation of social relations is forever changing."[14] Our reflexive ethical self must always respond to the needs of the other in their variety and, at times, ambiguity. *Ubuntu* gives us the language to express this response with the dynamism and holism needed for such a concept.

The ethical implications of *ubuntu* also inflects how race is viewed in this dissertation. In *Black Boy*, Wright says that "a sense of the two races had been born in me with a sharp concreteness that would never die until I died."[15] Race presents another series of dualities that are challenged by *ubuntu* and, as we will see, the work of Douglass and Du Bois. But the sense of sharp concreteness felt by Wright is real in the distorted moral imagination of America. Black

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[13] Cornell and Panfilio, "Critical Issues for a New Humanism," 149.
[14] Cornell and Panfilio, "Critical Issues for a New Humanism," 150.
[15] Wright, *Black Boy*, 46.

does not speak to a skin color any more than whiteness does, at least in the usage of this dissertation. Blackness is given many definitions in the following pages due to the dynamic and still evolving process of Black self-creation. At times I call blackness a metaphor, at other times I call it a way of knowing, and often I refer to blackness as representative of a group of people with a common ancestry and experience of enslavement–all are true, and all are needed. In this dissertation, Black is used sociologically, metaphorically, and epistemologically. Whiteness, for my purposes, is just as dynamic and ever-changing. Whiteness is domination, the slaveocracy, those who benefit from Kelly Brown Douglas's "social-cultural epistemology of privilege,"[16] and those who hate blackness. *Ubuntu* keeps me from making blackness idolatrous–all forms of supremacy speak against the fundamental power of oneself as another, "our ethical relationship to others is inseparable from how we are both embedded and supported by a community that is not outside each one of us, but is inscribed alongside each of us."[17] Or a community inscribed within the very possibility of humanity.

[16] See Kelly Brown Douglass, *The Black Christ: Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Edition*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2019), 67-95.

[17] Cornell and Panfilio, "Critical Issues for a New Humanism," 149.

Chapter 1

A New and Special Revelation:
Frederick Douglass and the Reclamation of Self through Blackness

"And that servant, which knew his lord's will, and prepared not himself, neither did according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes (Luke 12:47, KJV)."

"Whispers and sighs. And they too rose on the air. They rode the hot breezes. The ones flyin were black and shinin sticks, wheelin above the head of the Overseer. They crossed the rows, the fields, the streams, and were away."[1]

To understand Frederick Douglass, one must understand the blood and sweat of countless enslaved persons ground into the foundations of the United States of America. This dissertation is meant to wrestle with the subjectivity that emerges from the reality of racialized humiliation–a blackness which creates itself and cries out from the dust. Douglass spent his life telling and retelling of the reclamation of his self from the brutality of chattel slavery. In this chapter, I will explore how this story is revealed and the concepts which can be drawn from the narrative of blackness emerging from the annihilation of humanity.

Who am I and how ought I to live? The project of ethics is to understand how one relates to the world and how such a relation ought to be expressed in living with others. What is at stake in the narrative of Douglass is how one comes to an ethical subjectivity when the very possibility of a self is contested. The horror of slavery is its ability to extinguish the humanity of persons at the extremity of cruelty. For Douglass, this horrific state of affairs is magnified by the use of Christianity to justify the slave system. The contradiction of a God of goodness, professed in the land of the free, is morally offensive to a self-emancipated slave who came to embody the ability

[1] Virginia Hamilton, *The People Could Fly: American Black Folktales told by Virginia Hamilton,* illus. by Leo Dillon and Diane Dillon, (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), 170.

of humanity to win out over the direst of circumstances. In his biography of Douglass, David Blight writes:

> In words, Douglass always fought back not only to defeat slavery, but to make sense of its extremes and work through his pain. "Why am I a slave?" is an existential question that reflects as well as anticipates many others like it in human history. Why am I poor? Why is he so rich, and she only his servant and chattel? Why am I hated for my religion, my race, my sexuality, the accident of my birth in this valley or on that side of the river or on this side of the railroad tracks? Why am I a refugee with no home? Why does my color define my life? Douglass's story represents many others over the ages.[2]

I propose that Douglass's answer to these questions is the emergence of a unique epistemology: blackness. The question of "Why am I a slave?" can only be answered through laying claim to the dignity inherent in the human person. The ability to *know* that one ought to be free despite the all-encompassing reality of enslavement. This is not a knowing limited to blackness, but it is a key component of Black epistemology–the knowing that this world is not what it ought to be. This knowing comes from the innate ability of persons to tell the story of who they are, often in opposition to the narrative thrust upon them through social forces and communal morality corrupted by hatred.

The separation of the Black soul from the body, and hence the separation of the status of individual worth in the eyes of God and the socio-political reality of domination, represents to Douglass the hypocrisy of American religion used to justify slavery. Through his critique of the slaveholder's religious hypocrisy, Douglass examines how the dignity of an enslaved people is

[2] David W. Blight, *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom*, (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2018), 28-29.

held hostage to a white supremacist theology. Douglass conceptualizes the "Negro problem" as a constellation of social, political, and religious propositions used to dehumanize the enslaved. Dehumanization, in this sense, is necessary in order to justify the brutality needed to maintain the slave system. But, as I will demonstrate in this chapter, revealing the hypocrisy which underlies these justificatory propositions is also the work of self-creation. I argue that Douglass's criticism of the systems which result in the Negro problem creates a hermeneutic theme encompassing his career as a public speaker, abolitionist, and intellectual. This hermeneutic theme is blackness as a way of knowing and acting in the world with human dignity.

I will begin by exploring Douglass's linkage of personhood to the autonomy implied through conversion to a specific understanding of the Christian gospel message. For Douglass, this reading of the gospel exposes the contradictions at the core of the slaveholder's self-understanding and ethical reality. Douglass will also encounter how the conception of a dualistic person–of a body or material reality separated from the realm of mind, soul, and the spiritual–worked to dehumanize slaves. Next, I will demonstrate how Douglass's experience at the hands of the slave-breaker, Edward Covey, and his exposure to the religious hypocrisy of Thomas Auld leads to an understanding of the "religion of the south." Douglass uses the term "religion of the south" to point to a complex integration of religious, political, social, and philosophical ideas which work to construe slaveocracy as an institution justified by God. Following this description of a particular sort of justification, I will enumerate how Douglass connects the ability to conceive of oneself as an autonomous ethical actor, with a say in one's relation to God, the community, and one's own condition, with the process of learning and self-reclamation. This self-conception is integral to this dissertation's understanding and use of the term 'dignity.' The horror of losing one's self to the brutality of the slave system is an important moment in

Douglass's development, and in my concept of how blackness is working epistemologically. Then I will explore blackness as both an epistemology and a hermeneutic; I argue that a new way of knowing is revealed through the process of self-reclamation through narrative interpretation and the act of condemning the institution of slavery. I conclude this chapter through an examination of Douglass's cosmic understanding of justice–what such an understanding means for the condition of blackness and its relation to the prophetic.

Conversion and the Necessity of Autonomy

Douglass writes the following in a letter to William Lloyd Garrison, "Slavery has its own standards of morality, humanity, justice, and Christianity. Tried by that standard, it is a system of the greatest kindness to the slave–sanctioned by the purest morality–in perfect agreement with justice–and, of course, not inconsistent with Christianity. But, tried by any other, it is doomed to condemnation."[3] During his carrier, Douglass would make it his mission to challenge the ethical assumptions of an American public inured to the suffering of Black people. Of particular importance to Douglass's moral condemnation of slavery, is the examination of the *aporia* implicit in the profession of Christianity when interpreted through the experience of the humiliation of slavery. Riggins Earl refers to this *aporia* when he writes the axiom of slave religion, "If God endowed me with the capacity to think freedom, I am capable of initiating my own freedom project."[4] Liberation is key, according to slave religion and Black theology, to

[3] Frederick Douglass, "Letter to William Lloyd Garrison, January 27, 1846," *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*, ed. by Philip S. Foner, adapted by Yuval Taylor, (Chicago, IL: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999), 20.

[4] Riggins R. Earl, Jr. *Dark Symbols, Obscure Signs: God, Self, and Community in the Slave Mind*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 177.

understanding the gospel message. How can one profess to be Christian while holding others in bondage?

Douglass's main argument against enslavement was the narrative of his own life: a childhood devoid of familial love, the experience of profane violence, the discovery of the written word as a path to self-understanding, and finally emancipation and the battle to raise up those left behind. To the American public conditioned to view slaves as subhuman and lacking the claim on the rights and obligations owed to persons, Douglass's very existence is a contradiction, a challenge to the accepted understanding of what a Black person is capable of and the condition of their souls shackled within the system of chattel slavery.

There are two assumptions at the heart of Douglass's argument against chattel slavery. The first, is that there is an underlying morality to the human condition. To be fully human, one must have considerations for the rights of others and the duties implied by the equality of persons. The second, is that one must, at the very least, attempt to live up to the religious and moral tenets that you hold and work to have them proclaimed and instantiated through civic institutions, political agreements, and the social order. Who you say you are, and the actions justified through your beliefs, must be ethically consistent with what you actually do. If not, then you ought to feel the conviction of those actions which speak against your ideals; "The cowskin makes as deep a gash in my flesh, when wielded by a professed saint, as it does when wielded by an open sinner."[5] The brutal reality of slavery defines who you are, above and beyond any claims toward valuing freedom or the rights of the human person, or claiming to follow the religion of Jesus Christ.

[5] Douglass, "Letter to William Lloyd Garrison," 20.

The hypocrisy of a Christianity which justifies slavery was a staple of Douglass's condemnation of slavery. In an early speech, Douglass points to the ethical contradictions at the heart of professed religious beliefs. Douglass writes:

> The white people gathered round the altar, the blacks clustered by the door. After the good minister had served out the bread and wine to one portion of those near him, he said, "These may withdraw, and others come forward"; thus he proceeded till all the white members had been served. Then he drew a long breath, and looking out towards the door, exclaimed, "Come up, colored friends, come up! for you know *God is no respecter of persons*!" I haven't been there to see the sacraments taken since.[6]

The assertion that all persons are equal before God (God is no respecter of persons!) forms the basis of the good minister's understanding of the ethics implied by claiming to be a Christian.[7] If you accept that all persons are equal before God, then you must be against the institution of slavery or the designation of Blacks as lesser than whites. The implied secondary status of the Black people clustered around the door, speaks to the falsity of the good minister's public religious discourse. The action of first serving one group of persons, then the next is an obvious contradiction. That such a contradiction is demonstrated through the sacrament of communion, speaks to how deep the hypocrisy has entered into the foundation of American Christian religious practice. Douglass continues:

> ...among those who experienced religion at this time was a colored girl; she was baptised in the same water as the rest; so she thought she might sit at the Lord's table and partake

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[6] Frederick Douglass, "The Church and Prejudice," *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*, ed. by Philip S. Foner, adapted by Yuval Taylor, (Chicago, IL: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999), 3.

[7] See Acts 10:34 and Romans 2:11.

> of the same sacramental elements with the others. The deacon handed round the cup, and when he came to the black girl, he could not pass her...so he handed the girl the cup, and she tasted. Now it so happened that next to her sat a young lady who had been converted at the same time, baptised in the same water, and put her trust in the same blessed Saviour; yet when the cup, containing the precious blood which had been shed for all, came to her, she rose in disdain and walked out of the church. Such was the religion *she* had experienced![8]

The religious experience, the conversion leading to the baptism, does not supplant the embodied reality of white supremacy. The girls are able to share in the same baptismal pool because it is the soul which is being saved–the act of conversion is taken to be spiritual in a way which has no bearing on the assumed superiority embedded within society.

The bifurcation of the human person, and of the spheres of society affected by moral consideration, is an important issue in Douglass's ethical investigation of religiously justified enslavement. In a later speech, Douglass writes that the "book of Morgan Godwin is a literary curiosity and an ethical wonder."[9] Douglass is referring to Morgan Godwyn's *The Negro's and Indian's Advocate, Suing for Their Admission into the Church, or, a Persuasive to the Instructing and Baptizing of the Negros and Indians in Our Plantations,* a book published in 1680. Douglass writes:

> [Godwin] proposed no disturbance of the relation of master and slave. On the contrary, he conceded the right of the master to own and control the body of the Negro, but insisted

[8] Douglass, "The Church and Prejudice," *Selected Speeches and Writings,* 3.

[9] Frederick Douglass, "The United States Cannot Remain Half-Slave and Half-Free," *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings,* ed. by Philip S. Foner, adapted by Yuval Taylor, (Chicago, IL: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999), 663.

> that the soul of the Negro belonged to the Lord. His able reasoning on this point, it is true, left the Negro for himself neither soul nor body. When he claimed his body, he found that belonged to his earthly master, and when he looked around for his soul, he found that that belonged to his master in Heaven. Nevertheless the ground taken in this book by Dr. Godwin was immensely important. It was, in fact, the starting point, the foundation of all the grand concessions yet made to the claims, the character, the manhood and the dignity of the Negro.[10]

This is a generous reading of Godwin's argument which aims to justify the enslavement of persons in order to save their souls; the bodily domination which arises as a result of chattel slavery is a mere, though necessary, step to curb the bestial nature of Africans.[11] Douglass continues, "They sought in the sacredness of baptism the salvation of slavery...They contended that this holy ordinance could only be properly administered to free and responsible agents, men, who, in all matters of moral conduct, could exercise the sacred right of choice..."[12] The imposition of the sacraments assumes a level of assumed moral autonomy involved in the necessity of the communicant to *choose* to participate. Douglass is pointing to the rational conclusions which can be drawn from Godwin's assertions–such assertions opened the door to religious instruction and participation for the enslaved and, thus, to their consideration as moral persons. Godwin, like the good minister Douglass experienced in the integrated churches he

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[10] Douglass, "The United States Cannot Remain Half-Slave and Half-Free," 663.

[11] Morgan Godwyn, *The Negro's and Indian's Advocate, Suing for Their Admission into the Church, or, a Persuasive to the Instructing and Baptizing of the Negros and Indians in Our Plantations: Shewing, that as the Compliance Therewith can Prejudice No Man's Just Interest: So the Willful Neglecting and Opposing of it, is no Less than a Manifest Apostacy from the Christian faith: to which is Added, a Brief Account of Religion in Virginia*, (London, UK: J. D., 1680), 75-76.

[12] Douglass, "The United States Cannot Remain Half-Slave and Half-Free," 664.

visited in his travels, is straining to contain the contradictions inherent in their profession of certain Christian ethical demands. "To thrust baptism and the church between the slave and his master was a dangerous interference with the absolute authority of the master. The slave-holders were always logical. When they assumed that slavery was right, they easily saw that everything inconsistent with slavery was wrong;" for Douglass, there is no way to hold the conflicting logics of both the Christian understanding of God and the bodily domination of the human person within the same ethical framework.[13]

These arguments, of what it means to claim Christian sanction for the immoral reality of slavery and the totality of the Black person, are gleaned from the lived reality of Douglass's time as a slave. Douglass's three autobiographies, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, and *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, recount his journey from enslavement to spiritual and physical freedom. Examining some of the major turning points in this journey, in the narrative developed by Douglass concerning the construction of his personhood, will shed light on and reinforce the base hypocrisy at the heart of the dichotomous account of Black existence when contrasted against the Christian ethical stance which Douglass uses to convict the slaveholder class and America writ large.

Justification and the Religion of the South

Douglass's earliest memories are of witnessing the suffering of his fellow slaves at the hands of their masters. For the purposes of this dissertation, it is necessary to explore the violence inflicted on the bodies of Black people used as chattel. This exploration is important because it

[13] Douglass, "The United States Cannot Remain Half-Slave and Half-Free," 664.

relates to Douglass's own conception of how this violence and bodily domination are structured to spiritually break enslaved persons. The brutal methods of the slaveholders speak to their understanding of the wholeness of human experience–physical injury is a path to intellectual, emotional, and spiritual control. The bifurcation of the enslaved person, a body held in bondage while the soul is saved through Christian instruction, is shown to be hypocritical on its face.

Douglass recounts an important memory of his childhood on the plantation of one Captain Anthony:

> I have often been awakened at the dawn of day by the most heart-rending shrieks of an own aunt of mine, whom [Cpt. Anthony] used to tie up to a joist, and whip upon her naked back till she was literally covered with blood. No words, no tears, no prayers, from his gory victim, seemed to move his iron heart from its bloody purpose. The louder she screamed, the harder he whipped; and where the blood ran fastest, there he whipped longest. He would whip her to make her scream, and whip her to make her hush; and not until overcome by fatigue, would he cease to swing the blood-clotted cowskin...It was the blood-stained gate, the entrance to the hell of slavery, through which I was about to pass.[14]

The screams of the woman under the lash, the public nature of her torture, and the relentlessness of her punishment were meant not only to control her body, but also to control the ethical reality of all the slaves made to witness her humiliation. Blight writes that Douglass, "became a thinking being trying desperately to preserve and protect his mind as well as his body from internal

[14] Frederick Douglass, "Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave," *Frederick Douglass: Autobiographies*, ed. by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., (New York, NY: Literary Classics of the Unites States, Inc., 1994), 18.

disintegration and external destruction."[15] Such instances of public inhumanity were meant to inculcate in the slave the understanding of their complete submission to the will of the slaveholder and the systems used to create and sustain such conditions.

The slaveholder's conception of Christianity became an important component of the social and spiritual controls used to dominate the Black persons held in bondage. An important component of Douglass's awakening to the hypocrisy at the core of the slaveocracy, and the religion they used to justify its existence, were his specific experiences with Thomas Auld and Edward Covey. Thomas Auld was a devout Methodist; Douglass writes in *Narrative of the Life*: "If it had any effect on his character, it made him more cruel and hateful in all his ways; for I believe him to have been a much worse man after his conversion than before. Prior to his conversion, he relied upon his own depravity to shield and sustain him in his savage barbarity; but after his conversion, he found religious sanction and support for his slaveholding cruelty."[16] Douglass especially recounts how Auld would recite Bible verses while whipping slaves bloody. Auld's most cited verse was Luke 12:47: "That slave who knew what his master wanted, but did not prepare himself or do what was wanted, will receive a severe beating (NRSV)."[17] In the King James version, the last section of the verse reads as "beaten with many stripes" in a specific reference to the whip. "Master Thomas was one of the many pious slaveholders who hold slaves for the very charitable purpose of taking care of them," to Auld, beating was part of the cruel religious justification meant to preserve the souls of Blacks while subjugating their bodies to the natural place of their being.[18] In *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass elaborates:

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[15] Blight, *Frederick Douglass,* 27.
[16] Douglass, "Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass," 52.
[17] Douglass, "Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass," 53.
[18] Douglass, "Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass," 53.

> Slaveholders may, sometimes, have confidence in the piety of some of their slaves; but the slaves seldom have confidence in the piety of their masters. "He can't go to heaven with our blood on his skirts," is a settled point in the creed of every slave; rising superior to all teachings to the contrary, and standing forever as a fixed fact. The highest evidence the slaveholder can give the slave of his acceptance with God, is the emancipation of his slaves. This is proof that he is willing to give up all to God, and for the sake of God. Not to do this, was, in my estimation, and in the opinion of all slaves, an evidence of half-heartedness, and wholly inconsistent with the idea of genuine conversion.[19]

Slaves reach different conclusions based on the moral implications of Christianity. Emancipation is linked with the concept of a genuine acceptance of God and conversion to the Christian religion–the falseness of a conversion which justifies inhumanity is rejected as inconsistent with a piety which conforms to the profession of religion. Auld's "natural wickedness...had not been removed, but only reenforced, by the profession of religion."[20] Auld's recitation of Luke 12:47, part of a parable which situates and analogizes God as master of all knowing believers, in the service of humiliating his slaves is, to Douglass, a foundational example of the hypocrisy of slavocratic religious practice when contrasted with the reality of profound suffering.

Edward Covey was known as a "slave breaker;" a man who could take the rebellious or indigent slave and turn them into a productive tool of the slaveholder: "Mr. Covey could have under him, the most fiery bloods of the neighborhood, for the simple reward of returning them to their own masters *well broken*. Added to the natural fitness of Mr. Covey for the duties of his

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[19] Frederick Douglass, "My Bondage and My Freedom," *Frederick Douglass: Autobiographies*, ed. by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., (New York, NY: Literary Classics of the Unites States, Inc., 1994), 251.

[20] Douglass, "My Bondage and My Freedom," 252.

profession, he was said to 'enjoy religion,' and was as strict in the cultivation of piety, as he was in the cultivation of his farm."[21] For Douglass, the fact that Covey was counted as a pious man, attested to the perversion of the Christian religion in the hands of enslavers.[22] Douglass's religious turn in his mid-teens, helped to awaken and enliven the conviction that he was entitled to the freedoms owed to fully human persons. Being sent to Covey to be broken, to be disabused of the emancipatory implications of a newly found religious practice rooted in the written word and learning, challenged Douglass on a level which only served to cement his understanding of the wholeness of a claimed humanity and the hypocrisy of slaveholder religion.

During his time with Covey, Douglass was repeatedly subjected to vicious beatings for the slightest offense to his new owner.[23] Of particular importance to Douglass was the falsity of Covey's religious outward appearance–Covey represents the contradictions of the slaveholder's justification embedded within Douglass's narrative of his life. Douglass is not attempting to write a dispassionate account of his life, instead he is endeavoring to construct his narrative into a call to liberation for his people. Over time, Douglass would expand the story of his physical and spiritual battle with Covey to represent the experience of all slaves whose claimed humanity is the target of slaveholder brutality. This is an act of reclamation, of gathering the fragments of

[21] Douglass, "My Bondage and My Freedom," 256-7.

[22] Some readers did not believe that Douglass had experienced such violence at the hands of Auld and Covey with some people even insisting that those men did not even exist. It was in a published defense of Covey that his existence was proven to a doubting public: "Thompson accused Douglass of writing a 'budget of falsehoods,' defended the characters of Colonel Edward Lloyd, of Auld, and of Covey as practicing Methodists; as 'good Christian' men, they were incapable of the violence and abuse Douglass claimed" (161). See Blight, *Frederick Douglass*, 160-161.

[23] Douglass, "Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass," 56.

his experience and those of other enslaved Black persons and gaining meaning from imposing order on the disordered experience of humiliation.

Douglass would ask his audience as they listened to the story of his life with the slave breaker: What do you say of this overseer who claims the same religion as you do? What do you say to the young slave struggling to hold his humanity under the whip? Of Covey, Douglass writes:

> Every thing he possessed in the shape of learning or religion, he made conform to his disposition to deceive. He seemed to think himself equal to deceiving the Almighty. He would make a short prayer in the morning, and a long prayer at night; and, strange as it may seem, few men would at times appear more devotional than he...Poor man! such was his disposition, and success at deceiving, I do verily believe that he sometimes deceived himself into the solemn belief, that he was a sincere worshipper of the most high God... [24]

Slaveholders become victims of their own contradictions in their sincere belief that inhumanity is consistent with the God of Christianity. Covey, according to Douglass, held his religion as "a thing altogether apart from his worldly concerns. He knew nothing of it as a holy principle, directing and controlling his daily life, making the latter conform to the requirements of the gospel."[25] Just as rending of the body from the soul is necessary to justify the holding of fellow humans in bondage, this dichotomy also acts as a way for the slaveholder to faithfully embody their own lived contradictions.

Douglass referred to the Christianity turned to justify enslavement as the "religion of the south"–as a brand of Christianity wholly distinct from the religion Douglass absorbed from his

[24] Douglass, "Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass," 57.
[25] Douglass, "My Bondage and My Freedom," 266.

study of the gospel message and the ethical implications he found in the condition of slaves whose conversion attested to their status as autonomous ethical actors. The religion of the south is, "a mere covering for the most horrid crimes; the justifier of the most appalling barbarity; a sanctifier of the most hateful frauds; and a secure shelter, under which the darkest, foulest, grossest, and most infernal abominations fester and flourish."[26] It was this socially and civically sanctioned religion which created and empowered Covey. Douglass insisted as a matter of fact that religious slaveholders, as taking their cruelty as justified beyond the bounds of ordinary human empathy, were the most vicious in their treatment of the enslaved.[27] As pointed out above, Douglass saw this justification, this slaveholder religion of the south, as being the result of an internalized deceit, which paves the way for inhumanity to be construed as an expression of faithful piety.

In his life as an abolitionist, Douglass would tell the story of Covey many times to white audiences. The recitation of such pain and hypocrisy was meant to shock the audience out of their complacent acceptance of the slaveocracy. In a paper promulgated in 1853, Douglass would insist that, "slavery cannot bear to be looked at. The slaveholder must become a madman, and forget the eyes of just men and of a just God, when he burns his name into the flesh of a woman."[28] The natural human reaction to injustice is strong enough to point out the derangement needed to believe that what is plainly and mercilessly evil is not only good, but in keeping with the morality expressed in the gospel message. And it takes a systemic and purposeful

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[26] Douglass, "My Bondage and My Freedom," 293.
[27] Douglass, "My Bondage and My Freedom," 293.
[28] Frederick Douglass, "The Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin," *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*, ed. by Philip S. Foner, adapted by Yuval Taylor, (Chicago, IL: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999), 249.

misconstrual of the God of justice to claim that the chains of bondage are for the good of the slave indoctrinated into the religion of the south and the hypocrisy of slaveholder Christianity. Douglass's retelling of his life called on his listeners and readers to acknowledge the humanity in his quest for freedom and to understand the terror of religious justification.

The Horrid Relation

Covey used a religiously sanctioned program of pain, hunger, exhaustion, and the constant threat of humiliation to break the humanity of the slaves sent to his farm. Douglass writes, "Cry aloud and spare not, is the word of wisdom as well as of Scripture. 'Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free,' applies to the body no less than the soul, to this world no less than the world to come. Outside the truth there is no solid foundation for any of us..."[29] Christian morality means nothing if it does not extend to the lived reality of those who claim to follow its precepts. Covey knew that breaking the body is the way to break the spirit– that the dichotomy of body and soul which runs through the slaveholder's seeming misappropriation of the gospel message is merely a way to justify levels of cruelty that could never be visited upon persons holding the same ethical value as their masters. "Mr. Covey succeeded in breaking me. I was broken in body, soul, and spirit. My natural elasticity was crushed, my intellect languished, the disposition to read departed, the cheerful spark that lingered about my eye died; the dark night of slavery close in upon me; and behold a man transformed into a brute!"[30] This is the only instance in his autobiographical record that Douglass would

[29] Frederick Douglass, "I Denounce the So-Called Emancipation as a Stupendous Fraud," *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*, ed. by Philip S. Foner, adapted by Yuval Taylor, (Chicago, IL: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999), 713.

[30] Douglass, "Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass," 58.

admit that he was broken; that he did not have the resources to hold his humanity in the heat of Covey's program.

Douglass imagines himself a man brutalized and utterly stripped of the curiosity, determination, and resolve which resulted from the course of spiritual and physical emancipation he had been on, and which led to his being sent to be broken:

> The more I read, the more I was led to abhor and detest my enslavers. I could regard them in no other light than a band of successful robbers, who had left their homes, and gone to Africa, and stolen us from our homes, and in a strange land reduced us to slavery. I loathed them as being the meanest as well as the most wicked of men...that very discontentment which Master Hugh had predicted would follow my learning to read had already come to torment and sting my soul to unutterable anguish. As I writhed under it, I would at times feel that learning to read had been a curse rather than a blessing...In moments of agony, I envied my fellow slaves for their stupidity. I have often wished myself a beast...It was this everlasting thinking of my condition that tormented me. There was no getting rid of it.[31]

Douglass always linked the capacity for thought, for conceptualizing freedom and engaging in serious religious inquiry, to his ability to read. The written word opened the door to his own self-creation. But there is no degree of learning that could overcome the concrete reality of the hopelessness at Covey's farm. When Douglass writes of the auction block, he always makes it a point to mention being evaluated along with cattle, pigs, and horses.[32] Just as the auction block dehumanizes, the pain of the whip divests the slave of the self-conception intrinsic to the ability

[31] Douglass, "Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass," 42.
[32] Douglass, "Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass," 46.

to inhabit their dignity. When tortured, the human person no longer has the ability to envision their flourishing or to exercise control over the narrative of their life. Douglass, under the hand of Covey, was broken because he could no longer see his story as *his*. This is what it means to be brutalized, to be humiliated and broken.

This inability to conceive of one's own life as a narrative leading to emancipation and fulfillment, is what this dissertation insists is the ultimate loss of dignity. And for Douglass, the dignity inherent within the human person is the overriding message of the gospel. This dignity can only be demonstrated within the ability of persons to make ethical choices–to control what they are and how they ought to live with others. Dignity cannot be lost, but it can become disfigured through brutalizing dehumanization. Allowing slaves to enter into the circle of Christianity through baptism and communal participation, without giving them the ability to freely choose how they socially and morally interact with others, is such a contradiction to the religiosity of the slaveholder, that Douglass contends that this hypocrisy as the most wicked of the pains visited on Black people. Douglass writes:

> It is one of the damning characteristics of the slave system, that it robs its victims of every earthly incentive to a holy life. The fear of God, and the hope of heaven, are found sufficient to sustain many slave-women, amidst the snares and dangers of their strange lot; but, this side of God and heaven, a slave-woman is at the mercy of the power, caprice, and passion of her owner.[33]

Again, we return to Douglass's contention that slavery breeds its own morality. Douglass's birth was the result of a master exercising his arbitrary and vicious passions on his slaves–just as all

[33] Douglass, "My Bondage and My Freedom," 176.

slaves are born and live under an immense dominating power which crowds out their humanity in connection with the holiness which can only come from autonomy, from emancipation.

