

SOCIETY FOR THE STUDY OF

# BLACK RELIGION

NEWSLETTER | Vol. 5, No. 1 | MAY 2007



[www.ssbr.net](http://www.ssbr.net)

## OFFICERS FOR THE SOCIETY FOR THE STUDY OF BLACK RELIGION

Lee H. Butler  
*President*

Allison Gise Johnson  
*Registrar*

Stephen G. Ray  
*Corresponding Secretary*

Anthony B. Pinn  
*Executive Director*

Emilie M. Townes  
*Newsletter Editor*

James H. Harris  
Cheryl A. Kirk-Duggan  
Horace O. Russell  
*Members at Large*

Arthur Sutherland  
*Treasurer*

Larry Murphy  
*Web Page Editor*

### IN THIS ISSUE

- 2 Message from the President
- 3 Executive Director's Corner
- 4 Featured Essay
- 7 Book Reviews
- 22 Announcements

The Society for the Study of Black Religion and the SSBR Newsletter are housed at  
Rice University, 6100 Main St., MS-15, Houston, Texas 77005

## MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT

Dear Society Members:

Thank you for your vote of confidence by electing me president of our distinguished community of scholars. I am looking forward with great expectation to the marvelous work we will do together in the coming years.

As we look to the future and the 40th anniversary of the Society, we must examine, and perhaps re-imagine, our life together as a community of scholars. While the substance of our gatherings have changed over the years, the main purposes of our formation as a professional society have not changed. Looking to our past to locate ourselves in this present moment as Black religious studies scholars, we must ask, “What is the purpose for gathering as the Society for the Study of Black Religion in this present age?”

Historically, our life together as a community of scholars has had two purposes. First, the Society meeting has been the place where we gather as colleagues without the constraints of institutional life to support one another in the struggle that can be so isolating. Second, the Society meeting has been the meeting place for Black creativity to be stimulated, shared, and encouraged. These dynamics have been renewing forces for me annually. Even as I believe these emphases must continue, the context of our existence has been redefined. In the early days, we fought for the right to exist as Black scholars; but today, we must fight to maintain a distinctive and integral Black voice. And while the communal aspects of our existence as persons of African descent are never to be denied, too many of us have claimed “membership” and denied our existence as a “community” of Black scholars.

It has been said from time-to-time that black and womanist theologies are dead. If there is any truth to those claims, then the life of the Society has ended. This, I do not believe! The furies still seek to dominate our being, and what the furies cannot dominate, they endeavor to destroy. Our life, Black life, is too important to surrender our legacy and forfeit our future as a community of Black scholars. Our work, just as our life, must continue!

In the struggle . . .

Lee

## EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S CORNER

Dear Colleagues:

Greetings! I am convinced those who were able to attend will agree that the events during our annual meeting in Fort Worth were excellent, thought provoking, and timely. And, we owe the success of that meeting to the efforts of Stacey and Juan Floyd-Thomas and their team of assistants. Many thanks! The meeting was also a success because of the hard work of Society leaders like President Katie G. Cannon and Rosetta E. Ross. While both have ended their term of service, their hard work remains evident. We now look forward to the involvement and ideas of Lee Butler, the new president of the SSBR and Arthur Sutherland, our new treasurer.

Plans are currently underway for the 2008 annual meeting in Charleston, South Carolina. The local coordinating committee for that meeting is off to a wonderful start in arranging the venue for our activities. I am grateful for the committee's hard work, and we look forward to your participation in the 2008 annual meeting. Please keep in mind that membership fees should be sent to our treasurer:

Arthur Sutherland  
Theology Department  
Loyola College in Maryland  
Baltimore, MD 21210

As a final note, in addition to the SSBR most of us are also involved in other professional organizations, including the AAR/SBL. Those who are members of the latter are well aware of debate and discussion concerning the stand-alone meeting. And recently, the SSBR has weighed in by sending to the leadership of the AAR a letter outlining concerns regarding the potential ramifications of the separate meetings. You might be interested in the recent interview with AAR President, Jeffrey Stout for the contextual information it provides. The interview is in the March 2007 issue of *Religious Studies News*.

Allow me to end this letter with a word of thanks to Rice University PhD student, Torin Alexander, who has taken over responsibilities once held by Stephen Finley. I hope the summer affords you time for rest and to accomplish tasks important to you.

Cheers,

Tony

## FEATURED ESSAY

### LIBERATING THE OPPRESSED The Black Church Facing American Crisis

*Past President Katie G. Cannon participated as a panel participant for the third annual State of the Black Church Summit at Brite Divinity School. The Summit is part of the Black Church Project at Brite and is directed by SSBR member Dr. Stacey Floyd-Thomas. Other members on the Summit panel were The Reverend William Lawson, Dr. Juan Floyd-Thomas, the Reverend Freddie Haynes, and the Reverend Valda Combs. The following are Past President Cannon's remarks.*

Wherever we turn in the great literature of the human race, we come upon something that is common in the experience of all people. It does not matter whether we are young, middle-age, or in the twilight years of our lives; whether we are female or male, transgender or transsexual; whether we are Black or White; whether our ancestors are from Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America or among the Indigenous people of the First Nation; or whether we are descendents of any, none, or some combinations of all of the above; whether we are laity or clergy; whether we are rich, in the middle-muddle, or working poor; whether we are formally educated or organic intellectuals; whether we are underemployed, over-utilized, or not working at all, there is something that all of us have in common. And, our common denominator is that God never leaves the people without a prophet.

In every nation, in every language, and in every age, there are prophets—women and men who present the sense of wonder amid the gloom and doom of destruction. There are always spokespersons who make known to us again and again the short-sightedness of human-engineered destruction over against the magnificence of God's creation. As apostles of truth, they offer challenges for transformation.

What this means is that our contemporary visionaries reveal our true selves. They show us how we are becoming compulsively addicted to our computers, ipods, play-stations, cell phones, and blackberries.<sup>1</sup> They hold up the mirror so that we can see the back of our heads as we struggle to make sense of the questionable messages and controlling symbols blasting forth from radios, television, movie screens, and DVDs.

Our community griots ask, "What does the Lord require of us? as we precariously wrestle with never-ending data regarding energy-saving news about cars, trains, planes, airbuses, satellite towers and space shuttles. Our contemporary prophets remind us how we are simultaneously juggling unmythologized truth about domestic concerns—what is the most efficient washing machine, dish washer, hot water heater, garbage disposal, humidifier and robotic vacuum cleaner we should purchase, while at the exact same time there are competing demands for us to master in-depth knowledge about laser surgery, heart-kidney-liver and lung transplants, stem cell research, autism, organ donation, genetically modified food, the pandemic of HIV/AIDS, aftermath of Katrina and Rita, artificial limbs, immigration reform, A-Bombs, H-bombs, Dafur and the war.

Our modern-day prophets testify to our frustrations and our perplexities. They bear witness

<sup>1</sup> Lori Redd, *High on Technology: Computer Addiction and Cultural Regulation* (forthcoming from Routledge 2008); and Steven Fitch, *Digital Divide: An Equation Needing a Solution* (Lula, 2007).

to our anxieties and our longings, while tapping into our communal archive of memory. These observers give words to the undercutting of dreams that become troubling nihilistic existential realities for far too many in our communities. In other words, from the beginning of recorded history to this very day, prophets tell us what it feels like to be cast down and in need of hope; to be cast down and in need of courage; to be cast down and in need of meaning in our lives.

