

CHARLES LATTIMORE HOWARD

BLACK THEOLOGY AS MASS MOVEMENT

Black Theology as Mass Movement

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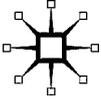
The Souls of Poor Folk

The Awe and the Awful

Black Theology as Mass Movement

Charles Lattimore Howard

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BLACK THEOLOGY AS MASS MOVEMENT

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F O R E W O R D

“You’re working on a book? Wonderful! And what is the book going to be about?”

I respond with just three words; “Black Liberation Theology.”

“Oh. I see. Interesting. And what exactly *is* Black Liberation Theology?” they reply.

Very few individuals outside of seminaries, divinity or theological schools, or religious studies departments have ever heard of Black Liberation Theology. Even fewer could begin to explain it. And therein lies the problem.

Well a part of the problem.

I will never forget my first experience reading this particular stream of theology while in seminary. Many of my classes in college focused on Black history, yet only occasionally did they intersect with the Black religious experience(s) or Black theological reflection. When they did, it was almost always while discussing the US struggle for civil rights and in the context of Black religious social leadership. This is of course an extremely important part of Black religious history and indeed Black Liberation Theology, but only one part.

Sitting in my seminary dorm room I was struck for two reasons by the theology that I was reading. First, it was a profound experience for me as a student to be assigned and then to read scholarly works by women and men who looked like me. This was no small detail for a young seminarian who up to that point

had only read the works of White theologians (both historical and contemporary). Yet it was more than the skin tone of the authors that grabbed me. It was their courage, their belief that society could be moved and positively changed, and that theology and religious spaces had an important role to play in that. These Black theologians thought that theology could speak to every aspect of society and every system that contributed to the oppression of marginalized peoples.

Why was I only just finding these books—some of which had been in print longer than I had been alive? Working in the campus bookstore, I used my employee discount to read not only the Black theologians on the store's shelves, but everything that was connected to Liberation Theology and any text that sought to apply theological reflection to progressive action. Needless to say I had very little money left after payday.

I remember telling friends and family members about what I was studying and the same was true then as it is today—very few people had heard of the names and texts that I was dropping. Neither church folks nor Black folks. There are reasons for this that are explored in the pages that follow. Yet, this text is meant to be more than an explanation for the distance between much of the Black theological work produced and the majority of individuals who are living under the oppression that most Black theological work is tackling. Here I seek to explain why making this reconnection is important and I try to explore the good that may result if this reconnection is made.

And I say reconnection because it was not always like this. Black Liberation Theology was not always something dominated by scholars who are writing and producing scholarship mostly for and in dialogue with their peers. In its origins and in the work of those whom I describe as Black theological precursors like African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Bishop Henry McNeal Turner or the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) Chaplain General George McGuire, Black theological reflection was integrally connected to mass

movement efforts for liberation.¹ And if Black Liberation Theology can get back there—or better yet get to a new place with a greater consciousness of where we came from, I believe some amazing things can happen.

I love Black Theology.² After sharing an early draft of this text with an early reviewer, their response was from a defensive posture as if I was attacking Black Theology. Their defensiveness resulted from the incorrect perception that I was setting up a (false) dichotomy between scholars and activists. The reviewer thought that I was critiquing Black theologians for not “getting out there” or for not being a part of the struggle. This is incorrect for several reasons, chief among them being that academic work is most certainly activist work. As someone who works in the academy myself, I bear witness to this every single day. Be it the tireless daily work in the classroom, the critical work done on committees striving to increase access for people of color, women, poor people, and others who are marginalized, or the unseen but just as important one on one mentoring that happens on university and seminary campuses, academic work is most certainly activist work and I would be and often am in conversation with friends who are more prone to demonstrating, the first one to say so. History demonstrates that change very often results from the power of ideas. Working through ideas and through classroom engagement is just as powerful as the work done by those who faithfully protest and demonstrate against injustice, who risk getting arrested, who lobby and pressure political leaders for change in policy, who organize through nonprofit work, or those who impact their communities through their religious spaces. It is just a different work done on a different front.

Yet our work in the academy can do more. It should do more. Long ago, it did do more and I imagine it will soon do more.

Black Theology as Mass Movement, seeks to challenge current and future Black theologians and all readers to remember the earliest days and “prior stages” of the development of Black

Liberation Theology, and while looking back, readers will be challenged to look ahead and consider the deep call on Black Theology not only to be a space for intellectual inquiry but also to connect to the larger mass movement for liberation and societal change in the years to come.

This project seeks to extend a call to Black Liberation Theology and Black theologians to expand their scope and work toward transitioning from what is almost exclusively an academic discipline into a critical globalized mass movement without sacrificing what is certainly necessary academic reflection and constructive theological work. This transition would expand the reach of Black Theology from the academy to the pulpit or rather to more pulpits, as well as from the academy to the streets and unpaved stony roads where we who are still in need of liberation have trod.

Within the text, methodological adjustments are suggested while looking into certain cultural movements from history and individuals who may provide inspiration and examples of ways intellectual reflection, ideologies, or in this case theologies, might transition (expand) into movements. Themes of inclusivity, accessibility, and mass appeal surface within the text, but in an effort to speak directly to scholars, practical suggestions are posed in an effort to enhance and expand their theological work and broaden their audiences.

I admit that in some regards this is a very strange book. There is no way for the reader to know this, but this final version looks very different from the earliest outlines and drafts. Originally it was a far more “straightforward” academic text and there are remnants of that. Portions may still read like an article submitted to an academic journal. Other portions around certain topics may read more conversational. I have tried to edit the text so that it may have a consistent voice and authenticity, but I found that both sounds, both positions are authentic and belong to me. I suppose some of this can be attributed to the

ability that so many of us have to code switch, but I think that I am trying to model one of the major points of this project which is that Black Theology must be able to transcend “academic speak”—not forgo it, but be free enough to work for liberation regardless of sentence construction. Thus this final draft includes a letter to future Black theologians, a letter to my children, and a letter to my theological parents and ancestors. I have included some poetry, some lyrics, some slang, and some more of whatever I felt needed to be said. I tried to be free, while remaining faithful to what I originally submitted to my publisher and the reviewers.

This is a strange book also because in its original iteration, I sought to draw from other “well-known” mass movements in Black history in particular the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements. These have been and continue to be important and deep wells from which Black theologians draw. My not explicitly including them in this project should not be read as a dismissal of these extremely pivotal movements, but rather an effort to draw from untapped or infrequently tapped sources. Again, this is an effort to model one of the things I am calling for in this text: challenging Black theologians to look beyond our usual boundaries for inspiration and for sources that might make our work bear more fruit.

This offering is meant to only be the beginning, or rather, a rekindling of an older concept within Black Liberation Theology—that our work is incomplete if it is left on pages and in classrooms. The strongest theological work grows legs and marches out of the classroom and off the page into the streets working for change in the greater society. Or rather than grow legs, perhaps “grow wings” is more appropriate. My prayer is that Black Liberation Theology might grow wings and follow the path of the Sankofa bird—moving ever forward while looking back to where we started.

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A C K N O W L E D G M E N T S

God has been good to me. And though I have seen much suffering and faced tremendous loss in my life, I cannot remember a day when I did not feel loved. What a gift! And throughout my time working on this project I have felt nothing but love from those around me. I give thanks for and to the many individuals whom I have studied with and the academic colleagues whom I have been blessed to journey with over the years in particular those who taught me theology and history at The Gilman School, The University of Pennsylvania, Andover Newton Theological School, and Lutheran Theological Seminary of Philadelphia. You inspire me and have taught me how to Love the Lord our God with all of our mind. I extend gratitude for and to the many ministers whom I have prayed with, served with, and worshiped with in Baltimore, Boston, Plainfield, and Philadelphia especially. You have taught me how to Love God with my soul. I sing “Thank you Lord” at the top of my lungs for the blessing that is my family—my beloved wife and best friend Lia (one of the most brilliant scholars that I know—definitely the brains of the operation!), my girls Charissa Faith and Annalise Hope (of whom I am so proud), my dear siblings Chuck, Ami, Trina, Dana, Joey, Yvonne, Cara, Mark, John, Sarah, and Faith as well as all Howards, Lattimores, Coopers, Fantuzzos, Petersons, Dixons, and all who have taught me how to love God with my heart. And I thank my ancestors who

through their endurance, their faithfulness, and witness have taught me how to Love God with all of my strength. The desk behind the office chair where much of this text was written holds framed pictures of many of those in my family who have, as they say in the church, “gone on to glory.” Your faces remind me not only of your faithful witness, and not only of the great work that you each have done, but also of the work that remains to be done.

At various points in my life people have taken risks on me that ended up making a tremendous difference in my journey. Risk taking demands courage—something deeply integral to doing the work of Black Liberation Theology. I would like to thank Burke Gerstenschlager and the courageous team at Palgrave Macmillan for taking a risk on this manuscript. Thank you!

This book is written for the Glory of God and dedicated to the memories of Audrey Lattimore Howard and Charles Preston Howard, Jr. Your lives continue to teach me about what it means to work for freedom, peace, and love.

A Letter to Future Black Liberation Theologians

That you are reading this presumes three things; that by some miracle this book has found its way to publication and somehow into your hands, that Black Liberation Theology is still relevant, and that the struggle continues.

If the above is true let me begin by saying thank you, of course for reading this little book, but more so for continuing to carry the torch down the road toward freedom, peace, and life. I do pray this small text might be of some help to you as you go along your journey. If not a help then I pray that it at least presents some useful questions that result in helpful reflection.

If there is one prayer that I offer on your behalf, one blessing that I might bestow upon you, it is the blessing of freedom. That in the end is the great goal of Black Liberation Theology, at least as I see it: To glorify God by working for freedom. Thus I pray that you might be free.

During the writing of this book, I was invited to a concert where I saw a most remarkable artist named Raul Midón. Raul is a blind guitarist of African and Argentinean descent. He played a powerful song called “Invisible Chains” that has haunted me ever since. Throughout track that keeps pace with nothing more than his melodious voice and his acoustic guitar, this gifted brother keeps returning to the phrase, “Where’s

there's a will there is a way." An especially powerful and challenging part of the song says,

It's a crying shame to lose the game
as a prisoner in a picture frame,
made for you and me, if only we could see,
the invisible chains.¹

Be free especially in your work as a Black theologian. Too often the work of the professional theologian invites a very subtle binding by the entrapping invisible chains of the academy. Certainly there is a kind of freedom that comes with academic work, indeed that a part of what makes it an attractive career for many of us. But the chains of which I am speaking I imagine you may have already caught glimpse of. These are chains that have the potential to affect our work and what we work on.

Some of these chains are connected to the pressures of the academy. Certainly not all, but many departments and schools foster cultures where security is (seemingly) wrapped up in the attainment of tenure and in the gaining of acceptance from one's peers both on campus and in the field. There is a temptation to publish either for publishing sake or for the sake of acquiring tenure. These invisible chains make individuals seek out the "best" and the "right" publishers for their books because certain presses will not be impressive enough for the review committee. I say this is not intending to question the commitment to liberation that Black theologians have. Who knows the heart of another? Further I have known far too many Black theologians who are deeply committed to the doing liberating work. Rather, I share all of this with you in order to name the powers that are competing with liberative work or—liberated work.

How can academic work be free if it is beholden to the eyes and approval of a tenure committee or a review board? How can we write about liberation when we are not liberated ourselves?

I have felt this temptation in the writing of this book. I of course want this text to be well received. I would love for my peers and those who will read it to each love this book. But when we write to impress others, rather than for the cause or for the joy of writing and making art, or for God, we are not free. And, I would add when we write to impress others the creative process can be hampered, which ultimately gets in the way of the work that we are trying to do.

At some point in the writing of this book, I turned a corner and felt free. I hope that my writing grows freer overtime. I remembered, after briefly forgetting, that I am writing this book for you and not for my own reputation or my own career. I think I began to “carefully not care” after sitting with my dear friend and long time mentor James Spady—a scholar and journalist who is referenced at various times throughout this book. Spady, to this day, remains my favorite and the best writer that I know. He is a free Black man and that is reflected in each sentence that he writes. Spady has been published in academic journals, edited collections, and has written a few dozen books of his own (not to mention the hundreds of articles and interviews of his that have been published over the years). He knows how to, and at times does, write in the expected academic format for scholarly pieces. Yet, even in the deeply researched academic pieces that he has had published he writes freely. He at times uses incomplete conversational sentences, contemporary urban slang, onomatopoeias, or words and phrases that emerge out of his free ever-flowing creativity like “Wayblackmemories”. His delight in his freedom is apparent when he at times will end a paragraph by typing, “Yeaaaaaaaaaaaaa!” Like our predecessors’ fighting has secured our freedoms, he has wrestled in the past with editors for his freedom and his efforts toward his own liberation have ultimately affected the liberation of the many writers that have come after him. To that I too say, “Yeaaaaaaaaaaaaa!”

Like Spady I challenge you to also be free. Not only in your writing but also in the everyday liberation theology that we live. And work for freedom. Your work will be better, your life will be better, and you will have a better chance at making the world better.

One last thing. The Book of Proverbs speaks about the sojourner being at a crossroads. There she or he hears the voices of both folly and Wisdom. Folly tempts us by appealing to our insecurities and in particular to pride and arrogance. Wisdom is humble and while it may not seem like the more exciting path, it is the better way.

Don't let pride or an unhealthy ambition be the fuel of your work. Let wisdom and love drive you. That is what I have seen in the best Black theologians over the years and it is what I pray for you.

Chaz

CHAPTER ONE

Awakening the Sankofa Bird: The Movement-Centric Origins of Black Liberation Theology

And What Exactly Is Black Liberation Theology?

As a parent of two little girls who like me are “of color,” I both looked forward to and dreaded the day when I would have “the talk” with them. The talk to which I am referring is the one about race. The one where I get to share with them all that they have to be proud of as women of African descent. That they come from a beautiful people who have given much to the world in every field and aspect of the human experience. Yet there is another side to the talk isn’t there? It’s where I share with them the fact that there are and will be individuals who will hate and try to hurt them just because of the color of their skin. That there may be moments in life where they will be discriminated against because of how they look and how they identify. Talking about race can be a beautiful or a very challenging thing. I held both pride and pain as I sat my girls on my lap and began to introduce them to this part of themselves—to the great continuum that they are now a part of. I’m glad that we could have the discussion and work toward a narrative and definition of what it means to be Black, rather than having who and what they are be defined by others. I

think it is also important here to work toward a narrative and definition of what Black Liberation Theology is before moving ahead. Black Liberation Theology also comes from a beautiful, brilliant people, from powerful world changing movements, and from a God who is Love—and continuously loving.

Defining Blackness is a complex endeavor. It might be wise to first consider the notion of race. A consideration of this historically complex term reveals the unstable character and malleability of the word. When employing the term race, some use this word to describe biological classifications of people. More recently, the term has been used to describe socially and legally constructed identities. The biological construction of race is one that perpetuates the theory that there are hereditary categories among human being based on their physical composition—especially skin color and the appearance of certain features such the shape of the eyes and the size of the nose or lips. These categories are designated by terms like Black, White, and Asian¹ (or Negroid, Caucasoid, or Mongoloid).² In other words, a biological construction believes that one's racial classification is determined by what one looks like.

In his essay “Racial Identity and the State: Contesting the Federal Standards for Classification,”³ Michael Omi shares how racial classification moved from a solely biological basis to being connected to the law during the earliest years of American history. He explains how different states used different criteria for racial categorization. For example, the notorious “one-drop” rule employed by certain states suggested that if, within your lineage there was even one drop of African blood, you were “Negro.” Thus, the person who has blond hair and blue eyes and had just one person of African descent in their family tree eight generations ago would by these criteria would legally be considered Black although biologically they may appear to be White.

Various states have had different laws, which created terms like “quadroon” (one of their four grandparents being Negro)

or “octoroon” (one of their eight great-grandparents being Negro) that classified people as Black. All of that is meant to briefly demonstrate the fact that within the United States, race is about more than just the physical features one may have (a certain pigmentation of skin or a certain type of nose or eyes or hair texture)⁴ as there are other components in how we as individuals and as a nation (and individual states) determine “what someone is.”

In many ways, this is positive because race cannot be demonstrated solely by observable features—if at all. Yet, the move from biologically based classifications of race to legally based classifications, of course, had severe consequences in the United States, particularly around certain civil rights. The right to vote, for example, in certain times and places has been extended by law to only “White men who own property.” The same was true for the right to own property, or run for legal office, or even which types of marital relationships were legal and illegal. Therefore it becomes clear why some thought it was necessary to clarify who was White and who was not—as some people who “looked White” needed to be legally reminded that they were not.

An example of how legal classifications continue to have consequence even in recent times is evidenced in the Phipps (Jane Doe) Case. Scholar James Davis describes the history in the Phipps (Jane Doe) case as going as far back as 1770. The case originates, according to Davis, with the actions of French planter Jean Guillory and his affair with his wife’s slave Margarita. Nearly 220 years later, their great-great-great-great-granddaughter, Susie Guillory Phipps, asked Louisiana courts to change the classification on her deceased parents’ birth certificate from “Black” to “White” so she and her brothers and sisters could be designated as White. They all “looked White,” according to the social construction of what White is meant to look like, and some were blue-eyed blonds. Mrs. Phipps

had been denied a passport because she had checked “White” on her application although her birth certificate designated her race as “Colored.” This designation was supplied at her birth by a midwife who presumably based this information on her parents’ or family’s status in the community. Mrs. Phipps claimed that this classification came as a shock and was inaccurate, since she had always thought she was White, had lived as White, and had married two White men. Some of her relatives, however, gave depositions saying they considered themselves “Colored” and the lawyers for the state claimed to have proof that Mrs. Phipps is 33-seconds Black. That was more than enough “drops of Black blood” for the district court in 1983 to declare her parents, and thus Mrs. Phipps and her siblings, to be legally Black.⁵ This “one-drop rule” is based on the belief that Whiteness symbolized privilege, purity and that which was “good” while Blackness symbolized an underclass, contamination and that which was “other.”

The social construction of race is a third way to identify how racial categories are formed (after biological and legal). This is always the most difficult concept in this conversation for my students to grasp. Most of us can grasp the idea that some people look at physical features and categorize people into different races be they correct categorizations or not. And most can understand that the government (and other governments around the world) has sought to define what “legally makes certain people White” (the legal construction of race). Yet the social construction is often a new concept for many of the women and men in my classes. I try to clarify it with an activity called “What am I?”

In the activity I stand in front of the class and ask them what race I am. They say “Black.” I reply with “How can you tell?” And though they are a little cautious after just being told that it is a “no-no” to judge race solely by physical featured, they hesitantly say, “Because of your skin color.” “Because of the shape of your nose.” “ Because of your lips.”

I push back and say, “Well doesn’t he (a student of Mexican decent) have the same skin color that I do? And aren’t her lips similar to mine? (I say gesturing toward a student from India). After a few more comments each year, a brave student raises their hand and says,

It’s just your style. I mean you act Black. You kind of have that Black guy swag. You know, the way you walk, the way you talk in conversation. Plus I think you were in a Black fraternity weren’t you? And plus you teach Black history!

This, I try to point out, is how race is socially constructed. The student was categorizing me by means not based on my physical features or the legal racial classification of my ancestors, but instead by social cues. Overtime, in certain times, different ideas of what it means to be Black have formed in our minds with images put there through various social interactions. On television I may see that a lot of Black men act a certain way so when I see another person who fits my very basic physical requirements around Blackness and I add that to their behavior and/or style then I deduce that they are Black. One is socially trained to believe that all Black men are good at basketball, therefore when choosing teams at a pick up game, one might presume that they should “pick the Black guy” because he’s probably better than the guy from China.⁶ When some teachers see an Asian student in class sometimes, they quickly deduce that they will be on the smarter end of the spectrum because over time a part of the social construction of what it means to be “Asian” (a big group of diverse people by the way) is to be smart. The social construction of race includes the invisible attributes that we think of when we are thinking of race. Gender, sexuality, and other aspects of our social location can be socially constructed as well.

Within this project, which is focusing primarily on the “Black Race,” Black is used to describe a socially constructed group that has at times been regulated by legal parameters. But what is “Black?” Throughout the text there are times where the terms Black, African American, Colored, and Negro each be used. It is the term Black that is most consistently used, however here. I deeply appreciate the authors of the powerful book *Black Church Studies: An Introduction* when they write that,

We use Black as our preferred descriptive label of racial identification because contrary to any negative connotations about the pigmentation of human skin or pejorative assessments of personal traits and behavior, we reclaim the term as a unifying description of peoples, communities, and cultures of African descent that span the limits of historic time and geographic space... Most important, we have chosen to capitalize Black as a means of moving beyond skin color towards a notion of shared history, cultural heritage, and group identity as well as a challenge to the pervasiveness of White supremacist thought.⁷

Another helpful definition of Black or Blackness is offered by Fred Moten in his text *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*. He states that,

The history of Blackness is testament to the fact that objects can and do resist. Blackness – the extended movement of a specific upheaval, an ongoing irruption that anarranges every line – is a strain that pressures the assumption of the equivalence of personhood and subjectivity.⁸

Thus in this book Black is more than a signifier for those within the African Diaspora. Black is inherently connected to Blackness—a broad, yet focused tradition of resistance and in accordance with this project, liberation.

There is one final dimension of the term Black that should briefly be examined, and it is found within the early work of the man who is appropriately most closely associated with Black Liberation Theology. In *God of the Oppressed*, James Cone begins by identifying the starting point of Black Theology as the Black experience. Here, by using the word “Black,” he is specifically referring to the experiences of those of African descent, but perhaps more importantly, he is referring to all women and men that experience oppression.⁹ His point here is, “that one’s social and historical context decides not only the questions we address to God but also the mode or form of the answers, given to the questions.”¹⁰ Thus, Black, within Cone’s particular constructive Black theological work, can at times mean more than just those within the socially constructed “Black” race. It may also include those who are regardless of their skin color or socially constructed race—the Black of the earth.

Black Theology

Black Theology is another key term with discreet complexities. Indeed defining Black Theology and the demonstration that there are in fact diverse streams within Black Theology is one of the important notions that I have learned over the years and that I often wish to convey to my students. Similarly, one could say that there is no one monolithic Black Church—though there is certainly a unifying history and enduring ethos and style existing within many bearing the descriptor. Therefore I put forth a broad definition and consideration of what Black Theology is with the intent, however, of naming the critical fact that there exist many diverse streams.

Again, as it was important to start by defining what race is before defining Black, I begin by examining Liberation Theology before Black Liberation Theology. There are several different types of Liberation Theologies of which Black

Liberation Theology is just one. Each has its own emphases as well as slightly different sources and methods. With a strong emphasis on context and the unique experience of a particular marginalized group, it makes sense that there are very different norms within different types of Liberation Theologies. Yet, there are some very strong parallels and similarities that can be identified.

Liberation Theologies work toward reconstructing not only theological norms but also the social center of various spaces and institutions. It means moving the experience of the oppressed, be they individuals experiencing poverty, women, women of color, colonized peoples, LGBT peoples, or other marginalized groups from the margins where their experiences are considered little or not at all, to the center where their experiences become (a part of) the norm, the starting point, and one of the theological sources. Within Black Theology, this means moving the Black experience from being marginalized (othered, negative, or exotic) to being the center and starting point of theological reflection.

Black Theology starts from the social location, daily experience, and collective histories of those who are Black (though it is of course readable, accessible, and applicable by those who may not identify, yet, as Black!). Cone and other early Liberation Theologians have taught that Black theological work is the work of liberation—the work of attaining freedom in every aspect of life. Therefore it must be done with an eye toward liberating those that are Black (or those who are the oppressed of any “race”). These efforts toward liberating are done by drawing wisdom, guidance, strength, and theological insight from several sources including scripture, the lived experiences of people of African descent, other theological partners, history, and other intellectual fields.

When the term Black Liberation Theology was coined in the late 1960s and 1970s, these liberating efforts were clearly

connected to the liberating work that was happening right outside the classroom in streets. It was a part of the movement. I still believe it is. I just dread the possibility that it has moved to classrooms so many floors above the streets that it no longer hears freedom songs being sung as our people march toward freedom. The next section considers Black Liberation Theology's origins in the larger continuum of the movement for freedom.

Movement-Centric Origins

Where one begins when describing the history or origins of Black Theology can provide clues into what they see as the sources, influences, and ground from which Black Theology emerged.¹¹ While this project must acknowledge the deep and continuous echo of diverse African religious traditions as well as the creative religious work during the time of slavery, this historical narrative will begin neither on the continent of Africa nor during the period of slavery. Likewise, while there are several Black religious (ordained and lay) figures who served as precursors to Black Liberation Theology (indeed their work was a type of lived Black Theology), such as Nat Turner, Denmark Vassy, David Walker, Sojourner Truth, Jarena Lee, Richard Allen, Henry McNeal Turner, Junius Austin, and more—this project will not begin with any of them either.

With an acknowledgment that if one is to examine any one moment in Black History then they must consider what led up to that point and what followed it, this project will begin with three small documents written all by several religious leaders and theologians during the late 1960s. Note that this first Black theological liberative work was done in the context of the intersecting liberating movements that surrounded it.

This section is “jumping in mid stream,” though later in the text we go back up river.

Statements, Manifestos, Theology, and Movements

The late 1960s were an amazing and tumultuous time for the entire world and indeed for the Black community in the United States. The emergence of the phrase and ideology of “Black Power” reverberated throughout the Black community. Black religious leaders needed to respond to this force that held the tension of being threatening to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) led religious-based civil rights ethos, while simultaneously being deeply attractive to many in the Black community for its boldness, its Garvey-like emphasis on self-esteem and self-dependence, and its far more direct critique of the economic system that was keeping so many Blacks in poverty. One of the first such responses was the National Committee of Negro Churchmen’s “Statement on Black Power.”¹² Describing the origins of this document, renowned scholar Gayraud Wilmore states,

Under the leadership of the Harvard – Educated Baptist preacher, Benjamin F. Payton, then executive director of the Commission of Religion and Race of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A, a meeting was called that brought together a small group of Harlem pastors and denominational staff who worked at the Interchurch Center in New York City. The purpose was to defy the White churches by drafting a moderate, but ringing affirmation of Black Power.¹³

This piece was not particularly radical (certainly not in comparison to what would soon follow), but the fact that religious leaders did not condemn but rather affirmed Black Power was a defiant and telling move that would pave the way for a (partial) shift within Black religious leaders and scholars from more SCLC type paths to liberation to a more Black Panther like call for action.¹⁴ It also began to shift (or join) the conversation from

one solely based on integration and civil rights to one incorporating the need for political and economic power. On this the statement reads,

Powerlessness breeds a race of beggars... At issue in the relations between Whites and Negroes in America is the problem of inequality of power... Without this capacity to *participate with power* – i.e., to have some organized political and *economic* strength to really influence people with whom one interacts – integration is not meaningful.¹⁵

In 1967, an organization called the Interreligious Foundation for Community Organization (IFCO) was founded. At this group's conference in 1969, a far more radical and direct statement written from and to the Black religious community would be drafted. James Forman and other leaders at this conference would draft the document that would come to be known as the "Black Manifesto."

The language of the preamble, the demands that it states and indeed the entire document had several intended audiences. In some ways it was meant to be a "wake up call" to Black America, especially Black religious leaders. It challenges them to recognize the complicit role that White religious entities have played in the oppression of Blacks and the need for them to help in its reparations. It also challenges all Blacks to be a people of action and a people of liberation—a liberation not just for rights, but for power in the political and economical spheres. But the statement was also meant for government officials and White religious leaders. There is much to critique about this document yet still it is best appreciated not for its demands or for what resulted of this manifesto, but rather for the very important critique that it provides and for the foundation that it laid—a foundation that would contribute directly to the creation of the academic school of Black Liberation

Theology and would provide an example of the need for Black religious critique of all forms of oppression and a ground level movement to accompany that critique.

The “Black Manifesto” begins by saying,

Brothers and Sisters: We have come from all over the country burning with anger and despair not only with the miserable economic plight of our people but fully aware that the racism on which the western World was built dominates our lives. There can be not separation of the problems of racism from the problems of our economic, political, and cultural degradation. To any Black man, this is clear.

But there are still some of our people who are clinging to the rhetoric of the Negroes, and we must separate ourselves from these Negroes who go around the country promoting all types of schemes for Black capitalism.¹⁶

It is understandable why this document enraged and terrified some people especially with many remembering the days of the “Red Scare” and in the midst of the struggle with the Soviet Union around Vietnam, Cuba, and several other places around the world. There were other “threatening” phrases in the text stating that “We live inside the United States, which is the most barbaric country in the world, and we have a chance to help bring this government down.” Or “But while we talk of revolution, which will be an armed confrontation and long years of sustained guerrilla warfare inside this country...” or “We are dedicated to building a socialist society inside the United States...led by Black people...concerned about the total humanity of the world.”

Three months after Forman and several others authored and endorsed this document, the National Committee of Black Churchmen needed to respond by affirming what they felt should be affirmed and distancing themselves from what they

felt they could not agree with—at least in public. They put out a statement featured in several newspapers including the *New York Times*. This statement was not a direct response to the “Black Manifesto” in that it did not directly address it. Rather, it was a response to the *zeitgeist* within Black America at the time—it was another response to Black Power by Black religious leaders, but this time it called for a movement toward what they called “Black Theology.” Note its emphasis on a Black public that is outside the theological classroom.

Black Theology is a theology of Black Liberation. It seeks to plumb the Black condition in the light of God’s revelation in Jesus Christ, so that the Black community can see that the gospel is commensurate with the achievement of Black humanity . . . (This) means that Black Theology must confront the issues which are a part of the reality of Black oppression. We cannot ignore the powerlessness of the Black community. Despite the *repeated requests* for significant programs of social change, the American people have refused to appropriate adequate sums of money for social reconstruction. White church bodies have often made promises only to follow with default. We must, therefore, once again call the attention of the nation and the church to the need for providing adequate resources of power (reparation).

Reparation is a part of the Gospel message . . . The church which calls itself the servant of Christ must, like its Lord, be willing to strip itself of possessions in order to build and restore that which has been destroyed by the compromising bureaucrats and conscienceless rich. While reparation cannot remove the guilt created by the despicable deed of slavery, it is, nonetheless, a positive response to the need for power in the Black community. This nation, and, a people who have always related the value of the person to his possession of property, must recognize the necessity of restoring property in order to reconstitute personhood.