Covey ushered Douglass into the inner world of the slave broken and devoid of access to the moral universe of the Christian God. Douglass continues, "Slaveholders I hold to be individually and collectively responsible for all the evils which grow out of the horrid relation, and I believe they will be so held at the judgment, in the sight of a just God. Make a man a slave, and you rob him of moral responsibility. Freedom of choice is the essence of all accountability."[34] Freedom of choice defines what it means to enter into one's full humanity. The written word, for Douglass, was his entry into a wide world of existence where one is fully accountable for their decisions in the light of their ethical commitments and connections to others. Slavery, through the auction block and the whip, severs connections. The ethical commitments that Douglass gleaned from his encounter with the gospel were made a mockery through Auld's recitation of scripture at the whipping post and Covey's world-narrowing brand of humiliation.

Blackness as a Way of Knowing

Part of Douglass's reclamation of his self from the brutalizing nature of slavery, was to learn to envision the world in a different way. Religion played a major role in this revisioning, as well as coming to a realization of the ethical contradictions underlying the slave system. If one is determined to take their own humanity as a given, as both the result of natural law discourse and as the result of conversion to an emancipatory understanding of the gospel message, then the

[34] Douglass, "My Bondage and My Freedom," 248.

irresolvable core justifications of slavery become impossible to ignore. Douglass especially finds it impossible to resolve the difference between what slavers claim to believe and how they actually live in relation to the world. Douglass writes:

> It was a new and special revelation, dispelling a painful mystery, against which my youthful understanding had struggled, and struggled in vain, to wit: the *white* man's power to perpetuate the enslavement of the *black* man. "Very well," thought I, "knowledge unfits a child to be a slave." I instinctively assented to the proposition; and from that moment, I understood the direct pathway from slavery to freedom.[35]

This instinctive attestation is what Douglass would depend on his audience to experience as they encountered the reality of the slave system. Douglass is describing his revelation as a new way of knowing the world brought about by appropriating the ability to read and insisting on the humanity which survived Covey's attention.

This way of knowing is wrapped up in an understanding of how power insists on its own moral vocabulary which is often in direct contradiction to the actions taken to continue systems of domination rooted in dehumanization. Douglass was broken, but not beyond the ability of a new way of knowing to heal. I call this new way of knowing blackness:

> To use [Auld's] own words...he said, "If you give a nigger an inch, he will take an ell. A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master–to do as he is told to do. Learning would *spoil* the best nigger in the world...It would make him discontented and unhappy." These words sank deep into my heart, stirred up sentiments within that lay slumbering, and called into existence an entirely new train of thought. It was a new and special

[35] Douglass, "My Bondage and My Freedom," 218.

> revelation, explaining dark and mysterious things...I now understood what had been to me a most perplexing difficulty–to wit, the white man's power to enslave the black man."[36]

This perplexity comes from the lived experience of one's humanity subjected to the impossibility of bifurcation–of the body chained while the soul is saved. It comes from seeing the unjust and arbitrary power of white supremacy demonstrated in the flesh of the slave tied to the whipping post. Douglass, as he roved around America in service of the hope of abolition, introduced white audiences to the hermeneutic of blackness as he interpreted the religion of the south through the lens of the humiliated still clinging to their humanity. Douglass lived the contradiction of slavery through his intellectual grappling with the natural political meaning of personhood and the Christianity used in service of slavery: "I might rely with the utmost confidence on the results which, he said, would flow from teaching me to read. What he most dreaded, that I most desired. What he most loved, that I most hated. That which to him was a great evil, to be carefully shunned, was to me a great good, to be diligently sought..."[37] The knowing which results from self-creation, in this case blackness as a way of knowing, interprets reality in a way which openly questions the state of the world that twists morality into the unique and hypocritical religiously justified logics of slavery.

Blackness Interpreting: Condemnation as the Prophetic

Douglass was not a moral suasionist. Douglass's call to live in an ethically consistent way was always tied to the condemnation of society as it was currently constituted in slaveocracy.

[36] Douglass, "Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass," 37.
[37] Douglass, "Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass," 38.

Douglass used his narratives to convict the United States of failing to live up to its professed ideals and to hold itself accountable for its moral failings. I use conviction in what I take to be its most normative sense, as ascribing guilt based on laws which result from a shared humanity and the assumed equality of being which can be inferred from Douglass's understanding of Christianity and natural law. Frank M. Kirkland writes, "Moral suasion would be used to *counteract* the moral ignorance of and blindness to the self-evident character of human nature and rights."[38] In fact, Douglass was much more attuned to the tragic nature of whiteness than he is often given credit for. Note Douglass's repeated insistence on the ability of self-deception to confuse piety for cruelty. After the death of John Brown, Douglass conceded:

> Moral considerations have long since been exhausted upon slaveholders. It is in vain to reason with them. One might as well hunt bears with ethics and political economy for weapons, as to seek to 'pluck the spoiled out of the hand of the oppressor' by the mere force of moral law. Slavery is a system of brute force. It shields itself behind *might*, rather than right. It must be met with its own weapons.[39]

This passage is often taken as proof of Douglass's conversion to violence, and civil war, over the moral suasion of his early period. I contend that it is a continuation of Douglass's conception of what it means to be fully human. Douglass never set out to bring his story to slaveholders in the

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[38] Franklin M. Kirkland, "Enslavement, Moral Suasion, and the Struggles for Recognition: Frederick Douglass's Answer to the Question–"What is Enlightenment?"," *Frederick Douglass: A Critical Reader*, ed. by Bill E. Lawson and Frank M. Kirkland, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, Ltd., 1999), 245.

[39] Frederick Douglass, "Capt. John Brown Not Insane," *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*, ed. by Philip S. Foner, adapted by Yuval Taylor, (Chicago, IL: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999), 375.

hope of persuading them of the wrongness of their actions, rather, Douglass's cause was to bring his way of knowing to those who were blinded by their own social supremacy.

Douglass acted in the prophetic mode of public, social, and religious prosecutor. His goal was the awareness that one could only support slaveocracy if they were prepared to accept that such a system had no religious or philosophical justification. The slaveholder's religion of the south and natural law insisted that, "It is better that a dozen slaves suffer under the lash, than that the overseer should be convicted, in the presence of the slaves, of having been at fault."[40] Douglass's arguments rested on the revelation of the hypocrisy of the assumed national piety which countenanced enslavement and the barbarous inhumanity of the society which allows slavery to exist. The listeners, often those of a religious or abolitionist temperament, were guilty of the same deceitful and self-serving justice which defined slaveholder religious justifications, if they were not openly supporting and agitating for the humanity of Black persons.

The annunciation of a new way of knowing, of blackness interpreting what it means to exist in the dignity of one's full humanity, was meant to move those whose beliefs were not completely corrupted by white supremacy. The religious and ethical valence of Douglass's speech acts should not be reduced to mere persuasion: "From the earliest recollection, I date the entertainment of a deep conviction that slavery would not always be able to hold me within its foul embrace; and in the darkest hours of my career in slavery, this living word of faith and spirit of hope departed not from me, but remained like ministering angels to cheer me through the gloom. This good spirit was from God, and to him I offer thanksgiving and praise."[41] Douglass, as we read above, saw himself as broken, but there remained a fragment of who he was under

[40] Douglass, "Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave," 29.
[41] Ibid., 36.

God, and from that fragment he can begin the work of self-creation–of imposing a narrative reality on the experience of a totalizing brutality. This was the same God who spoke to Douglass through his investigation of the gospel and, in Douglass's reckoning, spoke to all those who suffered under the lash. In reference to Nat Turner's rebellion, Douglass concluded that: "the thought was present, that God was angry with the white people because of their slaveholding wickedness, and, therefore, his judgments were abroad in the land. It was impossible for me not to hope much from the abolition movement, when I saw it supported by the Almighty, and armed with Death!"[42] Douglass's condemnation of white supremacy was always predicated on a higher order of justice that would make itself known through the movement of the people toward the goal of abolition.

Any morally consistent conception of justice must account for the spiritual repercussions of slavery, that Douglass well knew from Covey, and the material reality of what it means to survive a socially and religiously sanctioned brutality. Douglass wrote in a letter to Horace Greely:

> Believing [the disreputable nature of slavery] most firmly, and being a lover of Freedom, a hater of Slavery, one who has felt the bloody whip and worn the galling chain–sincerely and earnestly longing for the deliverance of my sable brethren from their awful bondage, I am bound to expose its character, whenever and wherever opportunity is afforded me. I would attract to it the attention of the world. I would fix upon it the piercing eye of insulted Liberty. I would arraign it at the bar of Eternal Justice, and summon the Universe to witness against it. I would concentrate against it the moral and religious sentiment of

[42] Douglass, "My Bondage and My Freedom," 231.

> Christian people of every "class, color, and clime." I would have the guilty slaveholder see his condemnation written in every human face, and hear it proclaimed in every human voice, till, overwhelmed with shame and confusion, he resolved to cease his wicked course, undo the heavy burden, and let the oppressed go free.[43]

Douglass's condemnatory vision calls upon the authority of God to convict the cruelty of the slaveholder state and the system which stands as an insult to the order of the universe. Notice Douglass's religiously infused language which calls for "deliverance" and consideration in the court of "Eternal Justice" when calling for those who count themselves among Christian believers to bear witness at the fiery trial. The "slaveholding religion of the southern states, and the northern religion that sympathizes with it" are due to be convicted according to the religious and moral sentiments which animate the ideals instantiated in the project of the United States.[44]

There is a cosmic accounting owed to the justice Douglass seeks through the act of speaking his life and humanity into existence. Quoting James 3:17, Douglass said: "I love the religion of our blessed Savior. I love that religion that comes from above, in the 'wisdom of God, which is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be entreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy.'"[45] As pointed out by Margaret Aymer, Douglass seldom engaged in formal *apologia*.[46] Rather, Douglass depended on a shared conception of

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[43] Frederick Douglass, "To Horace Greeley, April 15, 1846," *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*, ed. by Philip S. Foner, adapted by Yuval Taylor, (Chicago, IL: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999), 29.

[44] Frederick Douglass, "An Appeal to the British People," *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*, ed. by Philip S. Foner, adapted by Yuval Taylor, (Chicago, IL: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999), 37.

[45] Douglass, "An Appeal to the British People," 37.

[46] Margaret Aymer, *First Pure, Then Peaceable: Frederick Douglass Reads James*, (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2008), 44.

Christian mercy and love which moved in opposition to the, what was to him, self-evident hypocrisy which could only be overlooked due to the power of white supremacist self-deception. Douglass's call for justice within a guiding universal order, is situated in the religion that he conceived of giving him the resources to reclaim his selfhood from the ministrations of Covey and to take on the task of sharing his story with the world. I believe that Douglass is sincere when he writes, "I loved all mankind–slaveholders not excepted; though I abhorred slavery more than ever. My great concern was, now, to have the world converted."[47] But Douglass's love and hope for conversion is still subject to the justice of God which hates hypocrisy and is duty bound to the mission of overthrowing slaveocracy. This overthrowing could not, due to the entrenched misappropriation of religious justification and the base demonstration of power inherent in the domination of slavery, come about through moral suasion without the assurance of Godly vengeance sweeping the earth: "The slaveholder has been tried and sentenced, his execution only waits the finish to the training of his executioners. He is training his own executioners."[48]

Conclusion

So, what can be said of blackness as it emerges from Douglass's narrative and self-reclamation? Douglass lived long enough to witness the crumbling of the Reconstruction and the beginnings of the Jim Crow era–to see the hopes of wide-ranging justice and reconciliation doomed to a white supremacy so ingrained in the American condition that it could survive a civil war. I have argued that blackness is the epistemological reality which emerges from the experience of

[47] Douglass, "My Bondage and My Freedom," 231.

[48] Frederick Douglass, "Peaceful Annihilation of Slavery is Hopeless," *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*, ed. by Philip S. Foner, adapted by Yuval Taylor, (Chicago, IL: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999), 344.

enslavement and the reclamation of one's humanity from the logics of a Christianity founded on brutality and humiliation. Douglass then uses this new way of knowing to question the bifurcation of the human person which results from the internal hypocrisy of slaveholder religion. The interpretive power of blackness is used to reinterpret the conceptions of freedom, personhood, and humanity which were corrupted through the process of the communal breaking of a people. Douglass is then able to use the dignity which arises from self-narrativization and moral autonomy to convict the slaveocracy and those who support systems of oppression relying on a Christian ethics which sees dehumanization as an affront to the God of the universe whose being insures justice. These conclusions I have drawn from Douglass's speeches and autobiographies are sorely tested by the reinstantiation of white supremacy after the Civil War.

In the next chapter, I will explore how W. E. B. Du Bois can speak to how the way of knowing that is blackness responds to the ethical and material demands of Jim Crow and the emergent Civil Rights era. But here, a few more points should be made concerning Douglass's conception of self and what Charles W. Mills sees as his unequivocal adoption of "what, in contemporary vocabulary, would be called the 'epistemological standpoint' of race."[49] Douglass is generally considered as firstly a natural law theoretician of human morality with a Lockean inflected religiosity which acts, primarily, as a source for equal consideration of the human person: "The doctrine of the image of God is often regarded as grounding human dignity in something permanent and unchanging that transcends our attitudes and behaviors. All who bear the image of God are taken to share a fundamentally equal, and particularly weighty, form of

[49] Charles W. Mills, "Whose Fourth of July? Frederick Douglass and "Original Intent"," *Frederick Douglass: A Critical Reader*, ed. by Bill E. Lawson and Frank M. Kirkland, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, Ltd., 1999), 102.

moral considerability."[50] Often missed in this standard discourse is the place of condemnation in Douglass's moral stance toward slaveholders and the enablers of the system of domination justified by a perverted form of Christianity. In fact, as stated by Jennifer A. Herdt, "Christians have not found it difficult to hold together affirmations of divine sovereignty, and of universal human creation in the image of God, with dehumanization of the enemy."[51] Douglass's conception of the human person, claiming the dignity owed to their station as choice-making moral agents, manages to call for justice through divine sovereignty without dehumanization. War itself, according to Douglass, would not be humiliating or brutalizing because it would avoid the arbitrariness of slaveholder punishment. The consequences of injustice would be due in a cosmic sense and would be justified through commonly held notions of right and wrong which resist the lure of self-serving deceitful hypocrisy.

Douglass was operating in a mode of the prophet rather than of a political philosopher appealing to the rational natures of his audience. Douglass used his blackness as a witness to the contradictions inherent in the failure of the United States to comport their civil actions and policies with the claims to universal humanity enshrined in the Constitution and preached in its pulpits:

> Douglass was a living prophet of an American destruction, exile, war for its existence, and redemption. Jeremiah and Isaiah, as well as other prophets, were his guides; they gave him story, metaphor, resolve, and ancient wisdom in order to deliver his ferocious

[50] Jennifer A. Herdt, "Of Wild Beasts and Bloodhounds: John Locke and Frederick Douglass on the Forfeiture of Humanity," Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics 41, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2021): 213.

[51] Herdt, "Of Wild Beasts and Bloodhounds," 223.

critique of slavery and his country before emancipation, and then his strained but hopeful narrative of its future after 1865.[52]

Self-making was the project of Douglass as he constructed, then reconstructed, his life to speak to the urgency of abolition and the plight of slavery. In convicting the slaveholder of injustice, Douglass challenged his audience to consider what their ethical self-conception really consisted of when exposed to the inhumane reality of enslavement. And what it truly meant to have the moral authority and duty to cry out for the oppressed. Douglass notes that the slave, "looked around for something that really belonged to himself, he found nothing but his shadow, and that vanished into the air, when he might most want it."[53] The vestiges of the slave's existence are contingent on forces beyond their control. Douglass believed that the self-narrativization involved in the conception of blackness, and then making the choice to use the resultant epistemological standpoint to convict the hypocrisy of society, is a prophetic undertaking ordained by God through a natural order which ensures justice.

There is an old story which tells of people who could fly. As Virginia Hamilton relates, "they would walk up on the air like climbin up on a gate. And they flew like blackbirds over the fields. Black, shiny wings flappin against the blue up there."[54] As the people were taken from Africa, they lost the ability to sprout wings–the shackles and hopelessness of slavery robbing them of their knowledge of freedom. Only Old Toby remembered the old words and could cry out to the fallen, raising them into the air with their forgotten knowledge of freedom restored.

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[52] Blight, *Frederick Douglass*, xviii.

[53] Frederick Douglass, "Why is the Negro Lynched?," *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*, ed. by Philip S. Foner, adapted by Yuval Taylor, (Chicago, IL: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999), 775.

[54] Hamilton, *The People Could Fly*, 166.

Old Toby would lean down and speak freedom into existence, "Whispers and sighs. And they too rose on the air. They rode the hot breezes. The ones flyin were black and shinin sticks, wheelin above the head of the Overseer. They crossed the rows, the fields, the streams, and were away."[55] Toby lacked the ability to save all the slaves on the farm, but in his escape into the air he gave them hope.

Hamilton notes that there are many tales of slaves flying off into the night, of mysteriously and supernaturally disappearing into the darkness.[56] What Hamilton does not point out, is that many of these tales of slaves flying spoke to the deaths which resulted from the arbitrary and brutal realization of racialized hatred. The promise of being taken up, of slipping their chains and escaping their earthly captivity, allowed slaves to speak of those who had been made to disappear without conceding to the reality of their daily lives. The narratives of Douglass speak so powerfully because his very survival, and thriving as a fully realized person, demonstrated that slaves had the power to reclaim lost knowledge and, thereby, to whisper and sigh a new way of being into existence.

[55] Hamilton, *The People Could Fly*, 170.
[56] Hamilton, *The People Could Fly*, 172.

Chapter 2

The Soul's Striving:
W. E. B. Du Bois and Black Dignity Emerging from Within the Veil

" For now we see only a reflection, as in a mirror, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known (1 Cor. 13:12, NRSV)."

"We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries
To thee from tortured souls arise.
We sing, but oh the clay is vile
Beneath our feet, and long the mile;
But let the world dream otherwise,
We wear the mask!"[1]

A man was lynched on the 23rd of April in 1899. Sam Hose was seized by a mob and murdered in an extra-judicial act of communal violence. Hose was stripped naked then tied to the trunk of a pine tree and secured with chains. Children searched the woods for kindling while men began to soak the tree with kerosene.[2] Reportedly, Hose began to beg to be killed quickly, but the mob, encouraged and seemingly delighted by their numbers, began to slowly torture the man in an act of unmitigated cruelty and brutality. Philip Dray writes, "The torture of the victim lasted almost an hour. It began when a man stepped forward and very matter-of-factly sliced off Hose's ears. Then several men grabbed Hose's arms and held them forward so his fingers could be severed one by one and shown to the crowd."[3] These were relics given to the spectators, souvenirs to be retained in remembrance of the event. "Finally, a blade was passed between his thighs, Hose

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[1] Paul Laurence Dunbar, "We Wear the Mask," *The Sport of the Gods and Other Essential Writings,* ed. by Shelley Fisher Fishkin and David Bradley, (New York, NY: The Modern Library, 2005), 48.

[2] See Philip Dray, *At the Hands of Persons Unknown: The Lynching of Black America*, (New York, NY: Random House, 2002), 14.

[3] Dray, *At the Hands of Persons Unknown*, 15.

cried in agony, and a moment later his genitals were held aloft;" the act of vengeance could only be complete with the total emasculation of the supposed offender.[4] Dray records Hose's final moments: "'Sweet Jesus!' Hose was heard to exclaim, and these were believed to be his last words. As the flames began licking at his legs and smoke entered his nose, eyes, and mouth he turned his head desperately from side to side."[5] It is reported that Hose struggled so mightily against his bonds, that he had to be held back with "heavy pieces of wood" to prevent his mangled and brutalized body from falling into the assembly.[6]

We must imagine the sun rising on the body of Sam Hose charred beyond recognition on the pyre. The stench of burning flesh must have filled the nostrils of the thousands of people who came to witness the spectacle. The sight of children and young men rushing forward to claim pieces of Hose's body must have been amusing within the carnivalesque atmosphere. To understand W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folks*, we must inhabit the reality of the lynching of Sam Hose. The reality that Du Bois was speaking to in his writings and Du Bois's struggle for the uplift of Black personhood needs to be realized within the context of a sort of violence which offends common conceptions of what it means to be human.

In Du Bois's telling, the lynching of Sam Hose intersects with the core concepts that Du Bois would contend with during his long career. Du Bois writes:

> I remember when it first, as it were, startled me to my feet: a poor Negro in central Georgia, Sam Hose, had killed his landlord's wife. I wrote out a careful and reasoned statement concerning the evident facts and started down to the Atlanta *Constitution*

[4] Dray, *At the Hands of Persons Unknown*, 15.
[5] Dray, *At the Hands of Persons Unknown*, 15.
[6] Dray, *At the Hands of Persons Unknown*, 15.

> office...I did not get there. On the way news met me: Sam Hose had been lynched, and they said that his knuckles were on exhibition at a grocery store farther down on Mitchell Street, along which I was walking. I turned back to the university. I began to turn aside from my work.[7]

Du Bois comes to the realization that his work lacked the immediacy of the moment. The assumed unbiased stance of the social scientist fails to respond the desperate pleas of Sam Hose to be released from the agony of racialized violence. The reasoned response to the ultimate humiliation of Sam Hose could not account for charred knuckles displayed in a grocer's window. Whatever ethical standards or ideals attached to civilized humanity were not extended toward a Black man; no trial or reasonable standards of law and common life were needed to exact retribution. The reality of Jim Crow and the lynch mob required a new understanding of what it meant to form and exist within Black personhood.

Du Bois's work is animated by the question: How does it feel to be a problem? In this chapter, I will attempt to answer this question through an investigation of the ethical and social dimensions of the human person emerging from the brutality of enslavement into an era of crucifixion. The metaphor of the veil encompasses Du Bois's construction of what it means to claim personhood under the existential threat of arbitrary violence. The gift of second sight relates to the autonomy and flourishing possible through the determination to see the world in a new way–blackness becomes a hermeneutic that can be used to interpret the struggle against racialized hatred as a project encompassing humanity's striving toward truth. Blackness, in the

[7] W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Autobiography of W. E. B. Du Bois: A Soliloquy on Viewing My Life from the Last Decade of Its First Century*, ed. by Herbert Aptheker, (Canada: International Publishers, 1968), 222.

sense emerging from Du Bois's work, is both a socio-political force for self-realization and the answer to the question of how America, and perhaps the world, can be saved from its own drive toward inhumanity. I contend that through investigating Du Bois's work, focusing mostly on *The Souls of Black Folk*, we will come to an understanding of the bifurcated self which results from the dehumanization involved in the concept and reality of double-consciousness. Black dignity is formed from the soul's striving for a self-realized, though communally oriented, liberated existence.

I will begin by exploring and outlining the concept of the shadow of the veil and blackness as an epistemology arising from the embrace of the gift of second sight. Of special importance in this section is to understand how Du Bois uses conceptual metaphors to describe an existence which not only must survive a post-Reconstruction era of racialized violence but must also somehow claim a humanity from the shadow cast by the peculiar history of enslavement. Next, I will reconsider the Negro problem–drawing out the complexity of the problem as presented in Du Bois's work. The Negro problem is not limited to, but is considered through, the experience and creation of a Black self from the crucible of a disintegrated double-consciousness. Problematizing Black existence allows Du Bois to consider uplift and striving beyond the bounds of the purely political into a realm of morality and spirituality which challenges what it means to be human. This leads to a discussion of Du Bois's faith in a humanistic education and the soul's striving for truth. The final move of this chapter is to begin to develop a conception of Black dignity which results from the mission of self-creation and social critique. The shadow of the veil, despite the horrors of its creation and continuing impact on Black life, holds important possibilities for new ways of knowing.

The Concept of the Veil and Blackness as Second Sight

The metaphor of the veil represents the necessity of distorting one's personhood in response to the persistent threat of arbitrary violence. To live within the veil is to recognize the fragility of existence within a system based on humiliation. This is a state of contingent humanity given to the whims of a society gripped by white supremacy. Du Bois writes:

> ...the Negro is sort of a seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,–a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.[8]

Du Bois is referencing the tradition of the seventh son, within the sphere of American folk tales, as one imbued with special importance. To be born with the veil, with the amniotic sac covering one's face, according to many folk legends, gives one access to higher planes of understanding– the gift of second sight allows one to see the world in light of the transcendent and to prophesy the future; "Du Bois paints a picture of the Negro that suggests the Negro's capacity for second sight is an ability to see what is ordinarily not available to be seen..."[9] In the sense of the one born into the condition of blackness, the gifts of second sight are diminished through a world narrowed to the American experience of racialized humiliation. Access to one's true self-consciousness is always negotiated with a world created through a deep history of enslavement,

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[8] W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Souls of Black Folk," *W. E. B. Du Bois: Writings,* ed. by Nathan Huggins, (New York, NY: Library Classics of the United States, 1986), 364.

[9] Robert Gooding-Williams, *In the Shadow of Du Bois: Afro-Modern Political Thought in America,* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 78.

cruelty, and dehumanization. The soul's ultimate dimensions are determined by how it is deformed to fit into the measurements of a world which regards blackness as a thing to be despised.

Du Bois continues, "One ever feel his two-ness–an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder."[10] It is this 'two-ness' which defines the Negro problem for Du Bois–How can a unified self be created from the warring duality of the Black person who must always view the self through the prism of white supremacy? Gary Dorrien writes, in *The New Abolition*, "[Du Bois's] struggle to forge his double self into a better, truer, self-consciously integral self was key to African American existence."[11] The bifurcation of the Black self, as experienced post-emancipation, brings to light new challenges to the ability of blackness to interpret the world in a way which responds to the demands of inhabiting an autonomy determined through hatred and violence. Du Bois alludes to the dogged strength attached to the survival of Blacks under the shadow of the veil, his project is to find a way to experience flourishing and integrity within the context of America.

To live within the veil is to constantly struggle to claim personhood from the condition of existence under white supremacy. The challenge of abolition, to create personhood through the ultimate conditions of humiliation, must turn inwards in order to counter the moral harm of having to divide the self in order to survive a new autonomous reality defined by hatred. Du Bois writes, "Men go wild and fight for freedom with bestial ferocity when they must–where there is

[10] Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 364-365.

[11] Gary Dorrien, *The New Abolition: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Black Social Gospel*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015), 187. And also, Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 365.

no other way; but human nature does not deliberately choose blood–at least not black human nature."[12] Blackness has the ability, the potential, to counteract the degraded humanity which results from an American world rooted in white supremacy. The lynch mob, the harbingers of the American reality, represents a human nature twisted by unreason and hatred. The veil, in a sense, also harms those who have the power to dehumanize others arbitrarily–to inhabit such a condition leads to a bestial nature that subsumes the humanity of participants in the committing of mob violence–only such an understanding of dehumanization could account for the lynching of Sam Hose. According to Robert Gooding-Williams, "Du Bois further develops this suggestion by presenting the Negro's power of second sight as an ability to see the world as it is disclosed to the sight of a social group different than one's own–thus as it is ordinarily not available to be seen–in this case, the world as it is disclosed to the sight of white Americans. Gifted with second sight, the Negro can see reality as whites see it, and so can see himself as whites see him."[13] The goal of integrating one's self-consciousness can lead to a new way of experiencing and relating to what it means to be human. When blackness is conceived of as a way of knowing and understanding, we can begin to understand Du Bois's project in its fullness as a way of suggesting the ethical and hermeneutical possibilities of Black personhood.

Du Bois often frames the project of self-creation and reclamation as "striving." In this sense, moral, spiritual, and social uplift is the process of overcoming the limitations of the veil:

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[12] W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2007), 53.

[13] Gooding-Williams, *The Shadow of Du Bois*, 78.

> In those sombre forests of his striving his own soul rose before him, and he saw himself,–darkly as through a veil;[14] and yet he saw in himself some faint revelation of his power, of his mission. He began to have a dim feeling that, to attain his place in the world, he must be himself, and not another. For the first time he sought to analyze the burden he bore upon his back, that dead-weight of social degradation partially masked behind a half-named Negro problem.[15]

The veil not only traps the self within the constant, and deadening, reality of disintegration, it also prevents the formation of the concept of human flourishing or personal advancement. The faint mission of self-creation is clouded by the necessity of finding resources for survival under the shadow of the lynching tree. Double-consciousness is a "false and alienated consciousness" trapped by a false autonomy.[16] Striving encompasses the project of becoming, and in this case, of developing blackness into a way of knowing emerging into the clarity of a self claimed from beyond the veil.

The persistence of the veil, as both a condition of survival and as a looming presence casting a dark shadow over one's ability to truly conceive of an integrated self-consciousness, prevents the Black soul from flourishing. In the chapter titled *Of the Passing of the First-Born*, Du Bois writes with a deep self-compassion and sorrow for the death of his child. But even in suffering, Du Bois must strive against the shadow of the veil: "Within the Veil was he born, said I; and there within shall he live,–a Negro and a Negro's son."[17] The color-line is ever present to Du Bois and all Black persons subject to American life. The thrownness of Black existence leads

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[14] See 1 Corinthians 13:12.
[15] Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 368.
[16] Gooding-Williams, *The Shadow of Du Bois*, 67.
[17] Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 507.

Du Bois to question the underlying logics of the truth claims undergirding white supremacy. Du Bois writes, "And then some unjust God leaned, laughing, over the ramparts of heaven and dropped a black man in the midst."[18] This statement comes from *Black Reconstruction in America* as Du Bois struggled with the failures of Reconstruction and the hopes of emancipation. The unjust nature of the veil means that blackness must come to a new way of knowing what it is to inhabit liberty and what it means to be human. This constant work and suffering lead Du Bois to question the existential worth of Black life. Du Bois insists that to be born Black in America is to cling to a "hope not hopeless but unhopeful, and seeing with those bright wondering eyes that peer into my soul a land whose freedom is to us a mockery and whose liberty a lie. I saw the shadow of the Veil as it passed over my baby."[19] Already, Du Bois can see the double-sightedness emerging within the eyes of his son–Du Bois comes to view his own soul through the eyes of the child in an act of disintegration which already subjects the boy to the shadow of the veil. Notice how Du Bois is self-consciously using different genres of storytelling, both fictive and non-fictive, to narrativize his story. Also notice how "Veil" is now capitalized in the context of the death of his child. Du Bois sees the Veil as the personification of the deep injustice which even claims Black death as subject to the reality constructed in service of white supremacy.