For instance, we are living in a world wherein 30 million people have died on war-torn battlefields since the end of World War II, the war that was supposed to end all wars. There have only been 26 days of peace, only 26 days of no armed fighting, only 26 days of no human combat, only 26 days without military battles somewhere on this planet of ours since 1945.<sup>2</sup> And right at this very moment, there are more than 250 million soldiers, mostly teenagers,<sup>3</sup> who are armed and trained to kill all over this world, with more than a 100 million young women and young men waiting for war action in global reserves that make up the military industrial complex.<sup>4</sup> Some of us worry if there will be a World War III but if we consider the multi-billions we are spending everyday since the US invaded Iraq four years ago this very week, in many forms and fashion, we are already fighting a Third World War.<sup>5</sup>

Again for instance, when genetically manipulated mapping is being determined and reproductive-technological-potential becomes part of our DNA profiles, we need to investigate, whose bodies are being used as guinea pigs and whose bodies are left behind.<sup>6</sup> And when the local impact of bioethics, genomics and cloning is neglected for the global – economic amputation of Africa, let us ask ourselves-- How will we create life from destroyed remains?<sup>7</sup>

Sisters and brothers, we are living in a world wherein we are consuming and destroying non-renewable resources.<sup>8</sup> Our human activities contribute to the looming crisis of global warming. We must act to avert the terrible consequences that climate changing is producing. With an agenda of wrong-headedness, wherein so-called progress is our most important product, we are polluting our life-support systems with toxic waste, contaminated materials and other deadly pollutants.<sup>9</sup> Close to a quarter of a million people will die before December 31<sup>st</sup> 2007 as a result of environmentally induced cancer. And the statistical prognosis is that a high percentage of this environmental genocide will be the blood, sweat, and tears—the body-count of our kinfolks and our skinfolks-- because racialized binaries dictate that the working-poor in

2 The Presbyterian Peacemaking Program in Louisville, Kentucky is a reliable source for updated intergenerational, global statistics on war and peace.

3 Alcinda Honwara, *Child Soldiers in Africa* (University of Pennsylvania, 2007); David M. Rosen, *Armies of the Young: Child Soldiers in War and Terrorism* (Rutgers, 2006).

4 Jimmie Briggs, *Innocents Lost: When Child Soldiers Go to War* (Basic Books, 2005).

5 Helen Caldicott, *The New Nuclear Danger: George W. Bush's Military Industrial Complex*, rev. updated (New Press, 2004); and Jeremy Scahill, *Blackwater: The Rise of the World's Most Powerful Mercenary Army* (Nation Books, 2007).

6 Susan B. Thistlewaite, ed. *Adam, Eve, and the Genome: The Human Genome Project and Theology* (Augsburg Fortress, 2003); Amy Kaplan, *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture* (Harvard University Press, 2005); and David W. Mount, *Bioinformatics: Sequence and Genome Analysis* (Cold Spring Harbor Lab Press, 2004).

7 Evelyn Hammonds and Helen Longino et al. *Gender and Scientific Authority* (University of California Press, 1996); Evelyn Fox Keller, *The Century of the Gene* (Harvard University Press, 2002); and Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (Vintage Press, 1998).

8 Larry Rasmussen, *Earth Community, Earth Ethics* (Orbis Books, 1998).

9 Luke Cole and Sheika Foster, *From the Ground Up: Environmental racism and the Rise of Environmental Justice Movement* (New York University Press, 2000).

our church communities are still the first fired and the last hired to do the work that is most menial, the work that is most tedious, the work that is the most hazardous, the work that our counterparts decline to do, and at wages that they refuse to accept.<sup>10</sup>

And still again, we are living in a world where, according to facts from Dr. Marian Wright Edelman's Children's Defense Fund (CDF), the state of emergency that the Black Church community must confront can be summed up like this: each morning when we wake up, at least 100,000 children wake up homeless. Every 32 seconds—about the time that it takes us to walk to the kitchen and put the coffee on—an American baby is born into poverty. Every two minutes a child is sexually abused and violated in the US of A. Every 14 minutes—while we shower and brush our teeth—a baby dies in America. And, every 13 hours, from the time we leave home in the morning until we go back to sleep tonight—an American preschooler is murdered.<sup>11</sup>

To be even more specific in the context of the Black Church community, Dr. Wright-Edelman says that an African American child still lacks a fair chance to live, to learn, to survive, to thrive. A Black baby is three times as likely as a white baby to have a mother who dies in childbirth and is twice as likely to be born to a mother who has had no prenatal care at all. Black children in America are twice as likely as white children to have no regular source of health care, to be more seriously ill when they finally see a doctor, and are five times as likely to have to rely on hospital emergency rooms for any kind of medical attentions.

Today, in our public schools, African American children are twice as likely as other children to be suspended, expelled or given corporeal punishment; three times as likely to be labeled mentally retarded but only half as likely to be classified as gifted and talented. Some folks even go far to say that the longer Black children are in school, the farther behind they fall, so much so that the prison industrial complex decides on how many jail cells they will need in the future based on the number of blacks boys who are not able to read and write in today's fourth grade.

More than 50 years after *Brown versus the Board of Education of Topeka*, a time when the Supreme Court declared school segregation unconstitutional, some of us have lived long enough to see the eroding and corroding of Equal Employment Opportunities and Affirmative Action charting the movement from segregation, to de-segregation, to re-segregation

And each of can probably go on and on naming the various life-issues challenging us today in our particular locales. Such as within every 15 minutes of a 60 minute hour--a woman is beaten in America, and if the number of women who suffer domestic violence in this calendar year alone would join hands, the line would stretch from Boston to Los Angeles and beyond.

Therefore, Sisters and Brothers, now that I have chronicled some of the crises facing the Black Church community, the question before us is “Where do we go from here?” The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., one of the most compelling prophets of the twentieth century, was truly a member of this long line of wise, judicious, prudent, trusted advisors. King posed this question, “Where do we go from here—chaos or community?” more than forty years ago. Embedded throughout King's preaching repertoire is his challenge that each of us must actualize our moral selves, by realizing the distinct character of our human

10 Robert D. Bullard, *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed (Westview, 2000); and *Confronting Environmental Racism: Voices from the Grassroots* (South End, 1993).

11 Subscribe to the CDF's monthly newsletter for current, updated statistics.

## BOOK REVIEWS

*Liberating our Dignity, Saving Our Souls*

Lee H. Butler

Chalice Press, 2006

Dr. Lee H. Butler provides a very deep and complex investigation into the psycho-social and cultural dynamics of African American cultural identity formation in these nine chapters. The book parts easily between the cultural forms of race theory, color consciousness, and genderism, on the one hand, and soul making, on the other, which is mediated by his own constructive moves in psychodynamic and developmental theory. Butler's thesis is stated well on pages 172-73. I will quote it at length because it is an accumulative thesis that ties the whole book together.

If we walk through each of issues presented in the TAACIF [Theory of African American Cultural Identity Formation], our cultural identity is clear. America called us less than human, yet our Historical Self maintained our clear vision of ourselves as human beings. As human beings in America, we are entitled to a right to life. The declarative expression of our humanity was creative and was guided by African Spirituality. Our work for freedom and justice was not understood as simply being political action, but rather political action was joined with and considered religious work. We were treated as people who feel nothing. In fact, our emotions were only thought to be a conditioning resource for our oppressors. It was believed we could be whipped into total submission and obedience. Had we followed that plan of action, we would have been nonrelational—completely disconnected from life and love. Instead, we banded together, hand-in-hand and arm-in-arm, and sang many songs with deep relational significance. This was done because, at the core of our being, it was clear that God indwells our humanity. We would not stop until we experienced justice through having the bonds of our existence broken. Learning the Rules and Living the Paradox might lead one to assume that no one should challenge the system. But to the contrary, Living the Paradox means that one is fully aware, totally conscious of the abuses one experience in life. This, indeed, motivated us to challenge the system. Furthermore, recognizing the paradox also meant that the absurdity of the relationships were clearly seen and understood. This vision helped us to creatively engage in the work of transformation. The final set of issues spoke most clearly to declare the relationship between who we are and what we do. Knowing the difference between the two, we didn't have to rage. We, in fact, transformed our rage into a divine courage to stand against the destructive force of the enemy and declare we are entitled to the same promises of the nation: of life, liberty, property, and the pursuit of happiness.