As Black theologians address themselves to the issues of the Black revolution, it is incumbent upon them to say that the Black community will not be turned from its course, but will seek complete fulfillment of the promises of the Gospel.¹⁷

This extended quotation has been included because not only does it provide a solid starting point for an exploration into where Black theologians were at the commencement of this academic movement, but it is also an interesting goal to aim toward. Whether reparations should be the main objective or not, the goal should be toward the upliftment of a people group by way of tangible changes brought forth by concerted efforts by united fronts. A movement.

While there are several Black theologians who could be particularly singled out as being especially important in the development of Black Liberation Theology, there is one whose efforts toward movement making deserve, I believe special mention—not particularly because his efforts should outweigh those of other Black theological pioneers, but because his work and his name are sadly often overlooked or forgotten when the story of Black Liberation Theology's origins are told.

Albert Cleage and the Shrine of the Black Madonna

Thirteen years before Stokely Carmichael began to speak about Black power, Albert Cleage displayed Black consciousness. Sixteen years before James Cone published the first book on Black Theology, Albert Cleage was presenting a new perspective on Christian faith. Albert Cleage has never received the recognition due to him.¹⁸

While perhaps not always receiving the credit for his role in the early formation of Black Theology, Cleage's name is often included on lists of early Black theologians. This fact deserves some exploration because, by some standards, he was not an academic theologian (as in he was not a professor at a seminary

or a university). He never obtained his doctorate. Rather he was a full time Pastor, denominational leader, writer, and movement maker. The very controversial and opinionated¹⁹ Alistair Kee, who provides the quote found above about Cleage not receiving enough recognition, also says, “Anyone familiar with modern western theology will know that it is now written within the university rather than the church: its dialogue partner is the academic community rather than the community of faith . . . The most striking feature of Cleage’s theology is that it is set out not in lectures but in sermons.”²⁰

Albert Buford Cleage, who later in life changed his name to Jaramogi Abebe Agyeman, was born on June 13, 1911, in Indianapolis, Indiana. He died in February 2000. From an early age, Cleage bore witness to strong Black leadership. After he and his family moved from Indianapolis to Detroit, his father was the first Black physician on payroll in the city. The elder Cleage also helped to found the city’s first African-American hospital. This must certainly have made a strong impression on Cleage and his six siblings. After high school, he attended both Wayne State University and Fisk University. Following college, he matriculated into the Oberlin College Graduate School of Theology where he was awarded his Bachelors of Divinity degree in 1943.

After his graduate work, Cleage pastored in a number of congregations in Ohio, Kentucky, San Francisco, and Springfield, Massachusetts as a congregational minister. One important point to mention is that during this time he served on the staff of the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples in San Francisco. This congregation, founded by Dr. Howard Thurman, has been committed to bringing together different races and cultures since its inception in 1944. It is difficult to know what impression this might have made upon Cleage, but his season under the preaching and leadership of Dr. Thurman, one of the precursors to Black Theology proper, must certainly have challenged and moved him.

In 1951, Cleage accepted a call to serve on the staff of St. Mark's Community Church in Detroit. The actions that would occur in this congregation would be a pivotal moment in Cleage's life and an important moment in Black theological history. After two years, he would lead the congregation in changing its name from St. Marks Community Presbyterian Church to the Central Congregational Church. During the early years of the civil rights movement, Cleage worked with local and national leaders, including Martin Luther King, Jr, to work for the rights, particularly civil and economic rights, of Blacks in Detroit. After a time of personal study of early twentieth-century Black leadership (which makes sense considering his nationalist heritage that is discussed later in this study), Cleage launched the Black Christian Nationalist Movement. One particular action, more than any other embodies the theology of Cleage and the denomination that he would ultimately establish. In March 1967, Cleage installed an 18-foot religious painting that depicted a Black Madonna and an infant Jesus. The work was officially dedicated on Easter Sunday of that year. During the service, Cleage spoke of the need for a separate Christian church for the Black community, one that worshipped a Jesus that not only cared about the experiences of Black people, but that might have actually been Black Himself. The church then changed its name again to Shrine of the Black Madonna. This church and movement would soon grow into the church known as the Pan-African Orthodox Christian Church, which is still active today.

During the 1970s, several churches within this new church would be established across the United States. The new church was a part of Cleage's Black Christian Nationalist Movement. With its community service programs, Cleage and this new applied theological stream sought to provide a framework for the economic self-sufficiency of its members. Thus, economic liberation was/is an important part of this stream of Black Liberation Theology.

Like some other Black theologians, Cleage presented alternatives to the contemporary economic state of African Americans as a center piece in his efforts to movement making. His large congregation established a communal living center where members were able to pool their resources and become active participants in the church's service efforts. The congregation established a neighborhood supermarket and several other economically self-sufficient initiatives. The goal of creating a separate self standing Black Nation was key to Cleage's ministry and his theology.

In 1968 Cleage published, *The Black Messiah*. Black theologian Dwight Hopkins described this as "the first book on the religious roots of Black power."²¹ This text adds to the large canon of Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Black Nationalist literature, yet, unlike the work and projects of thinkers and leaders like Marcus Garvey, Elijah Muhammad, or certain voices within the Black Panther Party, Cleage sought for the Black church to be the leading institution in nation building. Within Cleage's particular stream of Black Liberation Theology, the connection between the literal Blackness of Jesus and the liberation of Black people through the building of a Black Nation is integral.

Thus, the primary source of Cleage's theology is the Black Jesus and His struggle for liberation as recorded in Christian scripture—Christ's liberation movement. Cleage states this clearly; "The theological basis for the gospel of liberation can be found in the life and teachings of Jesus."²² In his text, *The Black Messiah*, Jesus is a Black revolutionary who is in the center of a liberating struggle between White Rome and Black Israel. Jesus' being Black is just as important as the struggle in which He was engaged. Cleage states, "When I say that Jesus was Black, that Jesus was the Black Messiah...I'm not saying, 'Wouldn't it be nice if Jesus was Black?' Or 'Let's pretend that Jesus was Black' of 'It's necessary psychologically for us to

believe that Jesus was Black.' I'm saying that Jesus WAS Black. There never was a White Jesus."²³

Gayraud Wilmore makes the important point that prior to Cleage, Bishop Henry McNeal Turner (1833–1915) spoke of a Black God and Rev. George Alexander McGuire (1866–1934) urged Blacks to worship a Black Christ (in the African Orthodox Church of the Universal Negro Improvement Association—UNIA). This point is not meant to demonstrate that Cleage was unoriginal or to take anything away from him, but rather to show that Cleage was an important descendant of these two preceding proponents of Black religious liberation.²⁴

If the life (far more than the resurrection) of the Black Jesus is the primary source for Cleage's Black theology, in conjunction with the experience of Black peoples, then the goal of this liberation theology is not just liberation for Black people, but liberation and the grasping of power—Black power. "Our basic struggle then is to get some kind of power. We must not be ashamed of power. We must mobilize the entire Black community to secure political and economic power. Without power we are helpless and psychologically sick."²⁵

Black Christian Nationalism, to clarify, is for Cleage the construction of an organized Black nation within the nation of America. This nationalism is, again similar in many ways to the powerful movements that Marcus Garvey, Elijah Muhammad, and the Black Panther party each respectively and at times cooperatively built. The theory is that the government of United States does not either effectively represent the interests of Black Americans or care about the welfare of Blacks, therefore a separate nation, not dependent on an oppressive White nation, should be established thus giving Black women and men real power both politically and economically. The main difference however, between Cleage's Black Nationalism and that of the aforementioned nation builders, is that Cleage sees the church as the central driving institution in this work.

Cleage is an important voice in the Black Theological canon, not just because of his courageous and visionary interpretation of the Black Jesus, but because of the important model of employing Black Theological intellectual work as the fuel behind a Black Theological movement. His work was a continuation of the origins of Black Liberation Theology.

Would someone like Cleage be considered a Black theologian today? I imagine many of us would say no, simply because Cleage was not based in an academic institution. That divide between academics and others is sad. It creates a kind of exclusivity to who can be a theologian. Of course anyone can “do” theology, but it would be considerably more difficult for a non-credentialed individual to submit a article to most theological journals, have their theological book published by most publishers, or teach a course at most seminaries. Before going too far, I should say that this is of course not at all limited to theology or the academy. In addition, I should add that the need for credentials is not entirely a bad thing.

It is almost cliché to say “Well wouldn’t you want your doctor to be credentialed?” Of course. I am also very mindful of a presentation that I heard a colleague give about the impact that the Internet has had on faith. He began by discussing all of the progress allowed by the Internet specifically around access to information and community. He also discussed the benefits of how the Internet has democratized religion in ways unimaginable years ago allowing anyone with access to the Internet to theologically reflect on scripture or any aspect of religion. This is good, he noted, but also very dangerous as a search for a particular topic might lead someone to a site, an article, or a post that is uninformed, ill intended, or ignorant. There is a reason that I turn to certain books by trusted scholars when exploring a topic or text rather than a search engine online.²⁶

Yet there is a need for a middle ground on this question is there not? There is an obvious import in having a trained

group of individuals in an academic field, yet keeping the locus of Black Theology in the academy limits not only the practitioners and producers of Black Theology, but it also limits its potential effectiveness. This kind of intellectual class division is not only less effective but also contrary to Black Liberation Theology's origins. We can do better and in order for Black Theology to grow from what has become an academic field (back) into a movement effecting societal change, it will need to partner with nonintellectuals—or rather witness and partner with the nonacademy intellectuals—in a new way.

CHAPTER TWO

The Underground Railroad and Underground Rap: Imagining an Underground Black Liberation Theology

“Underground” is a word that has grown in poetic depth over the last few centuries. It is still of course used to communicate its literal meaning—below the ground. And yet it also has grown to communicate something that is hidden or out of sight. It connotes an entity that has depth (is not metaphorically shallow) and that is free from the influence of a potentially controlling gaze.

There are two underground institutions that I want to consider in this chapter; the Underground Railroad and Underground Rap. It is my hope that by looking at these two powerful efforts, perhaps movements, we might be able to imagine what an underground version of Black Liberation Theology might look like.

Underground efforts often work in tandem with an “above ground movement” (whether this is known by both parties or not). The Underground Railroad, which we consider in closer detail below, was the hidden compliment to the greater (in size) abolitionist movement. Underground Rap compliments the commercially produced recordings that get the majority of

airplay on conglomerate radio and television stations as well as the majority of the sales done by the dominant music labels—the latter being an aspect of the music industry that while having much about it that is deserving of criticism, is nonetheless a part of the larger global Hip Hop movement. Likewise, an underground theology would not and should not replace Black Liberation Theology, but it could move underground simultaneously doing liberative work from different depths.

Lessons from the Underground Railroad

The name most synonymous with the Underground Railroad is Harriet Tubman who earned the nickname “Moses” through her work of leading enslaved men and women out from the land on which they lived as slaves into “the promised land,” which was usually the Northern States or Canada where slavery was not the way of life. The Underground Railroad was more than just the work of one (amazing, brave, and inspiring) woman and it was more than moonlit rescue missions. Others besides the woman who would earn the nickname “Moses” would risk their lives by shepherding formerly enslaved individuals or providing food and shelter. Their relative anonymity in history testifies to the grave seriousness of helping individuals escape to freedom.

The brutal institution of chattel slavery began in the United States during the Colonial era—more than a century before the United States became The United States. Women, men, and children were taken from Africa¹ and sold to individuals who “owned” them as a part of their property. These enslaved individuals were forced to work a range of jobs all over the colonies. Some worked agricultural jobs (with cotton, tobacco, and other farmed products) others did domestic work like cooking and cleaning. As if being taken from one’s own land, being separated from one’s own family, language, and culture was not

dehumanizing enough, many enslaved people were both physically, psychologically, and sexually assaulted. A sentence like that really does not come close to capturing the pain of the lash or the trauma of being raped. This brutality and oppression, this second sin of the nation,² has affected people of African Descent in ways that are sadly and tragically still felt today.³

The movement for liberation from the institution of slavery was fought on many fronts and in many different ways. Some fought for freedom through armed revolt. The best known revolts or rebellions were the one planned by Denmark Vesey in 1822, the one led by Nat Turner in 1833, and the taking over of the ship *The Amistad* by Cinque and others in 1839. Others worked to abolish slavery through the abolitionist movement working to end slavery legally through a change of state and national policy as well as by changing culture by touching the hearts and minds of those who owned slaves. These above ground efforts were employed simultaneously while the underground mission worked. What role did the underground liberation efforts play in the larger movement to abolish slavery and what might Black Liberation Theology learn from this underground liberation movement?

The first lesson might be drawn from not the “what,” but the “who.” During the nineteenth century, the names most closely associated with the abolitionist movement were the famous Frederick Douglass, author Harriet Beecher Stowe, the (then) notorious John Brown, and Sojourner Truth. Each of their stories truly deserves (and has) its own treatment in numerous volumes written over the course of the last century. The biggest point that I wish to make about them here is that they each achieved a great deal of notoriety during their lives. Douglass the great formerly enslaved orator and writer whose passion was felt from the poorest individual all the way to the White House. Stowe wrote one of the most popular (and in some cases most hated) books written in our nation’s history with

the publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. John Brown's revolt both inspired and terrified a nation to the point where children have been singing songs about him ever since. And Sojourner Truth was an amazingly in demand speaker as she worked for racial and gender equality declaring "Ain't I a woman?"

They were above ground. Tubman and the many other "railroad conductors" were not. Tubman was not famous for her oratorical abilities. She did not write an antislavery newsletter or novel. She was not a headline grabbing figure—well not in the same way Douglas was. Her name became known because of the bounty on her head, not because of her being in demand. Her work during her season of "conducting" trips along the Underground Railroad was done with little acclaim and demand, though her bravery and humility during this underground season certainly led to a far greater notoriety later in her life.

The Underground Railroad played just as important a role in the liberation of enslaved people as did the above ground abolitionist movement. It is amazing to think that the brave souls who worked alongside and at the same time as Harriet Tubman—names that have since been lost to history—are just as important as the celebrated names from that period that we do know. The Underground Railroad was noncredentialed and operated by many who "did not have a name." What about Black Liberation Theology? Is it possible for there to be Black Theologians who "do not have a name?"

Certainly there can be individuals who study, write, and "do" Black Liberation Theology. I love meeting people who have Black theologians on their book shelves, even though they are not and never have been enrolled in any seminary or college-level theology courses. Some people are simply intellectually interested in the topic without desiring to receive a degree. Further, I have enjoyed meeting people who have written theological reflections that were never published and were never intended for publication, but were shared with others with the intent of reflecting on

the Black experience through theological lenses. I share all that to say that there are certainly some individuals who are “non-credentialed” Black theologians—yet we need more. And to me the more important question is would we as professional “above ground” theologians accept or appreciate the noncredentialed Black Liberation theologians?

It is a complicated question. I can of course not speak for anyone else, but I do know of theologians who, for example, teach courses in prisons. They often speak of the deep theological work that many inmates are doing looking critically at an unjust prison industrial complex through a Black theological lens. Their work is respected and appreciated and seen as authentic by the professional theologians who are serving as their instructors. It is not looked at with condescension at all. I think that many would describe these brothers and sisters as Black theologians. And yet would a publisher publish a book length manuscript by one of these incarcerated theologians?

Likewise, it is easy to dismiss the need for credentials and letters after one’s name as being unnecessary for Black theological reflection, yet academic training is important. Hundreds of theologians around the country would stand testament to the growth and learning that they experienced while in doctoral (let alone master’s level and bachelor level) courses, studying for the comprehensive exams and in writing their dissertations. Whether one sees them as rites of passage or preparatory steps, this training is important, but it should not create an inaccessible exclusivity. In so doing we run the risk on missing important voices that could contribute to the ongoing struggle for greater freedom and our continuous efforts to improve society.

The second lesson that I see Black Theology gleaming from the Underground Railroad is that the railroad was constantly in motion along paths that were seldom taken. It was never stagnant. The notion of taking new paths “off the beaten trail” was essential. Walking up the well worn routes between the

South and the North would have surely resulted in capture or death. Thus, the railroad conductors were forced to walk in places that were seldom explored.

This is important for future Black theologians to remember. We need new ideas. We need creativity. We need freedom. A freedom to try new things. Theologians working for liberation must have the courage to intellectually experiment lest they find themselves stagnant and captured walking the same paths that others have tread.

Another key lesson from the Underground Railroad can be drawn from the partnerships that the conductors made. It is well documented that Harriet Tubman had several allies along her route(s) to the North. There were free Blacks who transported formerly enslaved people. There were White abolitionists (very often people of deep faith) who hid individuals in their homes. And there were other trusted allies who were not necessarily working on the railroad who helped along the way to freedom.

It is important for Black theologians to partner not only with theologians from other subfields but also with scholars of various academic fields outside of theology. Furthermore, our partnerships should not only be in the academy, but they also should extend to all fronts that are working for spiritual and societal liberation.

Underground Rap

As I write this section on Underground Rap music, I am very much aware of the swiftly changing landscape of Hip Hop Culture and Rap Music in particular. To site or an artist who at present might be current is to face the reality that in a few years (really a few months), that person and their music might be outdated. Having looked back over previous writings that I have done about Hip Hop, much of what I said back then, when the

intersection between theology/religious studies and hip-hopological studies was still new and fresh, would and should, seem very outdated today. Referencing a current cultural trend like a popular hair style of current slang might not only be outdated, but it also might not even be understood or remembered soon. Yet constant change and evolution are one of the marks of Hip Hop (perhaps the first lesson for Black Liberation Theology!)

Perhaps one way to begin a description of Hip Hop is to say (referencing the famous Emily Dickinson poem) that Hip Hop tells all the truth, but “tells it slant.” In fact, Hip Hop tells many things in many ways. It even speaks of liberation, though in a slanted, artistic way as opposed to the more direct way of scholars or of activists (not to say that Hip Hop artists and practitioners are not scholars and activists—I would argue quite the opposite). Since its emergence in the late 1970s Hip Hop has been an important voice comprised many distinct voices in describing and articulating what’s going on, and what needs to go on. There is much that Black Liberation Theology can (and has)⁴ learn from this powerful global movement.

Prior to identifying that which Black Theology might draw from, it is important to clarify what I mean when I refer to Hip Hop. What I do not wish to do in this space is add to the already thorough (though there is still plenty to explore) expositions into the contact points between Hip Hop Culture(s) and religion.⁵ I first simply wish to clarify what I mean and then explore what might be learned from this enduring international cultural movement.

“What is Hip Hop” is a difficult question for many to answer—challenging even for practitioners and residents in a Hip Hop Universe.⁶ How might one answer the question “What is Rock and Roll?” It is a musical genre, yes—and even within that there is a broad spectrum that needs to be identified with the music of Little Richard and Chubby Checker being very different from that of the Beatles. Musical groups

like The Eagles, Metallica, and Nirvana and all would be classified as Rock and Roll, yet each have a very different sound. But Rock and Roll is about much more than the music. Rock and Roll is the crowd that was at Woodstock, not just the music that was heard. It was the style and manner of the performers themselves. Another example is who Elvis was (not just his music) and how that contributed to the culture that Rock and Roll was and is. The clothes, the (at times) counter-cultural movement, the dance as well as the language all comprise what Rock and Roll is. Certainly Rock and Roll has been a part of other cultural and social movements including Civil Rights, Anti-War, Women's Liberation, the "Hippie" culture, and the Seattle Grunge cultural movements that have emerged at different times. Just as Rock and Roll is more than just music, the same is true for Hip Hop and its (primary) musical expression Rap.⁷

When discussing Hip Hop, one of the starting points is often the distinction made between Rap and Hip Hop. Rap music is not synonymous with Hip Hop, but rather rap is a part of Hip Hop. Hip Hop is a cultural movement of which rap is but a single, though very large and integral, part. In general terms, those composing parts are described as the elements of Hip Hop. H. Samy Alim describes the elements in the following way,

Hip Hop culture is sometimes defined as having four major elements: MCing (rapping), DJing (spinning), Break dancing (street dancing) and graffiti art (writing). To these Hip Hop Pioneer KRS-ONE adds knowledge as a fifth element, and Afrika Bambaata, a founder of the Hip Hop Cultural Movement, adds "overstanding." Even with six elements, this definition of a culture is quite limited in scope, and it is useful to distinguish between the terms Hip Hop and rap. Rapping, one element of Hip Hop Culture,

consists of the aesthetic placement of verbal rhymes over musical beats. Hip Hop Culture refers not only to the various elements listed above, but to the entire range of cultural activity and modes of being that encompass the Hip Hop Culture-World. This is why we might hear Hip Hop fans say, ‘Hip Hop ain’t just music, it’s a whole way of life.’⁸

Besides the described elements, there are other aspects of Hip Hop culture including the styles of dress and the linguistic presence, which is separate from rapping. The stylistic influence of Hip Hop is apparent in any metropolitan area of the world with the clothes being worn very often reflecting the latest styles modeled by celebrities in the Hip Hop Culture (not only rappers but actors and athletes as well). Athletes and non-musical entertainers are cultural icons who hold great stylistic influence.

Linguistically, much research has been done tracking speech patterns within Hip Hop including the work by Alim⁹ or the important research by University of Pennsylvania Professor William Labov. An amazing amount of the language heard on television, in movies, on the street, and in homes has been popularized or created by Hip Hop culture—especially rap music.

Identifying when Hip Hop started is a difficult task because in many ways it was a continuation of a stream of cultural expression that can be traced in America back to the spiritual songs in the early years of the nation—and even back to the continent of Africa (similarly to the way that Black Liberation Theology is a part of the larger stream of Black liberation movements throughout history). Jazz, the Blues, Rock and Roll, Soul, and R & B music are all a part of the musical pedigree of Rap music and Hip Hop culture. Hip Hop was also a child of the civil rights movement and the Black Power/Black Consciousness Movement of

that time. The words of the performance group The Last Poets, the speeches of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, and the courage and style of The Black Panther Party, all have been poured into the mix that Hip Hop is.

It is widely held that Hip Hop started in the late 1970s in New York City. While citing a place or particular moment when Hip Hop was started would be difficult, one thing is for sure—faith and spirituality were right there with it at the beginning.

The name Sylvia Robinson is unfamiliar to most of the ears it falls upon. Yet, she is properly described as the “Mother of Hip Hop.”¹⁰ She is credited with first recording the music that would, in Hip Hop Journalist James Spady’s words “spawn a multibillion-dollar industry.”¹¹

In his standard setting book with Alim and Charles Lee, Spady had the opportunity to interview Sylvia Johnson and provide space for her amazing and perhaps surprising story to be told. Her narrative describes what may not be the inception of Hip Hop, but what was certainly the birth of Hip Hop into the greater world. The presence of her faith in this narrative about how she decided to record the rap music that she was hearing, is of profound importance.

Well really it was a revelation from God. I was at a disco one night in Harlem . . . at a club called Harlem World. My sister was having a birthday party for me and it wasn't even my birthday. She was managing the place and she wanted to drum up business. She knew I had been very depressed at the time because I was going through a very sad time in my life and she was having this party for me. I didn't want to go out. I said, “I can't disappoint her.” So I made myself go that evening and while I was there, you know. I used to ask God. I said, “you know every time I was in trouble I could always pick up my guitar and write a hit record . . . I

was sitting up in the balcony and I saw all these kids out on the floor . . . And here was a fellow talking on the mic with music playing and I saw if he told them to do this or do that, they did it . . . All of a sudden I felt a chill all over my body and a voice said to me, “You put that on tape and You’ll be out of all the trouble you’ve ever been in.” And all at once, I felt the chills all over my body, like the Holy Spirit overcoming me. And that’s how that happened. It was really a Revelation of God how that happened.¹²

In the beginning, there was God, right there at the advent of Hip Hop. The description of her experience hearing the Sugar Hill Gang at Harlem World night club is an important contact point with her speaking of “the Holy Spirit overcoming her.” Still, to present the origins of Hip Hop from a strictly Christian perspective would be misleading and misrepresentative. One important point that residents or visitors of Harlem will note is that the club Harlem World is right across the street from The Malcolm Shabazz Mosque (formerly Mosque number 7 of the Nation of Islam) let alone several other places of faith. Hip Hop has always been an interfaith space with individuals who hold diverse beliefs connecting under the banner of the larger Hip Hop movement—sometimes even being in the same rap group. This is an important lesson for Black Liberation Theology. Our efforts toward liberation will only be that much more effective when they are (more consistently) connected with other freedom fighters from different faith traditions. Interfaith is not all roads leading to the same destination or everyone believing the same doctrine. Nor is it “multifaith” that is different people being the same space but not interacting. Rather, interfaith is where people of different faiths connect with one another by sharing their unique faith claims, histories, and beliefs. I discuss more about this in the following section.

Hip Hop's Movement-Centric Origins

The 1960s were an amazing time in the United States of America. The easiest milestones to point out are the Civil Rights Movement, the Anti-War Vietnam demonstrations, the Black Power Movement, Chavez and the United Farm Workers Association, and the Women's Liberation work. This youthful and revolutionary culture was expressed in many ways. Musically, some of the names that might come to mind are James Brown, Jimi Hendrix, Bob Dylan, Elvis Presley, The Grateful Dead, and many others.

As our nation and world moved into the 1970s, the stage was being set for the emergence of Hip Hop toward the end of the decade and its rapid growth during the 1980s. During the 1970s the United States ended its official involvement in the Vietnam War, Roe. V. Wade was heard in the Supreme Court, and the presidencies of Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, and Jimmy Carter spanned the decade.

Musically, Elvis and The Beatles gave way to other rockers like Led Zepplin, The Eagles, Pink Floyd, Elton John, and Bruce Springsteen. A young Rastafarian from Jamaica named Bob Marley also came on the scene with his praise, protest, and prose within Reggae Music. Reggae Music and Caribbean culture has a very important place in the birth of rap music and the larger Hip Hop Culture.

Davey D (Hip Hop journalist) in his "History of Hip Hop"¹³ essay presents one angle on the origins of Hip Hop naming an important connection to Jamaican culture and music.¹⁴ He sees modern day rap music as finding its immediate roots in the toasting and dub talk over elements of reggae music. He tells the story of a 1970s era Jamaican DJ known as Kool Herc and how his move from Kingston, Jamaica to the Westside of the Bronx was one of the key factors in the blending of Jamaican dub talk and the break beats in the New York sound. Davey D

describes how Herc attempted to incorporate his Jamaican style of DJing, which involved reciting improvised rhymes over the dub versions of his reggae records.

Davey D says “Because these breaks in the music that he was playing (the instrumental bridges where there were no lyrics) were relatively short, he learned to extend them indefinitely by using an audio mixer and two identical records in which he continuously replaced the desired segment.”

Hip Hop historians like Davey D describe how a popular trend in New York parties was the call and response between the DJ (or his MCs) and the crowd. It was the clever rhymes and catch phrases (perhaps drawn from radio DJs of the early 1970s) that emerged as the first rapping. This is one way the story is told. Another version sees the rapping done by artists today as growing out of the spoken word movement most identified with artists like The Last Poets or the conversational lyrics and shouts done by artists like James Brown. Regardless of the origins, which are probably all true, the early MCs and DJs were finding new ways to express themselves.

Therein is perhaps the base element or purest definition of what Hip Hop is—expression. For cultures and communities of women and men that are often denied room at the table to express themselves, Hip Hop stands as a type of microphone. Hip Hop speaks for people in the Bronx, NY, and for folks in New Orleans, LA. It speaks for people in Kingston, Jamaica, and in Paris, France. From Haiti to Sierra Leone and from Jerusalem to Tokyo, Hip Hop is working as a mode of expression for people all around the world. The story of the creation of Hip Hop is told in many ways by many different people. There are traditions that do not mention the name Kool Herc and instead identify Africa Bambaata, the DJ and founder of “The Zulu Nation” crew as their main Hip Hop pioneer.¹⁵ Still, others that do not cite any one individual, yet rather consider the contextual or structural source, such as when the culture

emerged after music programs in New York City public schools were being cut. Hip Hop creations narratives abound yet they all point to one consistent truth—the deep need for and the powerful efforts toward expression.

I can't help but smile at the notion that I am drawing upon Emily Dickinson as I write about Rap/Hip Hop and Black Liberation Theology, but the distance between this nineteenth century poet and this contemporary cultural movement and theological school may not be as great as one might think. One of my favorite poems of Dickinson's is "Tell All the Truth." The wise poet commends readers to the art of truth telling from an angle as at times the directness of reality can be too much for feeble human beings like "as lighting to a child." Rather she encourages us to share truth in a gradual way that "dazzles" lest "every man be blind."¹⁶

Hip Hop, I have found, "tells all the truth slant." There is something powerful and important about having artistic expressions of reality. When a painting or a poem or a dance is composed about poverty, it has the ability to touch and move others in a different way. The arts are not necessarily "better" or more effective; they are just different and serve as an important compliment to research and academic presentation.

Black Liberation Theology has not connected with Black youth in the way that it potentially can or should. Some would argue that it has not connected well with anyone who is not in seminary or professional theology. Perhaps an effort to translate our theological work into artistic arenas would prove to be a way to connect with new populations that they (we) have not been able to connect with before. An examination of other movements (and Black Liberation Theology is not yet a movement although it could be!) such as the Civil Rights Movement or the Black Power movement will demonstrate their reliance and use of artistic means to communicate a message. The role that James Brown played in communicating the message of the

Black Power and Black Consciousness to youth was critical and stands out in the memory of that powerful moment in Black history. His lyrics “Say it loud, I’m Black and I’m proud!” will forever stand out. The antiwar movements of the 1970s will be remembered not only for courageous protests and pacifist literature, but particular songs and artists will stand out such as John Lennon, Joan Baez, Bob Dylan, and John Prine. There are movies and art exhibits that also played an important role in the antiwar movement that spoke both to our nation’s leaders and to popular culture.

How might Black Liberation Theology begin to employ a more consistent artistic pedagogy that might compliment the traditional way that it is taught and done? One way is that the academic culture, which sometimes can frown on “nonacademic” productions by scholars, will need to change. The tense exchange between former Harvard president Larry Summers and Cornel West over among several things, his production of a rap CD, demonstrates the scorn that is at times put upon those that break out of the academic norm.¹⁷ In academic spaces that emphasize the “publish or perish” tenure system, scholars are forced to focus most of their creative energy on writing books and articles. This suggestion is by no means meant to deemphasize the importance of academic writing, but rather to encourage a change in the culture that creates little room for creative “nonacademic” artistic expressions. Much of the critique here toward academicians who are working toward liberation is not a critique of their intentions or their sincerity, but rather it is meant to call into question the coherency of their methodology and content. In other words, it is problematic for a theory or strategy toward liberation to be inaccessible to those whose liberation it seeks! It is inaccessible, not so much in the inability of a nonacademic to understand it, but inaccessible in the fact that they (everyday people) may never have the opportunity to read it or hear it articulated in a lecture. Imagine a Black Liberation

Theology poetry book. Or a Black Theology art exhibit, jazz or rap album!

