

the presence of the lord is [here]: black christian theology and trans-ancestral interventions on the genders of the black body

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¹SHORT BIO

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ABSTRACT

Departed ancestor James Cone's *A Black Theology of Liberation* emerges as a powerfully meditative text on the conditions of possibility for Black bodies on Earth, and for theology as a vehicle for resistance *only* when it is imbued within Blackness and Black liberation. Cone argues that God is aligned with those on Earth who suffer most, and that Black liberation is so by divine right. In this essay, I argue that the Black Church is inhibited from true and honest Black liberation because of its failure to access revelation through knowing of Black trans bodies and the fullness of Black gender. This essay addresses not necessarily a teleological concern of whether revelation can happen, but whether normative Black bodies can catch up to the work that is being forged by Black trans and queer bodies. Most prominently, what does it mean for Black liberation to be exclusively expressed in terms of bodies who are deemed normative: cisgender and heterosexual? What Black liberation through the Black Christian Church is fungible or possible for Black trans/nonbinary bodies? In what ways does a Black liberatory politic that obfuscates or omits the existence of Black non-normative genders fail to examine the full potential of Black liberation and the fruit that it bears, specifically, in the overturning of violent, rigid, and gendered prohibitions surrounding the Black body? I take up the words of Hortense Spillers, M. Jacqui Alexander, Zenaida Peterson, Hari Ziyad, Marquis Bey, and C. Riley Snorton to suggest a Black theology that has actively been conjured by Black non-cis and queer bodies. Such a theology, black-trans-queer, outpaces the normative considerations of Blackness and revolution/ revelation, currently and historically housed in the Black Church – and I imagine what it would mean for the normative Black Church to catch up. If we understand self-knowing and revelatory power in Black theology as conducive to liberation of Black bodies, what would it mean for this intimate, internal awareness to be housed in that part of our Black bodies that inherently resists colonial gender metrics?

KEYWORDS

Christian theology; Black theology; Trans-queer theology; James Cone; Africana Studies; Queer Studies; Trans Studies; the American Civil Rights Movement; Queer of Colour Critique

In the hallowed halls of my family church, I must sign the visitor's book. The stained-glass windows are inscribed with hymns that have been tucked into my chest. I must know that the presence of the Lord is

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ephemeral, here-and-gone, circumstantial, and altogether overpowering – but allegedly alienated by my queerness; inextricable; attracted only by a distinct lineage that does not possess all of my kin.

The perennial struggle for civil rights and Black liberation in the United States was originally able to take root in Black Churches in myriads of Christian denominations in the American South because of the theology's premise: salvation, liberation, and a new temporality for the abused on Earth. Black bodies under constant siege took refuge behind stained glass windows with texts that promised recovery. In the deepest niches of the Jim Crow South, my great-grandmother sought a family church that would bear her lineage. There she demanded her favourite hymn be sung during her last Sunday on Earth. Her daughter has buried two mothers, two husbands, and one son, all taken by the same plague: cancers caught too late and too little money for finer care; overwork; depression, PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder), and anxiety undetected and silenced. The crucifix of the Jim Crow South, of anti-Blackness underscored the recorded cause of death.

Liberation is by no means here. If anything, the line of Black women in the front pews, showing how the artillery of whiteness has weathered their skins, assert that point by virtue of their existences. Yet still, I make room for minor concessions: though the fact of liberation is not one that has been fully actualised, what does it mean for the Black Church, specifically Black cis, non-queer bodies, to believe that they possess the makings of Black liberation without Black trans and queer bodies?

In his seminal text, *a Black Theology of Liberation*, departed ancestor James Cone leads with this: "There can be no Christian ideology that is not identified unreservedly with those who are humiliated and abused."¹ Published in 1970, this book emerges as a powerful and meditative text on the conditions of possibility for Black bodies on Earth and for theology as a vehicle for change *only* when imbued within Blackness and Black liberation. James Cone dedicated his life, body, and energy to not simply inscribing Christianity and Christian theology with Blackness, but by emphasising that God himself is Black. He makes clear that those aligned with Christian theology must be aligned with the obliteration of whiteness, the affirmation of Blackness, and the obliteration of all oppressive entanglements related to racial capitalism and systems of

¹ James Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1970), 1.

