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Theological Aesthetics in the African American Anthropologies of Emilie M. Townes and M. Shawn Copeland

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to the Faculty of the Historical and Systematic Theology Area School of Theology and Religious Studies Of The Catholic University of America In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements For the Degree Doctor of Philosophy

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Theological Aesthetics in the African American Anthropologies of Emilie Townes and Shawn Copeland

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This study analyzes the theological ethics of Emilie M. Townes and theological anthropology of M. Shawn Copeland in order to determine the implications for the construction of a theological aesthetics defending Black woman personhood. The study explores the beauty and goodness of the female soul and body—to explore how Copeland and Townes treat beauty and justice in suffering and oppression among African American women and their bodies. This reading points the way toward Eucharistic solidarity where the imago Dei is imprinted in the tapestry of diversity in community.

Townes and Copeland are themselves working not in theological aesthetics, but in Womanist and Black theology. Black theology is a liberation theology based on the social location of African Americans, which seeks to reclaim the human dignity that has been abused, subjugated and assassinated in persons of African descent by examining the effects of slavery on the “Black body”—spiritually, physically, psychologically and culturally. Womanist theology, a derivative of Black theology, focuses on the experience of African American women.

The enslavement of people of African origin in America was an abhorrent oppression that has left substantial scars on the minds and lives of African
Americans. Copeland maintains that it is through suffering that human dignity is witnessed, recognized and reaffirmed. For example, the sufferings of Christ did not undermine the divinity of Christ, who was God enfleshed; rather Christ’s human sufferings testified to the glory of God, who raised Christ from the dead. Similarly, enslaved Africans did not succumb to slavery; rather, they cherished their human dignity and affirmed their faith in the omnipotent God, in whose image they were created and whose image they bore.

During the centuries of slavery, the bodies of enslaved Africans, particularly women, were defiled, mutilated, abused, and discarded simply because they were black. Reflections that link the body of Jesus of Nazareth and the bodies of Black women uncover both the human capacity for inhumanity and the divine capacity for love. God’s declaration of the male and female, body and soul as beautiful and good is a focus of theological anthropology; thus, African American anthropology and theological aesthetics proclaim the beauty of African American personhood grounded in the *imago dei*.

Building on the work of Townes and Copeland, I argue that countermemory and Beauty in Eucharistic solidarity, spoken from the pulpit in the Black Church, offer a way toward healing and hope in theological aesthetics so that all are welcomed and affirmed at Christ’s table as co-equal human beings in the body of Christ.
This dissertation by Audrey Coretta Price fulfills the dissertation requirement for the doctoral degree in Systematic Theology approved by Susan Wessel, Ph.D., as Director, and by Rev. Raymond Studzinski, O.S.B., Ph.D., Michael Root, Ph.D., and Beverly E. Mitchell, Ph.D. as Readers.

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Dedication

57 But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.  
58 Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.  
1 Corinthians 15:57-58

This study has been a journey of finding my own voice and being a voice within the African American community on behalf of Black women. It has been a blessed journey that has not always felt so glorious, rewarding, or quite frankly exciting. The countless hours of research, reading and writing; the frustrations, disappointments and missed deadlines now seem all worthwhile.

As a budding theologian who walks comfortably in my Black skin and my divinely fashioned African American body, a womanist theological aesthetics—that affirms, celebrates and honors Black woman personhood—is intimately precious and dear to my very being. For this reason, I dedicate this work to the women who have taken this journey with me...not just Black women, but all women; not just heterosexual women, but all women, not just those who are named, but the unnamed.

I am grateful for the fellowship, support and sisterhood experienced among my clergy sisters. First established within a covenant group of graduated seminarians who journeyed with each other for several years. We laughed and cried together, prayed for and cheered each other on, and attended each other’s ordination. Black women answering their vocational call...despite heretical claims that God does not call women to preach the gospel.

I am deeply grateful for the exceptional scholars whose teaching, coaching, mentoring and collegiality have been the wind beneath my study wings. Dr. Beverly E. Mitchell, the professor who awakened my love and thirst for systematic theology. Beverly helped me identify the deep desire within me to have theology be a liberative vehicle for all of humanity. Dr. Susan Wessel, an extraordinary church historian, who I encountered my first year of coursework in the doctoral program. Susan’s commitment to excellence is paralleled with her nonsensical coaching and care of students with potential who need a gentle nudge. Having Beverly as a reader and Susan as my dissertation director are a great honor that both humbled and challenged me to give nothing but my very best to my first official scholarship. I am abundantly thankful for the years I have co-taught with Dr. Denise Dombkowski Hopkins at Wesley Theological Seminary in the field education program. I was astonished during our first semester of co-teaching when Denise invited me to be a contributing voice in her volume on Psalms, Books 2-3, in the Wisdom Commentary series. Denise facilitated the first official publication of my womanist voice.
I offer libations in honor of the cloud of witnesses of Black women who suffered atrocities of dehumanization, whose strength carried them through the Middle Passage, whose tenacity fortified them to survive slavery, and whose sassiness equips them to persevere inequity in the workplace, domicile, and sadly even the church in the twenty-first century. For all the women who the world has attempted to silence—the abused, assaulted, dehumanized, marginalized, and ostracized because of their fierce gender—âse.

Thank you God for the bundles of blessings you bestowed in my life, my daughter Micaiah Denae Wiggins and, my son, Marcellus Kinley Wiggins. When I wanted to give up on this pursuit, looking in their loving faces, receiving a hug or seeing their innocent smiles—that only comes with blissful youthfulness—recharged my resolve and pushed me across the finish line.

For all those I have named, and for those whose names are unmentioned but remain close to my heart, I remain grateful.
# Table of Contents

Introduction: Black Theology and Womanist Theology ............................................. 1

Slavery and the “Self” ................................................................................................. 9

Black Theology: Healing and Division ..................................................................... 26

Womanist Theology: An African American Female Voice ........................................ 34

Womanist Theological Aesthetics ............................................................................. 41

Chapter 1: Theological Aesthetics ........................................................................... 45

Beauty ....................................................................................................................... 51

Chapter 2: M. Shawn Copeland ............................................................................... 64

Catholic Roots .......................................................................................................... 68

Theology of Suffering: Womanist Perspective ....................................................... 84

Theological Anthropology ....................................................................................... 92

Freeing the Body ...................................................................................................... 103

Conclusion ............................................................................................................... 108

Chapter 3: Emilie M. Townes ................................................................................ 109

Townes’ Womanist Spirituality ............................................................................. 118

Womanist Spirituality and Colorism ...................................................................... 132

Chapter 4: The Archetypes and Countermemory .................................................. 140

Countermemory ...................................................................................................... 144

Connecting to The Justice Within ......................................................................... 150

Mammy Image ........................................................................................................ 155

Aunt Jemima ........................................................................................................... 159

Sapphire ................................................................................................................... 164

Tragic Mulatta ......................................................................................................... 172

The Black Matriarch ............................................................................................... 176

Conclusion ............................................................................................................... 181

Remnants of Beauty and Justice .......................................................................... 183

A New Aesthetic ..................................................................................................... 189

Bibliography ............................................................................................................ 200
Introduction: Black Theology and Womanist Theology

Ben Carson\(^1\), Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, during his first address to the agency’s employees, made a controversial and, I argue, insulting statement. Carson described African slaves as “immigrants” during his first speech.

“That’s what America is about, a land of dreams and opportunity,” he said. “There were other immigrants who came here in the bottom of slave ships, worked even longer, even harder for less. But they too had a dream that one day their sons, daughters, grandsons, granddaughters, great-grandsons, great-granddaughters, might pursue prosperity and happiness in this land.”\(^2\)

Despite Carson’s insensitive remarks, African slaves did not come to the “land of the beautiful” willingly or envisioning better opportunities. In fact, African slaves suffered under the brutal hands of taskmasters who used “Christianity” as a spiritual warden to keep them shackled and under control. Those who transited the middle passage on slave ships probably did not embrace this new world prison as a land of dreams and opportunity. I imagine they lamented as they tried to sing their God’s songs in a foreign land.\(^3\)

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\(^{1}\) African American neurosurgeon. Carson became famous after successfully separating conjoined twins. Ben Carson is the United States Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, appointed by President Donald Trump.


\(^{3}\) Ref Psalm 137:3-4. “For there our captors required of us songs, and our tormentors, mirth, saying, “Sing us one of the songs of Zion!” “How shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?”
Dwight N. Hopkins, I assert, more accurately captures the emotional and spiritual crisis African slaves experienced. Hopkins writes:

The 17th century arrival of Africans to what we now call the United States of America opened up a novel interpretation of Christianity in the “New World.” This slave hermeneutic fashioned a theological practice from which the liberation of African Americans would portend freedom for all of the earth’s oppressed. By seizing the initiative to appropriate the Bible for themselves, the slaves laid the historical foundation for today’s Black theology.... By unraveling the components of the slaves’ religious life we can better appreciate how African Americans reassembled a theology of self-identity and self-determination.4

Africans had to reassemble their self-identity before they could envision dreams in America. America needed to transition from a land of oppression and dehumanization to a land of beauty and opportunity.

Growing up in Montgomery, Alabama afforded me the distinct experience of living in a historic hotbed of the civil rights movement. I was born three years after The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated5 and seven years after the Civil Rights Act 1964.6 During my childhood, racism, “segregation,” sexism and oppression still permeated the one-time capital of the Confederacy and defined

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5 King was assassinated on April 4, 1968.
6 In the 1960s, Americans who knew only the potential of “equal protection of the laws” expected the president, the Congress, and the courts to fulfill the promise of the 14th Amendment. In response, all three branches of the federal government—as well as the public at large—debated a fundamental constitutional question: Does the Constitution's prohibition of denying equal protection always ban the use of racial, ethnic, or gender criteria in an attempt to bring social justice and social benefits?

In 1964 Congress passed Public Law 88-352 (78 Stat. 241); the provisions of this civil rights act forbade discrimination on the basis of sex as well as race in hiring, promoting, and firing. The word "sex" was added at the last moment. Source: http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/civil-rights-act/
divisive social norms. While “White Only” signs were no longer present at water fountains or public entrances, demarking access for the privileged class access only, the practice of segregation and exclusion was still very much operative. As an African American female born in the 1970’s and living in Montgomery, there was much with which to wrestle. Trite sayings like, “If you’re White, you’re right; if Black, get back” were painful reminders of the systemic racism that governed the “Old South.”

The most disheartening and scarring residual effects of slavery and the Jim Crow era—manifested through epithets, whippings, classification as property, legally considered three-fifths of a person, etc.—for many Blacks⁷ in the South was overcoming the mindset that judged African Americans as evil, ugly and inhumane. Coarse, kinky and short hair was judged as “bad hair” while long, straight, silky hair was favored as “good hair.” “Good hair” was judged as such because it emulated European American (White) hair. That which mirrored characteristics of the White population was defined as good, pretty, and enviably human. Thick lips, dark skin tone, voluptuous and full figured hips and buttocks were all physical features deemed as those possessed by a savage, over-sexed and ugly human being. These features characteristically define the Black population. Instead of being recognized as distinctive characteristics that define the beauty of the African American race, they were classified as unattractive. Self-hatred developed among those bearing these

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⁷ In this dissertation, the terms Black and African American are used interchangeably to refer to persons of African descent living in the United States and with cultural heritage in the history of the United States. This cultural heritage includes the legacy of enslaved Africans in the United States. Following womanist and Black theology religious scholars, black and white are in lowercase, except in quotations of authors, who capitalize these words. Similarly, an author’s usage of “Black” or “African American” will be followed in the author’s quote.
characteristics, because they felt branded by these innate features, rather than feeling themselves to be the beautiful creation of the Creator God. Emotional, psychological and spiritual scars caused by slavery remained without healing. Consequently, they festered and produced this mentality. While the civil rights movement strove to combat this oppression, and heal these open wounds, these deep wounds still existed during my upbringing in the Old South.

Before understanding the mental scars, one must examine the root of the problem. The root of the problem was slavery, and the scars it caused festered and rotted during the Jim Crow era. The Jim Crow era birthed laws that enforced racial segregation in the South between the end of Reconstruction in 1877 and the beginning of the civil rights movement in the 1950s. Such laws became known as Jim Crow laws. Centuries of slavery and Jim Crow have perpetrated deep and penetrating harm to the African American culture, establishing a hateful shroud of oppression enforced by racism, sexism and classism. These realities historically defined African American existence—arguably erroneously and hatefully. Much work has been done to redefine African American personhood in a wholesome and healthy way.

The violent and forced arrival of twenty Africans at Jamestown, Virginia in August 1619 marked the historical and symbolic beginning of African Americans, black Americans, Africans in the Diaspora, or Americans of African descent. More

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9 “Jim Crow” was the name of a minstrel routine (actually Jump Jim Crow) that began to be performed in 1828 by its author, Thomas Dartmouth (“Daddy”) Rice, and by many imitators, including actor Joseph Jefferson. “Jim Crow” came to be a derogatory epithet for African Americans and a designation for their segregated life.
specifically, it revealed the new creation of a human category called black American women [and men].  
During the early period [1600s] there was no racial issue involved in slavery, although it raised some religious questions. White servants and black servants were treated the same as indentured servants. Rather, the concerns raised were focused on religious ideology. Generally, it was considered that enslaving heathens was more ethical than enslaving Christians. Negro slaves were simply listed as “servants” in the census of 1623-1624. The first Negroes were generally required to serve for a stipulated term, but were then freed and given some land, as was done with the white indentured servants.

David Brion Davis argues that by the 1760s, when slavery was taking hold in North America, there was nothing unprecedented about chattel slavery, even the slavery of one ethnic group to another. Nor were the central characteristics of slavery in America unique. The three defining characteristics of slavery were: (1) the slave was the property of another person; (2) the slave’s will was subject to his or her owner’s authority; and (3) the slave’s labor was obtained through coercion. The most disturbing aspect of American slavery was the slaves’ lack of protection from murder and physical assault. 

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14 Ibid., 255.
conspicuous part of the American rationale for slavery only after nearly two centuries of slavery’s existence as an institution, and slavery itself became institutionalized and legalized only several decades after the presence of blacks in the English colonies.\textsuperscript{15}

The system of slavery dehumanized persons of African descent. Slavery transforms human beings into objects or expendable property. It denies the humanity of the slave.\textsuperscript{16} Persons of African descent experienced their humanity being stripped and eventually denied in a variety of malicious methods by their oppressors. Gerald Sorin observes that throughout Western history, many thinkers viewed slavery in North America as the ultimate dehumanization.\textsuperscript{17}

A mindset that definitely eroded the humanity of enslaved Africans was the denial of the cognitive abilities of persons of African descent. An important assumption undergirding slavery, according to Sorin, was that some people by nature were incapable of maintaining or governing themselves. Such an assumption downgraded humans to animals. When white men first made contact with blacks in Africa, they were already preconditioned culturally to see blackness as something negative or inferior.\textsuperscript{18} African differences were exaggerated and, in spite of evidence to the contrary, were taken as proof of racial inferiority. Blacks were viewed as the

\textsuperscript{15} Mitchell, \textit{Black Abolitionism}, 20.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 69.
\textsuperscript{17} Quoted in Ibid., 25.
product of a separate creation, bearing in their color the mark of ancient sins, and they were punished due to the need for subordination to higher authority.\textsuperscript{19}

One detrimental blow to African personhood was the three-fifths compromise of 1787. Southerners and Northerners in their polar views on slavery enacted a compromise in order to get the Constitution passed. For the sake of congressional representation, a slave was to be considered three-fifths of a person.\textsuperscript{20} Enslaved Africans were considered property rather than persons. Southerners did not value their slaves as persons but did not want to lose the leverage they would have in governmental representation because of the amount of property they owned—slaves. Consequently, a formula that allowed them to be counted was the motivation for brokering a compromise. Enslaved Africans were diminished to the status of property to be controlled, owned and sold at the will of their masters. Worse, as an individual

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{20} Delegates to the Constitutional Convention of 1787 hotly debated the issue of slavery. George Mason of Virginia argued eloquently against slavery, warning his fellow delegates: “Every master of slaves is born a petty tyrant. They bring the judgment of heaven on a country. As nations cannot be rewarded or punished in the next world, they must be in this. By an inevitable chain of causes and effects, providence punishes national sins by national calamities.”

Southern delegates, on the other hand, argued strenuously that the new government should not be allowed to interfere with the institution of slavery. Delegate John Rutledge of South Carolina, for example, told delegates that “religion and humanity have nothing to do with the questions” of whether the Constitution should protect slavery—it was simply a question of property rights. The proposed Constitution included several provisions that explicitly recognized and protected slavery. Without these provisions, southern delegates would not have supported the new Constitution—and without the support of the southern states, the Constitution had no chance of being ratified. Provisions allowed southern states to count slaves as 3/5 persons for purposes of apportionment in Congress (even though the slaves could not vote), expressly denied Congress the power to prohibit importation of new slaves until 1808, and prevented free states from enacting laws protecting fugitive slaves.

in his or her own right, a slave was legally classified as a fraction of a person—two slaves had to be gathered in order to legally claim one person was present.\(^{21}\)

Unfortunately, there were several distinctive elements in the practice of slavery in the United States: its permanent, hereditary character; its racialization; the insistence on the inherent inferiority of blacks and the concomitant belief that blacks were inherently suited for slavery; and the elaborate rationalizations to justify slavery in the face of the double contradiction that slavery heightened in a society that ostensibly held to Christian principles and idealized the notion of liberty.\(^{22}\) Such a dehumanizing system inherently threatened the dignity of black slaves.\(^{23}\) Karen Teel draws a powerful conclusion:

In considering the history of European American attitudes toward African bodies, a basic paradox immediately becomes apparent. We have denied African people’s humanity, choosing to believe that they lack authentic subjectivity and moral agency in comparison with ourselves and deeming them to be more like animals than humans, thus justifying treating them inhumanely.\(^{24}\)


\(^{22}\) Mitchell, *Black Abolitionism*, 27.

\(^{23}\) Ibid.

Slavery and the “Self”

In the Bible, the book of Genesis recounts the creation story. In the first chapter of Genesis, the story begins with God, out of darkness, calling forth light. God separates the darkness from the light. The story progresses, chronicling God’s acts of creation, culminating with God creating humanity, “God created humankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them.”25 Humanity was created in God’s own image. In this creation story, after God created, God declared God’s creation as good.26 The birth of humanity was an intimate, meticulous, and holy affair as humanity was fashioned by God’s hands out of the dirt of the earth and life was transferred from the divine to humankind by breathing air into Adam and Eve. It was an act of love and selflessness that defined the very nature and character of Adam and Eve. It was the foundation of God’s chosen race and royal priesthood.27

Conversely, slavery birthed a people who have come to be known as African Americans; it was an act of dehumanization, selfishness, and hatred. Instead of life being transferred from the parent to the child, death—emotional and spiritual—was imparted and life was snatched away. Slavery was a harsh and abusive parent. The

26 The declaration God saw that it was good is repeated several times in chapter 1 after God creates. For example, “17 God placed the lights in the expanse of the sky to shine on the earth, 18 to preside over the day and the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. God saw that it was good.” Gen. 1:17 NRSV.
27 See 1 Peter 2:9: “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.” All scripture citations are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).
African people who first arrived in America experienced a rebirth and slavery gave them a new name and a new identity. The notion of being made in God’s image was stripped away, leading to personhood being stripped away as well. Knowledge of the beauty of the *imago Dei* within eluded them. Those Africans were robbed of the undeniable truth of Genesis 1:27, “So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.”

Turning to theologians like Dwight Hopkins, Beverly Mitchell and M. Shawn Copeland who attend to human dignity, a theology of *imago Dei* is present in their scholarship. Fundamentally, the theology of *imago Dei* makes two claims: first, God’s own self-actualization through humankind; and second, God’s care for humankind.28

To say that humans are created in the image of God is to recognize the special qualities of human nature that allow God to be made manifest in humans. Instead, slaves were taught a humiliating falsehood that they were not human, but property instead.

- this first domination of Blacks by Whites on North American soil would epitomize an ensuing white Christian theology: that is, the image of God would reside in the corporate White privilege to expect and demand Black compliance and silence.29

Consequently, over time, African Americans formulated an inner dehumanized self. Slavery defined the Black self as demonic, evil, inferior, and sinful. It is

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28 Definition is taken from the Glossary at: http://www.pbs.org/faithandreason/theogloss/imago-body.html
understandable how these wards of slavery did not see the image of God within themselves.

Commencing with a rebirth into slavery, a distorted understanding of their humanity developed and a new self-identity inevitably emerged. A new people was indoctrinated into a new way of being:

The first twenty rapidly grew into hundreds and the hundreds into thousands. By 1865, the thousands had yielded four million people.... Black bodies labored for two and one-half centuries, rendering uncompensated work and wealth to a nation legally owned by propertied White male citizens as inscribed in the Constitution.30

Over time, people of African descent thought differently, looked different, behaved differently, and became different people. They thought differently because they were forced into a new culture, a new society, a new familial structure, and a new religion. All that had defined them before—for example, religion, family, and geographic location—had abruptly changed and was being redefined. The redefinition was founded in a construct of oppression that was necessary to enslave them. Over time, the slave masters realized that physical bondage was not sufficient to keep slaves in line, or more accurately, under their tyrannical control; rather they needed to impose emotional, spiritual, and psychological shackles. Breaking and subjugating a person’s will, they surmised, was the most beneficial way of maintaining their sovereignty over Blacks. The devious plan and ominous process were the foundation that thrust this unknowing and unsuspecting people into a long circular journey of discovering and redefining their self-identity.

30 Ibid., 28.
With their minds shackled, slaves became disconnected from the self that existed within them prior to captivity. Now they were vulnerable to being defined by their oppressors (the task masters), the oppression they endured (rapes, whippings, harsh labor), and an oppressive spirituality. Hopkins coins this repressive time in the lives of slaves: “This was the sunup to sundown period when daylight enabled a White Jesus Christ to rule over Black slaves like a wolf over a sheep fold.”

While the labor was gruesome and the treatment was harsh, the most damaging suffering Black slaves underwent was spiritual. Ex-slave Frederick Douglass underscored this reality: “For of all the slaveholders with whom I have ever met, religious slaveholders are the worst. I have ever found them the meanest and basest, the most cruel and cowardly, of all.”

The White sovereign order used Christianity to tighten the shackles around the minds of slaves in an effort to have full control of what they deemed as their property.

In this tyrannical situation, even the sacramental rites given to slaves were co-opted. Rather than being the liberative faith that it is, Christianity was co-opted to be the religion that justified slavery. How Whites practiced and taught Christianity to enslaved Africans portrayed God as oppressor rather than God as liberator. White Christianity played a role in shaping the identity of Blacks; in particular, it was an oppressive tool used to strip Black persons’ dignity, shatter their self-identity and redefine them as instruments of labor that could be easily controlled.

The Christianity the Black man received at the hands of the slavemasters was not calculated to make him, the Black man, free either

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31 Ibid., 29.
in his mind, his body or his spirit…. That version of the faith given the slaves was administered as a spiritual narcotic intended to protect the economic interests of the slavemaster by so confusing the mind of the slave as to make his dehumanization seem to him reasonable, right and consistent with the will of God.33

Whites had prostituted the gospel, skewed Christian doctrine, and subjected Christian tenets to their service.

Blacks were taught beliefs that were antithetical to the Christian faith but a tremendous justifier of the evil acts of the White oppressor. For example,

Encoding this religious superiority, the Anglican Church’s Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (SPG) standardized the following text for slaves preparing for baptism in the thirteen colonies: You declare in the presence of God and before this congregation that you do not ask for the Holy Baptism out of any desire to free yourself from the duty and obedience you owe to your master while you live; but merely for the good of your soul and to partake of the grace and blessings promised to the members of the Church of Christ.34

In order to be baptized, slaves had to confess the lordship of their slave owners over their lives; they had to forgo some of their spiritual liberties that becoming a Christian afforded them. The message of the gospel is freedom and the power of the gospel is liberation:

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 let the oppressed go free (Luke 4:18).

Through their baptism, the soul was saved but the self was still enslaved. According to scripture, “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has

passed away; see, everything has become new!” So, the question is, who were Blacks becoming after their Holy Baptism in captivity? More poignantly, how could Black slaves become the new creation, the new self that Christ desired of them while existing in the hell of slavery?

Slavery stained the imprint of self within Blacks. Roberts encapsulates it well:

Having thus indicted slavery for its tendency to warp the moral integrity of the enslaved, the former slave avowed that ‘the conditions of the slave are nothing more deplorable than in its being so unfavorable to the practice of every virtue.’ It affirms that slavery is more than a political or civil matter in which one person presumes to rob another of his or her labor and substance; slavery is a moral affront in that it frustrates and undermines the ability of the enslaved to practice and embody virtues, virtues that presumably when practiced would be within the provenance of self-possessing, viable human beings.

Slavery hindered Blacks from constructing a positive and healthy relational position on faith when establishing a holistic self-identity and self-image. Abusive and repressive slave masters became surrogate parents of enslaved Blacks. The formation of the self by these surrogate parents was a perverted identity and image. The beginning point for the processes of faith is found in the early life condition of the human person:

... the formulation of self is characterized by (1) the child’s long dependence on his parents and (2) the child’s birth into a matrix of power relationships to which in his helplessness a young person must adapt. The formation and maintenance of a sense of self is a life achievement that takes place in complex interaction between child and interpersonal environment that is the matrixed relationships around him.

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35 2 Corinthians 5:17
37 Information from TRS 858A, Outline IIB-1, “Toward a Constructive Relational Position on Faith in Relation to Self” created by Raymond Studzinski.
An adult slave remained a child in society. His parents were his abuser, yet he was dependent upon these parents for sustenance. Unlike in a stable and loving household where a child matures into a well-adjusted adult because she is provided a psychological and theological foundation that enables her to depart her parent’s home and exist away from her parent’s care, a slave remained a lifelong child dependent upon her parent. Although a slave matured in age, he was never afforded the financial, psychological, emotional, or societal building blocks to self-exist. Furthermore, he was denied the freedom to become an independent member of society, with an opportunity to establish his own home base and productivity within the world. Consequently, slaves were perpetual children with a victimized self-identity.

While being redefined in a manner that would solely serve the purposes of the dominant culture, enslaved Blacks retained a small core nugget of true self that they could tap for fortitude to prevent them from remaining victims of the violence occurring during the sunup to sundown period. Slaves began to re-create themselves in what is known as the Invisible Institution—a sacred space and relationship where they loosely organized and surreptitious religious gatherings of the slave community could take place. There the Black chattel re-named themselves as liberated children of God.\(^\text{38}\)

Slaves might not have been equipped with an impressive vocabulary of theological terms nor were they educated with a sophisticated theology to explain why deep within they felt they were more than what slavery had proclaimed them to be.

Nevertheless, enslaved Africans believed they were not who slavery named them. They were convinced they did not belong to whom slavery had endowed them. The unblemished and intact image of God, within which the divine had attached, shielded them from violence and dehumanization. The unblemished and intact image of God that remained ever present preserved their humanity as valuable. The theology of the image of God that the White slave owners attempted to use to dehumanize slaves also named the truth of the image of God within them. The image of God was named because despite the mischaracterization of the theology, slaves understood and interpreted the theology in light of the God they knew who had created and not left them. This was just enough to empower them to define an alternative, holistic self. It provided the inner strength to reject the outside messages and to embrace, understand and be who God had created them to be.
From Slave Theology to Black Theology

Christianity, or more accurately, the practice of Christianity by the white race during slavery and the subsequent Jim Crow era, was a stronghold in which hate and oppression had a solid foundation. As Copeland asserts, “No Christian teaching has been more desecrated by slavery than the doctrine of the human person or theological anthropology.”39 The incongruence of White Christianity and the God they worshiped created a spiritual crisis for enslaved Africans. Their hope, salvation and liberation were rooted in a liberative and just God, yet this was not the God they experienced in White Christianity. Slaves refused to accept this false faith that justified their oppression and inhumanity.

Equipped with a fortitude that emanated from an undeniable, yet still immature, self that existed deep within, “through their daily cultural practices, enslaved Blacks perceived their ultimate concern, and this ultimate concern, or God, worked with them to refashion themselves within and, at times, beyond the confines of their chattel existence.”40 Through the process of “self (co)constitution,” a “slave theology” emerged, which Hopkins defines “as a systematization of slave experiences of God in everyday religious cultural practices.”41 The ingenious power of their slave theology resided in their utilization of what was at their disposal and in their sphere

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39 as quoted in Teel, Racism and the Image of God, 6.
41 Ibid.
of control. Consequently, the possibility of slave theology evolved from two examples of everyday cultural elements—the experience of sacred word power and the experience of creating a syncretized religion.\textsuperscript{42} This experience of sacred word power, according to Hopkins, divinely influenced Black slaves and facilitated their discovering and naming a liberative self-identity.

The most prominent employment of sacred word power was experienced in four practices: (1) reading the Bible; (2) prayer; (3) spirituals; and (4) naming. Learning to read was a bold act for slaves to attempt. During slavery, laws prohibited slaves from learning how to read. Slave owners understood the liberative power in reading; for slaves would no longer be ignorant to the untruths that their masters taught regarding the Bible. Literacy would equip slaves with knowledge that would unshackle their minds, exposing them to the possibilities of a valued self.

\textit{Truly it was a seizure of power when slaves deployed the Bible: doing so helped them constitute themselves as self-initiating beings. Surreptitiously reading the biblical story enabled slaves to know the world for themselves, to be made whole by expressing their intellect, and to master a sacred text.}\textsuperscript{43}

Struggling to learn to read, having the tenacity to push past the legal obstacles, overcoming the fear of punishment, and having the fortitude not to be denied literacy, helped slaves to connect with the self they had earlier begun to define as liberated children of God. Although the body was held captive in the bonds of an oppressive society, the ability to read and understand the sacred words of Scripture—what we might call “sacred word power”—helped slaves realize that the

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 90.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 90.
self that still existed apart from its barren conditions of captivity could not and would not be enslaved without their permission. Reading the Bible, in particular, was integral in repairing the wounded, fragile, and dehumanized self that the social conditions of captivity had created:

For the enslaved, reading the Bible resurrected the black intellect from the hell of darkness and ignorance…. The seizure of the sacred text symbolized a journey from imprisonment to a new religious being, one liberated, at least on the cognitive level, in a new space claimed within the physical bonds of captivity.44

Slaves gained a new understanding of themselves because reading the Bible opened up truths they had been denied. They realized that they also were made in God’s image, an insight that equipped them with divine ownership of the self. David Ford’s45 discussion on facing helps us to understand the seeing and knowing of the authentic self. Seeing one’s authentic self puts one in touch with whom God has created us to be. It is an inward look of the mind and soul. According to Ford, “Christianity is characterized by…facing; being faced by God, embodied in the face of Christ; turning to face Jesus Christ in faith; being members of a community of the face; seeing the face of God reflected in creation and especially in each human face, with all the faces in our heart related to the presence of the face of Christ…”46

Slaves unwittingly engaged in what Ford defines as facing. They realized that God infinitely loves God’s creation; this ascribed value to the self. They learned that

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44 Ibid., 91.
46 Ibid.
they are a member of God’s covenanted people; this formulated meaning and purpose for the self. The Bible confirmed that the voice they heard from the intact piece of self, deeply embedded within, proclaimed the truth and that they were a valued asset who belonged to God. Knowledge of this truth created a liberated self that thirsted for the fullness of freedom that only a life outside of slavery would bestow. Frederick Douglass’ discovery of the sacredness of reading removed him forever from the power of his master and propelled him into a free space, both metaphorically, in terms of sense of identity and self-knowledge, and literally, by impelling him to run away to the North. Reading the Bible made Douglass unfit to remain a slave.47 Like Douglass, after slaves encountered the truth of the Bible, they were steadfast in seeking and securing their freedom.