Self-realization emerges from the process of a personal and communal striving against the Veil. In this sense, to be Black is to seek both survival and personhood within the struggle to claim the self from the unjust reality of the American project. Du Bois states that, "I shirk not. I long for work. I pant for a life full of striving. I am no coward, to shrink before the rugged rush

[18] Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 23.
[19] Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 507.

of the storm, nor even quail before the awful shadow of the Veil."[20] The death of Du Bois's son means that he will be spared the burden of striving, but it is within the crucible of Jim Crow that the gift of second sight can emerge into the way of knowing that is a blackness conceived in relation to an emancipatory autonomy. In the essay *The Souls of White Folk*, Du Bois writes:

> Of them I am singularly clairvoyant. I see in and through them. I view them from unusual point of vantage. Not as a foreigner do I come, for I am native, not foreign, bone of their thought and flesh of their language...Nor yet is my knowledge that which servants have of their masters, or mass of class, or capitalist of artisan. Rather I see these souls undressed and from the back and side. I see the working of their entrails. I know their thoughts and they know that I know. This knowledge makes them embarrassed, now furious! They deny my right to live and call me misbirth...yet as they preach and strut and shout and threaten, crouching as they clutch at rags of facts and fancies to hide their nakedness, they go twisting, flying by my tired eyes and I see them ever stripped,–ugly, human.[21]

The striving for Black personhood through the shadow of the veil must, of necessity, rupture the conception of the America built on white supremacy. The result of this rupture is an all-encompassing humanity; the knowledge of justice which comes through blackness denies to white supremacists the power over life and death of the formerly enslaved. Whites are reduced to their mere humanity within the project of becoming. Du Bois is clairvoyant–the second sight of the self-created, of the integrated self, allows him to see beyond the veil and into the possibilities

[20] Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 508.

[21] W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Souls of White Folk," *W. E. B. Du Bois: Writings*, ed. by Nathan Huggins, (New York, NY: Library Classics of the United States, 1986), 923.

of a world to come where we see one another stripped of arbitrary power and structural inequity. A new world of possibility and true emancipation is the work of striving and is an emerging counter to the concrete reality of the lynching tree.

The Negro Problem Reconsidered

The Negro problem, as conceived by Du Bois, deals with the bifurcation of the Black self due to the constant state of a soul bound up in the horror of a disintegrated double-consciousness which is required to survive in a sociality founded in oppression and humiliation. There are deeply humanistic possibilities for advancement of Black persons and of America as a whole if the gift of second sight can be claimed by an integrated self. To come to this personal integration, to create a fully autonomous blackness, one has to contend with the reality of white supremacy and the shadow of the veil which haunts the newly emancipated. In *The Philadelphia Negro*, Du Bois considers the problem in this way:

> ...the Negro problems are no more hopelessly complex than many others have been. Their elements despite their bewildering complication can be kept clearly in view: they are after all the same difficulties over which the world has grown gray: the question as to how far human intelligence can be trusted and trained; as to whether we must always have the poor with us; as to whether it is possible for the mass of men to attain righteousness on earth; and then to this is added that question of questions: after all who are Men?[22]

[22] W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2007), 268.

This was written before Du Bois's dramatic confrontation of the veil through the lynching of Sam Hose. Who are men? or, who is imbued with a full accounting of their humanity, is a question considered alongside an outlining of the Negro problem. Between *The Philadelphia Negro* and *The Souls of Black Folk*, the emphasis of Du Bois's socio-ethical investigation evolved. In the above quote Blacks have problems; after an intimate experience with Black death the question is what it feels to *be* a problem. The difference between having a set of problems that are able to be rationally solved and the condition of having one's being considered a problem represents a foundational shift in Du Bois's conception of what must to be done to secure the self-realization of Black persons. It is no longer a question of the correct sociological policy; it becomes the project of speaking one's self into existence. The mix of narratival structures, the allusions to the Bible, all are attempts to tell the story of the Black soul to an unbelieving reader– Du Bois is aiming at conversion and using all the tools at his disposal to tell the story.

The Negro problem cannot be reduced to a matter of sociological forces impacting Black folk or "'a group united by a collectively shared ethos or spirit."[23] Therefore the spiritual striving of a people has to go beyond questions of development or respectability. Blackness as a way of knowing, as a way of inhabiting the gift of second sight without losing oneself to the shadow of the veil, must adapt and grow in order to meet the challenges of the post-Reconstruction and Jim Crow reality of arbitrary racialized violence. One's person is the problem in a society where to be Black is to be considered a sub-human, and thus a soulless, threat. *The Souls of Black Folk* is written to both justify the soul-life of Black folk and to argue for the epistemological, political, and, in Du Bois's unique way, the theological value of Black knowing and being. Read in this

[23] Gooding-Williams, *The Shadow of Du Bois*, 4.

sense, uplift and striving carry deep ethical and social possibilities for the future of a shared humanity. As Gooding-Williams points out, "During the years [Du Bois] wrote the essays that found their ways into *Souls*, 'the Negro problem' was Du Bois's primary category for comprehending white supremacy. Reference to 'the Negro problem' was common among Du Bois's contemporaries, but in Du Bois's writing this popular though somewhat obscure phrase acquired the precision of a term of art."[24] Gooding-Williams' *In the Shadow of Du Bois*, primarily considers *The Souls of Black Folk* as a political tract arguing for what he terms "expressive self-realization."[25] Expressive self-realization contends that Du Bois viewed the political project of communal uplift in terms of assimilating the Black masses into a unified force for social change. I would say that Du Bois's striving for uplift moves beyond the politics of the post-Reconstruction era into the realm of the religious and ethical through seeking personal integration and self-creation which transcends the veil.

To gain more understanding of Du Bois's reading of the Negro problem, it is necessary to consider his later work *Black Reconstruction in America*. *Black Reconstruction* is usually read through Du Bois's embrace of Marxist analyses in his later life. *Black Reconstruction* deals primarily with enslaved Blacks as an economic class and the Reconstruction Era as a missed opportunity for the newly emancipated and poor whites to claim political and social power after the Civil War. But even in this later work, Du Bois is still dealing with the survival of the Black soul under the conditions of existential and physical terror. Du Bois writes, "The hurt to the Negro in this era was not only his treatment in slavery; it was the wound dealt to his reputation

[24] Gooding-Williams, *The Shadow of Du Bois*, 16-17.
[25] Gooding-Williams, *The Shadow of Du Bois*, 17.

as a human being. Nothing was left; nothing was sacred."[26] The brutality of enslavement was designed to deny the humanity of those reduced to chattel. Du Bois specifically refers to this humiliation as a "hurt," as a wound to the spiritual and psychological state of the enslaved. Again, Du Bois asks how it *feels* to be a problem–enslavement was not simply a political caste inhabited by Black people, it was a condition which challenged the existence of their humanity. The sacred reality of the human person was denied to the enslaved; "African history became the tale of degraded animals and sub-human savages, where no vestige of human culture found foothold."[27]

The soul hurt of enslavement, the humiliation of a brutalized people, manifests in the continued problematized existence of the Black self living in the shadow of the veil. Du Bois writes:

> It is easy for men to discount and misunderstand the suffering or harm done others. Once accustomed to poverty, to the sight of toil and degradation, it easily seems normal and natural; once it is hidden beneath a different color of skin, a different stature or a different habit of action and speech, and all consciousness of inflicting ill disappears.[28]

The cruelty of the veil is that it forces Black persons, as a condition of survival, to inhabit this distorted and degraded view of the self. This distortion is what is meant when we speak of the moral harm caused by life within the veil: one is constantly forced to humiliate one's self merely to exist. The project of uplift is meant to counter this self-degradation, not to simply gain certain

[26] Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 31.
[27] Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 31.
[28] Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 41.

forms of power that, after all, rely on racialized forms of dominance for its very existence.[29] Du Bois continues, "The mere fact that a man could be, under the law, the actual master of the mind and body of human beings had to have disastrous effects...As the world had long learned, nothing is so calculated to ruin human nature as absolute power over human beings."[30] The spiritual striving for uplift is not a project of assimilation into a system doomed to fail due to its inhumane nature. Instead, Du Bois insists that the second sight developed through living within the veil can lead to a new way of being–a new way of knowing that integrates the realities of Jim Crow into a moral project of overcoming a degraded nature. This new way of knowing is a black epistemology–a way of interpreting the world through the shadow of the veil and into a new way of being in community. Second sight develops when it becomes a tool for seeing the world both as it is and as it ought to be.

The felt problem to Negroes is how to come to terms with the reality white supremacy and lay claim to the sacrality of the Black soul. Du Bois writes, "he saw himself,–darkly as through a veil; and yet he saw in himself some faint revelation of his power, of his mission."[31] We can imagine Frederick Douglass stealing time between working the fields to teach himself to read. Or we can recall Du Bois turning away from his work in *The Philadelphia Negro* and toward a more expansive and compassionate understanding in *The Souls of Black Folk*. There is also the faint allusion to 1 Corinthians 13:12 as translated in the King James Version: "For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part, but then shall I know

[29] For more on Du Bois and uplift, see the essay '"The Talented Tenth' Revisited" in Stephanie J. Shaw, *W. E. B. Du Bois and* The Souls of Black Folk, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 61-74.

[30] Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 41-42.

[31] Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 368.

even as also I am known." Notice that Du Bois, once again, appeals to the language of the sacred to describe the conditionality of Black existence and the call to confront the problem a Black self created within the veil. Du Bois insists that even within the shadow of the veil, one can encounter a revealed beauty emerging from the conditionality of blackness: "beauty revealed to him was the soul-beauty of a race which his larger audience despised..."[32] The experience of blackness as an "oasis of simple faith and reverence in a dusty desert of dollars and smartness," speaks to the possibilities of the gift of second sight and a problematic existence transmuted into a hermeneutic used to critique the values and formation of American society.[33] Black epistemology, a Black way of interpreting the world as it is, has the ability to critique the privileged normative understandings of the world meant to prop up and continue white supremacy.

Du Bois's concern with moral uplift is attached to the normative promise of blackness which must be constructed within the existential darkness of the veil. He writes:

> [Black people] must perpetually discuss the 'Negro Problem,'–must live, move, and have their being in it, and interpret all else in its light or darkness. With this come, too, peculiar problems of their inner life...All this must mean a time of intense ethical ferment, of religious heart-searching and intellectual unrest. From the double life every American Negro must live...from this must arise a painful self-consciousness, an almost morbid sense of personality and a moral hesitancy which is fatal to self-confidence.[34]

[32] Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 366.
[33] Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 370.
[34] Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 501-502.

The double-consciousness demanded of the veil leads to an inability to realize an integrated personhood. One's very being *must* be realized and created within the crucible of hate and the lynching tree. There is no escape from the shadow of the veil. The Negro problem then becomes that of finding the resources with which to begin the project of moral, religious, and narratival self-creation.

The horror of encountering the humiliation of Sam Hose lies in the understanding that, for Blacks emerging from enslavement, the reality of the veil is all-encompassing. In the chapter of *The Souls of Black Folk* titled "Of the Coming of John," Du Bois frames the shadow of the veil in this way:

> [John] grew slowly to feel almost for the first time the Veil that lay between him and the white world; he first noticed now the oppression that had not seemed oppression before, differences that erstwhile seemed natural, restraints and slights that in his boyhood days had gone unnoticed or been greeted with a laugh. He felt angry now when men did not call him 'Mister,' he clenched his hand at the 'Jim Crow' cars, and chafed at the color-line that hemmed in him and his. A tinge of sarcasm crept into his speech, and a vague bitterness into his life; and he sat long hours wondering and planning a way around these crooked things.[35]

The soul deforming power of the veil is witnessed in this description of a Black man who, through striving toward uplift and education, comes to a greater awareness of his positionality within a white supremacist reality. This is why Du Bois often speaks of a desire to live "above and beyond" the veil in "a region of blue sky and great wandering shadow."[36] If the veil cannot

[35] Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 525.
[36] Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 364.

be destroyed, it must be transcended. It is only through the appeal to new ways of being, of knowing, that one can gain the ability to cast light within the shadow and claim one's "essential and common humanity" despite the terror of the lynch mob.[37] Du Bois continues this theme in *Dusk of Dawn* when he writes:

> It is difficult to let others see the full psychological meaning of caste segregation. It is as though one, looking out from a dark cave in a side of an impending mountain, sees the world passing and speaks to it; speaks courteously and persuasively, showing them how these entombed souls are hindered in their natural movement, expression, and development; and how their loosening from prison would be a matter not simply of courtesy, sympathy, and help to them, but aid to all the world.[38]

This dark prison cave carries an allegorical meaning similar to that of the shadow of the veil–it is to exist in a deadening and distorting reality constructed to reproduce harm and domination. Just as in Plato's cave, we must ask who is projecting this world as it is and benefits from the vision thus imposed. Blacks have been emancipated into an American world where they are called to continually justify the existence of their souls and the promise of their flourishing. The disintegrated self contending with a "single whirlpool of social entanglement and inner psychological paradox," can only strive toward a humanity denied by brutality.[39]

Soul Education

[37] W. E. B. Du Bois, "Dusk of Dawn," *W. E. B. Du Bois: Writings*, ed. by Nathan Huggins, (New York, NY: Library Classics of the United States, 1986), 650.

[38] Du Bois, "Dusk of Dawn," 649-650.

[39] Du Bois, "Dusk of Dawn," 555.

So far, we have analyzed the conceptual metaphor of the veil and the second sight which emerges from a life lived within its shadow. Then we reconsidered Du Bois's complex understanding of the Negro problem–a problematic existence which extends from the humiliation of enslavement through the emergence of blackness into a degraded and distorted world. The Negro problem moves through and beyond the political and social to the realms of the spiritual where one's soul must be claimed within the shadow of the veil. Now, we will deal explicitly with Du Bois's concept of the integrated self emerging through an embrace of the possibilities of the gift of second sight. Du Bois sees this integration as, mostly, coming to a conscious realization of the double-consciousness created by the veil. To know this as a distorted reality is to begin the project of gathering the fragmented self into a unified being capable of relating to the world in a way which reveals truth and accomplishes communal uplift. I view this integration a bit differently because knowing of the veil is not enough; it is only through rending the veil that one can go beyond the bounds of double-consciousness into the possibility of liberation and Black dignity. The self-creation of an integrated humanity is the culmination of a rigorous project of social, moral, and intellectual uplift. It is the mission of the formerly enslaved to strive toward a new way of being, an epistemological and critical condition of blackness which emerges from the paradox of the soul cast behind the veil.

Du Bois spent much of his career defining and investigating the role of leaders within the struggle for freedom. Not only did Du Bois take time to critique Booker T. Washington's goal for the uplift of Black people in *The Souls of Black Folk*, but Du Bois also took tremendous offense to the appointment of Washington as spokesman for the disinherited former slaves seeking the full benefits and challenges of the American experiment. Du Bois writes, "If the best of the American Negroes receive by outer pressure a leader whom they had not recognized before,

manifestly there is here a certain palpable gain. Yet there is also irreparable loss,–a loss of that peculiarly valuable education which a group receives when by search and criticism it finds and commissions its own leaders."[40] Even at his most strident, Du Bois is a communal thinker: self-creation can only truly take place when it is in service of the intense mutual condition of the human person. It is important for Blacks to exercise a newly gained autonomy through striving to understand themselves and to define what their flourishing will consist of in the America of post-Reconstruction.

Education is, according to Du Bois, a force of anti-assimilation. It is not the destiny of Blacks to become part of the soul harming system which extends from the plantation fields to the sphere of international commerce and trade. Instead, Du Bois envisions a blackness allied with the humanistic lineage of seekers after truth through a devotion to study, critique, and the important project of moral rectitude. Uplift is not a matter of civilizing a newly emancipated race which has been brutalized and dehumanized for generations, uplift is the asserting of one's integrated human self within the shadow of the veil. Liberatory self-creation is founded in the claiming of dignity–an assurance of one's place within the human family and owed the requisite ethical and social considerations attached to all who are imbued with personhood. Du Bois writes:

> When sticks and stones and beasts form the sole environment of a people, their attitude is largely one of determined opposition to and conquest of natural forces. But when to earth and brute is added an environment of men and ideas, then the attitude of the imprisoned group may take three main forms,–a feeling of revolt and revenge; an attempt to adjust all

[40] Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk,* 395.

thought and action to the will of the greater group; or, finally, a determined effort at self-realization and self-development despite environing opinion.[41]

Blackness encompasses those emerging from the tutelage of humiliation into the humanistic project of defining one's flourishing and the future of the society into which they are beginning to participate. Assimilation is a deadening adjustment of the self to the prevailing view of those in power. Essentially, assimilation is to fully inhabit the duality of the veil and to attempt to contort one's humanity to fit a distorted view and to limit one's horizons to a soul crushing doubleness.

Much like Frederick Douglass, Du Bois has a thorough going belief in the power of education to provide the impetus for self-creation. But, for Du Bois, education itself is not a neutral process, it is an exercise of one's ethical pull toward uplifting humanity. The ultimate goal of the integrated autonomous self, in its full dignity, is to enter into the stream of history on behalf of abolition and communal flourishing. According to Du Bois, the function of education, especially that attained at the university level, is to fit one to investigate the disparity between how the world ought to be and how the world is given to human degradation and violence. Du Bois calls this the ability to critique the chasm "between real life and the growing knowledge of life, an adjustment which forms the secret to civilization."[42] The veil can be understood in the terms of the purpose of education–the growing knowledge of self, the striving to claim the integrated self, questions the ethical and social basis of the reality of white supremacy. Civilization is not a sphere of whiteness entered into through assimilation or respectability, it is a way of being which encompasses the deep search for truth.

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[41] Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 395-396.
[42] Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 421.

Partly as a result of his work on *The Philadelphia Negro* and then his personal experience of the grim reality of the lynching tree, Du Bois began to shape an understanding of education centered on self-realization through the sort of civilizing process described above. Civilizing in this sense is not rising from some bestial nature into a more human subjectivity; instead civilizing is coming to understand one's place in the long chain of human history and as a responsible sociological and moral actor. In his autobiography, Du Bois writes, "Nothing new, no time-saving devices, simply old time-glorified methods of delving for Truth, and searching out the hidden beauties of life, and learning the good of living."[43] And later, Du Bois continues that this truth seeking university will, "grow more deft and effectual, its content richer by toil of scholar and sight of seer, but the true college will ever have one goal–not to earn meat, but to know the end and aim of that life which meat nourishes."[44] It is difficult to escape the echoes of *The Souls of Black Folk* in Du Bois's description of the sort of education meant to lead to the intense project of self-creation. "Sight of seer" is related to the conception of the gift of second sight–a gift both mystical in its import and connected to the striving of a people towards their full humanity. The true scholar of humanity will have the ability to see the world both as it is, in its concrete brutality and need, and the world as it ought to be as civilization emerges from the shadow of the veil.

It is the death of Sam Hose which deeply informs Du Bois's understanding of flourishing and the uplift of Black humanity. The gift of second sight transcends the veil in its ability to integrate what truly is and the material social conditions which casts the shadow over an emancipated existence. Educational striving, then, is toward a vision of an idealistic humanistic

[43] Du Bois, *Autobiography*, 211.
[44] Du Bois, *Autobiography*, 212.

civilization of integrated self-worth, universal dignity, and an autonomous life given to the search for the truth. In an editorial from *The Crisis* in May, 1914, Du Bois writes that, "Humanity is progressing toward an ideal; but not, please God, solely by help of men who sit in cloistered ease, hesitate from action and seek sweetness and light; rather we progress today, as in the past, by the soul-torn strength of those who can never sit still and silent while the disinherited and the damned clog our gutters and gasp their lives out on our front porches."[45] Education unlocks the critical capacity of second sight, it allows the searcher for truth to interrogate the inequity and humiliation of society. For Du Bois, to be educated implies the ethical duty to confront the instances where we fail to live up to the ideals held sacred by all who participate in the social order. Du Bois continues:

> These are the men who go down in the blood and dust of battle. They say ugly things to an ugly world. They spew the lukewarm fence straddlers out of their mouths, like God of old; they cry aloud and spare not; they shout from the housetops, and they make this world so damned uncomfortable with its nasty burden of evil that it tries to get good and does get better.[46]

The way of knowing that is blackness must speak out of the horror of the veil. The ideal of the human is not a place of comfort or of a sweet lightness, instead it is a place that both sees the crowd gleefully celebrating the roasting corpse of the lynching victim and confronts one's self as constructed through such a deep inhumanity. The truth lies in investigating and enunciating the dichotomy between what is and what ought to be.

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[45] W. E. B. Du Bois, "Editorial," *The Crisis,* vol. 8, no. 1 (May 1914): 26.
[46] Du Bois, "Editorial," 26.

White supremacy is the antithesis of the education that Du Bois advocates or those seeking personal development and emancipation from the shadow of the veil. In harming the soul of the other, one's own soul is destroyed. For Du Bois, this is a crucial component of the crisis of society confronted in *Black Reconstruction* and addressed in *The Souls of Black Folk*. *The Souls of Black Folk*, perhaps paradoxically, is not written for Black folk, the justificatory mission of the work is to speak the uncomfortable truth of Black humanity into the consciousness of a white supremacist nation based in the lie of superiority. "All this is Truth, but unknown, unapprehended Truth. Indeed, the greatest and most immediate danger of white culture, perhaps least sensed, is its fear of the Truth, its childish belief in the efficacy of lies as a method of human uplift."[47] This quote illustrates the importance of the concept of blackness as a way of knowing–the importance of viewing second sight as a gift rather than a curse cast by the shadow of the veil. The capitalized Truth of Du Boisean education seeks to transcend fear and refuse the self-deformation of domination. The Truth leads the educated to "exalt the Lynched above the Lyncher, and the Worker above the Owner, and the Crucified above Imperial Rome."[48]

Black dignity is constructed through integrating the self. The integrated self is the result of a communal and deeply personal striving to escape the shadow of the veil through a soul education centered in embracing the gift of second sight. Second sightedness itself can be considered the application of a world interpreting hermeneutic emerging from the social precarity of Black life under Jim Crow and arbitrary violence. Epistemological blackness, when considered through the works of Du Bois, is a stance that while critical of the American reality of domination, still hopes in the uplift of humanity above the veil into the realm of Truth which

[47] Du Bois, "Dusk of Dawn," 664.
[48] Du Bois, "Dusk of Dawn," 663.

insists of the equity of all persons and the ethical duty to advocate for those on the underside of history–the workers, the lynched, and the crucified. Emancipation into the post-Reformation era of the lynching tree and the bifurcated Black self suggests to Du Bois that "the majority of mankind has struggled through this inner spiritual slavery" which results from existing within the shadow of the veil.[49] The revelation of the *Soul of Black Folk* is that the veil cast by white supremacy occludes the humanistic development of both the despised and the despiser. There is no escape from the shadow of the veil when one insists on the lie of white supremacy and the soul-hurt of the lynching tree. "Individual equality and the free soul is impossible" as long as the United States are bound by the chains of hatred and inhumanity.[50]

Conclusion

We Wear the Mask, a poem composed by Du Bois's near contemporary, Paul Laurence Dunbar, is worth quoting in full:

> We wear the mask that grins and lies,
> It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,–
> This debt we pay to human guile;
> With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
> And mouth with myriad subtleties.
>
> Why should the world be over-wise,
> In counting all our tears and sighs?
> Nay, let them only see us, while
> We wear the mask.
>
> We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries
> To thee from tortured souls arise.
> We sing, but oh the clay is vile
> Beneath our feet, and long the mile;
> But let the world dream otherwise,

[49] Du Bois, "Dusk of Dawn," 654.
[50] Du Bois, "Dusk of Dawn," 654.

We wear the mask![51]

This is a work composed from within the shadow of the veil. In it, Dunbar expresses the duality of Black existence in a society dominated by the lynching tree. The allegory of Dunbar's mask works in a way similar to the double-consciousness of life within the shadow of the veil. Just as Sam Hose did, Dunbar's poetic voice cries to the Crucified One in an attempt to transcend the conditionality of the mask–the Black soul is tortured through an existence hemmed in and distorted by lies of white supremacy. Du Bois wrote on the failure of Black Reconstruction that, "God wept; but that mattered little to an unbelieving age; what mattered most was that the world wept and still is weeping and blind with tears and blood."[52] The conceptual wrestling with the gift of second sight and the shadow of the veil carry considerable stakes when considered both in the fullness of Du Bois's project and in the history of blackness in the United States.

For Du Bois, blackness is not just about Black people, instead it is a way to critique the world as it is in light of the sort of humanity which may emerge from seeing the world from the position of the marginalized and degraded. The self-creation of Black folks acts both as a condemnation and example for a world destined to die. And just as the personage beneath Dunbar's mask, second sight holds the possibility of rising above the conditionality of Black existence under white supremacy.

In my reading of Du Bois, spiritual striving is toward the achievement and reclamation of Black dignity out of the fraught history of a nation built on persons brutally consigned to the dust–to be trampled under the heels of history–to be humiliated. "Some day the Awakening will come, when the pent-up vigor of ten million souls shall sweep irresistibly toward the Goal, out of

[51] Dunbar, "We Wear the Mask," 48.
[52] Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 520.

the Valley of the Shadow of Death, where all that makes life worth living–Liberty, Justice, and Right...'"[53] The promise of Black self-realization and Black dignity, according to Du Bois, is that through the uplift of the most despised, all of humanity can escape the shadow of the veil and approach the life we ought to be living.

[53] Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 505.

Chapter 3

Blest Be the Tie That Binds:
The Dual Nature of Black Humanity Conceived through Douglass and Du Bois

"My mother bore me in the southern wild,
And I am black, but O! my soul is white;
White as an angel is the English child:
But I am black as if bereav'd of light.
...
And we are put on earth a little space,
That we may learn to bear the beams of love,
And these black bodies and this sun-burnt face
Is but a cloud, and like a shady grove.

For when our souls have learn'd the heat to bear
The cloud will vanish we shall hear his voice.
Saying: come out from the grove my love & care,
And round my golden tent like lambs rejoice.

Thus did my mother say and kissed me,
And thus I say to little English boy.
When I from black and he from white cloud free,
And round the tent of God like lambs we joy:

I'll shade him from the heat till he can bear,
To lean in joy upon our fathers knee.
And then I'll stand and stroke his silver hair,
And be like him and he will then love me."[1]

"Tell me what you're gonna do
When the shadow comes under your door
O Lord, O Lord
What shall you do?"[2]

[1] William Blake, "The Little Black Boy," *William Blake: The Complete Poems*, ed. Alicia Ostriker, (London, England: Penguin Books, 1977), 106-107.

[2] Bod Dylan, "Whatcha Gonna Do," *Bob Dylan: The Lyrics 1961-2012*, (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2016), 70.

To the modern reader, this poem from William Blake, The Little Black Boy, can seem deeply offensive. The boy is Black because his life is to be dedicated to providing shade to the English boy–he absorbs the physical and psychological burden of protection from a young age. In fact, the darkness of his skin marks him as designed and designated by the will of God for such a service. Even in death, ascended to the womb of the Creator, the Black boy is still relegated to lovingly stroking the English boy in admiration. The ultimate reward is not the end of painful labor and protection in the presence of the Lord, nor is it to be reunited with the guiding will of the universe in eternal Being...here it is to bask in the love of the English boy. When all is said and done, the Little Black Boy will finally be recognized for the quality of his soul–innocent and white, just as his master's is taken to be–and with that recognition comes love. This poem was written in 1789 by William Blake, but the dichotomy presented in the second line, "I am black, but O! my soul is white," is a continuing and deeply troubling aspect of Black existence. Salvation is attached to labor, the ability to be useful in service to an abstracted and pure whiteness. The conditionality of the soul is a question of God's beneficence and fulfilling God's will through subservience. The blackness was created to protect the status of whiteness–and the soul's status as saved depends on meekly waiting for the equality of an existence freed from Black enfleshment.

This dual aspect of blackness–the Black body meant for service to whiteness and a soul only given salvation through pain and labor–would be the prevailing theo-ethical understanding of blackness for hundreds of years after Blake's poem was written. In this dissertation, I use Frederick Douglass and W. E. B. Du Bois to argue that this conceptual understanding of blackness, perseveres through history to the present day; that rending the Black soul from Black enfleshment, not only allows, but demands, brutality and control. The Abolitionist movement,

the fight against Jim and Jane Crow, the Civil Rights Movement, and modern movements like Black Lives Matter are attempts to resolve the dichotomous understanding of Black life. Not only are Black's human, but that humanity is based on both physical autonomy and a soul allowed to breathe in equity free from the constant fear of catastrophe–to inhabit the dignity owed to all human beings. Black life was not meant for pain.