anti-Blackness. He emphasises that “anyone who claims to be fighting against the problem of oppression and does not analyze the exploitive role of capitalism is either naive or an agent of the enemies of freedom.”²

My introduction to Cone happened shortly after his death in April 2018. Perplexed by the expectations of academic writing and with where to situate Black trans and queer bodies – with where to situate *my* Southern Black trans-queer body in life and in the Christian theological traditions in which I was reared – my mentor Jared Rodriguez introduced me to Cone. I took considerable interest in his pointed and prescient takedown of ideological fallacies that keep Black bodies trapped, the words-like-anvils that weighed on my queer, economically-exploited, Black body like a shroud during every altar call. He spoke against the idea of the perpetually-eventual “win” through divine right – this idea that Black bodies had to wait for a vague, liberal “win” that would then situate, I read, those most conventionally-divine (i.e. cis, heterosexual) as free. He indicted white/ness, and Black non-radical, neoliberal articulations of freedom unmotivated towards the obliteration of *all* of the trappings of white supremacy, which includes trans- and queer-antagonism. I take up the text to which I was introduced, the text in which I found most immediate resonance, *A Black Theology of Liberation* – his second work, released in 1970. Cone eked out a radical lineage up to his death with 2011’s *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, which articulates the death of Christ as a lynching. This article is by no means a comprehensive assessment of his wide corpus of knowledge, but rather a close reading of *A Black Theology of Liberation* by a Black Southern trans-queer femme scholar. This article is, too, a conversation on the ways in which I have found resonance with Cone’s indictments of what holds the Black Church from the premise of revelation, and my abstractions on what it takes for Black bodies – of the Church and not – to access material and spiritual liberation in the ways that we seek. That liberation lies within my body and that of others – Black trans and queer bodies, who naturally usurp the violence of colonialism, binary gender configurations, and heterosexism. We are what liberation looks like, through our presence’ through the bodywork that goes into our very being.

What is perhaps paramount to Cone’s praxis, which still lives, is his commitment to the annihilation of the normative, disabling assemblage³

² Cone, *A Black Theology*, xvii.

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that is whiteness. Cone indicts the internalisation of white and liberal metrics of how Black bodies should be and move. He warns:

Black theology also rejects those who counsel Blacks to accept the limits which this society places on them, for it is tantamount to suicide. In existential philosophy suicide is the ultimate expression of despair. If we accept white definitions of Blackness, we destroy ourselves.⁴

I speak from a perspective of the American South. I breathe through parents who remember and are continually reintroduced to the violence of the Klu Klux Klan; of militarised police; and of antagonisms above and below the Mason-Dixon line that eroded their bodies – generationally, spiritually, materially.⁵ I am because of a black domestic worker who sought change through the church in which she was reared. When I speak of the Black Church, I refer not to expressly physical churches and steeples, but to the spiritual, theological, ontological, metaphysical, and material configuration of Black-American Protestant Churches in which people worshipped, sought refuge, and under which people rallied for any tangible freedom and relief from the necropolitics⁶ of white supremacy. For Cone, too, Black liberation theology is something not ensconced inside the physical walls of churches. The Black Church does have an immense level of power and credence over Black theology. Cone writes:

In the New Testament the church (*ecclesia*) is the community that has received the Holy Spirit and is now ready to do what is necessary to live out the gospel. It is the assembly of those who have become heirs of the promises of God; and because they have experienced what that means for humanity, they cannot accept the world as it is. They must rebel against evil so all citizens may know that they do not have to behave according to unjust societal laws.⁷

³ This term is largely influenced by the work of Dr. Alexander Weheliye in his book *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

⁴ Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*, 17.

⁵ The Mason-Dixon line is a demarcation that has historically and famously separated the American North from the American South. It borders Pennsylvania, Maryland, West Virginia, and Delaware.

⁶ J.-A. Mbembé and Libby Meintjes. "Necropolitics." *Public Culture* 15, no.1 (2003): 11-40, <https://muse.jhu.edu/>.

⁷ Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*, 130.