The next lesson that Black Liberation Theology can draw from Hip Hop culture—and in particular Underground Rap is the necessity to create a dialogical space where any and all voices have room to express themselves without the mandate of conformity. Rap music, within the broader Hip Hop culture which reinforces the same, is a creative space where divergent views can be in constant dialogue while also creating a space for absolutely anyone to participate. While, as Tricia Rose describes in *Hip Hop Wars*, the rap music that enters the ears of the public is what she calls “Commercial Rap”¹⁸ (or for our purposes “above ground rap”), there are several different rap genres from several different cultural origins that all coexist and remain in constant dialogue. Mainstream rap has been described as a materialistic behemoth that glorifies greed, hypersexuality, objectification, and gangsterism. This is of course a tremendous generalization which places the blame for the perceptively “negative” within rap music on the artists, rather than on the record labels. Further this type of a judgment forgoes the mentioning of the redeeming value of bringing pain and suffering to light. Still, along with what gets the most airplay, other rap genres exist as well, for example, the “conscious rap” most closely identified historically with artists like Grandmaster Flash, Common, Lupe Fiasco, Talib Kweli or the more “political/radical rap” of groups like Dead Prez or the Palestinian group DAM. However, rappers should not be put into broad camps like that, in the first place, as each artist or group (like all humans) is complex. While Jay-Z is often written off as a main stream politically-indifferent individual, but with songs like “Minority Report” where he raps about the (lack of) response to Hurricane Katrina or his work on the Obama Campaign, his complexity begins to be apparent. Hip Hop is a space where you can have Queen Latifah, Lil’ Kim,

and Nikki Minaj in a dialogue about their different brands of feminism. Hip Hop is an area where Ice Cube, Common, and the Roots can be in conversation about diverse expressions of Islam. Hip Hop is a dialogical space where the political ideas of MIA can be in engaged with the powerful expressions of Public Enemy. Likewise, it can provide a space for theological dialogue as well.

Yet, not only are famous wealthy artists included in the dialogue, but also unknown artists and commentators are included in the cipa (the metaphysical democratic cloud of witnesses that is accessible to all members of the Hip Hop universe). Hip Hop heads engage in conversations on and about every aspect of life whether it is in small conversations on school playgrounds and street corners and online on websites where individuals may upload their own lyrics, videos, and commentaries and instantly be in conversation with millions of other women and men around the world. While this might be a result of technological advances more than Hiphopological ones, the Hip Hop dialogical space has become expanded by the tools of the internet. While the above ground/mainstream rap artists seem to be dominating Hip Hop Culture (some would say American culture), the Hip Hop underground is very large and more importantly deeply accessible and inclusive.

Black Theology has much to learn in this regard. If one familiar with Hip Hop were asked to compile a list of Hip Hop artists, it would be nearly impossible. After writing the names of the most famous world renowned artists, she or he would then list up and coming artists and then the unsigned rappers, and perhaps the talented individuals who have posted material on line, and so forth. The list could be potentially endless and it would included names both known and unknown. If the same question was asked in regard to naming Black theologians (to someone familiar with this theological school) only the most well-read individuals could name perhaps ten professional Black

theologians. Seminarians and professional theologians might be able to name a few more, but the list would be short. There are many reasons for this shorter list, including a smaller number of college graduates entering this vocation (as theologians), the majority of Black seminarians going into pastoral ministry, and so forth. Yet, there is another reason. It is far easier to enter the Hip Hop cipa than it is to enter the Black Theological cipa. Entering the gates into the Black Theological House should not be so difficult.

This is not to criticize the long journey toward the PhD that most Black theologians are asked to navigate before assuming a tenured professorship. This preparation is important and necessary, but, this should not be the only path into Black theological inquiry. Certainly there are exceptions (The aforementioned Albert Cleage, others might say famed preacher and writer Jeremiah Wright). But to be considered a Black theologian, or to even enter into the conversation, one needs to be credentialed in a way that is not true within Hip Hop. Furthermore, the Black theological dialogue is happening in a very inaccessible space—the academy and in the academic journals and conferences that maintain theological conversations. Black Theology is scarcely found on social media or video sharing sites.

Yet an online search for something as broad as “Hip Hop” will bring up an interesting mixture of professional artists and their videos and concerts, and either fans, or “non-stars” who have posted videos or commentary. If Black theology wishes to move from a theological school into a theological movement, it will certainly need to widen its boundaries in a way that Hip Hop has since its inception.

Again, not only is there room for nearly anyone within Hip Hop, but there is also room for tension. To this, I am not referring to the classic rap battles or rivalries between artists or graffiti taggers or rival dance crews. Rather, there is room for both the corporate endorsed, main stream, above ground rap music

as well as the independent or small label underground artists whose politically charged lyrics may not seem like potentially lucrative songs (resulting in limited radio play). There is room for both (and all) of these camps within Hip Hop.

There is certainly room for divergent theological positions within Black theology, but there does not seem to be room for the credentialed academic theologian as well as the grassroots organic theologian who does not have a high school degree, but is a Black liberation theologian nonetheless. This is an area in which we can and must grow. I suppose if one reading this text is not credentialed and wants to “do” Black Liberation Theology, what are you waiting for? Start writing, speaking and engaging others. Don’t discount what you might learn from those who have studied and do this for a living, yet don’t let your voice be discounted either.

Continuing with the need for an open capha within Black theology, there is another model within Hip Hop for Black theology to learn from and that is its ecumenical spirit.

This ecumenism, or openness and connectedness to different religions and spiritualities within Hip Hop is an important aspect of Hip Hop culture. Black religious scholar, Anthony Pinn’s groundbreaking text *Noise and Spirit: The Religious and Spiritual Sensibilities of Rap Music*¹⁹ demonstrates that broad range of religious and spiritual expressions within rap music as does the powerful work *Religion and Hip Hop* by Monica Miller, which helps to progress the conversation to the next stage. Pinn’s project, while not being the first book to explore the intersection between rap and spirituality, was the first by a Black religious scholar that incorporated several different faith traditions. As it considered rappers and lyrics, it did not even present the entire Hip Hop global culture that would include an even larger number of traditions within it.

A survey of signed rap artists reflects the presence of different faith traditions. Certainly the most prevalent is Islam and

there are different Muslim sects represented from Sunni Islam (including well known rappers like Mos Def, Lupe Fiasco, or Everlast of the group House of Pain), The Nation of Islam rappers of the 1980s and 1990s (such as Ice Cube and certain members of Public Enemy), or the Five Percenters, also known as the Five Percent Nation of Gods and Earths (like many members of the Wu-Tang Clan or Poor Righteous Teachers).²⁰ There are several other examples of each Muslim sect whose music is still being played on airwaves across the nation and around the world. This list simply presented American-based rappers, but one must bring global artists like DAM, the Palestinian rap group or Akon, the Senegalese musician whose Sunni faith claims are known to their fans.

While the number of Jewish artists is considerably smaller, their presence has been felt over the last twenty-five years. Rappers like Remedy (previously affiliated with the Wu Tang Clan) who first gained notoriety for his Holocaust memorializing song “Never Again” are well known to be Jewish. Others such as the members of the Beastie Boys are not always known to be Jewish. Perhaps that is because some of their members have at times identified as Buddhist. Still other rappers like MC Search (of rap group 3rd Base) did not become known to be Jewish until well after they had transitioned from performers to producers of rap music. Some are surprised to learn the popular rapper Drake is Jewish with his mother being a Jewish Canadian woman.

Christian rappers come in two distinct forms, the first being Gospel rappers or Holy Hip Hop artists and the second group is comprised those rappers who are Christian by confession in their personal life, but are mainstream artists whose music is not particularly or explicitly Christian. There has been much written assessing the lyrics of artists for their spiritual content and that work is powerful, yet it is not fair to label one as Christian or Muslim simply because they reference Jesus or quote a Sura from the Quran. Likewise, it is not fair to describe

one as irreligious simply because their lyrics lack any mentioning of religious concepts.

A visit to India (or London in some cases) will reveal Sikh rap artists like Panjabi MC. There are East Asian rap artists who make strong Buddhist faith claims, others in Africa who make faith statements that reference local indigenous traditions.

Yet, more than simply having different traditions all within Hip Hop all over the world, these traditions are in dialogue with one another moving Hip Hop from a multifaith space to an interfaith one.²¹ Not only does having a multi- and interfaith Hip Hop universe creates a welcome space for individuals of all faith traditions, but it also creates an ongoing dialogue that grows and challenges those who participate and witness the exchange. Further, it allows for more ideas to be exchanged from various perspectives around different topics.

By nature, a Christian Black Liberation Theology of is in some ways limited. When one surveys the names of Black theologians, it is almost exclusively, at least historically, Christian names that are found. Black Liberation Theology has not erased the boundaries of particular religious identities. Further historical factors such as the majority of people of African Descent in the West being Christian contribute to the reality that Black Liberation Theology has been a primarily Christian discourse. This is understandable, but it will forever limit the scope and effectiveness of Black Theology of Liberation.

This project is not calling for Black Liberation Theology to downplay its Christianity, or to necessarily to become an “interfaith theology,” but if it is to make a serious effort at becoming a movement that works for the liberation of people of diverse faith backgrounds, it will need to do more than “be in conversation” with other traditions. It will need to be integrally connected with them.

At the risk of going on a tangent, that has been my experiencing working in University Chaplaincy. I have the honor of

working with several campus rabbis, local and campus imams, a number of priests from various traditions, and other religious leaders from faiths different than mine. I do not believe what they all believe. I am a Christian man, ordained in a non-denominational church of AME origins. They don't believe what I believe doctrinally either. Yet we unite under the mission of serving the students, faculty and staff of our community. Together we can accomplish so much more than we could as individuals. A united effort to address the stress that our community often wrestles with is far stronger than the individual efforts that we might try. We share resources, ideas, space, and encouragement. The same could most certainly happen within Black liberation theology between Black theologians and religious practitioners of different traditions.

In addition to stretching its religious borders, Black Theology might need to become a multi-ethnic space as well. Again, this is not meant to be a call to delete the word "Black" from Black Theology of Liberation. The Blackness is deeply connected to the liberating drive of the theology. An analogy might be drawn from Hip Hop culture. Hip Hop will always be identified with Black (and Latino) culture(s). Yet, there have and always will be non-Black voices within Hip Hop and this consequently brings a more universal appeal.

Is there a way that Black Liberation Theology might imitate this? Black Theology must always be a Black institution, but if the borders of Black Theology might be expanded to include non-Blacks, if not in its constructive development, at least in its application and teaching, it will be far more effective and will reach a larger audience. In seminaries, if Black Theology relied on Black professors alone to teach it, hardly any future minister would graduate having read even James Cone, let alone any other Black theologian. Sadly this is the case of an American Academy of Religion Black Theology Group study in 2007, which demonstrated this reality. It found that the mean number

of Black professors teaching at seminaries in the United States is 0%. Black theology cannot sustain itself—as a taught theological school—at this rate and certainly it will never translate into a theological movement with just the Black professors who are practicing now. That is not meant to be a critique of their ability, but rather of their/our small number. Does this reflect a theological academic trend that the vast majority of theological educational spaces are unwelcoming to Black scholars? If that is the case, what does this signal for Black theology? While it certainly means that there is a struggle and fight within theological schools and seminaries that needs to be fought, it may also remind scholars that Black theology needs to find other spaces to engage and work from. Likewise, and I say this fully recognizing the tension with previous comments, we need more Black seminarians and collegians to consider professional careers in theology. I support Black theologians doing theology without a degree, but we also very much need Black theologians teaching in seminaries and graduate schools.

The final lesson that Black Liberation Theology might draw from Hip Hop is its ability to engage and resist neo liberal capitalism, while simultaneously participating and succumbing to its deep influence and pervasiveness. For some, the notion of Hip Hop resisting capitalism is ridiculous. So many of the images that are seen on television and described by rap artists seem to glorify greed, making as much money as possible, and endorsing corporate brands (including some brands led or represented by artists themselves).

But the relationship to capitalism is far more than just image. Many young artists are in fact very successful businessmen and businesswomen. By momentarily laying the anticapitalist critique aside, one must certainly celebrate the talent and business acumen of many of these young Black men and women. In an industry where many of the performers find themselves wrestling with contracts and deals that are often not in their best

interests, they have risen to gain significant production and creative control of not only their material but also the careers of several others. Further, many entertainers have “branched out” into other industries capitalizing off of their own names and brand recognition. Artists and groups launching their own clothing lines is something that is not new to rap music as rappers 10 and 15 years ago were demonstrating the profitability of it. Regardless of the critique of capitalism, the business savvy of many of these young women and men is impressive.

Yet, the capitalist reach within Hip Hop has touched far more than the behavior and image of rappers. The corporate culture that is, in many ways, just as influential on the content of rap music, is an often overlooked, but very important part of what Hip Hop is (and what mainstream commercial Hip Hop is not). No book describes the corporate influence on Hip Hop culture to the degree and with the clarity that Tricia Rose does in *Hip Hop Wars: What we talk about when we talk about Hip Hop and Why it Matters*. There she describes the problem:

Five conglomerates – Time/Warner, Disney, Viacom, News corporation, and Bertelsmann (of Germany) – now control the vast majority of the media industry in the United States. (General Electric is a close sixth.) Viacom, for example, owns MTV, VH1, and BET, along with CBS radio, which operates 140 radio stations in large radio markets. The four biggest conglomerates (each made up of many record companies) are Warner Music, EMI, Sony/BMG, and Universal Music Group. Together they control about 70 percent of the music market worldwide and about 80 percent of the music market in America.²²

She continues on by saying that a multitude of the leading rap artists have contracts with these companies and that, while it may seem like they are on a vast array of rival record labels,

they often tend to ultimately work for the same company. Rose says that “For example Warner Music (which falls under Time/Warner) has more than forty music labels including Warner, Atlantic, Elektra, London-Sire, Bad Boy, and Rhino Records to name just a few. The situation looks bleaker after considering radio. After the Telecommunications Act of 1996, all ownership caps were lifted for radio station broadcasters. Previously owners could only own two stations in any given market and only forty nationwide. Today companies Clear Channel and Radio One control the overwhelmingly vast majority of “urban radio stations.” Rose says that this consolidation of station ownership has affected radio programming in many ways “including a higher consolidation of playlists within and across formats, higher levels of repetition of record industry chosen songs, homogenized and in some cases automate programming, and the near erasure of local, non-record-industry-sponsored artists.”²³

These conglomerates result not only in consolidating the market (and the crushing of smaller radio stations or record labels), but also it directly effects the music material that is played on the radio. If one company owns 30 percent of the stations in major markets, and if they program and decide which songs and artists will be played, then that many listeners will hear the same music played and selected by the programmers. They, in turn, decide which music to play in response to the promoters from record companies. Thus, the market and the creative output (on a mass scale) is controlled by a very small number of individuals whose motivation may not always be positive, but rather profit garnering. This is an important factor in the conversation around “the negative content” within Hip Hop as there are a lot of “positive and conscious” songs and rappers.

Yet, there is a tension within Hip Hop between the corporately influenced material (and artists) and the artists, practitioners,

and their material that are firmly in a posture of resistance to the financial capital seeking factions within and around Hip Hop. This ability to exist and to resist is a powerful model for Black theology to draw from.

Within Hip Hop, the corporate presence is not a secret. Artists boast about it and bloggers critique it.²⁴ Conversations with “up-and-coming” artists demonstrate their awareness of the looming temptation to “sell out” and change the content of their music and “play a role” in order to obtain a record contract and make a career out of their love for music. An interview with Philadelphia rapper Aaron Mingo revealed how he had gained a descent following in Philadelphia and in other East Coast metropolitan areas. His music has garnered a tremendous amount of “hits” and “views” on social networking sites. His music would be classified as “conscious” or underground rap with many of his lyrics detailing the experience of living in poverty and struggling with an unfair criminal justice system.

In our interview Mingo described the tension that he feels in desiring to breakthrough into a larger musical arena and be signed by a major recording label while also not wanting to succumb to the demand for an image makeover and lyric makeover with the sole purpose of selling records. Instead of just accepting any record contract that is offered to him, he resists and continues to make music while maintaining his day job.²⁵

This unsigned underground movement within Hip Hop is where many think the best music is being made—not only because of the content but also because of the creative freedom that exists. Still, this tension even exists with mainstream popular musicians and which of their songs get played on the radio and which of their videos get aired on television. At the risk of naming an artist, I will reference the seemingly timeless Jay-Z. In past years, he had gained recognition for popular party songs

like “Encore” or “99 Problems.” Yet songs like his “Minority Report” about his experience of wanting to help out after the tragedy in New Orleans and our responsibility as a nation to help and rebuild this city, have hardly received any media recognition. Why should popular artists like Jay-Z continue to make positive educational music when all the companies want him to make, and when the majority of his listeners want him to make, is more party music that is “gangster and sexist?” Why should Black theologians critique capitalism and write about poverty when they are living and prospering at institutions that are sustained and pay their salaries through investments in the “free market” and by collecting tuition from students with the intent of making a profit?

The journey of the Hip Hop artist and the career and vocation of the Black theologian present these and other interesting questions: Have Hip Hop and Black Theology both been co-opted by profit-driven systems? Has the goal of monetary or recognition based success replaced more community-centered goals like free expression and/or liberation? Does the success of Hip Hop artists or Black theologians necessarily signal “selling out?” And how can either, Hip Hop artists or Black theologians, speak from the margins while successfully ascending within the system that it originally was meant to critique? The answers to these questions are of course deeply complex and there are both individuals who serve as examples confirming the suspicions of the questions and individuals who break the mold and disprove them. Within Hip Hop, for every corporate created and controlled artist one can find an intentionally marginal underground rapper working with far less financial support and acclaim, but working with freedom and artistic creativity.

Perhaps what is needed is a parallel to the underground rap music genre. What might an Underground Black Theology look like? A collective of Black theologians producing material and

exchanging ideas that are not beholden to institutions, or publishers, but rather are writing and teaching with a freedom and commitment to liberation rather than having that commitment tested and withheld by the academy and the publishing world. The unsigned underground talent within Hip Hop getting out their message on mix tapes, independent tours, and the internet are an important balance and compliment to the talent working in the spotlight with the large contracts and the world tours. If Black Theology is to move into a new, more effective stage, an underground group of Black theologians will need to emerge to work with, yet on a different front from, the “signed” Black theologians. Or, those who have already made it can change the game. Black artists have in the last decade become the owners of some of the production companies. We are also beginning to see more and more Black deans and presidents of seminaries and theology schools. Perhaps they will change the game too.

CHAPTER THREE

Black Stars: Learning Movement Making from Marcus Garvey and the UNIA

I imagine that my experience of attending a predominantly White private school during the 1980s and 1990s was similar for many other prep-school educated African Americans. Living in Black spaces and then being educated in a mostly White space were deeply formative, albeit jarring at times experiences with the constant demand of crossing bridges and beautiful at other times with the opportunity to build them. It was confusing at times to learn about Black History from my parents, from the books that they kept in our home, from the stories they and other family members told, and then to only hear about a very few of them in school. In my Western Civilization and US History Courses, I saw few people who looked like me. The first mention of Black people came as we learned about slavery. We did not learn about Africa, its many nations and people groups, its many amazing leaders, writers, philosophers, and artists. The first images that I saw were of men and women in chains. Then Frederick Douglas, Martin Luther King Jr and that was it.¹

There was one teacher who on his own accord decided to teach a Black History class. I was excited about this development,

although it did not come until my eleventh grade year. I knew many of the faces that we saw, but there was a new one that was unfamiliar to me. It was of a regal looking man wearing a large hat riding in what looked like a parade. His name was Marcus Garvey.

The primary source and model for this chapter is one particular mass cultural movement that is integrally connected to Black Liberation Theology. The themes of universalism, inclusivity, and mass appeal within this movement are highlighted and explored with the hope of continuing to challenging Black theologians to move toward movement work—perhaps something akin to what Garvey did.

The mass movement that is considered here, as the title suggests, is the ongoing work of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) led originally by Marcus Mosiah Garvey and other Black leaders of diverse faith traditions, ethnicities, and social locations. The UNIA and the ideology associated with it and Garvey have presented an inclusivity and universality that allows for diverse perspectives (which transcend class, ethnicity, gender, and faith), diverse voices (adding an important integrity and democratic element), a continuous internal self-critique disallowing elitism, and a persistent demand for action to accompany critical reflection. The tremendous mass appeal and the effectiveness of this movement in critically engaging on a societal level, as well as in the everyday lives of individuals, are deeply connected to its universalism and natural inclusivity of a wide range of people groups as well as other factors that could be beneficial for Black Theology if integrated into Black theological method.

The first recommendation of this essay is that Black Liberation Theology works to “reunite the family” of Black religious radicalism by embracing both its Du Boisian legacy and its (perhaps lost) Garveyite legacy. This reunion is necessary not only to resolve the internal tension that has continuously been played

out with different characters in the lead roles, but so that, as a united front, liberation can be made more attainable and possible as the different opinions and perspectives on the causes and ways out of Black suffering—come together. Many identify W. E. B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington as being the two models for the typologies associated with radical Black liberation efforts (an oversimplified description of this would name these as calls for structural reform being with Du Bois and calls for individual responsibility associated with Washington). While this polarity is in reality mythic and oversimplifying, the two of them (and before them T. Thomas Fortune and Washington before Du Bois and Washington) serve as good entry points at least, into the conversation around the most effective road to the alleviation of Black suffering. Du Bois and Garvey are also placed along this polarity scale. More recently, most identify this ideological tension with the Michael Eric Dyson—Bill Cosby debate that garnered attention through speeches and books written by the both of them.

In the landmark text *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, cited earlier, Gayraud Wilmore describes what he sees as the radical lineage within Black America. The radical liberative streak described in the text is first expressed through slave revolts, like those led by Nat Turner and other radical leaders who were mostly Christian ministers. Wilmore sees this heritage being passed down next to the radical Black abolitionists like Frederick Douglas. Wilmore considers Douglas' heir to be African Methodist Episcopal Bishop Henry McNeal Turner.

After Turner, Wilmore sees a split in the “family tree” that would have ramifications over the next several generations. From Turner, the mantle of radical leadership of Black America was (according to Wilmore) taken up by both W. E. B. Du Bois and Marcus Garvey—but in (seemingly) different ways. Wilmore sees Du Bois as continuing the religious and intellectual legacy of Turner and he sees Garvey as continuing the

mass movement (oriented) and grounded style of the A. M. E. Bishop (as opposed to the seemingly distant Black elite style of Du Bois). Before explaining what Black theology might learn in regard to movement making, this lineage of Wilmore's is challenging and should be critiqued before the crucial message from it can be gleamed.

The distinctions of Du Bois being representative of the religious and intellectual, and Garvey emblematic of the mass movement and grounded side, are incomplete and do not leave enough room for the complexity in the two leaders. Du Bois' faith life, for example, was indeed complex, if not, at the least, somewhat private.² This is an important point, because often Black intellectuals are accused of being distant from the "believers" and the faith of everyday people, which is most commonly played out in the distrust of seminary and theological professors who "do not believe in the Bible." Yet, Du Bois complicates this with his apparently abiding faith commitment. Furthermore, to see Garvey as not representing the religious would be to dismiss a very critical aspect of the UNIA's work and appeal (and, as argued later, one of its important gifts to Black theology). Still, it cannot be denied that Du Bois and Garvey—while both maintaining goals of liberation for Black people not only in the United States but also globally—saw the means to achieve that goal very differently. The rift was unfortunate as we may never know what might have become of the UNIA had Du Bois gotten involved in its publications or in its leadership or what might have become of the NAACP had Garvey been allowed (or desired himself) to partner with it. Yet, the distrust and resentment were real between these two leaders, and in many ways, the legacy of this relationship still exists.

The "intellectual side" (including the theological academy) is distant from the "mass movement side" (which might be interpreted as the members of the church). To read resentment

into the relationship might be going too far, but a lack of trust and understanding might not. There has long been an anti-intellectual belief, as I certainly experienced when discerning a call to go to seminary, coming from several pastors who often repeated the quip that “seminaries are cemeteries” and that they are dead spiritually. Some pastors do not see the need for those who are “called” into ordained ministry to go to seminary and study with scholars who “do not believe the Bible is the Word of God.”³ Likewise, there are some on the seminary side who distrust “uneducated ministers” who do not have any formal theological training yet are teaching and ministering in churches.⁴ It is unfortunate because their mutual goals toward liberation (perhaps both from sin and from oppression) are often missed by one another. It is important to explore whether race and class factor into the hesitation and distrust coming from some clergy about sending their congregants and those who sense a call into the ministry, to seminary. Historically and even in large part today, with the exception of just a few prominent seminaries that have historically been connected to the Black church, most seminaries and divinity schools are either connected to predominantly White institutions or are governed and run by White men and women. One might understand why a Black pastor might hesitate about sending the young person from their congregation to the Divinity School of a major research university, as the dean is quite often a White man or woman likely not from the pastor’s tradition. There might naturally be fears that the leadership and the faculty would not be able to relate to the unique history, challenges, and theology of their tradition. Further, by projecting notions of the mythologizing of scripture and “liberal politics” such as openness and affirmation of sexual minorities, that pastor might believe that seminary just is not for this young person in my congregation because they do not want seminary to change them. This split is a complex reality that creates a fruitless trap. The distrust of

higher education coming from many pastors keeps some clergy from entering seminary and learning about strong liberation movements like Black Theology. Yet, there is also a distrust of nonseminary educated pastors because they have not been formally trained thus keeping necessary partnerships strained or nonexistent. Consequently, the Black (radical) family remains in some places distant and our effectiveness is restrained.

For Black Liberation Theology to be more effective in its efforts toward economic liberation (and its broader liberation project) the “family will need to be reunited.” Specifically, Black Liberation Theology, which has moved more solidly toward the Du Bois’ side of the family tree, must take steps back toward the Garvey side. This bifurcation of the intellectual and grassroots sources of Black liberative power is unfortunate. They need each other not only for the effectiveness of pursuing their shared goals but also for the inherent credibility of their projects as well.

A Mass Movement from the Beginning

It is important to state that the UNIA was more than just Marcus Garvey. There were literally thousands of other women and men who helped to develop and sustain the group during Garvey’s life. Even today there are several small, yet enduring local chapters of the UNIA still striving for liberation. Yet, any conversation about the UNIA and what it might have to offer Black Liberation Theology must start with the man whose life is most identified with the organization, Marcus Mosiah Garvey.

In a recent biography on the great leader it says, “Marcus Mosiah Garvey was once the most famous Black man on earth.”⁵ Born in Jamaica, Marcus Garvey is remembered as being an ambitious and intelligent young man. Noted for his ability in oratory in Jamaica, in England (where he would later live both prior to the UNIA and after his conviction), and in the United

States. He was raised Catholic, and he was religious throughout his adult life. Faith in God, an aspect not emphasized in most accounts, was an important part of the UNIA movement in a way that has relevance to this essay. Indeed Garvey's first public speech in the United States was made in a Catholic church in Harlem.

Garvey spent much of his young adult life traveling and speaking on the oppression that "Africans" (women and men of the African Diaspora—not just those living on the continent) were facing. Though it had existed in smaller chapters before, in 1917 Garvey founded the New York branch of the UNIA with approximately 15 members. Within 18 months, it would grow to nearly 300,000 dues-paying members according to a conservative estimate by W. E. B. Du Bois.⁶ In a few short years, there would be branches in nearly every major metropolitan area in the United States where there was a concentration of Black people. There were strong branches in the Caribbean, London, Central and South America, and in Africa. The major literary and news organ of the UNIA was *The Negro World* (founded in 1918), a publication that was shipped in several places overseas—often illegally on cargo ships. There were several auxiliary groups and businesses to the UNIA including the Black Star Steam Ship Line (which was meant to serve both as a Black owned financial enterprise and a means for African Americans to return to Africa), The Negro Factories Corporation, The Black Cross Trading and Navigation Corporation, The Black Cross Nurses, The African Black Cross Society, Universal African Motor Corps, as well as the Universal Restaurant (specializing in Southern cuisine), and the Phyllis Wheatley hotel.

The UNIA worked for unification and liberation in several different ways on several different levels. It fought (and continues to fight, on a far smaller scale) against the oppression and marginalization of Blacks in America and Blacks (Africans)

living all around the world. Yet, it also worked to free Blacks from the internal self-hatred that often results in colonized and postcolonial peoples.⁷ The articles in *The Negro World* played a part in this as Blacks (even today) are often portrayed in offensive ways if they are portrayed at all. While not the only one of its kind, the circulation of *The Negro World* and the quality of its writers sent positive and (somewhat) accurate portrayals of Black life in the Americas and throughout the world.⁸ Still, along with the words of *The Negro World*, the images from the parades and conferences that the UNIA sponsored continue to speak to present generations. The parades included everyday people, not just the “elite” like Garvey and the leadership of the UNIA, but former soldiers (who faced segregation fighting for this country that oppressed them), teachers, nurses, retail clerks, club men and women, children, religious leaders, and everyday members of the organization. Dressed in regalia with hats and military and religiouslike garb, marching to music and riding in cars and trucks, the UNIA would move through Harlem and remind people that “we come from kings” and that “we are a mighty people,” as Garvey was known to say. Martin Luther King Jr, while speaking at Garvey’s memorial in Jamaica stated, “Marcus Garvey was the first man of color in the history of the United states to lead and develop a mass movement...he was the first man on a mass scale and level to give millions of Negroes a sense of dignity and destiny, and make the Negro feel he is somebody.”⁹

Randall Burkett, author of the powerful text *Garveyism as a Religious Movement* states that

The meteoric rise to national prominence in the decade from 1917 to 1927 of his Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities league (UNIA) as the largest mass-based protest movement among Black people in the history of the United States is a phenomenon

which one might have expected to receive the most intensive and detailed investigation on the part of both scholars and black activists... The reasons for the neglect are complex.¹⁰

Before stating directly the lessons that Black Liberation Theology might learn from the UNIA movement, one of these “complex reasons for scholarly and activist neglect should be pointed out. Garvey saw as his ideological mentor, Booker T. Washington and his liberation within capitalism and through capitalism model as the way out of oppression.¹¹ Burkett says that amidst his (Garvey’s) positive nation building and crucial racial pride work, “his economic theory was all wrong.” He was a Bookerite unalterably dedicated to capitalist economic policy.”¹² Garvey recognized that poverty and a lack of economic opportunity were an important factor, along with genuine racism, ignorance and fear, in the oppressive challenge that Blacks in the United States were trying to answer. Among the answers provided by Garvey and the UNIA, one of them was to establish Black-owned businesses and to create Black wealth. This Black nationalist and Black capitalist perspective had strong appeal to his contemporaries and even trickled down through the years to some Black theologians and ministers like Albert Cleage. Some see later Black clerical responses to poverty such as the model put forth by Jesse Jackson in the 1980s and 1990s and in some ways the Prosperity Gospel movement, as being the ideological progeny of Garvey’s Black economic plan.¹³ Still, it was not an alternative to a capitalist system that has exploited individuals of color in the West, and this version of Black nationalism can be and should be criticized. In fact, it was the UNIA’s capitalist agenda that created many of its harshest critics like (formerly) A. Phillip Randolph, Cyril Briggs of the under-researched African Black Brotherhood,¹⁴ Du Bois (who would lean toward socialism most of his career), and others. The capitalist leanings

of the UNIA only half explain its neglect in the academy. The other reason might simply be that much of Black history is forgotten or neglected in the academy. Garvey, although he should be, is not as popular historically as King, Washington, Douglas, Civil Rights, and Black Power. Yet, amidst the relatively little intellectual attention that Garvey and the UNIA receive, there is still much to be learned and gleamed.