Butler's description of the psycho-social dynamics of African American cultural identity formation is rather complex because it draws on the best insight of pragmatic philosophy, namely, that all inquiry is a matter of social interaction. Our best work (if we are to give the largest account of African American experience) must be genuinely interdisciplinary.

When asked by Dr. Anthony Pinn to respond to Butler's book, I wondered why he had chosen me--since Butler's work was not in my academic fields of comfort. Pinn said: "Do you know of any other academic association besides the Society for the Study of Black Religion where you have the privilege of reading books by African American colleagues outside of your own narrow field?" The answer is emphatically No! There are always connections. This is especially true in African American Religious Studies and Theological Studies.

I read Butler's book as a case study that moves along intersecting plains from historical and culture studies, Black Liberation and Womanist Theologies, gender and sexuality studies, Black Psychology and cultural criticism. By its very interdisciplinary character, Butler models an approach in which our own particular fragments of our individual works are informed and enlarged. The need for interdisciplinary work provides an actual check on the kinds of theoretical extravagances of reductivisms and conceptual absurdities that all too often follow from working in isolation. Butler reminds us that the best of our theoretical thinking is not at the beginning of a project (something like a First Philosophy). Rather, as he shows, our best theoretical work is the fruit or the result of the accumulative intentionality of research. As William James noted, knowledge grows by addition not subtraction, and Butler shows this well throughout this book.

I think that the central or main core of his work is phenomenological. There is a phenomenological reduction that forms the key or internal logic to this book. After Butler peels away layers of perceptions, which have become so deeply sedimented into the symbolic universe of race, color consciousness, and genderism in both the American psyche and the black psyche, he reaches the core, the relational self. In the American psyche, the natural and taken for granted attitude is determined existentially by totalized individuality, subjectivity and pervasive narcissism, each typified as "radical individualism." And in the Black psyche, the natural and taken for granted attitude comports to a "blackness that whiteness created" (borrowing from Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark*). It is a psyche created from regimes of oppression, race, color, sex, gender, and class, all regulated by white supremacy. The condition for the possibility of this psyche lies in the psycho-social and cultural effects of a kind of primordial trauma inflicted on African bodies by chattel slavery. It is an archaic trauma that sought to destroy the African soul.

The soul, which makes us most human, is what was at stake in the long history of contact and conquest. If I have read Butler correctly, liberating our dignity and saving our souls is the end or telos of African American culture formation. Liberating our dignity, saving our souls can only happen when we begin with Africa, says Butler. Africa is the internalized home of the soul, experienced in embodied existence, practices, and values that are nurtured in African American spirituality. It is a spirituality that is fundamentally relational. In other words, out of order are both individualism, which leads to narcissism, and communalism, which all too often leads to totalitarian regimes of power even among African Americans, making no room for difference. Relational embodiment is Butler's norm for his Theory of African American Cultural Identity Formation (TAACIF). It is as relational selves that the forms of cultural exchange contribute to the liberation of our dignity and makes whole our souls. For Butler, liberation is understood in terms of restorative justice or making whole. The cultivation of such existential possibilities is the ongoing task of African American culture—its practices, its creative and expressive culture, and its rationalizations, all contribute to the possibility of our human dignity and our restored souls.

As a reader, I am left, however, with a set of critical questions regarding what I take to be a deep logic of this book, namely, what are the hermeneutical consequences for the TAACIF when it has as its starting point, a transcendental boundary condition, the phenomenology of primordial trauma, pain, and suffering? As with any theory of origins, functioning like a genetic marker, such trauma doesn't go away with time or environmental change. How shall we to understand and evaluate the determinacy of this psycho-social genetic marker on African American practices? Are we to treat it as a hermeneutical starting point only, heuristically? Is it interpretatively determinate only for those aspects of our cultural practices that Butler wants to attribute to and commend for African American cultural formation that are transformative? or does such an interpretative starting point in the TAACIF also negatively mark our cultural practices with the stigma of social pathology, signifying cultural dysfunctions of our families (Moynihan Report), our acts of signifying (vulgarity of our speech and music from cussing to morphologies of internal codes surrounding the N-word, B-word, and H-word in expressive culture), and our pervasive homophobias and castigations of homosexuality throughout our communities (Isis Papers, and homophobic Sermons)? In other words, this reader would like to see what Butler takes to be the typifying limits of this "transcendental boundary" for African American cultural interpretation. It is perhaps here that Butler's TAACIF, as interdisciplinary as it is, may itself be enlarged critically by the creative exchange with Black Culture Studies. Still, Butler's book is well worth a closer reading and more rigorous account than I have provided here. It is a well-executed case study in what it means to be committed to interdisciplinary research in our traditional fields in the study of Black Religion and Theological Studies.

Victor Anderson  
The Divinity School, Vanderbilt University

***The Talking Book: African Americans and the Bible***

Allen Dwight Callahan  
Yale University Press, 2006

INTRODUCTION

In a single volume, Allen Callahan takes the reader on a quest to find the heart of African American imagination about and fascination with the Bible from slavery to the present. In that quest, and with a touch of genius, Callahan traverses several centuries, thousands of African American arts and letters, multiple biblical genres, and a host of languages. Callahan's study reveals astutely and stirringly, moreover, what slavery's children found in the Bible: "a penchant for interrogating" (242) all things to find "a thread of divine justice" (xiv, 48) in this world.

In this review, I wish to offer a few reflections on Callahan's work by raising four questions: 1) What is the basic content of the book?; 2) How does this text compare to other recent books on African Americans (or on African American biblical scholars) and the Bible?; 3) What is the contribution of Callahan's monograph?; and 4) Where do we go from here or how does this book challenge us?

## I. CONTENT

Framed by a prologue and a postscript, the argument develops in two broad sets of chapters: the first set (The Talking Book, The Poison Book, and The Good Book) exposes the bible's paradoxical utility among African Americans, i.e., how the biblical text has been a boundless artifact bespeaking the presence of a just God; a contestatory site evoked by toxic texts and toxic interpretations; and a language-world with which African Americans have interrogated their world; and the second (Exile, Exodus, Ethiopia and Emmanuel) distills the salient biblical images or themes in the effective history of the Christian bible as appropriated by African Americans.

In the prologue, Callahan notes first the pervasiveness of the bible in African American arts and letters (in black churches, among African American politicians, folk medicine practitioners, *littérateurs*, and Hip-hop lyricists). Next, he adumbrates the factors of the bible's great appeal among African Americans (its availability, its compelling imagery (thus, resonating with the experiences of African Americans), and its thread of justice.

In Chapter One (The Talking Book, a title emanating from Henry Louis Gates's tour de force work on black literacy and identity in *The Signifying Monkey*), Callahan reveals the historical relationship between African American literacy and the Christian bible. The chapter neatly reveals the evangelical context out of which African American literacy developed, the initial aural hermeneutics of enslaved Africans, the obstacles that made the bible a closed book for African Americans, the biblical text as the primer for the initial quest for literacy, and the prejudicial criticism against African American literacy and creativity.

Three pages into Chapter Two (The Poison Book), Callahan avers that "The Talking Book was also a poison book" (25). Preceding this acknowledgment of the bible's poison, Callahan presents the 1849 debate between Frederick Douglass and Henry Highland Garnet over whether enslaved Africans in the South should be given bibles. For Callahan, that debate (with Douglass saying "no" and Garnet saying "yes") crystallizes the perennial tension in African American receptions of the bible and the inherent problematic of the bible itself, i.e., the bible—being full of medicine and maledictions—is saturated with contradictions between its spirit of justice on the one hand and certain repressive commands on the other. Subsequent to his acknowledgment of the bible's poison, Callahan illustrates the toxicity with three examples: the so-called curse of Cain, the so-called curse of Ham, and the passages attributed to Paul that seem to endorse slavery. In featuring various responses to these toxic texts (from, e.g., Jarena Lee and Maria Stewart), moreover, Callahan reveals how African Americans have both embraced the bible even as they responded to those who would limit the canon to these toxic texts. That is, despite the poison, African Americans have found the bible to be a Good Book because they treated the toxicity with a homeopathic cure: "Their cure for the toxicity of pernicious scripture was more scripture" (40).