As in the written word, slaves found power in the praying word. Prayers provided slaves with fortitude. Armed with an accurate understanding of God and a more positive image of self, slaves prayed fervently and faithfully for protection from the evil acts of their slave owners and deliverance from slavery. Slaves began to experience the power of their prayers. Via the tradition of storytelling, historical accounts testify to how slaves were spared from the venomous punishment of their slave owners when they were discovered in secret camp meetings (slave worship services). The slave master would ride toward them, and when the slaves heard the slave masters approaching, they began to pray that God would protect them. Instead of suffering the whippings and lashings they would have normally received, the slaves

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remained untouched as the taskmasters’ knees would buckle or the taskmasters would retreat in fear. Prayer created a fortified self. Believing that God would deliver them, the slaves felt that “prayer aided the structurally marginalized to endure and to triumph in the end. The power of prayer was the certitude of faith.”

Another cultural element of sacred word power was the singing word. The singing word defined the initial remnant of the communal or relational self. The power of singing existed in the unification that resulted from the communal act of composing unique religious songs that originated within the slave community. These spirituals were the bold communicative voice springing forth from the relational self, proclaiming a new hope, a new identity, a new faith, and a new freedom. The singing word revealed the beauty of a unified and relational self: “Thus, the revelation of divine lyrics and holy rhythm implanted in the aesthetic harmonizing of beautiful dark tongues signified the co-laboring exertion of God and humanity in the reconfiguration of the black self.” The singing word added security to self because slaves no longer defined themselves as individuals, but as a community. The larger the community of singers expressing the singing word, the louder and stronger the resonance sounded. This reality was an empowering metaphor for the relational self. A strength that had previously eluded this oppressed people was now available for the relational self to capture and own.

The Negro spiritual, O Freedom, is a powerful illustration of sacred word power in singing the spirituals. In this hymn, enslaved Africans would affirm their inner

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48 Ibid., 92.
49 Ibid., 92-93.
strength. While they were in slavery, legally, they would not allow their soul, their mind or their faith to be enslaved. They maintained freedom of the self as much as realistically possible. It also spoke of their inner fight and tenacity. Those enslaved were willing to protest and fight against slavery even unto death rather than to consign themselves and future generations to the wretchedness of slavery. They boldly declared, “Before I’d be a slave, I’d be buried in my grave...” The hymn ends with the hope towards which they were turned, \textit{freedom}.

\begin{quote}
\textit{BEFORE I'D BE A SLAVE (OH, FREEDOM)}$^{50}$

\begin{verbatim}
Before I'd be a slave
I'd be buried in my grave
And go home to my Lord
And be saved

O, what preachin'!
O, what preachin'!
O, what preachin' over me, over me
O, what mourning...
O, what singing...
O, what shouting...
O, weeping Mary...

Doubting Thomas...
O, what sighing
O, Freedom...
\end{verbatim}
\end{quote}

The sacred word power of naming provided import equal to that of reading, praying and singing: “Given the religious consequences of naming rituals in certain indigenous West African worldviews and practical witness, to give an enslaved African or African American a name had an ultimate significance for his or her self-identity, communal relations, and being in the world....”\textsuperscript{51} The naming word was the vehicle through which Black slaves salvaged, protected, and isolated their true self, the true self that they maintained deep within. The naming word allowed them to maintain full claim on the \textit{imago Dei} and the self that God created at birth. Naming rituals were a rich part of their African heritage that slaves clandestinely cherished and maintained. Keeping this tradition helped them to stay connected to God, because, as one Ghanaian theologian articulated, “The Akan of Ghana link divine naming to God’s ‘love of justice and fairness.’” Quoting Akan sacred folk wisdom, he continued: “Since God does not like wickedness, He gave every creature a name.”\textsuperscript{52}

Slaves sought to maintain their birth and/or family name and not accept their slave name. The giving of a name is extremely important because it defines who you are and to whom you belong. The naming symbolizes a child’s official entry into a family. The naming establishes the adopters as parents and the child as their own. Additionally, the naming severs the ties with the child’s former parents and symbolically dislodges the child from his past heritage and establishes him in a new heritage shaped and controlled by his new parents. With the link of the name broken,

\textsuperscript{51} Hopkins, “Self (Co)Constitution: Slave Theology from Everyday Cultural Elements,”, 93.
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid.
the intent is for all connection and identification to the child’s past to be forever lost to the child and remain under the adoptive parents’ control. This paradigm applies in the naming of slaves. Slave owners named slaves to establish control and lordship. However, the slaves maintained that only God their Creator had the authority to name them, which God would do in love. The naming word empowered slaves to maintain their God-created self, regardless of what their masters labeled them.

Slave theology was a vehicle of liberation. What slave owners tried to steal from them, Black slaves took back. Whites forced their version of Christianity upon slaves to make the slaves impotent and dependent children they could control. Slave theology offered true Christianity that embraced the slaves with dignity, nurtured them with love, matured them into independence, and identified them as human. Armed with the reassurance of a humanized self and the liberative and transformative power of slave theology, slaves commenced to identify and embrace their redeemed self-identity. The practice of slave theology began to heal the broken Black self. Slave theology was the means whereby the shattered and fragmented self was being made whole. Slave theology accomplished this re-identification of self because “liberative outcomes ultimately force an identity crisis, a crisis of legitimation and utility.”  

Reading the Bible (the written word) materialized the liberated self. Singing spirituals (the singing word) fashioned the relational self. Prayer (the praying word) produced the fortified self. Naming rituals (the words of self-definition) brought into being the God-created self.

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Slave theology formed a harmonized self that postured slaves unwaveringly to pursue their liberation. Perhaps the power of the sacred word is as Thomas Merton said: “…every expression of the will of God is in some sense a ‘word’ of God and therefore a ‘seed’ of new life.” Slaves were not only securing their freedom—they were protecting, securing, and building upon their transformed self: the new life that sprang forth from the power of sacred word. They developed a transformed self that would bring forth a new people and a new culture, an African American culture.

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Black Theology: Healing and Division

After 1865 and the abolition of slavery, slave theology would turn into what is now known as Black theology. No longer slaves, but still oppressed children of God, they still needed some type of theology to nurture them. The abolition of slavery transitioned Black people from slavery to oppression: from suffering under slave masters to systemic oppression.

Enslaved African Americans created a Black theology of liberation by intertwining African Traditional Religions and daily life experiences with a radical reinterpretation of slave-master Christianity. After slavery, Blacks had achieved only a partial freedom and there remained a foe of the well-adjusted, harmonized, and holistic self. The liberative outcome of this partial freedom produced another crisis of identity and surfaced a crucial question: “What is Blackness?” This is one question African Americans still find themselves trying to answer comprehensively while fighting the dominant culture’s intrusion of providing an answer that serves its oppressive purposes. The psychological, emotional, and spiritual self underwent attacks and sought refuge through connectivity to, and relation with, the divine. Black theology became the vehicle by which the self would be nurtured, and redefined or refined again.

Christian theology is a theology of liberation. It is a rational study of the being of God in the world in light of the existential situation of an oppressed community,

relating the forces of liberation to the essence of the gospel, which is Jesus Christ.\textsuperscript{56} However, Christian theology, as practiced by White Christianity, was not the liberative force it could be for Blacks, particularly in the Jim Crow south. Jim Crow laws revived principles of the 1800-1866 Black Codes, which had restricted the civil rights of Blacks. The Jim Crow south was plagued with laws that enforced racial segregation in the South between the end of Reconstruction in 1877 and the beginning of the civil rights movement in the 1950s. An alternative to the perversion of White Christianity was desperately needed to combat Jim Crow and its oppression.

James Cone posits, “[Christian theology’s] sole reason for existence is to put into ordered speech the meaning of God’s activity in the world, so that the community of the oppressed will recognize that its inner thrust for liberation is not only consistent with the gospel but is the gospel of Jesus Christ.”\textsuperscript{57} Unfortunately, Blacks in the 1960s were not partakers of the inner thrust Cone mentioned. Realizing and believing that the true gospel of Jesus Christ is not inherently flawed or oppressive, Black theologians embarked upon a reinterpretation and practice of the Christian gospel from the perspective of the Black experience and rooted in the institution of

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid.
the Black Church. At the time that Gustavo Gutiérrez\textsuperscript{58} was formulating a liberation theology in Latin America, Cone fathered Black theology in the United States.

Although stated a century after slavery ended, the 1969 statement of the National Committee of Black Churchmen, the first organization of African American liberation theology, provides insight into the utility of Black Theology:

Black Theology...is the affirmation of black humanity that emancipates black people from white racism, thus providing authentic freedom for both white and black people. It affirms the humanity of white people in that it says No to the encroachment of white oppression.\textsuperscript{59}

Cone’s articulation of Black theology maintains its ancestral relationship to Christianity:

The task of theology is to explicate the meaning of God’s liberating activity so that those who labor under enslaving powers will see that the forces of liberation are the very activity of God. Christian theology is never just a rational study of the being of God. Rather it is a study of God’s liberating activity in the world, God’s activity in behalf of the oppressed.\textsuperscript{60}

[Moreover,] the task of black theology, then, is to analyze the nature of the gospel of Jesus Christ in the light of oppressed blacks so they will see the gospel as inseparable from their humiliated condition, and as bestowing on them the necessary power to break the chains of oppression.\textsuperscript{61}

\textsuperscript{58} Gustavo Gutiérrez Merino, O.P. (born 8 June 1928 in Lima), a Peruvian theologian and Dominican priest, is regarded as one of the founders of liberation theology in Latin America. Gutiérrez, author of \textit{A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, Salvation} (1971), explained his notion of Christian poverty as an act of loving solidarity with the poor as well as a liberating protest against poverty. He holds the John Cardinal O’Hara Professorship of Theology at the University of Notre Dame and has been professor at the Pontifical Catholic University of Peru. Accessed on August 20, 2015 http://liberationtheology.org/people-organizations/gustavo-gutierrez/

\textsuperscript{59} Pinn, ““Black Is, Black Ain’t”,” \textit{Dialog} 43/ 1 (Spring 2004): 54.

\textsuperscript{60} Cone, \textit{A Black Theology of Liberation}, 3.

\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 5.
Black theology understands Blacks' struggle, is rooted in their culture and experience, and addresses their ontological and social concerns. Black theology gives voice and power to a marginalized and disempowered people. Black theology is an effort of African American people to claim their blackness and their freedom as people of God. Freedom comes when black poor folk, led by the African American church, live out their freedom because God helps them in their daily struggle against personal pain and collective oppression. In addition, a liberation movement needs to free black minds from self-hate and subordination to white power.\(^\text{62}\)

The encroachment of white oppression triggered—and the physical and psychological scars of slavery created—an unsavory and unseemly image and classification of Blackness and the black body. The new self was in conflict with the body that withheld it. The external and the internal needed to be reconciled because “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.”\(^\text{63}\) Black theology provides a healing balm for the disunified self. Black theology recognizes that God, through Jesus Christ and the presence of the Holy Spirit, works with the poor as they learn to love themselves enough to practice their total freedom and create their full humanity on earth as it is in heaven.\(^\text{64}\) Black theology authors maintain the importance of the Black church

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63 Pinn, “"Black Is, Black Ain't",” *Dialog* 43/1 (Spring 2004): 56.
owning, teaching and living the truths of Black theology. Hopkins—writing decades after Cone—affirms:

God today continues to offer a divine Spirit to enable and sustain black folk on their journey toward a liberated humanity. Black theology works with African American churches so that they will remain responsible to this divine calling. Theology serves as a critical conscience of the church’s vocation to liberate the poor in their journey with God to full humanity.\(^65\)

After slavery, Blacks struggled with negative body images. This is another dynamic that Black Theology would have to address in order for Blacks to be made whole. According to Ford, facing is connected to one’s salvation. In fact, healthy facing is important to one’s salvation and shapes one’s relationship with God. Ford offers some explanation about the crisis Blacks experienced: “The self, as one key contemporary locus of identity, crisis and transformation, is symbolised by the dynamics of human facing.”\(^66\) Blacks found themselves in an identity crisis because the image of the Black man, specifically the black body, was synonymous with what was ugly, flawed, evil, inhumane, and dark (absence of God’s light). White Christianity was the primary offender in this assault on Black self-identity.

Kelly Brown Douglas, in assessing the Platonized form of Christianity promulgated by many African American Christians, argues that this form of Christian belief leaves little room for “pro-black” considerations of the black body. That is, since, according to Platonized Christianity the body and soul cannot together exist in any fruitful capacity, the body in general, and the black body in particular, becomes a vessel of “sin,” sexual lust, and is thus antithetical to the nature of God...Therefore, she holds, black Christians who adopt Platonized forms of Christianity (often found in slaveholding Christianity and current strands of

\(^{65}\) Ibid., 4.
conservative evangelicalism) suffer psychologically, emotionally, spiritually, and physically, paradoxically expanding and advancing the misuse of the black body\(^{67}\).

One of Black theology’s tasks is to resurrect the face of the black body. Facing Blackness would be salvific and play an integral role in moving Blacks forward with a healthy, relational self. Although a legal part of society, freed slaves faced a White-dominated world that loathed the face of the Black woman and man. Blacks faced the reality that “the religious and social symbolism of black bodies in light of slave auctions, chattel slavery, sanctioned arbitrary maiming and killings, and lynchings become a prominent precursor for understanding the social structure of black religion.”\(^{68}\)

In the midst of this adversity, Black theology nurtured the soul and self of Blacks and facilitated their connectedness with God. Their thriving relationship with God helped them to maintain a salvific hope and appropriate perspective. The role of the invisible institution, birthed out of slavery and eventually referred to as the Black church, was a means of grace for Black Christians: “The Black church became the chief organizing principle around which, and through which the slave and his successors would find meaning and identity in the land of the western pharaohs.”\(^{69}\)

Within the Black church, Blacks encountered a loving God in whose image they were created; redemption of Blackness and the black body; and an unparalleled fellowship.


\(^{68}\) Ibid.

The Black church provided African Americans with reaffirmation of the beauty they believed was within them and reminded them they were human and a valued part of God’s precious creation. Blacks gained a confidence in their humanity, a mentality of their equality, and a freedom in their worship: “When the Negro worshipper gained conscious self-respect he grew tired of the back pews and upper galleries of the white churches, and sought places of worship more compatible with his sense of freedom and dignity.”

Freedom in worship equals freedom in self. The Black church permitted Blacks to drop their alter persona (developed out of fear and necessity to be tolerated by the White dominant culture), and be who they were and not who others had viewed them to be. The ability to be themselves fortified the self and matured the liberative power within them: “Black Christians had their own thoughts about their bodies and their souls and their destinies.” Their new spirituality facilitated a new philosophy that imaged a new “Black.” For example, Blacks and the Black church were challenged to wrestle with a provocative and liberative Trinitarian definition of God. The blackness of God means that the essence of the nature of God is to be found in the concept of liberation. In a Trinitarian view of God, Black theology says that as Creator, God identified with oppressed Israel, participating in the bringing into being of this people; as Redeemer, God became the Oppressed One in order that all may be free from oppression; as Holy Spirit, God continues the work of liberation. The Holy Spirit

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70 Ibid., 7.
71 Ibid., 8.
is the Spirit of the Creator and the Redeemer at work in the forces of human liberation in our society today.

Black theology states that the God of freedom, through the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ the liberator, has provided a journey of faith and hope to be free. Now God’s Spirit of liberation offers empowerment to the oppressed African American community to struggle for the full realization of that community’s structural and personal free humanity. Black theology helped resolve many of the problems that plagued the Black community regarding self-identity; but it also, unintentionally, created some problems. As the Black male began to re-assert himself, he experienced integration back into society. While not fully accepted and respected as a person within the White dominant culture, the Black male had a marked progression towards equality. The pursuit of equality for the Black female had not kept pace. An unintentional consequence of Black theology practiced in White America was the equity divide between the Black male and the Black female. Although the “black church can be a haven of escape from the pain of white racism, “it was an additional source of pain for Black women.” Over time, the Black church modeled some of the ills of American society and also embodied its African heritage. Both scenarios hurt Black women and afforded a fertile environment for sexism and classism.

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Womanist Theology: An African American Female Voice

The collapsing of male and female into “Blackness” left women voiceless. While Blackness suffered at the hands of slavery, male and female were not similarly impacted. Teel summarizes Katie Cannon’s multidimensional implications that infected the personhood of African American women. Europeans exploited women for: [1] their physical labor in the fields and in the houses; [2] their reproductive capabilities by forcing them to bear children to reproduce the slave force; [3] their sexuality by rendering them “answerable with their bodies” to the desires of European American men; and [4] their nurturing capacities to nurse our children while neglecting their own and to do the domestic chores of our households.”

While black men’s oppression under slavery usually had only one dimension, black women’s was fourfold. All these aspects of oppression were lived out in the bodies of black people who were treated like animals. Cannon accurately and profoundly captures the assault on the Black women’s body that has had implications for decades. Emerging theologies are challenged to address and answer such attacks. Womanist theology embarked upon this endeavor.

The Black woman was often defined as inferior to the Black male. Black women were a double minority: first, because of their racial status, Black; second, because of their gender, female. Black women have an association with Black men and White women that is both ambivalent and contradictory; they could identify closely with the

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75 Ibid., 24.
oppression that Black men suffered due to their Blackness because they too were Black, and they could empathize with the sexism White women underwent because of their gender because they too were female. However, both Black men and White women oppressed Black women: Black men viewed them as inferior because of their gender and White women viewed them as inferior because of their race. Yolanda Smith summarizes this twofold oppression:

The dual role of Black men and White women as oppressed and oppressors leaves the Black woman, as Diane Hayes suggests, ‘on the bottom, stigmatized and condemned both for her strengths and her weaknesses and too often denied a space of her own in which to grow, explore, and develop into full womanhood’.76

Accordingly, black women’s self-identity is forced into an isolated standing within society, the lowest among the minorities, with no companionship.

Womanist theology enabled “Afro-American women to name and to define their own experience of oppression.”77 While Black theology addressed racism almost exclusively and feminist theology addressed sexism exclusively, womanist theology tackled not only the threatening combination of racism and sexism but also the completely unaddressed element that afflicted Black women: classism. Combining the two liberative voices and addressing classism birthed a theology that addresses the distinctiveness of the social location of Black women and comprehensively speaks

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to the Black woman’s plight. Smith brilliantly expounds the meshing of the two theologies:

Although womanist theology has drawn insights from both feminist theology and Black theology, neither one of these perspectives has been able to fully address the concerns of African American women. While Black theology is concerned with the liberation of all humanity, with particular attention to Black people, and is engaged in the struggle against racism, it is often indifferent to Black women’s experiences and has been guilty of sexist practices. It has frequently ignored the contributions of Black women who participate in the mutual struggle against racism. In a similar fashion, White feminist scholars have often overlooked Black women’s voices and particular realities related to race and class. Although feminist and womanist scholars often stand in solidarity in the mutual struggle against sexism to affirm the “full humanity of women,” Black women have often experienced racism through their involvement with the feminist movement (202).

Because Womanist theology addresses the unique social location within which Black women find themselves, it empowers Black women to name and identify themselves. As Yolanda Smith explains, “Womanist theology, since the 1980s, has emerged as a vehicle for African American female clergy and religious scholars to shape their own identity, honor their unique experience as Black women in America, preserve and celebrate their cultural heritage, and highlight the contributions they have made historically to religious discourse and to the wider society.”

Linda Thomas defines womanist theology as “critical reflection upon black women’s place in the world that God has created; it takes seriously black women’s

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78 Smith remarked in a footnote: “This phrase is used by Rosemary Radford Ruether to describe the vision for women’s liberation and the struggle against any sin that impedes this vision.” See Rosemary Radford Ruether, Sexism and God-Talk (Boston Beacon Press, 1983), cited in Williams, Sisters in the Wilderness, xiv.

experience as human beings who are made in the image of God; it affirms and critiques the positive and negative attributes of the church, the African American community, and the larger society.”

Womanist theology provides a vehicle through which the Black woman can define her identity. Black women found power in religious narratives and the process of healthy self-identity continued for them. According to Delores Williams, one of the first generation of Womanist scholars,

... the religious narratives of Zora Neale Hurston, Margaret Walker, and Alice Walker portray black women’s oppression as a multidimensional assault...[an] assault upon black women’s reproductive and nurturing functions. Black women’s self-esteem is undermined by the use of alien aesthetic criteria to assess black women’s beauty and value. Finally...[it was an] assault upon black women’s independent right to choose and maintain positive, fulfilling, and productive relationships.

This three-pronged assault violated and tarnished the relational self that had arisen in Black women after their survival of slavery. Williams critically explores literary texts to reflect upon Black women’s oppression in the hope of broadening the hermeneutical circle and illuminating a new direction for rediscovering the Black woman: Zora Neale Hurston’s *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*; Margaret Walker’s *Jubilee*, and Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple.

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82 Williams, “Women’s Oppression and Lifeline Politics,” 60.
83 Delores Williams noted: “In this study, the works of Zora Neale Hurston, Margaret Walker and Alice Walker are called religious narratives because religious language, religious practices and religious issues help effect the resolution of the plots. These books have also been classified as novels. However, this essay understands “black novel” to be a narrative metaphor mirroring the faith, hopes, values, tragedies, failures and celebrations of an oppressed community. Black novels portray the ultimate concerns of the black community. The female narratives used in this study reflect all these characteristics.”
Williams contends that Black women experienced an assault upon their reproductive and nurturing functions and that one does not have to read far into Hurston’s, Margaret Walker’s, or Alice Walker’s narratives before encountering this assault. This offense began with the white slave master’s oppression of helpless slave women and continued with Black men’s treatment of Black women. Ironically and sadly, Black men used the same oppressive tools that were used against them:

“When Hetta 84 came to the plantation—a ‘gift’ to Dutton from his father—she was well-built, high spirited, and graceful like a queen. But to be useful to John Dutton, her spirit had to be broken...Master Dutton attempted to break Hetta’s spirit by constantly raping and impregnating her.” Additionally, this learned behavior was exhibited in the great penalty Black women paid if they did not produce: “Just as slave masters seriously punished the black woman who refused to be a breeder, the black husband often resorted to the lash if he did not receive ‘the first fruits’ of the black woman’s nurturing efforts.” 85

White women were also complicit in these assaults upon Black women. Black women were expected to raise White women’s children,

Like Alice Walker’s Sofia, 86 Margaret Walker’s Vyry goes to the Big House at an early age to care for the slave owner’s children. Vyry is supervised by Big Missy, the slave master’s cruel wife who hates Vyry because Vyry is the daughter of the slave master and the slave woman Sis Hetta “and once after severely punishing Vyry for forgetting to change the chamber pot, said, ‘There you lazy nigger that’ll teach you to keep your mind on what you’re doing. Don’t you let me have to tell you another time about this pot or I’ll half-kill you, do you hear me?’ Vyry was seven years old” (No 1985, 62). Such experiences stripped the nurturing self from the Black woman, forced to care for the children of her abusive slave master, and forced to give birth as a result of rape and sexual assault. As a result of this oppressive treatment, “This continual

84 Hetta and John Dutton are characters in Margaret Walker’s Jubilee (New York: Bantam Books, 1996).
violence, physical and psychological, destroyed the bodies and spirits of many black women.\(^{87}\)

Black women experience other assaults on their psychological and physical well-being. Black women experience a harsher assault to the self,

One of the most painful aspects of black women’s oppression reflected in the narratives...is the undermining of black women’s self-esteem. Anglo-American standards of feminine beauty become the norm in the black as well as white community. Both white and black people use these alien aesthetic criteria to judge the black woman’s beauty and value.\(^{88}\)

Blacks face the unbearable reality that the depiction of beauty is portrayed as the White woman; long flowing lighter tinted hair, blue, green or hazel eyes, and white complexion. The characteristics of beauty were exemplified by everything the Black woman did not possess; leaving the self-deprecating truth that what the Black woman portrays is ugly and grotesque. Williams traces this oppression in the religious narratives:

In Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*, the protagonist, Celie, is constantly told she is skinny, black, and ugly. She is of no value except as a “workhorse” to clean her husband’s house, work in his fields and care for her stepchildren. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston writes that black men give preferential treatment to those black women who most closely resemble white women. Thus Janie Starks, the female protagonist, is treated well by men because her hair feels like the underside of a dove. Other darker and more negroid women are valued far less. In Margaret Walker’s *Jubilee*, Vyry, the main black character, has white skin and blue-grey eyes...She eats better food than field slaves because she has access to the food from the slave owner’s table.\(^{89}\)

\(^{87}\) Williams, “Women's Oppression and Lifeline Politics,” 62.

\(^{88}\) Ibid.

\(^{89}\) Ibid., 62-63.
Value is placed upon a skin color most black women do not have and a quality of hair most Black women will never have; those who have the right skin color and quality of hair receive favoritism. Black women internalize this value and it negatively affects their self-esteem: “…the black woman’s subjection and internalization of this standard [and resultant inequitable treatment] ultimately undermines her sanity.”

Unfortunately, black women are still pondering this question: “Is it possible to be black, beautiful, woman and a human being at the commencement of the 21st century?” Black women’s identity as human, as images of God, makes their own and their community’s survival a virtue, an ethical imperative. By exercising moral agency, black women honor their own human dignity as human beings made in the image of God. Black theology did not afford an opportunity for Black Women to do this fully. Anderson, although not the first, questions “the reduction of Black life to blackness; to think so is to dismiss Womanist scholarship among other subversive discourses.”

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90 Ibid., 63.
91 Sheppard, Self, Culture, and Others in Womanist Practical Theology, Preface.
92 Teel, Racism and the Image of God, 73.
93 Pinn, “"Black Is, Black Ain't"," 55.
Womanist Theological Aesthetics

Theological aesthetics is a growing area in contemporary theology; theologians working on theological aesthetics construct a conversation or particular theological style grounded in their concern for beauty. ⁹⁴ An emphasis on the aesthetic is grounded in the belief that within the realm of symbol, imagination, emotion, and art, one finds a privileged expression of the encounter with the Divine and its articulation. ⁹⁵ As Gonzalez observes,

> The body is both vilified and glorified within the Christian tradition. When it is vilified, however, it is most often linked to women. The ambiguity surrounding the body mirrors, in many ways, the ambiguous views of women throughout Christian theology, where they are both celebrated and disparaged. ⁹⁶

How do womanist theologians answer the question about the body and the image of God? Womanism has embarked upon this area of scholarship. Teel endeavors a beginning by examining prominent theologians in womanist and Black theology. Womanist theologians consider theologically the intertwining factors of race, gender, class, and other factors—including but not limited to sexual orientation, age, and disability—as they have functioned to oppress black women. ⁹⁷ For Douglas,

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⁹⁴ See Richard Viladesau, *Theological Aesthetics: God in Imagination, Beauty, and Art*. Theological aesthetics holds that in the encounter with beauty there is an experience of the Divine. “What is meant by theological aesthetics’ in its wide sense is the practice of theology, conceived in religion, and theology in relation to sensible knowledge (sensation, imagination, feeling), the beautiful, the arts. p. 95


⁹⁶ Ibid., 101.

although every person is created in the image of God, not everyone manifests that image well. To manifest the image of God means to practice agape: “an active love, the giving of oneself for the sake of justice and the building of an authentically human (loving) community.”

However, there is substantially more exploration, consideration, and research to be done.

This dissertation explores the works of two scholars, Townes and Copeland, to glean what implications for womanist theological aesthetics emerge. In chapter one, I strive to answer how a womanist theological aesthetics can give voice to the divine Beauty radiating from the African American community. I begin with a working definition of Beauty. Then I embark upon a discussion of justice and beauty, my focal points for a liberative womanist theological aesthetics. With this foundation, I engage two prolific and prophetic theologians—M. Shawn Copeland and Emilie M. Townes to unearth implications for theological aesthetics from Copeland’s anthropology and Townes’ ethics.

In chapter two, I introduce M. Shawn Copeland. I journey through the formative elements of her life that influences her theological thought. Additionally, I engage Copeland’s womanist thought by outlining her theology of suffering and womanist spirituality. I conclude by providing an extensive discussion on Copeland’s theological anthropology. Her scholarship informs my thoughts on Beauty with the offering of Eucharistic solidarity.

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In chapter three, I introduce Emilie M. Townes. Similarly, I journey through the formative elements of her life that influences her theological thought. Townes’ family and the Black church and community were integral shapers of her prophetic voice. Offering a lens into Townes’ womanist voice. I outline Townes’ womanist spirituality and discuss her theological ethics. Understanding Townes’ womanist lens on theological ethics provides foundation before engaging Townes’ indictment on the hegemonic imagination that created a cultural production of evil for African American women.

In chapter four, I engage several black images and archetypes created by White dominant culture in an effort to dehumanize, redefine and oppress African American women. Archetypes like The Mammy, Tragic Mulatta or Sapphire have negatively caricatured Black women and informed racist and sexist social policy and ideology that oppress and stigmatize. Leveraging Townes’ engagement of countermemory, I lift a justice voice that informs my exploration of a budding womanist theological aesthetics.

I conclude with implications I glean from Copeland and Townes. The exploration of these two great minds and their scholarship unearthed valuable nuggets for developing a womanist theological aesthetics. Black woman personhood has been viciously assaulted since the advent of slavery in the United States. My womanist focus is righting this wrong. I assert that a fully developed womanist theology engaging prominent womanist scholars like Townes and Copeland is necessary in asserting a liberative theology for the defense of the human dignity and
personhood of Black women. This dissertation begins the journey of that formulation and deepens my interest in the Black woman personhood.
Chapter 1: Theological Aesthetics

I have not encountered a robust formulation of theological aesthetics in the context of Black or womanist theologies. Certainly, these contextual theologies incorporate aesthetic sources, for example, Black literature, spirituals, Black culture. Moreover, there are liberation theologies that tackle human dignity and affirming personhood of those from marginalized communities. However, an arena of scholarship on a focused womanist theological aesthetics is still emerging. I view this as an untapped well needing to be explored. The importance of this exploration does not rest in the need to develop more scholarship but the liberative goal of giving voice to the divine beauty radiating from the African American community—the Black woman.

How can womanist theological aesthetics accomplish this? I endeavor to respond to this question in this dissertation. First, let me provide a working definition of theological aesthetics. An accepted definition of theological aesthetics is “Theological aesthetics holds that in the encounter with Beauty there is an experience of the Divine. An emphasis on the aesthetics is based on the belief that within the realm of symbol, imagination, emotion, and art, one finds a privileged expression of the encounter with the Divine and its articulation.”¹ This area of scholarship is still very much emerging. Moreover, the area in which I am mostly interested, the

exploration and theological formulation of beauty and justice in theological aesthetics in the context of womanism, is understudied and minimally discussed.

The maltreatment of Black woman personhood and the stronghold of negative imagery and stereotypes plague African American women and threaten the affirmation of their humanity. Negative imagery to oppress, redefine and marginalize African American female beauty and justify the injustices perpetrated, screams for a liberative theological aesthetics in contemporary theology.