The first lesson that might be learned by Black Liberation Theology is the UNIA, unlike Black Liberation Theology, had a mass appeal that transcended socioeconomic location. Noted Black historian and journalist, James Spady describes this aspect of Garvey's work in the following way,

(An) outstanding characteristic of Garvey's life was his ability to inspire mass action. By mass action we mean both an activity involving a mass of people (popular use of the term), as well as the exertion of energy so that it causes a body of mass to have weight in a gravitational field. Mass when used with length and time constitutes one of the fundamental quantities on which all physical measurements are based. According to the theory of relativity mass increases with increasing velocity.¹⁵

Comparing Du Bois' organization, the NAACP¹⁶ and Garvey's UNIA, Grant states the following,

There were aesthetic and philosophical differences between the two groups. The NAACP was an interracial organization with a significant number of sympathetic White members; in fact the majority of readers of its journal, the *Crisis*, were White; integration was its endgame. The talented-tenth of African Americans to whom it made a naked appeal – the doctors, lawyers, and public school teachers – led a 'top down' movement that would eventually, in some

distant future, cascade to the rest of the black folk. The UNIA was by contrast a uniquely black organization that grew from bottom up.¹⁷

Perhaps another way to state the difference between the two organizations and ideological strategies is that Du Bois' (at that point in his life) believed that change would come through the leadership and efforts of a "talented tenth" as opposed to Garvey's explicit involvement of the "submerged tenth" and the remaining 90 percent of Black America (and of the African Diaspora). Du Bois wrote about this concept that he is famous (or notorious) for in *Culture and Anarchy* saying,

Who is today guiding the work of the Negro people? The "exceptions" of course... A saving remnant continually survives and persists, continually aspires, continually shows itself in thrift and ability and character... Can the masses of the Negro people be in any possible way more quickly raised than by the effort and example of this aristocracy of talent and character? Was there ever a nation on God's fair earth civilized from the bottom upward? Never; it is, ever was and ever will be from the top downward that culture filters. The Talented Tenth rises and pulls all that are worth the saving up to their vantage ground. This is the history of human progress; and the two historic mistakes which have hindered that progress were the thinking first that no more could ever rise save the few already risen; or second, that it would better the unrisen to pull the risen down.¹⁸

In all fairness to Du Bois, he would ultimately renovate his perspective on Black leadership and Black vanguard, but during the emergence of the UNIA and, in fact, for much of his career, this is the perspective that Du Bois would put forth.

One might argue that the organizations reflected the personalities of the leaders with whom they were most clearly identified. Colin Grant, writing in his own words and quoting Harlem Renaissance author Claude McKay says,

The problem for Du Bois was that although he spoke clearly and passionately in his prose, he was not, in person, an inspirational or magnetic character (unlike Garvey). 'Meeting Du Bois was something of a personal disappointment,' Claude McKay observed. 'He seemed possessed of a cold, acid hauteur of spirit, which is not lessened even when he vouchsafes a smile.' Physical distance was also a factor. Garvey had detritus of Harlem. Du Bois and the talented tenth were enshrined in fastidious offices downtown. And decay as he might the Garvey theatrics up in Harlem, up in Harlem was where, in 1920, the head Negro-in-charge needed to be.¹⁹

On the other hand, Spady, who has long worked with members of the Philadelphia branch of the UNIA describes the "nobility" of Garvey's character and the "indominable will to organize the masses to do something for themselves." Again, here is a reference to that "Bookerite" figure that Burkett describes, yet, it is Garvey's passion for mass organization en route to racial uplift that shines through. Spady also states that his character and personality "add to his unusual ability to organize and inspire millions of Africans to engage in mass action (and) that endeared him to the hearts, minds and souls of millions."²⁰

Still, it was more than Garvey's own character and cultural upbringing that made the movement he led appealing to such a wide mass of people from all around the world. Gayraud Wilmore says that it was a certain "ambiguity" that was key in the message of the UNIA. He describes these complex ambiguities as a

“love separatism,” a “paramilitary pacifism,” and a “conservative radicalism,” which grasped the complexity of the discrete Black situation in the United States, the Caribbean, and Africa. This effort at intentional ambiguity, Wilmore says, created a space where diverse types of women and men of African descent could all be at home in within the same house.²¹

To describe specifically how Garvey and the other leaders of the UNIA accomplished this “mass protest movement” is difficult in that there were several individuals involved over several years. Spady, however, sees two key points that might help in understanding this important lesson from Garveyism. He first states that it is important to see the emergence of the UNIA as a part of “a mass-based anticolonial movement” situated within the context of a global “decolonization process,” which would play out over the next 50-plus years. Spady says,

Throughout his career Garvey behaves as a man of mass action fully cognizant of the responsibilities and burdens that come with such a leadership role. His movement developed in response to the longings of African masses worldwide.²²

In addition to the timing of the emergence of Garvey and the UNIA on the stage of history, there was another practical tool that was used in the building of a mass-based movement and that was an (almost) democratized or, at least, broad communication journalistic organ. *The Negro World* newspaper included articles in English, French, and Spanish and had a diverse staff of writers from various UNIA divisions in the Northeast, the South, the Midwest, and the Western parts of the United States, as well as from Cuba, Jamaica, and occasional articles from nations in Africa. Furthermore, the subject matter of the articles covered stories and interests from all over the world—where people of African descent lived. Spady

states, “There has never been a Black periodical that attracted such a diverse range of Black writers and subscribers. Bold in its ideas and ideals this newspaper instilled racial pride, engaged in mass education on domestic and international issues (with a large segment being on Africa and the Caribbean), provided a range of literary/artistic materials, propagated, international consciousness, women’s issues, and Pan African unity.”²³ *The Negro World* was essential in the liberative work of the UNIA.

Black Theology does not yet have the same broad mass appeal. Those familiar with Black Theology are almost exclusively seminarians or theological academics. Perhaps some clergy are familiar with Liberation Theology and might be able to name James Cone, but familiarity by the majority of congregants will be very little. Why is this? Is it reflective of the same dynamics McKay described around Du Bois? Are Black theologians simply cold and unapproachable—having an “acidic hauteur?” The elitism alluded to is not dependent on affect. Rather Garvey’s critique of Black intellectual elites is a part of the historical lineage of critiques made toward (non-grassroots connected) Black intellectuals. The two best known of these written critiques are Harold Cruse’s *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* and Adolph Reed’s *Village Voice* essay “The Current Crisis of the Black Intellectual.” In the latter essay, Reed’s criticism is aimed at two particular individuals, Henry Louis Gates and Cornel West, who are featured prominently in this study. While Reed also attacks Michael Eric Dyson, Robin Kelly, and bell hooks, it is the former two scholars who receive the greatest amount of attention. Manning Marable describes Reed’s work in his text *Beyond Black and White* and says that Reed’s main argument is that these scholars “present themselves as ‘authentically Black’ spokespersons, yet actually lacked viable constituencies of any genuine accountability within the African-American community.” He continues by saying “(Reed) believes that (these Black intellectuals) exhibit

little sense of debate or controversy among themselves... (and have an) absence of controversy (which) betrays a lack of critical content and purpose.”²⁴ In other words, one of the problems with those who are the intellectual “elites” is (in Reed’s opinion) that they do not risk being controversial for fear that they lose some of their power and influence.

Marable, while ultimately critiquing Reed, concedes that “there is a growing sense that a significant number of Black scholars speak primarily to White elites, rather than addressing the specific problems of the African-American community.”²⁵ Thus, one of the great problems of academic elites might be not only the physical distance from their people (by leaving Black communities and working in White institutions) but also that after this exodus or brain drain, these intellectual leaders stop speaking to the oppressed and start speaking to those in power—since now they are just down the hall.

Perhaps it goes back to the need for Black Liberation Theology to adopt a more Public Theology like posture rather than speaking almost exclusively in the academic sphere. Yet having a mass appeal is more than doing Public Theology. It is a call for Black Theology to not only be accessible to different populations and to be committed to dialogue with different spaces including policy makers, it is asking Black theologians to work to make Black Theology take root among the “everyday people”—to function in an incarnational way among Black people. This is suggesting that Black Theology, in fact, not be leading from the front, but rather dwelling with the masses, dependent on them rather than on an elite leadership “from on high” in our academic “ivory towers.” This move from a school of theology comprised a relatively small number of scholars, to a large mass of people is not simply for “street credibility.” The transcending of class within a group of people will bring diverse perspectives on life and different life experiences from which to draw from and the lived experience of

Black people is one of the primary sources of Black Theology. Further, it can bring an important element of accountability to Black Liberation Theology, as provision and privilege may sometimes bring forgetfulness about the struggle of day-to-day life.

Having mass appeal leads to another important lesson from the UNIA and the Garveyites. Mass appeal has the potential to lead to mass movement.²⁶ This will be key for Black Liberation Theology to increase its effectiveness. By appeal, I mean the ability for others to not only relate to a concept or a vision but also be drawn to it. In *Black Faith and Public Talk*, in his essay “Black Theology and the Turn of the Century: Some Unmet needs and Challenges” Gayraud Wilmore sees that Black Liberation Theology needs to develop into a mass movement “comparable to Garveyism or King’s non-violent campaign.”²⁷ Amen! Wilmore’s prescription for Black Theology is consistent with the proposal in this chapter and book to move Black Theology from academic discipline to movement.

Is it possible for an ideology or, in this case, for a theology to develop into a movement? I believe that it is not only possible, but it is also necessary if Black Theology is to remain relevant. As we look back on history and the work that leaders and theologians like Charles Morrison of *The Christian Century* and Walter Rauschenbusch led, we refer to it as the Social Gospel Movement, even though it was certainly a theological school.²⁸ This theology grew legs, came off the page, and walked out of the classroom connecting with many churches and social organizations. The Civil Rights Movement is another example of just that—a social movement. It drew on the intellectual work of Black scholars like Howard Thurman, Benjamin Mays, and George Kelsey, but it also moved into effective activism for change. Black Liberation Theology similarly needs to become a mass movement if it is ever to sincerely fight economic oppression. Unless the ideas and theological interpretation of Black

theologians get out to “the masses” and become a mass movement, they will remain simply the ideas and theological interpretation of a few Black theologians and little more. Though, I do not want to discount what happens in the seminary classroom when the future pastor learns of Cone and other Black theologians. Prayerfully, some of the ideas in that class stick to the future preacher and seep through in their sermons and pastoral work. I suppose it is difficult to measure the effect it has. My point here is to challenge us to do more and to expose those not blessed enough to sit under the teaching of a professor who is teaching Black Liberation Theology, to this rich tradition.

UNIA Religion and George McGuire

Another lesson gleaned from Garveyism is the role that interreligious dialogue and collaboration plays in the journey toward liberation—similar to the lessons learned from Hip Hop as an interfaith space. On this, Garvey’s ex-wife stated;

Black preachers were continually disturbed with Garvey’s religion, and yet many thought that his position was sound and made sense for Black people. At his Forth International Convention of Negroes in 1924, the religious question came to the fore ‘When this subject came up, and was thoroughly aired by both Clergy and laity, the pious and the worldly, it was decided that, as there are Moslems and other Non-Christians who are Garveyites, it was not wise to declare Christianity the state Religion of the Organization; but by establishing the Temple of God in each heart, and letting our every word and action be motivated from that Source, we could reach a state of inner Serenity so as to enable us to establish on earth the Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of Man – a belief which is the basis of

recognized religions. Christians, who were not members of a Church, could join the African Orthodox Church; but all Church members should bear this in mind: that God is everywhere, not just in Church on Sundays; that attendance at Church was for Christian fellowship, and rededication to righteous living.²⁹

The presence of religious leaders of different faith backgrounds in the UNIA was subtle and often overlooked by historians. This multifaith presence within the UNIA and its relevance to our constructive work within Black Theology is a powerful model worth considering. The authoritative text on the religious nature of the UNIA and Garveyism in general is *Garveyism as a Religious Movement* by Randall K. Burkett, as well as its follow up text, *Black Redemption*, which looks more specifically at some of the clergy associated with the UNIA. In the preface to the book, describing the text, Burkett says that “this important study presents the Black ‘race leader’ Marcus Garvey, to us in the unfamiliar role of ‘theologian’ attempting to ‘create a form of civil religion’ among the people of the Black Diaspora in the Western Hemisphere – what he once called ‘the beloved and scattered millions.’”³⁰ The book, however, does not simply focus on Garvey. In fact, it gives as much, if not more, attention to the clergy who helped to shape the religious and spiritual culture within the UNIA. Some of the more notable well-known clergy of the time period associated with the UNIA were, for example, Junius Caesar Austin, one of the best known pastors in the country at the time, James Robert Lincoln Diggs, who was among the organizers of the Niagara Movement with W. E. B. Du Bois, and William Yancey Bell, one of the first Black men in the country to receive a PhD.

There were many other clergy involved from nearly every Black denomination as well as several of the predominantly White denominations, yet none made nearly as great an impact

on the religious life of the UNIA and its members as did George Alexander McGuire, the former Chaplain-General of the organization. McGuire was preeminent among the Garveyite clergymen who began to rethink theology from the perspective of African Americans and those of African descent. Like Henry McNeal Turner, McGuire is important precursor to Black Theology who received far too little credit for his contributions to Black religious thought.

While it is unclear when he got involved with the UNIA, by the 1920s McGuire's name began to appear regularly in *The Negro World*. An early report says that "he took the convention audience by storm with his eloquent speeches and prayers." The same article describes his election to the position of Chaplain-General at the convention. It describes how after his long journey through various Christian denominations and after some difficult relationships with overseeing non-Black Bishops in the Episcopal Church, that he chose "not to affiliate with any existing body of White Episcopalians, but to organize an independent African Episcopal Church to include Negroes everywhere."³¹ McGuire thought that this new Black led denomination would be welcoming and big enough to include Baptists, Methodists, AME members, and Christians from all different types of worship styles, church structures, and ecclesial cultures. He wanted the common factor to be the shared goal of African liberation. Further, he wanted to shape the UNIA into an ecumenical organization that welcomed all faiths. His religious vision of the UNIA was not very different from that of Garvey—at least at first—but it would ultimately be this vision that would lead to a rift between Garvey and McGuire.³²

McGuire began to implement his (and Garvey's) vision for the UNIA in a very practical—albeit Anglican—manner. Burkett reinforces the fact that this was not solely McGuire's vision by saying that "Garvey had from the outset conceived

the organization as a missionary religious association espousing ‘The brotherhood of man and the fatherhood of God’ and his explicitly committed the UNIA in its original aims, to promoting ‘a conscientious Christian worship among the native tribes of Africa.’³³

McGuire was the primary author of two very formative, yet often overlooked documents that helped to shape the religious climate and in many ways the general culture of the UNIA. These were *The Universal Negro Ritual* and *The Universal Negro Catechism*. Burkett describes the ritual and the services contained therein as “not mere strategies conceived for mobilizing the Black masses, but were rather, a serious attempt to provide ‘a coherent way of viewing the world’ for a people whose old certainties had been shaken.”³⁴ It is important to note that McGuire, while being the primary author of these documents, compiled them at the behest of the High Executive Council and Garvey himself.³⁵

The Universal Negro Catechism was used, like many catechisms, to educate members about what the UNIA believes—particularly about theological questions. Might Black theology/theologians develop a similar tool that could be shared with churches as a way to help teach Black Theology to nonseminarians? An example of what was contained in *The Universal Negro Catechism* follows:

Question: What is the Color of God?

Answer: A spirit has neither color, nor other natural parts, nor qualities

Question: But do we not speak of His hands, His eyes, His arms, and other parts?

Answer: Yes, it is because we are able to think and speak of Him only in human and figurative terms.

Question: If then, you had to think or speak of the color of God, how would you describe it?

Answer: As black since we are created in His image and likeness.

Question: On what would you base your assumption that God is black?

Answer: On the same basis as that taken by White people when they assume that God is of their color.³⁶

The Universal Negro Ritual contained services for the funerals of members, and even baptisms into the Body of Christ and the UNIA. The ritual and the catechism were both modeled off of Anglican documents being very similar in language, service order, and liturgical feel.³⁷

There were other factors in the creation of the “Religious Ethos” of the UNIA, besides the presence of George McGuire and his catechism and ritual. Burkett says, on this point, that,

From the descriptive point of view alone, one can scarcely help being struck by the fact that meetings of the Universal Negro Improvement Association possessed many of the characteristics of a religious service.³⁸

Most UNIA meetings were held on Sunday evenings and often in churches that became “Liberty Halls”—the name given to places which held UNIA gatherings. These meetings would begin with a procession and would feature many other elements that were explicitly “church like.” Burkett says that “During the procession (of officers into the formal meetings of the UNIA), the officers sang ‘shine on Eternal light.’” This was one of the official opening hymns used by the organization. It had been written by the Black Jewish bandmaster of the UNIA Rabbi Arnold J. Ford. Following the singing of another hymn, a prayer would be offered by the chaplain. The meeting would then commence and those gathered would work their way through the rest of the business items on the agenda. The

meeting was often closed by the singing of the African National Anthem (which is not to be confused with the Black National Anthem written by James Weldon Johnson).³⁹ The meeting was officially closed with the singing of the Star Spangled Banner and a benediction. To add to the ecclesial feel, an offering was occasionally received.⁴⁰

This religious feeling was not only caused and perpetuated by the format of the meetings, but it was also furthered by the mere presence of chaplains at the meetings. Chaplains, all under the leadership and the authority of the Chaplain-General, by way of the revisions to the constitution by George McGuire, were meant to do more than open and close meetings with prayer. Written in a *Negro World* article, McGuire expanded the duties of the chaplaincy to include presiding over the UNIA ritual worship services, assisting in the group's meetings (opening prayers), mentoring and instructing those in the Juvenile Branch's, encouraging members to purchase the association's ritual and catechism, offering pastoral care to sick and afflicted members in their divisions, and serving as moral model's to other members in the association.⁴¹

One of the above-mentioned constitutional revisions that McGuire discussed in *The Negro World* and that required action by local UNIA chaplains concerned the formation and instruction of youth divisions in each UNIA branch. In these youth auxiliary groups, McGuire and the executive council leadership hoped teachings of spiritual and racial uplift be shared with the younger members of the organization. Children ages one to seven would have classes around the Bible and prayer as well as the doctrine of the UNIA. They would also learn facts about the Black Star Shipping Line and other business ventures. Lastly they would learn the History of Africa.

Children aged seven to thirteen were divided by gender and the emphasis in the education was on the Universal Negro Ritual. They were also taught creative writing where the work was to

focus on stories of racial pride and love. They were also taught Black history, etiquette, and then discipline by the legions.

Young teenagers who were 13–16 studied the ritual, had military training, learned flag signals, and continued to study Black history. The boys in these groups were taught by Black military leaders and the girls were taught by Black nurses as they were being trained for the nurse corps.⁴²

This youth education and formation program was complex in regard to this study. Still, the concept of some type of youth education around Black Theology is an interesting possibility. The study of Black Theology is mostly limited to seminarians or those adult members of the very small number of churches that may do a study of a Black theological text. If churches and/or theologians could engage young women and men during their youth around the various facets of Black Theology and the systems of oppression that it seeks to reconstruct, the possibilities around change in future generations could be potentially very high.

The final and perhaps the most powerful lesson that Black Theology might draw from the journey of Marcus Garvey and the UNIA (aside from the need to create a movement that transcends class) is the intentionally ecumenical nature of his/their work. Of this Burkett says.

His problem was complicated by the fact that there were Black Jews, Black Islamicists, practically every variety of Christian group, plus numerous vocal and articulate anticlerical if not atheistic spokesmen to be found in his organization.⁴³

This is both a problem and a tremendous and rare blessing that these different organizations could coexist within the same house. Burkett goes on to say that considering the divisive fragmentation of Black churches and the tendency of Black clergy to maintain

denominational loyalties, Garvey knew that the UNIA could not be identified as just another Black denomination. He never wanted to force UNIA members to choose between their particular denomination and the UNIA.⁴⁴

This makes sense in theory, but how did Garvey go about creating a space that was open to women and men from such different traditions, beliefs, and theology? One way was that he kept the rituals, goals, and beliefs of the UNIA “of a sufficiently high level of generality” so that members could ascribe to them without contradicting what they were already practicing in their own denominations. This highlighting of common goals (such as the economic development of Black people) was an effective action in that it kept liturgical bickering to a minimum while rallying diverse groups of people to one common cause. It is not a small fact that after surveying the leadership records of the organization, one finds members from the Baptist church(es), the Episcopal Church, the African Methodist Episcopal Church, several from predominantly White denominations, Black Jews, and Black Muslims. Perhaps one of the most telling cases is the powerful role that Arnold Ford played in the UNIA.

Rabbi Arnold Josiah Ford who died in 1935 was a leader of one of the first Black Jewish groups formed in the United States. He was among the earliest of Garveyites in this country signing the Declaration of Rights (published by the UNIA). He would later go on to serve as Choirmaster and Bandmaster of the organization as well as author of *The Universal Ethiopian Hymnal*. But Ford was not the only Black Jew by any means. He brought many from his congregation Beth B'nai Abraham with him into the Garveyite movement. Another example of a Black Jew in leadership was Prophet F.S. Cherry—a leader in a Philadelphia Jewish congregation and a leader in the local UNIA division number 162 in Philadelphia.

The necessity for Black movements—for any movement—to be a broad coalition of diverse individuals and groups is paramount.

If Black Theology is to gain any legs and mature from a school of thought into a (Public theological) movement then it must not only respect and be in dialogue with diverse traditions (which it already is) but also include and grow directly because of an integrated relationship with religious traditions that are not Christianity.

Emilie Townes agrees with this and adds,

An adequate explication of black theology today will involve not only the story as it is told in the black churches of the predominantly White Protestant churches, in the black Roman Catholic churches, in the temples of our black Jewish brothers and sisters, and in the mosques of our Muslim brothers and sisters, and –perhaps more than we realize – in the streets of our de facto segregated communities. In other words, what black people have to say from other religious persuasions about what it means to be the people of God, what our novelists, poets, and musicians are saying about black consciousness and the arts, what is being said by black Marxists and other political radicals about our political destiny, are all interwoven parts of our ceaseless quest for the Eternal God who made us, bound together with our African ancestors, and wrapped up in that peculiar amalgam we call African American Culture . . . Only that holistic, Africentric culture and world view, hammered out in the strife and struggle for survival and liberation, can give us the secret of what it means to be black, and how to go about building a new World for all oppressed peoples on the shambles of the Old World of Euro-American racism, capitalism, imperialism, and their concomitant phobias and hatreds.⁴⁵

This is a convicting and radical call for Christians and subtly for Black Liberation theologians to expand their vision and the reach of their work. Indeed, if liberation is the goal, this work for freedom cannot and should not be done solely within

the walls of the Christian church or within the walls of the Christian academy. Rather, this will call for work of one accord, with diverse minds, yet an undivided heart between previously unlikely allies so that a broad coalition can work for liberation, peace, and love. If the effort is to liberate all peoples of African descent, not just Christians, then should not this effort include the work of all Diasporatic African peoples regardless of religious affiliation? A strategic and intentional partnership (which is more than dialogue) with scholars, clergy, and lay leaders of different faith traditions will not only increase mutual learning and understanding, but it will help to build and foster a broad and diverse coalition of people of African descent. This increase in numbers and in perspective might make the efforts toward liberation, including economic liberation far more productive. An example of how this might work is a partnership with Black economists (not necessarily of a different faith) that would bring a different perspective to Black theological conceptions of what a “commonwealth” (to use theologian Dwight Hopkins’ term) may look like. In *Pragmatic Spirituality*, Gayraud Wilmore supports this theory on the need for broad and diverse coalitions within the Black community. He challenges Christians to recognize that “the God who revealed himself to us in Jesus Christ” has also revealed (God’s) self to us through the “totality of our African-American history and culture” including the religious traditions, the musical traditions, the political traditions, and even the more radical traditions.⁴⁶ If Black Christians can move toward a Black-ecumenical position like this (regarding revelation) then the ability to create and maintain coalitions for the purpose of liberation might be more attainable.

This chapter has endeavored to identify specific strategies that Black Liberation Theology may draw from and incorporate into its method. It is hoped that future theologians will

be able to remain in dialogue with spaces like the UNIA and the Garveyite tradition, so that Black Theology might become more effective in its efforts to become a critical globalized movement bringing about positive change in our society and ending Black suffering.

CHAPTER FOUR

Darkwater: Lessons on Movement Making from W. E. B. Du Bois

Reading is rarely affirmed for its healing potential—for its ability to name that which the reader may be experiencing either directly or in allegory. I felt this reading Susan Howatch's Church of England Series as her characters navigated the pressures and expectations of their vocational careers in the ministry and the adventures of their personal lives. I felt this when reading Henri Nouwen, Kirk Jones, and Parker Palmer as they have spoken directly to the suffering, exhaustion, and internal conflict that I felt early on in my pastoral ministry. But perhaps the first time I ever felt this—and had that deep literary connection was in reading *The Souls of Black Folk* by W. E. B. Du Bois.

I can clearly remember holding the Avon Discus 1969 edition of this classic text. It was featured in a collected volume entitled *Three Negro Classics* and along with *Souls* it included Booker T. Washington's *Up from Slavery* and James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*. Much can be read into the selection of these three particular classics for this volume, but to me the more important matter at the time of my first holding that dog-eared book in my hands was what I felt. I read it with awe.

There is a danger, however, in describing books as classics isn't there? The temptation is to no longer read them for what they may say to us now, but rather to just collect them and relegate them to the past. Most of us have personal libraries full of classics that we seldom pull down and allow to still speak to us. I have always been inspired by scholars who have living libraries where every voice on the shelves is a potential contributor to whatever she or he may be working on.

Du Bois' words still speak to me today and in a potentially convicting way, they may also speak to Black Liberation Theology.

“Bottom Line I’m a Problem Y’all”¹

The above line comes from Philadelphia-based rapper Cassidy's 2004 song “The Problem” featured on the album *Split Personality*. This track gained modest national airplay (not nearly as much as his track “I’m a Hustla”). The song however spoke to many of its listeners, myself included as it captured one of the great tensions of the ambitious young African American. For many in our society, we are a problem simply by way of our existence. And we will also be a problem for others in society professionally by way of our own success. The contemporary rapper entering a restaurant may be a problem because he/she may make the manager uncomfortable because of their appearance, but she/he is also a problem because they may buy the restaurant later. Still, even nearly four-hundred years after the first enslaved individuals were brought to the shores of the Americas we are still a problem. Du Bois explored this in *The Souls of Black Folks*.

Between me and the other world there is ever an unasked question: unasked by some through feelings of delicacy; by others through the difficulty of rightly framing it. All, nevertheless, flutter round it. They approach me in a half-hesitant sort of way, eye me curiously or compassionately, and then, instead of saying

directly, How does it feel to be a problem? they say, I know an excellent colored man in my town; or, I fought at Mechanicsville; or, Do not these Southern outrages make your blood boil? At these I smile, or am interested, or reduce the boiling to a simmer, as the occasion may require. To the real question, How does it feel to be a problem? I answer seldom a word.²

Du Bois continues by introducing his famous metaphor of “the veil” and the notion of the “double consciousness” that many people of African Descent experience.

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

The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He does not wish to Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He wouldn’t bleach his Negro blood in a flood of White Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of opportunity closed roughly in his face.³

An American and a Negro. How true this rang for me, at that time as a teenager whose hours at home were surrounded by a family that was proud of their Blackness, a family that taught me Black history, that played Black music, watched Black television shows and Black movies, and worshiped at a Black church. And yet by way of testing and a scholarship I was admitted to a predominantly White high school, where I took Western Civilization and United States History courses that forgot that Africa (let alone Asia or South America) existed.

This notion of a double consciousness spoke right to my spirit as my being Black was, like Du Bois said, often a problem. My friends and I were required to behave, dress, and speak a certain way, to “act White”⁴ in school as we use to say. And this was of course about much more than dialect as H. Samy Alim gets at in *Articulate while Black*.⁵ For us it was more than going to a party and never having *our* music played, *our* food cooked, or *our* history taught. The problem came when we were looked at as if we did not belong. It happened in micro ways when classmates wanted to touch our hair or ask why our noses were so flat and our lips so big. And then when the college acceptance letters began to come in the problem manifested in suspicions that we were only admitted to play sports or fill an affirmative action quota because, well, “those spots belonged to others.” We were a problem.

And yet, I cannot help but smile as I think about how much of a benevolent problem so many of my classmates from high school and college are now as they work in business, law, medicine, education, politics, and more.

It has been my experience that many Black theologians have had the experience of being a problem. And that their discomfort with this, their inability to endure being looked at as a problem, has gotten in the way of their working toward movement making.