The purpose of this article is threefold. I offer an abbreviated trans-queer reading of Cone's *A Black Theology of Liberation*, and I articulate the failings of Black theological traditions that do not detect Black trans-queer bodies, which are effectively removed from any legitimate liberation due to their obfuscation of non-cis, non-heterosexual bodies. Critically, I explain how Black trans-queer bodies perform the work of revelation that is so intrinsic to theological readings of liberation and healing, which non-trans and non-queer Black bodies in and outside of the Black Church must understand if they are truly committed to a world free of white supremacy and colonial violence. To be clear, I do not identify the Black Church as the only entity moving towards liberation. Black folks of any religion or spirituality, and of none, are moving towards liberation in a myriad of ways, but those who are non-trans and non-queer must also attend to the bodywork being done by Black trans and queer people if they (cis, straight people) are committed to any kind of tangible liberation politic. The Black Church was one of the central homes of the Civil Rights Movement, but, as Cone dedicated his life to articulating, it is by no means a holistically revolutionary site. I say this as a student of his work, and as a body who has endured harm and listened to fiery polemics against my closeted being since my childhood. I often say that I only go to my home church for the community in which I was raised and for the music, but it is an infrequent visit that is fraught with nerves. I possess a body that they are not yet ready for.

Cone's work is a response to the violence of the Black Church and its pandering to white supremacy, a direct abjuration to Blackness itself, but it is of note that he does not abandon it. Rather, he understands the Church's power, its meaning, its ability to merge with Black radical movements and thought traditions that could fuel the total revelation that must happen. I feel similarly. I still pray. I will always long for the stained-glass windows, the feeling of a hymn book in my hands, and the kindness of ushers. I listen to Mahalia Jackson and Aretha and recall women elders and their humming when I was in times of distress. The Church is in me; I cannot leave it, and so this article is altogether a desire for it to transform and to understand the abject violence of its abandonment and refutation of the bodies that it marks as errant. This work is an opportunity for me to articulate in community the power of Black trans and queer bodywork.

I extend Cone's work to interrogate and find more resonance with the Black theological, and within that, the epistemological concept of

knowing that is cultivated through the process of revelation. Through others' work on queer theology, James Cone has aligned himself with queer bodies and has sought to make queer struggles visible, given the resonance with anti-Black struggles and the struggles of all oppressed people under racialised and gendered capitalism. Paul B. Raushenbush, Senior Vice President at Auburn Theological Seminary and editor of the Auburn Seminary's online journal, *Voices*, relays a critical and warm anecdote on what I would term as an intersectional⁸ lens by James Cone. Raushenbush recalls:

I remember my first theology paper, which was an examination of the intersections of Black Theology and Queer Theology. Cone invited his students to understand how different communities understood God, especially communities that had lived under oppression. When Dr. Cone taught the section on LGBT history and theology, I could see how he relished quoting the profanity laden statements by the drag queens who stood up and refused to take the abuse anymore. Dr. Cone was generous that way; he wanted people to know about the experience of oppression and terror that Black people had experienced in this country but he also was moved by other voices. He told me, "God is a God that makes liberation meaningful to those who are marginalized no matter where they are. God takes on that identity of the oppressed".⁹

Cone's take on Black theology and Blackness is that Black theology is a theological, ontological, and epistemological mode of self-awareness and internal decolonisation that allows one to galvanise towards total and unabashed revolution and liberation. Cone gave us a transformative understanding of the Bible itself: God is not simply being borrowed and arbitrarily Blackened; God is and always has been Black, and configurations of him that align more with whiteness are erroneous. Cone emphasises that he is unconcerned with a Christian theology that is wholly abstract or distanced from the material conditions afflicting bodies on the ground. God is more closely identified with, as Hortense Spillers terms in describing the ontological condition of Black flesh, "lacerations, woundings, fissures...openings, ruptures, punctures of the flesh" that line Black

⁸ Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no.6 (1991).