During my doctoral studies, I embarked upon a class, *Latino/a Theology*. In this class, I encountered provocative readings. It further educated me on a theology about which I was knowledgeable and introduced me to scholarship with which I was unfamiliar, namely, theological aesthetics. The book, *Sor Juana: Beauty and Justice in the Americas*\(^2\), authored by Dr. Michelle A. Gonzalez, piqued my interest on many levels. Michelle A. Gonzalez\(^3\) presents a study on an unknown figure to me, Sor Juana, while outlining her liberation theology. Woven in that discussion was my discovery of theological aesthetics that generated this wondering within. It was the


\(^3\) Dr. Michelle A. Gonzalez (Michelle Gonzalez Maldonado) is Associate Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Miami. She received her Ph.D. in Systematic and Philosophical Theology at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California in 2001. Her research and teaching interests include Latino/a, Latin American, and Feminist Theologies, as well as inter-disciplinary work in Afro-Caribbean Studies. She is the author of Sor Juana: Beauty and Justice in the Americas (Orbis Books, 2003), Afro-Cuban Theology: Religion, Race, Culture and Identity (University Press of Florida, 2006), Created in God’s Image: An Introduction to Feminist Theological Anthropology (Orbis Books, 2007), Embracing Latina Spirituality: A Woman’s Perspective (St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2009), Caribbean Religious History (co-authored with Ennis Edmonds, NYU Press, 2010) and Shopping: Christian Explorations of Daily Living (Fortress Press, 2010).
beginning of my interest of developing an aesthetical lens on my womanism, particularly focusing on beauty and justice. Gonzalez’s approach provides an entry point to what has become my dissertation focus.

Gonzalez is a theologian focused on Latino/a and Feminist Theologies. Gonzalez’s research and teaching interests include Latino/a, Latin American, and Feminist Theologies, as well as inter-disciplinary work in Afro-Caribbean Studies. Here inter-disciplinary work in Afro-Caribbean studies is evident in Sor Juana. The cross section of feminist theology, Latino/a theology and her exploration in Afro-centric theological thought as she engages theological aesthetics, I believe is the compelling draw for me to her work. I can see implications and connections to a womanist theological aesthetics. Her work certainly awakened my interest in area. Her book, Sor Juana, informs my understanding of theological aesthetics; it becomes the launching point for my examination of justice and Beauty within a womanist theological aesthetics.

She proposes a perspective on theological aesthetics that resonates with my theological thought. In Sor Juana, Gonzalez analyzes the works of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, a seventeenth-century Mexican nun, considered a compelling and prolific writer in defense of the rights and dignity of women, making her a pioneer during her time. What I seek to leverage from Gonzalez is how she combines aesthetics with the quest for truth and justice. Gonzalez’s work provides insightful foundation as I examine Copeland’s theological anthropology and Townes’ theological ethics for implications of theological aesthetics.
Michelle A. Gonzalez argues, “Aesthetic form is the fullest expression of desire, emotion, and faith, which [some theologians]⁴ see as central both to the theological task and to an understanding of the human. Purely rational concepts are not adequate vehicles for expressing the fullness of the human.”⁵ It provides a framework of viewing liberation and womanist theology and captures the notion of Beauty within it as it defends the human dignity of the African American personhood via justice and truth. Consequently, I deem it necessary and beneficial to provide a summary of Gonzalez’s work in this dissertation.

Gonzalez introduces Sor Juana Inéz de la Cruz’s literary work to the theological community. Sor Juana’s writings posit a theology that not only expounds attributes of God but also addresses questions of beauty and justice with which the contemporary Latino/a community is wrestling. In doing so, her theological perspective offers hope. Sor Juana did not intend to be a theologian. Rather, she intended to capture truth about God’s mindfulness of the oppressed. Gonzalez leverages Sor Juana’s work and interprets a foundational theological aesthetics for her community. This is how contextual theologies are birthed, out of the social location of the community. Gonzalez presents Sor Juana as an integral liberative voice that has been overlooked historically and marginalized in theological scholarship. Gonzalez studies Sor Juana because although “ignored or forgotten by present-day Latin American liberation theology, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz is a

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⁴ Gonzalez refers to María Pilar Aquino, María Clara Bingemer and Ivone Gebara theological perspectives in support of her assertion.
⁵ Gonzalez, Sor Juana, 171.
compelling 17th century Mexican figure whose work offers a significant voice both to the history of Christian thought and to contemporary theology.”

Gonzalez’s study “explores Sor Juana’s theological contribution to theology through her theological aesthetics, an area that has been integral to the task of various liberation theologians for some time now.” Theological aesthetics is an area that is under studied in the Latino/a theology, Black theology and Womanist theology. Gonzalez contends that a comprehensive voice or theology on the role of aesthetics has not emerged from Latino theologians. I would argue that neither has a comprehensive theology on the role of aesthetics emerged from womanist theologians. This is a reason why I find such a strong and viable parallel with Gonzalez’s work and exploration of Sor Juana to my study of Shawn Copeland and Emilie Townes. We both are leveraging the aesthetic voice within their theology to promote conversation in this emerging scholarly area. Latin American theology, liberation theology and Christian theology have merely scratched the surface of discovering the paramount insights Sor Juana’s, Copeland’s and Townes’ scholarship can contribute to this academic area.

Gonzalez unearths interesting insights on beauty and justice and I will present some of those. Gonzalez believes, “The theology of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz offers an avenue for exploring the interrelationship between the True [doctrine], Beauty, and the Good [Justice]. The aesthetic form of her theology places Beauty at the center, though her concern for Justice and Truth also remains a fundamental component of

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6 Gonzalez, Sor Juana, 10.
7 Ibid., 3.
her theology.”

Gonzalez finds that some liberation theologies “explicitly examine the intersection of aesthetics and justice, arguing for the organic unity of the two.” I am not arguing that Copeland or Townes sought to explicitly examine this interrelatedness or argue for their unity. My aim is to investigate the existence of an implicit unity in their womanist theologies and aesthetics. Their theologies certainly champion justice and I observe an experience of the Divine in this justice. Interestingly enough, Gonzalez seeks to elevate the discussion of the Good within theological aesthetics scholarship; conversely, my aim is to elevate Beauty in scholarship on justice and doctrine. Consequently, I assert an emphasis on the Good (justice) and the True (doctrine) does not have to be at the expense of Beauty, and can in fact inform one’s commitment to social justice.

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8 Ibid., 190.
9 Ibid., 154.
10 Ibid., 155. I am looking at the converse of Gonzalez’s argument. Gonzalez states: “A hasty interpretation of aesthetics can lead to perceiving its focus as downplaying or obscuring the significance of ethics and social justice. However, an emphasis on Beauty does not have to be at the expense of the Good [justice], and can in fact inform one’s commitment to social justice.”
Beauty

“Let us rejoice, Beloved, and let us go see ourselves in your Beauty.”

Theological aesthetics holds that in the encounter with Beauty there is an experience of the Divine. An emphasis on the aesthetics is based on the belief that within the realm of symbol, imagination, emotion, and art, one finds a privileged expression of the encounter with the Divine and its articulation. Encountering God can and does happen in community. I favor a theology that casts theological aesthetics in its relationality. Being that womanist theology is a contextual theology—meaning it begins with a particular social location, a community—the communal approach Gonzalez utilizes is viable for my exploration of Copeland and Townes. For me, Beauty is not an individual experience but communal, for we know and image God in context of relationship or relatedness.

Gonzalez interprets from her works that Sor Juana also holds beauty as relational, for it only exists in relationship. Beauty is not found in individuality, but rather in the harmonious relationship of the parts to the whole. Beauty cannot stand alone, but almost always exists in community. Only in beauty and harmony of its parts can the whole be beautiful.

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11 Ibid., 57.
12 This understanding of Beauty connects with classical definitions of Beauty (i.e. Plato’s formulation).
13 Ibid., 13.
14 Ibid., 59.
Description of Beauty

The author analyzes *El Divino Narciso* (The Divine Narcissus), an *auto sacramental* (allegorical drama) written by Sor Juana to expound Beauty. *Auto sacramentals*, a popular genre during Sor Juana’s time, encompassed three significant elements: glorify the Eucharist, performed as a public spectacle, and combat heresy while affirming dogma. In *El Divino Narciso*, Sor Juana affirms Beauty; in fact, she affirms Beauty as being the primary attribute of God.

In *El Divino Narciso*, Sor Juana portrays Christian principles and characters via secular sources; this is illustrated in some of the characters: Gentilidad (Gentile), Sinagoga (Synagogue), Narcissus (Christ), Naturaleza Humana (Human Nature), and Gracia (Grace). In summary, one of the main characters, *Naturaleza Humana*, becomes ugly because of sin. *Naturaleza Humana* embarks upon a journey to discover or encounter Beauty. Eventually, *Naturaleza Humana* discovers a fountain (representative of Mary) that reflects Narciso who has an unparalleled and undeserved Beauty. After having found that Beauty in Narciso, *Naturaleza Humana* names Narciso God. The climax is that Beauty lies in the *imago Dei*.

Gonzalez gleans two significant theological themes from this allegorical drama. One is Sor Juana’s engagement in the perennial debate of the One and the Many, “the act of the individual Narcissus has implications for the many [humanity].”\(^\text{15}\) She extrapolates this from the actions of Narcissus. Narcissus, Son of God, falls in love with himself (the One). However, Narcissus is a part of humanity

\(^{15}\) Ibid., 75.
and in falling in love with himself, falls in love with humanity (the Many). Consequently, Narcissus’ love for himself has implications for humanity. Secondly, the role of theological aesthetics is a significant theme. Within Sor Juana’s theology, the reader ascertains that Narcissus is Beauty, not a mere reflection of it. In the drama, the *imago Dei* is defined as Beauty and humanity’s Beauty is the gift of God’s *Gracia* (grace). The aesthetics are spotlighted in the function of the fountain and water through which the divine is revealed and Beauty is reflected in creation.

The affirmation of human dignity of the marginalized and oppressed is a fundamental theological element of liberation theology. Sor Juana’s incorporation of aesthetics in her theology masterfully narrates the beautiful and glorious relationship between creation and its creator: humanity and God. A reminder of the image of God within every member of society, regardless of race, culture, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual identification, gender, mental or physical ability, she argues for the equitable treatment of all people because all bear the imprint of God. Persons of color do not simply reflect Beauty, they bear the *imago Dei* and therefore Beauty.

I especially appreciate the discussion on theological aesthetics and the invaluable insights it offers liberation theology. The marvel of theological aesthetics is that one can explore non-traditional sources to explicate theology. It provides an avenue to re-read theology through a liberative lens utilizing all the elements of culture that are the contextual focus of liberative theology. Liberation theology is a contextual theology and theological aesthetics allows scholars to bring to bear the comprehensive elements of culture being studied from its specific context. It
underscores the cultural diversities and particularities of the marginalized and oppressed that, oftentimes, the dominant culture disregards, negatively judges and does not view of value. The essence of a person and her culture is meaningful, in fact, foundational when seen through the theological aesthetic lens. How awesome it is to bring all of whom a people are and their comprehensive voice into their story. Their voice, then, speaks prophetically, compassionately and authentically when examining how they articulate who God is and who they are in relation to God. This understanding beautifully informs their relationality with God and humanity. Out of this relationality and prophetic voice, a womanist theological aesthetics is formulated.

Traditionally, Black theology and womanist theology engage literature from Black artists like Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, and James Baldwin. A powerful element of Black theology is the incorporation of slave narratives and the soul of Negro spirituals. These also become valuable sources for womanist theological aesthetics. As this scholarship arena of theological aesthetics matures, there is an opportunity and opening for non-traditional sources like the Black woman images archetypes Emilie Townes interrogates (discussed in chapter five), the Black sermon, or the Eucharist (discussed in chapter three) to inform its formulation. I argue that the Eucharistic solidarity—leveraging Shawn Copeland—can be a non-traditional source of this emerging contextual theology, womanist theological aesthetics. This is the journey upon which I embark in this dissertation.
**Beauty and Black Womanhood**

One of the concepts I appreciate about Gonzalez’s work on aesthetics is that beauty is relational. Gonzalez concludes, “Sor Juana also holds beauty as relational, for it only exists in relationship. Beauty is not found in individuality, but rather in the harmonious relationship of the parts to the whole. Beauty cannot stand alone, but almost always exists in community. Only in beauty and harmony of its parts can the whole be beautiful.”¹⁶ Beauty being relational connects well with a foundational principle in Black and womanist theologies inherited from our African heritage. Desmond Tutu states, “One of the sayings in our country is Ubuntu – the essence of being human. Ubuntu speaks particularly about the fact that you can’t exist as a human being in isolation. It speaks about our interconnectedness. You can’t be human all by yourself, and when you have this quality – Ubuntu – you are known for your generosity. We think of ourselves far too frequently as just individuals, separated from one another, whereas you are connected and what you do affects the whole World. When you do well, it spreads out; it is for the whole of humanity.”¹⁷ The communal philosophy of liberation theology is a cherished touchstone and is

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¹⁶ Ibid., 59.

encapsulated in this Ubuntu\textsuperscript{18} proverb, “I am what I am because of who we all are.”\textsuperscript{19} The individual becomes—is affirmed—because of who he or she is in the community and because of who the community is with and among the individual. The community takes on the responsibility of nurturing each individual and in the building of the individual, the community is also given identity and strengthened. Desmond Tutu reminds us, “A person with Ubuntu is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, based from a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed.”\textsuperscript{20}

\textsuperscript{18} The word ‘Ubuntu’ originates from one of the \textit{Bantu dialects of Africa}, and is pronounced as uu-Boon-too. It is a traditional African philosophy that offers us an understanding of ourselves in relation with the world. According to Ubuntu, \textit{there exists a common bond between us all and it is through this bond, through our interaction with our fellow human beings, that we discover our own human qualities}. Or as the Zulus would say, “Umuntu Ngumuntu Ngabantu”, which means that a person is a person through other persons. We affirm our humanity when we acknowledge that of others. The South African Nobel Laureate Archbishop Desmond Tutu describes Ubuntu as:

\begin{quote}
‘It is the essence of being human. It speaks of the fact that my humanity is caught up and is inextricably bound up in yours. I am human because I belong. It speaks about wholeness, it speaks about compassion. A person with Ubuntu is welcoming, hospitable, warm and generous, willing to share. Such people are open and available to others, willing to be vulnerable, affirming of others, do not feel threatened that others are able and good, for they have a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that they belong in a greater whole. They know that they are diminished when others are humiliated, diminished when others are oppressed, diminished when others are treated as if they were less than who they are. The quality of Ubuntu gives people resilience, enabling them to survive and emerge still human despite all efforts to dehumanize them.’
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\textsuperscript{19} https://motivationinspirationandlife.wordpress.com/2012/06/02/ubuntu-i-am-what-i-am-because-of-who-we-all-are/ accessed on September 8, 2016.

\textsuperscript{20} https://motivationinspirationandlife.wordpress.com/2012/06/02/ubuntu-i-am-what-i-am-because-of-who-we-all-are/ accessed on September 8, 2016.
Most womanist scholars underscore community as they focus on the human dignity of the African American woman and challenge sexism, racism, classism and hetero-normativity, that strive to demean Black woman personhood. As womanists defend and highlight African American women, most are intentional in formulating theology that is not to be understood or intended to attack, demote or emasculate the Black male. Moreover, womanist scholars understand and affirm equal and equitable contribution of the Black woman within the Black community as a strength and, quite frankly, a necessity for the health of the community. When an individual in God’s tapestry labeled as community is marginalized and oppressed—particularly on the sole basis of the precious and admirable innate characteristics of her embodiment—it not only weakens the individual but equally the entirety of the community. The disregard of the African American woman stains and discolors the Beauty of the community.

Another compelling and connecting point of Gonzalez’s work with my focus on womanist theological aesthetics is the embodiment of divine Beauty. Gonzalez proposes a second theme related to aesthetics found in Sor Juana’s work, “The second significant theme is the role of theological aesthetics in Sor Juana’s play. As the embodiment of divine beauty, Narcissus is Beauty, not a mere reflection of Beauty. [Sor Juana’s play] affirms beauty as the primary attribute of God. In a similar vein, as created in the image of God, Human Nature also embodies this beauty. The *imago Dei* is defined as Beauty, the incarnation a result of love and attraction...Humanity’s
beauty, however, is only complete with the Grace of God. It is only with the gift of God’s grace that humanity’s beauty fully comes forth.”

Both Copeland and Townes profoundly address how oppression, slavery and racism have relentlessly endeavored to distort, stigmatize and demean the image of the Black woman and Black womanhood. Townes’s and Copeland’s theological anthropologies present legitimate, irrefutable and scholarly theology in defense of the divine and natural beauty of the Black woman. “Beauty—the glory of God is beauty. God is Beauty. Humanity bears the imprint of God imago Dei and therefore embodies beauty. Beauty is relational one to many...the beauty within humanity is the affirmation of the imago Dei in all of humanity. The Christological implications speak to aesthetics and beauty.” The Beauty in the human race is only manifested when the Beauty of Black woman personhood is respected, affirmed and cherished. My challenge to racism and sexism is how can the church—the gathered community, that is the body of Christ—be whole, healthy and imbued with the shining glory of God when the Beauty of the Black woman is ostracized and not recognized.

When I speak about Beauty, I speak of divine Beauty as I have defined earlier. In this argument, we must be mindful of not bringing into the conversation the contemporary understanding of beauty. The contemporary infatuation of beauty has humanity focused on cosmetic body image characteristics—flawless complexion, ideal body weight or pristine body measurement—defined by white privilege in the dominant culture, albeit arbitrarily. Their perceived dominance has allowed them to

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21 Gonzalez, Sor Juana, 75.
22 Ibid., 85.
take ownership of defining what is enticing and appealing to the human eye and
crowing it as beauty. This is and should not be our theological understanding of
Beauty. Gonzalez captures this ideological perspective from Aquinas on Beauty. In
this study, my focus is to affirm that God intends for Black womanhood to become
beautiful and that we are shaped in the fullness of divine beauty. Gonzalez writes:

Aquinas, in his commentary on the Divine Names of Pseudo-Dionysius,
claims that divine beauty is the motive of creation. Because God loves
the divine beauty, God wishes to share it as much as possible by
communicating this likeness to creatures. God is the cause of their
radiance. Each form imparted to a creature is a beautifying
participation in the divine radiance; and since being (ease) comes from
form, Aquinas affirms that beauty is the course of the existence of all
things. Out of love for divine beauty God gives existence to everything,
and moves and conserves everything. God has created the universe to
make it beautiful for God’s self by reflecting this same beauty. God,
Beauty Itself, intends everything to become beautiful in the fullness of
the divine beauty.\(^23\)

Gonzalez assesses, “While employing aesthetic sources in their theologies,
womanist theologians are aware of the manner in which aesthetics can be oppressive.
Beauty is ambiguous, for it can be used to marginalize and silence. For African-
Americans, unrealistic beauty standards are linked to esteem issues within the Black
community...”\(^24\) Certainly, womanist scholars understand and deal with image and
the Black body. The bodies of Black women, during slavery, were abused, sexually
assaulted, and mutilated producing devastating generational psychological, spiritual
and emotional damage to the healthy affirmation of Black beauty. The centuries of
violence perpetrated on the Black female body unearthed the harrowing question as

\(^23\) Ibid., 156-7. Quotes John Navone, Toward a Theology of Beauty (Collegeville, MN: The
\(^24\) Ibid., 175.
to whether her body is human or property. The oppressor believed her body was property to be disposed of, at will, as he earthly decided. Her body was not recognized as humanity that is cherished by her divine Creator. The oppressor attempted to annihilate the notion of humanity by every whip, lashing and rape. However, black female bodies endured; the Beauty within could not be stamped out or eradicated. The African American community, along with liberation theologians, knows “Worldly beauty can never be equated with Beauty, aesthetics with aestheticism.”

In *Sor Juana*, Gonzalez draws a poignant and relevant conclusion, “…theological aesthetics redefines how one can speak authentically about the religious dimension of humanity.” Both Townes and Copeland address humanity and human dignity of African American women. Copeland, for example, in her article addressing race and aesthetics, says, “I should like to try and say something from the point of view of a political theologian about race, racism, and Catholic Social Teaching…in replying to the question ‘Who can tell me what beauty is?’ I answer that beauty is consonant with performance—that is, with ethical and moral behavior, with habit or virtue. In other words, beauty is the *living up to and living out* [sic] the love and summons of creation in all our particularity and specificity as God’s human creatures.” While not explicitly stated, I hear overtones of justice in Copeland’s

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25 When “Beauty” is capitalized it signifies that Michelle Gonzalez or I is referring to divine beauty and the deity, God.
26 Ibid., 175-6.
27 Ibid., 183.
answer. I seek to explore Copeland’s and Townes’ theologies to glean implications for theological aesthetics. I believe their work can contribute integral dimensions to the conversation on Black woman personhood.

A painful exemplar of the problematic ways the dominant culture mistreats and maligns African American personhood, imagery and beauty, is the criticism of Gabby Douglas’ hair during her historic Olympic performance in 2012. The Huffington Post writes,

“It’s still shocking that while [Gabby] Douglas\(^{30}\) was busy rewriting Olympic history and making the country proud, a string of negative Twitter comments about her “unkempt” hair stole the spotlight. Some are blaming the media for that shift in focus to Douglas’ hair, while others see the story as a segue into a much broader subject: black women’s hair...Black women’s hair has always been a hot (and often, touchy) topic—inspiring documentaries, books, movements, and full-blown debates. So it’s no surprise that after Douglas’ meteoric rise to the public eye, opinions of her hair would be shared via social media outlets and beyond. However, the problem lies in the fact that those comments have somehow out-shined the Olympian’s gold medals.”\(^{31}\)

Rather than congratulating Douglas on her Olympic accomplishments and celebrating the history-making to which they were present, some in the dominant culture criticized and maligned an African American gymnast accusing her of having

\(^{30}\) Gabrielle Douglas is a US Women’s Artistic gymnast. At the 2012 London Summer Olympics, she won gold medals in both the team and individual all-around competitions. Gabrielle is the first woman of color of any nationality and the first African-American gymnast in Olympic history to become the Individual All-Around Champion. She is also the first American gymnast to win gold in both the gymnastic individual all-around and team competitions at the same Olympic games (accessed September 21, 2016), http://gabrielledouglas.com/biography

“unkempt” hair—a hugely racially loaded and latent descriptive. Not only was this a rejection of the style, consistency and texture of the hair of persons of African descent, but it was also an attempt to marginalize this great gymnast through the dog whistle of inadequacy. As talented as she was, she did not bear the hallmarks of white, European, American culture—i.e., the flowing, silky blonde coif of hair. The insult was meant to undermine her achievement and put her in her appropriate place.

Stories like this—the ugliness of racism—both anger and motivate me. They are what make this not just an academic exercise but a passion and meaningful exploration for me. The intersection of beauty and justice in theological aesthetics is a great vehicle to challenge the stigma around images of African American women and the God-given beauty of the African American female. Copeland offers some insights on this problematic area when she addresses race and challenges racism. Copeland explains, “Although race cannot be explained as an objective condition, in racist culture this idea remains. Insisting on the empirical aspect of race, racist culture requires racial apprehension, conception, and judgment of each human being. Each human being is reduced to biological physiognomy; innocuous physical traits—skin color, hair texture, shape of body, head, facial features, blood traits—identified, ordered, exaggerated, evaluated...Finally, in this arrangement one racial group is contrived as ‘the measure of human being’ and deemed normative.”³² Douglas suffered from this prejudice as America had their portrait of the model gymnast and Douglas’ skin color and hair texture did not conform. Consequently, they criticized

her appearance (that only fell short in their prejudiced mindset) rather than celebrated her historic accomplishments and medals won.
The discussion of humanity is an ongoing conversation in Black theology. While enslaved in the United States, the bodies of Africans were regarded as property rather than human. Treated like property, bodies of enslaved Africans were traded, inspected, whipped, raped and discarded. After centuries of blatant disregard and abuse, Black bodies were viewed as inhumane and evil by White slave holders. Today, centuries after institutionalized slavery, men and women of the African diaspora still struggle against prejudices and racism and the rejection of affirming the humanity of Black bodies.

Fortunately, we have prophetic scholars speaking and writing on behalf of the humanity and liberation of African Americans who suffered under racism. Dr. M.

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Shawn Copeland is one of those prolific scholars. When I encountered Copeland’s voice on behalf of the humanity of Black women, I encountered a powerful theological formulation challenging racism, sexism, classism and heterosexism. In this chapter, I briefly outline Copeland’s life journey, focusing on formative elements that inform her scholarship. Then I present her theological thought regarding suffering from a womanist perspective. This sets the stage for my primary focus, Copeland’s theological anthropology. In some detail, I present Copeland’s theological anthropology and any gleanings or insights for my exploration of a womanist theological aesthetics.

Dr. M. Shawn Copeland is Professor of Systematic Theology at Boston College. She began at Boston College in 2003. Prior to Boston College, Copeland was Associate Professor of Systematic Theology at Marquette University commencing in 1994; from 1989 to 1994, she taught at Yale University Divinity School. Additionally during 1994 to 2005, she taught systematic theology regularly in the degree program at the Institute for Black Catholic Studies, Xavier University of Louisiana, New Orleans. Copeland lectures frequently on college and university campuses on topics related to theological anthropology, political theology, social suffering, gender and race.² Copeland’s lecture on King’s activism, his pursuit of “the beloved community,” demonstrating a concrete realization of the Catholic notion of the Mystical Body of

Christ is an exemplar of her anthropological perspective. M. Shawn Copeland earned a Ph.D. in 1991 from Boston College/Andover Newton Theological School in Systematic Theology with a dissertation on the notion of the human good in the thought of theologian and philosopher Bernard Lonergan.

Copeland is an elected member of the Society for the Study of Black Religion (SSBR) and the Society for Values in Higher Education (SCHE). She has been recognized for her theological scholarship by Barry University with the Yves Congar Award for Excellence in Theology, and for her advocacy by the Black Women’s Community Development Foundation with the Sojourner Truth Award. Copeland is also a former convener of the Black Catholic Theological Symposium (BCTS), an interdisciplinary learned association of Black Catholic scholars, and a former president of the Catholic Theological Society of America (CTSA), the primary professional association of Catholic theologians in the United States and Canada.

Dr. Copeland is a prominent theologian making scholarly contributions particularly in theological anthropology and womanist theology. Being a theologian is a vocation not a profession, according to Copeland. This mindset undergirds her research, writing and theological thought. “The phrase *vocation,*” she says, “signals that our theological work, our theological lives are not so much about careerism, upward mobility, but they are about a response to the word made flesh.”

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In an interview, Copeland shared a little about her personal self. Probably since she was 12 years old, Copeland says her theological concerns centered around theological anthropology, that is, what does it mean to be human? She recalls that her first question about this was when she was in the seventh grade and wanted to go to summer school because she had nothing else to do. She wanted to learn French and study world history. During that summer, she learned about Shoah, and it struck her quite forcibly that people who have a great disregard for human life: if they can stigmatize you and identify you and if they are in charge, they can make laws which can eradicate you.\footnote{Ibid.}

Copeland is an only child. She is single and a former nun. Copeland grew up in Detroit, Michigan where she was educated in parochial and private schools. Copeland believes, “What it means to be a human is extraordinarily important in our society, and I think African Americans struggle with this question on a daily basis...So I think the different presentation or the diverse presentation of God's human creation is a real concern. And in that sense, what theology is and how I am a theologian has a lot to do with the person who I am.”\footnote{Ibid.}
Catholic Roots

Dr. Copland’s Catholic roots are dear to her and inform her scholarship. Copeland is a prophetic voice in the Catholic faith tradition with a provocative and systematic liberative lens. As a systematic theologian, Copeland contributes ground-breaking scholarship in the area of theological anthropology. Her focus on the Black body, particularly the black female body is foundational and will be examined in this dissertation.

When Copeland was asked what her Catholic faith means to her personally, her answer emphasized her love and commitment to her faith, “I can’t imagine myself any other way. I can’t imagine not being Catholic. And I don’t want to imagine it. I really don’t. It’s part of who I am.” While having a deep love for the Catholic Church, Copeland dutifully and with integrity critiques the Catholic Church. Not as a means to tear it down, but in her hope that it becomes the “mystical body of Christ.” Copeland admits, “I know our church is not perfect. It’s deeply flawed in some ways, but there is something about it that I’m not willing to let go of, and I demand that it hold [sic] me.” Recognizing and writing about the imperfections of the Church does not prevent Copeland from maintaining hope in the vision of the Church. Copeland exclaims, “I don’t think the church exhausts God in any way, and I don’t think it exhausts even the Body of Christ, but I do think it has a power for good that is

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7 Ibid.
wholesome. I love the mystery of the church, the sacramental life of the church, and
to me that means that God is holding it in some way."\(^8\)

I view Copeland as a twenty-first century reformer. She does not self-identify as a reformer in any of her works I have examined; however, her writings are akin to the works of the Catholic reformers in centuries past. One that comes to mind is Teresa of Avila.\(^9\) Teresa was born in the sixteenth century during a time when a Christian revival occurred through varied religious reformation. Admittedly, historians looking back have labeled this as a period of reformation. For some reformers, reformation or counter-reformation was not their aim. Rather, their aim was to write faithfully their interpretation of the faith.

The Protestant Reformation sent shock waves through the Catholic Church. A Catholic revival was birthed and Teresa of Avila was a major figure in this revival. Catholic revival was characterized in some ways by a new flowering of mystical piety. The chief trait of this spirituality included self-renouncing quietism, whereby the soul is raised in contemplation and voiceless prayer to God until a union in divine love or in ecstasy of inner revelation is attained. Teresa de Jesús of Avila (1515-1582) is one of the best-known figures to represent this form of spirituality. Although Teresa was a member of a contemplative order – the Carmelites – Teresa provides an example of

\(^8\) Ibid.

\(^9\) Teresa Sanchez Cepeda Davila y Ahumada Born at Avila, Old Castile, 28 March, 1515; died at Alba de Tormes, 4 Oct., 1582. The third child of Don Alonso Sanchez de Cepeda by his second wife, Doña Beatriz Davila y Ahumada, who died when the saint was in her fourteenth year, Teresa was brought up by her saintly father, a lover of serious books, and a tender and pious mother.
the joining of the contemplative life with the active life. She, among a few others, initiated reform of the Carmelite order in Spain.

Similarly, Copeland is ushering in a revival in the Catholic Church. Her work in womanist and liberation theology gives voice to the marginalized community and theology within the Catholic Church. Moreover, Copeland challenges classic Catholic theology that esteems whiteness, maleness and heterosexuality. Copeland, also a former member of a contemplative order, joins the contemplative life with the active life.

Copeland critiques the Catholic Church on its complicity in structural racism. During an interview, Copeland was asked about her assessment on the Church tackling “structural racism.” Copeland declares what tackling structural racism in the Catholic Church means to her,

If you want to talk about structural racism from a Catholic perspective, I would ask, what are we doing with our Catholic schools? Today [in 2009] there’s only one Catholic high school in the city of Detroit. So I’d want them to think about that. And when did Catholic schools become reserved only for Catholics? What happened to the drive to evangelize through Catholic education that I experienced when I was in grade school? If you want to change structures, you have to change people because people are responsible for creating the structures. Structures don’t just spring up out of nothing.10

One of the contributors to this structural racism is the ineffective way the Church has approached racial diversity. When addressing the failure of imagination in the Church’s approach to racial diversity, Copeland asserts,

“Fundamentally it is about seeing different people and listening to different voices. If we think of ourselves as a universal church, we can’t be a uniform church. We need to become more open to the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is

10 “Dream On,” 5.
never selective about race. We are. The Holy Spirit is never selective about gender. We are. The Holy Spirit is never selective about sexual orientation. We are. These are our limitations, not God’s limitations. Our lack of imagination is another main reason why we don’t have more black priests, bishops, or vowed religious today.”