A couple of years after I received my doctorate, I taught a course on Hip Hop and Faith at a seminary in Philadelphia. One of the great joys of that class, along with challenging many future ministers and scholars to blur the line between what we think of as “sacred” and “secular,” was bringing in a number of brilliant guest lecturers. One guest lecturer was a sister who I first met at the American Academy of Religion. We were similar in age and had similar intellectual interests. She and her partner were moving to Philadelphia soon so I knew that we would be both colleagues and friends. I invited her to come and lecture to our Hip Hop and Faith class on the intersection of gender, Hip Hop, and religion, which she happily did. As she walked in the room, it was clear that many of my students “had a problem.” That is probably too strong. Let me instead say that the guest lecturer raised many eyebrows. At the time, her hair was dyed red and locked. She had a nose ring and several ear piercings. Her exposed arms revealed many tattoos, and her dress style was Hip Hop casual. I saw several of my students look at me to verify that this was in fact our guest for the day. That scholar has since gone on to publish and gain appointments at multiple institutions. I share that story because I have seldom seen a scholar be so comfortable in her own skin (let alone bring the kind of brilliance that she continues to bring through her work). She could have conformed and changed her appearance or worse, changed the focus of her scholarship from Black religion, youth, and Hip Hop to something more acceptable so that she could more easily secure an appointment somewhere, but she did not. And now she is a benevolent problem in the academy. I love it.

It is difficult to write, teach, and speak about something if we are operating from a place of fear. If one is afraid of the way their tenure committee might react to something or even how reviewers and readers may react to them, truth telling becomes

difficult. When one feels themselves being perceived as a problem, the temptation is to change oneself, rather than change the space that cruelly and oppressively sees them as a problem. If I may appropriate a word from scripture; Be ye not conformed to the world!⁶

Du Bois

Shortly after his death on the eve of the March on Washington in 1963, an author in *The Wall Street Journal* wrote, “You really have to forget about the last years of Du Bois’ life.”⁷ The author was referring to the fact that over the last few years of his long and productive life Du Bois lived a type of exile in Ghana after facing increased opposition from the US government that, because of his pro-peace positions and anti-atomic weapon positions (not to mention a track record of leftist positions), labeled him a communist. Near the end of his life, Du Bois did in fact join the Communist Party a final act contributing to the position that we who are remembering him, should just “forget about the last years of (his) life.”⁸

Du Bois was a problem. He was a complex man who was mostly vilified and ostracized by mainstream America, not only during the final of his 95 years but also throughout his life because of his consistently progressive leftist positions on racial equality as well as on women’s suffrage, socialism, and the peace movement.

We often do this with saints, don’t we? We pacify their lives and witness, domesticating previously wild ideas and acts of theirs in an effort to negate them or make their memories more tolerable. We have done it with those who are officially canonized saints like Francis of Assisi the wild beggar whose “minor” movement convicted the church around issues of poverty and materialism by striving to live a life after the life of Christ. Yet now he has been reduced to the gentle kind man who simply preached to animals. We have done it with Martin Luther King

Jr who by the end of his life was denouncing war (not just the one in Vietnam) and espousing democratic socialist views. Today he is more often remembered for his “I have a dream speech” and the day that is dedicated to his memory has moved more from his convictions into a day of service.⁹ Similarly, Du Bois was more than *The Souls of Black Folk*, and that book was more than just a push toward equality. I think that there is a word in this for Black theologians. Very seldom are the individuals who bring the difficult prophetic words celebrated during their lives on earth. We should be cautious when we are receiving too many accolades and when too many people like us. It might mean that we are forgetting to say, write, preach, or teach the difficult things!

Double Consciousness

Within *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois explores the concept of the “Double Consciousness” which, at the risk of oversimplifying a complicated idea worthy of many more pages, is the challenging tension contained within the experience of trying to navigate the two modes that many individuals of African descent are called to walk. In the case of the United States, this is the experience contained within the hyphenated title many of us bear: African American.

This, I believe, also contains lessons for Black Liberation theologians. Is there a potential cognitive dissonance between being a Black scholar and being in a predominantly White (or American or Western) field? This is again about much more than the need to switch codes when speaking with a Black colleague and then with a White one later. The double consciousness, which I think is most difficult to navigate in the academic context, is the tension between working for liberation as the goal of one’s academic endeavors while being employed in a system where the primary goals of many of our

peers is a successful career accomplished most readily by making a unique contribution to their respective field, receiving respect from one's peers (departmental and externally), being granted tenure and then perhaps being named department chair or dean. None of these latter goals are bad in and of themselves, yet they are different. The goal of being hired and then being granted tenure is a different goal than reforming an unjust criminal justice system or exploring ways to alleviate Black poverty.

Within the Gospel according to Matthew, Jesus is recorded as saying "No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon."¹⁰ It is certainly possible to sincerely work for liberation and to simultaneously pursue an academic career. Indeed, Black scholars climbing the academic ladder is an important part of progress and liberation. The point that I am getting at and the message that I am trying to translate from Du Bois' notion of the double consciousness are that the pursuit of career advancement and success cannot be one's master. It should be integrated into the liberative work of the scholar. As a father, in rereading the above paragraph the first response that I give to myself is that "I have mouths to feed and I need a job to pay for the food that will go in those mouths." I get that. And as critical of our economic system and various aspects of the academy that I might be, I am also thankful for my job and the benefits that it affords me and my family. The double consciousness in action.

I feel this tension. There are times when I have wanted to say, read, pray, certain things in front of our university's board of trustees and yet the dual direction pull of wanting to speak out for progress while also wanting to keep my job has at times left me dumbfounded. Tragic. A problem. I too wrestle with this academic double consciousness and it can be a tremendous barrier to our liberative efforts.

Pan-Africanism

Awake, awake, O sleeping world
 Honor the Sun;
 Worship the stars, those vaster suns
 Who ride the night
 Where black is bright
 And all unselfish work is right

 And Greed is sins
 And African leads on

 Pan Africa

W. E. B. Du Bois

The concept of Pan-Africanism is something that I learned from my grandfather. I did not learn it directly from him as he passed away nine years before I was born, but rather I learned it through the articles that he wrote. After spending his early years working as an attorney, my grandfather, the original Charles Howard, took up journalism as a second career ultimately working as the National Negro Press Correspondent at the United Nations. He served in this capacity during the period where several African people groups were working to find liberation from the colonial nations that were occupying them.

My grandfather, like my father and I suppose myself, was a pack rat. He saved nearly every letter and every article that he wrote. Thus, while in college I found myself working through some of the files in my cousin's garage. There were several boxes with my grandfather's name on them. In his letters and in his articles several familiar names began to stand out especially in a folder labeled "Africa." Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere, Jomo Kenyatta, Patrice Lumumba as well a letter addressed to W. E. B. Du Bois and his wife Shirley in Accra. Grandfather began to grow particularly close to Nkrumah, and they sustained their

writing relationships even after the former prime minister and president of Ghana moved to Conakry. In their letters I read for the first time of the importance of African unity across national barriers and even across oceans.

Later I would be reintroduced to the importance of the shared social, economic, judicial, and political liberative vision of Pan-Africanism by, of all places, music—first by Bob Marley and secondly by the rap group Dead Prez.¹¹

It is something that I have never lost hold of. Pan-Africanism can ultimately mean different things to different people. For some, it is simply a connection or a transcending relationship. It is the young person from Haiti meeting someone from South Africa or Jamaica or even a Black person from Canada or Great Britain and recognizing the connection even amidst the many cultural and language differences. For others, Pan-Africanism is a political vision. This may include shared economic resources, cooperative governmental and potentially military resources, ease of travel between nations, and other political connections. This type of pragmatic or applied Pan-Africanism is realized to some extent through the African Union.¹²

Du Bois is often listed among the most important Pan-Africanists of the twentieth century, particularly for his work in organizing and convening, along with Ida Gibbs Hunt and others, the African Congresses that met in the 1920s. These critical and auspicious gatherings were held in places like London and Lisbon and included in their various gatherings several future world leaders including Nkrumah and Jomo Kenyatta.

What might Black Theology learn from Pan-Africanism? Well, I should start with myself here. In reviewing this text I realize that I have written a very American-centric work. This is perhaps pardonable considering where I reside, yet I sadly confess that much is lost by my not writing with an eye toward a larger audience across the diaspora. This book automatically grows if it is cowritten with my dear friend from Ghana or with

a contribution from a trusted Eritrean sister or with consultation from a theologian that I admire in England. This is something that I think many established theologians do especially well (and something that folks like me can learn from). Staying in relationship with colleagues from around the world is something that can only enhance one's work. There are several Black Theology groups connected to national bodies that make this work possible and easier in ways than they once were.

Doing theological work from the mindset that the liberation of people in our neighborhood is connected to the liberation of people on the other side of the planet is a powerful perspective. More than just providing a spirit of unity, however, it can produce important results. The theological reflections that were produced in the United States during the presidential administration of Barak Obama have been deeply informative and constructive. Two very public situations were the state execution of Troy Davis¹³ and the killing of Trayvon Martin.¹⁴ Black Liberation Theologians entered into these conversations powerfully, writing, speaking, and teaching their students about the important intersection between theology and contemporary systems of oppression. Indeed Black Scholars from around the world weighed in on this debate by way of articles, books, and even through online social media. The killing of two Black men in the United States was connected to the lives of Black individuals around the world. Similarly, the experience of Black youth in France or in South Africa, or the tragic earthquake in Haiti and other events are deeply integrated (whether we know it or not) into the lives of Black Americans as well.

Yet, we in the States are not always as globally minded as many of our counterparts from around the world. Situations like what happened with Trayvon and Troy happen around the world, but very few United-States-based Black Liberation theologians engage them let alone are aware of them. This is

something that transcends Black theologians, the United States can at times be very inwardly focused in general with even our media reporting relatively very little world news.¹⁵

Du Bois recognized that any movement toward liberation would indeed demand a global vision. As one of if not the pre-eminent scholar of the last, we as Black theologians must take Du Bois seriously. There are few models that better demonstrate the scholar-activist posture better than he does. Prolific with his writing production and faithful in his commitments to a number of organizations and causes, we would do well to pay attention to his witness.

When I moved to college, I was placed in a dorm named after him. With pride I moved into the W. E. B. Du Bois College House. A large portrait of the man greeted us as we would enter the building reminding us of our intellectual heritage. Our building was placed right on the edge of campus standing on the cusp of both college life and the life in the surrounding community. This location was not lost on us students and it testified to the challenge Du Bois left for future scholars and community activists. In order to carry the heavy burden of liberation, a movement must employ both hands—the academy and activism. What we hold is too heavy to be moved with just one arm.

A Letter to My Children: Faith and Hope

I imagine that you all won't read this letter for some time. Let me begin by simply saying that I love you. And much of the work that we Black theologians are doing is precisely because we love you and all of our children.

As a young man I was deeply moved by the phrase from the great Maya Angelou's poem "Still I Rise" when she writes,

Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave, I am the dream
and the hope of the slave.

I think that is what I wish to communicate to you. Black Theology and the entire Black liberative stream that has flowed down through history is a gift. It was passed down to me and I have passed it down to you. I pray that you see it not as a burden, but as a gift as Sister Maya so beautifully wrote.

You two are the reason for much of this work as well as the hope of this work. When we wrestle with discrimination today, it is because I don't want you to have to experience some of the things that I and my peers have had to endure. When the generations before me were "the firsts" in schools and in other institutions, they broke those barriers and laid those paths so that I could walk in. Before them individuals marched, protested, and fought segregation in the face of hate and fear. Our ancestors who worked to end slavery, and indeed simply

survive within that wicked institution, had us on their minds. They worked for us just as I am working for you.

And we now place our faith in God and in what God will do through you. Only God knows whether you will take up theology or religion vocationally. You know that I love you and support whatever you choose and whatever you are called to do. Just make sure that in whatever field you are in, that you are doing the work of furthering freedom. The hope of the slave is not simply a hope that you would be free. Their hope was also that you would work for the freedom of others insuring that none would have to live through what they experienced. You are their—our—hope, but we also have hope in the world that you will build.

I will always hold onto two images of you all from your childhood. The first will be the sweet times that I have been blessed to just hold you all. You're the best huggers that I have ever known. No greater feeling on this earth.

The other is whispering to you the two words that I always said to you when dropping you off at school, or at a sports game or at a performance—"Be brave." My darlings be brave. With love and gratitude and hope,
Daddy

CHAPTER FIVE

Lessons from the Black Left: Socialist Inspiration and Marxian Critique

The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways, the point is to change it.¹

—Karl Marx

Black Liberation Theology is—as its name attests to—concerned with liberation. At its best that liberation is a holistic one that takes into account liberation not only from racial and ethnic oppression but also from gender-based, sexuality-based, class or economically based, and other types of oppressions that negatively affect people of African Descent. Concerning its liberating work from economic oppression, a number of powerful conversations have emerged over the years perhaps most notably the dialogue that has occurred between Black Theology and the various streams within Marxism.

This chapter does not, however, draw upon Marxist thought for a solution to economic oppression. Rather it presents a Marxist critique and draws from Marxist thinkers as a helpful source in an effort to push Black Liberation Theology and Black Theologians toward a posture of movement making. Further it looks to the historic Economic Black Left for lessons on how to translate ideas into actions.

In the works *Black Theology: A Documentary History Volume One and Two* by James Cone and Gayraud Wilmore, Cornel West takes up this initiative. And any treatment of the intersection between Black Theology and Marxism must pay proper homage to the first scholar to bring these two intellectual institutions into dialogue.

In the essay “Black Theology and Marxist Thought,” he states that,

Black theologians and Marxist thinkers are strangers. They steer clear of one another, each content to express concerns to their respective audiences. Needless to say, their concerns overlap. Both focus on the plight of the exploited, oppressed and degraded peoples of the world, their relative powerlessness and possible empowerment. I believe this common focus warrants a serious dialogue between Black theologians and Marxist thinkers.²

I recognize that the mentioning of Marxism can be isolating and a conversation stopper for some people. I would encourage individuals to keep an open mind around the possibility that even individuals, institutions, and movements that we may disagree with may have something to offer that might enhance our work. That has been my experience with Marxism. I am not a Marxist, but I certainly recognize and appreciate some of the tools that Black Theology and my faith tradition might employ in its efforts toward improving the world for the next generation.

At the risk of oversimplification, Marxist thought contains two specific elements: a theory of history and a theory for understanding capitalism. Marxist historiography can be described as having six major points or claims, the first of which being that the history of human societies is the history of their “transitional stages.” These transitional stages can be described or distinguished by “their systems of production, or their organizational

arrangements in which people produce goods and services for their survival,” in other words the relationships between the classes of different people groups. Marx sees these distinct classes as consistent throughout time though unique because of the particular circumstances of an era (e.g., certain technologies or industries of the time period.) Therefore, Marx and/or Marxism concludes that all of history is essentially a struggle between these different classes.³

The Marxist theory of capitalist society is important to consider in conjunction with Marxist historiography. Definitions of capitalism tend to usually have either a positive or negative tint to them depending on who is doing the defining. So with that in mind, I try to simply say that capitalism is an economic and in some ways political system revolving around the transaction of commodities with the intent of making a profit. Within capitalism, capitalists try to capitalize or make a profit on these transactions. Capitalists (those who own the commodity, the places, and the instruments that produce that commodity) aim to exchange that which they have produced for money from a purchaser. If they can sell their product for more than it cost to produce it, they have made a profit and have capitalized on the transaction. Things get complicated when the owner or capitalist employs others to produce their commodity or product. Decisions must be made so that the owner can still capitalize from the transaction while also paying employees. Two classes with different goals quickly emerge with the owners trying to capitalize on the work and the business transactions while the workers usually have the goals of just receiving their pay check, so that they can pay their bills and feed their families.

A Marxist Critique of Black Liberation Theology

Perhaps the first place to start is with the perceived irony in introducing Karl Marx in a book connected to religion when

Marx held real hesitation about the usefulness of religion as a force for liberation. Indeed, Marx was suspicious about the role that religion can play without being the status quo, supporting oppression, and in his language serving as an “opiate” or cathartic force. In his *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, Marx states that “*Die Religion . . . ist das Opium des Volkes.*”⁴ The larger context of the quote is

Religion is, indeed, the self-consciousness and self-esteem of man who has either not yet won through to himself, or has already lost himself again. But man is no abstract being squatting outside the world. Man is the world of man—state, society. This state and this society produce religion, which is an inverted consciousness of the world, because they are an inverted world. Religion is the general theory of this world, its encyclopedic compendium, its logic in popular form, its spiritual point d’honneur, its enthusiasm, its moral sanction, its solemn complement, and its universal basis of consolation and justification. It is the fantastic realization of the human essence since the human essence has not acquired any true reality. The struggle against religion is, therefore, indirectly the struggle against that world whose spiritual aroma is religion. Religious suffering is, at one and the same time, the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. *Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people.* The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is the demand for their real happiness. To call on them to give up their illusions about their condition is to call on them to give up a condition that requires illusions. The criticism of religion is, therefore, in embryo, the criticism of that vale of tears of which religion is the halo.⁵

History has proven that Marx was partially right about the use of religion to dull the senses and dull a desire for freedom.

And his theory has proven correct at times about the use of religion as a sigh and hope for “pie in the sky” after suffering on earth. But he underestimated the liberating potential of religion, for example, the key role that religion has played in the freedom quest out of slavery during abolition, the civil rights movement, or the anti-apartheid efforts in South Africa, and more. Furthermore, he underestimated the agency of the poorest of the poor to organize and strive for freedom and revolution often with religion as one of their primary motivating factors. Yet there is more critique from Marxist thought that should be applied to religion and in particular Black Liberation Theology.

British literary theorist, Terry Eagleton’s says that;

Marxist criticism is not merely a ‘sociology of literature’, concerned with how novels get published and whether they mention the working class. Its aim is to explain the literary work more fully; and this means a sensitive attention to its forms, styles and meanings. But it also means grasping those forms, styles and meanings as the product of a particular history.⁶

An attention to form, style, and/or meaning in most Black theological writing will reveal that it is written in an often inaccessible language and that its target audience tends to be peers in the academy. Further, while partial “blame” may be attributed to publishers and book sellers, one will find it very difficult to locate Black Theology books in large (nonseminary) bookstores. Perhaps this may be attributed to the lack of demand for this type of literature, but this might lead back to either the readability point or the desired audience point. Still, there is a disconnect between the Black theologians and the work they produce and those who are living Black Theology in the church and in the streets. This disconnect is a very important point that has been written of before in other places and that

this project has already commented on. It should be added that the identifying of a tendency toward less accessible language in Black theological writing is problematic for two important reasons. The first is that it makes an assumption that “everyday people”⁷ do not or could not have intellectual access to certain types of language—particularly academic language. This assumption is not fair and prejudices the intellectual capabilities of certain readers and that is not my intent at all. Rather, this critique harkens to the comment often found within the call and response of what is described as the Black preaching style to “make it plain.” Say it in a way that relates to the experiences of the listeners—of the potential responders to the call. It is not a matter of the listener or reader understanding it, as much as it is having the speaker or writer, in this case, present “it”—theology—in a way that is relevant and relatable to everyday people.

Second, it brings the lack of access accusation in tension with the progressive content therein. How can one accuse theologians of not being progressive and connected to everyday people when the subject matter of their books and teachings are in fact progressive and often about the experience of everyday Black people? Of course most Black Liberation Theologians are progressive in their thought and study. Yet, again, one of the major pushes of this text is to challenge theologians to write and speak in a way that allows for mass appeal, mass understanding, and mass action—mass movement.

Returning to the Marxist critique, is there a type of commodity fetishism within Black Theology? Commodity Fetishism is the trading of labor power for money. The task of doing Black Theology as a labor for money rather than a labor of love or liberation is a judgment and accusation that should not be broadly lofted at Black theologians yet, there exists the possibility that books are written, teaching positions are sought and speaking engagements are accepted with the motivation

of making a profit or gaining wealth, (perhaps along with a love of the material) rather than doing the work for the sake of liberation. Of course, this is not exclusively done within Black Theology and it would not at all be fair to accuse all Black theologians of this, but if the task or goal is no longer liberation, but rather to get paid then have they (we) begun to walk away from the task of liberation? Or if our work and ideas have become commodified and sold and traded as a thing or as a product, is this not problematic? Is it not difficult to critique capitalism when you are a capitalist yourself and capitalizing off of a commodity? A further challenge of this is that it obscures the relationship between people (writers and readers, producers and purchasers).

If one were to conceive of the Black Church as a society and then offer a Marxist critique of that society, what might be revealed?⁸ Marx, who saw humanity as being comprised different social classes of people groups based on their relationships with the means of production, delineated these classes into the basic categories of bourgeoisie, petit-bourgeoisie, proletariat, lumpenproletariat, landlords, and peasant farmers. In *Capital*, Marx describes the bourgeoisie class as those who “own the means of production” and buy labor power from the proletariat, thus *exploiting* the proletariat. The petit-bourgeoisie are also “owners of labor” but they may also work themselves. The proletariat class are “those individuals who sell their labor power, (and therefore add value to the products), and who, in the capitalist mode of production, do not own the means of production.” Their labor is owned by the capitalists—the bourgeoisie class.

To these classes Marx adds, the lumpenproletariat that might be described as the nonworking poor, the criminals, the homeless, or those who are not directly exploited by the capitalists for profit. Still, it would be a mistake, as Marx did, to discount the role or potential role that this social class plays in

liberation efforts. Lastly, he mentions the landlords, the rural peasantry and farmers—a class/group that he saw disappearing in the future.

Might it be argued that Black theologians are a petit-bourgeoisie class who are not the full owners of labor as they indeed are workers, yet they are “higher on the class ladder than some.” Pastors and everyday church folks might be placed in the proletariat class whose day-to-day work is “doing church as labor.” It would be too much to say that Black theologians own the labor of or are exploiting the work of church folks, but they are making a profit (by writing and discussing) the produced church work of proletariat church people.⁹

Another example of this application might be the relationship between some televangelists and the owners of a religious television station. It is the televangelist who is “doing the labor” of preparing messages, giving sermons and talks, encouraging viewers to support financially, and indeed drawing viewers to watch the station. All the while, the owners of the station are making the profit from the increased audience, the advertisers, and the fees associated with having a show on their station.

Pastors, and lay members of churches are doing the labor and theologians (this is not exclusive to Black Theology and the Black Church) are writing about what is being produced—making a profit. This is complicated in that there are some theologians who are well integrated into church life.

Yet, the information disconnect is an incriminating factor. If the theological work that authors were writing was written with the Black Church as the target audience then it would be coming from within for those within, as opposed to the written material being written for a target audience other than Black Church folks, thus making what is close to being an exploitative relationship. Still, it should be added that at times there is a rejection of the Black theologians coming from many within the week to week church. Many within congregations may

not want to hear or read what a group of “liberal theologians” are saying. This might ring true particularly as Black Church goers tend to be far more conservative than theologians. Yet, there is much that can be learned from reframing the Black Christian space through Marxist lenses. A parallel example could be if a high school teacher helped students produce a school news paper and then took that paper and sold it around the city keeping the proceeds for her or himself. This would be exploitative especially if all the articles were about the students at that high school, but they never had a chance to see them. However, if that teacher helped in the writing of that paper and then the paper was distributed to the students and faculty members of that school for the betterment of that school, not for the thickening of the teacher’s pockets—and further, if the proceeds were then distributed among all who worked on the paper or even all who go to the school—this would be a far less exploitative model.

This model within Black Theology and the Black Church creates an alienation of the “rest of us”—those who are not academic theologians. Within his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Brazilian educational philosopher Paulo Friere challenges academics and educators to take more seriously the intellectual capabilities of the “non-tutored.” This is a Gramscian critique addressing the need for the education of “popular workers” to be acknowledged and affirmed. It is also connected to this theory of the organic intellectual who while not having letters after her or his name, is still just as able, in this case, to do theology as well as the academic theologian.

Another Marxist critique (mostly through Gramsci) is the notion of hegemony as one of the key factors in sustaining a capitalist society. Hegemony is the set of ideas that the dominant group tries to perpetuate in a society to secure the consent of the oppressed to continue without revolt. Emilie Townes says that “the notion of consent is key, because hegemony is created

through coercion that is gained by using the church, family, media, political parties, schools unions, and other voluntary associations – the civil society and all its organizations.”¹⁰ It might be argued that Black Theology (or theologians) risks falling into the hegemonic idea that our intellectuals must be in and of the academy (rather than organic). Is it possible that this idea has domesticated Black theologians and made them less dangerous because they are away from everyday church folks and now “working for” institutions that are not the Black Church from which they came? The consent has been given (by theologians themselves) to isolate and hide Black Theology in the locked towers of the academy (universities, seminaries, and academic literature). Of this Cone says that

When Whites opened the door to receive a token number of us into the academy, church, and society, the radical edge of our race critique was quickly dropped as we enjoyed our new-found privileges.¹¹

The Black Church is not a nation or a society and any Marxist critique of it should remember that this is not the case. However, by considering it from a Marxist perspective, much may be revealed in regard to what is lacking in the theological school of Black Theology.

Lesson from the Black Left

Ministers and theologians, both ordained and lay, of the African Diaspora, have always served as leaders in the international struggle for liberation and the bettering of our society. God has spoken and continues to speak through that diverse segment of the Body of Christ, which has come to be known as the Black Church. From the movements to abolish slavery here in the United States to the Civil Rights Movement, The Black

Church has “spoken truth to power” and worked to revolutionize our young nation and ultimately the entire world.

Describing a “Black Left” is a complicated endeavor. It is difficult to describe because as is the case with many descriptive political titles like “conservative” or “liberal” it is all relative. An example of this could be the individual who at a various points in time is for an increase in LGBT rights, women’s rights, and against discrimination based on race or ethnicity, being described as a “raging liberal” by someone who is on the opposite end of the political spectrum. And yet, that same raging liberal may work on Wall Street, be in favor of a capitalist economic system and a strong military—things that many on the left do not endorse. Some call many of the Civil Rights Leaders of the late twentieth century liberal (and they were in regards to race), yet some would see (some of them) as rather conservative on gender and sexuality issues.

The Black Left that I am referring to within this chapter and the Black Leftist Movement to which I will be referencing is looking especially at the economic Left most closely identified with the various socialist streams in our nation.

While small in number, there is a rich history of Black socialists in this nation, with many of them being clergy and church people. Most Marxist historians trace the advent of Marxism in the United States to the early 1850s when Joseph Weydemeyer, “a comrade and friend of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels” immigrated to this nation.¹² He is described as the most important Marxist propagandist in the United States at that time. It should be noted that there were socialist and utopian groups in the country as early as the decades leading up to the Civil War. Utopian socialists, at the risk of over simplifying, were groups that led communal lives driven by varying degrees of democratized economic and social systems. These groups often “broke” apart from the rest of society sometimes for religious reasons sometimes for cultural ones in an effort to create a more

perfect micro-society. They were the major groups that practiced socialism in the United States through their intentional communities that were spread mostly throughout the Midwest and Western parts of the nation.¹³

In the United States, the utopian socialists and the Marxist socialists, while agreeing on some basic economic and political tenants, found themselves at odds on many other key issues including the question of slavery and the place that Blacks should have in American society. One of the more progressive socialist groups of the time was the Communist Club of New York which invited and encouraged Blacks to become members—a bold move even among liberals of the day.

It was not until around 1879 that Blacks began to actively support and join socialist parties in any major numbers. One of the first Black individuals to publicly identify himself with socialism was Peter Clark. A local organizer in St. Louis, he would later become the first Black to hold a position of leadership in any socialist party in this nation.

While different socialist parties showed sympathy and even action toward abolition and then various civil rights efforts, it was through the American Communist Party(s) that the most pro-Black action was taken. After the Russian Revolution, communism emerged not only as the dominant socialist movement but also as a growing world political system. Therefore, many of the American Communist (formally Socialist Party) Party's positions would come from Russia. It was not immediately that the international communist leadership (The Comintern) spoke on what they called "The Negro question." Yet, after the Forth (International) Congress of the Comintern held in 1922, they released the following "Theses of the Negro Question."

Therefore the congress recognizes the necessity of supporting every form of the Negro movement which undermines or weakens capitalism, or hampers its further penetration.

The Communist International will use every means at its disposal to force that trade unions admit Black workers, or, where this right already exists on paper, to conduct special propaganda for the entry of Negroes into unions. If this should prove impossible, the Communist International will organize the Negroes in trade unions of their own and use united front tactics to compel their admission.

The Communist International will take steps immediately to convene a world Negro congress or conference.¹⁴

The number of Black members of the Communist Party did not rise dramatically just yet, but these public steps in solidarity with Blacks did manage to attract many members of a very important yet almost forgotten Black Nationalist Marxist group—The African Blood Brotherhood (ABB).

Organized in 1919 by Cryril Briggs, Richard Moore, and W. A. Domingo, the ABB had only about 12 years of existence in total. Still, it managed to foster large chapters in New York, Chicago, Baltimore, Omaha, West Virginia, Trinidad, Surinam, British Guiana, Santo Domingo, and the Winward Islands. In *Black Marxism*, Cedric Robinson presents a list of other important Black radicals that were members of the ABB movement, including Otto Huiswoud, Otto Hall, Haywood Hall (Harry Haywood), Edward Doty, Grace Campbell, H. V. Phillips, Gordon Owens, Alonzo Isable, and Lovett Fort-Whiteman.¹⁵

Theodore Vincent in his book *Black Power and the Garvey Movement* says that “The ABB saw itself as a tight-knit, semi-clandestine, paramilitary group which hoped to act for a worldwide federation of Black organizations...in order to build a strong and effective movement on the platform of liberation for the Negro people.”¹⁶

The ABB is an organization whose full story remains to be told. Their relationship with Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association, as well as their relationship

with the Communist Party USA (CPUSA) are complex and probably too tangential for this short piece. But for the purposes of this chapter, it is suffice to say that the ABB was perhaps the earliest Black Liberation group that embraced Marxism, thus paving the way for later such groups as the Black Panthers. Perhaps one point that contemporary Black theologians may draw from the ABB is this effort to employ theory into an active organization. I am of course not suggesting that Black theologians arm themselves in a paramilitary unit. However, an organization with efforts, tasks, and goals, besides (in addition to) the convening of academic panels—as important as that sincerely is—could help bring about some of the goals of our theological work.

As the ABB began to decrease in size and activity, many of the members moved into the CPUSA. This movement was after failed attempts to pull the UNIA over to more of a socialist outlook. The presence of Blacks in the CPUSA would continue to grow slowly throughout the 1920s. After the famous “Black Belt Theory” more Blacks would enter the party paving the way for the unprecedented growth of Blacks in the CPUSA during the 1930s. Ahmed Shawki describes the Black Belt theory by saying, “At its sixth congress in 1928, the Comintern declared that southern Blacks in the U.S. constituted a nation and that the party should adopt the slogan of ‘Self determination in the Black Belt’ for party work among Blacks.”¹⁷

This as well as their work during the Scottsboro Trial¹⁸ would make the CPUSA into a strong force among Blacks. In 1930 there were just less than one-thousand Black members in the CPUSA. This number grew to five-thousand and five in 1939.¹⁹

The coming years would see a number of famous Black women and men enter the Communist Party or at least sympathize with them (which meant being labeled Communist anyway).²⁰ Among them were, authors Richard Wright, Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, Ralph Ellison, Chester Himes, some years

later, Paul Robeson (who never officially joined the party, but offered to join and remained supportive), and W. E. B. Du Bois. Du Bois, as is the case in so many aspects of Black history, serves as the great bridge between the Black Leftists of the early 1900s and the Black Power Leftists of the 1960s and 1970s, and by way of academic lineage, many contemporary Leftists.