⁹ Paul B. Raushenbush, "Dr. James Cone, Professor and Prophet of Black Liberation Theology, Rest In Power," *Auburn Voices*, 2018, <https://auburnseminary.org/voices/dr-james-cone-professor-and-prophet-of-Black-liberation-theology-rest-in-power/>.

bodies and reinterpret Black gender.¹⁰ Any practitioner or worshipper must align themselves with racial justice and the dismemberment of systemic anti-Blackness, if they truly and adamantly worship. To continue to allow systems of anti-Blackness to proliferate, renders a body and one's alleged status as a believer inert. Cone raises that,

if the oppressed of this land want to challenge the oppressive character of white society, they must begin by affirming their identity in terms of the reality that is antiwhite. Blackness, then, stands for all victims of oppression who realize that the survival of their humanity is bound up with liberation from whiteness.¹¹

Cone's theology shows that Black theology can be a liberating force that must be transnational and intersectional. His life's work demonstrates an alignment with bodies maligned by the many evils of Eurocentricity and the violent project of whiteness, and of racialised-gendered, fascist capitalism. My work does not detect an obfuscation, but instead, a need to go further; to address the contours of *misogynoir* and trans-antagonism that lie in non-radical, cis-heterosexual, white, liberal interpretations of theology.¹²

I concede to the differences in language and semantics that exist in the time in which Cone was writing, that exist in his 1986 revision, and from where I write today. I give credence to Cone's in-text acknowledgment of Black feminism and womanism, and his critique of masculinist writings within Black philosophy and theology that ignore or create a present-absence about Black women. The language of trans, transgender, cis-gender, many vibrant non-cis-genders, and the recent linguistic and semantic shift towards addressing systems of anti-trans violence as trans-antagonism, is one that has largely been codified by younger trans bodies. However, I contend that trans bodies, especially trans bodies of colour, have always been articulating and mapping out our oppression in

¹⁰ Hortense Spillers, *Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book* (Baltimore: Diacritics, 1987), 67. This idea of black gender is attributable in large part to Hari Ziyad, as well as Hortense Spillers, Zenaida Peterson, C. Riley Snorton, and Marquis Bey.

¹¹ Cone, *A Black Theology*, 7.

¹² "Misogynoir" is a term coined by Moya Bailey and @TheTrudz that addresses the intersection of misogyny/transmisogyny and anti-Blackness experienced by Black women and *femme*-aligned folks. Moya Bailey, "They aren't talking about me..." *Crunk Feminist Collective*, 2011, <http://www.crunkfeministcollective.com/2010/03/14/they-arent-talking-about-me/>.

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words that are enough. I do not believe that the language in which Black trans bodies have articulated themselves is necessarily new, or that a lack of sufficient address can be written off as a 21st-century semantic shift. Thus, there is still an absence within Cone's text that is still cis-masculinist and not centred on queer and trans bodies. My work dives deeper into the specificities of transgender and Blackness, of Blackness-as-gender, in ways that Cone's intersectional analysis of revelation and Black liberation theology can situate.

Cone argues that religion must be codified along lines of Blackness and Black liberation. Christian theology must take shape as a method of theological expression for bodies under domination. He insists that,

to be passionate, Black theology may find it necessary to break with traditional theological concerns. Such concerns are often unrelated to oppressed existence...it believes that racism is incompatible with the gospel of Christ, and it must, therefore, do everything it can to reveal the satanic nature of racism, so that it can be destroyed.¹³

I move to extend his indictment of the Church's code of moral purity that has ousted and silenced calls towards the very insurgence upon which the Black Christian Church is founded. My concern is that current, normative conceptualisations of Black liberation and Black liberation theology are illegitimate because they obfuscate these catalytic bodies – Black trans and queer bodies – which are intrinsic to the formation of Blackness. The Black church's break with immediate insurgence and the internalisation of a biopolitical moral code is evident when examining who, in fact, remains visible and present in the mouths of the congregations, and in the archives of history. Cone speaks of this "purity" code but does not fully articulate the queerness and transness that the Black Christian Church expressly disallows and shames. An icon in his own right, Bayard Rustin was eschewed and made illegible in the old Civil Rights Movement and in the campaign of Martin Luther King Jr., solely for possessing a Blackness that is queer. As Imani Perry asserts in her 2018 text, *Looking for Lorraine: The Radiant and Radical Life of Lorraine Hansberry*, we are still searching for Lorraine Hansberry – a Black gay poet on many of the frontlines of the Civil Rights Movement, who wrote

¹³ Cone, *A Black Theology*, 7.

towards a Black and liberated future – in ways that, until recently, have been obscured and overwritten.¹⁴