In this chapter, I will present both Douglass and Du Bois engaging in the discourse surrounding the prevailing understanding of the dual nature of blackness outlined above. I argue that there is a through-line from the conceptual understanding of Douglass dealing with the hypocrisy of baptismal controversies and, later in his writings, Jim Crow era lynchings to Du Bois speaking to the epistemological, and metaphysical aspects of Black duality through the veil of self-perception. The question, 'What is to be done with the Negro?,' is still live–how to control a population thought to be genetically, intellectually, and morally inferior. Blackness is a problem of the white imagination and the fear that breeds the need for domination, by imposing a racialized dual-nature on the human person, violence motivated by white supremacy is both justified and required. Douglass and Du Bois will help us to deconstruct the historical roots of an equal humanity only justified outside or beyond physical existence. We will investigate how this dual conception of the human person reinforces the domination logic of slavery, but also how this logic persists in the use of overwhelming state force in response to Black uprisings. Blackness is a problem because this conceptual dual nature forces the Black souls to forever view itself from the dominating aspect of whiteness–the personification of brutality and systemic injustice.

The Coffle

Imagine the slave market. White men chatting together and bartering as they wait for the goods to be displayed. The warmth of the Baltimore, or Charleston, or Norfolk sun beating down on the crowd. The thrum of excitement as nude oiled Black men are led to the blocks–the brawniest and most skilled saved for after the sick and young are sold off. The Black women made to strip to show the fullness of their breasts and the width of their hips, not only for the delight of the white men bidding on their bodies for personal use, but also for the possibilities of building breeding stock for future use and sell.

After the horrors of the Middle Passage, after emerging into a world of a different sun, earth, and being, slaves would be fed well for a few weeks. Their matted hair would be shorn from their heads and their soiled garments replaced. Downcast slaves would emerge to rub their arms and legs with oil meant to emphasize whatever musculature survived the journey across the Atlantic. Not only would they be made to display themselves nude to the eyes of those buying their bodies, but they would also often be made to lift, squat, and dance to show their nimbleness and strength. Such markets were also places of breaking where these people would come to understand their place in this new world. No longer were they persons; they were now chattel. They would be made to move, live, breed, and work at the whims of these masters who now had ultimate control over their lives and futures.

The term "coffle," is derived from the Arabic word *cafila*: a group of travelers or the movement of goods. Groups of purchased men would be herded together and chained in double lines for the five-hundred-mile jog to the plantation. Edward E. Baptist writes:

> Men could march together carrying their chains. But there was no way that they could all run together. There was no way they could leap off a boat and swim to shore, no way thirty-three men hauling one thousand pounds of iron could hide silent in the woods. The

> coffle-chains enabled the Georgia-men to turn feet against hearts, to make enslaved people work directly against their own love of self, children, spouses; of the world, of freedom and hope.[3]

Imagine the burning of the sun on naked flesh. Wrists and necks and ankles rubbed raw from chaffing iron. The smell of the dozens of unwashed people as they passed towns and villages where whites would simply look the other way in embarrassment or note the passing bodies for future purchase. The wails of women taken during the night to entertain the Georgia-men on the journey. Baptist continues, "Men of the chain couldn't act as individuals; nor could they act as a collective, except by moving forward in one direction."[4] Pain and hopelessness became the new reality of these people taken from the world.

What is of particular note for this chapter is the forced bonding of these persons. Differing people with their own languages, traditions, hopes, and understandings are suddenly forced, both in reality and metaphorically, into the emerging epistemology of blackness. Bondage and pain are harsh but effective teachers, and they are being taught who they are and *what* they are within the context of American civilization. Even as they seek to process the trauma of the Middle Passage, they are thrown into the need to understand themselves anew.

Interpretation is the primary mode of human being in the world. And now these people, these Black people, are bound together in the discourse of what it means to be a problem. The lived reality of enslavement and displacement must change who they are and how they come to know the world around them. The coffle as both event and metaphor acts to destroy certain ways

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[3] Edward E. Baptist, *The Half has Never been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism*, (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2014), 23.

[4] Baptist, *The Half has Never been Told*, 25.

of knowing and to create something new and problematic. Blackness as a way of being and knowing emerges from the void of deep brutalization. I argue that the problematic discourse of blackness binds both Douglass and Du Bois into a hermeneutic circle which acts to understand this new reality and to, ultimately, seek liberation. In the history of both Du Bois and Douglass was the coffle–their ancestors chained and made to journey in a new land under new contexts. To be Black is to take part in this history and to join the discourse of Black humanity and understanding.

Douglass's Negro Problem

In one of Frederick Douglass's first transcribed speeches, he tells the story, most likely apocryphal, of a little Black girl and her experience in an 'integrated' worship service:

> ...Then [the minister] drew a long breath, and looking towards the door, exclaimed, "Come up, colored friends, come up! for you know *God is no respecter of persons*!" I haven't been there to see the sacraments taken since.
>
> ...But among those who experience religion at this time was a colored girl; she was baptized in the same water as the rest; so she thought she might sit at the Lord's table and partake of the same sacramental elements with the others. The deacon handed round the cup, and when he came to the black girl, he could not pass her, for there was the minister looking right at him, and as he was a kind of abolitionist, the deacon was rather afraid of giving him offence; so he handed the girl the cup, and she tasted. Now it so happened that next to her sat a young lady who had converted at the same time, baptized in the same water, and put her trust in the same blessed Saviour; yet when the cup,

containing the precious blood which had been shed for all, came to her, she rose in disdain, and walked out of the church. Such was the religion *she* had experienced![5]

Let us examine this story closely. In this section, we will be focusing on two eras of Douglass's oratory. This story is from a speech delivered to the Plymouth Church Anti-Slavery Society in 1841–three years after Douglass escaped enslavement and twenty years before the American Civil War. Douglass was a master at oratory, mixing the conviction of his own experience with a conceptual understanding of the social aspects of slavery that would evolve over his forty-year career as an abolitionist. At this stage of his career, Douglass, who was a former minister himself, often deployed folk tales mixed with biblical exegesis meant to expose the hypocrisy at the root of white understandings of God and providence. This story of the little Black girl is dripping with sarcasm–the God of worship is presented as "no respecter of persons," but the *experience* of white worship is still contained within racialized understandings of what it means to not only be a person, but to be a person within the context of whiteness. The girl who refuses the cup sits next to the Black girl–this is an acceptable integration, an integration which does not threaten the conditional personhood of the white worshipper. Sharing the same cup at the Lord's table represents a religious, ethical, and metaphysical sameness which is refused. The "precious blood which had been shed for all" was shed for some more than others. And this preciousness cannot cover the reality of lips physically interacting with the same cup. The deacon, who has good intentions in much the same way as Blake did above,[6] can only propose a shared cup when

[5] Frederick Douglass, "The Church and Prejudice," from *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings,* ed. Philip Foner, (Chicago, IL: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999), 3.

[6] According to David B. Erdman, Blake's *The Little Black Boy* was used to "[assist] the philanthropic agitation of the Society for Affecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade in 1787 and began soliciting subscriptions in November 1788" (132). See David B. Erdman, *Blake: Prophet Against Empire*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017): 132, 239, 421, and 429.

the personhood of humans falls away under the guiding aspect of God. "God is no respecter of persons," means that the cup can be shared because the bodily aspects of existence has been dismissed before God. For the white girl, such an existential sameness runs up against the physicality of drinking from the same cup–the duality is so persistent that she is willing to forgo participation in the community of faith.

In a speech given almost forty years later, in 1883, Douglass reveals the conceptual basis of the reaction hinted at in the story above:

> The book of Morgan Godwin [*The Negroe's and Indian's Advocate Suing for Their Admission into the Church* (London, 1680)] is a literary curiosity and an ethical wonder. ...He proposed no disturbance of the relation of master and slave. On the contrary, he conceded the right of the master to own and control the body of the Negro, but insisted that the soul of the Negro belonged to the Lord. His able reasoning on this point, it is true, left the Negro for himself neither soul nor body. When he claimed his body, he found that belonged to his earthly master, and when he looked around for his soul, he found that belonged to his master in Heaven. Nevertheless the ground taken in this book by Dr. Godwin was immensely important. It was in fact, the starting point, the foundation of all the grand concessions yet made to the claims, the character, the manhood and the dignity of the Negro...[7]

The status of the bodily enslavement of persons was challenged by the salvific understanding of what it meant to be baptized into the Christian religion. The body/soul duality allowed for a

[7] Frederick Douglass, "The United States Cannot Remain Half-Slave and Half-Free," from *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*, ed. Philip Foner, (Chicago, IL: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999), 663.

situation where the slaver could insist that he owned the body of a person as distinct from the condition of their soul. But the ontological tension of this stance–of overlapping communities where freedom was conditioned on differing aspects of the human person–was a theo-ethical conundrum from the beginning of chattel slavery. Douglass continues:

> The opposition to baptizing and admitting the Negro to membership in the Christian church, was serious, determined and bitter. That ceremony was, in his case, opposed on many grounds, but especially upon three. First, the Negro's unfitness for baptism; secondly, the nature of the ordinance itself; and thirdly, because it would disturb the relation of master and slave. The wily slaveholders of the day were sharp-eyed and keen-scented, and snuffed danger from afar. They saw in this argument of Godwin the thin edge of the wedge which would sooner or later rend asunder the bonds of slavery.[8]

The possibility of baptism meant admitting that Blacks had a soul which could be saved and, thus, were a type of person. Even this admission, Douglass suggests, was a step away from a purely bestial conception of blackness. The dual aspect of Black personhood preserves the domination of whiteness–the body is owned, not the soul of the person beloved and owed to God. The white girl's understanding of integration was backward–same cup perhaps but separated seating. The coffle can exist alongside the the Little Black Boy kneeling before his white master in both heaven and earth.

In his final published work in 1894, "Why is the Negro Lynched?," Douglas outlines "the so-called, but mis-called 'Negro problem,' as a characterization of the relations existing in the

[8] Douglass, “The United States Cannot Remain Half-Slave and Half-Free,” 663.

Southern States."[9] In the wake of emancipation, the ontological, and legal, duality of blackness has been disrupted. What is to be done with these free Negros, who exist somewhere between full personhood and the beasts of the fields? Douglass makes the connections explicit:

> Two hundred and twenty years ago the Negro was made a religious problem, one which gave our white forefathers about as much perplexity and annoyance as we now profess. At that time the problem was in respect of what relation a Negro sustains to the Christian Church, whether he was in fact a fit *subject* for baptism...[10]

Two points are important to draw from this passage. The first, is that Douglass points to *our* white forefathers–pointing to the reality of miscegenation, rape, between master and slave. What does the dominating conception of body/soul duality say of a people whose bodies are themselves the result of both blackness and whiteness. Secondly, Douglass points to the subjectivity of the Negro–objects which can be owned are outside of the logic of the relationship represented by baptism. Douglass continues:

> As usual, it was not merely the baptism of the Negro that gave trouble, but it was as to what might follow such a baptism. The sprinkling him with water was a very simple thing and easily gotten along with, but the slaveholders of that day saw in the innovation something more dangerous than cold water. They said that to baptize the Negro and make him a member of the Church of Christ was to make him an important *person* - in fact, to

[9] Frederick Douglass, "Why is the Negro Lynched?," from *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*, ed. Philip Foner, (Chicago, IL: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999), 771. Douglass references Dr. Godwin in the following sentence.

[10] Douglass, "Why is the Negro Lynched?," 774.

make him an heir of Jesus Christ...It was to take him out of the category of heathenism...[11]

Personhood comes with the status of baptism. Douglass reengages with the legacy of Dr. Godwin and racialized dichotomies:

> Nevertheless, our learned doctor of divinity, like many of the same class in our day, was equal to the emergency. He was able to satisfy all important parties to the problem, except the Negro, and him it did not seem necessary to satisfy.
>
> The doctor was a skilled dialectician. He could not only divide the word with skill, but he could divide the Negro into two parts. He argued that the Negro had a soul as well as a body, and insisted that while his body rightfully belonged to his master on earth, his soul belonged to his Master in heaven. By this convenient arrangement, somewhat metaphysical, to be sure, but entirely evangelical and logical, the problem of Negro baptism was solved.
>
> ...When the Negro looked for his body, that belonged to his earthly master; when he looked around for his soul, that had been appropriated by his heavenly Master; and when he looked around for something that really belonged to himself, he found nothing but his shadow, and that vanished into the air, when he might most want it.[12]

The dichotomy of the body and soul has a long precedent in Christian thought, but this dichotomy is radicalized in new ways when it comes to the Black body and how it can be owned separately and a different sphere from that of the soul. The problematized existence of Black personhood was solved according to the logic of white supremacy and an economic and social

[11] Douglass, "Why is the Negro Lynched?," 774.
[12] Douglass, "Why is the Negro Lynched?," 774.

system based in enforced labor. Emancipation restates the problem of blackness–a white social group which now has to contend with Black bodies no longer held in bondage. The threatened next step was an autonomous relation between Blacks and their own beings encapsulated by an integrated body/soul–the end of domination and the beginnings of liberation and a dignified existence.

The intentionality of Douglass is often misinterpreted, his goal is persuasion by any means necessary: "[I approve] of all methods of proceeding against slavery: politics, religion, peace, war, Bible, Constitution, disunion, Union–every possible way known in opposition to slavery is my way."[13] When Vincent Lloyd writes, in *Black Natural Law*, "...[Douglass] occasionally though not often...suggests that we each have a soul that transcends our body, and this soul maintains our humanity even when our body is in bondage," he is only partially correct.[14] Douglass is not only arguing for the existence of a God of justice, but for moral and intellectual consistency from the white supremacist ruling class and from doctors of divinity like Godwin. The dualism of white Christianity represents, to Douglass, a deep and persistent hypocrisy. Douglass suggests transcendence and the soul/body duality in order to call into question the metaphysical and social existence of newly freed Negros. The argument from "Why is the Negro Lynched?" is that persistent dualisms allow for overt white aggression and Black death. Lynching solves the problem of the freed autonomous Negro by using fear and pain to reclaim control, through brutal death, of the bodies of former slaves. Control through the utter destruction of flesh. It is also partially true that, "[Douglass] urges a shift in focus, from the focus

[13] Frederick Douglass, "Speech on John Brown," from *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*, ed. Philip Foner, (Chicago, IL: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999), 417.

[14] Vincent Lloyd, *Black Natural Law*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016), 9.

his contemporaries have on an otherworldly God, on which much can be projected, to a focus on fellow human beings. This, Douglass suggests, has always been the core of Christianity; after all, the Christian savior is a God who became human. Moreover, our best access to God comes from a place we have ready access to: ourselves."[15] It is not true, however, that it is best for the enslaved to access God from their bodies held in bondage–nor can they access God through the white supremacist theology of their masters. Part of Douglass's argument is that Blacks, in fact and experience, do have a self which can be in relation to God but this self must be reclaimed from the dehumanization of enslavement. For Douglass, baptism is the proof of this selfhood, while supremacist duality is the antithesis of a realized self in the world. Blacks are fellow human beings–a unified being just as whites are allowed to be in America. Again, Douglass writes:

> Slavery has its own standards of morality, humanity, justice, and Christianity. Tried by that standard, it is a system of the greatest kindness to the slave–sanctioned by the purest morality–in perfect agreement with justice–and, of course, not inconsistent with Christianity. But, tried by any other, it is doomed to condemnation. The naked relation of master and slave is one of those monsters of darkness, to whom the light of truth is death![16]

White Christianity, white theology, hides the light of God because it produces a morality which sanctions brutality and bondage. This morality can only exist when body and soul are considered as separate when considering the ontological reality of certain kinds of persons.

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[15] Lloyd, *Black Natural Law*, 15.

[16] Frederick Douglass, "To William Garrison; Perth, Scotland, 27th Jan. 1846," from *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*, ed. Philip Foner, (Chicago, IL: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999), 20.

Du Bois's Metaphor of the Negro Problem

It is here that we can view W. E. B. Du Bois as a powerful interlocutor who carries forward the arguments and ideas of Douglass in response to a resurgence of Negro dualistic thought which arrived along with Jim Crow. The *Souls of Black Folk* is, essentially, an argument to white people that Blacks are not bestial entities, cursed to exist in the liminal space just short of full personhood. *The Souls of Black Folk* was written only nine years after Douglass's "Why is the Negro Lynched?," and those intervening years witnessed the domination of Black flesh through new quasi-institutional understandings of racialized justice which reified, while recontextualizing, what it meant to be Black in the United States. Edward Blum writes in *W. E. B. Du Bois: American Prophet*:

> Were blacks connected to the divine? Did "Negroes" have souls? Was access to the sacred determined by race? Did heaven predestine white Europeans and Americans to rule over darker peoples? Were the various races created in the image of God? And had people of color contributed anything of religious value to the world?[17]

These were the questions animating the creation of Du Bois's most enduring work. According to Douglass, not only are Blacks connected to God, but this connection is more *real* than whites' because it understands the unified personhood of created human beings–Blacks can come to know God in a way untainted by the hypocrisy of a white supremacist deity. God is not subsumed in the justification of domination. Blum continues:

[17] Edward Blum, *W. E. B. Du Bois: American Prophet*, (Philadelphia: PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 62.

> ...whites crafted a variety of religious and theological rationales for structures of exploitation...as the [nineteenth] century wore on, theologians, ministers, and scientists expanded their religious justification for racial oppression. They began to view the entire Bible as a "white man's book."...By 1900, white supremacist theology was firmly rooted in white American mainstream culture. Its arguments and ways of perceiving the world permeated scientific, missionary, and literary discourse in the United States.[18]

Douglass's life-long project of uncovering the brutality of Southern Religion was unraveling as whites began to reassert dominance after the social and ethical upheaval of the American Civil War. Du Bois picks up the battle over the Negro question joining a discourse living in the lives and flesh of Black people and responds to the theo-ethical conception of Blacks as "soulless beasts" undeserving of autonomy, much less equity.[19] Blum sums up when he states:

> *The Souls of Black Folk* confronted white supremacist theology in a dramatic and an extraordinary way. At its most profound level, *Souls* offered its readers a new way to view their selves, their society, their world, and the connections between religion and racial beliefs. Although Du Bois did not name [Thomas] Dixon [author of *The Leopard's Spots*] or [Charles] Carroll [theologian and author of *The Negro: A Beast*] in *Souls*, he acknowledged that the question of African American humanity and spirituality was a pressing one for him and people of color.[20]

Blum misses the connection to the earlier battle waged by Douglass against false segregationists and moralizers of domination like Godwin, because the soul/body duality seems to be taking a

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[18] Blum, *American Prophet*, 62-63.
[19] Blum, *American Prophet*, 65.
[20] Blum, *American Prophet*, 76.

different valence in Du Bois work. Douglass argued that true religious belief necessitated understanding the personhood of Blacks in the conflation of body and soul into a cohesive and theo-ethically real self. Du Bois must take a step back and argue that not only is the body/soul duality incorrect, but there are rational arguments which can be made to show that not only do Blacks possess souls, but these souls are just like those of whites and are deserving of the same social and systemic protections. Black souls are veiled by the need to exist within the context of violent white supremacy–but this veiling in no way diminishes the true humanity of blackness.

Du Bois writes that the, "problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the problem of the color-line...No sooner had Northern armies touched Southern soil than this old question, newly guised, sprang from the earth, –What shall be done with Negroes?"[21] In 1881, Douglass had published an article titled *The Color Line*, where he argued that the separateness of American society, both North-South and White-Black, is the defining reality driving the damaged morality of lynching: "...this wonder-working prejudice–this moral magic that can change virtue into vice, and innocence to crime; which makes the dead man the murderer, and hold the living homicide harmless–is a natural, instinctive, and invincible attribute of the white race..."[22] Du Bois carries this argument to its conclusion–the color line also inhabits Black people, who must constantly deal with the terror of the lynch mob and the ontological uncertainty of Black personhood. To constantly view one's self as a self, and to view one's self from the unearned fear and moral certainty of the point of view of whiteness, creates a new

[21] W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Souls of Black Folk," from *W. E. B. Du Bois: Writings,* ed. Nathan Huggins, (New York, NY: The Library of America, 1986), 372.

[22] Frederick Douglass, "The Color Line," from *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings,* ed. Philip Foner, (Chicago, IL: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999), 650

duality–one which no longer deals with the rending of Black soul from Black body, but deals with the rending of the Black soul from itself:

> ...the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, –a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness–an American, a Negro, two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.[23]

The color line becomes the veil which distorts the world while also providing protection to the self. Many people overlook the wordplay when Du Bois writes about the "revelation of the other world." This other world is not only the America created to preserve and instantiate white domination, but also the heaven of white supremacy meant to keep Blacks docile and to view their lives in terms of a promised hereafter which rewards meekness, staying in one's place through acceptance of a particular interpretation of the revealed Word. Du Bois's metaphor of the veil becomes a way to understand an American world as it is while also pointing to the possibility of new worlds and new ways of being.

All Blacks must exist in the duality of the veil. In a way, the slave coffle has been reborn and reconstrued as a race is forced to move and exist chained together through circumstance and the need for survival. This is a blackness produced by the deadening abyss of the Middle Passage

[23] Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 364.

and the bestializing nature of an iron-clad march to the plantation. The fight for the Black souls begins when those enslaved persons had to come to understand a vastly alienizing reality–the veil drops over who they are and the ways of knowing humiliated through the context of white supremacy. Their horizon of understanding literally shifts as they see where they are and who they have become from a new shore. Blackness as an epistemology emerges in response to the need to create a new sort of self. The arguments of Douglass and Du Bois are chained together in the hermeneutic circle which surrounds the Negro Question.

Robert Gooding-Williams, for instance, writes that Du Bois is only dealing with "how it feels to be denied membership in American society through the violation of an ethical ideal."[24] This misses the crucial religious aspect of this dissertation and of Du Bois's thought. This ethical ideal has a theological valence: "Why did God make me an outcast and stranger in mine own house?"[25] And later, instead of being coworkers in the kingdom of God, a reference to 1 Corinthians 3:9, Black striving is construed as the goal of becoming a "co-worker in the kingdom of culture, to escape both death and isolation..."[26] Social isolation and social death are workings of a religiosity filled with white supremacist ideals outside the possibility of Black personhood. I agree with Blum when he writes, "The [*Souls of Black Folk's*] purpose, and Du Bois's vocation, was to display the spiritual side of black life, the side that white supremacist theologians denied even existed, the side that could only be viewed by first believing that people of color had souls."[27]

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[24] Robert Gooding-Williams, *In the Shadow of Du Bois: Afro-Modern Political Thought in America*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 71.

[25] Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 364.

[26] Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 365.

[27] Blum, *American Prophet*, 77.

The degradation of the Black soul and the oversized influence of white supremacist logics on the Black conception of self, prompted Du Bois to attack the prevailing *Black* theology of the time, most of which had taken on white supremacist interpretations of blackness and the conditionality of the Black soul. According to Du Bois, this is evidenced in Black's "infinite capacity for dumb suffering" and the acceptance of the "offered conceptions of the next [world]; the avenging Spirit of the Lord enjoining patience in this world, under sorrow and tribulation until the Great Day when He should lead His dark children home, –this became a comforting dream."[28] If only, Douglass's argumentation and understanding of the "Negro problem" had persisted in the Black imaginary, had had more sway with a newly educated and empowered Black doctors of theology, Du Bois would not have had to rehearse and continue the same arguments set out by Douglass. Only the acceptance of soul/body duality allows for the type of communal suffering outlined by Du Bois–the internalized white supremacy of bisecting the Black being. Du Bois is inviting the reader into the hermeneutical circle defined by the metaphor of the veil–as the metaphor faces and interprets differing contexts, new understandings are gained. This is, in essence, the continuation of the discourse of Black liberation and dignity which animated Douglass's understanding of the enforced dichotomy of Black personhood. In a sense, Du Bois invites the reader not to consider the Negro Problem as a concern of the world, but as a concern of *a* world–essentially a world defined and caused by white supremacy.

Ibram X. Kendi, in *Stamped from the Beginning,* makes the case that mistaken solutions to the Negro Problem became accepted and institutionalized after the public dissemination of Du Bois's work. Kendi writes:

[28] Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk,* 500.

> In the aftermath of *The Souls of Black Folk*...racial reformers and scholars of race, whether White or Black, whether applauding or critiquing Du Bois, seemed to have formed a consensus on the solution to the "Negro problem." They spoke of the need for more strident uplift suasion, for upwardly mobile Talented Tenths persuading away the racist ideas of White folk. The strategy remained deeply racist. Black people, apparently, were responsible for changing the racist White minds. White people, apparently, were not responsible for their own racist mentalities.[29]

This is perhaps reductive of Du Bois, who was in conversation with then cutting-edge social theories surrounding the concept of a Talented Tenth and the Great Man Theory of History taken up by prominent public intellectuals such as William James and Max Weber.[30] Du Bois would come to reevaluate the idea of cadre politics, but Kendi does point to a by-product of coming to terms with the internalization of white supremacy demonstrated through soul/body dualisms– blame becomes shared because conceptualizations of blackness are shared by both the oppressor and the oppressed. The discourse itself become dominated by white supremacy and internalized anti-blackness. Douglass's earlier understanding of the color line, owing more to the material reality of owning Black flesh than to the continuing terror and public brutality which exemplified the Jim Crow era, suggests a different solution to the problem of white supremacy:

> Let them give up the idea that they can be free while making the Negro a slave. Let them give up the idea that to degrade the colored man is to elevate the white man. Let them

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[29] Ibram X. Kendi, *Stamped from the Beginning*, (New York, NY: Nation Books, 2016), 294.

[30] For more information on this see Christopher A. McAuley, *The Spirit vs. the Souls: Max Weber, W. E. B. Du Bois, and the Politics of Scholarship*, (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2019), 15-16.

> cease putting new wine into old bottles, and mending old garments with new cloth [Matthew 9:14, Mark 2:21-22, and Luke 5:33-39].
>
> They are not required to do much. They are only required to undo the evil they have done, in order to solve this problem.[31]

The epistemology of blackness is used as a way to interpret the reality created through oppression. And the solution is one which not only invites whites into a new way of interpreting the world, but also into a new way of seeing themselves through the prism of blackness. Douglass and Du Bois are involved in a discourse buried in a shared history of enslavement, the shared present of creating a Black self-hood from the humiliation of slavery and the lynching tree, and the continued existence of Black persons, marked both by birth and social circumstance, within the context of white supremacy. White people are marked by white supremacy as well–all of our humanity is held captive if any are denied liberation. This is *ubuntu* the thought that all of our humanity is dependent on mutuality and recognition: "the concept of human interdependence precedes that of the individual. Being a person–an individual human being–is only intelligible on the strength of the prior recognition of the many others in relation to whom one exists."[32] The interpretive hermeneutic structure of blackness is shared through both speech and the written word–inviting others to partake in a different way of knowing while continuing to develop the narrative being of blackness. Part of undoing the evil of slavery is to come to the understanding of a shared communal existence which denies domination.

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[31] Douglass, *Why is the Negro Lynched?*, 773.

[32] Deborah Posel, "Human Complicities," *The Humanist Imperative in South Africa*, ed. John W. De Gruchy, (South Africa: Sun Press, 2011), 223.

Everyday Black life itself is the text being written and created in the shadow of the veil. The ultimate goal is liberation, distinct from mere freedom or autonomy through the ability of liberation to create a shared future world where blackness does not mean death and brutality. Dignity is to live into this future–to possess the ultimate ability to choose where one's capabilities are used in community with others and one's flourishing is not given to the whims of one's birth.

The Place of Metaphor within Dignity

The veil is not only a matter of self-consciously recognizing dichotomizing conceptions of the self, but contained within the epistemology of the veil is the use of white supremacy to distort Black persons' ability to understand the world for what it is. Unification of the self is dependent on both a newly integrated understanding of Black being, and also on the material and social conditions which allow for Black humanity to exist without dread. Persons must first be liberated before they can begin a proposed project of racial uplift–and this liberation is more than a matter of no longer being enslaved, it must also mean freedom from need, wrath, and oppression along with access to education, stability, and democratic participation. In short, a dignified life is contiguous with the continuing and living project of liberation. Without such liberation, it becomes not only possible, but probable that one is lifted into continuing systems of domination. And to live in a system of domination, whether as oppressor or oppressed, means that one's humanity is harmed. It means that one will never come to fully understand their own capabilities or come to fully conceptualize their futures–key components of what it means to inhabit the dignity owed to humanity.

Du Bois's veil affords a subaltern dignity to Black people as they are able to use the dichotomy imposed by white supremacy to create a self constructed in opposition to the prevailing ways of being in their society. As Jürgen Moltmann notes, most prevailing notions of what it means to have human dignity, especially those based in liberal democratic social institutions or modern conceptions of autonomy, fall to a basic problem: "Dignity defined in any of these ways immediately entails a counter-definition of others as inhuman, not possessing dignity."[33] In its best interpretation, black epistemology can escape this fault of human comprehension based in cycles of domination. For both Douglass and Du Bois, all ethical thought is bound up in mutuality–liberation differs from freedom and autonomy in that it is conceptualized as social in nature, as *ubuntu*. Deborah Posel writes:

> Sociality, then, *is* the human condition. And this has powerful ethical consequences: to be humane is to recognise our human mutuality, to acknowledge and respect the humanity of the other. This is the locus of *ubuntu*, typically defined by way of the claim: 'a person can only be a person through others.' We are human through our recognition of the humanity of others; this is the kernel of our sociality as well as our ethical community. *Ubuntu* is primarily an ethical idea, a prescriptive evocation.[34]

To be truly liberated is to live in a society where all are liberated because all of us are caught up in the chains of human understanding and recognition–*ubuntu* becomes one of the guiding principles of defining who we are–a new way of knowing and seeking liberation through the veil of blackness. Just as enslavement denies the humanity of both the slave and the slaver; let them

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[33] Jürgen Moltmann, *On Human Dignity*, trans. by M. Douglas Meeks, (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1984), x.

[34] Posel, "Human Complicities," 223.

give up the idea that they can be free while making the Negro a slave. Behind the veil is a new way of being which posits a new kind of world to be in.