His passing on the eve of the March on Washington gave way to a new generation of Black radicals in the United States. There were two major strands of Black socialism that the 1960s bore in the United States—the Black nationalist socialism expressed by Angela Davis and others associated with the Black Panther Party and the Black Power Movements, and the Democratic Socialism whispered by others like Martin Luther King, Jr.

Founded in 1966, by Richard Aoki, Bobby Seale, and Huey Newton, the organization originally known as The Black Panther Party for Self-Defense would move from being strictly a Black Nationalist group to a legitimately socialist one. The Panthers, while being best known for the clothes they wore and the arms they legally displayed, did far more than they are often recognized for. Many local and national antipoverty programs were initiated ranging from day care and education projects to food distribution. Some famous Black Panthers were Angela Davis, Assata Shakur, Afeni Shakur, H. Rap Brown, Stokely Carmichael, Mumia Abu-Jamal, Fred Hampton, and Geronimo Pratt.

But have there been any explicitly Christian Black socialist individuals? In 1896, Reverdy C. Ransom, a man who would go on later to become a Bishop in the AME Church, wrote “The Negro and Socialism,” a piece where he advocated socialism.²¹ Within this article, Ransom said when the “Negro comes to realize that socialism offers him freedom of opportunity to cooperate with all people upon terms of equality in every avenue of life, he will not be slow to accept his social emancipation.”²²

Some other Black ministers who advocated socialism in writing near the turn of the previous century were Bishop James T. Holly (“Socialism from the Biblical Point of View”²³) and George F. Miller (“Enslavement of the Worker”²⁴ and “Socialism and Its Ethical Basis”²⁵).

Rev. George Washington Woodbey would emerge onto the national socialist stage as the sole Black delegate to the 1904 and 1908 conventions of the Socialist Party. Woodbey was a Baptist minister from San Diego, California and was a contributor to *The Christian Socialist*. A former slave freed after the civil war, he would become one of the most consistent Black Christian socialist voices this nation would hear.²⁶ At one point, he was even nominated to be Eugene Debs’ running mate at one of the conventions, though the nomination was turned down.

The Black Gramsci

Today, Black socialists seem to be experiencing a resurgence of sorts within the larger Black Left. A number of well-known scholars, theologians, and activists are once again presenting themselves as socialists or at least critical of neo-liberal capitalism, most notably, Cornel West who has described himself as a “Non-Marxian democratic socialist”—a descriptor he has bore since the publication of his first major work *Prophesy Deliverance*.

One of the most important constructive contributions that West has made in his efforts to sustain dialogue between Black theology and the socialist left is his incorporation of Gramscian theory into the conversation. He offers a powerful description of what hegemonic, pre-hegemonic, neo-hegemonic, and counter-hegemonic cultures are. Hegemonic culture, West says, “is to be viewed as the effectively operative dominant world-views, sensibilities, and habits that sanction the established order.” In the United States, the hegemonic culture is the “Horatio Alger mystique” of the mythology of social mobility

or the American Dream, perhaps best presented by Benjamin Franklin.²⁷

A Pre-hegemonic culture “consists of those residual elements of the past which continue to shape and mold thought and behavior in the present; it often criticizes hegemonic culture, harking back to a golden age in the pristine past.” A Pre-hegemonic belief would be that the United States was founded as a Judeo-Christian country and that our nation needs to work to get back to this way of life.

West describes neo-hegemony as being,

... the counter-cultural movements of the 1960s by predominantly White middle class youths who have ended up in the mainstream status quo. Neo-hegemonic culture constitutes a new phase of hegemonic culture; it postures as an oppositional force, but in substance, is a new manifestation of people’s allegiance and loyalty to the status quo.

Finally a counter-hegemonic culture represents a sincere opposition to hegemony. West argues that “it fosters an alternative set of habits, sensibilities, and world-views that cannot possibly be realized within the perimeters of the established order.”²⁸ This is where Black theology, West says, needs to be, with the “radical grass roots organizations, socialists, feminists, and with the counter cultural movements within people of color.”²⁹

What might a radical grass roots Black Liberation Theology look like? The first image that comes to mind as I write this during the second administration of President Obama is the effort put forth by the Occupy Movement. Occupy, while short lived at least on the large multicity scale that it reached at its pinnacle was counter-hegemonic in its message(s) and grass roots in its practice. I want to ask why can’t Black Liberation Theology grow into a type of Occupy-like movement? Why can’t we rally around issues like the criminal justice system, the

prison industrial complex, corporate greed, racial profiling by a number of police departments, voting rights, portrayals of Blacks in the media, unemployment rates, health disparities, or any of a number of other issues oppressing our community. Imagine Black theologically inspired demonstrations, marches, and rallies around the country.

Again, there is much about the Occupy Movement that warrants criticism, but the greatest lesson that we can learn from it and from the above named Black Leftists is that they took their ideas and put them in action. But we should never simply protest, march, or demonstrate simply to be active or to retain some type of street cred. Being an activist for the thrill of the action is the worst type of activist. Being out there for the sake of bring about change and connecting with others who want change could be a tremendous act though. I fully recognize that the activism of many individuals does not entail them being “outside” their classrooms or offices. As mentioned earlier, there is a very real kind of activism that happens in the classroom. And public demonstration is not for everyone. Yet being connected to the folks on the streets is essential. Had more of the theorists or experienced activists connected with Occupy, perhaps more could have resulted from the efforts of the thousands of individuals who invested time and energy into this movement. Black theologians, we are needed!

CHAPTER SIX

Outward Commitments: Imagining a Black Public Theology

Serving as the University Chaplain at a major research university has taught me a lot. Our school seems to have a reputation among many as being a “secular school.” I often find myself correcting faculty members or other administrators around their word choice, as I tend to consider secular in this context to refer to a spaces that is devoid of religion. I know secular schools. Some of these institutions are not only without a chaplain, but they also do not have a religious studies department and do not recognize religious student groups on their campuses. I see that kind of a place as being closer to being secular (not to mention discriminatory or at least ill guided.)

Our school is not secular. Neither are we a religious school. We are not formally connected to any denomination or religious tradition. There are not crosses on the walls of our classrooms, our president is not a professed brother or nun. Rather we describe ourselves as nonsectarian. We are unaffiliated with any one tradition, but religious life is an important part of our schools history and current landscape. Very rarely do I get any push back about religious life on campus. Most administrators recognize the importance of supporting students for whom faith is an important part of their lives viewing religion as another

aspect of diversity that should be affirmed and supported. Yet, when I do experience some resistance, it is because someone feels that religion should be a very private matter. It should not impose on others, nor should it be imposed upon. I can certainly respect this and agree with it to a certain extent. My faith and my relationship with God is very personal at times, and I would not want anyone dictating how I should believe or worship or observe my faith commitments. Yet imposing my beliefs on others is a different matter than letting my beliefs, and the beliefs of my tradition intersect with matters affecting our society. Yes, religion is a private thing, but there are times and ways in which we need it to be brought out into the public. The same is true for Black Liberation Theology.

The origin of the term “Public Theology” and its definition are clarified by E. Harold Breitenberg in his essay “To Tell the Truth; Will the Real Public Theology Please Stand Up.” Breitenberg begins his description of the origins of Public Theology with Robert Bellah’s discussion of civil religion in 1967.¹ By starting here, Breitenberg quickly differentiates Public Theology from civil religion. He sees civil religion as “consisting of a basic and minimal set of religious beliefs and values, shared to some extent by most members of society.”² This is different than Public Theology, which I define in detail later.

Breitenberg goes on to credit Martin Marty, however, as the person who first coined the term “Public Theology.” Breitenberg states that Marty was distinguishing the work and persons within the Christian tradition from the “civil religion” that Bellah was describing. Next the author presents the call that David Hollenbach put forth in his essay “Public Theology in America: Some questions for Catholicism after John Courtney Murray.”³ Hollenbach’s phrasing is a solid starting point for working toward a definition of Public Theology, and it is worth repeating here. He says what he is calling for is, “...the formation of a public theology which attempts to illuminate the

urgent moral questions of our time through explicit use of the great symbols and doctrines of the Christian faith.”⁴

This, so far, is consistent with what Black Liberation Theology aims to do and in fact does, but there is more to Public Theology. The next theologian that should be mentioned here is David Tracy. Tracy argues that Public Theology occurs in one of three “publics”—the wider society, the academy, and the church.⁵ Yet, even with Hollenbach and Tracy’s definition and clarification of which “publics” theologians are engaging, the difference between Public Theology and related fields is still not clear. It is to this effort that I will next turn.

The definition for Public Theology that I wish to put forth draws from the aforementioned Public theologians and is as follows: Public Theology is theologically informed discourse dealing with issues relevant to the public in ways that are accessible to the public and in ways that can be persuasive and influential on the policies, social movements, and individual decisions within that greater public. Very often the definitions provided for Public Theology seem broad and wide ranging, which is in some ways appropriate considering the diverse number of voices dialoguing within and about Public Theology. Still, let me attempt to clarify what I see as the parameters of Public Theology and its relevance for Black Theology.

By “theologically informed discourse” I mean to make clear that Public Theology is not just commentary about public issues. Just because a Black theologian takes to a social media platform and comments on current affairs does not mean that they are “doing Public Theology.” The first parameter that I see is that it must have theological origins, sources, methods, perhaps language (though we must stay mindful of the importance of accessibility) or at least theologically influenced motivations. While even that previous statement is vague, I mean here to differentiate between the work that a Public theologian does and the work of a social ethicist, for example, which is not

necessarily theological in nature. Again, Black Theology has been very consistent in its use of theologically informed sources in a way that has strengthened its overall project. Yet, the word discourse alludes to dialogue and real dialogue must include more than one party. Thus theologically informed discourse connotes a conversation between a theologian (or theological institution) and others. This is an important point for Black Theology and it is a recurring theme in this book.

By “dealing with issues relevant to the public” I mean that Public Theology seeks to interpret and provide guidance for a society’s public sector, leading institutions, social movements, and individual engagements. Therefore, the next parameter is that Public Theology needs to be constructive, that is, to seek to influence and shape public perspective or policies that govern a public.

In so far as Black Theology deals with issues relevant to the public, Black theologians are engaging the liberation of oppressed people—an issue clearly of tremendous relevance for everyone, both the oppressed and the oppressors. Yet, in regards to micro issues,⁶ Black theologians do not often “deal with these” in a way that is consistent or even “public.” It is one thing to address, for example, wealth disparities between the Black and White individuals within a nation by addressing the historic origins of that situation. It is quite another to address an unlivable minimum wage at a particular company.

Being “accessible to the public” is another key parameter to Public Theology. This begs the question of identifying which publics Black Theology needs to engage. This not only means that the theological discourse needs to include participation from different spaces, but it also needs to be understandable and be able to be interpreted by those outside of the academy. It will need to be accessible to scholars of other disciplines, as well as those of other faith traditions. Public Theology needs to be set in a language that is accessible. Furthermore, Public Theology

is multidisciplinary and Black Theology needs to continue becoming the same. While Public Theology may have origins from within a particular faith community, Public Theology has access to sources and is in dialogue with spaces that are not distinctively Christian.⁷ Thus, Black Theology, as it moves to becoming a more public theological school, will need to be in conversation with several different publics, among them, different disciplines in the academic public (such as political science, economics, or business), the political sphere so that it can be in direct conversation (discourse) with those creating policy, as well as with the everyday people public in ways that are comprehensible and, most importantly, democratic.

The inaccessibility of theology, in general, is not a new critique, nor is this news to theologians. Yet, for a theology to be concerned with the liberation of individual women and men—the vast majority of whom do not have doctorates and have not read “the classic theologians”—and to not write in a way that is simply understandable, presents a disconnect. Again, what is being proposed is not necessarily that Black theologians stop writing in “academic language” or cease to write texts for fellow theologians, but rather that they also write pieces that have a different target audience from whom they are usually writing—“the people.”

It should be added that, as the call is made to Black theologians to embrace and become Black Public theologians, doing Public Theology is more than just speaking on contemporary social issues publically.

In his article “Public Theology as Christian Witness: Exploring the Genre” featured in *International Journal of Public Theology*, J. W. de Gruchy, South African Liberation theologian during and after apartheid, writes, “From time to time some (theologians) might make comments on public issues from their theological perspective, but doing public theology is more than this; not more frequent comment, nor more detailed comment, but methodologically different.”⁸

That difference in method is key to understanding the difference between Public Theology and other types of theologies that may occasionally provide commentary in the public sphere. Among the methodological differences is a commitment to doing theology in the public square—consistently. Within the previously mentioned journal, the editorial staff states, “Public theology has emerged as theologians wrestle with the problem of the privatization of Christian faith and seek to engage in dialogue with those outside church circles on various issues, urging Christians to participate in the public domain.”⁹

This commitment to theological discourse in the public sphere includes, as stated before, doing theological work that is accessible to those outside of theological circles. It also means doing theological work that is in dialogue with other academic disciplines and perhaps other faith communities. Yet, more than just being in conversation with other disciplines, it is working with for example, sociology, political science, psychology, and economics—for a common purpose. That common purpose is “to influence public decision-making, and also to learn from substantive public discourse. It involves academic theologians in developing categories that are capable of affecting the ethical conscience of the political community.”¹⁰ In summary, Public Theology is theological discourse done in the public sphere with the public, with the aim of affecting the public (political, social/cultural, and personal).

For clarification sake, if this project is calling for Black Liberation Theology to become a (more) public theology, it might helpful to identify what the difference between Liberation Theology and Public Theology is. The project of Liberation Theology¹¹, its goals, its sources, and its normative methods, is different from Public Theology, which is not as much of an adjective as it is a noun and distinct theological school or genre. Primarily, Liberation Theology is committed to the historical, spiritual, political, intellectual, and full emancipation of

oppressed, marginalized, and poor peoples in their particular social and cultural situations, which is consistent with the particular aims of, and distinct streams within, Black Liberation Theology. While working toward policies that can improve the individual lives within the greater public and working to influence the individual decisions that they may make may be a goal of Public Theology, Public Theology does not have the same explicit commitment for liberation. Further Liberation Theology does not share a commitment to do Public Theology in the public square¹² and to do theology that is in dialogue with other disciplines and other faith traditions, nor does it have the same commitment to accessibility. Lastly, Liberation Theology works to redefine the theological or culturally normative center. Once again, while Public Theology often does work that seeks to benefit the marginalized, redefining the center is not among its commitments or parameters.

Within Public Theology there are distinct streams (similar to Black Theology) that should be noted here. Breitenberg describes three different types of literature, all of which claim to come under the rubric of “Public Theology”; historical or descriptive, definitive, and constructive. The first type is concerned with describing the lives and works of those who may be identified as Public theologians. These biographical projects end up describing the lives of those who lived their usually religious lives in the public sphere. The second type of literature identified with Public Theology is concerned with describing what Public Theology is and “how it should be carried out.”¹³ This would be the important work of providing definitions and suggestions of ways that it can be practiced. Constructivist Public Theology is “theologically grounded and informed interpretations of and guidance for institutions, interactions, events, circumstances, policies, and practices, both within and outside the church.”¹⁴ I have included Breitenberg’s definition in entirety as it demonstrates well that Public Theology cannot

simply be works about those identified as Public theologians, nor can it be a discussion about what Public Theology is. There is a necessary dialogue with the public about the public, with the intent of guiding the public, which makes it Constructivist Public Theology. It is to this type of constructive Public theological work that this project is calling Black Liberation Theology to so that its work toward liberation, in particular economic liberation, might be more effective and relevant.

CHAPTER SEVEN

A Homeless Black Liberation Theology: Lessons from the Street Church Movement, Trinitarian Theology, and the Rev. Dr. Debbie Little

On the edge of Boston Common, a city park dating back to the 1630s, there is a statue of a woman sitting on a bench in a peaceful yet resolved pose. The statue commemorates the life and witness of Mary Dyer. A friend and follower of Anne Hutchinson and later the famous Quaker George Fox, Dyer believed, among other things, that women and men should be equal in the church and (perhaps more dangerously) that God could speak directly to individuals and not just through ordained clergymen. She wanted to do church in a way that brought the love of God directly to the common man and the common woman outside the walls of the church. She, very much like Black Liberation Theology, wanted to “reconstruct the center” of the religious and theological world in which she lived. Her beliefs and her refusal to denounce them were particularly threatening to the Colonial Puritan establishment that did not suffer dissention lightly. Thus, after warnings, banishments, and imprisonments, she was hung from an old elm tree in the Common.

That statue, just a short walk from where the elm once stood, now serves as a convicting challenge and inspiration to others who are not only working for religious freedom but also for those who wish to do church and to practice their theology differently—in a way that connects not only with the religious or theological elite but also with everyone. After 335 years, that same Boston Common would bear witness to another woman of deep faith who wanted to “do church differently.” The Rev. Dr. Debbie Little, an Episcopal priest, founded Common Cathedral and the larger ministry to which it belongs, Ecclesia Ministries. Common Cathedral is a church. It is an outdoor “street church” whose congregation is nearly all women and men who are experiencing homelessness. Each Sunday afternoon more than one-hundred souls gather in rain, snow, or sunshine on the corner of the Common right near the Park St. “T” Stop. Since the early 1990s when Little first celebrated and shared communion with a handful of homeless men and women, thousands of sisters and brothers from the streets, visiting guests from suburban churches, seminarian interns, curious tourists, and other sojourners have stood in that circle and witnessed Love in that church-without-walls. This profound ministry has grown from the passion and calling of one woman to what is today—an international movement of street churches with outdoor congregations all around the country and as far as Brazil, Australia, and England. And it is still growing. The more than three-hundred affiliated Street Churches in various stages of development seem to be inspiring new outdoor gatherings and many sensing a call to ministry are seeing themselves serving in street churches and homeless outreach ministries. Visiting one of these street churches one can’t help but shake their head and think “Something about this seems very right.”

Like many of the chapters in this book, I wrestled with whether or not to include this one in the final version of the text. It features a lesser known movement (the under studied

and seldom seen Street Church movement) and brings it into dialogue with various Christian theological interpretations of the Trinity, all the while focusing on a lesser known theologian/priest in Debbie Little. Still, I felt drawn toward writing, researching, and ultimately including this chapter not only because of what has long been a personal calling to journey with individuals experiencing homelessness but also because of a desire to draw from sources that might be perceived as being on “the bottom” of our society and not just those that are celebrated at the top.¹ Further, Debbie and the Street Church movement that has blossomed from her work presents certain unique lessons from which current and future Black Theologians may reaply in our efforts to bring Black Liberation Theology into a season of mass movement and further our efforts toward liberation.

It all started with one then (and still to be perfectly honest) unknown woman. There is a lesson just in that fact. A movement can begin with just one or two people. We too often discount what our little efforts might accomplish. The way one professor teaches her or his class might deeply inspire students who go on to pastor or teach or write or serve in ways that change thousands of lives. Movements start with the courage of one or two people.

This movement began with this particular one person named Debbie. Her journey to and from Boston Common and Common Cathedral is an interesting one. It is a story of overcoming, of not giving up, of prophetic imagination, of faith, and of a liberating theology. It is the story of an emerging movement that grew from one person’s faithfulness to what she felt God was calling her to.

Serving in the spirit of Dorothy Day, if she was Roman Catholic, Debbie would, in my opinion, be on the way to being canonized because of her faithful witness and the strong affirmation of those who live out their faith on the ground

through good works that the Roman Catholic Church has. I also remember wondering why she was not nominated to be and consecrated a Bishop in her Episcopalian Church. The more entrepreneurial part of me has wondered why she has not written the best seller that her story could easily be, bringing all of the high speaking fees that would accompany it. I suppose the more interesting and more telling question to ask is “Why this middle-class woman left a life of comfort for a life of solidarity with the poor, of caring for the homeless, and of giving away all that she has received from the God that she serves?” What is it that draws someone from the safety and normalcy of a salaried and proscribed job, working at Harvard Law School as the Director of Communications to the unpredictable life of street ministry?

On a rainy Friday afternoon, I had the opportunity to speak with Debbie at length about her journey, her calling, and her ministry. Listening to her I cannot help but wonder why so few have heard of her or Ecclesia Ministries. She could be the American Mother Teresa. I wonder why so few people know her name. I think they will someday. Daydreaming during our conversation I imagined a statue of Debbie just outside of Boston Common, not far from Mary Dyer’s. It will take a generation or so for us to really see the reforming movement and call to a radical love for the homeless that Debbie and Ecclesia Ministries have started. Maybe most of us just do not want to see the painful reality of homelessness and the enduring conviction of our society that it is, thus we simply turn the other way at all things having to do with homelessness including efforts to help and alleviate it. Or maybe it is something else. Maybe notoriety, attention, credit, power, and statues are not important to her. Giving away all that she has received, is. She says,

The thing I feel best about is not holding on to it – giving it away. All I want to do is give away what I’ve learned.

Debbie's life has been one of giving away or rather sharing her blessings. Once on the path to healing and wholeness herself, thanks to the privilege of good counseling and pastoral care, she felt that she wanted to move closer to people struggling with similar histories and their effects. After a successful and stable career in journalism and communications, she would ultimately give away the security and comfort of her life in an effort to be available to provide comfort to those in need. And after growing a ministry from a small gathering in a downtown park to a growing international movement—she again has no desire to hold onto it. Instead she would rather move out of the way for others to take the helm, share credit, and give away all that she has received.

Debbie has been through a lot in her life. Our conversation featured stories of amazing joy and dreams realized, as well as some deeply painful moments of suffering, loss, and deep hurt. Listening to this Henri Nouwen-like “Wounded Healer,”² I became acutely aware of one of her most powerful charisms. Her vulnerability and honesty are a gift to those who come in contact with her. It became clear why so many men and women, addicts, veterans, individuals struggling with mental health conditions, differently abled people, runaways, transients, abuse victims, and people suffering economically felt like they could trust Debbie. It is because she trusts them. Because she is one of them.

Preaching in Brazil recently, Debbie shares her story.

“20 years ago, the living bread appeared to me as a homeless woman. She was sitting on the steps of my apartment building. In an instant, I knew I was to make my home with her...with her and others who lived on the street. It took me five or six years to say yes to this prompting, but eventually I quit my job, went to seminary and was ordained a priest. I did this so that I could take the church

outdoors. Take the church to people who cannot or are not welcome to come inside. The gifts of the church for people outside its walls. I wanted to serve the homeless people in Boston. Jesus said if you want to grow in love, if you want to meet me, go care for the poor... I wanted to learn about God from them.”

In the classic, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*,³ one of the notions explored by educational philosopher Paulo Freire is the difference between humanitarianism and humanism. The former is the hierarchical giving of aid or charity that while being of good intent, ultimately leaves both the receiver and the giver in the same state and fundamentally unchanged. This is giving that makes the privileged individual “feel good” after doing community service by providing just a “band-aid” to someone who needs reconstructive surgery. Humanism, in this context, refers to not only the full care of one’s fellow human, but it also desires more than charity from those who are privileged. This entails an individual becoming one with the poor. This, Freire believed, was an essential step in working toward liberation. Flying in as a faux savior can only be minimally and temporarily helpful as it sustains a dependency and superiority of the saving one. Rather, partnering with and empowering the oppressed is a more incarnational and more freeing path to liberation. It is easy to miss, but this was a crucial first step for Debbie—and really for anyone wishing to minister to and with the poor. She left the comfort of her old life (her safe job, her steady income, her middle-class reputation), gave it away, and settled in with the homeless of Boston where she could also give away and share healing and hope.

This is an important lesson for Black theologians. This notion of “becoming one” with those whom we are endeavoring to liberate is essential. The subject(s) of our research should never remain people to be studied and written about. This in fact is

dehumanizing. For us to transition from simple an academic field, we must make sure that we are united with those whom we are “studying.” We must not only work on behalf of the oppressed but also be one with them. At the risk of taking a tangential detour, one theological interpretation of the relationship between the three persons of the Trinity within the Christian tradition might help to clarify what I am getting at here.

A Perichoretic Trinitarian Black Liberation Theology

During my the first semester of my doctoral studies, I found myself enrolled in Professor John Hoffmeyer’s class on Trinitarian Theology. I was both excited and intimidated. The Trinity has played an important role in my personal faith journey and I was excited to have the opportunity to explore the historical Trinitarian theological reflections in greater depth. However, I also found myself sitting in that first session with feelings of trepidation especially once I looked up at the board and saw that the first day’s lecture included notes and references that were in Greek, Hebrew, German, and Latin. I loved that class and I especially loved how my professor made different cultural, historical, and lingual interpretations of Trinitarian theology dance together and interpenetrate on another with the result of a greater understanding in all of the students in the class.

The first theme that we studied that semester was the concept of *perichoresis*. This Greek word was first popularized by John Damascene (John of Damascus) who lived during the late seventh and early eighth centuries. The word *perichoresis* was expressed in his work *De Fide Orthodoxa*.⁴ Leonardo Boff, the Brazilian liberation theologian, defines it as a “Greek expression, literally meaning that a person contains the other two (in a static sense) or that each of the persons interpenetrates the others mutually (active sense); the adjective *perichoretic* is intended to designate the communion nature in effect among the divine Persons.”⁵

Boff sees *perichoresis* as a way in which one might understand the oneness of the Three Divine Persons as it helps to (although obviously not perfectly) clarify the interrelating that occurs between the persons of the Trinity. Within his writings, Boff uses words like inclusion and communion to describe what the marks and work of *perichoresis* bring to the Holy Trinity. Certainly inclusion and communion are words and ideas that need to be considered when thinking about ways that Black Liberation Theology might expand outside the classroom.

Applying the concept of *perichoresis* to the struggle for liberation that many Black Americans and all human beings live with could be a revolutionary exercise. Yet, there exists a “gap” in applying *perichoresis* to the Triune God and then applying it to humans. Viewing and confessing that the Three within the Godhead “interpenetrate” each other is one thing, but making the statement that those of us that populate the Earth, the women and men of diverse nations and ethnicities, are contained within each other, is a difficult concept, not only to grasp but also to accept. Should Black theologians spiritually interpenetrate and become one with other oppressed individuals? With God being Spirit and humans being all that we are, this seems like a difficult bridge to make. Ah, but I am haunted by the words of Jesus when He prayed that “They all may be one.”⁶

With a *perichoretic* world view integrated into Black Theology, would people not be encouraged to act with a more interconnected intention? One of the recurring messages of this text has been the call for Black Liberation Theologians to bridge the gap between “us and them” —between professional theologians and the everyday theologians and other individuals who are navigating the various oppressive systems in the world today. A call for a *perichoretic* worldview should suggest a spiritual or emotional interpenetration where the cares, concerns, and realities that others face are owned and contained within

each other within a society. An application of this might be the sincere hurt and care that one individual may have upon hearing that another is faced with being homeless. The housed individual should *perichoretically* realize, as Debbie Little did, not only that the experience of the person sleeping on this bench or in this shelter is tragic and an indictment on our society but also that their experience is integrally tied to ours. This is far more than charity and even deeper than compassion—it is an inclusion of another’s circumstances into one’s own. Boff says, “The Blessed Trinity is thus a mystery of inclusion. Such inclusion prevents us from understanding one Person without the others.”⁷

Another way in which one might walk and live a Trinitarian Black Liberation Theological *perichoresis* is by responding to the very present urban homeless individuals and families that populate many of our nations, cities, and towns. During the homelessness awareness sessions that I have facilitated and in the courses that I have taught over the years, one of the most commonly asked questions that I hear is “What should I do when I am approached for money?”

While there are many different legitimate answers to this difficult question, one of the consistent answers given (sometimes pending safety) is, whether or not one gives money or food, to address the person experiencing homelessness and treat them as a human being. This is a small, but important, act of inclusion, for many people are excluded from the communion of normalcy that many are privileged to live within. Those who are panhandling on the streets or living in shelters, or dressed and acting in a way that is different from the norm are often treated as less than human, like animals or scenery even—like they are not a part of us. Pedestrians pass by people lying on the ground as if they are not there. Even when we are spoken to, many of us act like we have heard nothing. Perhaps if we worked to invite and include the “poor outcasts” into

our communion, some great strides toward ending poverty could be made, because some real relationships could be established. This is an ideological and not very practical concept. It is different than addressing the structural systems of oppression that contribute to chronic homeless and the ongoing cycle that many individuals find themselves stuck in. However, it is a mindset that is counter-cultural and contrary to a culture that suggests we take care of ourselves first. One might argue that it was ideological positions that helped to grow the interwoven systems of oppression that people of African descent find themselves in around the world today thus making an ideological response an important starting point in efforts to bring about change. Perhaps this *perichoretic* ideology might be the touchstone for the creation of something new. Still, we have a very long way to go before we may even begin to resemble the “Model Society” of the Trinity.

What if Black Liberation Theology sought to live in the image of this Triune God and the Model Society that it demonstrates for us?

An iconographic image of this might be the famous Trinitarian icon by Rublev where the Three figures representing the Trinity are sitting at a table together. While there is much that can and has been said about this icon, one of the most impressive aspects is the powerful quality that is conveyed with Three figures that look nearly identical save the different coloring in attire that may signify which member of the Trinity they are. Further, the three members of this Divine Society are all “at the table” together sitting and sharing in unity yet not uniformity.

How are we, as Black Liberation theologians, doing in regard to our unity? How is our unity with the (rest of) the church or the entire community of faith? Or with other theologians and scholars in other fields? It has been my experience that there is a sweet spirit of collegiality among most Black theologians. I have personally felt affirmed and encouraged and “at one with”

other Black theologians, but I cannot say that I have always witnessed unity between the various factions that are working for liberation, in particular activists, scholars, those affecting policy, and church folks. This is not suggesting disunity but rather to challenge us to move and operation in a greater spirit of unity.

If we are indeed made in the image of God—this Three who is One God, Adonai Echad⁸ maybe we can work to emulate the way that the Three relate to one another as a relational community. Dr. Louis Pedreja shares an example of how this might be already happening on some level in parts of our society.