Perhaps the failure in imagination led Copeland to leave the religious community. I have not read where Copeland draws this direct correlation. Rather, I am left wondering based upon her comment, “I used to be in a religious community, and I remember going to church in my habit. I was standing there waiting for the priest to give me Communion, and he was just staring at me because I was a new sight for him. He just didn’t know how to deal with a black nun.” Certainly, the unfamiliarity of this priest with black nuns and Copeland’s communion experience left an indelible impression. That experience must have been a stark contrast to the formative experiences Copeland remembers from her childhood in her parish. “When I was a child, we had a black priest in our parish, a Spiritan. He was a young, energetic, and vibrant priest who was fun to be around. There was this natural interest in him in our community, and our parents had an immediate connection with him. People were able to relate to him as a human being, and that helped us experience the church as an extension of our family. That personal connection nurtured black people’s desire for participation in the church. Today very few black Catholics have that opportunity.”

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11 Ibid., 6-7.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
I imagine positive and nurturing moments like the aforementioned helped young Copeland imagine a vocation in the Catholic Church. Unfortunately, the challenge in realizing and embracing racial diversity has overshadowed the imagination for African Americans. Copeland admonishes, “We want young [African American children] to be able to become anything they want to be. We want them to be firefighters...letter carriers and businesspeople and police officers. And, yes, we want them to be president. And if we want them to be priests or sisters, we’ve got to help them imagine it.”

Margot Patterson asked Copeland, “Is there a sense in which black Catholics feel that they are not truly integrated or accepted into the church?” To which Copeland responds, “You’d have to look at the number of black Catholic priests. You’d have to look at the number of black Catholic religious women. You’d have to ask about the presence of the church in inner city areas. Those kinds of gestures and those kinds of proactive actions—recruiting priests, recruiting women for religious life—would reflect whether or not black Catholics were integrated into the U.S. Catholic Church. I would have to say that historically in a certain way, that we are not as a people.”

Despite this challenge, or maybe because of it, Shawn Copeland has remained a faithful member of the Catholic Church and a reformative voice in her beloved faith tradition. I view Copeland’s observations and critiques made out of love and hope for a better Catholic church, a better universal Christian church, a better representation of the body of Christ. Realizing this hope—this vision—requires addressing

14 Ibid.
15 Patterson, “Complete Interview with M. Shawn Copeland,” 2-3.
structural or systemic racism in both the church and the secular space. In doing so, the human dignity of all persons, all whom God has created and proclaimed good, is welcomed, affirmed, respected and loved. Copeland’s landmark work in theological anthropology, particularly, *Enfleshing Freedom*, posits a liberative theology that just might get the church there.

In nurturing her theological vocation, Copeland appeals to the encouraging and poignant words of Catholic theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez, “God is first contemplated when we do God’s will and allow God to reign; only after that do we think about God. To use familiar categories: contemplation and practice together make up a first act; theologizing is a second act. We must first establish ourselves on the terrain of spirituality and practice; only subsequently is it possible to formulate discourse on God in an authentic and respectful way.”  

From Gutiérrez’s sentiments, Copeland concludes that without a life in faith, authentic theology is impossible.

**Shawn Copeland—Black Catholic Theologian**

Copeland is a Black Catholic Theologian. Copeland’s theological framework relies heavily on Bernard Lonergan’s methodological approach. She argues that her theological analysis has “relied on Bernard Lonergan’s methodological proposals, because these can provide a bridge for indigenous peoples, for Latino-, Celtic-, Anglo-

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17 Ibid.
European Americans, for all women and men of good will who want to understand African American efforts toward a Catholic theological mediation from [the African American] perspective. Lonergan’s framework for collaborative creativity is a scaffold for initiating, developing, correcting, and sustaining authentic religious, moral, intellectual, affective, and practical cooperations.”¹⁸

Copeland argues that the role of the Black Catholic theologian is a vital contribution to the Black theology scholarship. In her persuasive essay,¹⁹ Copeland outlines the role of the Black Catholic theologian in today’s context. Copeland begins with a startling and revealing milestone: “For the first time in the history of the Catholic Church in the United States, in the [21st century], there is a cadre of formally educated theologic women and men of African-American descent—canon lawyers, ethicists, moral theologians, historians, religious educators, sociologists and anthropologists of religion, and systematic theologians.”²⁰

Realizing this and comparing Copeland, who is Catholic, and Townes, who is Protestant, this dissertation might give insight to the beginnings of ecumenical dialogue in the theological aesthetics arena. It would be ideal to have continuing

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¹⁹ Copeland notes that “this essay is a revision of the opening address of the 20th annual meeting of the Black Catholic Theological Symposium given in at Lyke House, Atlanta, Georgia, October 8, 2009 and draws on material included in the Parks-King Lecture given at Yale Divinity School, New Haven, Connecticut, on February 24, 2009.”

ecumenical dialogue among the leading Catholic and Protestant theologians to broaden and enrich this scholarship area which remains essentially untapped. Beauty and justice in the African American context are crucial concepts to explore for constructing a liberative theological aesthetic that addresses and speaks to those in the African diaspora. An ecumenical approach would make great strides in unifying the body of Christ and affirming the human dignity of all who bear the *imago Dei*.

The Catholic Church has produced profound and fundamental theology throughout the ages. From the councils of the early church (i.e. Nicea) to Vatican II, foundational theology and doctrine have emerged that have guided the church in its mission and kingdom building. However, it became blatantly and painfully clear that the theological authoritative voice and social location of persons of African descent were absent, marginalized and/or co-opted. African Americans were underrepresented among Catholic theologians and as a result in many ways the voice of Blacks in the Catholic Church was silenced, leaving their oppression and marginalization inadequately critiqued. Upon this recognition, some within the Catholic Church called for and embarked upon a change. Copeland claims that the birth of a group of prominent Black scholars is in response to black Catholic Blessed Sacrament priest and Scripture scholar Joseph Nearon. S.S.S. Nearon “made a study of black theology and prepared a report that proclaimed the ‘absolute necessity [of] a corps of competent black Catholic theologians,’ who would develop a theology accountable to the exigencies of being *black* and *Catholic.*”\(^{21}\) The development of this

\(^{21}\) Ibid., 58.
group and the scholarship produced did not come haphazardly or coincidentally. Rather there are seven factors and forces that shape the scholarly and theological task of formulating Black Catholic theology.  

- **First**, most tenured black Catholic theologians began their graduate studies in the late 1970s and early 1980s, just as the discipline faced up to paradigm change in response to historical, social, and pastoral impulses stirred by the Second Vatican Council.

- **Second**, a theology is not only the product of faith but also of a culture. Catholic theologians are challenged not only to acquire knowledge of the culture(s) in which they live and study, write and teach, but also to acknowledge that there exists a “multiplicity of theologies,” which may express the one faith. I find this factor to greatly influence Copeland’s womanist writings along with Lonergan’s theological perspective.

- **Third**, Christian social ethicist Peter Paris has observed that with the irruption of black theology, “for the first time in the history of religious academe, African Americans [have] a subject matter and a methodological perspective...peculiarly their own and capable of rigorous academic defense.” Sadly, Copeland notes, the subject matter has been accorded “scant attention”

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22 Ibid., 58-62.

23 Copeland notes “between roughly 1930-1950, academic theologians in Europe, particularly in France, began to find neo-Scholastic theology, which had been regnant since Leo XIII’s 1879 promulgation of the encyclical *Aeterni Patris*, incapable of responding to the challenges of encroaching secularization in society.

in Catholic seminaries, and college and university departments of theology. I reflect and recall my own struggle at the Catholic University of America in my doctoral program. Essentially, there are no doctoral classes specifically on this subject matter. However, I am grateful for a wise and lone voice in the person of John T. Ford who provided great exposure to liberation theology in several contexts—Latin American, Hispanic and Black Theology.

- **Fourth**, while ‘the academy’ has become a site of often biting competition for status and prestige, scholars trained in the Humanities are losing the competition to those trained in science, technology, and business. Human persons, Copeland argues, are not reducible to atoms or theorems, to statistics or social problems. Rather, human persons are instances of the intelligible as intelligent in the world, instances of incarnate moral and ethical choice in a world under the influence of sin, yet standing in relation to a field of supernatural grace.25

- **Fifth**, since most black Catholic theologians and scholars have been (and are) trained in European or European-American Catholic educational settings, the exclusion or marginalization of Black Studies in the curriculum may serve to alienate students and faculty of all racial-ethnic backgrounds not only from the fertility of Black Studies but also from the very intellectual ethos of those educational settings.

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• Sixth, nearly all black Catholic theologians and scholars teach or work in predominantly white and white Catholic institutions. In this setting, tokenization and trivialization on racial grounds may be all too commonplace. Copeland concludes this leads to black Catholic theologians and scholars being reduced to a ‘colorful’ and illustrative slice of social location, while [Black scholars’] disciplinary expertise either is diminished and ignored or subordinated to ‘racial incidents.’

• Finally, anti-black racism remains an inescapable and lived reality in the United States, even an inescapable and lived reality of Catholic life. In the United States, either directly or indirectly, racism permeates, deforms, and governs every social, cultural, personal, and even, religious encounter or exchange between radicalized human subjects.

These factors, as identified by Copeland, were the impetus to the birth and founding of a phenomenon group of black Catholic scholars. These factors also inform the work of these scholars as they address oppressive ideology and theology and formulate liberative theology. In the study of Copeland’s work, the reality postulated in the seventh factor is well addressed by Copeland.

Shawn Copeland becomes an integral voice within theology because she contributes scholarship that is a counter voice to oppressive theology. The universal church embodies a diverse congregation. It is not a monolithic country club of members who are heterosexual, white and male. Consequently, a theology that only has this perspective as the foundational definition of humanity limits its contextual
lens and ability to give voice to others who do not embody these preferential characteristics. Some theologians in the Catholic church understood this deficiency and ventured into the arena of Black theology for the well-being of the whole church. Copeland is among those theologians.

The task of black theology is critically important because the health of the Church is at stake. Copeland proposes a provocative litmus test for the condition of the church and our country. “The condition of black people is the condition of our country. To put it differently, black people are like the canary used to test the quality of oxygen in a coal mine. The condition of black people serves as an early warning system, alerting the rest of the country to toxic social policies and programs.”

With the conditions being poor and deteriorating, Copeland sounds the battle horn to awaken the church. “Beset by spreading scandal, repressed in vision, lost in a labyrinth of power, the Big church crashes against its own Mystery, squandering grace; yet down in the underbelly of the kingdom of God, we had better learn compassion and solidarity, creativity and strategy, humility and courage, prayer and fasting.” The role of the black Catholic theologian is to produce a salvific theology that leads to a liberative faith that fully appropriates grace and strengthens the condition of black people thereby improving the health of the church. “Arguably, this entails,” urges Copeland, “the pull and shock of critical interrogation, understanding,

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27 Ibid.
and judgment; moreover, for blacks and for whites, for all of us in this society, this ‘moving’ implies self-reflection, conversion, perhaps, metanoia.\textsuperscript{28}

For Copeland, her theological exploration is not simply an academic aspiration. Rather, she understands this as her vocation. Copeland understands her vocation to not only entail being a theologian but to being a Black Catholic theologian. She views a particularity in this calling. I assert the vocation of the black scholar is formed in the community and keeps him or her grounded in the community out of which the black scholar was produced. Copeland acknowledges, “The black scholar finds the exigencies of her or his vocation in the life and condition of the black community: ‘It is that community through which vocation, purpose, direction, and life itself are most fully known and lived.’”\textsuperscript{29} In conferring all of this, Copeland concludes, “The vocation of the black Catholic theologian and scholar in today’s context is to live a life of critically engaged scholarship, that is, to contest any attempt to domesticate the Gospel, to retrieve the story of Jesus of Nazareth and clarify it as a ‘dangerous memory,’\textsuperscript{30} that is, a memory that makes a demand on us, that refuses to succumb to

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thrall of amnesia, which filters out oppression and social suffering in history and in society.\textsuperscript{31}

M. Shawn Copeland acknowledges being a Black Catholic theologian is her vocation, it is her calling. An element of this vocational call is the prophetic voice of liberation. Copeland asserts, “Above all, the vocation of the black scholar and theologian is to tell the truth especially in uncomfortable settings.”\textsuperscript{32} Copeland appeals to Mari Evans’ charge to black scholars and theologians:

\begin{quote}
Speak the truth to the people.
Talk sense to the people.
Free them with reason.
Free them with honesty.
Free them with Love and Courage and Care.
For their being
Speak the truth to the people
To identify the enemy is to free the mind
Free the mind of the people
Speak to the mind of the people
Speak truth.\textsuperscript{33}
\end{quote}

As she has journeyed in and with this call, Copeland has contributed invaluable scholarship, addressing the historical plight of the African American

\textsuperscript{31} M. Shawn Copeland, “The Role of the Black Catholic Theologian and Scholar in Today’s Context,”, 75.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid.
woman and liberation of the Black female body. I believe the contrast of the welcoming and communal environment she experienced in her formative years in parochial schools—which had Black priests and nuns—and the lack of imagination, diversity and liberation she witnesses and critiques as an adult and eventually theologian in the universal Catholic Church, fuels her passion and motivation to be steadfast in her vocational work. The call is not without sacrifice or cost. Many scholars and theologians (i.e. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Howard Thurman, Maya Angelou, etc) have noted this sentiment in their writings, witnessed this in their lives, and publicly and privately lamented to their God. If black scholars and theologians speak and act and live in truth, then they will pay a price. For there is a price “to [be] paid in devoting disciplined, serious, and imaginative thinking to the condition of black people, in creating and sustaining programs that support authentic liberation, in speaking truth to all people.”34 Copeland does not recount publicly the price she is paying or has paid in being faithful in her liberative and provocative works that powerfully and convincingly speak truth to power.

Understanding Copeland’s formative roots and who she is as a Catholic, African American woman and a Black Catholic Theologian are vital to understanding her work. Liberation theology is a contextual theology that begins and is grounded in the social location of its subject. The social location from which Copeland comes and the social context about which she writes inform her work, fuel her passion and are the foundation of her vocation. It is from among her people that God has called M.

Shawn Copeland to deliver the prophetic message of liberation. Moreover, understanding the landscape that shaped her life is essential because it educates us on the struggle and resistance in and through which her work is birthed and the environment in which reform is needed.

Copeland’s writings provide a pathway to unifying the body of Christ or at the very least provide an ecclesial vision and promote hope by well articulating beauty of the unified mystical body of Christ that welcomes, affirms, and integrates all in building the beloved kingdom of God here on earth. The vibrant hopes and expectations that liberation theology, or more properly, liberation theologies, carried are related to concrete social (i.e., political, economic, and technological) struggles for justice, for self-determination, for control of national or regional economic and technological resources, and for human equality.35 Her work in theological anthropology reclaims the beauty of even the marred, scarred, desecrated and suffering body of the Black woman. Copeland articulates it beautifully, “Divine logic releases us: it frees us from the gravity that impedes the human spirit, that anesthetizes our deepest desires for more fruitful, more creative living and loving.”36

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36 Ibid., 69.
Theology of Suffering: Womanist Perspective

Black women experienced an unimaginable amount of suffering during slavery, post-slavery and pre-slavery during the middle passage. The scars that formed the suffering have imprinted the African American female body in ways that Copeland explores extensively and sensitively in her theological anthropology. Before surveying Copeland’s anthropological approach in depth, it is worthwhile to consider Copeland’s theology of suffering. Because Christianity was misused and co-opted in order to enslave, abuse and dehumanize enslaved Africans, particularly Black women, it is important to unpack suffering and its connection to personhood.

Enslaved Africans were introduced to a White version of Christianity. White slave masters lorded over enslaved Africans with a bitter and oppressive hand. They preached and taught scriptures that would spiritually support and enforce their brutal treatment. White slave masters appealed to scriptures like “22Slaves, in all things obey those who are your masters on earth, not with external service, as those who merely please men, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord. 23Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men, 24knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve. 25For he who does wrong will receive the consequences of the wrong which he has done, and that without partiality.”37 in order to enslave and dehumanize. Enslaved African men, women and children were taught to believe that their enslavement was the will of God and their suffering was a consequence of the evil act

37 Colossians 3:22-25 NASB (New American Standard Bible)
of their resistance to inhumane treatment. This version of Christianity—White Christianity—was far from the liberative and true gospel of the Word of God.

Furthermore, white oppressors internalized and believed their own “gospel.” The planter class held one set of morals for white women, another for white men, and assumed that enslaved women and men had little, if any, capacity for real moral experience, moral agency, and moral virtue. All too often, Christian preaching, teaching, and practice complied. Black women’s narratives counter these assumptions and stereotypes. Moreover, these women are living witnesses to the power of divine grace, not merely to sustain men and women through such evil, but to enable them to turn victimization into Christian triumph.\(^{38}\)

Copeland profoundly explains how suffering violently attacks personhood. In slavery, enslaved Africans did not just suffer physically but their human dignity suffered just as deeply and brutally. Suffering always means pain, disruption, separation, and incompleteness. It can render us powerless and mute, push us to the borders of hopelessness and despair. Suffering can maim, wither, and cripple the heart; or, to quote Howard Thurman, it can be a “spear of frustration transformed into a shaft of light.”\(^{39}\) Copeland argues, “...suffering coaxes real freedom and growth, so much so that Thurman insists we literally see the change: ‘Into their faces come a


\(^{39}\) Ibid., 37.
subtle radiance and a settled serenity; into their relationships a vital generosity that opens the sealed doors of the heart in all who are encountered along the way.”

A theology of suffering in womanist perspective grows in the dark soil of the African American religious tradition and is intimate with the root paradigms of African American culture in general, and African American women’s culture in particular. Such a theology of suffering attends critically and carefully to the differentiated range of Black women’s experiences. It holds itself accountable to Black women’s self-understandings, self-judgment, and self-evaluation...a theology of suffering in womanist perspective is characterized by remembering and retelling, by resisting, by redeeming. An element that emerges in Copeland’s work is memory. The notion of memory is treated in her theology of suffering and theological anthropology. To handle their own suffering, Black women remember and draw strength from hearing and imitating the strategies adopted by their mothers, grandmothers, great-grandmothers, great-great-grandmothers. These stories evoke growth and change, proper outrage and dissatisfaction, and enlarge Black women’s moral horizon and choices.

Memory is important because it engages reflection that promotes critical thinking. In constructing a womanist perspective on a theology of suffering, Copeland uses cognitive practice as a key element. Black women’s cognitive practice emphasizes the dialectic between oppression, conscious reflection on the experience of that oppression, and activism to resist and change it. The matrix of domination is

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40 Ibid.
41 Ibid., 123.
responsive to human agency: the struggle of Black women suggests that there is choice and power to act—and to do so mindfully, artfully.\textsuperscript{42} A defining choice is wading through, rejecting, and recovering from false doctrine. Womanist Christian realism eschews naive Bibliicism, dogmatic moralism, and idealism distantiated from critics’ knowledge of experience, of human reality—of black women’s reality. Thus, a theology of suffering in womanist perspective begins with the acknowledgement of black women’s critical cognitive practice and develops through their distinctive Christian response to suffering.\textsuperscript{43} The powerful action is reclaiming the truth of the gospel and constructing and understanding a liberative theology. Copeland posits two aspects of a theology of suffering. One, a theology of suffering in womanist perspective is \textit{redemptive}. In their narratives, Black women invite God to partner them in the redemption of Black people.\textsuperscript{44} Two, a theology of suffering in womanist perspective is \textit{resistant}. With mother wit, courage, sometimes their fists, and most often sass, Black women resisted the degradation of chattel slavery.

According to Copeland, black women’s resistance involved the engagement of their total being. She describes an interesting critical consciousness engaged by black women. Copeland claims, “As a mode of critical consciousness and emancipatory struggle, black women’s critical cognitive practice is glimpsed in the earliest actuated meanings of resistance by captured and enslaved African women in North America. This practice emerged even more radically in the patterned operations of seeing,

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 43.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 124.
hearing, touching, smelling, tasting, inquiring, imagining, understanding, conceiving, formulating, reflecting, marshaling and weighing the evidence, judging, deliberating, evaluating, and deciding, speaking, writing. As a mode of critical self-consciousness, black women’s cognitive practice emphasizes the dialectic between oppression, conscious reflection on the experience of that oppression, and activism to resist and change it.”

“Black women have experienced unspeakable suffering that in part violently attacked their personhood in a deliberate act to assassinate their human dignity. The healing of these wounds and the reclaiming of the Black female body must incorporate a liberative theology of suffering. Only by attending to Black women’s feelings and experiences, understanding and reflection, judgment and evaluation about their situation, can we adequately challenge the stereotypes about Black women—especially those stereotypes that coalesce around that “most popular social convention of female sexuality, the ‘cult of true womanhood’.” Copeland surmises, “Hence, a womanist theology of suffering is rooted in and draws on Black women’s accounts of pain and anguish, of their individual and collective struggle to grasp and manage, rather than be managed by their suffering.” I offer that attending to the personhood and human dignity of the African American female body must engage a death of the notion of necessary and redemptive suffering and resurrect the liberation in salvation of the body, mind and soul; for whom the Son has set free is free indeed.

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45 Ibid., 43.
46 Ibid., 111.
47 Ibid.
48 John 8:36, So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed. NASB
The mission of Jesus is to those who are outcast, brokenhearted, imprisoned, downtrodden, ritually unclean, and oppressed; to those who are without choice, without hope, and without a future. To these children, women, and men, Jesus proclaims freedom, emancipation, and deliverance.\textsuperscript{49}

A womanist perspective on suffering is healing for Black women and for some the only measure through which healing can be appropriated. While I have not read where Copeland self-identifies as a womanist, her scholarship—particularly that which attends to the Black female body—is akin and reminiscent of womanist formulation. Most assuredly, Copeland investigates fundamental questions and concerns explored in womanism. Copeland asserts, “...if black women are to be subjects, to claim and act out of their own personhood, their own humanity, they must engage in three battles: the battle against the ever-pervasive racism of the dominant culture; the battle against sexism of the dominant male culture and the battle against the sexism of black men. Black women struggle in the name of Jesus to effect the realization of their essential human freedom.”\textsuperscript{50}

Womanism informs Copeland’s formulation of suffering. Copeland does not begin from a universal theological understanding of suffering. Rather, she founds her discussion within a defined context. Her contextual perspective speaks to and on behalf of African American women. Contextual theology is a vehicle through which the voice of freedom can be proclaimed, heard and received. Liberation theologies

\textsuperscript{49} Copeland, “Freedom, Emancipation, and Deliverance: Toward a Theology of Freedom,” 56.

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 65.
broke with the oppressive forms of theology, but not with the Christian tradition as such. Rather, these theologies grappled with what the “Christian tradition has handed down in connection with liberation and the relationship between the eschatological reality of God and the historical struggle of human being, their suffering and their revolt against the powers that oppress them.”

While Black theology endeavored to address the marginalization of African Americans, it focused heavily on Black men. Feminist theology arose in response to classic Christianity that muted the voice and presence of women. However, feminist theology was devoid of the classism and racism that oppressed Black women. From the void of Black theology and feminist theology arose womanist theology. Womanist theology is the response of black women moral and social ethicists, theologians, philosophers, and cultural critics to the marginalization and suppression of black women’s questions and discoveries, theological and pastoral work within the churches, within academic religious discourse, within black theology, and to some extent, within African American culture.

Copeland establishes three assertions connecting the human freedom of Black women to Jesus and Jesus’ body.

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First, Jesus of Nazareth is the clearest example of what it means to identify with the oppressed, to take their side in the struggle for life—no matter the cost. He is freedom incarnate. Second, the cross signifies God’s own struggle against the powers and principalities of this world. Third, the real meaning of the cross of Jesus is a mystery of freedom enacted for our deliverance.\textsuperscript{53}

The work of womanist theology embodies a theology of the cross, theology of suffering, and liberation that affirms the human dignity of the Black woman, reclaims her personhood, and appropriates liberation through the salvific work of the crucified Jesus on the cross. The work of womanism challenges the notion of redemptive suffering, dehumanizing servitude and devaluation of the beauty of the African American female body. Copeland resurrects the Black female body and reminds both the oppressor and the oppressed that Black women—just like all of God’s precious children—bear the imprint of God, \textit{imago Dei}.\textsuperscript{53}  

\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 65.
Theological Anthropology

To the memory of
Black women
Whose bodies were destroyed in the middle passage
Whose bodies were abused and chewed up in the maw of slavery
Whose bodies were tortured and lynched
Whose bodies were defiled and discarded
Whose bodies lie in unmarked and unattended graves\textsuperscript{54}

The Anthropological Subject

There are ways in which theologies of liberation, including womanist and Black theologies, give attention to embodiment. They center on the conditions—such as sexism, racism, classism, and homophobia\textsuperscript{55}—that impinge upon humanity’s ability to experience life abundantly and fruitfully. The body and formulations of embodiment have given some shape to the discursive practices and conceptual frameworks undergirding the work of many theologians of liberation. Copeland proposes a provocative and new central point upon which to focus and from which to construct theology. Daringly, Copeland brilliantly explores and constructs a prophetic theological anthropology that can inform African American theological aesthetics.

In the twenty-first century, Copeland pivots in this theological subject area and ponders, “What becomes of theology, how is it enriched, if the body is placed at

\textsuperscript{54} M. Shawn Copeland, \textit{Enfleshing Freedom: body, race, and being} (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), v.

The dedication of Copeland’s book. I captured it here because it speaks powerfully to the love and sensitivity she possesses and maintained when exploring this subject.

\textsuperscript{55} Copeland begins to address homophobia in more depth in her later works. She treats this subject particularly in a provocative and fascinating chapter [name of the chapter].
the center of inquiry?”\textsuperscript{56} From this questioning she determines, “A theological anthropology worthy of reclaiming black women’s bodies is worthy of reclaiming human bodies.”\textsuperscript{57} Consequently, Copeland undertakes this task in \textit{Enfleshing Freedom}.\textsuperscript{58} In the foreword, Cannon and Pinn assess, “By framing theological inquiry around the bodies of black women, \textit{Enfleshing Freedom} points out both the pitfalls of human conduct and interactions and the potential for transformation found in the Christian faith.”\textsuperscript{59} Copeland’s seminal work in \textit{Enfleshing Freedom} is an asset to womanist theology and prophetic voice on behalf of the African American community. Taking the black woman’s body as a starting point for theological anthropology allows us to interrogate the impact of that demonization in history, religion, culture, and society\textsuperscript{60} and is a liberative reorientation for anthropology.

Copeland’s anthropological approach is expressed in her sentiments, “Religion is basic to the whole of human existence, it ‘tunes human action to an envisaged cosmic order and projects images of cosmic order onto the plane of human experience.’ In this anthropological approach, religion may be identified as that whole complex of attitudes, convictions, gestures, symbols, rituals, beliefs, and structures which ‘synthesize[s] a people’s ethos—the tone, character, and quality of their life, its moral and aesthetic style and mood—and their worldview.’ Religion binds the human to the

\textsuperscript{56} M. Shawn Copeland, \textit{Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being} (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), ix.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 6.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 6.
\textsuperscript{59} Katie Geneva Cannon and Anthony B. Pinn, foreword to \textit{Enfleshing Freedom: body, race, and being} (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), ix.
\textsuperscript{60} Copeland, \textit{Enfleshing Freedom}, 3.
divine in powerful feeling-filled encounter with awesome and fascinating Mystery...It makes whole what is fragmented or broken and binds the wounds of heart and mind, soul, and body.”61 Copeland presents a theological approach for healing the wounds on the body and the soul that living through and existing after slavery inflicted. It is imperative to deal with both body and spirit as slavery scarred African Americans deeply emotionally, psychologically, spiritually and physically. All wounds go deep and have transferred from generation to generation.

This wounding has impacted a healthy and theologically correct understanding of personhood of African Americans. Theologians who tackle this problem understand the importance of righteously recognizing, affirming, and respecting humanity of all people, particularly those who have been oppressed. There is a strong religious link with Black personhood and its spirituality and spiritual being. For the oppressed, the affirmation and salvation of their humanity is connected to being a liberated and emancipated people.

“For the oppressed enslaved Africans freedom, emancipation, liberation, and salvation were inseparably linked. Freedom meant emancipation: the elimination of the status land conditions of enslavement and oppression. Freedom, as emancipation from bondage, was a concrete, vital, and present reality intimately linked to any notion of liberation and salvation. Liberation projected the possibility of creative and personal exercise of freedom. Salvation was not grounded in some distant future; salvation occurred in the here and now; it occurred on earth as well as in the hereafter.”62

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62 Ibid., 134.
Connected to liberation is religious experience and conversion. This was a topic of theological writing and debate during the period of slavery and thereafter. Copeland captures the implications of this connection, “My analysis has emphasized religious experience, because it insinuates the specifically theological principle, religious conversion. It has emphasized religious consciousness, because religious consciousness is the crucial mediation of African American personal and communal transformation and self-transcendence and transformation.63

What I find deeply intriguing and profound about Copeland’s anthropology is that she begins with the Black woman, the marginalized, despised and oppressed being and body, as the premise, the anthropological subject. In doing so, I judge that she is faithful to the faith link of Black personhood and spirituality. Commencing with the Black woman body speaks to the theological connection of salvation and liberation understood by the oppressed. Salvation is not just about the saving of one’s soul for living in glory eternally but also about being an emancipated living being who experiences the kingdom of God here on earth.

To better understand her anthropological approach, we start with the convictions that undergird Copeland’s theology. Copeland outlines the convictions that inform and frame her theological construction when treating the body. Five basic convictions ground her discussion of theological anthropology: one, that the body is a site and mediation of rich revelation; two, that the body shapes human existence as relational and social; three, that the creativity of the Triune God is manifested in

63 Ibid., 140.
differences of gender, race, and sexuality; four, that solidarity is a set of body practices; and five, that the Eucharist orders and transforms our bodies as the body of Christ.  

As a liberation theologian, Copeland has focused extensively on Black women. Her scholarship and research have led her to a seminal work on theological anthropology. What is refreshing and prophetic about her work is the subject upon which she centers and considers her theological construction. Copeland boldly explores beginning with the black woman’s body because, “Taking the black woman’s body as a starting point for theological anthropology allows us to interrogate the impact of that demonization in history, religion, culture, and society.” Her anthropological approach sets Copeland miles apart from most of the scholarship produced in this subject area. Copeland’s perspective is an asset to womanist theology and a prophetic voice in the African American community. Moreover, Copeland gives voice to a marginalized, oppressed and suffering community; redeeming the black woman’s body, reclaiming its beauty and affirming its human dignity.

The suffering and death of Jesus of Nazareth rebuke our national amnesia, our forgetfulness of enslaved bodies, our indifference to living black bodies. The memoria passionis interrupts our banal resignation to a vague past, our smug democratic dispensation, our not so benign neglect. Copeland seeks to liberate the black body and sees the important connection to freedom in an anthropological work that’s

64 Copeland, Enfleshing Freedom, 2.
65 Ibid., 3.
66 Ibid.
inherent in the sacrificed and crucified body of Christ, because the freedom of the (human) subject is at stake here and so is the (human) subject of freedom. In history, the psychic, spiritual, and physical wounds of chattel slavery were rarely healed. Slavery was/is a vicious threat to freedom of enslaved Africans and generations later. In many ways, the black woman’s body remains enslaved. Moreover, by virtue of its subjects, theological anthropology evokes the church and the bodies that it recognizes, and those bodies that it suspects. If the body, the flesh of Jesus, is the “hinge of salvation,” then the embrace of the church must swing open and wide.