In Chapter Three (The Good Book), Callahan links the goodness of the bible to vindication. Though some African Americans, from slavery to the present, are astonished by the hypocrisy of oppressors who profess to be Christians and yet others turn to atheism, many African Americans instead assert that the Bible is good because it announces a coming vindication. That vindication, with allusions to or quotations from the bible, is captured in the violence of black imprecations and in the martial imagery of Negro spirituals (43). Moreover, that theme of vindication (or justice) ties together the threads of the recurring images that blacks draw from the bible, images (the ones to be taken up in the next four

chapters) that both inform African American's collective identity and their vision of God's justice despite the "injustice of history" (48).

In Chapter Four (Exile), Callahan avers that the transatlantic passages and their subsequent "cultural slaughter" (64) became the incubus for African American exilic mythology, a mythology that drew heavily on one of the visions of the prophet Ezekiel, i.e., the valley of dry bones. The mythology, developed in the aforementioned context of evangelical religion, was shaped largely by a "West African cultural heritage" (65) replete with Negro folksongs, spirituals, stories told by griots, dance and ring shouts. Moreover, for the mythology, African Americans did not select all of Ezekiel 37. Rather, in their songs and preaching traditions, they chose only the part of the vision that spoke of a restoration within a permanent state of exile (not restoration back to Africa), namely, Ezekiel 37:1-14, not Ezekiel 37:15-28.

In Chapter Five (Exodus), Callahan casts a wide net to show the parts of the larger exodus trope that African Americans experientially appropriated (e.g., slavery, wilderness, Moses, covenant, and an unfulfilled hope for entrance into the "promised land"). The chapter is replete with illustrations of African American appropriations of the Exodus trope, from an enslaved African woman (only known as Polly) to Paul Laurence Dunbar, and from David Walker, Martin Delany and W.E.B. Du Bois to Zora Neale Hurston, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Minister Farrakhan.

Psalm 68:31 is the textual site on which Chapter Six (Ethiopia) is constructed. In Psalm 68:31, which initially focused on Jerusalem as a center to which the kings of the earth would bring gifts, African Americans found an iconic symbol of African redemption. Called Ethiopians by the Europeans and endorsing the epithet for themselves, African Americans used this iconic symbol, and adjusted it as the experiences of black people changed, to highlight either a glorious past (a la vindicationist history) or to promote a glorious future, the latter occurring through African emigration (i.e., repatriation), African mission, or resistance to imperialism (as in geographical Ethiopia's resistance to Italian colonization or the development of independent nations in Africa free of their former European oppressors).

Chapter Seven (Emmanuel) demystifies the belief that African American appropriation of the Christian bible has a predilection for the Old Testament. This chapter, also cast widely, explores the broader dimensions of Jesus' life (e.g., his birth, words, death and immortality) with which African Americans identified or about which they raised grave suspicions when such dimensions were used by others for oppressive purposes. Again, Callahan's illustrations reveal his extraordinary mastery of African American arts and letters, for this chapter alone features Romare Bearden, Julia Cooper, Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, Elijah Muhammad, Public Enemy, KRS-1 and Tupac Shakur.

The postscript summarizes the four biblical images, highlights the interrogative impulse of Black people's appropriation of the bible (i.e., the fact that Black people have developed a "critical sensibility"), and summons slavery's children not to sell their birthright to a diabolical imperialism but to draw on their heritage and thus "call both scripture and injustice into question" (246).

## II. COMPARISON

If one wants to advance a methodology for investigating pre-Hip Hop African American transformations of history and culture through appropriations of the bible, then

Theophus Smith's *Conjuring Culture* provides a sophisticated phenomenological perspective. If one is looking for an edited collection of essays by various scholars, then Vincent Wimbush's *African Americans and the Bible* will do. If one wants a brief but representative purview and appraisal of African American biblical scholarship, then Michael Brown's *Blackening of the Bible* is outstanding. Yet, if one wants a fresh, digestible and illustrative exploration of the bible in *all* of Afro-America, then Callahan's *Talking Book* manuscript is the only one of its kind.

### III. CONTRIBUTION

Three features mark Callahan's contribution. First, his work alone both speaks about the stances African Americans have taken *toward* the Bible and the salient images African Americans have drawn *from* the Bible. Second, for each set of explorations, Callahan proffers apt illustrations that extend over a wide range of genres and historical periods. Third, in effect, Callahan has found what ties the illustrations together, i.e., he has found what has been consistent about African American wrestling with the bible over time and in similar ways: interrogation for the pursuit of justice. Indeed, Callahan's work is significant precisely because it shifts African American biblical scholarship from the isolated essay or article on African American appropriation of the bible to a constructive, compelling, and sustained monograph that weaves together recurring and salient biblical images deployed in African American appropriation of the bible. That is what this book does.

### IV. CHALLENGES

I think this book offers three primary challenges. First, for biblical scholars, it suggests that the effective history of the bible is both a subject matter of relevance for the real world and perhaps one of the few remaining avenues for the revival of passion within what has lamentably become for many an arid, dry-as-dust academic discipline. The subject matter of biblical studies can no longer be that which interests only a few scholars positioned in ivory towers, not even that which only serves the interests of a few black scholars. Second and relatedly, I think this book pushes all of us who study black religion to begin to think about the bible not so much in terms of a sacred book alone but in terms of the ways it has been used in the ideological struggles of black people. The question for me then is: How have black people received the bible to respond to various ideological struggles of discrete historical periods within their odyssey in this country? If certain parts of the bible were used prominently in the struggle over slavery in the antebellum period, are there specific ways in which the bible was used in the postbellum days as African Americans contended with a politics of respectability? That is, although there may be biblical themes consistently appropriated by African Americans throughout our sojourn here, are there also some themes that worked best during a certain period because of the prevailing ideological struggles of that period? Now that Allen Callahan has provided us an overview of the themes, we may now build on his work to investigate African American appropriation of the bible in specific periods or in specific regions. Third, given Callahan's honesty in exposing the paradoxical utility of the bible, how do we move from compensatory work, necessary if not inevitable in the light of the objectives of SSBR, to more critical work? That is, how do we avoid romanticizing either the bible or black appropriations of the bible, especially when either may lead to neo-colonial postures?

The content, comparison, contribution and challenges given, let me express my gratitude to Allen for this fine work. In person or in print, Allen Callahan has always had a knack for finding the right expression. The delightful but controlled metaphors he weaves throughout his argument in the *Talking Book* and his page-turning economy of expression: both are clues to his ability to capture thought without crippling the imagination.