“Living in community is central to many of us who live at the margins of society. Although often rejected from the dominant structures of their broader communities, ethnic and racial groups at the margins draw strength from their immediate communities and families. Because of the rejection they experience in society at large, the sense of belonging felt in their barrios, ghettos, neighborhoods, faith communities and families offers an oasis from their marginalization and a place for renewal. By understanding the Trinity in terms of communal relationship, those living at the margins of society cannot only find parallels with their experience, but can discover a sense of belonging as part of God’s community.”⁹

When all Black folks, when all who are experiencing oppression of any sort have that “feeling of belonging” that Pedreja speaks of, then we are working toward emulating this Trinitarian community. Then our efforts at liberation will be well on their way. What might our nation look and feel like if we really lived out the words of the Pledge of Allegiance—“One nation, under God?” Perhaps we would see greater efforts to include people in the work, life, and wealth of this nation. We might see our leaders working more toward unity than making the difference clear between political parties and polarized ends of the political spectrum. If we really worked for this unity and

worked to live in a relational community under God and in God's own image then our leaders would not make decisions that end up hurting the poorer parts of our populations, nor would we tolerate it.

Nor would most of us find ourselves so distant from those facing oppression in our society. More of us might connect, perichoretically interpenetrate with, and care for, the oppressed, like Debbie Little.

Lessons from Debbie Little

Changing careers is always challenging as it may demand that one learn a new skill set, perhaps receive more education or training, and then likely meet a new set of colleagues and start over. When the new career is ministry, there is the added challenge of having those around you think that you have absolutely lost your mind. It takes a tremendous amount of courage to leave the steady income, job security, and success over the course of a career like Debbie Little did. The challenge is not only in the leaving but also in the coming. Coming into a new vocation, going back to school, and wearing a new identity can be a significant transition for anyone, let alone a 45-year-old woman sensing a call into Street Ministry. Yet, facing fears and major question marks about what going back to school would be like, how she would support herself, and what this street ministry would actually look like, Debbie mustered the courage to heed the call and go to seminary. Of this season of life Debbie remembers, "Seminary didn't exactly prepare me for street ministry, but it gave me the ability to connect street church to traditional church."

It was there that she first encountered the teachings of Liberation theologians like Gustavo Gutierrez, Verna Dozier, Jon Sobrino, Leonardo Boff, and James Cone. She also read Jen Vanier and numerous other visionaries who have challenged

the way we think of community. Here she learned of the Base Churches in places like Sao Paulo, Brazil. It was in seminary that she learned the liturgy that she would go on to pronounce every Sunday in Boston Common after her graduation. Her courage allowed her to take the next step and to move beyond her hesitations and fears. In scripture, the beloved disciple writes that “there is no fear in love.” Love demands and motivates us to take risks. With no risk, there is no love. This is why courage must walk arm and arm with love. Black Theology demands courage in both the coming into Black theology as a vocation and also in the work of that vocation. Debbie would need not only courage and love but also endurance as some of her greatest tests were yet to come.

Most seminarians interested in pursuing ordination need to not only complete their academic studies, but they must also undergo some type of assessment by a committee in either their local congregation or with a group of appointed individuals in the denomination, presbytery or diocese. After petitioning for ordination, to Debbie’s surprise and great pain, the Commission on Ministry (who on behalf of the Bishop decide who should continue along the ordination process) decided that she should not be considered for ordained ministry. She remembers feeling “quite depressed” after receiving this news. To sense a call into ministry and then to muster up the courage to follow that call, only to have others tell you that they do not sense that same call or to tell you that you are not ready—is devastating.

Yet, she did not give up. She reapproached the commission and succeeded in changing their minds. They agreed to allow her to continue if she enrolled in Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE)—a ministerial internship that many seminarians experience during their pursuit of the Master of Divinity degree. It was difficult for them to see that street ministry was in fact ministry and not social work. Perhaps CPE would help her discernment of where she was really being called. Sadly, her

challenges with the Commission on Ministry would not be the only roadblock along her path.

In the Episcopal Church, one is first ordained as a Deacon for a number of months before their ordination as a Priest. Some people feel called to the Diaconate and spend their ministerial vocations as Deacons, which in some places is a distinct ministry from the priesthood. This was never Debbie's desire. However, after she was ordained a Deacon in the church, the Standing Committee of her diocese felt that she should remain a deacon and perhaps go work as an assistant pastor in the suburbs under a more seasoned priest instead of pursuing this street church dream of hers. They also did not think of street ministry as work of the priesthood.

What do you do when others can't see what you can see? How should you respond when you and your vision are both rejected and denied even an opportunity to try? Many of us might have succumbed to the temptation to give up at this point. Some might have gone back to the old safe job where there was far less risk of failure. And yet facing the risk of failure always seems to be a part of the holiest of journeys. Black Liberation Theology is risky work. Not only do we risk rejection from others who are either uncomfortable with what we are studying and working on, but also we risk failing or at least delayed success in our efforts for liberation. But the risk is worth it.

Some others would have simply tried another door and possibly changed denominations to one which would allow us to be who we think we are. I have over the years come across men and women who were not allowed to continue on in the ordination process of their denominations. Nearly all of them, in the wake of this rejection (or at best recommendation to pursue a different type of ministry) walk away. When the authorities tell you that you have heard wrong, that you in fact did not hear a call from God, it can be jarring and disorienting. It takes

a person of great faith and of a great love to go back in and risk failure and further shame.

Debbie ended up getting ordained. She convinced them after a number of meetings and with the encouragement and support of allies and friends, that street ministry was just as much a part of the priesthood as parish, prison, military, or hospital ministry are. But now that she had the blessing of the Standing Committee and the Bishop, what would this street ministry actually look like?

Anyone who has planted a church, or started a new ministry, knows the challenge of moving from vision to action. It is one thing to write about street ministry in seminary papers and to explain your vocation working with homeless populations to hesitant denominational bodies. It is quite another to actually speak with, pray with, and worship with real people who are more than just “the homeless,” but instead have real names. To this I would add that it is one thing to write about the liberation of Black people, it is quite another to initiate programs and efforts that employ what one has written about. This is our challenge—moving from theory to action.

Debbie’s personal journey of applying all that she had been studying about homelessness and its intersection with faith toward an actual homeless ministry is a powerful lesson on how to bring what’s in our heads and in our hearts into the world.

Debbie’s story of transitioning from theory to ministry and movement began on a Christmas Eve. Up to that point she had simply been spending time on the streets meeting individuals who were sleeping in shelters and in other places around the city. For the weeks leading up to that holy night, she would see someone who “looked homeless,” walk up to them and offer them either a cup of coffee or one of the peanut butter and jelly sandwiches that were in her backpack. And then she would just listen. What a great lesson for us in our efforts to move from academic field to movement. It is so important to know and to

be connected to people. Academic life can be isolating, but we must make an effort to hear people's stories and to witness their journeys. Doing so will only enhance our work.

After some time of just meeting people, Debbie felt led to spend the holy occasion of Christmas Eve with some of the folks that she was getting close to on the streets and she wanted to mark the occasion by celebrating communion—in the train station that many were finding shelter in on that cold Boston winter night. She describes it as being “an unlikely setting” as the prayers that were being said were often interrupted by the announcements about departing and arriving trains.

Only eight people were in that first gathering and Debbie would relate later that their reflections and prayers taught her more about worship than her years in seminary. I am convicted and convinced that if one wants to learn more about Black Liberation Theology, along with studying theology, one must spend time with Black people. Their stories, as was the case with Debbie, will teach us as much if not more about the struggle for liberation.

Debbie continued to spend time on the streets trying to build relationships (an essential when movement making) when she had an epiphany about what was happening on the streets,

“I realized this was the church, not where buildings are necessarily, but where people are. This isn't a new thought, but it's something I finally knew. Folks I was getting to know on the street, many of whom find it impossible or are not welcome to be inside, and others – “us” – who want to help and learn, needed to gather in the midst of the city, in an accessible place. We needed to pray, to celebrate, to talk, and to be a presence to people who sit around or pass by. We needed to pray for the city, raise up the concerns of the streets, bring alive a presence of hope and faith and hospitality. We needed to celebrate communion.”¹⁰

In 1996, Debbie led worship on Boston Common for the first time. And people have been gathering there ever since. That is how it all began. Today, when exiting the Park Street “T” Stop on a Sunday afternoon, one’s eyes will see the spire of the historic Park Street Church. If they turn around, they may see a large circle of homeless men and women singing along with visitors from a suburban congregation. They tend to have between one-hundred and one-hundred and fifty people present. Sometimes more.

In the center of the circle is an altar. This prophetic subversive act of setting up an altar in the midst of a circle of homeless people surrounded by houses of worship and business offices was not lost on me when I first visited this Church-without-walls more than a decade ago. Rev. Debbie Little was still the minister to this congregation then. I remember thinking that she was not who I imagined she would be. I imagined someone who looked a little more street savvy and a little tougher. Instead I saw a very average looking woman of medium height and dirty blond hair. Her glasses round out a face that seems to desire simplicity and sincerity. Not simple as in uneducated, but simple like patiently crafted Shaker furniture that is revered as genius by woodworkers.

She differed from my expectations in other ways as well. I was thinking more John the Baptist—a fringy, loud, “warm but a little scary” figure calling out the institutions in our society that are causing and sustaining homelessness. Instead of John the Baptist, there stood Debbie the Episcopalian, ironic in her “don’t make a scene” middle-class manner, even as she and the several dozen others out on the Common were making a tremendously prophetic scene as powerful as John submerging people in the Jordan River.

I have learned, after witnessing Debbie do this work, that God can use anyone for ministry. The same is true for theology. As a young seminarian, my image of a theologian was

someone who was intellectual, well-read, well-spoken, and in fact a genius. I'm not sure where that image came from, but I knew that I did not fit that mold. And yet, time has shown me that, while all of the Black theologians that I have met certainly are smart, they are not the distant cerebral bookworms that I thought. I have seen so many different people teach, write, and "do" Black Liberation Theology. People from all walks of life and from various social and intellectual backgrounds. The norm of what a theologian is supposed to be has changed.

As has been mentioned elsewhere in this text, one of the primary goals of liberation theology is to work to "reconstruct the center(s)"—be they theological and ecclesial centers that have left marginalized peoples out of narratives and practices, or other societal centers such as economic policies, literary and cultural norms, or education systems—that have kept marginalized people outside the circle, literally on the margins.

These street churches that are worshiping in the center of commerce dominated spaces are a lived manifestation of intersecting liberation theologies. The urban green spaces that most of these outdoor congregations gather in tend to be right in the center of their cities. Often homeless men and women are chased out of popular, commercial, and tourist locations by benches intentionally designed, so that they cannot be slept on, by police who in some cities are told to enforce strict anti-loitering or anti-aggressive panhandling laws, and by stores that do not allow nonpurchasing patrons to use their bathroom facilities. At their worst some cities have been known to be extra diligent in getting homeless individuals off the street when they are hosting major political conventions or large scale events like the Olympics. They work to get these individuals who are seen as a blight out of here and ship them to the margins where they can't be seen.

Many churches in one way or another also push the poor and the homeless to the margins. Either homeless women and men

are explicitly not welcomed in worship services (they can come to the mid-week soup kitchen though) or they are subtly made to feel unwelcome because of the lack of hospitality extended to those who may not fit in. Further, when the concerns and needs of the poor are a marginal issue in a congregation taking a back seat to issues like the building fund, they are marginalized in spirit and intent as well. What Common Cathedral and the hundreds of other streets churches are doing to respond to this is placing their focus and insistence on “taking the gifts of the church to people who cannot come into receive them” as Debbie often repeats when lecturing or preaching. They are bringing the issues of poverty, homelessness, and their causes to the center of society and the church’s attention. This is a powerful witness and prophetic act of liberation.

Considering this movement, I have to pause and ask myself whether or not there are any individuals who are not welcomed or marginalized from the center of Black Liberation Theology. This is of course a complicated question, but it is one that all of us should ask ourselves. Are there individuals that we feel do not belong under the umbrella Black theologians? And why? Should we do anything to reconstruct our own center so that the voices that we marginalize might have access?

There are two intentional acts within the Common Cathedral worship service that are especially powerful. The first is the time of testimony allotted for the community. Churches can be notoriously undemocratic spaces. There are reasons for that. Yet, the reasons do not necessarily make it comfortable. In most congregations only one person is allowed to truly speak (more than reading announcements) and that is the person preaching and the sermon is not meant to be a conversation. While many churches are experimenting with ways to create dialogue around sermons (posting them online and allowing for feedback, discussing the scripture or content of the sermon after the

service or during the week in small groups), for many churchgoers there is little opportunity to either respond to the sermon or to bring a word oneself during the service. When some of the Street Churches allow anyone present to share a testimony or a word, this is an especially powerful moment. On the most fundamental level, hearing how God has blessed or has worked in our neighbor's lives can be most edifying. In addition to this, having a space for congregants, not just she or he who is presiding or preaching to speak is a profound and courageous act. It is something that many of us who worship within walls might learn from. Lastly, men and women who are experiencing homelessness are far too often silenced and left without a voice. The most painful examples of this are the panhandlers who are asking for spare change hour after hour only to have a few hundred people walk by them not listening to a word they are saying. The poor and homeless are seldom listened to in our society and for street churches to provide a space where they can speak, share their stories, and be heard is amazing.

There are many voices within Black Liberation Theology that we also do not get to hear from. How might we find ways in which to create space for individuals besides those of us who are credentialed or titled to share their stories, their interpretations and vision for liberation? The work of theology is in many important ways different than the work of a church. Creating a space for testimony during a worship service may not translate easily into doing the same for theological work. Yet, the more seminaries open themselves up for a greater range of diversity in their student bodies; we may find small ways for new voices to enter into the theological center. This would be an important start.

The second powerful act within these outdoors worship gatherings is the serving of communion. The serving of the Bread and Cup is one of the oldest and most universally celebrated of Christian traditions. Though there are different theological

beliefs within different denominations, whether churches celebrate once a month or once a day, it is meaningful and powerful to nearly all Christians around the world.

The first time I took communion at Common Cathedral, I received the bread and cup from Debbie's hand. She went around the circle and gave a piece of bread to every single person standing there. I was aware of my hands being opened upwards and my head being bowed. I felt like a beggar waiting for someone to pour some change in my hands. Then looking next to me at someone who had actually begged for money before, I was humbled, (perhaps silenced is a better word) by the fact that we were in the same position. German reformer Martin Luther's last written words were *Wir sind bettler. Hoc est verum*. "We are all beggars. This is true."

Though there is much that might be described as prophetic, these street churches are not simply a demonstration or prophetic act meant to send a message. They are churches loving and growing as communities. In more ways than may be apparent, they are similar to their suburban counterparts. Celebrating the joys of life and grieving together the tragedies. Welcoming new members and saying goodbye and burying old friends. These are congregations that are trying to grow, deepen, and worship God in Spirit and in Truth.

Since that first time a group of men and women gathered at Brewer Fountain in Boston Common, Common Cathedral has been meeting ever since. Over time it grew from just a service that met weekly to a broad reaching ministry with Bible Studies, an Arts Program, a feeding program held after services on Sundays, a film screening program, legal and medical counsel, a hospital visitation program, and more. Ecclesia Ministries (the larger organization to which Common Cathedral belongs) has laid their trademark crosses around the necks of thousands of women and men on the streets of Boston over the years (and thousands more around the country).

Had the ministry continued on as the local community that it started as, that alone would be miracle enough to celebrate. However, over the last several years, a number of other ministers have been inspired by what Debbie started in Boston Common and have discerned their own calls into Street Ministry. They come to the leadership team at Ecclesia Ministries and they are mentored, encouraged, affirmed, and supported as they attempt to be faithful to their own callings and visions. Street churches have been started in other cities like Atlanta, Philadelphia, Portland, Los Angeles, San Francisco, New York, Phoenix, New Haven, Chicago, and other cities in Florida, Colorado, Iowa, Mississippi, North Carolina, and Texas. There are street churches as far as Australia, England, and Brazil. Ecclesia has transitioned from a small ministry to the homeless of downtown Boston to being an international movement bringing the love of God and the practice of the church, out into the streets. The growth of the street church movement has been rapid and far reaching and I am reminded in looking at it how things can grow from a small dream into movements.

In many ways, Black Theology has in fact grown like this. If one traces its origins back to the publishing of *Black Theology and Black Power* by James Cone in 1969, and then considers the tremendous expansion of the academic field today, one must pause and appreciate what has occurred over the last several decades. Numerous books on Black Liberation Theology have been published, courses are taught in seminaries and Divinity Schools around the country and indeed around the world, and the number of individuals who consider themselves to be Black theologians has continued to multiply with graduates entering the academy every year. And yet there is clearly still room to grow. Our movement making efforts have grown in one way, but growth outside of the academy in congregations and among the “everyday people” still remains ahead of us.

Giving It All Away

A few years ago Debbie decided that it was time for her to resign from being the leader and minister to Ecclesia and Common Cathedral. Rev. Joan Murray, who was the associate minister, was called to be the second executive director of Ecclesia. She was then followed by Rev. Kathy McAdams.

While Debbie is not present on most Sundays (she now makes her home in Maine), she is now the Missioner of Ecclesia Ministries serving as the primary mentor and developer with ministers interested in launching a street church in their own cities. Conversation betrays how letting go of the day-to-day management and pastoral responsibility of Ecclesia was not easy for Debbie. It seldom is for a pastor. She of course felt and feels very positive about her successors. That is not the problem. One gets the sense that her sisters on brothers on the street became just that—her sisters and brothers. And leaving family is never easy.

But why let it go? Why give it away? This has been a recurring theme of Debbie's life and I think one of her great lessons for all of us—especially for Black Liberation Theology. The best things are meant to be shared. Not hoarded or collected as trophies, not used as a means to power, wealth, or influence, but shared.

Perhaps someone a little more entrepreneurial might have been able to use Common Cathedral an Ecclesia Ministries as stepping stones to national prominence as the spokesperson for the homeless in America. That is not Debbie. Neither did she pen an autobiography that would most certainly have become a national bestseller bringing with it high speaking fees and prestige. Others have wondered why this successful and talented Episcopalian never pursued being appointed to the Bishopric (because she has been invited). I brought this up to her and she

laughed sharing that she is related to two late Bishops, brothers Benjamin and Henry Onderdonk. She then says that she was, “Never was really interested in a desk job.”

Debbie’s humility and lack of desire for power and ascension has surprisingly not hindered Ecclesia Ministries and the Street Church Movement that has blossomed from it. Perhaps it has done just the opposite. I would argue that had Debbie succumbed to the temptation of profiting off of this ministry either financially, or in regard to influence and power, it would not have grown to what it has becoming. She would have ascended, but it is possible that she would have left it all behind—no longer being one with those she has given her life to caring for. No longer would those experiencing homelessness and those trying to navigate poverty be the center. Instead she would have been. Rather than choosing power she chose love.

Love is not held captive by the “wine of the world” that demands an endless climb as high up the ladder as we can go. Love is free. Love is, perhaps *homeless*. Not bound, not kept inside, but it is allowed to walk unchained—working to bring others in. And then going back out to do it all over again.

In many ways this is not just a lesson for Black Liberation theologians in our efforts toward movement making, but it is also a lesson for all of us in the academy. There is often a natural path of ascension set before us. After we complete our degrees we find ourselves seeking a position where we can teach and pursue our research interests. But the pursuit often results in us leaving jobs or more prestigious schools or better titles. And our focus is on being granted tenure or becoming department chair, or dean, or becoming well known in the field. As I have stated before in this text, there is nothing wrong with this climb in itself—unless the climb comes at the sacrifice of the work for liberation that originally drew us in. As a parent myself, I certainly understand the need to provide for one’s children and

the desire to increase one's salary so as to do so more easily. Yet, there is something, if I may, deeply liberating, about letting go of that ambition. And liberation, along with glorifying God, is our ultimate goal.

If you are in Boston some Sunday afternoon, go and see for yourself. See what a street church looks like. Then walk up the hill and see the statue of Mary Dyer. Perhaps someday we will also see a statue of Debbie Little. She would hate that though and make us take the money we would have spent on the statue and give it all away.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Lessons from Professor Charles Xavier: Black Liberation Theology and the X-Men

Sworn to Protect a World That Hates and Fears Them

I must confess that I was considerably hesitant at the notion of including this chapter in the book. Not only am I outing myself as a “comic book geek” but I risk inviting the criticism that this section is drawing from a nonacademic source, indeed a fictional source. And yet, one of the great lessons that I have learned from Black Liberation Theology is that in the journey to freedom, one must take risks.

Since I was a child I have loved using my imagination and visiting the imagined worlds of others. I loved reading the great stories of C. S. Lewis as he constructed an entire new world called Narnia. Exploring the Middle-earth built by J. R. R. Tolkien provided adventures that I still remember to this day. When my older brother introduced me to the world of comic books, I entered a universe of adventures that I have not yet left.

Comic books are of course shorter, usually fictional, pieces of literature that rely heavily upon paneled illustrations in stories that, in some cases, have been ongoing for decades. The subject matter can vary greatly from title to title and can include

comedy, horror, science fiction, or be deeply political. Comics are written for children, teenagers, and adults from all walks of life. The most popular comics feature stories and images that revolve around the lives of “super heroes” like Superman, Wonder Woman, or Spider-Man.

Comic books have grown from the five cent, twenty page projects of the 1930s into a multibillion dollar industry that has expanded from the page to the movie theatre, television shows, and all kinds of merchandise all over the globe.

Why bring this up in a text that is exploring ways that Black Liberation Theology can expand into a mass movement phase? The sources from which one draws their theological reflection are deeply integral to their theological work and the realizing of the goals of that theological work. Slavery, the contemporary Black experience, Black literature, various African folkloric traditions and more have all served as theological sources. Why not expand the pool from which we are drawing? Indeed that is happening already as I see a new generation of theologians using Hip Hop, Black film, and various others spaces as theological sources. Why not fiction? And why not spaces that encourage the use of our imaginations? A space like comic books.

Referencing a particular series of storyline here has the potential, not unlike writing about rap music, to be quickly outdated. But I run that risk here by considering one particular title as I consider the entire literary genre of comic books and attempt to articulate what Black Liberation Theology might learn in an effort to expand into a stage of mass movement.

An Uncanny Black Liberation of Theology

Growing up, like a lot of children, I liked Spider-Man, Superman, Batman, and just about any super hero I came across. I liked them, but I wasn't particularly inspired by any of them. My

personal emotional and intellectual investment in the storylines of comic books began in earnest when I came across a comic book called the *Uncanny X-men*. The story line(s)¹ began and continue to revolve around “mutants”—individuals born differently than regular humans as they have certain mutations that give them super powers. They are distinguished from characters like Spider-Man, The Fantastic Four, Iron Man, or The Hulk who were all born human and obtained their powers from accidents or experiments gone awry. Mutants are distinguished as being “different” by birth. Their difference or otherness makes them fascinating to “regular” humans, but it also makes humans afraid of them—even hate them. They are feared, misunderstood, and ultimately marginalized.

As the story of the X-Men goes, a man named Charles Xavier, a mutant himself, decided to open a school for mutants so that they could learn to use their powers for good and protect a world that so often “hates and fears them.” Over the years, the original team of five student X-Men, imagined and brought to the page by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby in 1963, has grown to several different super hero teams of mutants, dozens of characters who have lived and died (and come back to life!) through hundreds of story arcs. The recurring theme throughout their 50 year history however has been the reality of a group of individuals who are different than the mainstream and pushed to the margins of society, all the while being committed to making the world a better place for mutants and nonmutants alike.

As a young African-American boy who was increasingly aware of my being different than the majority of the people that I saw on television or the historical figures that I was made to read and learn about in school, I too felt different. And I would over the years grow to understand what it is like to be both hated and feared. Being stopped and profiled by the police in every city that I have lived in and having people cross the street when I am approaching has made it clear that I am

feared or seen as suspicious by many who encounter me. And it doesn't take long to realize that there are individuals out here who hate Black folks once you post an article on a site that has an open comment section.

I deeply connected with the X-Men. I loved the tensions between the different characters who sought to respond to human hatred toward mutants in different ways. Charles Xavier in some ways was modeled off of Martin Luther King Jr and Xavier's old friend turned nemesis Magneto was meant to reflect Malcolm X and other Nation First, Black Power advocates like Kwame Ture. The depictions and references to Martin and Malcolm were of course limiting and incomplete,² yet they were relatable and they spoke to me and millions of other readers. More recent story lines (yes I still read the X-Men comics) have seen the world's fear and loathing of mutants increase with various mutants being murdered over the years simply because of who they are. It is not just African Americans who can relate to this tragic aspect of the X-Men story.

So what? Why bring all of this up? Well, again, I believe that there are lessons that we can glean for the purposes of expanding Black Liberation Theology the first being that The X-Men grew from a school to a movement. The character Charles Xavier (as depicted in the movies by actors Patrick Stewart and James McAvoy) recognized that he himself was different being a mutant and believed that there were others out there like himself. He finds his first class of "different" individuals and establishes a school where these teenagers can learn about themselves as well as learn how to use their gifts to work for a better world.

Years later this little group of five mutants has blossomed into two different "schools for gifted youngsters" and dozens of different "super hero teams" that work to both keep the world safe and to further the freedom of mutantkind. Xavier's first little school grew into a movement.

Wouldn't a Black Liberation Theology School be amazing? Not just a department at a University or even a predominantly Black seminary, but an institution that was dedicated to Black Theology—Black Liberation Theology completely. While it is important for Black Liberation Theology to be taught in context with other Liberation Theologies, other types of theologies, and other aspects of religious studies, establishing a school that sees Black Liberation Theology as the methodological base could produce some amazing results. More and more seminaries are describing themselves as being committed to a Public Theological posture in their work. Why not Liberation Theology or Black Liberation Theology?

Secondly, it is important to consider how these X-Men grew into a global movement. Though this is fiction, there are certain key lessons that might help us in our work.

Xavier's reaching out to teens was an extremely important factor. As mentioned earlier in the chapter on Garveyism, Black Theology needs to find a way to engage younger minds. I would venture to say that most individuals who have studied Black Theology did not do so until they were in graduate school save for the rare person who connected with a book or two during college. The byline on the old X-Men comics was "The strangest teens of all!" Black Theology might need some "strange teens" in order for it to grow into what it could be.

The X-Men grew from a group of American kids into a global movement precisely because they recognized similar struggles in others. The aforementioned call for a Pan-African Black Theology could be a similar effort. There are certainly many Black Theologians with important relationships that cross borders, and I imagine that the next generation of theologians will do this with far greater ease than their predecessors.³

Next, Xavier (and now his mantel has been passed along to other senior character directing the schools and the movement) encouraged the students to identify their powers and then

discern how they might use them to better the world. This is an important challenge to current theologians in their mentoring of seminarians and doctoral students. Helping future scholars and ministers discern their calls is a critical part of our work. Pursuing a doctorate was something that I had never considered until a professor presented the idea to me.

This small chapter could have been just as easily been about film, or visual arts, or any number of artistic sources besides comic books. I suppose my ultimate point in presenting comic books as a theological source was that I wanted to try and live out the notion of employing our imaginations in our efforts toward liberation. Think thoughts that are outside the box. A people who are marginalized must at times pull ideas from the margins in order to reconstruct the center.

*A Letter to Those Who Raised Me
Theologically: On Running with
the Baton and Letting Nas Down*

I can't watch without finding tears in my eyes—happy tears, as my girls would say. Sometimes it is the effort of the young runners with their determination to never give up even after falling down. At other times I am moved by the great comeback of an anchor leg. Maybe a few of my tears are in memory of the few races that I ran around that historic track.

I can remember very clearly the first time that I ran at Penn's Franklin Field during the Penn Relays—the first and oldest track and field relay meet in the country. Teammates Shawn, Alan, Terrance, and I were representing our High School in 4 × 100 meter relay. I ran the third leg. Shawn and Alana were both speedsters, and I can easily admit that I, the third leg, was the slowest on our team. I always knew that I just needed to get the stick around to our anchor leg and fastest runner Terrance as if he was in proximity to the lead, we would likely win the race. I just needed to keep my legs and arms moving, lean into the curve, breathe, and not drop the baton.

The struggle for Black freedom, for peace, for growth and to build the beloved community indeed God's Kingdom/Kindom is also a kind of relay race, and I am aware that I and many others have taken the baton from those who are no longer with us.

The life of the educator might be characterized as a constant passing of the baton as we pass along education and past efforts for freedom to our students. We try to get the legs of the next generation moving so that our team can come that much closer to the finish line.

We have all received the baton from those who ran before us. Running, I can't help but look back and see the faces of professors (who are of course still running and handing batons to other students), the faces of authors and leaders who have impacted me via the written and spoken and lived word, as well as the faces of ancestors whose blood flows through my veins. I pray that I haven't dropped it. I pray that I haven't let them down.

I pray that I haven't let you all down.

In 2013, a powerful moment in Hip Hop occurred. The rapper J. Cole—a young brother who was relatively new to national music stage—released a song entitled “Let Nas Down” in which he related the heartbreak he felt at hearing of the famed rapper Nas’ disappointment in Cole’s latest track. The track contains a sample from the song “Gentleman” by Fela Kuti—a powerful and deeply symbolic act in itself. The song tells the story of how growing up, young J. Cole looked up to Nas and how after he himself began to find acclaim as an artist eventually met Nas on tour. During that first meeting the elder rapper let Cole know that he was a fan of his music. Yet, the narrative continues, after J. Cole’s next single was released word got back to him that Nas hated it, thus resulting in the refrain of the song, “I can’t believe I let Nas down.” Nas’ disappointment created a type of existential crisis in the young rapper pushing him to question his decisions in releasing a mainstream radio ready track rather than one more faithful to who he was. Yet J. Cole never saw himself as “selling out” rather he thought by being played on large-scale radio airwaves, he would then

be able to “open a door and reintroduce (listeners) to honesty, show ‘em that they need more. (Let them see) the difference between the pretenders and the Kendrick Lamar’s.” But was his moving from the underground type feel to a more radio acceptable vibe worth it, he wondered. Cole apologized hoping that he didn’t let Nas and others from the previous generation down. He rapped;

Therefore I write from the heart
 Apologies to the OGs for sacrificing my art
 But I’m here for a greater purpose, not above but equal
 And for the greater good I walk amongst the evil
 Don’t cry mama, this the life I choose myself
 Just pray along the way that I don’t lose myself
 This is for the n—that said ‘Hip Hop was dead’
 I went to Hell to resurrect it, how could you fail to respect it
 Letting Nas down, I got the phone call quietly I mourned
 dog, I let Nas down
 Yeah, and on this flight may I never lose my sight.¹

It took me some time to understand why I was feeling a connection to this track. After some reflection and dialogue with an artist friend of mine, I came to realize that it had to do with my own insecurity as a theologian. You see although I consider myself to be a Black theologian, indeed a Black Liberation theologian, I do not work full time in a seminary or in a theology school. Nor do I hold an appointment in a religion department. Instead my vocation has brought me to the chaplaincy of a major research university and to a career in preaching, speaking, and writing. I have professionally gone main stream. Like J. Cole, I moved from the underground to the large conglomerate media airwaves.