While making the connection to Jesus’ body—that suffered and was crucified—Copeland is careful to not insinuate, incorporate or promote that suffering of Black women is necessary for their bodies’ liberation. Rather, Copeland carefully and skillfully addresses (past) suffering in the context of solidarity with the risen Savior. In fact, because of the horrendous and oppressive suffering endured, the black woman’s body should and needs to be reclaimed. With the vision of witnessing and being the authentic body of Christ in her sight, Copeland confronts a reality: “the personal and social sin that racism is in the breakdown of human solidarity. This breakdown uncovers the very loss of humanum, the loss of our humanness. Against this loss I argue for solidarity as an expression of the mystical body of Christ.”

Suffering is a correlative experience between Jesus and African American women. In his suffering and crucifixion, Jesus embraces and proleptically unites the

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67 Ibid., 4.
68 Ibid.
69 Ibid., 5.
70 Ibid.
real suffering of black bodies to his own. His embrace neither diminishes nor empties, neither justifies nor obscures the horror and misery of black suffering. Rather, the proleptic embrace of the suffering Jesus, who is the Risen Lord, interrupts the abjection of black bodies and creates an horizon of hope that is “hope against hope”...thus, the cross and the lynching tree reorient the discussion through reflection on Eucharist—the body of Christ, the black body, the body raised up in humanity by Jesus Christ for himself.\textsuperscript{71} This sensitive but crucial connection led Copeland to discuss a theology of suffering. A brief survey of Copeland’s theology of suffering is captured in chapter two. Copeland understands, “A theological anthropology worthy of reclaiming black women’s bodies is worthy of reclaiming human bodies.”\textsuperscript{72} Consequently, it is the task she set forth to accomplish in \textit{Enfleshing Freedom}.\textsuperscript{73}

Copeland’s undertaking is a salient contribution to the reclamation of the black female body; the theological implications are importunate. As Copeland explains, “The body provokes theology...the body incarnates and points beyond to what is ‘the most immediate and proximate object of our experience’ and mediates our engagement with others, with the world, with the Other”.\textsuperscript{74} The consequences are dire when this subject matter is inadequately addressed. Moreover, a black theological aesthetics is necessary and helpful in the reclamation of beauty and justice of the Black female body. Without a prophetic theological formulation, Black

\textsuperscript{71} Ibid., 6.
\textsuperscript{72} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{73} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., 7.
women will continue to suffer because, “In a negrophobic society, black ontological integrity suffers compromise.\textsuperscript{75} In such a society, blackness mutates as negation, nonbeing, nothingness; blackness insinuates an ‘other’ so radically different that her and his very humanity is discredited. Then, black identity no longer offers a proper subject of sublation, of authentic human self-transcendence, but a bitter bondage to be escaped.”\textsuperscript{76} However, one would be incorrect to understand this as a Black problem. Rather this is an ontological and theological problem, one closely connected with building and unifying body of Christ. “The black struggle for authenticity is coincident with the human struggle to be human and reveals black-human-being as a particular incarnation of universal finite human being.”\textsuperscript{77} The study of theological anthropology has expanded to address the Black body. Because of the history of slavery, its scarring of the Black body, and the generational consequences even into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, it was an area that inevitably needed researching and exploring for the breath and depth of Black theology. “Theologians and ethicists of African descent have begun explicitly to address the position and condition of the black body in Christian theological anthropology...after all, black women’s bodies have suffered under racial and gender bias in the extreme. Their critical analyses of the human condition and its incarnation in the black human condition, particularly the experiences of black female embodiment, imply new categories for theological anthropology,”\textsuperscript{78} Copeland observes. This work opens the

\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., 19.
\textsuperscript{76} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{77} Ibid., 21 (as quoted).
\textsuperscript{78} Ibid., 22.
door for Black theological aesthetics and Copeland’s work in *Enfleshing Freedom* has insights and implications for a scholarly conversation on Black theological aesthetics. I suggest a beginning point is inherent is Copeland’s explanation of why she undertakes to interpret the “opaque symbol of blackness” and the “opacity of black experience,” to uncover the light of divine revelation in that experience, to honor the beauty and courage of black being—to make this visible in black women’s enfleshing of freedom.\textsuperscript{79}

\textsuperscript{79} Ibid.
**Copeland’s Aim of Theological Anthropology**

God would not reduce the human race to slavery, since [God],
When we had been enslaved to sin, spontaneously recalled us to freedom.
But if God does not enslave what is free,
Who is he that sets his own power above God’s?80

Theological anthropology seeks to understand the meaning and purpose of existence within the context of divine revelation. Using the biblical witness, Copeland gleans three convictions central to theological anthropology. Copeland lifts these convictions from the creation stories captured in the book of Genesis in chapters one, two and three. Copeland affirms: one, that human beings, created in the image and likeness of God (imago Dei), have a distinct capacity for communion with God; two, that human beings have a unique place in the cosmos God created; and three, that human beings are made for communion with other living beings.81 Just as sin broke relationship between God and humanity in Genesis 3:6,82 slavery deformed the three aforementioned convictions. Slavery aimed to deface the *imago Dei* in black human beings, constrain black human potential, and debase black *being-in-communion* with creation.83

From the moment black women were violently removed from their home country, their objectification began. Regarded as property and treated inhumanely,
the black woman’s body became vulnerable to physical and sexual brutality and abuse. The black woman’s body was no longer an illustration of beauty and honored as royal—African queen—but it became the receptacle of suffering and pain. Copeland captures slavery’s ramification on black women: “Slavery rendered black women’s bodies objects of property, of production, of reproduction, of sexual violence.” Slavery redefined the black woman. “The bodies of enslaved black women were perceived with contempt and treated with contemptuous value. On the one hand, black women were considered lascivious whores; yet their putative depravity made them good “breeders.” On the other hand, those same characteristics were deployed to reinforce degrading stereotypes not only about the morality of black women but also about their very being.”

The question becomes, how do we return to the three convictions proclaimed by Copeland supported by scripture. The struggle is to reclaim the beauty the Divine affirms in Black bodies who were lovingly fashioned by God, the creator. The aim of theological anthropology is to provide the roadmap to this truth and to liberate the Black body. Creation did not define Black personhood as vile, slavery did that. “The reduction and objectification of black women began with the seizure and binding of the body; the violent severing of the captive from community and personhood.” The liberative gospel as articulated via Copeland’s theology stridently challenges this

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84 Ibid., 29.
85 Ibid., 37.
86 Ibid., 29.
erroneous path upon which the dominant culture has ventured and provides a compass to Christianity and the body of Christ finding its way back to truth.

**Freeing the Body**

The shackling and binding of the Black woman led to the oppression of her personhood. Slavery was eventually outlawed in the United States and shackled and imprisoned bodies were physically freed. Unfortunately, the freeing of the physical body did not emancipate black womanhood. Black women existed with a freed physical body and a bound and oppressed personhood and spiritual being. Outlawing slavery did not liberate black women wholistically. Understanding this dynamic, Copeland explores the concept of freedom in her theological anthropology. Copeland believes, “the body is the medium through which human spirit incarnates and exercises freedom in time and space.”

This foundation is built upon in positing the notion, “the freedom of the subject,” with the subject of course being the African American female (body).

We have discussed the impact of slavery on the African American woman; however, Copeland reminds us all was not lost and destroyed in their suffering. Slavocracy may have forced the enslaved people into a radical otherness, but their experiences of God’s acceptance and affirmation allowed them to perceive their authentic value and significance. The resilience and understanding of human worth with which enslaved African women left slavery and marched into freedom did not,

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87 Ibid., 48.
88 Ibid.
in and of itself, make daily living and their existence an easy task. Wounds were deep, scars fresh and fear engulfed their present reality. Formerly enslaved, now free, in their daily living they were confronted with a responsibility they and their ancestors had previously been denied for over 400 years. “The freed people now had the possibility of taking up the responsibility of human living without restraint. In sum, that responsibility was this: to be a human subject, to be a person; to be woman or man, who consciously and intentionally in word and in deed assumes and affirms her or his own personhood and humanity.”

Copeland concludes, “this affirmation means that a human subject cannot consent to any treatment or condition that is intended to usurp the transcendental end of purpose for which human beings are divinely created.” What a challenge! Living into their new existence was an exhilarating welcome because they were free to be a person. It was also frightening because this was a foreign reality into which they were living. Moreover, society did not welcome their change in status nor was it reformed to nurture this liberated existence. Herewith resided some of the challenges.

Nevertheless, Black men and women were committed to live into their emancipation fully. This internalized sentiment fueled the tenacity and spirit of survival within them. After all, they were survivors of slavery, now living in a society where they were only free legally, but enslaved in the minds of the oppressed and being treated as such was a tremendous hurdle and burden. Perseverance was a must and essential to their souls, “For the enslaved woman, in particular, freedom was

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89 Ibid.
90 Ibid.
linked inextricably and literally to the body.”91 Copeland argues there is a great deal at stake, “…Loving her body, the freed woman fleshed out autonomy, self-determination, decision, and action. Freedom from enslavement was freedom for healing, for effecting psychic healing and growth. Freedom from enslavement was freedom for proper self-love, for loving black flesh, for loving black bodies. Slavery sought to desecrate and deform black bodies; freedom desacralized those bodies.”92 From this argument, Copeland constructs an enfleshing freedom theology, where Jesus “does not forget poor, dark, and despised bodies. For these, for all, for us, he gave his body in fidelity to the basileia tou theou, the reign of God, which opposes the reign of sin. Jesus of Nazareth is the paradigm of enfleshing freedom; he is freedom enfleshed.”93 The notion of enfleshing freedom has implications for theological aesthetics and could be a solid launching pad for further scholarship. To enflesh freedom, we see in Copeland’s work, it to provide a vehicle to image beauty and justice. These are two foundational concepts discussed in theological aesthetics.

Copeland incorporates “(Re)Marking the flesh of the church” into her anthropology. In fact, Copeland insists it must be considered for the church to be the authentic mystical body of Christ. She proclaims, “if theological reflection on the body cannot ignore a Christ identified with black, brown, red, yellow, poor, white, and queer folk, neither can it ignore reflection on “the flesh of the Church.” And as the flesh of the church is the flesh of Christ in every age, the flesh of the church is marked

91 Ibid., 50.
92 Ibid., 50-51.
93 Ibid., 53.
(as was his flesh) by race, sex, gender, sexuality, and culture. These marks differentiate and transgress, they unify and bond, but the flesh of Christ relativizes these marks in the flesh of the church.”

The relevance of its consideration and incorporation is captured brilliantly and compellingly, “If my sister or brother is not at the table, we are not the flesh of Christ. If my sister’s mark of sexuality must be obscured, if my brother’s mark of race must be disguised, if my sister’s mark of culture must be repressed, then we are not the flesh of Christ. For, it is through and in Christ’s own flesh that the “other” is my sister, is my brother; indeed, the ‘other’ is me (yo soy tu otro yo). Unless our sisters and brothers are beside and with each of us, we are not the flesh of Christ.”

Even here we have a connection to aesthetics. “The sacramental aesthetics of Eucharist, the thankful living manifestation of God’s image through particularly marked flesh, demand the vigorous display of difference in race and culture and tongue, gender and sex and sexuality.” Copeland proclaims, “through attending critically to the bodies of black women, I have expressed in the particular the universal claim of the inviolability and sacredness of black humanity and reaffirmed black dignity and worth.”

My body was given back to me sprawled out, distorted, recolored, clad in mourning on that white winter day. The Negro is ugly, the Negro is animal, the Negro is bad, the Negro is mean, the Negro is ugly; look, a [Negro], it’s cold, the [Negro] is shivering, because he is cold, the little boy is trembling because he is afraid of the

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94 Ibid., 81.
95 Ibid., 82.
96 Ibid.
97 Ibid., 129.
[Negro], the [Negro] is shivering with cold, that cold goes through your bones, the handsome little boy is trembling because he thinks that the [Negro] is quivering with rage, the little white boy throws himself into his mother’s arms [in fear]...I sit down at the fire and I become aware of my uniform. I had not seen it. It is indeed ugly. I stop there, for who can tell me what beauty is?

The deep work that Copeland has done in theological anthropology has implications for theological aesthetics particularly for Black theology or womanist theology. In fact, Copeland ventures into this conversation in her chapter, *The Critical Aesthetics of Race*. In one section of the essay, Copeland attempts to answer, *Who can tell me what beauty is?* As Copeland formulates a profound answer she begins by stating, “beauty is consonant with performance—that is, with ethical and moral behavior, with habit or virtue. In other words, beauty is the living up to and living out the love and summons of creation in all our particularity and specificity as God’s human creatures.”

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100 Ibid., 75.
Conclusion

M. Shawn Copeland has made significant contributions to the field of theology and religious studies. Copeland is an African American Catholic female theologian and her social location informs her scholarship. Copeland uniquely treats the African American female body in her construction of theological anthropology. Her argument, “For centuries, black female bodies have been defiled, used, and discarded, quite literally, as refuse—simply because they are female and black, black and female. To privilege suffering bodies in theological anthropology uncovers the suffering body at the heart of Christian belief. Reflection on these bodies, the body of Nazareth and the bodies of black women, lays bare both the human capacity for inhumanity and the divine capacity for love,” is landmark. It leads her to take the Black woman’s body as the starting point of her theological anthropology. In her rending of this theology, it provides a credible connection to Black theological aesthetics particularly engaging African American women. The privileging of the black female body, its classification of beauty, and connection to the crucified and resurrected body of Jesus Christ provide a foundational point for examining beauty for black theological aesthetics. The well is deep and I believe that new wine can be retrieved from the fresh new skins of theological anthropology.

\(^{101}\) Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: body, race, and being*, 1.

\(^{102}\) References the New Testament scripture 17 Neither is new wine put into old wineskins; otherwise, the skins burst, and the wine is spilled, and the skins are destroyed; but new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved.” Matthew 9:17 NRSV.
Chapter 3: Emilie M. Townes

What should drive our research in large measure is that we are exploring traditions that have driven people to incredible heights of valor and despicable degrees of craveness. In other words, the research we do is not a free-floating solitary intellectual quest. It is profoundly tethered to people’s lives—the fullness and the incompleteness of them.” —Emilie Townes

The Revered Dr. Emilie Maureen Townes is a highly acclaimed minister, scholar, accomplished administrator, author and activist. Dr. Townes has contributed prolific scholarship on Black woman personhood, particularly addressing the ethical issues that create, promote and/or enforce oppression of Black women. She challenges and critiques systemic societal norms that threaten and diminish the humanity of Black people. In doing so, Townes maintains a keen lens on the harm done to Black

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woman personhood. Dr. Townes self-identifies as a Christian social ethicist with womanist leanings.

Emilie Maureen Townes was born on August 1, 1955 in Durham, North Carolina, to Ross Emile Townes, who served as a college professor and administrator, and Mary Doris McLean Townes, also a college professor and administrator, both at North Carolina Central University. She attended both Fayetteville Street and Watts Street Elementary Schools and Hillside High School, where she graduated in 1973. Following high school, she enrolled at the University of Chicago where she obtained her Bachelor of Arts degree and followed that with both Master of Arts and Master of Divinity degrees, also from the University of Chicago, and her Ph.D. from Northwestern University. She was awarded an Honorary Master of Arts degree from Yale University in 2005, an Honorary Doctor of Divinity degree from Washington and Jefferson College in 2008, an Honorary Doctor of Humane Letters from Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary in 2010, and another Honorary Doctor of Humane Letters degree from Franklin College, in May of 2013.²

Emilie M. Townes became the first African American to serve as Dean of Vanderbilt Divinity School in 2013. At Vanderbilt, she also serves as the E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Professor of Womanist Ethics and Society. She enjoys working with students, colleagues and her staff to help them do their best work by creating a supportive environment that values diversity and rigor. She hopes to continue Vanderbilt’s fine tradition of integrating ministerial preparation with

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scholarly preparation and hopes to inspire her students to engage in “justice-making” in their communities. She is deeply committed to activism in the academy and believes that scholars have a responsibility to be intelligible public intellectuals to help folk think more deeply about the issues of our day. This philosophy is evident in her works that I researched.

Townes is also an ordained minister in the American Baptist Churches U.S.A. denomination. Simply stated, she is a Baptist minister. Townes served as president of the Society for the Study of Black Religion (2012–2016). She was the first African American woman elected to the presidential line of the American Academy of Religion, which she led in 2008. Townes was inducted as a fellow in the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 2009. In 2010, Townes was honored as Distinguished Religious Scholar by the Black Religious Scholars Group. Townes is a contributing blogger for the religion page of the Huffington Post and the Feminism in Religion Forum.³

Prior to her appointment as Dean at Vanderbilt Divinity School, Townes possessed extensive teaching experience. She served as the Andrew W. Mellon Professor of African American Religion and Theology at Yale Divinity School from 2005 to 2013, as the Carolyn Williams Beaird Professor of Christian Ethics at Union Theological Seminary in New York from 2001 to 2005, as Visiting Professor of Christian Ethics and African American Theology at Yale Divinity School from 2003 to 2005, and as the Professor of Christian Ethics at Union Theological Seminary from

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1999 to 2001. Townes’ curriculum vitae bears witness to her being an accomplished scholar and clergy person whose voice has shaped the landscape of womanist social ethics.

When looking at a contextual theologian and her work, it is important to know her social location and the formative elements that inform her theological thought. This is of import because contextual theologians are informed by their community and their communal experiences. As a womanist theological ethicist, Townes is a contextual theologian. Consequently, I will identify what Townes has shared or what I have judged as formative events in her life that have impacted and informed her theology.

At a young age, Townes encountered the ugly reality of racism. “Jesse Helms, who later became a United States Senator but who was then an executive with the Capitol Broadcasting Company, spewed racist diatribes against the integrationists and the ‘nigras’ on WRAL-TV.” Townes recalls how she felt in that moment, “As I became aware that he was referring to the loving and hardworking folks that I knew, I realized that there were (and are) people in the world that dislike and even hate me because I am darker than they are. That struck me as odd and a tremendous waste of time and energy.” Trying to understand hatred has been one of the most formative things I’ve done in my life, and I now know that it will remain a challenge until I draw my last breath.”

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5 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
and seemingly sanctioned—or at the very least supported—by the national government was heart-wrenching for Townes. At a young and tender age, Townes processed the depth of this hate and racism in that moment. This event stole her innocent and euphoric perspective of equality and liberation in the United States. Young Townes faces the dark reality of societal and systemic racism and hatred. In that moment, she was confronted with the invisible chains and shackles still placed on the Black community and the daily fight to loose these shackles.

I remember the moment for me when this happened. I was a young elementary school aged child visiting my oldest sister and family, who were stationed on an Army base in Texas, during the summer. I befriended one of the neighborhood kids and she and I were best buds. On the fourth of July of that year, my friend and I agreed that I would come back to her house that evening to watch the fireworks together. After our plans were made, I mounted my bicycle and was about to leave when I heard my friend say, “How will I be able to see you when you come back since it will be at night.” It would be our first time playing together at night. This statement, a joke, honest inquiry, or whatever it was, was quite stinging. Of course I, like any other human, could be seen clearly at night. Obviously, this was an implication and slight of my skin color, that was of a darker hue than her Caucasian skin. I still remember how affronted and attacked I felt. It was the first time I realized that she noted a difference in our humanity because of the difference of our skin color. In that moment, the

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7 I do not recollect how old I was at the time so I cannot provide a definitive year. Interesting the event is imprinted in my memory and and heart. However, the age at which it occurred is not part of the lasting memory. What is enduring is what happened and how I felt when it occurred.
dynamic of our friendship changed and my innocence was lost. Those who looked different than me viewed me as a phenomenon to be understood because I was different and other than them. I do not recall going back to my friend’s house that night to watch fireworks. It did imprint a caution going forward when I engage with persons who wanted to befriend me who were not African American.

In reflecting upon formative moments in her life that informed her about race relations and the state of Blacks in America, Townes remembers key historical civil rights events. While Townes does not explicitly state such, I imagine these events are formative because they bring to her awareness that the fight for civil rights would claim lives. These events become a bitter example of the extent to which people will use hate and racism to secure dominance and privilege.

Townes grew up during the violent civil rights era. She was thirteen years old when the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated. Townes began high school in 1970, the same year the Kent State massacre occurred. In this horrendous massacre, Ohio National Guardsmen gunned down four students as they were protesting the United States Invasion of Cambodia in April 1970. Townes began to ponder human rights early in life.

Townes was very close to her parents and grandparents; they were integral in shaping her theological thought. Oftentimes, the death of those dear to us has a profound impact. It can be a time of contemplation and remembering, as well as grieving. As we begin our life-long journey of cherishing those loved ones who have transitioned, we might explore and memorialize how their lives impacted us and
formed our emotional and spiritual being. Townes, in remembering her parents and grandparents, discovered that,

“Perhaps the most profound experiences in my life that have caused me to look again at my beliefs are the deaths of my maternal grandmother, Nora Jane McPhaster McEachan McLean Jackson, and my parents, Ross Emile and Mary Doris McLean Townes. When my grandmother died in 1983, I learned that my deep and abiding sense of justice needed to be integrated with a vigorous understanding of grace. When my father died, I came to learn that my doctrine of sin was far too prominent and that I needed to have a more robust doctrine of creation. When my mother died, I learned that my understanding of salvation needed to be more expansive. With each of these losses, what I knew expanded and shifted. This grace-filled interplay of head and heart continues to shape me.”

Their deaths ushered in profound theological shifts that have influenced and are woven in Townes’ womanist theology. In reading Townes’ works published between 1990 and 2000, some common themes emerge. I note that Townes focuses on liberation, salvation and hope. She connects the death of her parents and grandparents with formative shifts in her theology. “Somehow along the way,” Townes recalls, “I came to realize that valuing institutions above people is bad for theology.” Consequently, Townes concludes that what is needed is an expansive sense of salvation and a robust understanding of creation, and we need to know that we are not dipped, we are not sprinkled, we are not immersed—we are washed in the grace of God. In her early works, the influence of her family is often acknowledged. For

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9 Ibid., 32.
10 Ibid., 34.
example, in *In a Blaze of Glory*, Townes proclaims, “My family is my benediction from which I come and to which I return.”

The institution of the Black Church shaped and influenced Townes. In her writings, the Black Church serves as a foundational context for her theological formulation. Townes also lovingly critiques the institution known as the “Black Church” in her womanist ethics. Townes challenges the sexism, classism and heterosexism that plague local churches in the Black Church. In a self-revealing article, Townes reflects, “It is the people in my churches and communities who have shaped me.” Townes recounts her earliest memories at Asbury Temple Methodist Church (now United Methodist) that were formative in shaping her theological thought. She recalls:

> Reverend Moore taught us about a God of righteousness who does not tolerate or condone racism and segregation. He reminded us of the power of prayer and spoke about developing a strong moral soul. The church was alive with debates and strategizing and the Holy Spirit. It was in this space that I learned that the church could and should combine a lively and soul-deep spirituality with a vital and active social witness.

In an interview, Townes addresses the role of the church in ethics. Townes acknowledges that the backdrop of her work is her own experience growing up in the

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12 Townes, “Washed in Grace,” 34.
13 Ibid., 30-34.
14 In 2000, the *Christian Century*, during its “anniversary year…spoke about [the] tradition of social ethics with three prominent writers in the field—Stanley Hauerwas, who teaches at Duke Divinity School; Robin Lovin, dean of Perkins School o Theology at Southern Methodist University; and Emilie Townes, professor of ethics at Union Theological Seminary in New York—and asked them to reflect on this tradition in light of the current challenges.”
black church. Additionally, a formative contribution to her scholarly work has been studying and watching how womanist theology unfolds in the black church.\textsuperscript{15} As a consequence, Townes concludes that womanist theology is contextual theology rather than “done by way of pronouncements from on high.”\textsuperscript{16} Townes proclaims, “My point is that formation in the black church has been important to the way I use my training in ethics. And one of the things that we’ve probably not done well enough as Christian ethicists is enter into dialogue with the church.”\textsuperscript{17}

Maintaining the connection with the church is critically important to Townes and is evidenced in her scholarship. Townes, at times, uses the Black Church context as both a launching pad and implementation point. The church was a stage to voice aloud heart-wrenching questions as she experienced racist behavior that attacked her human dignity. “When I was growing up, the church was the only place that gave me a clue that it was OK to be black. And it allowed me to ask the question, ‘Why do people hate me just because I’m black, when God loves me?’”\textsuperscript{18} Consequently, Townes argues there is no place more appropriate than the church to have these theological conversations about race, ethics and liberation.

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 955.
Townes’ Womanist Spirituality

Townes as an Ethicist

Emilie M. Townes is a Christian ethicist and has a pioneering voice in womanist theology. Townes self-identifies as “a Christian social ethicist who uses a womanist framework.” In formulating her womanist thought, Townes endeavors to approach the topic from descriptive and prescriptive points of view. This is evident in her womanist work, “Keeping a Clean House Will Not Keep a Man at Home: An Unctuous Womanist Rhetoric of Justice.” First, Townes critiques the deficits in Black Theology and Feminism: “As a womanist ethic of justice emerges, it must be radically rooted in the truth tradition and history of African-American life and whiteness. It cannot succumb to the praxeological framework in which all the women are white and all the blacks are men.”

Not only is the task of the womanist to address the gaping holes in Black theology and Feminism that do not give voice to African American women issues, but also the “task of the womanist ethic of justice is to move within the tradition descriptively yet jump for the sun as to climb beyond the tradition prescriptively. An

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21 Ibid.
ethic of justice must [sic] be based on the community from which it emerges.”

Townes affirms that a contextual theology is birthed from the community it addresses. Furthermore, the power and validity in liberation theology is that the voice of the marginalized is strengthened because the theology emerges from their perspective, and their libertative hope is realized in the radical ministry and liberating gospel of Jesus Christ. In outlining the descriptive elements of her womanist ethic of justice, Townes posits that, “Womanists must investigate the relationship between the oppression of women and theological symbolism.” Townes asserts, “If we, as blacks, can identify God as black, then we can certainly explore other imagery for God.” This provides an ideal exploration point of entry for theological aesthetics within her womanism. Townes summarizes beautifully, “Traditionally, black women have been clear that is the humanity of Jesus and not his maleness that is significant about his life and ministry, the crucifixion, and the resurrection.”

Townes is straightforward and assertive in describing the prescriptive elements of a womanist ethic of justice. Townes explains, “A womanist ethic is unapologetically confrontational.” A womanist ethic of justice prescribes “mutual respect for the dignity of others, a willingness to engage in dialogue, and an awareness and acceptance of diversity.” Townes mandates that these elements

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22 Ibid., 133.  
23 Ibid., 134.  
24 Ibid.  
25 Ibid., 140.  
26 Ibid.
must be present in the womanist formulation. A prescriptive function of this womanist framework is to address sin and its implications and contributions to injustice. “A womanist ethic of justice names the particular sin and can then articulate the universal dimensions of it—the universal is manifested in the particular but not exhausted by it. An unctuous rhetoric of justice is more than a vague concept of civil rights in a racist and misogynist system. It moves beyond tokenism to a radical transformation of social structures and human relationships within those structures.”

Prescriptive formulation means calling out the sin and naming the alternative and righteous vision.

In *Breaking the Fine Rain of Death*, Townes outlines a womanist ethic of care; she does so both descriptively and prescriptively. Townes also incorporates her literary genius in her theological work. She has penned provocative and deeply theological poems, verbalizing her womanist theology. She also utilizes biblical literary forms in her theological formulation. For example, in *Breaking the Fine Rain of Death*, not only does Townes present a prescriptive and descriptive womanist ethic, but she also explores *lament* “in an integrated way with health and healthcare to shape a womanist ethic of care that moves beyond concerns centered solely on identity politics that are exclusively gendered, economic, or racial.”

Townes decides to use lament because she “believes that *communal* lament can help us best get at these

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27 Ibid.
29 Ibid.
30 Ibid., 23.
complex issues. For lament enables us and even requires of us to acknowledge and to experience the fullness of our suffering.” Lament leads to action and it is Townes’ hope that the communal lament of systemically evil healthcare that African American women experience will lead to acts of justice. Townes sees spiritual power in lament that can bring forth liberative change. Townes proclaims, “Communal lament helps us move to responsible faith…as communities of faith, we can question the nature of radical evil in systems of health and health care that deny the humanity of many...keeps the question of justice visible and legitimate.”Townes pushes further, “Communal lament names problems, seeks justice, and hopes for God’s deliverance—so that we may not see that terrible Day of the Lord made real in our lives.” COMMunal lament has salvific power.

Townes examines Joel 1-2 looking at lament and its function in the lives of God’s people (faithful). “Joel announces a radical transformation of the social order, if not social revolution. In traditional Jewish society, the free, older male was at the top of the social structure. [quotes Dillard, p.23] Most of Israel’s prophets belonged to the group. Now the distinctions between the sons and daughters, old and young, slave (male and female) and free are swept aside. All people will become prophets, visionaries, and seers. The new people of God no longer recognize privileged individuals. All will live their lives into the future in an intimate relationship with God.

Townes appeals to Walter Brueggemann in noting the role of laments in the communit of faith. Walter Brueggemann notes that laments are genuine pastoral activities….Brueggemann reflects on our contemporary moves away from genuine lament, he suggests that this loss of lament is also a loss of genuine convenient interaction with God. [Walter Brueggemann “The Costly Loss of Lament,” Journal for the Study of the Old Testament 36 (1986): 60.]

The result that the petitioner either becomes voiceless or has a voice permitted to speak only praise. When lament is absent, covenant is created only as celebration of joy and well-being. Without lament, covenant is a practice of denial and pretense that sanctions social contro In Emilie M. Townes, Breaking the Fine Rain of Death: African American Health Issues and a Womanist Ethic of Care (New York: Continuum, 1998), 24.

31 Ibid., 24.
32 Ibid., 25.
Townes is a literary artist. I have included an excerpt from *Vanishing into Limbo: The Peculiar Career of Aunt Jemima*\(^3^3\) that illustrates her womanist approach and theology expressed in poetic form.

**what spaces in this country, then, do black peoples and our kin have control and autonomy**

**how do we grasp a-hold of our identity and truly name ourselves**

instead of constantly looking into some strategically placed funhouse mirror of distortions and innuendos and mass marketing

that smacks its lips and rolls its eyes while chanting "mmmm mmmm good"

**i am not here tonight to offer solutions**

**i am only naming the territory of what i understand to be threshing floor for my work**

as a social ethicist who is unabashedly and unapologetically

but critically and rigorously womanist in her approach

**for when black identity is property**

that can be owned by someone else

defined by someone else

created by someone else

shaped by someone else

and marketed by someone else

**we are chattel now dressed up in postmodern silks and linens**

our buckboards and dusty trails have been exchanged for one-legged stools by the one-way revolving door of academia and boardrooms

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\(^3^3\)Townes notes this address was delivered on the occasion of the author’s [Townes’] inauguration as Professor of Christian Ethics at Union Theological Seminary, February 16, 2001.
we are told that these canting stools are truly seats at the table
but when we speak, we are not heard
when we scream, they do not listen
we are often left standing on
some malformed gold dust twins soap box
with auction blocks as our foot stools
and the hangman's noose as our lullabies to rock us into the ultimate deep sleep
it is of little help
if in our cultural and theo-ethical critiques
womanist thought replaces the forms of supremacy we know so well
with a postmodern black slow drag of annihilation
if we sanction a brand of scholarship that is nothing more than a gigantic holding pen for the mind and the intellect
if the plateau for excellence means to make lists, set quotas, craft exclusive standards of specious excellence
aunt jemima and the proud reality and history i inherit as a mclean and as a townes
means that i must fight like hell to keep my work and life from becoming monuments of irrelevancy and domination
simply put, my momma did not raise me that way

This poem speaks powerfully to personhood and the affirmation of humanity.
I will share my reaction and reflection to this profound literature, particularly as I see a connection to Black woman personhood. This excerpt speaks to the necessity of
the justice fight of affirming Black womanhood. The alternative—so expressed by Townes—is dehumanization.