Mutuality is the component of dignity missing from the descriptions pointed to by Moltmann and others who view the concept of dignity as unable to fully encompass the legal and ethical duties owed to others. Metaphor as a tool of interpretation helps to frame our understanding in ways that compel mutuality and recognition. For Du Bois's veil to have explanatory power, all of us must access compelling understandings of the metaphor in which to hold the discourse of the Negro Problem. Here is Baptist describing the brutal movement of persons beneath the seeming promise of American society:

> From old Maryland and Virginia, which were crumbling beneath the glossy veneers offered to the world by their politicians, the coffle-chains and the people who toted them clanked across hundreds of miles into a new world where everything was flux and frolick [*sic*]. Forced migration and the expansion of slavery became a seemingly permanent and inevitable element of the mutually-agreed-to structure of lies that...made the nation.[35]

This description of the desperate persons transported under the jaundiced gaze of white supremacy helps to highlight the moral force of Douglass's and Du Bois's arguments. Hypocrisy and self-deception underly the structure of the world created through slavery as Douglass would quickly point out. Du Bois would say that as these people came to know and understand this new world based in veneers and seeming permanence, only life behind the veil could have prevented them from giving in to the humiliation of their trauma. Whites live a life behind an internal veil as well...a shroud which covers the ugliness of the slave coffle from their imagined reality of the

[35] Baptist, *The Half has Never been Told*, 36.

Antebellum South. Blackness as a way of knowing disrupts the mutually-agreed-to structure of a world based in domination because liberation is a social process.

Dignity in this sense is a way of being in a state of liberation. Liberation itself is emergent from interpreting the world in such a way that its hypocrisy and brutality become an integral part of one's self-understanding. Epistemological blackness is a way of knowing, but I doubt the only way, which can lead to liberation through the construction of a self in a world unbound by white supremacy. Metaphor is a crucial tool of understanding and interpretation which brings the hypocrisy of the world into a mutually conceptualized ethical reality. Once the veil is an agreed upon metaphor for the Black experience, we can begin to morally recognize the veil of white supremacy and normative epistemology which clouds the vision of America. Douglass's God of judgement and redemption is one way to personify this ethical reality. To be Black is to be a metaphor–one's emergent narrative self is always in response to the false reality of white supremacy.

It can be said, then, that to be Black in America is to perform a certain state of being–because the veil is an integral metaphor of Black life, blackness as epistemology must negotiate this veil in order to envision a world of mutuality and dignity. In *Black Dignity*, Vincent Lloyd posits this description:

> Dignity is also something you *do*, a practice, a performance, a way of engaging the world. This is a special insight of the Black political tradition, skeptical as it is of abstractions: with time frozen, dignity may look like status, but in its natural habitat, dignity names friction. In a world that denies Black humanity and embraces racial

> domination, dignity names an affirmation of that humanity, which necessarily means struggle against domination.[36]

I think it's important here to assume that Lloyd is expressly speaking to modes of domination that go beyond performative anger and self-victimization. For instance, I doubt those who are in favor of the Great Replacement Theory, the theory that whites are being systematically replaced by people of color and jews in society, would be dignified in their false struggle against the loss of white society to minorities. But it is important to note the action centered understanding of dignity at the heart of Lloyd's analysis: dignity is found in opposing white supremacy and other forms of domination. As I am attempting, Lloyd is involved in a project of reclamation–to free and reinterpret the ontological power of the concept of dignity from simply meaning high-mindedness or respectability. This is also a narratively oriented understanding of dignity; one continually strives toward dignity because it not something to be achieved it is a continuing movement against the denial of humanity. According to Lloyd, this can be done in a number of ways, "Sometimes dignity connotes struggle on a grand scale, in activism and organizing; at other times the struggle is simply for survival."[37] My interpretation of dignity is slightly different as the struggle may be in the process of self-creation against the very reality of a white supremacist world. The doing in this sense would be the work of imagining and narrating the self in a world beyond the confines of humiliation and brutalization. At the foundation of this doing is the paradoxical relation of creation emerging from the void of social death.

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[36] Vincent Lloyd, *Black Dignity: The Struggle against Domination*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2022), 2.

[37] Lloyd, *Black Dignity*, 3.

Lloyd continues, "When we turn from dignity as status to dignity as performance, as struggle, we find it easier to state clearly what dignity is not than what it is."[38] For Lloyd, performance does not mean to pretend or act as if one is struggling against the hypocrisy of a world ordered in domination, it means to inhabit the imaginative reality of the world beyond such a struggle. Writing of Douglass, Lloyd says, "Through struggle, supported by his community of fellow slaves, Douglass begins to manifest in the present the future freedom he desires."[39] I insist that this future freedom must be on the path to liberation, Moltmann's realistic fears of inhumanity imposed on those who lack dignity are interrupted by an idea of freedom which must, at all times and in all ways, be mutual and social. Douglass, in my reading, is manifesting blackness in the deepest sense of the word. Douglass and his community are beginning the work of creation through coming to see reality in a unique and powerful way–they are gathering toward *ubuntu* and true mutuality. The tragedy of the veil is that one must learn to inhabit such a worldview while existing in the world created through white supremacy. Du Bois shows that the struggle is both against the domination of one's self in society and against one's self considered in the light of hatred. Performance takes on many valences as one struggles to resist in ways which bring about the hoped-for future while still considering the need for present reality to transform in important ways. Douglass's condemnation of Southern Religion and Du Bois's advocacy for the existence of the Black soul are both instances where the struggle is both lived as performance and through engagement with a discourse which goes beyond the world as it is to what it ought to be.

[38] Lloyd, *Black Dignity*, 5.
[39] Lloyd, *Black Dignity*, 8.

Choice is another aspect of dignity which needs to be explored and considered. It is important that simply existing in black skin does not amount to the sort of blackness which comes from the project of interpretation and action. To choose is to be an ethical actor, Douglass and Du Bois chose to inhabit the epistemology of blackness because it was the right thing to do in service to the God liberated from Southern Religion and in respect to the souls suffocated by the veil. For instance, a Black person feeling true and honest joy under conditions of white supremacy is, according to Lloyd, a performative act of dignified struggle against domination. I would say that it is important that one chooses to feel such joy, and to do so unencumbered by the burden of racist social ideals, in order to be engaged in the discourse of what is to be Black. To choose is part of what it means to be a capable human–to embrace one's possibilities and to be liberated in one's decision to struggle against domination. This dignity goes beyond being and doing, toward willing and hoping, active capabilities which are ethical choices in light of white supremacy. Michael Rosen, speaking of the philosophy of Pico della Mirandola, puts it succinctly; "human beings do not simply fulfill a preordained role. On the contrary, man *chooses* his own destiny, for God has given him the capacity to shape himself according to a range of possibilities not available to other creatures."[40] Choice is related to possibility–to be an ethical person is to choose to act against domination. Being born into blackness is not enough; this blackness must be embraced and lived through one's interpretation of reality and the choices which result from such an epistemology. Choosing to act against domination is to choose toward the call of the other and toward a true communion of mutuality and recognition.

[40] Michael Rosen, *Dignity: Its History and Meaning*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 15.

As Paul Ricoeur writes, "the main problem of hermeneutics is that of interpretation."[41] And later, "the concept of interpretation occurs, at the epistemological level, as an alternative concept opposed to that of explanation..."[42] We see this understanding of an interpretive epistemology in the concept of blackness at stake in this dissertation. I believe that the discourse between Douglass and Du Bois, despite the time gap between their most active years, is reflexive and reflective in the way that creates a hermeneutic circle. It is important that this discourse be entered into voluntarily, that it be chosen, in order for it to have the ethical dimension hinted at by Ricoeur's understanding of interpretative epistemology as an *alternative* to mere explanation. Lloyd's performative dignity explains certain movements and acts of Black resistance to domination, my aim is to interpret blackness in a way that results in the liberation needed for dignity to become a moral concept.

The metaphor of the slave coffle is important to understanding the discursive circle I am drawing around the Douglass's and Du Bois's examination of the Negro Problem. To be part of the coffle was not chosen, but the act of survival in such circumstances was. To live and retain the capabilities of imagining and creating a self from the destruction of enslavement was not only an act reaching toward liberation and dignity, it was also a profound act of moral courage. Slaves were tasked with interpreting a reality which seemed as weighty and permanent as the iron around their necks. "Therefore," continues Ricoeur, "if we apply explanation to sense as the immanent design of the work, we may reserve interpretation to the kind of inquiry devoted to the power of a work to project a world of its own and to initiate the hermeneutical circle between the

[41] Paul Ricoeur, "Metaphor and the Main Problem of Hermeneutics," *New Literary History*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (Autumn, 1974), 95.

[42] Ricoeur, "Metaphor and the Main Problem of Hermeneutics," 95.

apprehension of those projected worlds and the expansion of self-understanding in front of these novel worlds."[43] This projection of a world is metaphor, symbol, and narrative. The veil presents a new world whose basis is self-understanding in response to the lack of self experienced and overcome in the coffle. The blackness which emerges interprets and points to the liberation of the world and the dignity possible through the ethical discourse around the Negro Problem and double-consciousness.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have made the case for epistemological blackness as a key hermeneutic for interpreting the Negro Problem. I have shown how Douglass and Du Bois handled the range of possibilities inherent in the act of helping to create a Black selfhood from white supremacist notions of the human person. *Ubuntu* has become a powerful way to point toward the moral need for mutuality and recognition. And the choices made by Douglass and Du Bois against domination were structured to point toward new worlds of possibilities bounded only by *ubuntu*, liberation, and ethical action.

Richard Kearney writes,"...we find a literal *is not* accompanied by a metaphorical *is*.[44] And later, "Metaphor thus thrives by virtue of the fact that it introduces the spark of imagination into a 'thinking more.' And this thinking more...is at the root of seeing more..."[45] To be Black is also to be a living metaphor–to exist in the now and to exist in what ought to be–to live within the shadow of the veil and to see with the gift of second sight.

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[43] Ricoeur, "Metaphor and the Main Problem of Hermeneutics," 100-101.

[44] Richard Kearney, *On Paul Ricoeur: The Owl of Minerva*, (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2004), 52.

[45] Kearney, *On Paul Ricoeur*, 52.

Chapter 4

When I Was Sinkin' Down:
Blackness and the Creation of the God of Endurance

"Lord, give my people, who have suffered so much, the strength to be great."[1]

"Borne from that land–
our god's false to us, our kings betraying us–
like seeds the storm winds carry
to flower stubbornly upon these shores."[2]

This is the scene: men in white robes are gathered in a cave lit by wax candles set into the rocks and dirt of the walls. Majestically in the center is "the Grand Cyclops of the Den, the presiding officer of the township, his rank marked by scarlet stripes on the white-cloth spike of his cap."[3] Others in the crowd are marked for distinction, here a yellow sash and there a man with red crosses painted on his chest. These are either Grand Turks or perhaps a Grand Dragon depending on the particular rules of this chapter of the clan. Grand Sentinels stand guard at the entrance of the cave and remove the prisoner from their midst as the pastor rises to speak:

> Lord God of our Fathers, as in times past thy children, fleeing from the oppressor, found refuge beneath the earth until once more the sun of righteousness rose, so are we met to-night. As we wrestle with the powers of darkness now strangling our life, give to our souls to endure as seeing the invisible, and to our right arms the strength of the martyred

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[1] Joseph Ndiaye, "Parable Tacked to the Door of No Return at La Maison des Esclaves at Gorée Island, Senegal, West Africa," *Barracoon: The Story of the Last "Black Cargo,"* ed. by Deborah G. Plant, (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2018), xxix.

[2] Robert Hayden, "Middle Passage," *Phylon*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (3rd Qtr., 1945): 253.

[3] Thomas Dixon, Jr., *The Clansman: An Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan*, (New York, NY: Grosset & Dunlap, 1905), 318.

> dead of our people. Have mercy on the poor, the weak, the innocent and the defenceless, and deliver us from the body of the Black Death.[4]

The metaphors in use here are not clever nor complicated: the powers of darkness and the Black Death refer to the ex-slaves running rabid in their land. They are oppressed by these foul monsters in the night who kill at will and molest without the check of military power or natural morality. The god they pray to is a deeply personal one, a god who has aided the white man in the past and is, even in the darkness of the cave, giving them the strength to protect their brethren who are unable to protect themselves. Reverend Hugh McAlpin continues:

> In a land of light and beauty and love our women are prisoners of danger and fear, while the heathen walks his native heath unharmed and unafraid, in this fair Christian Southland our sisters, wives, and daughters dare not stroll at twilight through the streets or step beyond the highway at noon. The terror of the twilight deepens with the darkness, and the stoutest heart grows sick with fear for the red message the morning bringeth. Forgive our sins–they are many–but hide not thy face from us, O God, for thou are our refuge![5]

At stake are the most precious fruits of the south, the women whom they are duty bound to protect from the ravenous desires of the formerly enslaved who seek nothing more than vengeance and to slake their dark need. These Clansmen call upon the god of their forefathers and the god of the Christian Southland to give them the courage to stand against the blackness choking out the civilization that they spent so many years carving from the unkempt, savage lands of the south. A woman and her daughter were found dead at the bottom of a cliff–they

[4] Dixon, *The Clansman*, 319.
[5] Dixon, *The Clansman*, 319-320.

chose to jump to their martyr's death rather than be besmirched and abused by the negro man chasing them. These officers of the Invisible Empire have gathered to mete out the justice denied them by the Reconstruction and the cruelty of northern aggression.

The Scribe reads aloud the Clansman's code of conduct before the prisoner is brought forth for sentencing. They are to protect the weak and disenfranchised, to honor the Constitution of the United States, and to "protect the people from unlawful seizure, and from trial except by their peers in conformity to the laws of the land."[6] Augustus Caesar, the ravenous former slave, is brought forth to stand in judgement for the heinous crime of "assault on a daughter of the South."[7] The evidence is inconvertible. Negro tracks were found at the scene of the crime discernable by the elongated heel and fallen arches of their kind. Gus ran–only the guilty attempt to subvert the law. And, as a plus to the prosecution, this particular negro is extremely susceptible to the power of hypnotic suggestion. Once under the influence of the superior mental capabilities of his captors, Gus's weak mind will easily bend and give the truth of the situation.

Gus is duly hypnotized, his animalistic intelligence no match for the mesmeric capabilities of his captors, and proceeds to reenact the movements of his crime as the Clansmen rage, cry, and rend their garments at the horrors revealed. Some of the white-clothed men fall to their knees as they imagine their own wives and daughters at the hands of the black menace. In thrall to this hypnotic state, Gus bursts into an imaginary room and "with the light of hell in his beady, yellow splotched eyes, Gus gripped his imaginary revolver and growled: 'Scream, an' I

[6] Dixon, *The Clansman*, 320-321.
[7] Dixon, *The Clansman*, 321.

blow yer bgrains out!'"[8] The Clansmen begin to press closer around the deranged figure, they begin to curse and sob as the truth comes to light:

> [Gus] still wore his full Captain's uniform, its heavy epaulets flashing their gold in the unearthly light, his beastly jaws half covering the gold braid on the collar. His thick lips were drawn upward in an ugly leer and his sinister bead eyes gleamed like a gorilla's. A single fierce leap and the black claws clutched the air slowly as if sinking into the soft white throat.
>
> Strong men began to cry like children.[9]

Gus had stolen himself and joined the Union Army. Apparently, in the process, he gained the devil's courage to finally fulfill his malignant desires. The negro still holds on to the authority given to him by the Northern scoundrels and the weapons of war now used to abuse and terrorize innocent southerners. His heavy jaws, obscuring the marks of rank meant for the bearing of a white body, ape-like eyes, and black claws mark Gus as something less than human–a beast which roams the night and must be dealt with as the monster that he is. Gus is ruthlessly beaten, then tied and gagged and thrown at the feet of the Grand Cyclops. A rite is prepared: water from the southern river is gathered to represent the blood of the women fallen to the hands of this beast; and a bundle of local herbs are gathered from nearby, formed into the shape of a cross, and lit on fire. Holding the cross above his head, the Grand Cyclops intones: "The Fiery Cross of old Scotland's hills! I quench its flames in the sweetest blood that ever stained the sand of Time."[10]

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[8] Dixon, *The Clansman*, 323.
[9] Dixon, *The Clansman*, 323.
[10] Dixon, *The Clansman*, 326.

My copy of the novel this vignette is taken from, *The Clansman: An Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan* by Thomas Dixon, Jr., is complete with illustrations adapted from the stage play of the same name showing blazing crosses and hunched ink-black apemen meant to represent the formerly enslaved. Later, this novel was adapted into the movie *The Birth of Nation* which is famous for being the first movie screened in the White House. President Woodrow Wilson is reported to have remarked, "It's like writing history with lightning. My only regret is that it is all so terribly true."[11] It is still possible to buy t-shirts and mugs with quotations from the novel prominently displayed. *The Clansman* is still alive–its imagery continues to haunt and, in some respects, define what it means to be Black in America. The bestiality of the descriptions echoes those from police officers terrified of Black suspects and their hidden supernatural strength and cunning. The fear of rape and miscegenation still animates large portions of our society who live in dread of the Great Replacement and the continued loss of an Edenic prelapsarian American South.

Notice how narrative is being used to write history with lightning when it comes to instantiating a deep fear into the reader. The truth of Dixon's story is not in the narrative honesty of the telling, but in the way it is used to shape the understanding of the world operative in white supremacy. White supremacy is cocreated with blackness in this sense–whiteness is a hegemonic structure whose aim is not simply to oppress, but to justify such oppression sociologically, metaphorically, and espistemologically.

[11] For a critical examination of the origin of this quote see Mark E. Benbow, "The Birth of a Quotation: Woodrow Wilson and "Like Writing History with Lightning," *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, Vol. 9, No. 4, Native Americans and Indian Policy in the Progressive Era (October 2010), pp. 509-533 (https://www.jstor.org/stable/20799409)

It is the seeming permanence of such understandings of Black life and being that are the topic of this chapter. This dissertation acts as, in large part, a project of reclamation–by exploring the historical, theological, and epistemological roots of blackness, I hope to show its ethical value to modern society and considerations of what it means to lead a full and dignified human existence. Douglas and Du Bois have given us the language, invited us into the discourse, surrounding Black epistemological understanding up to this point. But there are compelling arguments for the impossibility of blackness as a useful term of description or of the ontological and epistemological possibilities of a community of people created through racialized domination. To be Black is to live in a state of total and complete dehumanization; the only hope is to discover new ways of being beyond the terrors of Black being.

This chapter will, accordingly, critically examine some of these Afropessimistic theories of Black being, not in order to disprove them, but to respond to them in a way that furthers the discourse of the Negro Problem and what is to be done with those who have emerged from the void of the Middle Passage. Firstly, I will outline the major problems and considerations pointed out by Afropessimism and some schools of Black ontological theory. This will be a generalized examination of some of the works of Frank B. Wilderson, III, Victor Anderson, and other theoreticians of what it means to inhabit blackness. I will respond to these views with the story of Kossula as told by the sociologist and writer Zora Neale Hurston. Kossula's journey in America as one of the final batch of slaves delivered across the Atlantic Ocean, is representative of the promise and perils of what a Black epistemology can offer to the world and to our ethical understandings of what it means to be human and what a God of such humanity would look like. It is important to consider in what ways the told experience of Kossula can be said to be true and what sorts of epistemological being is the goal of such a telling. Kossula freely mingles memory,

narrative, and self-creation in a way that does important conceptual work for this dissertation. In the final movement of this chapter, I will again turn to Douglass and Du Bois as I explore some of the ways in which their discourse surrounding the Negro Problem points to the possibilities of Kossula's self-creation while still respecting the concerns of a pessimistic view of blackness.

Afropessimism

Frank Wilderson's *Afropessimism* opens with his experience of mental breakdown while working to complete his graduate degree. Wilderson is at the edge of his sanity as he struggles to come to terms with the nihilism of his own Black existence within the context of white supremacy. Wilderson relates:

> Then, without knowing how or why, I was on a bus in Downton Berkeley. I saw myself seeing myself through the eyes of passengers on the bus, as I slumped to one side and softly sobbed. *Make them feel safe*, I had thought to myself, even though I had never felt more at risk. I would think it again when the nurse and the doctor first came into this white sepulchre where I lay. Make them feel safe, the cardinal rule of Negro diplomacy.[12]

This is a tragic description of the shadow of the veil. Even at his most fragile, most exposed, state, Wilderson still feels the need to continually view himself from without himself as himself. This double-sightedness is necessary to project a self that is safe for the white people around him–to show anger, or fear, or any sort of aggression could mean his death. This is an apt description of life in the shadow of the veil: The raw fear of a Black man struggling to control the effects of the world piercing the veil that separates the possibilities of who he is from the

[12] Frank B. Wilderson, III, *Afropessimism*, (New York, NY: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2020), 6

need to live in a reality seeking to destroy his very being. Wilderson must make them feel safe in order to ensure his own safety–for Wilderson, this is the key moment of blackness understanding and navigating the world.

Later, Wilderson writes that the agreed upon reality of white supremacy shares: "...a largely unconscious consensus that Blackness is a locus of abjection to be instrumentalized on a whim. At one moment Blackness is a disfigured and disfiguring phobic phenomenon; at another moment Blackness is a sentient implement to be joyously deployed for the reasons and agenda that have little to do with Black liberation."[13] Here we can read echoes of Dixon and Saidiya Hartman. To Dixon's Clansman, not only is blackness disfiguring, but it is also a disease, a Black Death, which must be cleansed from the land. Domination preserves itself through control of the others ability to even envision freedom–it is beyond bodily autonomy and affects the inner-life of those under the heel of supremacy. White supremacy, in Wilderson's view, created blackness as a disfigurement in order to mark those who are destined to be dominated. This mark cannot be erased through the praxis of self-creation because even that act can be instrumentalized by white supremacy to serve the needs of domination. Hartman insists that even those non-Blacks who advocate against white supremacy cannot help but take an empathetic pleasure, "derived from the spectacle of suffering...the pleasure of indignation yielded before the spectacle of extreme violence; the instability of the scene of suffering; and the confusion of song and sorrow typical of the coffle, the auction block, performing before the master, and other popular amusements."[14] For Hartman, as for Wilderson, these popular amusements which coopt and *use* blackness are

[13] Wilderson, *Afropessimism* ,12.

[14] Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 2022), 29.

largely an unconscious act based in selves created to reflect the domination of their society. Both the white and Black self are but reflections of this white supremacist reality–the will to escape the cycle of domination and violence is hopeless. Wilderson writes:

> Afropessimism, then, is less of a theory and more of a *metatheory*: a critical project that, by deploying Blackness as a lens of interpretation, interrogates the unspoken, assumptive logic of Marxism, postcolonialism, psychoanalysis, and feminism through rigorous theoretical consideration of their *properties and assumptive logic*, such as their foundations, methods, form, and utility; and it does so, again, on a higher level of abstraction than the discourse and method of the theories it interrogates...It is pessimistic about the claims theories of liberation make when these theories try to explain Black suffering or when they analogize Black suffering with the suffering of other oppressed beings.[15]

Wilderson is attempting to position blackness as a metatheory of being which can be used to interrogate liberal social understandings of the human person. "Blackness as a lens of interpretation" is important to Wilderson's project as the pessimistic and nihilistic reality of Black life is used to assert a wider interpretation of Western values...or lack thereof. This dissertation asserts that the interpretive lens of blackness can be used to uncover ethical and theological possibilities occluded by the veil of living in a white supremacist reality. Wilderson insists that I am part of the issue in instrumentalizing and analogizing blackness into a set of constructs which denies the very existence of Black being. Black suffering and being are so

[15] Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, 14.

unique, so disfigured and alien, as to exist outside of the reality they are used to interpret. Black being is wholly other. This meta-analysis is possible because (Wilderson's italics):

> *Blacks are not Human subjects, but are instead structurally inert props, implements for the execution of White and non-Black fantasies and sadomasochistic pleasures*...the claims of universal humanity that the above theories all subscribe to are hobbled by a meta-aporia: a contradiction that manifests whenever one looks seriously at the structure of Black suffering in comparison to the presumed universal structure of all sentient beings. Again, Black people *embody* a meta-aporia for political thought and action–Black people are the wrench in the works.[16]

The metaphor which constitutes Black being within the context of the veil and white supremacy is more than a disruption to the ideas and language used to describe humanity. The wholly otherness of blackness means that it can be used to critically engage theories of liberation without ever fully participating in such liberative praxis. The creation of a Black self is a contradictory notion in and of itself. There is no possibility of the creation of the self *ex nihilo*–or at least such a created self would exist outside of the concepts of humanity involved in the types of liberation usually spoken of in terms of Human Rights or dignity.

In *Ontological Terror,* Calvin L. Warren makes a similar ontological claim about blackness. Warren argues that rather than blackness as a meta-state of being which, while existing, only exists as a meta-position from which to criticize claims to a universal humanity, blackness is instead a null state–a kind of non-being which acts as the repository for the hatreds, fears, and contempt of humanity or "we will *never* overcome metaphysics because the world

[16] Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, 15.

cannot overcome the Negro–the world needs the Negro, even as the world despises it."[17] The state of Being which upholds the entire edifice of what it means to be human, i.e. humanity, would crumble without blackness as a metaphysical and ontological necessity–a metaphysical and ontological dumping ground for everything which denies our humanity. Warren perceives a "deep philosophical conflict between Being, blackness and freedom" which can only be overcome through the recognition of what he terms "black ~~being~~."[18] Antiblack racism is the collection of social, communal, and political hatreds used to enforce the non-being of blackness onto those chosen to bear the metaphysical need of those who have the power to inhabit Being. Warren writes, "We can call this hatred *antiblackness*: an accretion of practices, knowledge systems, and institutions designed to impose nothing onto blackness and the unending domination/eradication of black presence *as* nothing incarnated. Put differently, antiblackness *is* anti-nothing."[19] The creation of the Black self is the creation of nothing, a ~~being~~ which is necessary for the Being of the entire world to operate. Blackness, then, is an operative paradox at the heart of what is taken to be our collective humanity. To hate blackness, or to embrace an antiblack view of the world, is to hate all that which threatens the world Being. To overcome, in this instance, would be to completely reorder what humanity is in such a way that humanity would cease to be...human. Warren feels a "nihilistic responsibility" to engage in the discourse of blackness without committing to such a discourse containing any meaning or hope.[20]

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[17] Calvin L. Warren, *Ontological Terror: Blackness, Nihilism, and Emancipation*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 7.

[18] Warren, *Ontological Terror*, 18.

[19] Warren, *Ontological Terror*, 9.

[20] Warren, *Ontological Terror*, 3.

What Wilderson and Warren have in common is the notion that the interpretive possibilities of blackness was never an emergent way of being or knowing. Out of the void of the Middle Passage came a group of non-subjects destined to contain the hurt of the world constructing its own way of being–Blacks were merely the latest incarnation of the non-persons which roam the borders of human self-understanding and humanities conception of itself in the world. Blacks are Hobbes's primordial unnamed fear, Blacks are the creeping death and uncertainty resulting from the embarrassment of Southern defeat. Even more terrifying is that Black self-creation, the project of using the discourse of the Negro Problem to interrogate what it means to be human, is simply a reification of white supremacy. Wilderson insists that Black people are "shackled to the cognitive maps of their well-meaning masters;" Douglass's God of justice or Du Bois's hope for beauty and truth arising from struggle are but hidden messengers of Black non-being.[21] "Blackness cannot be separated from slavery. Blackness is often misconstrued as an identity (cultural, economic, gendered) of the Human community; however, there is no Black time that precedes the time of the Slave."[22] The persistence of Black pain and struggle–the failure of Douglass's abolitionist dream to result in anything other than Jim and Jane Crow and Du Bois's dashed hopes of a cohesive African union or an America unburdened by the shadow the veil–speak to the solidity of antiblack hatred. We should not be surprised by Officer Derek Chauvin casually kneeling on the neck of George Floyd, as Kelly Brown Douglas writes:

> ...whiteness itself must be regarded as a violent identity construct inasmuch as it is defined in dehumanizing opposition to that which is nonwhite, notably blackness. For, any system of thought or culture that objectifies or dehumanizes another human being

[21] Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, 209.
[22] Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, 217.

must be understood as violent. Furthermore, such systemic and cultural violence initiates a cycle of violence in which the objectified being, in this instance black bodies, becomes entrapped.[23]

What if this trap is deeper than violence? Wilderson insists that blackness, rather than being created to interpret the world of pain that is slavery, is nothing but the personification of systemic violence and de- non- humanization. He insists that the desperation, violence, and futility of Black existence proves the facticity of the afropessimistic worldview.

Against Ontological Blackness

Perhaps the most cogent argument against a Black epistemology, or any worldview which seeks to privilege Black experience as a foundation of knowing, is Victor Anderson's *Beyond Ontological Blackness*. According to Anderson, "ontological blackness signifies the blackness that whiteness created."[24] Blackness is a totalizing discourse which, perhaps paradoxically, centers whiteness in its attempts to subsume a particular group of people under the limiting yoke of who or what is considered Black. Blackness, then, is tainted by its creation through suffering under white supremacy. "Ontological blackness is a covering term that connotes categorical, essentialist, and representational languages depicting black life and experience."[25] Anderson wants to disentangle the subjectivity of Black life from a supposed communal Black experience of suffering. The subjective self is lost when race is essentialized–the essence of a person is not

[23] Kelly Brown Douglass, *The Black Christ: Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Edition*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2019), xix.

[24] Victor Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness: An Essay on African American Religious and Cultural Criticism*, (New York, NY: Continuum Publishing Company, 1995), 13.