Abraham Smith  
Perkins School of Theology  
Southern Methodist University

***Darker Shades of Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society***

Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas, editor  
New York University Press, 2006

“Womanist Ethics & Theology: The Third Wave—Thriving”<sup>1</sup>

WOMANIST REFLECTION

I am the daughter of a womanist. My mother, Naomi Olivia Wells Harris was not initially involved in the academy, nor did she serve as the member of any clergy. Rather, she began her life as an educator, a teacher following the lead of her own mother, Bessie Spears Wells. Though extremely active in her Mississippi Black Baptist church, my grandmother was not allowed to speak from the pulpit. Similar to the way Alice Walker describes *her* hard working mother in the essay, “The Only Reason You Want to Go to Heaven,”<sup>2</sup> my grandmother too was a ‘mother of the church.’ She too would, “mop the bare pine floors, run dust rags over the benches, and wash the windows. Take out the ashes, dump them behind the outhouse, clean the outhouse, and be sure there was adequate paper.”<sup>3</sup> Even after all her work, *my* grandmother too – was silenced in the church. Sexism limited her moral authority when it came to religion. And even though she was married to the pastor, she was never allowed to publicly share her theological reflections on what it takes to live wholistically with the earth, teach and raise twelve children, and survive the deaths of three. When my mother was ordained in 2005, she became the fourth-generation preacher in our family - and the second woman ordained to walk freely in pulpits with womanist force. I was the first.<sup>4</sup>

1 This call for Womanist scholars to focus on the theme of “thriving” in addition to the theme of “survival” as articulated in *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* by Delores S. Williams (New York: Orbis Books, 1993), comes from Rebecca Adens’s essay, “Future of Womanism: Speaking from the Next Generation,” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 58, no. 3-4 (2004): 164-167. The paper was presented at the “Songs We Thought We Knew” Conference organized by Emilie M. Townes in celebration of the work and thought of Delores S. Williams on April 30, 2004 at Union Theological Seminary in New York City. In the work, Adens asks “Womanist mothers” to help members of the next generation who are “looking for ways to survive, looking for ways to thrive,” as they deal with the realities of poverty, abusive domestic situations, HIV/AIDS, and poor quality educational systems. (165)

2 Alice Walker, “The Only Reason You Want To Go To Heaven Is That You Have Been Driven Out of Your Mind (Off Your Land and Out of Your Lover’s Arms) Clear Seeing Inherited Religion and Reclaiming The Pagan Self,” in *Anything We Love Can Be Saved: A Writer’s Activism* (Ballantine Books, 1997), 3 -27.

3 Ibid., 11-12.

4 I was ordained in the African Methodist Episcopal Church three years prior to my mother in 2002.

## INTRODUCTION

The presence of a daughter's courage is a reflection – or rather an outpouring of what Katie G. Cannon calls “unshouted courage”<sup>5</sup> practiced by the generations of black women who have come before. Cannon gleans the womanist ethical virtue, from examination of the moral codes and values expressed in the stories and practiced in the lives of womanist foremothers such as Zora Neale Hurston.<sup>6</sup> Unshouted courage undergirds a mode of resistance designed to deconstruct systems of interrelated oppressions, including racism, classism, sexism, and heterosexism. It is “akin to fortitude in the face of formidable oppression,”<sup>7</sup> according to Cannon, and points to everyday acts of moral agency practiced by countless black women in order to overcome oppression. The acts are “unshouted” in that they may appear passive, and in accordance with an oppressive dominant ethical norm. However, they not quiet. These acts of unshouted courage ring with a loud force, in that they revolt against oppressive systems by subversively promoting communal survival and wholeness. By re-envisioning courage and naming its unshouted nature as a virtue, Cannon suggests that such themes as loving oneself regardless, and wholeness can also be interpreted as virtuous acts for black women.

The relational aspect of the story about my grandmother, mother and myself reflects an inter-generational connection shared between daughters-and-mothers illustrated in the second part of Alice Walker's definition, “womanist.” The imaginative call-and-response dialogue begins with, “Mama, I'm walking to Canada and I'm taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me.” Reply: “It wouldn't be the first time.”<sup>8</sup> In addition, I would also argue that the story of my family origin helps to characterize my identity as a third-wave womanist within the study of black religion.

## CHARTING WATERS

A major contribution to womanist thought in religion, Dr. Stacey Floyd-Thomas' *Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society*<sup>9</sup> illustrates the inter-generational connection between various womanist writers, artists, theologians, biblical scholars, historians, sociologists and ethicists and their methodologies. Making a clear distinction between Alice Walker's definition of womanist and the doing or movement of womanism, Floyd-Thomas argues that the four-part definition can be re-examined for the sake of determining womanist theological and theo-ethical methodologies. The four tenets of womanist epistemology include, i. radical subjectivity, ii. traditional communalism, iii. redemptive self-love and iv. critical engagement. Since, womanism is self-critical and as Kelly Brown Douglass writes, examining its own “epistemological privilege”<sup>10</sup> is vital

5 Katie G. Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988).

6 I am indebted to Emilie M. Townes for her scholarship and instruction about womanist methodology evident in the work of Katie G. Cannon as well as in her own work *Womanist Justice, Womanist Hope* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993). Townes' examination of Ida B. Wells in this book is another shining example of how womanist method is applied to glean ethical virtues from the lives and writings of womanist foremothers.

7 Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics*, 144.

8 Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers, 1983).

9 Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas, ed., *Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society* (New York: NYU Press, 2006).

10 Kelly Brown Douglas, “Twenty Years a Womanist: An Affirming Challenge” in *Deeper Shades of*

to living faithfully into well rounded power analysis, Floyd-Thomas adds a fifth tenet of womanism; v. appropriation and reciprocity.

Dr. Stacey Floyd-Thomas' *Deeper Shades of Purple* illustrates the inter-generational connection between various womanist writers and helps chart the methodologies that different scholars use. Her book, *Mining the Motherlode: Methods in Womanist Ethics*<sup>11</sup> is equally helpful for scholars interested in womanist methodologies, for it is here that Floyd-Thomas identifies the tools used in womanist gardens; the methodologies and approaches used in womanist religious discourse. Three womanist approaches are explicated in *Mining the Motherlode*, including, literary analysis, social analysis, and historiography. The methodologies that accompany the first approach include, biomythography, virtue ethics and diasporic analysis. The methodologies that accompany the second approach borrow research methods from sociology in order to, "help womanist...illustrate the multidimensional aspects of how black women come to understand themselves."<sup>12</sup> Specific methodologies used in this approach include, the dance of redemption, case study analysis and emancipatory meta-ethnography. The third approach that Floyd-Thomas explicates is historiography. In conjunction with the goal of womanism to debunk myths about Black women, uncover and re-claim liberating stories for theological reflection,<sup>13</sup> this approach embodies methods including the critical examination of slave narratives, and the writing of moral biography and autobiography.

## WAVES OF WOMANISM

Perhaps one of the greatest achievements of Floyd-Thomas' work is the embodiment of a variety of womanist perspectives that spans across different disciplines and generations of scholars. Just as Alice Walker's definition suggests a deep and abiding relationship between daughters-and-mothers, nieces and aunts, daughters and other-mothers, cousins and kin, partners and communities, wives and families, Floyd-Thomas emphasizes the inter-generational nature of womanism by charting three generations or waves of womanist scholars in religion. While, she admits there are numerous ways of determining the "generational distinctions,"<sup>14</sup> of womanist scholars, she puts forth a family-tree, or genealogical path that helps to chart the many different gardens, womanist scholars have planted over the past twenty years.

Floyd-Thomas names the first generation, as a "confessional" generation saying, "These first generation womanist works are groundbreaking because they challenge the normalizing ethical discourses that have disallowed a fully humanized portrayal of black women."<sup>15</sup> Through the bold steps of naming themselves womanist, scholars including Katie G. Cannon, Jacquelyn Grant and Delores S. Williams, helped pave a way for a first generation of womanist scholars. Some of these authors include, M. Shawn Copeland, Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, Diana L. Hayes, Clarice Martin, Jamie Phelps, Marcia Y. Riggs, Emilie M. Townes,

*Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society* ed. Stacey Floyd-Thomas (New York: NYU Press, 2006), 145 – 157.

11 Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas, *Mining the Motherlode: Methods in Womanist Ethics* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2006).

12 Ibid., 12.

13 See Marcia Y. Riggs, *Awake, Arise & Act: A Womanist Call for Black Liberation* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 1994).

14 Floyd-Thomas, *Deeper Shades of Purple*, 13.

15 Floyd-Thomas, *Mining the Motherlode*, 3.

Renita J. Weems and more.