Townes boldly reminds the reader what it means for a human of African descent to be considered and treated as property rather than acknowledged as God's precious creation. Being identified and handled as property diminish Blacks from fully experiencing a salvific and liberated life. I am struck by the verbs used in the poem; they are crushing and bruising. Townes challenges, “when black identity...is owned by...created by...shaped by...and marketed by someone else...we are chattel.” In such an oppressive dynamic, the encounter of the divine is distorted, beauty is not imaged and personhood is seen as a distorted image likened to the image presented in one of those fun mirrors as at a carnival. When looking at one's self in those distorted and sometimes horrifying carnival “fun” mirrors, the person is almost unrecognizable due to the amount of distortion the image undergoes in the mirror. The carnival mirror is found here in the verbs, owned by, created by, shaped by and marketed by someone else other than the divine.

However, this excerpt does not leave the reader without hope. This is the function of Townes’ womanist ethics. The message of hope and the battle cry to the Black community is “my momma did not raise me that way.” It is the liberative declarative, the wake up call that shatters the false messages fed to us by the dominant culture. It is a salvific truism, our ancestors, while rearing us and despite toiling in the field, did not reinforce the hateful narrative. Instead, they reminded their children and their children’s children of their worth, bestowed upon and in them
by the Creator, God. They taught us that we are who we are because of who God
designed us to be. We are owned by no one! We are defined, shaped and crafted by
the Supreme Potter, God.

Certainly, Emilie M. Townes is an ethicist with womanist leanings. I push this
further and say Townes is an unapologetic womanist ethicist who has a well-
formulated and provocative, prophetic and liberative voice. Her approach is
multifaceted from classic contextual theological formulation to literary creativity that
is deeply theological and ethical. She draws from prominent African American
literary figures like James Baldwin, Toni Morrison and Alice Walker in founding her
womanist theology. Townes reflects, “Throughout my life, I have always learned a
great deal from writers and poets. I speak, primarily, of those who do not deal with
dense theoethical discourse and reflection, but of writers such as Elizabeth
Alexander, Tina McElroy Ansa, Nikky Finney, Alice Walker, William Faulkner,
Ernest Hemingway, Ayn Rand, Carson McCullers, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Jorge
Amado, Chinua Achebe,…Fine writers help us “see” things in tangible ways and “feel”
things through intangible means. Their ability to turn the world at a tilt, to explore
our humanity and inhumanity challenges me in ways that theories and concepts do
not.”\(^34\) She also engages James Cone and womanist scholars like Delores Williams.
Townes’ scholarship has breath in topics and great depth in womanist ethics. There
is rich opportunity for examining her treatment of the African American female body

\(^34\) Emilie M. Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (New York:
Palgrave MacMillian, 2006), 4-5.
and theological implications within her work to theological aesthetics with a particular emphasis on African American community—specifically the Black woman.

**Womanist Spirituality**

Womanist spirituality is the working out of what it means for each of us to seek compassion, justice, worship, and devotion in our witness. This understanding of spirituality seeks to grow into wholeness of spirit and body, mind and heart—into holiness in God. Townes commences the formulation of her womanist definition with Walker’s definition of womanism. This has been a common practice among womanist theologians. The foundation of their formulation is rooted in Walker’s definition. Theologians tend to either embrace in part Walker’s definition or challenge or respond to it. Nevertheless, some engagement of Walker’s womanism is employed in the production of womanist theology.

Building on Walker’s statement, “Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender,” many Black feminists have moved away from feminist preoccupation with gender inequalities without adequate attention and analytical and reflective insight into the interstructured nature of race, gender, and class oppression to examine specifically how these impact the African American community. The womanist project is to take a fuller measure of the nature of injustice and inequalities of human existence from the perspective of women—Black women.

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36 Ibid., 10.
37 Ibid., 10.
In her work, *In a Blaze of Glory*, Townes discusses the notion of womanist spirituality. Womanist spirituality is a means for African American women to appropriate healing and build their self-image. Townes states, “Black folk need to work with Black folk to help create positive images of male and female that are not dominated by someone else’s version of who we are. We must become each other’s harvest and in doing so, we will begin to recognize the gift of life we have in each other and turn away from battering ourselves into victimage.” This womanist spirituality as defined by Townes undergirded and motivated the justice work she outlines as necessary for building the African American self-image and affirming the community’s human dignity. Townes insists, “So we must teach and live justice. We must engage in community-building work that ministers to our souls, lifts our spirits (individually and collectively), assures our connection with each other and to God, pulls us beyond ourselves.”

Townes’ work encourages the African American community to redefine (or define) itself based upon its rich African heritage. A horrendous injustice perpetrated on the African American community from its legacy of slavery is the negative imagery and redefining of the Black man and woman. Townes reminds us, “concepts of African-American manhood and womanhood have biological roots and emerge from acculturation. If we fail to see that we take in the culture around us in our breathing,

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38 Ibid.
40 Ibid.
if we miss that we are picking up all sorts of cues about what it means to be a “real” man or a “womanly” woman or a “whole” people through institutions, if we miss that we are socialized along gender lines, then we fall victim to racism and sexism.”\textsuperscript{41} The consequences of falling prey to this societal stereotyping and imaging of the African American community are profound and deep. Townes warns, “For what this does is set up a system of inequalities that stunt the mental, spiritual, emotional, social, economic, and physical growth of African-American children, men, and women. We end up fighting each other and putting forth such lopsided and misogynistic views...”\textsuperscript{42} 

Where Christianity should have been helpful in combating racism, the denial of human dignity and the stripping of self-worth, a co-opted White Christianity intervened and perpetrated devastating harm. Townes quotes Matthews, “The tragedy of southern Evangelicalism was not that its institutions were unable to make white men behave as they should have, but they could not allow black people full liberty in their Christian profession.”\textsuperscript{43} The sense of evangelicalism was to elevate a disciplined self within a disciplined community. Both African Americans and Whites strove to meet this goal with earnestness and passion. However, the catastrophe known as slavery and its companion, racism, prevented African Americans and Whites from carrying the evangelical impulse to its logical conclusion. Nevertheless, African Americans continued the struggle for full humanity and salvation. African

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 65.
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 64.
\textsuperscript{43} Townes, \textit{In a Blaze of Glory: Womanist Spirituality As Social Witness}, 29.
American men and women sought to proclaim their right to freedom by their religious understanding of freedom and a just God. African Americans who responded to the evangelical impulse of the late nineteenth century sought to maintain their dignity and shape a cosmology that affirmed their personhood and self-worth.⁴⁴

Understanding the residual effects of slavery that haunt Black people, Townes endeavors to formulate a womanist spirituality “to consider what it means for African American society and culture to love our hearts, to be called beloved, under the rubric of womanish ethical concerns for spirituality, and by praxeological extension, wholeness.”⁴⁵ A womanist spirituality is a radical concern for is-ness in the context of African American life. The notion of is-ness I define as self-being. It begs the question, who am I really? Who am I in the context of this dominant culture and in my own community. Is-ness marks the very nature of our breathing in and out as human beings and the movement of creation itself. Its primary concern is concrete existence (lived life) and the impetus for a coherent and unified relationship between body, soul, and creation. In this sense, it is consonant with African cosmology which understands all of life as sacred. A womanist spirituality seeks to rediscover this apprehension in Black life in the United States.

⁴⁴ Ibid.
⁴⁵ Ibid., 48.
Womanist Spirituality — Body and Soul

*To be called beloved is to do ethical reflection with the deeply held knowledge that we are not dipped, we are not sprinkled, we are not immersed, but we are washed in the grace of God.*

Townes’ womanist ethical reflection guides her to explore the bond between body and spirit. She examines the notion of “the Other,” believing, “the Other can lean heavily toward reductionism and denial of truth, toward indignity and injustice.” The creating of *Other* results from three social phenomena: the legacy of lynching, the siting of toxic waste dumps, and the rise of the influential Black neoconservative thought—each signaling the need for a spirituality of wholeness in which the self-other relationship becomes primary. Townes propounds that “at the heart of a womanist spirituality is the self-other relation grounded in concrete existence and succored in the flawed transcendent powers of our spirituality.

Survival, according to Townes, is predicated on the blending of body and soul. In fact, Townes goes so far as to claim that the blending is crucial to understanding and then constructing what the next seven generations will hold. Consequently, Townes appeals to a womanist spirituality for healing and wholeness. A womanist

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46 Ibid., 67.
47 Ibid., 65.
48 Ibid.
49 Ibid.
50 Ibid., 66.
spirituality of wholeness is founded on the belief that values such as hope, virtue, sacrifice, risk, and accountability have had a different cast in the Black community.\(^{51}\)

Why womanist spirituality? Townes exclaims, “The task of womanist spirituality is to illuminate and question the oppression, and then begin the eradication of radical oppression and devaluation of the self and the community in the context of structural evil.”\(^{52}\)

I find a connection to womanist theological aesthetics in what Townes has identified as the task of womanist spirituality. Womanist spirituality is a vehicle in eradicating devaluation of the self and the community. This eradication opens the door and provides a bright and unblemished path for rediscovery of beauty. Beauty and justice of theological aesthetics emerge as liberative forces that create afresh an encounter with the divine. Womanist spirituality provides a theological avenue for ostracized and stigmatized Black women to rediscover, embrace and affirm the divine within them. Eventually, it puts them on the sacred journey of the resurrected selves who image their Creator because they are empowered to affirm their Black woman personhood. It is a beautifully just interior work that liberates the Black woman.

\(^{51}\) Ibid.
\(^{52}\) Ibid., 67.
Womanist Spirituality and Colorism

slavery is not dead
even behind the cold iron bars of
the prisons
there are tensile threads of color and beauty
wrapped tight around the neck
these threads choke the life
out of our dignity
at least we see the prison bars
how perfect their power
to entrap and enslave a
whole generation
we cannot see the tensile threads
only feel their deadly pressure
on our necks

—Emilie M. Townes\textsuperscript{53}

In her womanist spirituality, Townes addresses colorism because of “…the importance of African American identity in an integrated spirituality. Identity helps maintain cultural continuity and wholeness in a context of oppression and injustice.

\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 89.
The systematic assault on Black identity is centuries old.”54 Black skin indicated intellectual and moral inferiority. This warped perception of color is what Delores Williams calls “white racial narcissism,” which expresses itself in an inordinate concern for White power and control. “The result is...exploited Black people considered less than and wearing ill-fitting masks of Whiteness that eventually annihilate. This form of White hegemony disregards human actions and laws when considering the rights of Black folk.”55 Colorism must be explored because some of the baggage from slavery is this conditioned mindset to fear Black as evil and illegal.56 The mindset was enforced by breeding a hatred for Black skin, Black culture, and all things related to Black personhood.

Colorism played out in detrimental ways as Townes explains, “Late-nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century Blacks most vocal about colorism in the Black community were darker-skinned Blacks who concentrated on the light-skinned upper class. They denied the intellectual superiority of light-skinned Blacks and often emphasized them as physically weak hybrids. Upper class light-skinned Blacks were blamed for the existence of the color scale between Blacks that created a perverted system of social stratification. Therefore, personal character and worth weren’t important in gaining admission to the upper class of Black society—color

54 Ibid., 93.
55 Ibid.
56 Ibid.
One day, I was sitting in a restaurant at the community table and happened to be next to an African American married heterosexual couple. They had been married for 22 years. The husband voluntarily explained that when he first met his wife because she was “light-skinned” he did not want to approach or date her because he assumed all light-skinned Black folk were “uppity” and “sadiddy.” Subconsciously, what he was feeling is that as a darker skinned male than this light skinned woman in whom he was interested, he would be viewed as inferior, lower class or inadequate. As a light-skinned woman, closer in hue to European Americans, she would deem herself of higher value, worth, education and social class than darker toned Blacks. This is another example of the colorist mindset that infiltrated the Black community, divided it and promoted self-hatred. The husband further admitted it took dating a darker-skinned Black woman and that relationship ending horribly for him to learn than one’s skin color did not define the character of the person. Within our own community, Black men and women, even in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries are having to healthily work through prejudices and stereotypes resulting from colorism.

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57 Ibid., 106-7.
58 I was eating breakfast at First Watch cafe in Fairfax, VA. They have separate tables for sitting like an average restaurant/cafe. They also have what they call the community table. It is a long stretched table situated in the front part of the restaurant. The table can accommodate 10-12 persons and each person is seated at an open spot. You are right next to stranger with whom you can engage in conversation or not.
59 Uptight in an utterly conceited sort of way. Someone who 'acts' as if they are completely superior towards/around another person. Someone who's of the perception that they are 'better' (physically and mentally) than another.
Returning to her womanist ethical reflection, Townes discusses the detriment of colorism along gender lines. She judges the damage and shame Black women experienced because of hair type and skin color as tremendous. When sociologist Bertrice Berry analyzed advertisements in *Ebony*, *Jet*, and *Essence* between 1985 and 1987, she found that over one-third of the advertisements were for hair products. Most of the models for these products were fair-skinned with long flowing hair. Mary Helen Washington points out that the subject of the distorted standards for Black women’s beauty is a frequent theme in Black women’s novels. Washington believes that this indicates how deeply Black women are affected by discrimination against the shade of our skin and the texture of our hair.\(^60\) Ironically and sadly, while Americans want to pretend we are now in a post-racial America because we elected an African American president, these same skin color and hair type critiques and biases plagued the first lady of the united states (FLOTUS) during their first term in office. The voyeurism with the FLOTUS felt akin to the infatuation white slave owners had with Black women bodies that they viewed and treated as their property. Townes astutely summarizes, “The noxious legacy of color and colorism in the United States leaves African American children, men, and women in a precarious place with ourselves. It leaves us vulnerable and targeted for forces that continue to define darkness and blackness as representative of lesser forms of creation.”\(^61\)

Townes appeals to spirituality to address colorism and challenges the church. The indictment is, “Many in the church continue to accept dark and light imagery

\(^{60}\) Townes, *In a Blaze of Glory: Womanist Spirituality As Social Witness*, 111.
\(^{61}\) Ibid., 113.
without question and with no critical reflection as to the kind of subconscious damage
done to our self-esteem and to our ability to function as responsible members of the
body of Christ.” 62 To heal the roundedness of Black personhood and human dignity,
the church—particularly the Black church—must self-correct. Townes summarizes
poignantly, “Womanist spirituality is passing on legends that affirm strength and
righteous agency in the miasma of oppression. Colorism defeats this at every turn if
we allow the destructive character of colorism to be our watchword for how African
American folk will live out our faithfulness—or not. 63”

Townes notes, “A spirituality of life that is social witness does not revolve
around a success ethic that is grounded in measurable gains and regrettable losses.
Rather, it moves in the midst of degradation to proclaim the dignity of life. Such a
strength measures its power in its ability to continually call forth hope and righteous
agency.” 64 A mission grounded in righteous agency is hard work. The consideration
of agency in this context is to recognize who we have been to one another, in light of
God’s demand on our lives. To do so, compels the community to continually explore
the history of Black folk on these shores and their connections not only to Africa, but
to the Caribbean, to Native Americans, to Islam, to other peoples of color, and to other
oppressed groups. The complexity of oppression can never be underestimated nor is
it confined to one community of persons or a specific context.

62 Ibid.
63 Ibid.
64 Ibid., 114.
After presenting a persuasive exploration of colorism, Townes challenges, “if Black folk cannot live into a witnessing spirituality or help foster it in others, then we have consigned ourselves to worthlessness. For to continue in pathways in which we condone or ignore the violence we do to our minds, bodies, and souls is to allow colorism, racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, ageism, nationalism, and other “ism” to dictate to us our values and our aspirations.”

Colorism erodes the human dignity of African American women. Townes cautions, “as people of faith, we cannot underestimate what colorism and caste do to the soul and spirit. For much of what spews the ability to inflict intracommunity wounds concerning color...It is a deep and abiding desire and then ability to dominate, to control, to dehumanize, to devalue. It is an abomination to the very fiber of existence.”

Townes’ womanist spirituality provides the bright light of hope and understanding in colorism’s darkness.

Townes incorporates two concepts into her womanist spirituality—apocalyptic vision and eschatological hope. Townes appeals to the apocalyptic vision because “it is a theo-ethical, sociopolitical manifesto that refuses to accept or tolerate injustice.” Townes reminds us that the apocalyptic vision is concerned with the “-isms” that plague and oppress African American women and men. The vision treats race, gender, class, ableness, sexuality, age, militarism, life and death. In bringing attention to these areas and moving within womanist spirituality, Townes establishes a theo-ethical approach for womanist spirituality to address suffering. Townes posits, “A

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65 Ibid., 118.
66 Ibid., 119.
67 Ibid., 121.
womanist spirituality is drawn to question continually the inordinate amount of suffering that is the lot of the oppressed. Spirituality is challenged to a new awareness of God’s presence within humanity as a liberating event.”

“Womanist spirituality dawns from the apocalyptic visions of hope and salvation in the midst of our inhumanity.” Townes’ womanist spirituality connects the oppressed with their humanity by reminding them they are made in God’s likeness. Embracing this womanist spirituality means integrating faith and life by exploring the nature of our relationship with God. Living out this womanist spirituality requires the community’s engagement in these ways outlined by Townes. First, we recognize that we are made in God’s image. This places us in a special relationship with God...we are called to a new and renewed awareness of our humanness and our infinite possibilities. Then, the community moves to exploring God’s presence as the very fabric of our existence. Finally, Townes instructs, we must deal with the fact that God’s love is unconditional. This womanist spirituality calls into questions the sociological ills and unethical systems that move God’s people further into exclusivity. Townes’ spirituality focuses on unity, not separation; edification, not marginalization; inclusion rather than exclusion.

There is a great hope for a new vision, liberation, and reclamation of beauty of the African American female and her body in Townes’ womanist ethics. This hope results from Townes’ focus in formulating a womanist ethics because “Townes

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68 Ibid.
69 Ibid., 139.
70 Ibid., 140.
71 Ibid.
[believes] womanist ethics advocates a renewed emphasis on authority, liberation and reconciliation that will move and guide the contemporary African-American community and its people of faith.”72 From it emerges a prophetic message for not only the African American community but also for all of God’s people for unification and living in a communal body of Christ.

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Chapter 4: The Archetypes and Countermemory

Emilie M. Townes is a womanist ethicist. She produced landmark scholarship exploring ethics in a womanist framework in her book *Womanist Ethics and The Cultural Production of Evil.* Her work is germane to this dissertation because first, Townes questions several stereotypes and images that have negatively informed and shaped the personhood of Black women in America. Secondly, Townes introduces us to her methodology of countermemory where she re-imagines or repositions these images to indict the resultant cultural production of evil and formulate ethical responses.

I outline Townes’ ethical argument regarding each image. Townes engages countermemory to upend these images. She challenges the oppressors’ use of these images to denigrate, dehumanize, and oppress African American women and by extension, the African American community. Via countermemory, Townes interrogates these images to speak prophetically to and on behalf of the community these images were designed to destroy.

I will leverage Townes’ work to inform my exploration of theological aesthetics particularly focused on justice. The liberative and prophetic voice from these images serves the justice argument within theological aesthetics. The prophetic message spoken through countermemory creates a connection with the divine for African American women by affirming the human dignity of Black womanhood.

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The notion of remembering is key to an oppressed, ostracized and marginalized community. Remembering does not serve the purpose of inciting anger and passing the same generationally. Rather, it is the community’s reminder to retell, to each generation, about the darkness of the past from which our people have come in order to carry an informed and fortified bright light of hope into a better future. Being uninformed about our past disarms us and weakens our ability to secure a greater future.

The words\(^2\) of Elie Wiesel\(^3\) poignantly proclaim and remind the oppressed never to forget.

\textit{Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, that turned my life into one long night seven times sealed.}

\textit{Never shall I forget that smoke.}

\textit{Never shall I forget the small faces of the children whose bodies I saw transformed into smoke under a silent sky.}

\textit{Never shall I forget those flames that consumed my faith for ever.}

\textit{Never shall I forget the nocturnal silence that deprived me for all eternity of the desire to live.}


Elie Wiesel was born in 1928 in Sighet, Transylvania, which is now part of Romania. He was fifteen years old when he and his family were deported by the Nazis to Auschwitz. His mother and younger sister perished, his two older sisters survived. Elie and his father were later transported to Buchenwald, where his father died shortly before the camp was liberated in April 1945.

A devoted supporter of Israel, Elie Wiesel has also defended the cause of Soviet Jews, Nicaragua’s Miskito Indians, Argentina’s Desaparecidos, Cambodian refugees, the Kurds, victims of famine and genocide in Africa, of apartheid in South Africa, and victims of war in the former Yugoslavia. Elie Wiesel died on July 2, 2016.
Never shall I forget those moments that murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to ashes.

Never shall I forget those things, even were I condemned to live as long as God himself.

Never.

Wiesel encapsulates the power of enduring ordeals and maintaining those memories. Slave narratives also powerfully recall heart-wrenching and horrendous atrocities that our ancestors survived. Now that we will not forget, what do we do with those memories? Townes offers insight as she addresses memory, identity shaping and countermemory. Memory and remembrance, identity shaping and making, tradition and traditioning are pivotal functions in an ethical framework that emerges from an oppressed community. The struggle to move beyond double consciousness—endemic in oppressed communities—is a confrontation with histories and peoples who have been and continue to be systematically and methodologically ignored. The African American woman wrestles with, I contend, triple consciousness, American, Black and female. The dominant culture chooses to

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4 Double consciousness is a concept that Du Bois first explores in 1903 publication, “The Souls of Black Folk”. Double consciousness describes the individual sensation of feeling as though your identity is divided into several parts, making it difficult or impossible to have one unified identity.

Du Bois said: “It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others...One ever feels his twoness—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.”

marginalize and dehumanize her not only because of her ethnic origin but doubles down on its stamp of inferiority because of her gender as well. To recover the record of Black women, children, and men as communities rather than as autonomous experiences is a part of the work of womanist ethics.\(^5\) These crucial functions of community are held in tension in womanist theoethical reflections.

W. E. B. Du Bois brought to our attention that persons of color are forced to not only view themselves from their own personal perspectives but also view themselves as they are or might be perceived by the dominant culture. Unfortunately, how the Black woman is perceived in some segments of society is shaped by the lens of those who have historically and repeatedly chosen to oppress and dehumanize her. Instead of honoring and celebrating the unique perspective created by being Black and female, the oppressor views these as sources of sin, ugliness and dehumanization. My exploration of justice and beauty in theological aesthetics in the African American context seeks to combat and dismantle this inflammatory view of Black woman personhood.

In order to understand some major contributors to the triple consciousness Black women wrestle with and struggle against, we must examine and engage the archetypes Townes thoroughly explicates in Cultural Production of Evil. I will introduce these and their legacy, then use their prophetic voice, surfaced through countermemory, to point us towards the justice element of theological aesthetics. It is important first to explain Townes’ employment of countermemory so that we can

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\(^5\) Townes, Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil, 149.
see how these images are upended to speak prophetically and positively for Black womanhood. I do not seek to redeem these images, for they are archetypes and stereotypes thrust upon African American women. My aim is to explore their encounter of the divine in being a liberative voice and counter message in spite of the vile reasons for which they were created.

These images of Black women and girls rest solidly in the imagination of U.S. Culture and must be deconstructed and understood for the awful impact they have on how a stereotype is hate into “truth in memory and in history.” Incorporating all members of the African American community and treating them with equal dignity, humanity and spirituality in one’s theological formulation provide a framework for birthing a comprehensive and liberative ethical message.

**Countermemory**

To fully understand the identity of the Black woman, we must probe the necessity of memory. The definition of the African American community has been shaped by memory that has been informed and skewed by the dominant culture. To rebuke and rebut the hateful and co-opted narrative shaped by the oppressor and fully understand its identity, the Black community must recover authentic memories of black culture, family values and faith tradition.

Emilie Townes embarks upon a similar process when she interrogates several historical negative images or caricatures of Black women created by the ruling class. She uplifts historical images of Black womanhood and explores them in depth,

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6 Ibid., 3.
engaging the notion of countermemory. Townes challenges these images by explicating the motives and their usage in society to marginalize, dehumanize, and oppress. As she moves to hope and the future, she challenges the African American community to engage in countermemory, a vehicle through which our authentic and liberative identity can be claimed. I consider Townes’ employment of countermemory as a vehicle to illumine justice and its service within these images. Countermemory upends the original intent of these images to promote the prophetic message of salvation and justice within these re-envisioned images.

Townes believes, “the American story can be told another way, such that the voices and lives of those who, traditionally and historically, have been left out are now heard with clarity and precision. These voices can then be included into our conversations—not as additives—but as resources and co-determiners of actions and strategies—and the moral agents they are. These stories acknowledge the intimate humanity of our plurality and work with as much precision as possible to name its textures.”

Townes appeals to memory as a powerful tool in framing the African American story that shapes our identity. Memory gives service to the fact that we remain a people who want to do justice while securing our safety as a community. While memory can be a powerful element for proclaiming the gospel, Townes rightfully acknowledges the shortcomings and failure of memory. She admits, “True, memory

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8 Ibid.,188.
can fail and fail in spectacularly devastating ways. It can leave blanks and fill blanks with mistakes. It can be a collaborator with forces that only know suppression and denial of life and wholeness.”

When memory is viewed as owned, it can be manipulated to serve the motives and agenda of the storyteller. One could paint a flowery and grander picture to cover, negate or forget the painful, debilitating or atrocious experiences of the journey, for example. Despite this pitfall, Townes models an academic and authentic exploration of memory, demonstrating how memory can “provide hope in the midst of degradation and strength to continue to put one foot in front of the other in movements for justice.”

However, in order to accomplish such a task, memory must “challenge the false generalization and gross stereotypes often found in what passes for “history” in our social worlds and religious spaces.” In Townes’ Christian ethics formulated in a womanist framework, she embarks upon what she calls a gospel journey to explore identity and hope for the African American community. I will focus on her work of identity and countermemory as she interrogates historical images of Black womanhood. In doing so, she explores the past to build a story for moving forward.

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9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
11 Ibid.
Before exploring these images, let us understand Townes’ notion of countermemory. According to Townes, “Counter-memory is a way of remembering and forgetting that starts with the local, the immediate, and the personal. It starts with the particular and the specific and then builds outward toward a total story. Counter-memory looks to the past for the hidden stories excluded from dominant narratives and forces us to revise existing histories by supplying new perspectives about the past.” This concept is crucial in redefining the negative stereotypes with which the African American community has had to live. Townes’ practice of countermemory is a vehicle through which African Americans can reclaim, shape, and own their Black identity. The legacy of slavery regarding Black identity was influenced and owned by the oppressor and arguably incorrectly defined and presented. Townes cautions, “For when Black identity is property that can be owned by someone else, defined by someone else, created by someone else, shaped by someone else, and marketed by someone else; we are chattel now dressed in postmodern silks and linens.” In order to authentically and comfortably wear Black skin, the negative images of Black face and the prejudicial judgments of Black

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12 I primarily reference two of Townes’ works in exploring countermemory. In both of those works, Townes incorporates different spellings for the word “countermemory.” In her article, “Memory, Identity, and Hope: Reflections for American Baptist Ecclesiology in the 21st Century,” the spelling is hyphenated: “counter-memory.” In her book, Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil, it is a compound word: “countermemory.” In this dissertation, I will adopt the spelling of countermemory as a compound word. However, when quoting from either work, I will use the spelling as it appears in the writing.


14 Ibid., 192.
personhood from centuries of slavery must be addressed and reformulated. Townes concludes, “Counter-memory becomes a vehicle for reconstituting history.”\textsuperscript{15}

Townes’ seminal work, \textit{Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil}, incorporates countermemory to examine and explore five influential and painful images of Black womanhood. These images of the Black woman have influenced and defined African American women in an unhealthy and damaging way. They have sought to attack human dignity, deny humanness and denigrate personhood in Black women. Townes educates our community on the image of the “Mammy,” “Aunt Jemima,” “Sapphire,” “Tragic Mulatta” and Black Matriarch via countermemory to proclaim a liberative and humanizing story of survival. Townes brings to the surface a gospel in these historical stories that helps to replace the pain associated with recalling these images of the past. “For a gospel that helps us move from memories that may be false or true or simply misremembered, demands from us an unwillingness to ignore the mundane daily evils we spin by denying parts of our personhood.”\textsuperscript{16} The engagement of countermemory allows us to formulate such a liberative gospel,

\begin{quote}
Counter-Memory gives us ethical and theological reflections and sociocultural critiques that do not further erase and exclude women and gender in racial analysis, the multiplicity of sexualities, the socioeconomic stratification within and beyond Black cultures, the genuine valuing of age—young and old, the melange of religious world views sweeping head and heart and heart/body and spirit, the continuing impact/fall out/beat down of colonial and neocolonial mentalities on peoples of the African diaspora. But I must engage counter-memory with one crucial awareness: it is of little help if in my cultural and theological critiques, if my womanist Baptist thought, merely replaces the
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 194.
forms of supremacy we know so well with a postmodern Black slow drag of annihilation.\textsuperscript{17} Townes argues that it behooves us to examine these images because ignoring them, or worse accepting them uninterrogated, is detrimental to self-understanding and definition of Black identity. Black folks have never owned these images and they are still among us with their psychological, spiritual and emotional effects threatening and demoralizing us. Townes warns, “Because we often fail to examine caricatures and stereotypes, we never know ourselves or each other—only our false images that sit like so many rows of false teeth molded to fit someone else’s head. And, we often fail to grasp the full impact of what it means that Black folk did not and do not own these public identities of Black life.”\textsuperscript{18} Reading Townes, I understand that leaving them unexamined does produce a threat to developing, understanding and embracing a healthy sense of Black identity and more specifically—when looking at Mammy, Aunt Jemima, Sappire, Tragic Mulatta and Black Matriarch—Black womanhood. Moreover, I want to uplift the prophetic justice message screaming and pleading within these images unearthed by Townes by virtue of countermemory.

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 190.
Connecting to The Justice Within

In formulating her ethics, Townes is influenced by H. Richard Niebuhr’s scholarship. Townes reflects, “In many ways, I have been engaging in H. Richard Niebuhr’s responsibility ethics19 as I have tried to discern his basic question “What is going on?” by looking at identity as property, uninterrogated coloredness, empire and reparations, and religious values and public policy.”20 For Townes, the most pressing part of Niebuhr’s ethic is his notion of social solidarity.21 The aspects of community, communal connection and communal accountability are important elements to be considered in the ethics discussion. It seems this is where vitality and life exist for Townes in examining the cultural production of evil and implications for the African American community. Townes argues, “For me, life and wholeness (the dismantling of evil/the search for and celebration of freedom) is found in our individual interactions with our communities and the social worlds, peoples, and life beyond our immediate terrains.”22 It is in these areas that Townes engages Niebuhr and even challenges some points. She acknowledges a rub in common understanding of Niebuhr’s social solidarity. “For him, responsibility is possible if all the members of a community of moral agents maintain a relatively consistent scheme of interpretations of what is going on. Here, Niebuhr’s ethic may be tempted to slide into a form of positivist epistemology with its emphasis on common cause and reciprocal loyalty.”23

20 Townes, Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil, 3.
21 Ibid., 6.
22 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
Townes locates some redemption in Niebuhr's thought as Niebuhr does recognize that a key feature of social solidarity is its relational nature.\textsuperscript{24} When Townes examines the historical images of Black womanhood, the relational aspect of social solidarity is unearthed.