[25] Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness*, 11.

determined by their wants, needs, or actions but by a communal formation under white terror. Anderson continues:

> Postmodern blackness recognizes the permanency of race as an effective category in identity formation. However, it also recognizes that black identities are continually being reconstituted as African Americans inhabit widely differentiated social spaces and communities of moral discourse. African American life and experience occur in differentiated socio-economic spaces along divisions of education, income, and occupations. And the variety of communities of moral discourse that influence black life and experience may include churches, temples, mosques, and many non-religious voluntary organizations.[26]

This postmodern blackness is the aim of Anderson's project, he wants a black identity more responsive to social pressures and differences which are lost under the covering terms of essentialized racial discourses. Black life is lived in a variety of social strata which means that it is impossible to draw out a singular Black experience which can be used epistemologically, ontology, or religiously. This sort of singular blackness is, to Anderson, a permanent feature of discourses which can be contained under the heading of ontological blackness. Anderson seeks to expose in ontological Black discourses, "The disclosure of the ways that race is reified–i.e., treated as if it objectively exists independent of historically contingent factors and subjective intentions–in the writing of historical and contemporary African American cultural and religious thinkers is the *first* theme of this book."[27] For Anderson and other thinkers along the lines of ontological blackness and Afropessimism, the subjective reality of individuals is lost in the

[26] Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness*, 11-12.
[27] Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness*, 11.

continual reification of Black experience as something which objectively exists. The historical and cultural contingency of race as a category of being is thematized in Anderson's writing to show that often other varieties of being, for instance poverty or sexuality, are more important to subjective individual experience.

There is another argument of Anderson's which speaks even more directly to the construction and intentions of this dissertation. Anderson writes:

> *Beyond Ontological Blackness* focuses on *the cult of black heroic genius*. I use the word *cult* here to designate dispositions of devotion, loyalty, and admiration for racial categories and the essentialized principles that determine black identity. And racial genius refers to the exceptional, sometimes essentialized cultural qualities, that positively represent the racial group in the action of at least one of the group's members.[28]

In this dissertation I refer to a new way of knowing which is Black epistemology and its ability to act as rich foundation for rethinking and reimagining how we envision society and our ethical commitments to one another. Black epistemology, I believe, can shed a particular light on hegemonic white supremacy which is often granted normative power in how we shape our communal lives together and set boundaries to who or what deserves full humanity. These claims do rely on a Black reaction to the humiliation of enslavement and a shared experience of reclaiming a Black self from the fragments of memory and living which result from dehumanization. Anderson would say that I am relying on an idealized cult of black heroic genius to explain the use of the narrative experience which goes from the hopelessness of enslavement to the redemptive possibilities of liberation. In Anderson's reading, Douglass, Du

[28] Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness*, 13.

Bois, and, as we will see in the next chapter, Jesus as the Christ may all fall under the rubric of the racial genius whose representational use often overshadows the subjective individuality of Black persons living their lives in response to social pressures and various oppressions/privileges. I intend to respond to Anderson in the next section of this chapter, but it is important to note here that the word "cult" is acting to signify a host of negative allusions. Cults are bad in popular discourse, therefore anything attached to cults is also bad. I would argue that the positive qualities gleaned from the narratives of Douglass and Du Bois provide a distinctive and interesting way to explore how such constructive qualities can be used to inform our ethical duties to one another.

I also argue that liberation is never an individualized process–that to achieve true liberation, all must be released from domination. This means that all of us are bound together in our actions and in our response to the historical situations which have produced the oppressions and supremacies that limit our full humanity. Anderson sates that, "Under ontological blackness, the conscious lives of blacks are experienced as bound by unresolved binary dialectics of slavery and freedom, negro and citizen, insider and outsider, black and white, struggle and survival. However, such binary polarities admit no possibility of transcendence of mediation."[29] Transcendence can only be attained, I argue in this chapter and the next, through appealing to higher orders of justice and condemnation which can be reached through, but not *only*, through the lens of Black hermeneutics. Douglass and Du Bois, as we have seen, spent much of their intellectual lives exploring the harm of binary polarities involved in the Negro Problem. The Black way of knowing, of living in the shadow of the veil, offers opportunities to find resolutions

[29] Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness*, 14.

to binary dialectics through a newness of vision which refuses to admit the permanence of dualities. The process of self-creation is an ethical choice, just as it is an ethical choice to live into the binaries which serve to contain and limit who we have the capabilities to be as humans. This is why Douglass is obsessed with the negro *as* citizen–an epistemological breaking of the dichotomy of negro and citizen. Du Bois, through the creativity of second sight, sees a new way to envision struggle and survival beyond the terms of those set by white supremacy. Struggle and survival become the space for exploring what is owed to one another in a society where survival is always at issue and struggle is a way of life. Du Bois dares us to ask what we would be if released from such a binary–what would humanity be if it were freed from precarity into fulfillment.

Anderson offers a third definition of ontological blackness when he writes:

> Ontological blackness signifies the totality of black existence, a binding together of black life and experience. In its root, *religio*, religion denotes tying together, fastening behind, and binding together. Ontological blackness renders black life and experience a totality. It is a totality that takes narrative formations that emphasize the heroic capacities of African Americans to transcend individuality and personality in the name of black communal survival.[30]

This succinctly identifies the problem with Anderson's description and understanding of blackness as a way of knowing–ontology is standing in for what ought to be an epistemological explanation for the work that experience is doing in this dissertation and in Black theology as a whole. In the previous chapter, I used the experience of the slave coffle to metaphorically

[30] Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness*, 14-15.

explore the creative discourse between Douglass and Du Bois. The binding together is an accident of history as it is not a choice. What makes the coffle morally unpardonable is that it humiliates those who are forced into its shackles, for without the ability to make choices we cannot be said to be fully human. The totality of Black existence is not ontologically bound to what we are as persons but is the work of white supremacy to impose itself on others. What emerges from this imposition, what is formed out of the binding of the coffle, speaks to the ability of persons to arrive at their humanity through their *interpretation* of their reality.

Meaning is derived from the narrative being of those who must come to a new understanding of who they are. To name this process as heroic misses its applicability to all those who are bound by systems of domination. This is not a heroic process, but rather, a human response to an experience of oppression which, through the machinations of the oppressor, becomes their totality. The totality is unmade through meaning and narrative. Anderson continues, "racial identity is not total, although it is always present. From a religious point of view, when race is made total, then ontological blackness is idolatrous, approaching racial henotheism."[31] Dixon's clansmen make racial identity into an idol, Black theology undoes this idolatry through naming blackness as a way of being which participates in, but does not totalize, the transcendence of God. Jesus is Black not because of his skin color or his experience of enslavement, rather Jesus's blackness is the work of entering the narrative of the oppressed.

Anderson, writing of the work of James Cone and Dwight Hopkins, says that:

> The difficulty arises here: (a) blackness is a signification of ontology and corresponds to black experience. (b) Black experience is defined as the experience of suffering and

[31] Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness*, 15.

> rebellion against whiteness. Yet (c) both black suffering and rebellion are ontologically created and provoked by whiteness as a necessary condition of blackness. (d) Whiteness appears to be the ground of black experience, and hence of black theology and its new black being. Therefore, while black theology justifies itself as radically oppositional to whiteness, it nevertheless requires whiteness, white racism, and white theology for the self-disclosure of its new black being and its legitimacy.[32]

There are several points here which miss the mark, but which shed light on Anderson's overall project and speak to the power of his argument against ontological blackness and, according to his own rubric, Black theology. Point (b) takes liberties which seem unfair to the variety of discourse encompassed by Black theology and Black sociological speech. Black experience also includes Black joy and creativity. Blackness includes differing sexual and gender expressions. And blackness never ought to be taken as meaning poor because oppression should not to be reduced to economic definitions. Suffering and rebellion against domination are human traits, not traits restricted to the Black experience. And it is a mistake to reduce Black experience to suffering and rebellion when both Cone and Hopkins have taken pains to show the wide scope of Black life which holds theological significance. Point (c) is also problematic. The necessary condition of blackness is Black people, meaning that a people were created through enslavement and the contingency of the coffle. Differing races, ethnicities, and sociologies were forcefully grafted together into a people as a brutal historical fact. These enslaved peoples created blackness as a way to understand their new circumstances as individuals thrust across the chasm of the Middle Passage and as a community under the whip of white supremacy. Whiteness and

[32] Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness*, 91.

blackness, in this sense, were co-creationary forces which resulted from the spiritual need to dehumanize those in bondage and grant supremacy to others. The story of what creates and provokes and creates blackness is much more complicated than one group begetting another. The ground of Black experience (in reference to point (d)) is narratival personhood and meaning, not whiteness.

Anderson's conclusion however, "Therefore, while black theology justifies itself as radically oppositional to whiteness, it nevertheless requires whiteness, white racism, and white theology for the self-disclosure of its new black being and its legitimacy," does raise the interesting question of what theology and ethics as disciplines are.[33] Does the discourse of theology and ethics need the oppositional force of whiteness in order to have legitimacy? Afterall, when I say that blackness is a new way of knowing, I must mean new in response to the old which can be taken as the white normative point of view. In the next chapter we encounter Kelly Brown Douglas and social-cultural epistemological privilege, so I will leave a deeper discussion of this problem for then, but here I can say that the old way is that of domination. Theologies and ethics of liberation speak against any form of domination and seek new ways to understand the world outside of oppressive ideologies taken as normative. All liberatory modes of being are oppositional–to *what* is contingent on the forces which constitute supremacy. This may be what Anderson is getting at when he writes, "My attempt is not to negate but to displace, decenter, and transcend the determinative transactions and practices of ontological blackness over black life and experience."[34] Anderson seeks to decenter the essentializing pressures of blackness in the hopes that other modes of domination do not go unnoticed or unencountered. If

[33] Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness*, 91.
[34] Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness*, 17.

this is what Anderson means, then it makes sense to note the different subjectivities which he believes are shrouded by racialized talk because he does not believe that liberation is enough of a basis for theology or ethics:

> The theologian as storyteller has a difficult task of overcoming the vicious circularity between oppression and liberation. The black theologian has to reassure the canonical gospel story as an effective liberating story in the context of black suffering. One would hope therefore that suffering can be ameliorated or transcended. At the same time, liberation is the correlate of black experience, but black experience is essentially the experience of unrelenting crisis. The oppression-liberation circle remains viciously closed to cultural transcendence.[35]

Anderson wants to know if theologies and ethics of liberation are dependent on continual crisis. He is also concerned about reaching conclusions that go beyond crisis to transcendence. But again, it is important to note that Anderson is only focusing on Black theology in response to suffering (see his point (b) above) when he writes, "[Black theology] is a theology of crisis insofar as it identifies ontological blackness with *black experience* and black experience as the experience of suffering and black rebellion."[36] As we have established, Black experience goes well beyond suffering and rebellion. But the charge that Black theology is a theology of crisis is, I think, a fair point to make. Theologies of liberation are always counter crises until liberation is no longer needed but arrived at in human existence. Whether or not it is possible for humanity to achieve true liberation is beyond the scope of this, or any other, dissertation. To seek a place of transcendence beyond the everyday struggles of persons is to cease to think theologically, if we

[35] Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness*, 102-103.
[36] Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness*, 103.

take Jesus's mission seriously as stated in Luke 4:18-19, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." The crisis is every day, it is up to us to determine if the correct response is liberation or transcendence.

The Man Born as Kossula

The story of Kossula is my answer to the main arguments of Afropessimism and Anderson's ontological blackness critique. There is no possibility of being in relation with the world, with others, or with God, without experiencing the tragic reality of dehumanization. To live is to expose oneself to a distorted order reflecting the humiliation of a society given to domination. The ghosts of communal trauma are embedded in Black self-creation–and those whose identity and life were destroyed beyond the bounds of re-membrance during the Middle Passage–but I insist that this is not the totality of what it means to be Black. Who were these people who survived into a new way of being, leaving behind their brutalized humanity in the vicious reality of the Middle Passage, the slave coffle, and the lynching tree? And most importantly for the work of a theological ethicist, how can Douglass's God of justice and love emerge from the narrative of slavery? Similar questions and motivations drove Zora Neale Hurston to journey to Africatown, Alabama, in search of the last extant slave delivered from his native land into a new state of being as a slave. Hurston was in search of:

> ...the man called Cudjo. This singular man who says of himself, "*Edem etie ukum edem etie upar*": The tree of two woods, literally, two trees that have grown together. One part *ukum* (mahogany) and one part *upar* (ebony). He means to say, "Partly a free man, partly

free." The only man on earth who has in his heart the memory of his African home; the horrors of a slave raid; the barracoon; the Lenten tones of slavery; and who has sixty-seven years of freedom in a foreign land behind him.[37]

The man born as Kossula, was stolen from his land and violently introduced into a new way of being which would determine not only his existence, but that of his progeny. A man of two different trees brutally grafted into one *thing* which must endure in its distorted reality. A newly created object which must, somehow, gain meaning from this endurance–learning to integrate powerful remembrances into a species of liberation which surpasses the pain and horror of slavery. This was 1927 and Hurston bent her genius to the task of salvaging the life of Kossula from the dustbins of history. Hurston was determined to preserve a precious resource for what would be the expression of blackness flourishing in the Harlem Renaissance. As a cultural anthropologist, Hurston is devoted to telling the unvarnished narrative of Kossula. Hurston writes:

Another muted silence. Then he said, "I thank God I on prayin' groun' and in a Bible country."

"But didn't you have a God back in Africa?" I asked him.

His head dropped between his hands and the tears sprung fresh. Seeing the anguish in his face, I regretted that I had come to worry this captive in a strange land. He read my face and said, "Excuse me I cry. I can't help it when I hear de name call. Oh, Lor'. I no see Afficky soil no mo'...Yeah, in Afficky we always know dere was a God; he

[37] Zora Neale Hurston, *Barracoon: The Story of the Last "Black Cargo,"* ed. by Deborah G. Plant, (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2018), 15.

name Alahua, but po' Affickans we cain readee de Bible, so we doan know God got a Son. We ain't ignant–we jes doan know...[38]

Kossula belongs to neither shore–an alien being in the new experience of Black freedom in America and denied a return to life before the onto-epistemology of Black existence which must account for the slave ship and for Jesus as the Christ. In Hurston's hands, the story of Kossula gains a particular sentimental force. Kossula cries, his broken English is transcribed with attentive care, his pain is made manifest as we witness his journey through memory.

But, Hurston uncovers more than a singular instance of recorded experience. She also introduces us to a new way of understanding what it means to be Black based on syncretic religious understandings and a harrowing exploration of the story of Kossula's self-creation within the context of the Middle Passage. Kossula's God is born of the blood of Africa, then transmuted across the impossibility of the Atlantic Ocean and communal endurance. Kossula's God is also borne across a trans-generational redemption which aims to preserve the humanity of those denied their personhood through the evil of chattel slavery. There is no syncretic violence associated with Kossula's appropriation of the Christian mythos, instead we see a man struggling to reconcile who he was with who he is becoming in a new land with a new way of knowing. When Anderson especially cites Hopkins's approach to Black theology as beholden to ontological blackness, Anderson writes:

The hermeneutics of return projects a grand narrative that evokes a great cloud of witnesses whose heroic legacy of survival, resistance, and hope can mediate the fragility

[38] Hurston, *Barracoon*, 18-19. It is difficult to know if "Alahua" is a direct reference to Allah or perhaps a vaguely remembered portion of the *Takbīr*, "*Allāhu akbar*." The similarity could, of course, be coincidental.

> of African American public life today and bind together our alienated generation that is so much in need of heroic black faith. But the consequence of such a hermeneutic is that whatever claims are made for African American identity in terms of black subjectivity, these are subsumed under a black collective consciousness definable in terms of black faith. So not only are the *remains* of the African gods disposed of under the totalizing hermeneutics of black theology, but black subjectivity itself is also subjugated under the totality of black faith.[39]

Kossula is engaged in the hermeneutics of reclamation–pulling on the scattered threads of the past and weaving them into the narrative of who he is. Kossula's subjectivity is never subsumed but is always in dynamic interplay with the society he is chained to in the reality of Africatown. The grand narrative is, in this sense, a hopeful and fecund place from were Kossula can begin his project of self-understanding and creation. Kossula's story must begin with his ancestors, in a past which continues in his very being and determines what tale he can transmit to the future:

> I was afraid that Cudjo might go off on a tangent, so I cut in with, "But Kossula, I want to hear about *you* and how *you* lived in Africa."
>
> He gave me a look full of scornful pity and asked, "Where is de house where de mouse is de leader? In de Affica soil I cain telllee you 'bout de son before I tellee you 'bout de father; and derefore, you unnerstand me, I cain talk about de man who is father till I tellee you 'bout de man who he father to him, now, dass right ain' it?"[40]

Whatever Kossula is, he does not possess the same humanity as those he left behind and, as we shall see, his conception of self undergoes dramatic and irreversible change when called to

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[39] Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness*, 99.
[40] Hurston, *Barracoon*, 20-21.

endure in a cosmic order which has been ruptured by the Middle Passage–a humanity which must be reclaimed and reimagined in a new world order. This section will explore this rupture and the humanity which emerges from the bowels of the slave ships. The Middle Passage creates a new humanity based on and created through the ultimate negation of personhood. Knowing the inhumanity of the journey from subject to object necessitates the creation of new way of being.

This is a new epistemology which draws from African traditional modes of existence while incorporating the being-in-Christ which serves to reorient the cosmological order to create meaning from the death of oblivion. Kossula is deeply concerned about preserving the memory of the Africa that inhabits his soul: "I want tellee somebody who I is, so maybe dey go in de Afficky soil some day and callee my name and somebody dere say, 'Yeah, I know Kossula.'"[41] Hurston knows, and subtly portrays to the reader, that the Africa of Kossula's memory no longer exists. This is not completely the fault of imperialism; it is also the product of projection–Kossula's Africa never existed as he remembers it because it is distorted by the journey through the Middle Passage. This is the work of narrative identity providing meaning to the tattered fragments of being and memory. Kossula envisions an Africa of deep spiritual and humanistic meaning. An Africa which *must* change in its very essence so that the experience of Jim Crow freedom and despair are subject to resurrection–a survival which projects a lost and humiliated humanity into a future of Black being and the reclamation of a Black self from the blood and soil of the ancestors. Hurston writes:

> Kossula was no longer on the porch with me. He was squatting about that fire in Dahomey. His face was twitching in abysmal pain. It was a horror mask. He had

[41] Hurston, *Barracoon,* 19.

> forgotten that I was there. He was thinking aloud and gazing into the dead faces in the smoke. His agony was so acute that he became inarticulate.[42]

There is no justice in the reality of Kossula. The only hope is in transcending pain to co-create a reality where God is at work through the humanity of blackness. Blackness represents a new way of being which *knows* that it will, in some way, survive the fire and depths–this depth of knowingness is what is often overlooked in afropessimistic accounts of what it means to exist as a Black person. Remembering, Kossula says, "We lookee and lookee and lookee and lookee and we doan see nothin' but water. Where we come from we doan know. Where we goin, we doan know."[43] The knowing is created through the Middle Passage. And this knowing re-orders the very God of Christianity into a life-force of endurance and the reclamation of a destroyed humanity. Re-ordering God must, as we will see, reconstrue the blood of diasporic blackness and the ancestral spiritual reality of Africa.

It is my hope that by using the narrative of Kossula I can construct a basic understanding of what it means to create a Black humanity–blackness which emerges from a new way of knowing, an epistemological self, that survives the horrors of the Middle Passage. It is my contention that the rupture of the Atlantic necessitates a new humanity which both negates and transcends common understandings of what it means to be human. I place this new humanity within the context of blackness as both a metaphor used to further the discourse of Douglass's and Du Bois's hermeneutic circle and as a means of interpreting the world of white supremacy and the God of Southern Religion. This Black humanity is also Christian, not only to account for

[42] Hurston, *Barracoon*, 49. Dahomey was situated between the modern countries of Togo and Nigeria in southern Benin.

[43] Hurston, *Barracoon*, 55.

my own intellectual limitations, but also to speak to the faith of Kossula and the place of Christianity within his community.

Objectification is not a mere material experience or a reoriented power structure; to become an object means to lose a self created through history and through connection to the soil of Africa. To Africans of Kossula's generation, nothing could be more brutal or final than being torn from the soil of Africa–a rupture which also separates the self from the life force of the ancestors. This is a new consideration of what it means to be humiliated, to have oneself reduced to dust in a land foreign to one's self-understood *humus* of creation; a new being must be created as a result. The Middle Passage is a void, a place of nullness where persons are reduced to non-beings. But I insist that what *emerges* from the Middle Passage is not a non-being, but a being in formation. As I have tried to argue contra Wilderson, Warren, and Anderson, Blackness is not a creation from nothing, it is a creation from the vestiges of a previous mode of existence and the spiritual imagination of those who survived. Black humanity is born from this emergent new way of being–this self-creation which will appropriate the blackness it is chained to. The God of Kossula breathes through the humiliation of enslavement to create a new cosmic ordering which transfigures suffering into survival.

The Great Rift and the Loss of Humanity

The Middle Passage is a vertical event in the horizontal and temporal reality of diasporic blackness. There is a before the Middle Passage and an after the Middle Passage; the humanity which enters the slave ship through the doors of no return on Gorée Island must be different from the humanity which emerges into objectification and recreation. Sowande' M. Mustakeem's *Slavery at Sea: Terror, Sex, and Sickness in the Middle Passage* is an exhaustive and harrowing

account of the Atlantic slave trade. Mustakeem gives us a contemporary historical examination of the dehumanizing reality of what it meant to become property. Slave traders and owners used the liminal space of the Atlantic Ocean to break the persons within their power–imagine the terror of an endless sea with few hopes of escape, surrounded by putrid filth and death, often separated from one's tribe and kin. Mustakeem writes:

> Sailors relentlessly unmade bondpeople's bodies through physical, emotional, and psychological conditioning, making intimately clear the dynamics of power. Exploring the cyclical assaults on slaves' personhood uncovers the politics of making and unmaking of black bodies for the first time, showing more holistically how men, women, the sick, weak, and unborn became paradigmatic to this foundational moment of conquest and debasement. This process of unmaking, which no captive was able to circumvent once forced into the slaving industry, produced a dramatic climate of terror in the world of slavery at sea that resulted in mental disorientation, familial and communal separation, malnourishment, lack of sanitation and cleanliness, severe isolation, debilitating diseases, miscarriages, sexual abuse, psychological instability, and bearing witness to physical violence committed against kin and shipmates.[44]

During the Middle Passage, hope was extinguished. Slavers had to convince their cargo that they were no longer humans, no longer entitled to the rights and expectations associated with the status of persons. In Mustakeem's analysis, this is a condition of a drastically changed power structure which considers Black flesh as capital or as a way to accumulate said power. The movement from person to slave, human to property, begins in the holds of the slave ship where

[44] Sowande' M. Mustakeem, *Slavery at Sea: Terror, Sex, and Sickness in the Middle Passage*, (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2016), 7.

the cargo is "seasoned" or brutally divested of their humanity in order to be docile, and therefore more valuable, tools for the planter class. But I find more in this breakdown of humanity than mere profit or power relations. The material brutality of the slavers cannot be doubted, but their fundamental motivation in attacking the bodies of Africans was to destroy the humanity of their cargo–this is where whiteness is beginning to be created alongside blackness. The process of unmaking is spiritual as well as material. The power is not just in controlling the bodies of Black people, but also in reorienting and controlling their understanding of what it means to be human in order to justify such treatment. The process of slavery revalues the human person into the order of object rather than subject–the loss of dignity results in a ruptured personhood.

You are no longer human, no longer a person inherently blessed with the dignity of personhood or the common rights of the social order; this is the message of Middle Passage. Continuing, Mustakeem remarks, "To counter any possibility of infectious transmissions, 'the cloth that they had round their middle was thrown overboard.' Such preventative measures appeased any initial fears of contamination, yet the intermingling of bondspeople into cramped ship holds facilitated the exchange of contagious diseases."[45] This is also a continuation of the unmaking process–a loss of the right to feel embarrassment over a body which is no longer considered outside of the status of object. The body becomes available to inspection and use by others. Fabrics also communicate tribal and ethnic affiliations in African culture, often even communicating power within the social order–protections for frail human bodies are removed along with a key marker of humanity, the will and ability to clothe oneself. Mustakeem writes, "Holding rooms reserved for captives' oceanic passage were far from extensive...'The Negro was

[45] Mustakeem, *Slavery at Sea*, 57.

laid on his Back,' one source revealed, to ensure they 'have sufficient Room for the Accommodation if they chose to turn on their Side.' In other ships, male slaves were 'locked spoonways,' or even in a head-to-foot spatial arrangement, forcing them to lie in close proximity to their fellow shipmates. More problematic than the resulting skin injuries were the toxic consequences from bodily excrement that flowed easily between, from, and to the bodies of slaves within their constricted environments."[46] During the Middle Passage, slaves were forced to lie in the liquid filth of their bodies like animals locked in cages too small for their number. This is a physical and mental description of Hell. A humiliation which serves to unmake the personhood of the cargo: "Throughout a vessel's passage they were forced to lie naked within hollowed spaces that both submerged and exposed their cramped bodies to contaminated mixtures of bacteria, blood, and mucus shed from their shipmates. Often these largely neglected darkened spaces were cleaned at the discretion of sea captains."[47] Exposed, disgusted, and dehumanized, the enslaved are now forced into a state of dependence.

A conditional existence based in humiliation, pain, and the loss of bodily control has replaced what was formerly a life lived with the dignity. This is beyond a simple power relation; the slaver can give or take life at will. The Middle Passage has unmade what it is to be human and created gods of ownership and greed. For Kossula, there was an even deeper understanding of the physical and spiritual derangement of the ship's hold. Mustakeem continues to give a description of the material reality of the slave ship when she writes, "Platforms, decks, and defecation tubs containing the blood, urine, fecal matter, and vomit of slaves were the primary

[46] Mustakeem, *Slavery at Sea*, 59.
[47] Mustakeem, *Slavery at Sea*, 61.

catalysts for the offensive stench" which surrounded the slave ships.[48] In his lengthy biography of Alexander Hamilton, Ron Chernow confirms that, "On the slave ships, hundreds of Africans were chained and stuffed in fetid holds, where many suffocated. So vile were the conditions on these noisome ships that people onshore could smell their foul effluvia even miles away."[49] Chained and forced to experience the decay and foulness of fellow Africans–communal suffering and loss of humanity.

Hurston provides a description of how Kossula would have interpreted this dramatic change in his status as human. Kossula relates how a man is punished for murder, by the king and chiefs of the tribe, by being roped to the dead and decaying body of his victim. Slowly, the entire village witnesses the punishment of the murderer as he is forced to baste in the hot African sun, denied water or food. This is the worst punishment that can be meted out by Kossula's heritage, to take part in the physical and spiritual loss of the other as your own being begins to die. Kossula recalls: "But people watch until he die too. How long it take? Sometime he die next day. Sometime two or three days. He doan live long. People kin stand de smell of de horse, de cow and udder beasts, but no man kin stand de smell in his nostrils of a rotten man."[50] The slave ship was a literal reenactment of the worst punishment that Kossula's people could imagine. In his poem *Middle Passage*, Robert Hayden writes:

> A charnel stench, effluvium of living death
>
> spreads outward from the hold,
>
> where the living and the dead, the horribly dying,

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[48] Mustakeem, *Slavery at Sea*, 62.
[49] Ron Chernow, *Alexander Hamilton,* (New York, NY: The Penguin Press, 2004), 32.
[50] Hurston, *Barracoon,* 32.

lie interlocked, lie foul with blood and excrement

and stink like animals.[51]

To survive such an experience, by Kossula's reckoning, meant that they must no longer be spiritually or physically attached to their living breathing humanity, they could not have survived the seventy-day long journey across the sea shackled to the dying or dead bodies of their kin and still be alive. Hurston calls this, "their journey from humanity to cattle."[52] They are unmade as humans through an existential and ontological punishment. African humanity is worthless unless revalued as a thing to be commodified and used; the "*thought* of the 'black ivory,' the 'coin of Africa,' had no market value."[53] There is no separation between Kossula's epistemological awareness of himself as a human being and the degradation of material reality on the slave ship. His sensory immersion in the stench of death re-orders Kossula's reality.

As related by Brigitte Kahl, in *Galatians Re-Imagined: Reading with the Eyes of the Vanquished*, when the Roman imperial order conquered a people they would announce the good news to the defeated: "*Evangelion* is a term firmly embedded in imperial propaganda; it celebrates for example, the accession or birth of an emperor...'and the birth of the god was the beginning of good tidings to the world through him.'"[54] The message was clear; before this moment you, as vanquished, had no history and when or if the emperor withdraws his hand of protection, your existence as persons will cease. When before there was chaos, you have been delivered into the cosmological order through catastrophe–you now exist under Rome but above

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[51] Hayden, "Middle Passage," 251.
[52] Hurston, *Barracoon*, 5-6.
[53] Hurston, *Barracoon*, 6.
[54] Brigitte Kahl, *Galatians Re-Imagined: Reading with the Eyes of the Vanquished*, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010), 255.

those barbarians who exist in the chaos of the unconquered. Your former life is over, now you truly live as a citizen of the empire. This has long been the way of empire–to bestow humanity through a newly re-ordered reality only available *through* humiliation and rebirth. This is the notion of Black non-being which animates the accounts of Wilderson and Warren; in their consideration of blackness there is no being before, landing on the shores of America instantiates blackness. There is a thread of truth in this understanding of reality. Before contemporary notions of Just War and occupation, defeat meant the loss of what made a person and their civilization particular. Oblivion often followed as peoples were doomed to be lost to history.