According to Floyd-Thomas a second wave of womanists emerged as scholars determined to carry on the womanist tradition by centering everyday black women's theological perspectives and taking seriously the challenge to frame womanist method and theory. Further sharpening the theological womanist themes of justice, love, hope, and survival, scholars including; Karen Baker-Fletcher, Kelly Brown Douglas, Carol B. Duncan, Stacey Floyd-Thomas, Rachel Elizabeth Harding, Barbara Holmes, Tracey Hucks, Cheryl Kirk-Duggan, Joan Martin, Debra Mubashshir Majeed, Evelyn Parker, Rosetta Ross, Shani Settles, Yolanda Smith, Dianne M. Stewart, Raedorah Stewart-Dodd, Linda Thomas, Nancy Lynne Westfield, Daphne Wiggins and many others, used intersectional analysis to probe deeper questions about how racism, classism, sexism and heterosexism function in Black communities and influence the doing and living of womanist ethics and theology.

A third wave of womanism has emerged. These scholars, daughters of womanist theology and ethics enter black religious discourse, many having received teaching about womanism, first-hand. Many have encountered womanism in classrooms led by womanist scholars, or through social activism, led by women who identify with the womanist ideas articulated by Alice Walker. It is too soon to say all of what third wave womanist will contribute, but already themes are being uncovered including religious plurality and environmental justice. As a third wave womanist, my own work, "Womanist Humanism: A New Hermeneutic" seeks to critically engage and connect other schools of thought to womanist religious thought.

## WOMANIST HUMANISM

My article "Womanist Humanism: A New Hermeneutic," combines my research interests in two sub-fields within black religion, namely, womanist religious thought and black humanism and creates a mutually enhancing hermeneutic that can be used for the further development of both sub-fields. The hermeneutic I develop shapes my own womanist lens. I apply aspects of a black humanist "nitty-gritty hermeneutic"<sup>16</sup> to womanist analysis providing a mode of fresh and hard inquiry into the "complex subjectivity"<sup>17</sup> of womanist identity amidst the reality of religious pluralism.

This move is particularly important in that it widens the Christian centered focus of traditional womanist theological work and expands the purview of this important field to honor the religious traditions, experiences, theological and ethical perspectives of women who identify as womanist, across the African Diaspora. To this aim the "nitty-gritty hermeneutic" of black humanism that "bring[s] into question the theological and religious assumptions of Christian doctrinal structures and scriptures"<sup>18</sup> supports womanism by adding methods and tools that can be used to critically examine theological perspectives that may not be life-affirming for black women.

The "nitty-gritty hermeneutic" comes out of the black theological perspective - black humanism. Black humanism lifts up human worth, human agency and human responsibility characterizing these as principles necessary for black liberation. Introduced into theological

16 This hermeneutic is thoroughly explicated by Anthony B. Pinn in his book, *Why Lord? Suffering and Evil in Black Theology* (New York: Continuum, 1995), 113 – 137.

17 I am building upon Anthony B. Pinn's notion of complex subjectivity articulated in his work, *Terror and Triumph: The Nature of Black Religion* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press. 2003)

18 Pinn, *Why Lord?*, 180.

discourse as humanocentric theism by William R. Jones<sup>19</sup> during the first generation of black theological scholarship, black humanism was not fully embraced until the third generation of black theology through the work of Anthony B. Pinn.<sup>20</sup> Pinn's "nitty-gritty hermeneutic" emerged out of a strong black humanist (non-theistic) position and attempted to reveal the "rawest layer of truth"<sup>21</sup> and addressing existential questions historically overlooked or deemed unimportant by traditional black Christian perspectives.

At the same time the womanist humanist hermeneutic applies aspects of a black humanist nitty-gritty hermeneutic, it also engages womanist race-class-sex-and-heterosexist analysis. This womanist analytical side of the hermeneutic exposes ways in which sexist norms and theological constructions operate within the approaches, methods and studies of various perspectives within black religion- including the perspective of black humanism. Womanist theological analysis and approaches prioritize black women's theological and religious reflections based upon their experiences resisting racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism and other forms of oppressions. The multi-layered deconstructive analysis is used to examine ways in which systems of patriarchy, power and normative ethical codes based on the logic of domination are used to oppress black women and their communities. Womanism is also constructive in that it names black women's stories and experiences as valid epistemologies and uses these epistemologies as sources from which to uncover strategies of resistance and survival. By mining theological constructions, religious and theo-ethical codes from the writings of black women foremothers and practices of moral agency in the everyday lives of black women, womanist theological approaches proclaim the importance of justice and quality of life for black women and black peoples across the African Diaspora.

Since, the womanist humanist hermeneutic is mutually enhancing, the womanist analytical side of womanist humanism offers black humanism a critique that interrogates the absence of female theological perspectives within black humanism. It poses the following questions; Is there something inherently patriarchal about the way black humanism constructs the sense of the self? Why are there so few "daughters of Nimrod?"<sup>22</sup> Is the notion of the *humanist self* gendered in such a way that it excludes women's realities, women's bodies, women's souls and women's selves, thereby making black humanism less accessible to women, to womanists?

## SEEING BEYOND THE OBVIOUS

At the outset, readers may be uncomfortable with even thinking of womanist thought in dialogue with black humanist thought, much less conceptualizing how the two groups can conceive a shared hermeneutic. Conversation between the assumed theistic perspective of womanism, and the presumed non-theistic perspective of black humanism would seem to only present additional issues of conflict while engaging their vastly different philosophies

19 William R. Jones, "Humanocentric Theism: A Theistic Framework for Ethnic Suffering," in *Is God A White Racist? A Preamble to Black Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), 185 – 202.

20 For a full sense of the trajectory of black humanist theological discourse I recommend, Anthony B. Pinn's *By These Hands: A Documentary of African American Humanism* (New York: New York University Press, 2001)

21 Pinn, *Why Lord?*, 180.

22 Melanie L. Harris, "Womanist Humanism: A New Hermeneutic" in *Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society* ed. Stacey Floyd-Thomas (New York: NYU Press, 2006), 216.

and theologies. However, I argue that a womanist humanist hermeneutic is precisely what is needed to offer an entry-point into a conversation between womanist female scholars and black male humanist scholars.

The hermeneutic operates in a way that simultaneously poses critical and helpful questions to both womanism and black humanism. The nitty-gritty hermeneutic of black humanism helps womanists engage theological “hard inquiries”<sup>23</sup> about whether and how Christian categories limit the reach and ability of womanism to respond to women who identify as womanist, but not as Christian. This critique leads to a re-examination of the phrase “Loves the Spirit” in the four-part definition of “womanist” authored by Alice Walker.<sup>24</sup> The inclusion of womanist analysis as a part of the womanist humanist hermeneutic in turn argues that a dormant theistic perspective (humanocentric theism) within black humanism be awakened and perhaps, adapted in order to make black humanism more accessible. In addition, womanist analysis helps black humanism examine “the importance of gender in the construction of the sense of self.”<sup>25</sup> This latter critique is particularly important in light of the important impact womanism has made on the whole of black religion. It is a hermeneutic that can be used to facilitate the kinds of conversations we are having today.

Melanie L. Harris  
Texas Christian University

***Being Human: Race, Culture and Religion***

Dwight N. Hopkins  
Fortress Press, 2005

Recently I had the immense pleasure of witnessing Professor Dwight Hopkins discuss his latest intellectual interest at a “Works in Progress” lecture series on the campus of Princeton University. On that day he lucidly introduced and articulated some lessons in wholistic living suggested by African American popular culture, namely black folktales. In drawing on the trickster, conjurer, outlaw and Christian witness symbols, he offered his reflections on the quest for human fulfillment in relation to community and ultimate concern in general, and the ways such theological reflections might be deployed as a counter-hegemonic force against the pernicious powers principally located at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue in particular. And what I experienced that day in person—the intellectual insight, scholarly acumen and prophetic sensibility in the form of a passionate commitment to the “least of these”—is all beautifully encapsulated within the pages of his latest text, *Being Human: Race, Culture and Religion*.