In \textit{Cultural Production of Evil},\textsuperscript{25} Townes takes up the weakness and gap in Niebuhr’s social solidarity and stretches the conversation in areas she believes Niebuhr wished to engage (but certainly left unaddressed). Townes notes, “The interplay between forms of structural evil, stereotype of Black womanhood, and literary guide that frames this book serves as a way to encourage the dialogue that Niebuhr so wished to engage in with moral decision-making.”\textsuperscript{26} Building on Niebuhr’s foundation and point of agreement, Townes affirms, “that we must pay attention to what is happening around us and look long beyond the surface of events, theories, or positions.”\textsuperscript{27} Consequently, Townes presents several stereotypes of Black womanhood to “point out that our failure to live an engaged and responsible life often produces fractured stories that serve to maintain a grasping social order that consumes us in its drive to possess and control creation itself. If we refuse to engage in dismantling systemic and intentional structural evil, we only leave a parched and desolate land for generations to come.”\textsuperscript{28}

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid.
Examining these stereotypes and Townes’ notion of countermemory allows us to explore Townes’ womanist ethics and its implications for womanist aesthetics because we have on center stage images that have historically defined the personhood of the African American female and the African American female body. Townes states her “use of counter memory throughout this book does not view memory and history as suspect. Rather, they too are natural dance partners—moving from Quickstep to Jitterbug.”29 The images of Aunt Jemima, Sapphire…the Tragic Mulatta…are counter memory. They unsettle and disrupt notions of identity as property, uninterrogated coloredness, reparations and empire, religious values in public policymaking, and solidarity. They challenge the images of the fantastic imagination that celebrate noxious stereotypes of Black women, children, and men.30 They also provide an alternative and more creative or “real” space to better understand who we are in our diversity. Rather than assume that such knowledge will destroy our ways of living, it offers the possibility that they will, in fact, enhance our lives—all our lives. It is to begin the work of dismantling evil.31

The conversation on social solidarity engages the topic of identity. In order for a womanist ethics to engage identity, it must treat human dignity. Townes launches from Baldwin’s critique when he explored Richard Wright’s novel Native Son. Baldwin lamented, “He is tired of Black folk being treated as mere social agendas

29 Townes notes: Jitterbug is more formally known as Jive. This dance began in the United States but took root in wartime Europe. It is also the Lindy or swing. Jive music is usually the “big band” swing music with a lot of brass and woodwind.
30 Townes, Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil, 27.
31 Ibid.
rather than as flesh and blood. He notes that dehumanization is never a one-way street, that the loss of identity—be it stolen, borrowed, denied, or annihilated—has consequences far beyond those who are the immediate victims.\(^32\) Townes explores the impact on identity because it illumines a problem in American life. Townes asserts, “This problem [Baldwin’s critique] has not materialized out of the mists, but it is one that has tracked human history with deadly precision—treating our identity as property and commodity.”\(^33\) Treating identity does not only damage the victimized community, but it also, according to Townes, hurts America as a whole. Both the oppressed and the oppressors benefit from dismantling the problematic structure of commodification of identity. Townes informs us, “Blacks are not the only ones damned by treating identity as property. To be sure, there are winners and losers in this deadly commodification. However, the ways in which we have produced this weary state of affairs have been a group project in American life. We have used memory and myth and history to deceive ourselves—all of us.”\(^34\)

While African Americans survived being savagely captured and uprooted from their African homeland, inhumane traveling conditions of transiting the Middle Passage, centuries of dehumanizing American slavery, and Jim Crow and institutionalized racism, they are still living with the centuries old brand of property—considered three-fifths of a person. From the moment an African woman or man was captured and severed from her family tribe, her body, her life and even

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\(^{32}\) Ibid., 29.

\(^{33}\) Ibid., 30.

\(^{34}\) Ibid.
her name were no longer her own. Rather, she became property of the slave industry, property of the slave owner, hired property of white elites cooking and cleaning their homes, property of a racist, sexist, and classist American society in the twenty-first century. This was an avenue for not only owning the physical body of enslaved Africans but also eventually owning the identity of a Black person. In order to reclaim humanity, Black identity and Black personhood, the community had to reclaim ownership of its own identity. Townes masterfully explores Black identity and posits a mechanism for ownership. Townes introduces countermemory and its utility,

Counter-memory prompts a necessary and vital intra-communal analysis that is crucial for our ecclesiological conversations that must also challenge ourselves in the many colors of peoples here this morning and within the American Baptist family to begin to refuse to continue to live in the gross stereotypes and/or sentimentality that are often the main ways we see each other and believe each other to truly be.\footnote{Townes, “Memory, Identity, and Hope: Reflections for American Baptist Ecclesiology in the 21st Century,” 194.}
I present Townes’ discussion on four images of Black womanhood. She interrogates each image to explicate their ethical implications. Then, she employs countermemory to preach another message out of these images. The new direction in which she pushes these images provides insight to the justice work I connect in theological aesthetics. I appreciate how these images of Black womanhood are resurrected into the service of liberation. It is the encounter with the divine, via countermemory, that the scarred, blemished and broken can experience healing and new salvific life.

**Mammy Image**

From slavery through the Jim Crow era (1877-1966), the Mammy image served the economic, political, and social interests of White ideology and history in the United States. Her caricature was used to prove that Black women (and by extension children and men) were happy with their enslavement. In fact, Mammy became a central figure in the plantation legends of the Old South.\(^36\) The Mammy image was

\(^{36}\) Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*, 31.

Townes references Cheryl Thurber, “The Development of the Mammy Image and mythology” in *Southern Women: Histories and Identities*, ed. Virginia Bernhard, Betty brandon, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, and Theda Purdue (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1992), 87, 91. Her image reached its greatest popularity with Progressivism, the New South movement, and the later phases of the Confederate Lost Cause movement. The Progressive era (1896-1913) featured the goal of reconciliation between the New South and the North, agricultural diversity, and industrialization in the South. The New South movement was conservative in its racial ideology. It believed in the facial inferiority of Black folk while decrying the belief in equality and the radical belief that Blacks were savages and should be driven out of the United States. The Lost Cause Movement (1880-1930) was a celebration of the Confederate South by veterans of the Civil Way. The next generation of Confederates, represented by groups such as the United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Sons of Confederate Veterans, memorialized and celebrated their Confederate heritage. This second generation emphasized preserving now fading memories.
constructed to cover up the horrendous abuses perpetrated on the Black woman body. For example, Mammy was constructed to refute, “abolitionist claims that slave owners sexually exploited their female slaves, especially the light-skinned ones. Mammy is constructed as an ugly antidote to such charges. After all, who would abuse a desexualized, fat, old Black woman when the only other morally viable alternative was the idealized White woman?” In order to prove their claim of the Black woman being undesirable and that “a good respectable White man” would not have her, Mammy was constructed as not sexual or sensual—she was and is completely deeroticized and safe. The intent is for Mammy to “provide safety for an idealized patriarchal White family structure—she provided safety for White men.”

This led to viewing the Black woman as ugly, unattractive, and asexual. This perpetuated the mindset that female attributes of the Black woman, nappy hair, dark skin, thick hips and lips are not feminine. Beauty is defined by the physicality that is in stark contrast and negation of the portrait of the Black woman. Whatever the Black woman is not is what beauty is.

The Mammy image became a fantastic facade for the sexual exploitation of Black women by White men during the antebellum period. She is “confirmation that White men did not find Black women sexually attractive or desirable. To further emphasize the ugliness and undesirableness of a Black woman, the image of the quintessential woman was the white woman. Beauty was represented by flowing

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37 Ibid.
38 Ibid.
39 Ibid.
blonde hair, white skin, blue eyes, well-mannered, and gentle femininity. Beauty and womanhood are socially defined to possess the direct opposite physical attributes and characteristics of enslaved African women. “The heightened glorification of Mammy from 1906 onward corresponded to the changes in the role of women and in race relations. It is questionable that the rise of the Mammy and the ideal of the Southern Belle appearing simultaneously was a mere coincidence. The Southern Belle was traditional, sweet, innocent, beautiful, and White—she emerged with great enthusiasm during the drive for women’s suffrage. Mammy was a perfect counterpoint because she implied that Black women were fit to be only domestic workers,”\textsuperscript{40} observed Townes. With the Mammy image, Black womanhood is classified as property and dehumanized. Moreover, all human attributes are assessed as unattractive, unredemptive and undesirable thereby striping femininity from Black women. The Mammy image reconstructs the enslaved Black woman as an asexual entity given over to being property of the slaveowners to be utilized in any means that served the best interest, financially, sexually and/or socially by its owners.

The image confuses and distracts from the living proof of miscegenation...To be the perfect Mammy meant the Black woman must neglect her own family.\textsuperscript{41} It is clear that the physical image of Mammy is heavily influenced by popular culture. The rise of the Civil Rights and feminist movements helped clarify the racist and stereotypical image of the mythological Mammy. Mammy is best understood as the product of plantation legends featuring a bucolic, idyllic society with Mammy waiting

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 34-5.
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 32 quotes Thurber, “The Development of the Mammy Image,” 88.
upon White children—a representation that among the memories of White childhood never existed as prevalently as legend holds.\textsuperscript{42} The Mammy image gave rise to other “mothering” images like the \textit{Aunt Jemima} image. African Americans did not readily accept these images of their predicament and with cost, pushed back and fought against them. Their fight sometimes gave rise to birthing replacement images. “As Blacks demanded economic, racial, political, and social equality during the first half of the twentieth century, the Mammy became an increasingly popular entertainment industry figure.\textsuperscript{43} The first talking movie, \textit{The Jazz Singer} (1927), featured Al Jolson

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 36.

\textsuperscript{43} Townes footnote is included in its entirety because it outlines integral history and tracks the development of this imagery in radio and television. Townes footnote: The landmark film, \textit{Birth of a Nation} (1915), was based on Thomas Dixon’s racist novel, \textit{The Clansman}. Both in print and on the screen, the Mammy defends her White master’s home against black and White Union soldiers. Later with \textit{Gone With the Wind} (1930), the Mammy also fights Black soldiers whom she believes are threatening her White mistress. Hattie McDaniel won the 1950 Academy Award for best supporting artist for her portrayal of “Mammy.” She was the first African American to win an Academy Award and the is remained the case for the next 25 years. After a successful career as a singer in which she became the first Black person to sing on U.S. network radio, McDaniel went to Hollywood in 1931 in search of a film career. She began as an extra before capturing larger roles. When work was not available, she hired herself out as a domestic, a cook, or a washerwoman. When \textit{Gone With the Wind} premiered in December of 1939, none of the African American performers had been invited to join the party in still-segregated Atlanta. When McDaniels’s picture appeared on the back of a movie program, protests from White Atlantans prompted the destruction of the programs and new ones were printed. Mammy’s portrait was replaced eventually with Alicia Rhett as India Wilke.

As the twentieth century wore on, the Mammy stereotype was portrayed in the 1950-1953 television show “Beulah.” The lead character, portrayed McDaniel on the radio and Ethel Water and Estelle Beavers on television, was a domestic servant for the White Henderson family. This was the first nationally broadcast weekly television series starring an African American in the leading role. A White male actor, Marlin Hurt, originally created the role the Fibber Mc Gee and Molly radio program. The character was spun off onto “her” own radio show in 1945. After Hurt’s death in 1946, Hattie McDaniel played the role on radio until her death in 1953. The program was a half-hour situation comedy that revolved around the middle-aged black domestic, Beulah, the so-called queen of the kitchen, and the White family for whom she worked—Harry and Alice Henderson and their young son, Donnie. Beulah’s boyfriend Bill Jackson ran a fix-it shop, but spent most of his time hanging around Beulah’s kitchen. Beulah’s other Black companion was Oriole, a featherbrained maid who worked for the White family next door. The shows story
in Blackface singing “Mammy.” In 1934, *Imitation of life* told the story of a Black maid, Aunt Delilah (played by Louise Beavers), who inherited a pancake recipe. Aunt Delilah gives the recipe to Miss Bea, her boss, who successfully markets the recipe and offers Aunt Delilah a 20 percent interest in the pancake company.⁴⁴

**Aunt Jemima**

Aunt Jemima emerged from the Mammy image. Aunt Jemima began when a White man decided to be Black and a woman. He dressed in drag, put on blackface, and became a part of the minstrel tradition with the goal of singing the White man’s cares away.⁴⁵ For White people, particularly White elites, the image of Aunt Jemima was a marketing and advertising vehicle not only for profit making via pancake mix but also to sell the idea of slavery past and the New South, the Antebellum South.

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⁴⁴ This footnote describes the public image portrayed of how Black women denied their own families to serve the White families. Townes footnote: The movie dialogue betrays Black women:

*Miss Be a*: “You’ll have your own car. Your own house.”

*Aunt Delilah*: “My own house? You gonna send me away, Miss Bea? I can’t live with you? Oh, Honey Chile, please don’t send me away. How I gonna take care of you and Miss Jessie (Miss Bea’s daughter) if I ain’t here…I’se your cook. And I want to stay your cook.”

Reading the recipe,*Aunt Delilah*: “I gives it to you, honey, I makes it you a present of it.”

Aunt Delilah worked to keep the White family together even though her own family disintegrated. Her self-hating daughter rejected her and ran away from home to pass for White and Aunt Delilah dies from a broken heart near the end of the movie.

⁴⁵ Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*, 38.
Aunt Jemima literally came to life from the pens of advertising copy editors and illustrators to “grace” the pages of ladies’ magazines... Real-life Aunt Jemimas toured country fairs and grocery stores and club bake offs to sell the pancake dough of a White advertising industry that understood that images sell... Speaking in dialect, the various Aunt Jemimas told “inoffensive” tales of slavery as they gave away samples at fairs, grocery stores, and other public gatherings.46

Aunt Jemima was a subjugated being that showcased the so-called humane side of servitude and slavery. She served as a reminder of the Good Ol’ South where the White elites would have cooks, house negroes and the like. Aunt Jemima was the big, fat, and dark-skinned cook who produced delectable eats for White households. Now, these products and this fallacy about slavery could be purchased and consumed legally and guilt-free. Cleverly, the ads removed White female domestic labor and replaced it with Black labor—Aunt Jemima—a “real” person and slave.47 In possessing an Aunt Jemima product, “Subtly or otherwise, the ads suggested that although White women could not have Aunt Jemima in the kitchen (or any other hired servant), they could mimic the lifestyle of a south plantation mistress—they could possess Aunt Jemima but not be Aunt Jemima.”48 The Aunt Jemima image allowed Whites to continue to lower the status of Black women in society, fixing them as servants, Mammy and house slaves—the best contribution they are capable of

46 Ibid., 39.
47 Ibid., 41.
48 Ibid.
making in society. To add insult to injury, Whites were again making money from the dehumanization and marginalization of Black personhood.

Initial attempts of African American culture to reclaim, re-orient or even redeem the Mammy image—and its successors Aunt Jemima and other “Aunt” images negatively impacted African American personhood. Initial attempts led to unintended consequences. Manthia Diawara argues that instead of freeing Aunt Jemima and other Black stereotypes from the White fantastic imagination, attempts to make stereotypes positive tend to reinforce the immediacy of these stereotypes in our collective imagination.49 Diawara explains the root of the negative consequences, “New interest in blackface stereotypes involves historical, political, and aesthetic implications that are more complex than allowed by the debates over positive and negative images. Every stereotype emerges in the wake of pre-existing ideology that deforms it, appropriates it, and naturalizes it. The blackface stereotype, by deforming the body, silences it and leaves room only for white supremacy to speak through it.”50 The Mammy image moved Black identity to property to be owned and defined. This is a major theo-ethical dilemma and Townes describes what it means for her to wrestle with it, “Ultimately, property means owning and ownership and possession—be it a moral-philosophical view of ownership or a sociolegal view of ownership, I am caught with a churning in the pit of my womanist theoethical stomach because the


50 Townes, Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil, 43. internal quote is from Manthia Diawara, “The Blackface Stereotype,” www.tiac.net/users/thaslert/m_diawara/blackface.html as quoted by Townes.
arrogance of all these definitions is manifest in the assumption of control and autonomy—being politically, socially, and theoethically free.”

However, Townes does not settle for the resolve that reclaiming or readdressing these images is totally detrimental or is without redemption. Rightfully, Townes recognizes these images cannot remain uninterrogated or be ignored. Consequently, she turns to the power of countermemory. While Aunt Jemima was used to commodify Black identity, Townes, via countermemory, posits a more useful purpose for Aunt Jemima, and the other images and stereotypes, serving the ethics agenda.

Townes’ countermemory addresses the dilemma in the commodification of Black identity. “Countermemory enables us to value identity even as we analyze and critique the formation and practice of identity. It is important to remember that Black identity is not a mere commodity formed as a natural by-product of culture and genetics and theological systems. It is also a social reality and socially constructed.”

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51 Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*, 44-5.

Townes notes: The sociol egal view refers to the factual legal arrangements of ownership. Positive human laws regulate, tolerate, or forbid transactions and relations among individual persons. The moral-philosophical view of ownership looks for the meaning of the concept of ownership-as-it-ought-to-be. Here, ownership is a relation between the owning person and all others to whom the owner excludes from or to whom the owner concedes possession. See Charles Avila, *Ownership: Early Christian Teaching* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983).

From the perspective of Christian ethics, autonomy, at its most basic level means self law or self rule. It also refers to persons and their actions. Hence the autonomous person is none who has the mental capacities to reflect on and chose her or his moral framework. A key ingredient in this understanding is the notion of choice. I contend, following the line of argument presented by Katie Geneva Cannon in *Black Womanist Ethics* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1988), that for peoples who live in situations of oppression, choice is often severely circumscribed, hence altering and challenging the traditional moral landscape of most normative ethical reflection.

52 Ibid., 54.
African Americans need to reconstruct their identity in their community and communal understanding. The work is ongoing and I find that theological aesthetics is an emerging area that can tackle this work. From her ethical lens, Townes observes, “To treat identity as property is one form of the cultural production of evil. The task of womanist ethical reflection is to continue to mine the motherlode of memory and history to explore this dynamic. If it does not, then it will collapse into a meaningless drivel of hosannas or inconsequential theological escape hatches that only serve to reify demonic stereotypes in theoethical discourses meant to break the fine rain of death on Black identities and realities.”\textsuperscript{53} The solution is to name ourselves. “We must name ourselves with precise anger and ornery love while churning justice and truth into a new analysis of our ethical dilemma. The dilemma of what it means to shape and name and create an identity forged by the hope found in those who are still here...”\textsuperscript{54} In this dilemma articulated by Townes, I find theological aesthetics’ implications for womanism or a launching point for womanist theological aesthetics. The notion of naming and re-creating our identity is beneficial. The African American community, encouraged by the hope that lies within us, must actively engage the work of formulating a truth and justice where we wholeheartedly understand and embrace that we also image God, our creator.

\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 55.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid.
Sapphire

Townes engages another image and tackles racism and colorism. Race is an important consideration when discussing justice. How society understands race, engages in race relations and treats a people based upon race are all justice issues. Townes says, “it is crucial to remember that inclusion does not guarantee justice; and access to a social order that is inequitable and grossly maldistributed cannot transform fragmented communities or whole one. Race is an “interesting” notion to consider in this context.” Townes uses the image of Sapphire to “navigate the rocky terrain of race and coloredness,” because “it is necessary to find a tough conductor” to question and victoriously journey through racism and colorism. Sapphire is indeed that tough conductor for examining and interrogating race due to the toughness of the image’s characteristics as Townes outlines,

Sapphire began as a joke in plays and minstrel music shows. She was smaller than Mammy and Aunt Jemima, but stout. She had medium to dark brown complexion, and she was headstrong and opinionated. She was loud-mouthed, strong-willed, sassy, and practical. The Sapphire stereotype made her husband look inferior, and in doing so, her image set detrimental standards for the Black family.

Such a negative stereotype may not seem to be a likely candidate for an incisive and progressive examination of race and racism. However, I argue that it is in this stereotype of the masculinized Black female who must be subordinated so that the Black male can take his “rightful” place in society, that we find the necessary resources and

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55 Ibid., 58.
56 Ibid., 60.
57 Ibid., 60-61.
methodological edginess to cut through much of the prattle and utter nonsense that often accompanies critiques of race and racism.\textsuperscript{58}

Sapphire\textsuperscript{59} is created to crush the Black man and his identity. Sapphire is a contrasting image of the Mammy and Aunt Jemima who were designed to de-eroticize the Black woman. Sapphire serves to extend the Mammy image and highlights the domineering characteristics of the Mammy image. Townes compares Mammy and

\textsuperscript{58} Sapphire began as a joke in plays and minstrel music shows. She was smaller than Mammy and Aunt Jemima, but stout. She had medium to dark brown complexion, and she was headstrong and opinionated. She was loud-mouthed, strong-willed, sassy, and practical. The Sapphire stereotype made her husband look inferior, and in doing so, her image set detrimental standards for the Black family.

Townes, \textit{Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil}, 61.

\textsuperscript{59} Based on the character Sapphire Stevens in the “Amos ’n Andy” television show of the 1950s, the contemporary Sapphire has the ability to make Black men and White folks look like fools, partly because she is unfeminine, strong, and independent.”

Townes notes: Sapphire Steven’s husband was The Kingfish. The Amos’n Andy Show began as a black face radio, Sam and Henry, show created by two White actors, Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll in 1928. When it moved to television in the summer of 1951, the show was recast with Black actors. Only Ernestine Wade (Sapphire) and Amanda Randolph (Mama) were brought over from the radio cast. The show centered on the activities of George Stevens (Tim Moore), a conniving character who was always looking for a way to make a fast buck. He was the head (Kingfish) of the Mystic Knights of the Sea Lodge and often involved his lodge brothers with his schemes. This put him at odds with them and his wife Sapphire, and her mother, Mama, in particular, didn’t trust him at all. Andy Brown (Spencer Williams, Jr.) was the most gullible of the lodge members—husky, well-meaning, but rather simple. Amos (Alvin Childress) was a minor character and the philosophical cabdriver who narrated most of the episodes. Madame Queen (Lillian Randolph) was Andy’s girlfriend and Lightnin’ (Horace Stewart) was the slow-moving janitor at the lodge.

The NAACP and other Civil rights groups protested the series from its inception as fostering racial stereotypes. The show had a large following during its two-year run on CBS run. It was widely rerun on local stations for the next decade. In 1963 CBS Films, which was still calling Amos ’n Andy one of its most widely circulated shows, announced that the program had been sold to two African countries, Kenya and Western Nigeria. Soon, an official of the Kenya government announced that the program would be banned in his country. In the summer of 1964, a Chicago station announced that it was resuming reruns. This announcement was met widespread and bitter protests. CBS found its market for the films suddenly disappearing, and in 1966 the program was withdrawn from sale, as quietly as possible. The show (72 episodes) is available once again through DVD and video release.
Sapphire, “Sapphire usurps the traditional (patriarchal, sexist) role of Black men. She is as tough, efficient, and tireless as Mammy. However, where Mammy operated within the prescribed boundaries for womb, Sapphire is firmly anchored in a man’s world. Sapphire not only threatens Black womanhood but also the communal relationship between black men and women. Sapphire could unravel African American culture and community as well as individual personhood.

Sapphire is constructed as malicious, vicious, bitchy, loud, bawdy, domineering, and emasculating. These are the characteristics that strengthen the Sapphire image making it a tough and roughed conductor for treating racism. Townes finds these characteristics are necessary to disrupt comfortable racisms. Sapphire exploits an old legacy negative stereotype of the woman, “inherently and inescapably evil.” While Mammy served the purpose of attacking the physicality of the Black woman, Sapphire is designed to destroy the interior of the Black woman. Sapphire is used to indict an entire race. Sapphire introduces a great threat to Black womanhood and her race that others leverage in order to denigrate the Black woman. Townes posits, “Sapphire is an image rooted in antifemale ideology and imagination.”

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62 Ibid.

63 Ibid.

64 Ibid.
Young argues that when the numerous negative connotations of blackness are joined with women, “the most pernicious and demonic images” emerge.\(^6^5\)

Townes spotlights Sapphire to address racism and colorism and presents this culminating argument prior to outlining moral benchmarks for a rigorous theoethical analysis of race and racism. This image of the bitter, hostile, cold, and domineering Black woman who is in charge is dangerous for the White imagination. Whites had no “safe” place to put a Black woman who cared for her family, who had ideas and could articulate them, who did not relate to White culture—by choice—and who was fiercely protective of her family, keeping everyone (men included) in line, fed, and cared for if that is what the situation demanded. This kind of Black woman was impossible for the White imagination to grasp and conjure. She is fully human, and as such, she had to be demonized to fit the worlds of blackness the White imagination sought to create. Ultimately, Sapphire is threatening to authority/hegemony.

One final thing about Sapphire—she is always in control of herself when her hands are on her hips and she is practicing the fine art of being loud-mouthed. Her rage is precise and her speech is like chicory coffee—strong, black, and with a bite. These are the characteristics that I contend are needed to untangle and demystify the intractability of racism. Being polite (dispassionate) about it has not worked.\(^6^6\)

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Townes articulates a womanist ethics from the mouth of Sapphire. I envision a secure, sassy Black woman with her hands firmly placed on her hips, her eyes making direct contact with her oppressor and with audacity and commitment proclaims her truth, THE truth. A womanist social ethic that springs from Sapphire’s steel-edged tongue must embrace all segments of society if it is to be thorough and rigorous and continue to push us into a critical dialogue that enlarges the boundaries of our humanness. When I engage the varying manifestations of Sapphire, I note that each woman takes precise aim at a dimension of racism and colorism. This is essential because oftentimes racism is addressed and treated as a one-dimensional issue. Sapphire exposes that fallacy and her sisters combat the multi-faceted and multi-dimensionality of racism. Townes introduces us to the powerful Sapphire sisters; theological aesthetics spotlight their prophetic voice and activism seeking to dismantle racism. Minimally, it brings in to clarion focus the multi-dimensionality of racism and the alarming expanse of its death reach.

Using *Practical Sapphire* to challenge the binary understanding of race as Black-White, countermemory allows the Black women to speak through practical Sapphire, put our hands on our hips, appropriate her sassiness and reject the Black-White binary. Townes judges “this antagonistic dualism does not help us address the intractability of racism because it tempts us to continue to use hackneyed moral and theoretical traps that allow culture to be the convenient escape hatch to avoid looking at the way in which *coloredness* cultivates the social construction of race. Turning on a black-white primary axis obscures the ways in which whiteness, as a racial
construction, functions as privilege and power on national and global stages.” Practical Sapphire debates that Whiteness is pristine beauty and Blackness is evil ugliness. A tremendous attack on Black woman personhood is skin color. Skin color was one’s marker for humanity, one’s membership card to the exclusive club of human society. Whiteness became the standard definition for humanness and beauty.

While over time the dominant culture had to relinquish its hold on humanity as defined by Whiteness—at least publicly due to its illegality—the oppressor still held firm to Whiteness as the defining standard of beauty and good. While a Black woman might have been stamped as human, she was not recognized or affirmed as a beautiful creation by God the Creator.

Townes appeals to Obstinate Sapphire to interrogate coloredness. The temptation to trend towards colorblindness does not combat racism or address the deep issues around race. Rather it is a dangerous mask that allows the problems to lay dormant and surface in catastrophic ways, for example shooting deaths of unarmed Black teenaged boys by White police officers or following African American shoppers around in high-priced boutiques in fear of them shoplifting (even when these shoppers are multimillionaires who were initially unrecognized by boutique workers). Obstinate Sapphire does not accept this vague colorblindness as a way to address race. Townes asserts, “Avoiding the messiness and complexity of race in the quest for a color-blind stance only serves to make palatable a bootlicking selective engagement with our genuine differences—differences that are assumed to be divisive rather than

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67 Ibid., 65.
enriching. In reality, much of the discourse on colorblindness actually brackets and ignores our coloredness. When taken to the extreme, it assumes a noncolored self who, when disrobed, is actually whiteness redux.”

Black woman personhood is worth fighting for, standing up for, sitting in for, boycotting for, and peacefully protesting for...for to deny the humanity of the Black woman has become nonnegotiable. To this, Sapphire has borne witness. Townes concludes, “The collective experience of Black women, like the experience of any subjugated group, can inform and challenge the dominant worldview. For a Black woman to forget her blackness is to deny a rich heritage that crosses the continent of Africa, moves in the waters of the Caribbean, touches the shores of South America, and is vibrant in the rhythms of Alice Coltrane, Miriam Makeba, Marian Anderson, and Sweet Honey in the Rock. She loses part of her very soul if she turns away from Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker, or Phillis Wheatley. African American women must continue to draw from the deep well of the lives of Fannie Lou Hamer, Cora Lee Johnson, and Septima Clark.”

In turning to Sapphire, Townes makes the appeal to history and tradition and asks, “how can an authentic ethic of justice be separated from where we have been and who we have been to one another?” It is necessary to ask and explore this question because Townes reminds us that, “The contemporary scene did not emerge from a vacuum; it evolved historically and is immanently contextual.”

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68 Ibid., 71.
69 Ibid., 76.
70 Ibid.
71 Ibid.
social ethic that springs from Sapphire’s steel-edged tongue must embrace all segments of society if it is to be thorough and rigorous and continue to push us into a critical dialogue that enlarges the boundaries of our humanness. Class, gender, and race analyses are crucial. But we need to challenge the ageism (of both the young and the seasoned), the homophobia and the heterosexism, the myriad issues around accessibility, the U.S. Color caste system, and the Pandora’s box around issues of beauty. The work of womanist ethics that is guided by Sapphire is not only eradicating a White cultural, political, and theological hegemony that names darkness less than, it is also exposing, examining, and eradicating the ways that Black folks help that system find new ways to deem us children of a lesser God.\textsuperscript{72} This is the justice message to which I connect and affirm in Sapphire and all her sisters. Sapphire’s encounter with the divine rejects any notion of the denial of her beauty. I am not focused on the contemporary understanding of beauty defined by body image, shape, size or voluptuousness. The beauty that Sapphire and I affirm is the \textit{imago Dei} within each Black woman that affirms and celebrates her humanity; beauty that attests to her humanity, the beauty that is her humanity.

\textsuperscript{72} Ibid.
Tragic Mulatta

Though skin color came to assume importance through generations of association with slavery, white colorists developed few qualms about intimate contact with black women. But raising the social status of those who labored at the bottom of society and who were defined as abysmally inferior was a matter of serious concern. It was resolved by insuring that the mulatto would not occupy a position midway between white and black. Any black blood classified a person as black; and to be black was to be a slave...By prohibiting racial intermarriage, winking at interracial sex, and defining all mixed offspring as black, white society found the ideal answer to its labor needs, its extracurricular and inadmissible sexual desires, its compulsion to maintain its culture purebred, and the problem of maintaining, at least in theory, absolute social control.73

The Tragic Mulatta74 comes center stage and provides an opportunity via countermemory to explore empire in American face. The Tragic Mulatta image, ironically, was contrived by white abolitionists. Even so, this image was a harmful image. From an ethical perspective, Townes pursues “How...the Tragic Mulatta stereotype legends function as a mediating ethic in understanding empire in American face.”75 The Tragic Mulatta emerged in the nineteenth century in ...stories, novels, and plays on biracialism [that] featured the Mulatta as a tragedy for Blacks.