The Middle Passage operated differently because the vanquished is re-ordered into objectification, not into a new way of being under their conquerors. The miracle of crossing the Red Sea or of Jesus as the Christ defeating death itself depends on the power of memory to reclaim the particularity of the self and community from the ashes of obliviation. Memory and its resultant narrative identity, in this sense, are the only assurances of the continuation of humanity through catastrophe. Blackness is what results when humanity must be re-made through the process of recreating memories in the fire of pain and death. Orlando Patterson's *Slavery and Social Death* provides us with a lens to view the difference in the story of Kossula and the uniqueness of emergent Black humanity. Echoing Mustakeem, Patterson situates different modalities of death within a relational power structure. Patterson writes, "All human relationships are structured and defined by the relative power of the interacting persons."[55] And later:

[55] Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 1.

> The power relation has three facets. The first is social and involves the use or threat of violence in the control of one person by another. The second is the psychological facet of influence, the capacity to persuade another person to change the way he perceives his interests and his circumstances. And third is the cultural facet of authority, "the means of transforming force into right, and obedience into duty" which, according to Jean Jacques Rousseau, the powerful find necessary "to ensure them continual mastership."[56]

Patterson argues that slavery is a social death where the threat of violence is continually reasserted through a Hegelian dialectic of master versus slave. The slave is alienated from full social participation; dead in the sense of lacking the ability to influence the relationality of their existence. Patterson continues:

> ...the second constituent element of the slave relation: the slave's natal alienation. Here we move to the cultural aspect of the relation, to that aspect of it which rests on authority, on the control of symbolic instruments. This is achieved in a unique way in the relation of slavery: the definition of the slave, however recruited, as a socially dead person. Alienated from all "rights" or claims of birth, he ceased to belong in his own right to any legitimate social order. All slaves experienced, at the very least a secular excommunication.
>
> Not only was the slave denied all claims on, and obligations to, his parents and living blood relations but, by extension, all such claims and obligations on his more remote ancestors and on his descendants. He was truly a genealogical isolate.[57]

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[56] Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, 1-2.
[57] Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, 5.

Patterson underestimates the unmaking of the humanity of the enslaved while also, as a consequence, underestimating the co-creative possibilities of blackness. The rift caused by the Middle Passage consigns the slave to oblivion in a way that transcends standard understandings of social power and relationality. Social death accounts for how we can conceive of the use of coercive power of one person over another, but we would never say that a dog or cow is experiencing social death. The loss of humanity means that the ontological death of the Middle Passage is deeper than what can be accounted for in relationality because the slave is no longer worthy of being in relation with their oppressors. Natal alienation is extended because who they were is utterly destroyed–vanquished in both material reality and in the sense of being remembered. The tie to the land has been irrevocably severed, so claims of responsibility to the living, to humanity, must be recreated. Patterson writes:

> The slave is violently uprooted from his milieu. He is desocialized and depersonalized. The process of social negation constitutes the first essentially external, phase of enslavement. The next phase involves the introduction of the slave into the community of his master, but it involves the paradox of introducing him as a nonbeing. The explains the importance of law, custom, and ideology in the representation of the slave relation.[58]

Is the slave really in community with their master? As we have seen from exploring how Kossula would experience the horrors of entrapment within the slave ship hold, we can come to the conclusion that this negation is not merely social nor is it external to the being of the enslaved– the negation runs through the very being of the enslaved. The external conditionality of the Middle Passage also constitutes an epistemological re-evaluation of the self. Nonbeing, as loss of

[58] Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, 38.

humanity, is to be placed outside the communal society of persons. But our exploration of the coffle from the previous chapter shows the persistence of both our inherent humanity and of the human need to come to understand their relation to the world. Self-creation is a process which survives even ontological death of the slave ship.

Patterson, Wilderson, and Warren neglect the will of the enslaved in their theoretical analysis. The inherent will to being, the ability and desire to survive, overcomes oblivion in the creative reclamation of the self and community. The Africa that Kossula recalled through the flames, that he longed to be re-membered in, was a willful act of self-creation through narrativizing history and God's role in the persistence of Black being. Patterson is right that relationality is at the heart of what it means to be dead in the sense of losing one's humanity. But he forgets that one is always in relation to the self as well as to external forces. Kossula is deeply humiliated and brutalized, and his village is obliviated, but the grave does not claim him. M. Shawn Copeland, in *Enfleshing Freedom*, writes, "Slavery was a business, a way of life, but most basically, it was a lie. Nearly everyone touched by slavery learned to live with it by learning to live with that life–a monstrous moral fiction that insulted God and human nature."[59] Kossula is able to begin the willful process of interpretation, of narrativizing his existence, re-creating a self from negation and a God of survival. Kossula and the people of Africatown learned to deny the lie of enslavement. Just as Douglass condemned the hypocrisy at the heart of the slaveocracy, the reclamation of a Black humanity speaks to the interpretive ability blackness as it comes to *understand* the Middle Passage.

[59] M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being*, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010), 26.

The human need to re-member is constantly at work in the act of self-creation. This will, this life force or what Kossula would insist is the breath of the Divine, survived the Middle Passage and this act of survival is in relation with itself and co-creates blackness. Thus, the creation of blackness through the Middle Passage is a co-creation with God *and* a re-creation of the being of God interpreted through blackness. Dwight Hopkins writes:

> Thus we can claim that the spirit inherently dwells in culture. One cannot detach oneself from the ever-presence of some being of force greater than the human self or collective selves. For Christians of all stripes, God fulfills this specification. God is the source of the creative energy of the human psyche, soul, and body–an originative force that allows the human self or the human selves to produce, by way of innovation, products that humans would seem unable to produce. This is precisely what one often calls genius or, in more Christian language, a miracle.[60]

Kossula, and by extension all survivors of the Middle Passage, is a genius miraculously transmuting the loss of humanity and soul death of the slave ship hold into a new way of being. The life force of God moves through the self-aware willful survival of Africans transmuted into blackness. Hopkins continues, "The first mark of indigenous spirituality, then, is its anthropocentric nature, human beings' reception of and vivification by divine spirit or super-sensible reality. Such a spirit allows human self and selves to make sense of the cosmic and quotidian struggle between the forces of life and the threat of death."[61] There is a syncretic basis to, perhaps, all variations of the Christian message which speak to the Black experience. This is a

[60] Dwight N. Hopkins, *Being Human: Race, Culture, and Religion*, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005), 72.

[61] Hopkins, *Being Human*, 74.

God, a Jesus as the Christ triumphant, who makes sense in the context of brutality–who moves through the life force of Black humanity. In the truest sense, to be anthropocentric is to be theocentric within the context of the miracle of blackness.

The Tears of Kossula: The Paradox of the God of Survival

Death stalked the life of Kossula. He would face immense grief and hardship through his long life–the emergent self was Black and invested with the life force of the divine but still subject to the brutality of the Jim Crow South. What are we to make of the miracle of emergence into suffering? What use is survival only to persist in a strange land of pain? Kossula bemoans, "De work very hard for us to do 'cause we ain' used to workee lak dat. But we doan grieve 'bout dat. We cry 'cause we slave. In night time we cry, we say we born and raised to be free people and now we slave. We doan know why we be bring 'way from our country to work lak dis. It strange to us. Everybody lookee at us strange. We want to talk wid de udder colored folkses but dey doan know whut we say. Some makee de fun at us."[62] For over five years Kossula was a slave. He was brutally controlled by his master, made to work the harsh soil in the oppressive heat of an Alabama cotton field. Lament would fill his days as a newly created Black man trapped between the alienation of daily existence and the Africa of his memory.

This is where Patterson's analysis is particularly helpful. Kossula experiences a form of social death in the struggle to relate to Blacks who had been born and raised in slavery. Hurston relates:

[62] Hurston, *Barracoon*, 60.

> "When we at de plantation on Sunday we so glad we ain' gottee no work to do. So we dance lak in de Afficky soil. De American colored folks, you unnerstand me, dey say we savage and den dey laugh at us and doan come say nothing' to us. But Free George, you unnerstand me, he a colored man doan belong to nobody...Free George, he come to us and tell us not to dance on Sunday. Den he tell us whut Sunday is. We doan know whut it is before. Nobody in Afficky soil doan tell us 'bout no Sunday. Den we dance no mo' on de Sunday."[63]

If we insist on a Black epistemology, a being centered in a way of knowing and relating to the world through blackness, we have to come to a Black conception of tragedy. Change is often tragic, something is destroyed in the conditionality of an emergent human existence. This means that being itself must change–often in ways that work against God's will or that must subjugate this will in favor of endurance. In Kossula's case, his being is continually in flux–stressed by the conditionality of slavery and the unusual autonomy which comes after a limited southern freedom. Sunday, a day of liberation and remembrance, becomes a locus of expectation and sorrow as the people of Africatown must adjust their bodies and their conception of the divine to align with dominant ways of being: "You made us slave. Now dey make us free but we ain' got no country and we ain' got no lan'!"[64]

Mustakeem writes that, "grief was an indelible part of bondpeople's lives that was exacerbated on board foreign ships."[65] Grief and tragedy are trapped within a paradoxical relation to joy within the Black experience. Kossula and his people feeling the freedom of their

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[63] Hurston, *Barracoon,* 62.

[64] Hurston, *Barracoon*, 67. Perhaps a deeper understanding of the connection between nostalgia and tragedy needs to be considered...

[65] Mustakeem, *Slavery at Sea*, 110.

bodies in motion through dance as they commune with the blood of their ancestors. Kossula and his people introduced to the social death of foreign birth and the need to leave behind tradition in favor of the syncretic Black God of their own creation. "Often kidnapped from their communities, grouped into coastal-bound coffles...bondspeople experienced trauma that manifested in their minds and became outwardly expressed through their faces and body language...an altered state took root not only in slaves' physical health but also in the psychological devastation that only intensified once placed into shoreline auction."[66] Birth is traumatic; the rebirth of self into a new onto-epistemological reality means that this trauma is instantiated into the being of Black humanity. Wilderson writes:

> At every scale of abstraction, violence saturates Black life. To put it differently, for Black people there is no time and space of consent, no relative respite from force and coercion: violence spreads its tendrils across the body, chokes the community, and expands, intensifies, and mutates into new and ever more grotesque forms in the collective unconscious...[67]

This condition of blackness is what Copeland speaks to so well in her theological anthropology, "No Christian teaching has been more desecrated by slavery than the doctrine of the human person or theological anthropology. Theological anthropology seeks to understand the meaning and purpose of existence within the context of divine revelation."[68] Copeland continues, referring to the fall as an "intensely realistic narrative" which "furnishes Christianity with a cosmic account of all creation, a history regarding the first individual human beings, and a paradigm of

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[66] Mustakeem, *Slavery at Sea*, 110.
[67] Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, 218.
[68] Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 23.

human nature."[69] In Copeland's theological anthropology is a robust Catholic Natural Law framework: humans are part of a divinely ordered cosmos and are created as caretakers of the earth. The dehumanization of slavery and its attendant persistence in the bodies and beings of Black people, especially Black women, is an affront to the will of God as testified to by creation. The fall can be likened to the onto-epistemological journey of the Middle Passage. Something is learned which affects what it means to be fully human. A boundary is crossed which can never be satisfied through willful self-creation. Even the miraculous is destined to serve a corrupted order. Creation is tainted through sin and must always contain an element of the tragic because freedom must be claimed from domination–the cross is necessary before there can be the hope of resurrection. This is not a condition of what it means to be Black–it is a condition of what it means to be human. Pain persists, but to be human is to come to know that pain, understand that pain, and interpret it in ways that gives life rather than negating it.

I insist that according to a Black epistemology, God is both within and transcendent of the created order. We are suffering beings, so God suffers with us. God travelled through the Middle Passage and was co-recreated in Black being. The tragic reality of human conditionality is not alien to God but is part of what it means to be in relation with God and the self. Loss and reclamation of the self, the tragic certainty of the fall, the horrors of the slave ship–all are aspects of a God whose will continually inflects and renews humanity. There is nothing static or dualistic about this relationality.

The relational nature of God is evidenced in the very existence of blackness–in the survival and transfiguration of the experience of negation into a new way knowing and being.

[69] Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 23.

Hopkins continues, "Not only does the divine spirit or ultimate vision enter the human sphere, the human being has the presence of the divine spirit or ultimate vision within the human being itself, no matter how smothered or covered over this sacred dimension may appear. All are created with the potential spark to live their lives in service to the least in each social configuration."[70] Now, Kossula's descendants dance in church on Sunday mornings in Africatown–a praised expression of human vitality attesting to the ultimate vision of co-creative Black being. "Culture is sacred because the ultimate vision is present both in the material (the tangible manifestation inspires humans to keep moving forward) and in the transcendent (the imagination of the ultimate is not limited to the self)."[71] Kossula reminds us that the spiritual imagination, especially in the self-creation of an emergent narrative, identity ensures that the spark of the divine inside of all humanity persists despite a deep and brutalizing humiliation.

Conclusion

Kossula's youngest daughter died from a mysterious illness when she was fifteen years old in 1893. "Dat de first time in de Americky soil dat death find where my door is. But we from cross de water know dat he come in de ship wid us. Derefo' when we buildee our church, we buy de ground to bury ourselves. It on de hill facin' de church door."[72] If death made the journey through the Middle Passage, it is no shock that the life force of God persisted as well. One of Kossula's sons was shot dead by a deputy. Two others died mysteriously, one beheaded and the other drowned. His eldest son caught ill and died. Finally, Seely, Kossula's beloved wife, seemed

[70] Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 23.
[71] Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 23.
[72] Hurston, *Barracoon*, 74.

to pass away from the grief of a hard existence–the spark finally consumed.[73] Hurston ends her story of Kossula on a note of heartbreak:

> When I crossed the bridge, I know he went back to his porch; to his house full of thoughts. To his memories of fat girls with ringing golden bracelets, his drums that speak the minds of men, to palm-nut cakes and bull-roarers, to his parables.
>
> I am sure that he does not fear death. In spite of his long Christian fellowship, he is too deeply a pagan to fear death. But he is full of trembling awe before the alter of the past.[74]

There is a paradox hidden in the particularity of a singular experience which can speak to the conditionality of those so far removed from the death-stalked existence of Kossula. If we take *ubuntu* seriously, as explored in the previous chapter, we must consider a divine personhood so capacious and generous as to encompass all of humanity within its being. In this sense, to exist in one's full humanity is to be on the side of God–to continually express the will of the divine for the survival and potentiality of the enslaved within one's own life and being. Humanity means that all persons participate in the expansiveness of the force of life searching for communion. The past must continue to humble us, to convict us, and to provide sources for great compassion and creation.

In the foreword to *Barracoon*, Alice Walker begins, "Those who love us never leave us alone with our grief. At the moment they show us our wound, they reveal they have the medicine. *Barracoon: The Story of the Last "Black Cargo"* is a perfect example of this."[75] Does

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[73] See, Hurston, *Barracoon*, 74-92.

[74] Hurston, *Barracoon*, 94.

[75] Alice Walker, "Foreword," *Barracoon: The Story of the Last "Black Cargo,"* ed. by Deborah G. Plant, (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2018), ix.

God love Kossula? And if so, what wonderous love is this? The miracle of Kossula's survival is only matched by the paradoxical nature of his tragic transcendent blackness. It may be ultimately unsporting to bring Kossula's understanding of the divine to the argument against Wilderson's *Afropessimism* and Warren's *Ontological Terror*, but we are discussing the survival of Black understanding through the discourse of Douglass and Du Bois who strove to take Kossula's God as seriously as we take Dixon's. Walker, considering the particularity and pain of Kossula's existence, continues, "But we see something else: the nobility of a soul that has suffered to the point almost of erasure, and still it struggles to be whole, present, giving."[76] All suffering is raw and individual, but it is the commonality of the individual experience of suffering which makes it both communal and, because of the relational reality of God's being, universal in the most serious sense of the word.

Jews in cattle cars on the way to Buchenwald. Migrants crammed into rusty shipping containers on the U.S.-Mexican border. Picts watching the orderly erection of Hadrian's Wall knowing that something profound was going to change, was going to affect their being, and confronted with the threat of oblivion. These are all particular experiences of the Middle Passage all experiences of humanity's persistence and self-creation in the shadow of nonbeing; it is a miracle that humanity continues to find ways to overcome the original sin of domination. "Lord, give my people, who have suffered so much, the strength to be great," is a parable that was tacked to the door of no return on Gorée Island in Senegal, West Africa by Boubacar Joseph Ndiaye. A black and white photo is included before the title page of Hurston's *Barracoon*. We see the vastness of the Atlantic Ocean framed by a narrow door. We imagine the fetid *barracoon*,

[76] Walker, "Foreword," xi.

the barracks where captives were held before the journey on the Middle Passage, touched by a salt breeze alien to the inland Africans swept up in the raid which claimed Kossula's humanity. "Ours is an amazing, a spectacular journey in the Americas. It is so remarkable one can only be thankful for it, bizarre as that may sound. Perhaps our planet is for learning to appreciate the extraordinary wonder of life that surrounds even our suffering, and to say Yes, if through the thickest of tears."[77] We must weep for Kossula and all those faced with the loss of their humanity, but we must be amazed by the blackness which emerges, amazed with a God of endurance who stands with the oppressed.

[77] Walker, "Foreword," xii.

Chapter 5

Lord, I will Lift Mine Eyes to the Hills: Black Epistemology, Black Theology, and the Ethics of the Oppressed

"We can say that to be a self entails the ability to question who one wants to be with respect to some idea of how one ought to live."[1]

"Since theology is human *speech and* not *God speaking, I recognize today, as I did then, that* all *attempts to speak about ultimate reality are limited by the social history of the speaker."*[2]

"Even granting that You had revealed to me this secret of Your inner life, would I be able to accept and realize this mystery if Your *life had not become* my *life through grace?"*[3]

"If I should take my stand on the shore of Your Endlessness and shout into the trackless reaches of Your Being all the words I have ever learned in the poor prison of my little existence, what should I have said?"[4] The shore is the major metaphor outlining Karl Rahner's understanding of the connection of the concrete human reality of transience to the mysterious transcendence of the God of the universe. At the barely perceptible horizon of the vast ocean and the covering sky is the meeting place between the moment and the endlessness which contains all time while remaining timeless. Rahner often struggled, as a theologian and survivor of war, with what can be said of the Divine created order. But it is my contention that blackness speaks into this

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[1] William Schweiker, "Imagination, Violence, and Hope: A Theological Response to Ricœur's Moral Philosophy," *Meaning in Texts and Actions: Questioning Paul Ricœur*, ed. by David E. Klemm and William Schweiker, (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1993), 206.

[2] James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2012), ix.

[3] Karl Rahner, *Encounters with Silence*, trans. by James M. Demske, (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 1999), 4.

[4] Rahner, *Encounters with Silence*, 4.

mystery. We know God because we know Jesus–and to know Jesus as the Christ is simply to recognize the humanity which exemplifies the possibility of co-creation and humility.

I want this last chapter to act as an invitation. An invitation to further discourse on the, at times, seemingly permanent Negro Problem. An invitation to enter into questions of self and what it means to inhabit the dignity and promise of creation. And finally, to wonder how blackness fits into the larger theo-ethical issues surrounding what it means to be oppressed.

In this dissertation up to this point, we have examined the work of Frederick Douglass with a particular emphasis on the work of Black self-creation out of the brutality of enslavement. Douglass's life story and work gave us the language to begin the work of understanding blackness as a tool of interpretation. Douglass also helped us to understand how blackness can be used to interrogate and condemn systems of oppression. A rich morality can be drawn from the substance of the narratival self–Douglass is able to attest to his own existence and his rights as a human being to live into a self-created life. The conviction brought to bear on the slave system and its supporting Southern religion and theology could only come from the lived experience of a blackness which escaped from slavery into personhood. Du Bois allowed us to formalize and come to a deeper knowledge of the sort of blackness arrived at through self-emancipation. The self divided in the Jim and Jane Crow era, and the gift of second sight which is its possible outcome, helped us to gain insight into the epistemological nature of Blackness. Life in the shadow of the veil is lived under the constant need to view oneself from the perspective of hateful bigotry–one must constantly live two lives in order to survive the brutality of the constant threat of the lynch mob. The striving of the Black self to encounter and rend the veil is the work of claiming one's dignity and humanity. Du Bois was also an intercommunal thinker. At no point

did he consider the work of uplift or of self-reclamation as able to be completed alone or without reference to a community of persons encountering similar struggles.

Next, we began to interrogate the hermeneutic circle binding the sense of blackness and duality used by Douglass and Du Bois. The cleaving of the body from the soul created the conditions in which the humanity of enslaved persons could be ignored–after all, it was the soul which needed saving, not the body. Douglass showed the thinness of the conception of the person and was able to express the wholeness of the Black person in their quest for liberation. Du Bois showed how this liberation was curtailed and constrained by internalized racialized fears. The metaphor of the veil invites the reader into the hermeneutical circle of Black epistemology through encounter with a new way of seeing the world. Yes, Black persons possess a soul, and this soul is riven by the necessity of seeing the world through the shadow of hate. Douglass and Du Bois experienced the enforced duality of domination in different ways, but we can gain a deeper understanding of epistemological blackness through comparing how divergent valences of self-creation through narrative identity works toward ideas of social dignity and liberation. It is the meaning drawn from memory and history that composes the Black self. This self is connected to other instances self created out of the condition of deep humiliation. This was the main point of the chapter dealing with Afropessimism and variations of Black nonbeing–blackness is not created through a nullity but emerges from the void of dehumanization through a self, and a God, which persists through the various Middle Passages of existence. The social and spiritual imagination combine the discordances of humiliation into the story of a humanity full in its capacity to choose its own way of being in the world and to insist on the ethical duties which arise from *ubuntu*.

In this final chapter, I will point forward toward definitions and understandings which will act as an entry into the hermeneutic circle of Douglass and Du Bois. We will explore what Black theology has to say to afropessimistic claims of the futility of Black struggle. This chapter is an invitation to confront our various horizons of understanding in the hopes of opening new avenues of communication and communion. Blackness has much to say to the world through its new ways of knowing and through its relationship with how God is moving in the world through the oppressed.

Here is another quote from Rahner's book of poetry *Encounters with Silence*: "Why have You kindled in me the flame of faith, this dark light which lures us out of the bright security of our little huts into Your night?"[5] Another metaphor enters into Rahner's attempt to describe the transcendent. The paradox of "dark light" acts to envelop the mystery of God with the revelation of the unknown. Our own limitations of perception and understanding stand as invitations to the entry of the divine into the everydayness of humanity's quest for both meaning and love. At the end of any hermeneutic vision of how the world is interpreted, there is a silence colliding with the epistemic humility of those who seek the ephemeral. I want to insist that this silence not only acts as an invitation to God, but also to the horror of the human condition in the face of unspeakable cruelty.

I have, in preceding chapters, described and theorized on slavery, Jim and Jane Crow, the slave coffle, and the Middle Passage. At no time have I forgotten the concrete humanity at stake in such investigations–what makes Douglass and Du Bois such interesting figures to think with is that they experienced the raw reality of Black history while still hoping and pointing toward a

[5] Rahner, *Encounters with Silence*, 5

future aglow in dark light. Aliou Cissé Niang writes the following on the project of relexification:

> Thus postcolonial critics are able to speak because of new positioning–a created space where they can be heard as they rehabilitate their once distorted selves–a process 'nurtured and nourished by their goals and aspirations.' This is the point bell hooks strongly argued when she challenged her readers to engage in reimaging their assigned margins into sites of struggle and creative 'openness.' Margins may appear static but in many cases they are highly contested spaces always open to negotiation with countless possibilities.[6]

Relexification is the appropriation of the one language in replacement of another. In most cases, this happens as the result of being conquered–those on the underside of history are tasked with taking their deeply held conceptual understanding of how the world works and replacing it with a new way of being often corrupted by hatred. Such a drastic change calls for a repositioning, for new interpretive capabilities speaking into oblivion. At the margins of this enterprise, especially in the American context, is blackness. The emergent cocreation of Black being is the beating heart of Black theology, especially the first generation of Black theology spearheaded by James Cone, as Jesus as the Christ is transfigured into the still living symbol of Black suffering and resurrection. Kelly Brown Douglass writes that, "Cone's version of the black Christ was based on an analysis that emphasized a compatibility between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith–that is, Christ's contemporary presence. Christ's meaning was not limited to the historical Jesus,

[6] Aliou Cissé Niang, *A Poetics of Postcolonial Biblical Criticism: God, Human-Nature Relationship, and Negritude*, (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2019), 12.

although the historical Jesus was the authoritative guide for understanding Christ."[7] Even the using the language of the master's religion, Black people were able to envision and enact new meanings. In blackness, concrete survival is joined with the marginality of the oppressed seeking to retrieve their being from the humiliation of domination.

"Cone concluded that Jesus's ministry was characterized by its focus on the liberation of the oppressed. This ministry to the oppressed was the governing principle for discerning Christ's contemporary presence. It was the basis for Cone's calling Christ black."[8] At his funeral, James Cone had Luke 4: 18-19 read aloud–the moment of Jesus announcing his ministry through quoting the Prophet Isaiah's promise to "set free those who are oppressed." I have tried in this dissertation to expand on what I believe is meant by liberation in the context of Black knowing and endurance. This is mostly because I believe that Cone was right to proclaim the importance of blackness to the understanding of what God is doing in the world. Brown Douglas continues, "...blackness was not incidental to who Christ was but was an essential aspect of Christ's nature."[9] This means that blackness is a central aspect of the guiding Spirit of the universe. The way of knowing that arises from the void of the Middle Passage is integral to the nature of the God of Black theology–God speaks into the void through the capacity and the action of self-creation. To interpret Christ as the victim of the lynch mob is to hear Jesus speak into the endlessness which often reduces our humanity to silence.

Jesus as the Christ enacts the metaphor of Black being–the Word comes to bridge the gap between the limits of our understandings and the concrete reality of the God of endurance. "It is,

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[7] Kelly Brown Douglas, *The Black Christ: 25th Anniversary Edition*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2019), 93.

[8] Douglas, *The Black Christ*, 94.

[9] Douglas, *The Black Christ*, 62.

therefore, in light of the cross that I now understand the meaning of Christ's blackness."[10] Douglass struggled against the bifurcation of the human person through the brutalization of enslavement. Du Bois's concepts of the veil and double consciousness helped us envision the internal dichotomy of seeing the self through the haze of white supremacy and as a being in the ongoing process of creation. There are constructive possibilities concealed in blackness and the kind of human dignity expressed in this dissertation; just as the hope of resurrection is hidden within the dark light of the lynching tree.

Communal Mutuality and Response Ethics

Rahner's metaphor of the endless sea can do more work for the discourse of this dissertation. In community, we are able to expand our individual points of view when we join our limited and transient humanity to others. This overlap of understandings, of ways of seeing and knowing, are endemic to what it means to be human–a communal existence of mutuality turns this overlap into a way to expand our epistemic horizons. We can come to know the mystery of God more fully when we are open to the ways of being stifled by modes of domination such as white supremacy.

The possibilities of communal mutuality are tragically denied by the praxis of dehumanization which is the foundation of this country. Black death still roams the American countryside as long held traumas and internalized hatreds control the public discourse and the common humanity found in limited horizons of understanding. Du Bois writes:

> The Nation has not yet found peace from its sins; the freedman has not yet found in freedom his promised land. Whatever good may have come in these years of change, the

[10] Douglas, *The Black Christ,* xxi.

> shadow of a deep disappointment rests upon the Negro people,–a disappointment all the more bitter because the unattained ideal was unbounded save by the simple ignorance of a lowly people.[11]

Freedom does not equal liberation and, as shown through the lens of Black epistemology, dehumanization is a reflexive process–to dehumanize the other is to harm something essential to what makes us human. This is the inverse of the meaning of *ubuntu* as without others we cannot be said to truly exist. The bitter disappointment comes when one realizes that freedom does not lead to the freedom *to*. The freedom to live in safety and security, the freedom of access to appropriate education and to a full societal engagement, and the most important freedom of continuing along the path to self-realization without the ever-present reality of race hatred. Writing in the *Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois insists that poor whites were used to prop up a slavocracy which countered their own material and spiritual needs. The so-called founding sin of slavery continues as skin color and heritage define the personhood of those under the heel of the social order. Douglass continues:

> Slavery, like all other great systems of wrong, founded in the depths of human selfishness, and existing for ages, has not neglected its own conservation. It has steadily exerted an influence upon all around it favorable to its own continuance. And to-day it is so strong that it could exist not only without law, but even against law. Custom, manners, morals, religion, are all on its side everywhere in the South; and when you add the ignorance and servility of the ex-slave to the intelligence and accustomed authority of the

[11] W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Souls of Black Folk," *W. E. B. Du Bois: Writings*, ed. by Nathan Huggins, (New York, NY: Library Classics of the United States, 1986), 366.

> master, you have the conditions, not out of which slavery will again grow, but under which it is impossible for the Federal government to wholly destroy it...[12]

This is the reality we saw in the previous chapter when sensed and expressed through the works of Frank B. Wilderson, Victor Anderson, and Calvin Warren. The anti-blackness bound up in the slave coffle has only changed valence in response to the needs of white supremacy. Different shackles have taken the place of iron in binding the capabilities and self-creation of Black people. One need only to study the carceral system in America or the state of the public outcry against historical understandings where whiteness is decentered to witness the evolution of the slave system. Douglass points to the outgrowth of the hypocrisy he condemned at the heart of Southern Religion as it spreads into the very fabric of society. Douglass would be unsurprised at the success of propaganda like Thomas Dixon's *The Clansman*.

But, when we mutually seek an ethical understanding which responds to the needs and humanity of others, we can rescue the hermeneutic circle which contains America from the tragedy of antiblackness. By attending to ways of being which emerge from the margins of society, we can see the mutual dehumanization which reflexively limits the possibilities of all persons. Through heeding the call of the other, to the light emitted from Black epistemology, we can rend the veil of self-negation. William Schweiker writes, "What self-understanding we attain is won by interpreting works that figure our condition: specifically, symbols, metaphors, and narratives."[13] We have seen the work of narrative in constructing possibilities in the life of Douglass. And I propose that Du Bois double consciousness has metaphorically described the

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[12] Frederick Douglass, "Reconstruction," *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*, ed. by Philip S. Foner, adapted by Yuval Taylor, (Chicago, IL: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999), 593.