The aim of *Being Human* is to prefigure a thoroughgoing construction of a black

23 Pinn, *Why Lord?*

24 I address this issue in my dissertation and specifically in a paper presented at the American Academy of Religion Womanist Approaches to Religion and Society Group on November 20, 2006 entitled, “Loving the Spirit: Expressions of Paganism in Alice Walker’s Non-Fiction.” This paper analyzes different womanist interpretation of the phrase ‘loves the spirit’ and argues that the religious identity of Alice Walker as a self-proclaimed pagan and as a womanist suggests that the phrase is intended to embrace a variety of religious practices and perspective that are life-giving to black women, beyond Christianity.

25 Melanie L. Harris, “Womanist Humanism: A New Hermeneutic” in *Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society* ed. Stacey Floyd-Thomas (New York: NYU Press, 2006), 211 – 225.

theological anthropology based on common folktale character types by interrogating key assumptions that commonly inform contemporary paradigms of God-human interactions. These key assumptions involve our understandings of culture, the community (the dynamic between the selves and self), and the place of race in the ways we think about the sacred-human interplay.

Each concept (culture, selves/self and race) constitutes a chapter. Hopkins builds on and moves beyond the contemporary perspectives of progressive liberals, post-liberals, feminist and liberation theologians. For instance, since theological anthropology is a “cultural process where the ultimate intermingles with the penultimate,”<sup>26</sup> according to Hopkins, it is necessary to “unravel the contours of culture that inform the constructive task.”<sup>27</sup> Hopkins thus locates the sacred within culture that is comprised of human labor, artistic dimensions and spiritual sensibility. Further, these attributes (human labor, art and the spiritual) saturate, animate and are extended throughout a given society by human bodies that constitute culture. In Hopkins words, “human beings do and develop culture.” Consequently, one must always keep track of the symbiotic contours between the communal selves and the individual self. Finally, Hopkins fourth chapter, *Race: Nature and Nurture*, reveals the ways white supremacist constructs implicitly inform most theologian’s perspective on humanity in relation to the *imago dei*. To be sure, the author’s unmatched ability to fuse a wellspring of theological, historical, social and cultural analysis in a compelling yet concise manner is on display here. This chapter on race can stand alone as a theological addition and/or alternative to Cornel West’s “A Genealogy of Modern Racism” or George M. Frederickson’s *Racism: A Short History*. Therefore, the author ingeniously unpacks these three concepts toward his goal of constructing a theological anthropology based on black folktales. But harkening back to the first chapter where he examines contemporary theological anthropologies in North America, this was not his sole objective. Demonstrating the skill of the trickster consciousness, Hopkins uses these chapters on culture, community and race to problematize the prevailing ideologies and assumptions concerning bourgeois values, the culture of European Enlightenment and Western Christianity that fosters an individualistic orientation to the world, and the audible silence concerning issues of race that are shot through most progressive liberal and post-liberal theological anthropologies.

Dare I assert that this is the power of the text. Hopkins’ cogent analysis and critique of the prevailing assumptions that informs European and European American theological anthropology situates this text squarely within the grand tradition of black liberation theology. As long as *Being Human* is on our bookshelves no longer can scholars take the dominant perspectives of, say, David Tracy or George Lindbeck as authoritative. Hence, Professor Dwight Hopkins continues to add to his own copious and courageous corpus of work which courageously holds the dominant theological community accountable for their own class, racial and gender biases; not to mention their often faulty theological presuppositions that are often ensconced within the dubious category of tradition.

The part of the book that I do have a question about, though, involves his conclusion, which is an introductory constructive turn toward black folktales. Consistent with his previous work Hopkins employs the popular religion of everyday, black folk as a primary source to construct a black theology that is organically related to the black community. As

26 Dwight N. Hopkins, *Being Human : Race, Culture, and Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 56.

27 *Ibid.*, 54.

already stated, his aim here is to engage black folktales, particularly, the paradigms of the trickster, conjurer, outlaw and Christian witness. I am not necessarily interested in what Victor Anderson refers to as the “problem of equivocation” in terms of the inferences that Hopkins is able to draw from these folktale archetypes in correlation to and consistency with black liberation theology.<sup>28</sup> Though I do think this could be a matter of debate. What I am more interested in is how Professor Hopkins understands the categories of black popular religion, folk culture and popular culture. I find this of interest because I think this has profound implications in terms of whether Professor Hopkins will be able to pull off effectively the hermeneutical return to black folktales as a credible source of black theological construction.

As far as I can tell, Professor Hopkins uses the terms black popular religion, folk culture and popular culture interchangeably. In previous writings, Professor Hopkins has defined popular religion as, “the sacred life experiences of non-elites—the poor, working class people, the marginalized, and the least of these in society.”<sup>29</sup> In *Being Human*, immediately after positing a definition of culture, like Raymond Williams, as a “whole way of life,” he defines folk as, again, “nonelites—working people, communities living in structural poverty, the marginalized, the unrecognized voices in our society.” “According to this description,” Professor Hopkins asserts, “the folk believe in and practice a sacred way of life from the bottom of society.”<sup>30</sup> What is more, in the introduction of the text, he refers to African American folktales as a form of black popular culture.<sup>31</sup> Thus I would think that it is safe to assume that folktales, which he characterizes as popular culture, emerge from African American folk culture; a folk culture, of course, that is defined as representative of the nonelites, the marginalized and unrecognized.

But a qualification needs to be made here. I agree with Professor Hopkins that African American folktales are forms of popular culture. I also believe that it is true that folktales represent the moral and ethical sensibility of late nineteenth and early twentieth century poor, southern blacks. But what makes African American folktales a part of popular culture were not that they emerged from the cultural bottom of society, per se. What makes African American folktales a part of popular culture is the ways in which these folktales entered into the imagination of the larger society; most notably through the writings of *Atlanta Constitution* journalist, Joel Chandler Harris, a member of the white, dominant overclass.

It is important to remember that whenever folk culture is circulated in mass, it is mediated by and through the hands of the cultural elite. Thus an appropriate nuance is

28 Victor Anderson, “‘We See through a Glass Darkly’: Black Narrative Theology and the Opacity of African American Religious Thought,” in *The Ties That Bind: African American and Hispanic American/Latino/a Theologies in Dialogue*, ed. Anthony B. Pinn and Benjamin Valentin (New York: Continuum, 2001).

29 Dwight N. Hopkins, “Black Theology on God: The Divine in Black Popular Religion,” in *The Ties That Bind: African American and Hispanic American/Latino/a Theologies in Dialogue*, ed. Anthony B. Pinn and Benjamin Valentin (New York and London: Continuum, 2001), 99.

30 Hopkins, *Being Human: Race, Culture, and Religion*, 169-70.

31 See pages 2-3 where Hopkins discusses why a deeper conceptual analysis of culture, selves/self, and race are necessary in relationship to cultural anthropology. After offering brief introductions of black folktales, contemporary models of theological anthropology, and his own previous writings, Hopkins states, “After these comparative reviews of black popular culture, theological anthropology paradigms, and my own prior works, I concluded that...” Thus, one can see that Hopkins is conflating the black folktales with black popular culture.

necessary when distinguishing the mass-mediated cultural expressions of the folk, which can be rightfully defined as popular culture, over and against authentic representations of the folk, which are largely invisible and have evaporated into the gases of history. Such an awareness of this distinction even led Zora Neale Hurston, the original black anthropologist of folk culture, to surmise that there has never been a legitimate presentation of genuine Negro expression to any audience anywhere. The true folktales, she said, “were being made and forgotten everyday.”<sup>32</sup>

So rather than describing religious orientation from below as the organic articulation of common folk sensibility, an examination of religion and popular culture must consider the political, social and economic power brokers at the helm of the varying culture industries and their vested interests in human labor, the artistic and their own spiritual strivings. This is to say, the same critical analysis directed toward the cultural assumptions that structure liberal and post-liberal theologies should equally target the circulation of black folktales in American society. Just as the former is not given a pass, we should not take the latter for granted as authentically representative of the folk.