Family wise, my parents went to historically Black colleges and had histories of activism working for desegregation and

justice via the legal realm. My grandfather worked against colonial oppression in Africa through the articles he wrote. I have other ancestors who were involved in the founding of the NAACP and the leadership of the Progressive Party. Others were involved in local community activism working for justice. And along with the familial teachers I have had, I have been privileged to sit under some of the brightest Black minds of the last 30 years because of the educational opportunities that have been laid along my path.

There are times that I worry that I let or am letting you all down, by not being “out there more” or by not speaking out more. I, like many scholars, wonder if I should be working at a historically Black college or university or teaching at a seminary. I wonder if I should be participating in direct action initiatives more on the street. I miss the work I did with individuals experiencing homeless. I was with them, not just writing about them. I can’t believe I let y’all down.

After J. Cole’s song, Nas himself replied by remixing the track. In his response he rhymes about how he too struggled with finding the balance between being mainstream and remaining true to the streets—with working for freedom via music and creating radio ready party music. He ultimately replies,

I ain’t mad at you young king, this unsung song is haunting
 Along comes a one called a offspring . . .
 Radio records are needed, I just wanted it to bring the
 warning
 Global warming to that cold world you was breathing
 While you was writing down my rhymes I was just trying
 to show you
 That if you say what’s on your mind, you can stand the
 test of time
 Now I’m playing Born Sinner loud, saw you live, rock the
 crowd
 Like wow, you made your n—Nas proud.²

I am thankful to the people who raised me both in my home and in the classroom. I hear your voices reminding me and others that you are proud, that you understand, and that as long as we keep telling the truth, we can stand the test of time.

Early in my career, I began to feel the effects of burn out. I returned back to the seminary where I first read Cone, West, Wilmore, Hopkins, and others and found one of my old professors. He looked at me and paraphrased the great Bible verse saying, “Chaz, the race is not given to the swift nor to the strong ...” He ended our time together by saying “I’m proud of you.”

So for God’s glory and with all of your memories, I’m still running and passing the baton on to my students and to my kids.

Afterword: A Question

This book has presented far more questions than it has answers and I now end with one final question for the reader: Why do this? Why are you involved with Black Liberation Theology?

In a sense your or my own personal reasons for our career path and/or callings are just that—personal. Whether one has become or is working toward becoming a theologian in Black Liberation Theology because they are laboring for the freedom of oppressed peoples or because they like the quality of life many academics have, is none of my business. Furthermore, choosing theology as a profession because of the potentially comfortable salary, flexible schedule, job stability, or even just an intellectual interest in Black theology is not only fine, it is also good. I say that knowing full well that nobody needs my blessing.

I often give thanks for a job that allows me to have time in my life to see my daughter's soccer games, basketball games, ballet recitals and to be there for mid afternoon tea parties with them. For all my criticism with our economic system, I am thankful to be able to, along with my wife, provide for our family. But those are not the only reasons that I have chosen ministry and theology as a career.

I chose them because I want to bring about change in society and change in individual lives. And I believe that most of you reading this book got into this for the same reasons.

No one studies Black theology to become famous. Go back to that moment you first read Cone or the first Cornel West talk you heard, or the time that someone slid you a copy of *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America*. Remember how you felt the first time that you considered the notion that “God was on the side of the oppressed.”

What would you write if money and publishing and tenure and reputation were not issues? What hurt in the world can you connect your passion and your expertise with? That “contact point,” as my doctoral advisor Katie Day use to say, is where your front of the movement can begin anew.

What does your theology have to say about the man experiencing homelessness that you pass everyday on the way to your office? And what does the field that you specialize in have to say about the violence our young people are trying to survive? Or an unjust prison industrial complex? Or war? Or the various broken political systems around the world? Or education? Or violence against women? There is so much hurt in the world. We need you.

This book is not perfect. My own insecurities have haunted me through much of the writing of it. I hear the worse part of me whisper that I have no business writing it considering that I failed a class in high school resulting in summer school. Or that I almost got put out of college because of being over involved in activities resulting in a poor grade point average. Or that I failed my doctoral comprehensive exams the first time that I took them.

In the same way that I came to understand the love of Christ after drowning in the brokenness I felt having lost both of my parents, it was in my academic brokenness that I first learned about Black Liberation Theology. Black scholars at Penn put a hand on my shoulder and taught me about our struggle while advocating on my behalf. Scholars at Andover Newton Theological School and then Lutheran Theological Seminary of

Philadelphia believed that I had something to offer and guided me through my course work while never just letting me get by. I learned that God is not just “on the side of the oppressed”¹ but that He is also on the side of the broken. And that after the brokenness of Friday comes the wholeness and resurrection of Sunday.

That is where I will end. For whatever reason you are in this, make sure you are working somehow to address brokenness and that you are collaborating to bring forth a new day. Resurrection.

N O T E S

Foreword

1. Turner and McGuire both presented brave theological reflections that they and many of their contemporaries applied to their efforts toward liberation. Of note, Turner and McGuire's preaching and teaching that not only was God on the side of the "Negro," but also God may be "Negro" Himself, was a powerful (and dangerous) consideration at the time. Some might say its still dangerous! But Turner and McGuire's teaching of notions like this helped not only to mobilize a new personal engagement with God for individuals in the church but also to repair the self-image that had been damaged by the painful and enduring legacies of slavery ultimately mobilizing individuals into doing the work of movement making—be it returning to Africa or uniting under the banner of the UNIA.
2. While I at times use "Black Liberation Theology" and "Black Theology" interchangeably, I do see a subtle difference. Not all Black Theology is liberation focused. I explain this further in the following chapter.

A Letter to Future Black Liberation Theologians

1. Midon, Raul, "Invisible Chains," featured on the album *Synthesis* (2010).

1 Awakening the Sankofa Bird: The Movement-Centric Origins of Black Liberation Theology

1. An explanation of why “Asian” or “Latino” are problematic racial classifications would and have filled entire books for many reasons, not the least of which being that Asia, like Latin America, is a continent and a region filled with many different people/ethnic groups who could be, based off of visual/social/legal constructions, classified as different races.
2. Lopez, Ian F. Haney, “The Social Construction of Race: Some Observations on Illusion, Fabrication, and Choice,” *Harvard Civil Rights-Civil Liberties Law Review* (Winter 1994), 11.
3. Omi, Michael, “Racial Identity and the State: Contesting the Federal Standards for Classification,” in Adams, Maurianne et al. (eds) *Readings for Diversity and Social Justice* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 73–78.
4. In fact it should be mentioned that research has demonstrated that there is no biological basis for the determination of race and that it is exclusively legally and socially constructed. Deconstructing the biological basis of race seems too tangential for this project save for the movement from biological basis to the social and legal basis in popular scholarship. For more information on this see Jill, Olumide, *Raiding the Gene Pool: The Social Construction of Mixed Race* (London: Pluto Press, 2002) or Ferrante, Joan and Brown, Jr, Prince *The Social Construction of Race and Ethnicity in the United States* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1998).
5. Davis, James F., *Who is Black* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991).
6. Thank you Jeremy Lin for challenging social constructions!
7. Floyd-Thomas, Stacey, et al., *Black Church Studies: An Introduction* (Nashville: Abington Press 2007), xxv–xxvi.
8. Moten, Fred, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 1.
9. In his first major work *Black Theology and Black Power* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1969), Cone says that “Being black in America has very

little to do with skin color. To be black means that your heart, your mind, your soul, and your body are where the dispossessed are. We all know that a racist structure will reject and threaten a black man in white skin as quickly as a black man in black skin . . . Therefore being reconciled to God does not mean that one's skin is physically black. It essentially depends on the color of your heart, soul, and mind."

10. Cone, James, *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1975), 14.
11. Dwight Hopkins, for example, in his first text on Black Theology began his narrative with the Civil Rights and Black Consciousness Movements and in later texts focused on slavery and its influence on Black Religion as the starting point. Gayraud Wilmore, begins his description with African religion and its *creolization* in the Americas with Catholicism, Protestantism, Native Religions and emerging "Western values." Still others will begin their descriptions with James Cone and his publishing of *Black Theology and Black Power* in 1969.
12. This organization would later change the word "Negro" in its title to "Black." It is also important to note that many of the early recognized Black theologians like James Cone and Gayraud Wilmore were a part of this group.
13. Cone, James and Wilmore, Gayraud, *Black Theology: A Documentary History* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993), 16.
14. I say partial because Black clergy and scholars are of course not a monolithic entity. Nor has there ever been a full radical shift as there are to this day Black pastors who see no need for liberating work save the liberation from sin for the individual. Further, several pastors remained disciples of King and the SCLC after the emergence of the Black Power. Perhaps the most interesting factor in this is King's own gradual movement to the Left and embracing of Black Power toward the end of his life. See his essay "Black Power Defined" in Washington, James M., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1991).
15. Foreman, James, "Black Manifesto" (Speech/Paper presented at The Black Economic Development Conference in Detroit, MI in July, 1969).
16. Ibid.

17. National Committee of Black Churchmen, “Black Theology – A Statement of the NCBC,” *The Christian Century*, October 15, 1969.
18. Kee, Alistair, *The Rise and Demise of Black Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2008), 45.
19. His above-mentioned book was received with an appropriate amount of critical frustration as he announced the “death of Black Theology” with many inaccuracies. Yet, he did make some important points, which warrant at least a partial consideration of his critiques—especially his words about the need for a more serious engagement with poverty and capitalism.
20. Alistair, *The Rise and Demise*, 48.
21. Hopkins, Dwight, *Black Theology USA and South Africa* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2005), 36.
22. Cleage, Albert, *Black Christian Nationalism* (New York: Luxor Publisher of the Pan-African, 1987), 188.
23. Alex Poinsett quoting Cleage in “The Quest for a Black Christ” in *Ebony Magazine* March, 1969, 174.
24. Wilmore, Gayraud, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, Revised (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1998), 208.
25. Cleage, Albert, *The Black Messiah* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1968), 197.
26. This was a lecture given by Paul Brandies Rauschenbush to the Ivy League Chaplain’s Conference in May 2013.

2 The Underground Railroad and Underground Rap: Imagining an Underground Black Liberation Theology

1. Slaves were of course taken not only to the United States but also to South and Central America, as well as Europe. This section, however, is focusing on the slave trade in the United States as that is where the Underground Railroad existed (although it “ran” to both present-day Canada and Mexico when formerly enslaved peoples would escape to those areas).
2. The displacement, mistreatment, and murder of Native Americans being the first.

3. Many, included myself, trace many of the contemporary challenges facing African Americans to the institution of slavery. Certainly the wealth disparity is connected with wealth from the slave trade and related businesses being passed down through certain families, educational institutions, and commercial businesses. Further Blacks in the United States started out “behind” (most of) their White counterparts educationally. None of this even takes into account the unequal segregation that closely followed slavery well into the twentieth century.
4. The dialogue between Theology/Religious Studies and Hip Hop has grown tremendously over the last two decades. Several books and articles have been written and indeed there are several panels dedicated to this very topic each year at large academic conferences.
5. See Monica Miller (2013) and Anthony Pinn (2003).
6. Phrase that some use to describe the trans-continental, trans-ethnic, trans-religious diverse cultural movement that Hip Hop is.
7. I say primary because Rap is not the only musical genre associated with Hip Hop. R&B, Dancehall Reggae, House or Club music, and others may all fall under the Hip Hop umbrella.
8. Alim, H. Samy, “Street Conscious Copula Variation in the Hip Hop Nation,” *American Speech* Vol. 77, No. 3 (Fall 2002).
9. See either his *You know my Steez: An Ethnographic and Sociolinguistic Study of Styleshifting in a Black American Speech Community* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005) or his more recent *Articulate while Black: Barak Obama, Language and Race in the U.S.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).
10. Spady, James G., “Lean Back: Re-Membering Religion, Culture, History, and Fam in the Hip Hop Global Community,” in Spade, James G. et. Al. (eds) *The Global Cipa* (Philadelphia: Umum Press, 2005).
11. Spady, James G., Alim, H. Samy, and Lee, Charles, *Street Conscious Rap* (Philadelphia: Black History Museum Publishers, 1999), 86.
12. *Ibid.*, 86–87.
13. Essay by Davey D. featured on www.daveyd.com.
14. This being the case, the connections between early Hip Hop Culture and Garveyism are also sadly under explored.

15. See the documentary “Rap: Searching for the Perfect Beat” (Hamilton: Films for the Humanities and Sciences, 1994).
16. Dickinson, Emily, “Tell all the Truth but Tell is Slant” in Dickinson, Emily (ed.) *Final Harvest: Poems Revised* ed. (New York: Back Bay Books, 1964), 248.
17. Described in detail in West, Cornel *Democracy Matters* (New York: Penguin Group Publishers, 2005).
18. Rose, Tricia, *Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk about When We Talk about Hip Hop – and Why It Matters* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2008).
19. Pinn, Anthony, *Noise and Spirit: The Religious and Spiritual Sensibilities of Rap Music* (New York: NYU Press, 2003).
20. Just as quoting lyrics or naming “current” artists can become outdated, it is important to note that individuals can and do change their religious traditions. This list is not meant to be up to date, but rather to name individuals who have at some point in their lives identified with certain religious traditions.
21. By being in Wu-Tang Clan, Jewish rapper Remedy found himself in dialogue with Muslim Five Percenters like rapper and producer, The Rza. The Internet hit “Mohammed Walks” by rapper Lupe Fiasco was a remix and direct response to Kanye West’s song “Jesus Walks” and not only allows these two artists to exchange ideas but also allows their fans and listeners to enter that dialogue as well.
22. Rose, *Hip Hop Wars*, 17–18.
23. *Ibid.*, 19.
24. Former artist Davey D. has maintained one of the longest running and most followed websites/blogs and this is a recurring message that he writes about there.
25. Unpublished interview with Aaron Mingo, Philadelphia, PA, May, 2009.

3 Black Stars: Learning Movement Making from Marcus Garvey and the UNIA

1. I should state that upon revisiting my old school, they are doing a much better job at teaching Black history not only by teaching specific Black History classes but by integrating that into US History courses.

2. See the recent book on Du Bois and religion by Blum, Edward *W. E. B. Du Bois: American Prophet* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009).
3. For more information on this see Buckner, Jerry “Is Orthodoxy Strong in the Black Church,” <http://www.equip.org/articles/is-orthodoxy-strong-in-the-black-church->.
4. All from my personal experience during my pursuit of my M.Div at Andover Newton Theological Seminary and my Doctorate at Lutheran Theological Seminary of Philadelphia.
5. Grant, Colin, *Negro with a Hat: The Rise and Fall of Marcus Garvey* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 2.
6. *Ibid.*, 164.
7. See Fanon, Franz, *Black Skin White Masks* (New York: Grove Press Revised Edition, 2008) for an example of the literature about this.
8. I say somewhat as their portrayals were often far more accurate than many of their non-Black counter parts, yet history has also shown that Garvey used *Negro World* as a propaganda tool and as a platform for his own agenda and in debates with other leaders, notably, Du Bois whom he attacked and blamed for the lack of UNIA inclusion in the First Pan-African Conference in Paris in 1919.
9. Burkett, Randal K., *Garveyism as a Religious Movement* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 1978), xv.
10. *Ibid.*, 1.
11. Garvey never met Washington, though they did exchanged letters. While planning a visit to Tuskegee College to visit with the legend and to discuss founding a similar school in Jamaica, Washington died. As Du Bois had a complicated and mostly difficult and tension-filled relationship with Washington (though many see them as complementing each other), it might be understandable that Du Bois and Garvey did not connect well either.
12. Burkett, Randall K., *Garveyism as a Religious Movement* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 1978), 1.
13. In regard to Jackson, his desire to create Black wealth and to create Black millionaires on Wall Street by having Blacks invest in Black-owned business is very similar to Garvey’s vision. Further, the more practical aspect of the message preached by some ministers labeled as

- prosperity gospel preachers is similar. Creflo Dollar while teaching a spiritual aspect to creating wealth or prosperity, also teaches economic strategies around investing wisely and creating business. While his congregation (and global following) is multiethnic, he has a large Black following and thus is influencing the Black community's journey out of poverty in the way that he sees best.
14. Perhaps the strongest treatments of the African Blood Brotherhood are in the sections within Cedric Robinson's *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*.
 15. Spady, James G., "Marcus Mosiah Garvey: Man of Nobility and Mass Action," in Ivan Van Sertima (ed.) *Great Black Leaders: Ancient and Modern* (Edison: Transaction Publishers, 1988), 370.
 16. Du Bois was not the President of the NAACP, but rather the editor of *The Crisis* magazine and at times a member of its board.
 17. Grant, *Negro with a Hat*, 165.
 18. Du Bois, W. E. B. "The Talented Tenth," in *Du Bois: Writings* (New York: Library of American, 1996), 846–847.
 19. Grant, *Negro with a Hat*, 224.
 20. Spady, "Marcus Mosiah Garvey: Man of Nobility and Mass Action", 371.
 21. Wilmore, Gayraud, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, Revised (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1998), 204–205.
 22. Spady, "Marcus Mosiah Garvey: Man of Nobility and Mass Action", 381.
 23. *Ibid.*, 396.
 24. Marable, Manning, *Beyond Black and White: From Civil Right to Barak Obama* Revised ed. (London: Verso Books, 2009), 167–168.
 25. *Ibid.*, 168.
 26. Movements certainly need more than "appeal." They need resources, strong deeply connected leadership, vision, communication organs, connections, and more.
 27. Wilmore, Gayraud, "Black Theology and the Turn of the Century: Some Unmet Needs and Challenges," in Hopkins, Dwight (ed.) *Black Faith and Public Talk* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2007), 232.
 28. See Dorrien, Gary, *Soul in Society: The Making and Renewal of Social Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995).

29. Garvey, Amy Jacques, *Garvey and Garveyism* (London: Octagon Books, 1976), 133–134.
30. Burkett, *Garveyism as a Religious Movement*, xii.
31. *Ibid.*, 161–162.
32. *Ibid.*, 162.
33. *Ibid.*, 5 (from “General Objects of the Association as stated in 1914. This was later changed to “spiritual instead of Christian” to demonstrate a diverse religious body.)
34. *Ibid.*, xiii.
35. *Ibid.*, 6. The full title of the 128-page Ritual is *The Universal Negro Ritual containing Forms, prayers, and Offices for use in the Universal Negro Improvement Association together with a Collection of Hymns Authorized by the High Executive Council Compiled by His grace, Rev. Dr. George Alexander McGuire, Chaplain General Approved by His Excellency, Marcy Garvey, President General, and Provisional President of Africa.*
36. McGuire, George, “Universal Negro Catechism”, 3 unpublished but featured in Burkett, *Garveyism as a Religious Movement*.
37. *Ibid.*, 163.
38. Burkett, *Garveyism as a Religious Movement*, 18.
39. Compare the lyrics of Rabbi Ford’s “Anthem of the Negro Race” and James Weldon Johnson’s “Negro National Anthem” Lift Every Voice and Sing written nearly 20 years earlier. Ford’s lyrics call for in Burkett’s interpretation “military preparedness in anticipation of an inevitable conflagration which would be demanded before God’s promise of freedom could be realized.” Johnson’s hymn, Lift Every Voice and Sing “breathed an air of determined hopefulness reflective of faith in the harmonies of liberty...” p. 37 in Burkett’s text. Of further note, it should be mentioned that James Weldon Johnson was publically critical of the UNIA thus the marked difference in the tone of his music from that of Rabbi Ford is understandable.
40. Burkett, *Garveyism as a Religious Movement*, 18–20.
41. *Ibid.*, 32.
42. *Ibid.*, 30–31.
43. *Ibid.*, 66.
44. *Ibid.*, 66.

45. Townes, *Embracing the Spirit*, 164.
 46. Wilmore, *Pragmatic Spirituality*, 165.

4 Darkwater: Lessons on Movement

Making from W. E. B. Du Bois

1. This is a line from Philadelphia-based rapper Cassidy's song "The Problem" featured on the album *Split Personality* (2004).
2. Du Bois, W. E. B., "Souls of Black Folks," in Washington, Booker T., Du Bois, W. E. B., and Johnson, James Weldon (eds) *Three Negro Classics* (New York: Avon Discus, 1969).
3. Ibid. "Of our Spiritual Strivings."
4. The phrase "acting White" is almost as problematic as saying someone is "acting Black" as these phrases draw not only popular stereotypes but also on racial social constructs. Further they deny intraracial diversity resulting in moments where one's Blackness is questioned because they don't act the way that the social construction says they are supposed to. One last thing, I say "almost" as problematic because the way that Blackness has been constructed in Western popular culture has been used in far more destructive and even deadly ways than the ways that stereotypical Whiteness has. Though neither are helpful.
5. Alim, H. Samy, *Articulate while Black: Barak Obama, Language and Race in the U.S.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).
6. Paul's Letter to the Romans chapter 12 verse 2 (King James Version).
7. *Wall St. Journal* November 4, 1963.
8. It is important to note that Du Bois had a long dance with socialism (it is important to note that socialism and communism are not the same thing) even to the point of briefly joint the United-States-based Socialist Party as early as 1911, yet soon withdrawing because of its inaction around race.
9. The day of service is a powerful day, yet it in many cases comes at the expense of discussions and remembrances of what King stood for.
10. New International Version Translation Gospel of Matthew 6:24.

11. Marley's song "Africa Unite" is but one example of his subtle yet powerful message of Black unity. And the first album by Dead Prez *Let's Get Free* speaks directly to Pan-Africanism introducing this philosophical/political vision to a new generation of Hip Hop practitioners.
12. The African Union is a complex entity that is an important example of Pan-African unity, yet it is very particularly African meaning its reach across the Diaspora is limited. Likewise, it being African means that nations where the majority is not necessarily "Black" but might rather be classified as Arab or Berber majority nations.
13. Davis was arrested, accused of, and convicted for the murder of a security guard in 1989. He was executed in the state of Georgia in 2011 amidst what seemed to be evidence at least calling his guilt into question if not altogether proving his innocence. The public outcry from not only African Americans but also a wide coalition of individuals including many celebrities and theologians was an amazing effort that while providing hope and furthering dialogue around capital punishment, did not change the minds of those who could have called off his execution.
14. The killing of Trayvon Martin by George Zimmerman was an extraordinarily high profile case in the situation and ultimately legal case in the US state of Florida occurring in 2012 and 2013. While many of the details of the actual encounter remain unclear, Trayvon Martin was an unarmed teenager who was profiled, approached, and killed by George Zimmerman after an altercation between the teen and the neighborhood watchman. The trial brought to light not only the pain of racial profiling but also gun violence and "Stand Your Ground" laws in Florida and many other states. Again, several theologians entered into this dialogue.
15. Much has been written about this. One explanation is our distance from much of the world. Whereas nations in Europe and Africa are often physically very close (i.e., France, Spain, and the United Kingdom) to the United States only shares borders with Mexico and Canada. Others however would simply attribute this to American arrogance and a myopic worldview only considering American news worthy of our attention.

5 Lessons from the Black Left: Socialist Inspiration and Marxian Critique

1. Marx, Karl, *Theses on Feuerbach* (First published as an appendix to Frederick Engle's *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*, 1886).
2. Cone, James and Wilmore, Gayraud, *Black Theology: A Documentary History* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993), 409.
3. *Ibid.*, 410.
4. Marx, Karl, "Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law," in *Karl Marx: A Reader* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 301. Translation mine.
5. *Ibid.*, 301. Emphasis mine.
6. Eagleton, Terry, *Marxism and Literary Criticism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976) 78.
7. Reference to the song by the music group Sly and Family Stone (1968) and brought back into use in the Hip Hop generation by the group Arrested Development in the 1990s.
8. One may problematize this hypothesis on the point that Black Christianity is not a society and therefore should not be examined as such, but similar critique has been made of the Catholic Church or of various educational systems that are not societies of course, yet may be critically examined from a Marxist perspective for the benefit of better understanding a situation.
9. This of course presumes a difference between theologians and church folks, which is often not true. Many professional theologians who work at seminaries are also on the ministerial staff of a congregation.
10. Townes, Emilie, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).
11. Cone, James "Looking Back, Going Forward: Black Theology as Public Theology," in Hopkins, Dwight (ed.) *Black Faith and Public Talk* (Waco: Baylor University Press 2007), 255.
12. *Ibid.*, 110.
13. *Ibid.*
14. Degras, Jane, *The Communist International, 1919–1943, vol 1. 1914–1922* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), 401.

15. Robinson, Cedric, *Black Marxism* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1983), 216.
16. Theodore, Vincent, *Black Power and the Garvey Movement* (San Francisco: Ramparts Press, 1972).
17. Shawki, Ahmed, *Black Liberation and Socialism* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2006), 137.
18. This case surrounded nine Black teenagers in Scottsboro, Alabama, who were accused of raping two homeless White women. They were tried and nearly all were sentenced to death only later having the death sentences changed to sentences of serving time in prison. The American Communist Party began to get involved even to the point of assigning lawyers to represent the young men. The party believed that if they would lend support for these young Black men, they could gain support and membership from within the Black community.
19. Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 216.
20. Calling roll on a list like this is tricky as some individuals identified themselves as communist or socialist, while others were simply critical of the capitalist system. Still others were simply “guilty by association.”
21. Cone, James, *The Black Church and Marxism: What Do They Have to Say to Each Other?* (New York: The Institute for Democratic Socialism, 1980).
22. This quote was found in the James Cone article previously mentioned. He referenced Foner, Phillip, *American Socialism and Black Americans: From the Age of Jackson to World War II* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1977), 205.
23. Holly James T., “Socialism from the Biblical Point of View,” *The AME Church Review* Vol. 10 (1984).
24. Miller, George F., “Enslavement of the Worker,” *The Messenger*, Vol. 2 No. 7 (July 1919a).
25. Miller, George F., “Socialism and Its Ethical Basis,” *The Messenger* Vol. 2 No. 7 (July 1919b).
26. Cort, John, *Christian Socialism: An Informal History* (Maryknoll: Orbis Press, 1988), 256.
27. “God helps those who help themselves.” Written in *Poor Richard’s Almanac*.

28. Cone and Wilmore, *Black Theology: A Documentary History*, 419.
 29. *Ibid.*, 420.

6 Outward Commitments: Imagining a Black Public Theology

1. Bellah, Robert N., "Civil Religion in American," *Daedalus: Journal of the American Academy of the Arts and Sciences* Vol. 96, No. 1(Winter 1967), 1–21.
2. Breitenberg, E. Harold, "To Tell the Truth: Will the Real Public Theology Please Stand Up?" *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethic* Vol. 23, No. 2 (2003), 56.
3. Hollenbach, David, "Public Theology in America: Some Questions for Catholicism After John Courtney Murray," *Theological Studies* Vol. 37, No. 2 (June 1976).
4. *Ibid.*, 299.
5. Tracy, David, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Cross Road, 1981), 3–5.
6. A Macro issue would be the liberation of Black people. A micro issue would be the election of Barak Obama or the dropout rate of Blacks in a particular urban area, or the AIDS crisis among Blacks in East and South Africa.
7. I do not mean to infer that Public Theology (or Black Theology) for that matter is a monolithic institution. There are several individuals within each.
8. De Gruchy, J. W., "Public Theology as Christian Witness: Exploring the Genre," *International Journal of Public Theology* Vol. 1, No. 1 (2007), 28.
9. Kim, Sebastian, "Editorial," *International Journal of Public Theology* Vol. 1, No. 1 (2007), 1.
10. *Ibid.*, 1–2.
11. There are different theologies that can be categorized as theologies of liberation, each with different sources, theological methods, and norms though all united with the goal of liberation.
12. Though Leonardo and Clodovis Boff do state clearly in their book *Introducing Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1987) that

liberation theology is done not only by professional theologians but by clergy, religious, and lay as well.

13. Breitenberg, "To Tell the Truth: Will the Real Public Theology Please Stand Up?", 64.
14. *Ibid.*, 64.

7 A Homeless Black Liberation Theology: Lessons from the Street Church Movement, Trinitarian Theology, and the Rev. Dr. Debbie Little

1. By the bottom I simply mean individuals and spaces that on a hierarchical scale would be perceived as being near the socioeconomic bottom.
2. This is meant to be a reference to the Henri Nouwen's book *The Wounded Healer* (New York: Doubleday, 1979) in which the author challenges readers to use the wounds in their lives as a means to help others by way of the compassion suffering allows.
3. Freire, Paulo, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum Publishing, 1993).
4. Chase, Frederic, *Saint John of Damascus: The Fathers of the Church* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 2000).
5. Boff, Leonardo, *Holy Trinity, Perfect Community*, 123.
6. Gospel of John 17:21.
7. Boff, *Holy Trinity, Perfect Community*, 15.
8. The "Shema" Prayer Deuteronomy 6:4.
9. De La Torre, Miguel, ed., *Handbook of U.S. Theologies of Liberation* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2004), 53.
10. *Ibid.*

8 Lessons from Professor Charles Xavier: Black Liberation Theology and the X-Men

1. I pluralize this because since the 1990s X-Men comic book titles have multiplied into an almost innumerable amount of ongoing titles, mini-series titles, graphic novels, and stories in all types of media.

2. I can't help but reference James Cone's masterful book *Martin & Malcolm & America: A Dream or a Nightmare* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1992) as it remains my favorite of Cone's books as well as an often overlooked work that really complicates the relationship between Martin and Malcolm.
3. Especially because of the ease of communication through new technologies and the ease in travel to conferences and other nations. The Pan-African Congress that Du Bois held was an amazing gathering, yet it was by no means easy to get to. An event like that today could potentially be attended by thousands of individuals (as opposed to a few hundred) and it could be viewed online by many more.

A Letter to Those Who Raised Me Theologically: On Running with the Baton and Letting Nas Down

1. Cole, Jermaine, "Let Nas Down" featured on *Born Sinner* (2013).
2. Nasir, Jones, "Made Nas Proud," 2013.

Afterword: A Question

1. This is of course a reference to the phrase made popular by James Cone's book bearing those words in the title.

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