[13] Schweiker, "Imagination, Violence, and Hope," 208.

reality of the bifurcated self in response to external modes of domination. The interpretive abilities of the Black way of knowing are central to refiguring the way American theology and ethics deal with questions of mutuality and the call of duty to the other. Schweiker continues, "Yet in this act narration transgresses its own linguistic structure because of aporias that inhere in temporal experience. These aporias are important, since they mark the transition from narrative to ethics."[14] This is a paradoxical reality denied by afropessimistic outlooks. The inconsistencies within Black existence, including those who deny that such an existence is ontologically possible, help to define the ethical structure of the state of being which emerges from blackness. Liberation can only be conceived of through epistemologies born of suffering and humiliation because it is only these types of epistemologies which bear witness to inhumane possibilities of society. And, paradoxically perhaps, it is these types of epistemologies of suffering that show most clearly how humiliation can also act as the basis for new and creative expressions of the human ability to overcome. Cruelty and dehumanization are concrete realities throughout human history; but our ethical imaginations are able to see beyond the enclosure of the past.

Black epistemology calls us to the future of the world liberated from the humanity's history of dehumanization. Past is not destiny. By heeding the call to the margins of our ways of knowing, through broadening our horizons of understanding to those denied their being, we not only come to a greater conception of the mystery of the universal order, but we also come to deeper understanding of our own place within such an order and the capabilities available to our mere humanity. As Schweiker writes, "The human is instituted by a word spoken to it as a possibility for its being a self in freedom."[15] Because our humanity is communal, social, the

[14] Schweiker, "Imagination, Violence, and Hope," 208.
[15] Schweiker, "Imagination, Violence, and Hope," 215.

reflexive loss of self that results from institutions like white supremacy can be resurrected through the concrete response to the humanity of others. This opening of the self to Black ways of being and marginal epistemologies also opens one to new and unique ways of knowing in which ones being is seized by transcendence: "You have seized me; I have not 'grasped' You. You have transformed my being right down to its very last roots and made me a sharer in Your own Being and Life."[16] Even a hatred as deep as white supremacy and antiblack terror can be transfigured through allowing the call to grasp one's being.

I believe that the ultimate purpose of the works of Douglass and Du Bois is not simply to explain the conditionality of Black life. They were inviting others into the way of being in the process of creation in response to white supremacy and the liberative quest for human dignity. Douglass's oratory and life spoke to the transformative nature of Black becoming. Du Bois's writing and advocacy for moral uplift went beyond notions of respectability to way of knowing which sought to bring the margins to the center of a shared ethical reality based in common humanity. As Schweiker notes, "The self as an ethical task inscribes its good within the claims and rights of other persons thanks to the principle of morality (the Golden Rule), even as this self calls for an affirmation of being amid evil."[17] The Xhosa theory of *ubuntu* may be more appropriate here in place of the Golden Rule. *Ubuntu* expresses the mutuality of human existence and the ethical reality which results from the understanding of a being which is liberated and subsumed (a key aporia) through community. Blackness emerged from the void of the slave ship with the message of endurance and care. There is no possibility of a being superior to another, at

[16] Rahner, *Encounters*, 30-31.
[17] Schweiker, "Imagination, Violence, and Hope," 216.

the center of all domination is a core of hypocrisy and falsehood which can only be exposed through the black light of marginal epistemologies.

Deliberate Contradictions and Epistemological Supremacy

I maintain that it is a mistake to conceive of Black epistemology as a creation of whiteness. If such were the case, it would be understandable to dismiss marginal epistemologies because, as a product of white supremacy, all such ways of knowing could only serve to replicate the systems of domination from which they emerge. To say that blackness came about through conditions created by white supremacy but is not *caused* by such conditions is the primary aporia at the center of humanity's relation with a divine order that can, as it is said, make a way out of no way. In such a case as Black being, a humanity was made from a no-thing created through a deep humiliation.

What Schweiker and Rahner are warning us of is the tragic inability to inhabit the redemptive possibilities evinced through differing ways of knowing. Brown Douglass has an interesting description of the phenomena: social-cultural epistemological privilege. She explains:

> Social-cultural epistemological privilege is about the knowledge that the social collective receives from the public square. This knowledge suggests the normative story through which to judge and evaluate information regarding 'shared history' and even shared experiences. The normative story sets the standard for those whose knowledge is acceptable for interpreting and evaluating reality.[18]

[18] Kelly Brown Douglas, *Resurrection Hope: A Future Where Black Lives Matter*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2021), 67.

The normative quality of this social-cultural epistemological privilege is contained at every level of society and is institutionalized through, most often, racialized violence and assumptions. Whiteness is so pervasive that is not recognized as an interpretive mode in and of itself. We can see this when there are Black, Queer, Korean, etc. theologies versus simply...theology. Such distinctions create normativity. The creation of normative tools of evaluation can actually be of worth–it allows us to identify, and thus critically engage, which theological and ethical claims can stake out territory on the margins. The existence of white normativity is only *bad* when it becomes an invisible epistemology which is used not in concert with other ways of knowing, but to evaluate other ways of knowing without its privilege being acknowledged. Brown Douglas continues, "While a white gaze is the inevitable result of a country founded on the premise of white supremacy, the persistence of this gaze reinforces its ideological foundation."[19] Because whiteness itself is invisibilized through its normative ubiquity, its use as an ideological foundation of the American experience exists without scrutiny. As pointed out by Douglass and Du Bois, and through Afropessimism, such an ideological foundation threatens the very imaginary which creates blackness. The veil itself is the manifestation of the Black self struggling to co-exist withing the gaze which is always in services of reifying its power to control how the world is understood.

There is no refuge from the sin of white supremacy when it is used as the rubric to determine the worth of other ways of being. Just as blackness is a unique and powerful tool of interpretation, whiteness is unique in its ability to suppress new and emergent ways of being. White supremacy distorts reality in such a way that even those who are its victims begin to think

[19] Douglas, *Resurrection Hope*, 67.

and live and *be* according to its needs. As Brown Douglas writes, "...the defining feature of social-cultural epistemological privilege is that it reflects the perspective of the dominant social-cultural group. It elevates the knowledge of those in power, creating a perspective 'from above' that sets the standard for knowing, even moral knowledge."[20] Remember that the definition of dignity is tied closely to the process and practice of liberation, social-cultural epistemological privilege not only robs one of knowing, but it also acts to unravel the moral being at the center of relations with others. This is why Du Bois can speak of the "deliberate contradiction of plain facts [that] constitutes itself a major charge against slavery and shows how the system often so affronted the moral sense of the planters themselves that they tried to hide from it. They could not face the fact of Negro women as brood mares and of black children as puppies."[21] Just as dehumanization is reflexive, so is the moral unraveling which results from one's way of knowing used as a tool of domination. Even slavers could not escape the all-encompassing social-cultural epistemological privilege that intentionally worked to occlude their ethical vision–their ability to recognize the other. White supremacy includes many deliberate contradictions that stand in opposition to the aporias which acts as a bridge to knowing in so many marginal epistemologies.

These deliberate contradictions are the cause of numerous moral injuries to both victims of its normative claims and those who seemingly benefit from social-cultural epistemological privilege. In both cases, the self is distorted in such a way that it is unable to perceive the horizons of its own understanding–the self is unable to achieve being in communion with others. Or, "In other words, a social-cultural epistemology of privilege inevitably impacts moral

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[20] Douglas, *Resurrection Hope*, 93.

[21] W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2007), 34.

knowing. For, if nothing else, it determines whose knowledge has moral efficacy, and this shapes the way in which justice is conceived, if not enacted."[22] This allows for the brutality described in this dissertation. It allows for slavers to sell their own children into bondage. It allows a slaver to write of freedom, equality, and liberty while a slave empties his chamber pot and warms his bed at night. The depth of human suffering enacted on Black flesh and being is due in large part to an inability to *see* humanity in its fullness and difference. White supremacy refuses any way of knowing which threatens its existence. Black epistemology is an affront to the way America views itself and is able to present itself to the world. This is what made the Civil Rights movement so effective–it made visible the deliberate contradictions and violence at the heart of America. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Frederick Douglass turned the normative gaze of whiteness upon itself and exposed the brutality effaced by social-cultural epistemological privilege. Brown Douglas continues:

> ...the knowledge of those whose very well-being is at stake–in large measure because of the privileges enjoyed by those in power–has no role to play in determining what a just society would look like. Therefore, a form of justice that actually challenges, let alone eliminates, societal inequalities is virtually impossible to conceive, especially when those inequalities sustain the privileges and power of the dominant social-cultural group.[23]

Whites become trapped in their own deadening sense of justice. Social-cultural epistemological privilege narrows the horizons of knowing available to those who follow its normative claims without critique.

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[22] Douglas, *Resurrection Hope*, 94.
[23] Douglas, *Resurrection Hope*, 94.

Mutuality implies equality of being. The definition and understanding of dignity and communal ethical life at the center of this dissertation assumes that all being is deserving of the consideration and duties inherent in the humanity of each person. I have also posited that blackness is its own privileged position due to its connection to the person and mission of Jesus as the Christ and, hence, to what we can know and say of God. This privilege of the oppressed is, as the name suggests, not based in domination. White social-cultural epistemological privilege is, "Like the identity it serves to protect...subjugating and oppositional; it cannot accommodate anything that would challenge an assessment of the American story as anything less than a white story."[24] Black epistemology, if it is to be counted as such, not only works from the margins of the social order but also challenges normative assumptions based on systemic and institutional supremacy. Black is not the description of a skin color; it is the metaphorical representation of a state of being which emerges from the specific context of enslavement and American life. Whiteness is not a skin color; it is the representation of hegemonic power in the service of maintaining a privileged and oppressive way of being. It is possible to conceive of an ethics of deep equity out blackness, as theories like *ubuntu* seek to do, but it is impossible to glean equality of beings from the position of hegemonic power. Whiteness, as such, must be rejected in order to begin the project of mutual respect for all persons. The humanity which emerges from nothing into self-creation is a rich and positive ground for considering the ethics of being and the kind of divinity we are willing and able to love. This is blackness as a way of knowing which not only challenges the normative claims of white supremacy, but also the normative claims concerning the possibility of a humanity liberated from violence, want, and domination. Our

[24] Douglas, *Resurrection Hope*, 86.

ways of knowing condition our ways of being, and our ways of being in community call us toward mutuality and the good.

Blackness as a Site of Theological and Ethical Creativity

I am proposing a Christological understanding born of humiliation and suffering. A God so low that they wallow in the mud, the *humus*, of creation with persons. Jesus as the Christ knows the retched filth of the slave ship. He knows the chaffing of manacles and the hopeless movement of a degraded humanity. The Creative force of the universe was lynched–and is gasping for breath under the weight of white supremacy. Cone writes, "There can be no black theology which does not take seriously the black experience–a life of humiliation and suffering. This must be the point of departure of all God-talk which seeks to be black-talk."[25] Any normative theology which operates from a position of domination cannot, and should not, be equated with the God of Christianity. Theology must always be critical of how it serves to degrade, or uplift, the ethical well-being of those who explore fundamental questions against the flow of hegemonic power. And such questions should revolve around the understandings and experiences of those with their backs against the wall. I say this because any theology which promotes white supremacy, which allows and encourages the suffering of my ancestors, speaks of a God which could never be known to blackness.

If Black theology is wrong, then Jesus lived and died as a God who permits the deepest of humiliations:

[25] James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2012), 24.

> ...the soteriological value of Jesus' person must finally determine our christology. It is the oppressed community in the situation of liberation that determines the meaning and scope of Jesus. We know who Jesus *was* and *is* when we encounter the brutality of oppression in his community as it seeks to be what it is, in accordance with his resurrection.[26]

There are several points to be drawn from this quotation. One is that Jesus is part of a community–the thought that God lives in mutuality with created beings implies that our horizons of understanding have the potential to embrace the endless reality of existence. Our humanity is not determined by the limitations of our individual yearnings and failings because we are both transcendent and concrete in our relation to each other and the world. *Ubuntu* speaks through Black experience into the hermeneutic circle of all beings who participate in community. Blackness can be the site of a powerful mutual understanding of both being and suffering. Black self-creation, the liberative practice of living into one's own dignity as fully human, can and should be the basis for a deep ethics of consideration and recognition.

Cone continues, "In view of the biblical emphasis on liberation, it seems not only appropriate but necessary to define the Christian community as the community of the oppressed which joins Jesus Christ in his fight for the liberation of humankind."[27] There are many points of emphasis which can be drawn from the Bible. What Cone is referring to here is a biblical story as understood through Black epistemology. The liberatory message of the gospel calls to Black being–to those who's very being is unmade through suffering and in the process of resurrection through learning, community, and discourse. The devastation of rupture produced a blackness that seeks to interpret the story of the Man-God in a way which constitutes healing and meaning.

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[26] Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 126.
[27] Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 3.

Cone prefigures Afropessimism when he writes that, "...nonbeing is usually identified as that which threatens being; it is that ever-present possibility of the inability to affirm one's existence. The courage to be, then, is the courage to affirm one's being by striking out at the dehumanizing forces which threaten being."[28] This courage is interpreted in the story of God remaining silent in the presence of martial authority and worldly power. Black epistemology helps to account for the truth seen in theology drawn from Black experience.

The Souls of Black Folk is a prime example of black epistemology helping to make sense and meaning out of the struggle for life amid the nonbeing of humiliation. In the shadow of the lynching tree, Du Bois continued to assert the personhood of those savaged by white supremacy. The Negro Problem, the problem of the color line, is one of coming to know the existence of the humanity of the oppressed. Of Du Bois, Cone writes, "Most scholars call Du Bois an agnostic. Though he certainly had little use for doctrines, dogma, or organized religion. I believe he was a man of deep faith. His faith was expressed in the conviction that evil does not have the last word and that there is a spiritual force for right that cannot be crushed."[29] Du Bois had great faith in the ability of the human person to overcome the contingency of history and to emerge into a fullness of being. That this is a Black being is the result of Du Bois's confrontation with a world trying to destroy and unmake who he was as Black man and believer in humanity. The metaphor of the veil represents Du Bois coming to terms with the need to survive as the repository of hate and humiliation. As Cone writes, "Somewhat like his use of the concept of 'double consciousness' to explain the African American search for identity, Du Bois used the paradox of

[28] Cone, *Black Theology and Back Power*, 7.

[29] James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2018), 101.

faith and doubt together to explain the meaning of the black religious experience. One cannot correctly understand the black religious experience without an affirmation of deep faith informed by profound doubt."[30] Just as faith is informed by profound doubt, black epistemology is informed, but not created, by the white supremacy hidden within social-cultural epistemological privilege.

Black epistemology, and therefore Black theology, must always be self-critical in its attempt to interpret the will of the Creator. The gift of blackness that is second sight can be used to question how its discourse is deployed and which voices are being obscured by normative assumptions. When Cone writes that, "Black identity is survival, while white racism is exploitation," it is necessary to make sure that this survival is not at the cost of the need to respond to the call of others who's being is in danger.[31] Black epistemology is the result of the tragic need for self-creation; and it is through this need that Black people were able to call on the God of endurance. The mutuality of a Black theological Christology is based on living in mutuality with both God and all of creation. "Our theology must emerge consciously from an investigation of the socioreligious experience of black people, as that experience is reflected in *black* stories of God's dealings with black people in the struggle of freedom."[32] In this sense, to be Black is to be oppressed, to be in need of resurrection and deliverance from the evil of dehumanization. Epistemological humility is the position of constantly checking to make sure that one is inhabiting blackness in a way that furthers the discourse of Black being. Just as we

[30] Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 106.
[31] Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 19.
[32] James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), 15.

hear the call to the other, none of us can doubt the call to supremacy within the human experience.

Ethical Action and Liberation

In our world, we see Christ lynched every time we turn from the needs of humanity. For me this is the lasting message of Douglass and Du Bois: all ethical life is reflexive, what we deny others is denied from our selves. Cone writes, "Until we can see the cross and the lynching tree together, until we can identify Christ with the 'recrucified' black body hanging from a lynching tree, there can be no genuine understanding of Christian identity in America, and no deliverance from the brutal legacy of slavery and white supremacy."[33] Kelly Brown Douglas's book *Resurrection Hope* presents the faces of Black death on its cover. Garner, Taylor, Rice, Castile, Floyd and so many others were not only dehumanized, but humiliated in a public manner which echoes the lynching of Sam Hose and so many others. These deaths were public and interpreted through social-culture epistemological privilege as their murders were debated and displayed over and over again.

But even in the presence of the shadow of white supremacy, Cone reminds us that we should consider Jesus as "resurrected and thus active even now...he must be alive in those very men who are struggling in the midst of misery and humiliation. If the gospel is a gospel of liberation for the oppressed, then Jesus is where the oppressed are and continues his work of liberation there."[34] This liberation arrives in different forms according to how we are willing to know and understand the reality brought forth through misery and humiliation. Liberation also

[33] Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree, xv.*
[34] Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power,* 38.

arrives in the visage of subjugated women, the LGBTQIA+ community, those still enslaved today, and all those who live under oppression. Douglass and Du Bois knew blackness through their journeys of self-creation as they struggled against deadening forms of domination. "Black is holy, that is, it is a symbol of God's presence in history on behalf of the oppressed man. Where there is black, there is oppression; but blacks can be assured that where there is blackness, there is Christ who has taken on blackness so that what is evil in men's eyes might become good."[35] Black epistemology and Jesus as the Christ challenge us to recognize the forms of domination rampant now–and how our horizons of understanding may not be wide enough to allow us to see our ethical duties for what they are. Who is being denied their humanity even now? And in what way are our theologies and epistemologies changing in response to the call to mutuality?

Our actions have temporal and transcendent meaning. Hermeneutic theory is, in its own way, a path to transcendence–it allows us to inhabit second sight in a way which encourages the growth of our humanity as we explore how our understandings are formed and persist. Cone insists that, "*Revelation is a black event*–it is what blacks are doing about their liberation."[36] This means that the interpretations of black epistemological understandings have revelatory power if they are in service of liberation. Rahner also speaking to the transcendent within our actions writes that, "Man is destined to eternal life as an individual and someone in the concrete. His acts are, therefore, not merely of a spatio-temporal kind as is the case with material things; his acts have a meaning for eternity, not only morally but also *ontologically*."[37] Our ethico-ontological concreteness is grounded in mutuality. It also means that according to Black theology, God is

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[35] Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 69.

[36] Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 31.

[37] Karl Rahner, *Philosophical Investigations: Volume II; Man in the Church*, (Baltimore, MD: Helicon Press, 1963), 225.

present in those actions aimed at the liberation of the oppressed. Who we are, or in this sense choose to be, is evinced in how our lives are turned toward the will of God in working to release those living under persecution. There should only be terror at this condition if we fail to work toward the liberation and possibility inherent in human dignity:

> Thus "dignity" is, in the last analysis, objectively identical with the being of an entity–understood as that which is given necessarily in its "essential structure" *and* as that which is given as a task to be accomplished. And in the present context "essential structure" means everything man necessarily is and must be, whether this–regarding in itself–be a natural essence or whether it be–with reference to the basic structure–a free gift of God...[38]

Our task is to attend to the dignity of the human person in mutuality with all persons and with God. This is the calling of God through the suffering of Jesus as the Christ–and the calling of God through blackness as a way of knowing and creation. Rahner continues, "...dignity is always both the innermost being of man and what lies above man and hence partakes in the remoteness, the mysteriousness and namelessness of God. It only unveils itself completely in the knowing-believing-loving dialogue of man with God."[39] God is found within the complexity of discourse surrounding the Negro Problem. God is unveiled as we come to know more and better and larger than the limitations of white supremacy. When we stand on the shores of our understanding, we are part of a great cloud of witnesses to the divine presence of transcendence through ethical relation. To answer the call of the other is to participate in the being of the endless mystery of human existence.

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[38] Rahner, *Philosophical Investigations: II*, 236.
[39] Rahner, *Philosophical Investigations: II*, 238.

Conclusion

"Humanity itself is a dignity; for a man cannot be used merely as a means by any man...but must always be used at the same time as an end. Is just in this that his dignity consists...he is under obligation to acknowledge, in a practical way, the dignity of humanity in every other man."[1]

"We need to look hard and clearly at some monsters inside us. But this is part of the project of caging and taming them."[2]

The direction of this dissertation changed after the events of Tuesday, November 8, 2016. I sat in a class run by Paul Mendes-Flohr on Martin Buber's ethics. I had my phone in one hand checking for updates on state vote totals and a dogeared copy of *I and Thou* in the other. I struggled to find meaning in this moment. It is hard to imagine any work of religious ethics that failed to take into account the moral devastation of this country's promise on that day. As Jürgen Moltmann notes, "there is no apolitical theology; neither on earth nor in heaven...there is no apolitical church, neither in history nor in the kingdom of God."[3] As Trump was elected, my already fragile understanding of the United States' ability to transcend its racialized and traumatic history took a decidedly pessimistic turn.

I remember the University of Chicago Divinity School held a meeting of students and faculty to discuss the election of Trump and the rise of white supremacy in America. Alireza Doodstar remarked that perhaps this could be a teachable moment for the country–that those of

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[1] Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. by Mary Gregor, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 255.

[2] Jonathan Glover, *Humanity: A Moral History of the Twentieth Century*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), 7.

[3] Jügen Moltmann, *On Human Dignity: Political Theology and Ethics*, trans. by M. Douglass Meeks, (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1984), 99.

us trained in theology, religion, and ethics could speak into the moral void of a country which seemed to have forgotten its own history of intolerance and cruelty. I, perhaps regrettably, spoke angrily in response. I had been reading for this dissertation and my head was full of Frederick Douglass: "We have been telling America about white supremacy for four hundred years. Why would this moment be different?" Later, I wondered where this "we" came from. It was clear that I was speaking from a deep pain, but this pain did not seem to be entirely my own.

My work had to understand the pessimism surrounding blackness and the ability of persons of good will to overcome the vestigial horrors of this nation's history. I had to find hope in the perspectival witness of the American story and what it could mean to the study of religious ethics and Black theology. In the back of my mind was a long quote taken from James Baldwin's collection of essays *Nobody Knows My Name*:

> ...the role of the Negro in American life has something to do with our concept of what God is, and from my point of view, this concept is not big enough. It has got to be made much bigger than it is because God is, after all, not anybody's toy. To be with God is really to be involved with some enormous, overwhelming desire, and joy, and power which you cannot control, which controls you. I conceive of my own life as a journey toward something I do not understand, which in the going toward, makes me better. I conceive of God, in fact, as a means of liberation and not a means to control others. Love does not begin and end the way we seem to think it does. Love is a battle, love is a war; love is a growing up. No one in the world–in the entire world–knows more–knows Americans better or, odd as this may sound, loves them more than the American Negro.[4]

[4] James Baldwin, "In Search of a Majority," *Collected Essays*, (New York, NY: Library of America, 1998), 220.

God in American life is small, shrunken, and distorted by white supremacy and the view of the world imposed at the end of a bloody whip. The God I believe in is howling from the universe toward the better angels of our human natures. A God who, despite our own histories, still believes in us, in humanity, to make of itself something worthy of the glory of creation. This can be done through a hermeneutics of generosity that, while still remaining critical of moments of domination, works to connect the different ways of knowing brought to bear on what it means to lead a full life and to love one another.

The conception of a Black way of knowing, an epistemological blackness, is integral to coming to terms with what it means to be an American within a religious context...at least this is the dominating framework of this dissertation. Points of view created in and emanating from the margins hold a God endowed epistemological privilege. Black theology insists that Jesus's narrative of siding with the despised and disenfranchised is representative and reflexive of the will of the Divine. Jesus as the Messiah sided with the poor and promised as part of his foreordained mission to release the captives–Black theology holds that liberation is the guiding message of the New Testament and that the core of liberatory praxis and understanding can only be found in those who struggle toward God through oppressive forces. Such struggle and oppression generate powerful new ways of conceiving of the world, and these conceptions are in line with how God is operating in the world through the exigencies of human finitude.

How we see the world is how we come to understand and know the transcendent. This is an analogical claim that moves from the human experience of reality to that of the God. But Ludwig Feuerbach warns us that:

> Such as are a man's thoughts and dispositions, such is his God; so much worth as a man has, so much and no more has his God. Consciousness of God is self-consciousness,

> knowledge of God is self-knowledge. By his God thou knowest the man, and by the man his God; the two are identical. Whatever is God to a man, that is his heart and soul; and conversely, God is the manifested inward nature, the expressed self of a man,–religion the solemn unveiling of a man's hidden treasures, the revelation of his intimate thoughts, the open confession of his love-secrets.[5]

This is the Southern Religion's God that Douglass warned us about as well–the Southern white man saw not only himself in God, but his values as well.[6] But, just as Douglass imposed meaning on his fragmented and broken self, we can see fragments of the Divine speaking through the fragmented reality of our everyday experience. The connections between our concrete earthly ways of knowing mold how we can conceive of the Divine reality. As shown in this dissertation, white supremacy is expert at making hypocrisy and brutality normative and, as a result, shapes a white supremacist God of misery, cruelty, and hatred. Of necessity, blackness acts against such normative understandings. The Black God is one of constancy, creativity, and liberation–at least the God spoken of in Black theology can lay claim to this description. This means that Black epistemology speaks not only to the conditionality of those persons who emerge from the history of enslavement and oppression in America; Black epistemology also makes claims about who, what, and where God is.

The God of Black theology also makes strong claims to how we ought to live. This is the realm of ethics spoken to through the experience of blackness. Any concrete action taken to

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[5] Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. by George Eliot, (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1989), 12-13.

[6] It should be noted here that the U. S. National Park Service, which maintains Frederick Douglass's library, lists a copy of Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity* among his possessions. See https://www.nps.gov/frdo/learn/historyculture/upload/Books-in-FDs-library.pdf

reduce one's ability to be a fully articulated and liberated human is against the very being of God. Frederick Douglass is fundamental to understanding how the order of the slaveocracy spoke to the understanding of God preached to enslaved persons and worshipped through Southern Religion. Douglass is also fundamental in understanding how a God of love and justice must exist in an ethical reality far removed from the humiliation and brutality of the Middle Passage. A God who would countenance such treatment of human persons could not be the liberatory presence evinced in the life of Jesus as the Christ.

God must mean more, must promise more for the future of humanity than the condition of oppressor and oppressed. Du Bois insisted that one's own claim to humanity is contingent on the humanity recognized in the other. *The Souls of Black Folk* works to express the humanity of Black people through deep contemplative thought and the sorrow songs. At the core of Du Bois's message was the salvation of all persons through collective recognition–we all live in a web of mutuality which must be supported and understood through the veil of hatred and racism which affects all of us. At stake is the very future of the American project and the promise of a humanity based in interdependence and flourishing. Our capabilities as ethical persons are limited to the scope of our hatreds, and the power of the written word to reach through time and across difference is the defining trait of our humanity. Du Bois thought that change could be accomplished through communication and collective action, and that whatever God that exists must be in line with our ability to overcome a shared heritage of deep degradation.

Douglass and Du Bois were not selected randomly for use in this dissertation. Through their collective experience, I was able to trace a Black discourse reaching from the Antebellum Period (Douglass born in 1817 or 1818), through the Civil War, abolition, and the Jim Crow Era, to the apex of the Civil Rights Movement (Du Bois's death in Ghana before the March on

Washington on August 27, 1963). Douglass and Du Bois gave me access to almost a hundred and fifty years of Black discourse and liberatory praxis. Both believed in the power of education and communication to overcome entrenched and institutionalized difference. And both Douglass and Du Bois believed in the salvation available through a Black epistemological understanding of what exactly was happening in the presence, past, and future of the United States.

We can imagine Douglass with his torn and frayed copy of *The Columbian Orator*, snatching the rare moments of rest in the life of an enslaved man, teaching himself to become the avatar of abolitionism and Black promise. This vision is contrasted with the startling record of Du Bois and his historic academic and political achievements as he blazed a trail from Fisk University to Friedrich Wilhelm University, and finally to Harvard. What connects these two divergent conditions of Black knowing is the continuing discourse which chained these men together. Neither Douglass nor Du Bois sought, or could, escape their blackness–any learning or understanding reached by their investigations into the human condition had to come *through* the prism of blackness. They helped to develop, while participating in, the epistemology of blackness. Their work helped to cement the ontological connections between the conditions of liberation and the dignity demanded of human persons living in mutuality.

Victor Anderson wrote, "The echoes of...prior discourses are like hearing my mother shouting from the kitchen and calling me to dinner. Her voice gets my attention...these prior discourses provoke my discourse. I am not only called to attention by these other discourses. I also respond. I hear and react to the echoes of prior voices."[7] The end of this dissertation, it is my hope, points toward the continuance of the work and conversation began by Douglass and Du

[7] Victor Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness: An Essay on African American Religious and Cultural Criticism*, (New York, NY: Continuum Publishing Company, 1995), 118.

Bois. They, in my reading, helped to the lay the foundations of a Black way of knowing, and this way of knowing led to the creation and establishment of Black theological understanding. The foundational Black epistemological understanding developed through the experience of humiliation and oppression implies an ethics responsive to the conditionalities and capabilities of the human person. We are called to be in service to one another–to live out the example of Jesus as the Christ in resisting empire while insisting on liberation. We also have a responsibility to ourselves to understand the limits of our ability to change the world while preparing the soil for new and powerful ways of knowing to grow and find important resources. After all, we are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are we free to abandon it.[8]

[8] Pirkei Avot 2:21

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