The circulation of the trickster, conjurer, outlaw and faithful Christian images by Joel Chandler Harris and others were deployed in popular print media, in part, to satiate the anxieties of America’s white supremacist imagination on the heels of the civil war and Reconstruction efforts. As an example, a book review of Harris’ 1892 collection *On the Plantation* in one northern, liberal magazine stated:

The old plantation negro and the old negro house-servant seem to live and talk again in his pages; and very interesting and attractive people they are, full of quaint good sense, full of affection, of good humor, and of natural courtesy. Why has the negro of to-day so completely lost the best traits that marked his race at that time? The good nature and humor are gone and the courtesy is gone; and what good qualities have taken their place? The negro has become a voter, and in the effort to seem the peer of the whites he has copied many of the worst defects of uncultivated white men, and has at the same time lost some characteristics of his own which once made his race attractive and lovable. It is a period of transition: let us hope that as it took a hundred years to transform the African savage into the gentle and lovable negro known on many a plantation before the war, so another hundred years may develop the negro of to-day into something much better than now seems probable.<sup>33</sup>

To be sure, I am not suggesting that we allow anyone to take hostage the cultural production of enslaved blacks who offered these folktales that beautifully blended the wisdom of Africa with the insight of the oppressed in the antebellum south. I am saying, however, that if African American folktales are going to be a theological source of liberation sentiment we have to take into consideration the full gamut of influences that inspired their entrance into popular culture and their subsequent circulation throughout the years.

Finally, what does it mean for Professor Hopkins to make such a connection between

32 Derived from Zora Neale Hurston’s 1934 essay “Spirituals and Neo Spirituals” as quoted in Eric J. Sundquist, *The Hammers of Creation: Folk Culture in Modern African American Fiction* (Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 1992), 51.

33 Alexander C. McClurg, “Old Time Plantation Life: A Review of *The Plantation*,” in *The Dial*, 1892.

the folktale archetypes of the trickster, conjurer and outlaw and the spirit of liberation found in black theology? Maybe, again, here I am harkening back to Anderson's "problem of equivocation." I wonder: can having such an essentialist and idealistic view of black folktales as representative of culture from below unwittingly blind us to how the narratives might teach us disturbing truths about our own willingness to aid and abet evil and injustice in this world? Might it be that this all-too human quality—the penchant toward greed and evasion of altruism—is what really characterizes the sacred-human interaction and our existential need for the ultimate to pierce through into our world? When I look over the religious landscape of African American practices, I see the trickster, the conjurer and the outlaw not necessarily in persons partnering with God toward justice. But I see the trickster, Creflo Dollar; the conjurer, Madame Cleo; and the outlaw, Rev. Henry Lyons. Hence, the folktales might be instructive in that they point us toward the ultimate so that we might find deliverance not simply from the white, privileged overclass, but deliverance from ourselves. For I hear the words of James Baldwin say, "One of the things the white world does not know, but I think I know, is that black people are just like everybody else. We are also mercenaries, dictators, murderers, liars. We are human, too."<sup>34</sup>

Jonathan L. Walton  
University of California, Riverside

---

34 James Baldwin, "American Dream and American Negro," in *Baldwin: Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: The Library of America, 1998), 717.

## ANNOUNCEMENTS

### **ANNUAL MEETING DATES**

2008 6-8 March, Charleston and the Sea Islands of South Carolina

2009 26-28 March, Washington, DC

2010 The 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of SSBR, Atlanta, GA

2011 Bahia, Brazil

### **NEW OFFICER ELECTED 2008-2011**

The Executive Committee presented the follow name for Treasurer: Arthur Sutherland. This was accepted unanimously.

### **NOMINATING COMMITTEE**

Wesley Roberts, Chair, will be joined by Melanie Harris and Marsha Snulligan Haney. They will be searching for a new registrar, secretary, and the three members at large.

### **PROGRAM COMMITTEE FOR 2008**

Rosetta Ross will be the local contact person and will work with Stephanie Mitchem, Harry Singleton, President Butler, and Executive Director Anthony Pinn.

### **TREASURERS REPORT**

Rosetta Ross reported that the Society is in excellent shape financially. The current budget (reflective of monies and expenses before the Annual Meeting) is \$27,901.35.

### **STRATEGIC OPTIONS VISIONARY COMMITTEE ESTABLISHED**

Larry Murphy reported that the Executive Committee noted the accumulation of funds in our treasury and gave an overview of the various suggestions that have come up over the years about the nature and purpose of the Society. President Cannon appointed a committee to explore this question. Dr. Murphy will serve as chair along with Boykin Sanders and President Lee Butler. President Butler will appoint at least one more person to serve on the committee.

### **NEW MEMBERS**

#### Full Members

Valerie Bridgeman Davis (Memphis Theological Seminary)

Betty W. Holley (Alliance Theological Seminary)

Sylvester Johnson (Indiana University)

Stephanie Mitchem (University of South Carolina)

Cleotha Robertson (Payne Theological Seminary)

Yolanda Y. Smith (Yale Divinity School)

Roger Alex Sneed (Central Michigan University)

Zachery Williams (University of Akron)

Associate Members

Stephen Finley (Rice University)

Angela D. Sims (Saint Paul School of Theology)

**TRANSITIONS**

Brian Blount has been appointed to the presidency of Union Theological Seminary-PSCE!  
Many and deep congratulations.

Incoming Lee Butler was promoted to full professor at Chicago Theological Seminary. He is the first African American to achieve this rank there.

Monica Coleman has changed positions from the director of womanist religious studies and assistant professor of religion at Bennett College for Women in Greensboro, NC to assistant professor of systematic theology at Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago.

Juan Floyd-Thomas was promoted to associate professor at Texas Christian University.

Stacey Floyd-Thomas was promoted to the associate professor at Brite Divinity School.

Peter Paris will retire from Princeton Theological Seminary on June 31, 2007.

Jonathan Walton has begun teaching at University of California-Riverside.

**NEW AND FORTHCOMING BOOKS BY SOCIETY MEMBERS**

Stephanie Y. Mitchem, *African American Folk Healing* (NYU Press, July 2007)

Stephanie Y. Mitchem, *Name It and Claim It: Prosperity Preaching in the Black Church* (Pilgrim Press)

Anthony B. Pinn and Allen Callahan, editors, *People of African Descent and the Story of Nimrod* (Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming).

Anthony B. Pinn and Gregory Colleton, editors, *Choices: Interpretations of Ecclesiastes* (Wipf and Stock, forthcoming).

Horace Russell, *The Missionary Outreach of the West Indian Church: Jamaican Baptist Missions to West Africa in the Nineteenth Century* can be purchased at a reduced price of \$25.00 post free. Send orders to: Rev. Dr. Horace O. Russell, Saints Memorial Baptist Church, 47 South Warner Avenue, Bryn Mawr PA 19010; Tel 610.525.5806 Fax 610.525.8934

Jonathan L. Walton, *Watch This! Televangelism and African American Religious Culture* (NYU Press, forthcoming)

**YALE DIVINITY SCHOOL ESTABLISHES A NEW MASTER OF ARTS  
CONCENTRATION: BLACK RELIGION IN THE AFRICAN DIASPORA**

The Divinity School faculty approved this new Master of Arts concentration at its March 2007 meeting. Current students may select this concentration beginning in the fall, all students will be able to do so beginning Fall 2008. This is an interdisciplinary program based in the Divinity School curriculum and encourages students to take courses pertinent to African American religious studies in other departments of the University such as anthropology, economics, history, literary theory, philosophy, psychology, political science, and sociology. The concentration also has a strong link with the African American Studies Department of Yale. The students who participate in this discipline will be poised to engage in further graduate work geared to the theological disciplines as well as other disciplines in the humanities and social sciences.