74 The Tragic Mulatta is the unabashed creation of the White imagination. Abolitionist Lydia Maria Child first brought her into print as Rosalie in the 1842 short story “The Quardroons” and again a year later as Rosa in the shot story “Slavery’s Pleasant Homes,” both published in The Liberty Bell. The character of Rosa is more radical than Rosalie. In a departure from the more common stereotype of the Tragic Mulatta, Rosa loves a Black slave and they openly rebel against their master. Rosa is whipped to death for her rebellion—despite the fact that she is pregnant.

75 Townes, Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil, 85.
Generally, abolitionist writers such as Child, Elizabeth Livermore, and Dion Boucicault portray a pitiful creature bound by race and sex to tragic, hegemonic death. The Tragic Mulatta appears as the heroine in many abolitionist tracts as the light-skinned woman of mixed race. She is beautiful, virtuous, and possesses all the graces of White middle-class true womanhood. Ignorant of her mother’s race and status, she is usually the daughter of an enslaved mother and slave-owning father. She believes she is White and free until her father’s death reveals her real status and race. She is formally enslaved and then deserted by her lover who is usually a White man and then dies, tragically, a victim of the racial and sexual dynamics of the peculiar institution. As exotic other, “the Mulatta underscores the conflation of color and gender in a socioeconomic system designed to produce a cheap labor pool.”

The Tragic Mulatta image has negative implications on the humanity of Black woman personhood. This is more complex given that these authors, such as Child, “sought to elicit sympathy and outrage against slavery and were ardent advocates of its eradication. Yet, as we see later in the creation of Topsy by Harriett Beecher Stowe, this figure reinforces prejudice. In this case, color is indeed the basis because her light skin attracts White readers’ identification with her while her Black heritage condemns her to misery.” The assault on Black womanhood caused spiritual, emotional and psychological scars on Black women. “The nearly white skin of the Mulatta is the image of the systemic racial and sexual violence. However, an

76 Ibid.
77 Ibid., 85-6.
78 Ibid., 86.
interesting divergence occurs between White abolitionist novelists and Black novelists in how they understand and bring the Mulatta to life. The Mulatta portrayed by White writers is usually a barrel drum of pathologies: self-hatred, depression, alcoholism, sexual perversion, and suicidal. In the twentieth century, the White image of the Mulatta is that of a selfish woman who gives up absolutely everything to live as a White person. The Mulatta character, Peola, in the 1934 movie *Imitation of Life* captures this self-annihilation: “Don’t come for me. If you see me in the street, don’t speak to me. From this moment on I’m White. I am not colored. You have to give me up.”

Using her notion of countermemory, Townes outlines how the Tragic Mulatta can be utilized to indict empire building in America. The difference between stereotype and complex reality is telling when placed within the context of empire building. As a commodity of the White imagination, the Tragic Mulatta represents the deceit of slavery and the sociopolitical and economic relations used to maintain it as a moral good in the face of massive dehumanization of all involved. In contemporary face, she becomes both the witness and critic of U.S. empire making and empire building—not of democracy or free-market capitalism. Here contemporary siblings in almostness are poor peoples, darker-skinned peoples, peoples who live outside of the West (which means most people), immigrants, and sexual minorities.

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79 Ibid., 87.
80 Ibid., 89.
Townes concludes, “The elite White imagination creates a world complete with images built on stereotypes of utter otherness. It is time to have an honest conversation about this with Chamoiseau’s observation that there are memories greater than memories as guide and prod. These legends, when spun at the service of hegemonic imagination, become evil sylphs with incredible destructive power. The Tragic Mulatta as a mediating ethic and a representative of the almostness that so many of us live in points to the fact that White liberal conceptions of race are often problematic and may not bring us any closer to reparations or a more balanced relationship between democracy and capitalism.”

The Tragic Mulatta spotlights the association that the White ruling class put on race and humanity. Humanity was not defined as a person created by God but rather a White person born into the ruling class. When Mulatta was believed to be a White women, purely White with no mixture or drop of Black blood, then she was affirmed and accepted as human and of equal standing to White women in society. However, the very second her Black heritage was discovered, she was outcast because she was Black and not human. Tragic Mulatta being of Black heritage was now imprinted as slave and not free, with evil and ugliness and not the *imago Dei*. According to White liberals, I ascertain through their treatment and understanding of this archetype, race defined humanity.

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81 Ibid., 109.
The Black Matriarch

Townes addresses epistemology in her womanist thought. This is necessary, Townes argues, because, “Epistemologies involve an interplay of ethical issues. This is particularly true when this exploration of knowledge and truth is grounded methodologically in Christian social ethics and an interdisciplinary framework that considers class, gender, and race such as womanist moral thought.”

According to Townes, theoethically, an exploration of epistemology focused on womanist thought must be conducted contextually. Just as liberation theologies are birthed out of and from the community, the same engagement is required to adequately and authentically examine and formulate a workable womanist epistemology. I find this a logical conclusion as I view this as a branch of liberation theology. Townes states, “The self-aware contextuality of womanist thought demands a passionate engagement with life where neutrality is impossible. ...Rather than divorce ethics and values from our consideration, we must use such insights to force ourselves to acknowledge the limits we place on how much of the rich diversity of our is-ness we actually know and to recognize that we do not know enough about others and ourselves globally.”

Townes questions another stereotype of Black womanhood in her exploration of womanist epistemology. Townes laments, “In the world views created by the fantastic hegemonic imagination, Mammy and her morphed twin Aunt Jemima have
historically represented the sexual and maternal embodiment of ideal Black womanhood—a perfect mother (to White children), a perfect slave to all. Sapphire is the castrating shrew whose mouth runs like a bell clapper. The Tragic Mulatta is the ultimate victim in whiteface and a revolutionary in blackface. Now I turn, in the midst of rethinking epistemology to better understand how unexamined religious values are a part of public policymaking, to the Black Matriarch. In doing so, I complete an arc from the older Mammy image in which Sapphire and the Tragic Mulatta have been touchstones. The Black Matriarch is the Mammy gone bad.”

Townes recounts, the Black Matriarch “is the domineering female head of the Black family in the United States. She is the single Black mother who was featured in the 1986 CBS special report, “The Vanishing Family: Crisis in Black America.” Yes, she is the one who Bill Moyers told us represents the moral depravity of Black childbearing. She is the one who represents the cause for all social problems because of her singleness and her blackness and her children.” The Matriarch represents Black women who refuse to be passive. This refusal leads to the stigmatization of Black women who insist on controlling their sexuality and fertility. These women do not serve the interests of the classist, racist, and sexist social order of the fantastic hegemonic imagination. They break the mold of what is acceptable for women and therefore they must be banished into a demonic image that represents pathology and moral depravity.

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84 Ibid., 115.
85 Ibid., 115-6.
86 Ibid., 117.
This stereotypical mindset leads to an unfortunate conclusion, that Black mothers are incapable of raising their children, deteriorate the Black family and are the cause of the poorly adjusted and mannered Black children who grow up to be criminals and menaces to society. How expedient—the perceived moral failures of Black children and Black men are placed in the laps of Black women. The Matriarch opens the floodgates for social theorizing about the intergenerational character of Black poverty through the transmission of values in Black families. Logically, one can conclude that The Black Matriarch becomes the failed Mammy. Mammy was adept at raising White children into productive members of society but The Black Matriarch fails motherhood.

While Townes has powerfully interrogated these images and stereotypes of Black womanhood and personhood and cleverly, through countermemory, used them to confront ethical issues such as empire building, poverty and economic disparity, racism and colorism, these images still hauntingly and negatively define African American women in the twenty-first century. Armed with these images, persons in power, policymakers and the dominant culture perpetrate harm systemically. Townes cautions, “In the hands of a fantastic hegemonic imagination, when yoked with the certain religious values, she and other stereotypes engender public policies that

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assume the worst about Black women (and all Black folk).”88 These images of Black woman personhood have led to the catastrophic misconception that Black women are ugly, over-sexed, andemasculating entities that should be owned, controlled and defined. Mammy, Tragic Mulatta, Aunt Jemima and Sapphire, according to the white dominant culture, have no human dignity or redeeming personal characteristics that inform and shape them as God’s creation.

Townes has thoroughly interrogated these images and produced a womanist ethics to counter the cultural production of evil resulting from them; we can begin a conversation on womanist theological aesthetics. Liberationists understand that such images or archetypes cannot be left to typify the African American community. Hence, even “Black artists concerned with producing work that embodies and reflects a liberatory politic know that an important part of any decolonization process is critical intervention and interrogation of existing repressive and dominating structures.”89 Townes systematically presented a womanist ethics in her exploration of these images and this is a rich launching pad for extrapolating justice and beauty from a resurrected image of Black womanhood. Reimagining Black personhood means combating these popular images that plague our society. While Townes utilizes countermemory as a method of reimagining these stereotypes and images, a well formulated womanist theological aesthetics might surface other methods, or even extinguish these images and create new ones. Nevertheless, these images are

88 Townes, Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil, 120.
prominent and have deeply influenced and in some ways informed (or enforced) the dominant culture’s definition of a Black woman. They simply cannot be ignored. Townes has provided deep and rich scholarship for our consideration.
Conclusion

I have two focal points for a womanist theological aesthetics. They are justice and beauty. Both engage the divine, are the divine mission for humanity and are divine blessings, yes, even for persons of color. Unfortunately, oppressors have vigorously sought to deny, disenfranchise, distort and dim these luminous manifestations of God’s presence and intimate connectedness with God’s creation. For an oppressed people, the experience of beauty and justice are restorative encounters with the divine. From Townes’ ethical discourse on the hegemonic imagination, I glean theological implications for theological aesthetics particularly speaking to justice. From Copeland’s theological anthropology, particularly when she proposes the Black woman as the new anthropological subject, I ascertain implications for theological aesthetics informing my focus on beauty. Of course, there are connections to beauty in Townes and to justice in Copeland's scholarship. In fact, finding elements of justice and beauty in both theologians’ scholarship provides a rich environment for leveraging the brilliance of these scholars.

Examining Townes’ theological ethics and Copeland’s theological anthropology produce a depth of knowledge from which I can explore implications for theological aesthetics in the African American context. In their scholarship, both Townes and Copeland probe threats to human dignity and personhood of African American women. Investigating Townes and Copeland facilitates surveying a fuller context for theological aesthetics as it pertains to Black woman personhood because I analyze both theological and ethical implications. Moreover, the connection between the
ethicist and theologian equips me to appraise womanist aesthetics from distinctly different vantage points that complement and inform each other. Copeland’s sentiments well articulate the value I locate in leveraging both scholars and tying together their work in my dissertation, “As an ethicist, [Emilie Townes] has been able to identify some very powerful currents in the culture that any theologian shall attend to in doing theology.”¹ This is exactly the endeavor I embarked upon in this dissertation. I attend to the cultural production of evil Townes identifies in the creation, proliferation and adoption of the demeaning archetypes of Black women. My exploration surfaced meaningful findings for my affirmation of Black woman personhood. The interplay between ethicist and theologian—Townes and Copeland—leads me to implications for formulating a womanist theological aesthetics defending Black woman personhood.

Both Townes and Copeland are in specific contexts that inform their scholarly work. Critics seek to judge contextual theology as limited, elementary or even heretical because it begins with a social location and speaks on behalf of and to the concerns of that context. However, this is the overwhelming strength in contextual theology: its relevance to the community and its connection of the divine at an imminent level with humanity. Copeland summarizes it brilliantly, “Our theology mediates between a cultural matrix and the role and significance of religion in that matrix.”² Womanist theological aesthetics is a contextual theology that prophetically

² Ibid.
affirms Black woman personhood. This liberation theology attends to the cultural current of dehumanizing African American women.

**Remnants of Beauty and Justice**

A cultural evil is the objectification, marginalization and ostracism of the Black woman. I explored Copeland’s thesis where she identifies the new anthropological subject as “exploited, despised, poor women of color.”

Similarly, my assessment of Copeland’s and Townes’ work presented in this dissertation leads me to a new subject for theological aesthetics, Black woman personhood. The starting point for theological aesthetics is a womanist perspective; hence a womanist theological aesthetics claims a new subject, the Black woman. Moreover, in exploring theological aesthetics and its contextuality, justice and beauty are the foundational elements of its theological formulation.

Theological aesthetics holds that in the encounter with Beauty there is an experience of the Divine. I point towards the emphasis in theological aesthetics that is based on the belief that within the realm of symbol and community, one finds a privileged expression of the encounter with the Divine and its articulation. Encountering God happens in community. For marginalized communities, the prophetic voice of the prophet who shares the community’s identity or social location

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4 This understanding of Beauty connects with classical definitions of Beauty (i.e. Plato’s formulation).
leads the oppressed in experiencing God as Liberator. Hence, a womanist construction of theological aesthetics must incorporate communal relationality. Moreover, a theological formulation should proclaim the community’s Beauty and advocate justice. Consequently, for a womanist theological aesthetics the new subject is affirming Black woman personhood particularly of the oppressed, marginalized and disenfranchised Black woman.

In Townes’ scholarship, I identify a major contributor to the detrimental cultural matrix that strives to deface and dehumanize Black women and women of color. The images and stereotypes created in the post-slavery era—outlined in chapter four—are poisonous to community building and solidarity. This cultural matrix, steeped in racism, sexism, and classism, claims my theological attention. Justice in the service of Beauty must attend to this ethical crisis of defining Black women by these archetypes. A womanist theological aesthetics is up to the task. Exploring Copeland’s scholarship, I have encountered a theological connection for theological aesthetics that can dismantle this cultural production of evil.

The interesting point of intersection for theological anthropology and theological aesthetics can be gleaned from Copeland’s passionate response to the challenge of Black humanity. Copeland charges, “the reply, ‘Black is beautiful!’ ‘Brown is beautiful!’ defies the hegemony of white racist supremacy, shakes the foundations of its unethical deployment of aesthetics and power. The insistence, ‘Black is beautiful!’ ‘Brown is beautiful!’ shouts a disregarded theological truth, nourishes and restores bruised interiority, prompts memory, encourages discovery
and recovery, stimulates creativity, acknowledges and reverences the wholly Other. To assert, 'Beauty is Black!' exorcises the ‘ontological curse’ that consigns the black body to the execrable and claims ontological space: space to be, space to realize one’s humanity authentically." The assertion reminds the oppressed that they are connected to the Divine and bear its imprint. The Beauty of Black and Brown—personhood—is in and from God.

In Copeland’s layered and compelling response, the notion that the black female body is made in the image of God bearing the *imago Dei* is pressed. “Beauty is consonant with human performance, with habit or virtue, with authentic ethical performance and action. Beauty is the living up to and living out the love and summons of creation in all our particularity and specificity as God’s human creatures, made in God’s own image and likeness” is the irrefutable conclusion. Affirming the beauty of the Black female is a justice issue. Embracing this justice concern allows the body of Christ to experience solidarity. A praxis of compassionate solidarity, justice-love, and care for the poor and oppressed is illustrative of humanity abiding in the “way” of Jesus. The resurrected Lord himself sends us into streets and alleys, shelters and schools, homes and hospices to find and feed those who are despised, abused, and marginalized. These children, women, and men are the only sure sign of

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6 Ibid.
his presence among us in our efforts to prepare a context for the coming reign of his God.\textsuperscript{7}

For a community who, historically, has been oppressed, liberation is a precious theological conviction. As the scripture proclaims, “So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.”\textsuperscript{8} Liberation theologians like Townes and Copeland understand that salvation means liberation. Salvation not only means being liberated from personal sin but also not being oppressed by systemic sin like racism, classism, or sexism. Salvation means liberty from all forms of oppression. Therefore liberation is inherent in salvation; salvation does not exist separate and apart from liberation.

Similarly, I argue that, in theological aesthetics, Beauty does not exist without Justice. Injustice is a threat to community; it dismantles and disrupts solidarity by dehumanizing one group and privileging another. Injustice mutilates and defaces the beauty that emanates from glorious solidarity in the body of Christ. Moreover, the archetypes of Black women, Mammy, Tragic Mulatta, Sapphire—to name a few—speak to the disfavoring of women of color. Justice emanates in their prophetic voices as they speak against societal ills—racism, colorism, dehumanization—and invites the body of Christ to encounter and experience the divine in solidarity with all humanity.

\footnote{7}{M. Shawn Copeland, “To Live at the Disposal of the Cross: Mystical-Political Discipleship as Christological Locus” in \textit{Christology: Memory, Inquiry, Practice} (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2003),193-194}

\footnote{8}{John 8:35 NRSV.}
Copeland’s Eucharistic solidarity is the hope of theological aesthetics as it embodies justice. Copeland’s calling “as a political theologian, [is to produce] work that interrogates the meaning of being human in cultural and social conditions that insult our humanity and mock our efforts at authentic solidarity.” This is also my vocation; it is the prophetic work to which I have been called. The compulsion that fuels my vocation draws me to tackle Black woman personhood.

I read a connection to justice for justice womanist theological aesthetics in Copeland’s explication of the Eucharistic body of Jesus Christ. Eucharistic solidarity for African American women is appropriated through justice. The Black body is within the Eucharistic body. The Eucharistic body finds its wholeness in the expression and equal affirmation of humanity of all of God’s people. God is embraced by Black women and their own because,

the sacramental meal of the Christian church grows from these notions of thanksgiving and gift. In this meal, the community of the faithful acknowledges, blesses, and praises the gratuitous gift of Jesus Christ. His ministry and his being in effect for us the very conditions of the possibility of claiming the gift of His body, person, and spirit; to dwell within the horizon of the magnolia Dei. Thus we embrace His Father as our own and seal our compassion and solidarity in the here-and-now.

I contrast Eucharistic solidarity with racism. Racism assassinates solidarity; it divides, oppresses and marginalizes. The Eucharist and racism both produce implications for the body, “Eucharist and racism implicate bodies—raced and

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gendered bodies, the body of Christ,”¹¹ one making a positive contribution and another having negative effects. Racism has detrimental and devastating results. “Racism focuses on and interprets the body through an aesthetic scale that hypostatizes phenotype; it rests on the separation of humanness from body.”¹² Moreover, Copeland argues, “As intrinsic evil, racism is lethal to bodies, to black bodies, to the body of Christ, to Eucharist. Racism spoons the spirit and insults the holy; it is idolatry.”¹³ Consequently, justice must be a foundational element of a womanist theological aesthetics. Justice battles racism. Justice annihilates the threat. Justice becomes an avenue of appropriating positive influences on the body. Justice is the vehicle for experiencing the Eucharistic body.

The Eucharist is a meal of justice because the meal engages a praxis of solidarity. This praxis of solidarity is meaningful to the unification of the body of Christ. “A Christian praxis of solidarity denotes the humble and complete orientation of ourselves before the lynched Jesus, whose shadow falls across the table of our sacramental meal. In his raised body, a compassionate God interrupts the structures of death and sin, of violation and oppression. A divine praxis of solidarity sets the dynamics of love against the dynamics of domination—recreating and regenerating the world, offering us a new way of being in relation to God, to others, to self.”¹⁴ This solidarity combats the evil of racism. “Eucharistic solidarity opposes all intentionally divisive segregation of bodies on the specious grounds of preference for race or gender

¹¹ Ibid., 107.
¹² Ibid., 107-8.
¹³ Ibid., 109.
¹⁴ Ibid., 126.
or sexual orientation or culture.”

Therefore, the meal that embodies the true body and blood of Jesus Christ—according to Catholic theology—or invokes Christological presence—according to most protestant theology—enfleshes freedom and compels partakers to act justly, embodying divine love. Justice materializes as “Eucharistic solidarity teaches us to imagine, to hope for, and to create new possibilities. Because that solidarity enfolds us, rather than dismisses ‘others,’ we act in love; rather than refuse ‘others,’ we respond in acts of self-sacrifice—committing ourselves to the long labor of creation, to the enfleshment of freedom.”

Powerfully, we have images and archetypes that resist the evil injustice for which they were created. The work of countermemory evidences for the African American community that accepting who we are leads us to know undeniably that we are the very beings God created us to be. Speaking our truth from that embodiment gives hope and energy that propels us into new possibilities. These are possibilities managed and held by our community and not created or limited by oppressors.

A New Aesthetic

While womanist theological aesthetics is an emerging theology, mechanisms already exist within the African American community for its proclamation and maturation. The institution of the Black Church provides a stable, powerful and ecumenical foundation for nurturing this emerging theology and giving it voice. A womanist theological aesthetics can touch the community and begin to offer hope,

\[15\] Ibid., 127.
\[16\] Ibid., 128.
liberation, and affirmation through the Black Church. In turn, it fortifies the strength of the community for resistance.

I return to the source from which enslaved Africans found their liberation: sacred word power. Sacred word power preserved the human dignity and the community of persons of African descent during slavery, through the Jim Crow era and now in contemporary times despite the cultural production of evil. Sacred word power embodies four elements: (1) reading the Bible, (2) prayer, (3) spirituals, and (4) naming. These elements unite to create a powerful source for tackling the aims of womanist theological aesthetics.

The prophetic voice of the Black Church in regard to womanist theological aesthetics is birthed out of leveraging the power of sacred word. I appeal to the Black Church to endeavor in a re-reading of the Bible via a womanist criticism. When singing the spirituals, let us be intentional about hearing the pained voices of our maternal ancestors and their stories in the song. When writing, reciting or reading prayers, let us re-imagine those prayers as being heard by God who images the Black woman. The power of sacred word opens a liberative door and prepares space for a liberative gospel. The proclamation of a liberative gospel is a formidable vehicle for delivering a womanist theological aesthetics. The black sermon can serve as a means to heal the wounded body and soul of African Americans, “The black sermon can be a
crucial instrument in the recovery and healing of distorted and wounded imagination.”

The black sermon has a checkered past and some baggage because it has been used as a tool to legitimize sexism, heterosexism and classism in the Black community. The context from which the sermon emerges—African American culture and religion, exegesis and theology, language and art—all too easily can be implicated in the legitimation of violence. African American women have been victimized by influential and powerful words that emerged from the rousing black sermon masquerading as the gospel. However, I entreat the true nature and undeniable influence of the black sermon. This sacred word can be redeemed and used as a constructive and liberate tool, “The sermon achieves its aesthetico-medico function only insofar as preacher and congregation participate in the retrieval of those meanings and values that constitute African American culture as a good, choice worthy, just, and beautiful way to live. The sermon’s ability to shape and to project realizations of aesthetic consciousness demonstrates just how imagination constitutes the ground not only of our cultural, social, and historical transformation but of our eschatological hope.” Just civil rights leaders used the Black pulpit to champion equal rights of the Black community so must the prophetic word affirming

18 Ibid.  
19 Ibid.
Black woman personhood and Black female Beauty must be heard from this sacred mantle.

Historically, the pulpit of the Black church was a powerful platform to galvanize, motivate and liberate the African American community. The prophetic sermons delivered by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. were crucial unifying and galvanizing messages from a liberative and true gospel that motivated and guided Blacks in the struggle of human dignity and freedom during the civil rights movement. The power in the sermon resides in its ability to become “a challenge to the members of the community to question, to analyze, and to transform their social and historical situation, and, to do so as and in community. It proposes practice solutions to the social dislocations of joblessness, homelessness, hunger, and poverty and thus ‘invites the congregation to make a decision for or against emancipatory praxis.’”20 The community and its members in response act out their self-determination and self-actuation in responsibly life-valuing ways. Consequently, the sermon evokes an aesthetic of redemption that orders a vision of solidarity. Moreover, the sermon enacts an aesthetic of liberation; it intentionally, attentively, intelligently, rationally, responsibly, and lovingly brings forth and tests fresh images, symbols, metaphors, and narratives; it engenders a nondominative, anti-violent, nonsexist, truly human and Christian future.”21 The aesthetic of redemption partnered with the aesthetic of liberation affirms Beauty in woman personhood that is illumined by Eucharistic solidarity where the imago Dei is imprinted in the tapestry of diversity.

20 Ibid., 45.
21 Ibid.
Recognizing the influence and powerful voice of the sermon in the Black church, I challenge the Black church to preach a new aesthetic. The sermon is a vehicle for serving this imperative. “Contemporary Christian churches, and black Christian churches in particular, must affirm the sacredness and transcendent quality of black human life, of the black woman’s human life and the sacredness of the black human body, of the black woman’s body, sex, and sexuality, specifically.”

I argue the sermon is a powerful vehicle, maybe even a necessary vehicle, through which the sacredness of black human life should be affirmed because it has been a misogynistic, classist and oppressive voice against African American women.

The preached word from the pulpits in Black churches has done great damage to Black woman personhood as it subjugated women by lifting up skewed understanding of submission, obedience and silence of women in the church, in their homes and by extension in the world. Copeland correctly surmises, “The sermon can serve as one mediation of this affirmation in this retrieval of a notion of the human person as a dynamic moral agent, rather than a passive consuming being who is the reductive product of advertising and marketed change.” The sermon can not only preach a new aesthetic but in doing so, reform the Black church that has opened its doors to sexism, classism and heterosexism. Formerly used as a vehicle of hate, it must be redeemed as a resurrected voice of love and equality.

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23 Ibid.
Historically, sermons in the Black church inform the Black community and provide the marching orders. Because of its influence, “As perhaps the chief exemplar of an African American (Christian) world-view, the black sermon is also the key to understanding and projecting this worldview.”24 Stephen Henderson’s concept of “mascon” could be employed to correct the historical path of Black sermons. According to Henderson, the word mascon denotes words that mediate a “massive concentration of Black experiential energy which powerfully affects the meaning of Black speech, Black song, and Black poetry.” Henderson contends that “certain words and constructions seem to carry an inordinate charge of emotional and psychological weight, so that whenever they are used they set all kinds of bells ringing, all kinds of synapses snapping, on all kinds of levels.”25 A viable path to reclamation via mascon images and symbols exists. Mascons have played an integral role in the African American community in fortifying our faith and strengthening our pursuit of liberty. According to Copeland, for generations African Americans have used mascons for four reasons:

one, to remember and to pass on their unspeakable suffering under slavery, their thirst for life, their unyielding spirit, and their relationship with the Divine; two, to bind the people to each other and to themselves, although this may never be fully realized in the here and now; three, to liberate themselves, if only for a brief time, from the material power of the capitalist dispensation; and four, to transcend societal and personal limitation. The use of mascons in the black sermon is all but required.26

24 Ibid., 189.
The use of mascons in preaching a new aesthetic is vitally important. It is life giving and liberating to combat the harm done to Black women. “Longstanding theological debates about the constitution and origin of female being (body and soul) have left black women wounded and suspicious of their authentic humanity. And, although we recognize that the soul is without gender, we still doubt women’s full participation in the imago dei,”"27 explains Copeland. A mascon that specifically addresses the question of Black woman personhood, such as Black female Beauty, can help Black women remember their history and spirit, bind them together, liberate them, and allow them to transcend all that would seek to oppress them.

The sermon is the vehicle by which the preacher defines, interprets and instructs the congregation in what it means to live a just and holy life, what it means to be God’s own people in history. Thus, the people are called to grasp, incarnate, and proclaim the liberating character and deed of God.28 The black sermon can serve as an instrument in the recovery and healing of the distorted and wounded imagination that is the ground of representation. At the same time, religion and theology, language and art all too easily can be insinuated in the legitimation of misogyny and sexism. Thus, the sermon achieves an aesthetic function only insofar as preacher and congregation participate in the retrieval of those meanings and values that affirm the body, sex, and sexuality as good and beautiful. The ability of transformed black

28 Ibid.
religious discourse to shape and to project new representations of aesthetic consciousness demonstrates just how imagination constitutes the ground not only of our historical transformation, but of a critical hope. Finally, black women have become signs and signifiers; they stand, as Gray White says, “at the crossroads of two of the most well-developed ideologies in America, that regarding women and that regarding the Negro. The sermon can provide a new representative aesthetic that intentionally, attentively, intelligently, rationally, responsibly, and lovingly purges and recovers mascons; that brings forth and tests fresh images, symbols, metaphors, and narratives; that supports black women and men in planning and building a non-diminutive, anti-violent, nonsexist, truly human and Christian future.”

I propose the black sermon and its aesthetical contributions can be a launching pad for an academic conversation on Black theological aesthetics and a womanist theological aesthetics. Returning to the allegorical drama, El Divino Narciso, we hear from Sor Juana. Sor Juana portrays Christian principles and characters via secular sources. In summary, one of the main characters, Naturaleza Humana, becomes ugly because of sin. Naturaleza Humana embarks upon a journey to discover or encounter Beauty. Eventually, Naturaleza Humana discovers a fountain (representative of Mary) that reflects Narciso who has an unparalleled and undeserved Beauty. After having found that Beauty in Narciso, Naturaleza Humana names Narciso God. The climax is that Beauty lies in the imago Dei. Just as Sor Juana discharges theology by way of allegory, the Black sermon can deliver a womanist theological aesthetics. The

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29 Ibid., 194.
Black sermon shall incorporate sacred word power and mascons to proclaim the womanist theological aesthetics.

Another powerful aspect of sacred word power is naming. Slave owners named slaves to establish control and lordship. However, the slaves maintained that only God their Creator had the authority to name them, which God would do in love. The naming word empowered slaves to maintain their God-created self, regardless of what their masters labeled them.

Post slavery, the white dominant culture attempted to name Black women with derogatory images and archetypes. Countermemory empowers Black women to maintain their God-created self, regardless of the association of those Black images. A womanist theological aesthetics is a liberative mechanism to appropriate sacred word power. I hope this area of scholarship matures, for its impact is life-giving.

The journey has been a long and painful one. The journey began with a people being forcefully removed from their village, family and continent. Captured Africans were stripped of their culture, their god(s), their dignity and their freedom. Upon being abducted, like damaged cargo, they were thrown into a slave ship. They transited the Middle passage under inhumane conditions that claimed the lives of thousands. The dead were tossed out to sea, obtaining their freedom, while the survivors were rewarded with a horrendous and atrocious life of slavery. Slavery robbed them of freedom and threatened to assassinate their humanity.

The personhood of African Americans suffered greatly in this journey. Black women still contend with the rejection of their humanity and assaults to the human
dignity regardless of the heights to which they have excelled or struggles through which they have battled. Michelle Obama, for example, was harshly tormented by the oppressive dominant culture: on the one extreme, she was called a monkey or on the other, she was objectified as hate groups gawked and made lewd comments about her body. This is a cultural production of evil in our society that must be dismantled and eradicated. Employing and living into a theology that beckons solidarity and champions justice is the path to getting there.

A womanist theological aesthetics steeped in justice and engaging the understanding of divine Beauty can tackle the problem. My read of Emilie M. Townes and M. Shawn Copeland produces insights that this emerging field must leverage. I emphasize two cornerstones that have rich value. One, the prophetic voices of the Black woman images upended by countermemory. Instead of being marginalized and dehumanized by these archetypes, countermemory resurrects a message of justice. The aesthetical message unearthed by their justice is a challenge and dismantling of a co-opted formulation of beauty and a reclamation of divine Beauty within the Black woman. Two, the other cornerstone, is the Beauty formulation within Eucharistic solidarity. Both cornerstones supply a solid foundation for a provocative and liberative womanist theological aesthetics formulation.

Justice speaks our truth and fortifies our resistance. The African American community—persons of African descent and the diaspora—are fearfully and wonderfully created by God, and imbued with a dignity and a worth that cannot be denied or redefined by hate or prejudice. The Beauty—divine Beauty—exists when
and only when all are welcomed and affirmed at Christ’s table as co-equal human beings in the body of Christ. The values of inclusion, affirmation, human dignity and being mutually enveloped in love provide us with the shining lights that illumine Beauty.
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