The discourses of Black liberation are imbued within heteronormative conceptualisations, ontologically and in terms of material positioning. In other words, liberation, the act or embodiment of “overcoming” that is situated or extolled from and by the Black Christian Church, is moored by, as Cone argues, white, and as I extend, cis and heteronormative conceptual geographies or grounds that foreclose the multitudinous potential of Black gender, and the centrality of transness to Blackness. Cone asserts that religion that moves away from or severs connection with Black liberation is itself null and inert. Where might we find Rustin? Hansberry? Most prominently, what does it mean for a Black liberation to be articulated in terms of and expressly for bodies who are cis and/or heterosexual? What Black liberation through the Black Christian Church is fungible or possible for Black trans and nonbinary bodies? In what ways does a Black liberatory politic that obfuscates or omits the intrinsicness of Black non-normative genders to any conceptualisation of Black revelation and liberation fail to examine the full potential of a Black liberation and the fruit that it bears, specifically, in the overturning of violent, rigid, and gendered prohibitions surrounding the Black body?

Cone offers us a series of questions that search for the contours of Black liberation theology. In Part 1 of *A Black Theology of Liberation*, he says this:

The Black experience forces us to ask, “What does revelation mean when one’s being is engulfed in a system of white racism cloaking itself in pious moralities?” “What does God mean when a police officer whacks you over the head because you are Black?” “What does the church mean when white churchmen say they need more time to end racism?”¹⁵

Cone provides answers to his own ponderings by reminding that

Black theology is concerned only with the tradition of Christianity that is usable in the Black liberation struggle. As it looks over the past, it asks:

¹⁴ Imani Perry, *Looking for Lorraine: The Radiant and Radical Life of Lorraine Hansberry* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018).

¹⁵ Perry, *Looking for Lorraine*, 24.

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“How is the Christian tradition related to the oppression of Blacks in America?”¹⁶

He emphasises that religion is not “irrelevant altogether...religion unrelated to Black liberation is irrelevant.”¹⁷

To be truly liberatory arbitrators of a Black theology, the Church must be committed to ending systemic and communal violence against all people. However, Black theology is itself an ontological and teleological paradigm that is representative of bodies who align themselves with the obliteration of all facets of white supremacy and Eurocentric hegemony. What does it mean, though, for the revelatory work of knowing and self-knowing to be held up within the Black Church out of rejection of the fullness of Blackness, i.e. the relationship of Blackness to transness? Cone argues that “the contemporary Christ is in the Black ghetto, making decisions about white existence and Black liberation.”¹⁸ If the contemporary Christ is ultimately concerned with bodies most imbricated and dispossessed by axioms of power, especially *Black* bodies at increased axioms of power, could the contemporary Christ not be a Black trans poet, indicting other manifestations of anti-Black oppressions – anti-Black trans and anti-Black queer violence – that go invisible to normative or cis and heterosexual eyes?

My intercession on Cone’s work lies largely in an expansion of the terms of revelation, and a re-inscription of a Black liberation theology that emphasises the intrinsic nature of Black gender to any formation of Blackness. Through his text, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, I question if the Black Church can even articulate a Black theology that is conducive to legitimate Black liberation for all Black bodies, or liberation that does not re-inscribe anti-Black trans and anti-Black queer violence on Black trans and queer bodies – which is not liberation at all. I take up the words of Hortense Spillers,¹⁹ M. Jacqui Alexander,²⁰ Zenaida Peterson,²¹ Hari

¹⁶ Perry, *Looking for Lorraine*, 25.

¹⁷ Perry, *Looking for Lorraine*, 58, 59.

¹⁸ Perry, *Looking for Lorraine*, 39.

¹⁹ Spillers, *Mama’s Baby*.

²⁰ M. Jacqui Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006).

²¹ Zenaida Peterson, “My Pronouns Are Black.” *SlamFind*, YouTube, 2017, www.youtube.com/watch?v=c0Mv8CYvQAA.

Ziyad,²² Marquis Bey,²³ and C. Riley Snorton²⁴ to suggest a Black theology that has actively been conjured by Black non-cis and queer bodies. Such a theology, black-trans-queer, outpaces the normative considerations of Blackness and revolution/revelation currently and historically housed in the Black Church; I imagine what it would mean for the normative Black Church to catch up. If we understand self-knowing and revelatory power in Black theology as conducive to the liberation of Black bodies, what would it mean for this intimate, internal awareness to be housed in that part of our Black bodies that inherently resists²⁵ colonial gender metrics?

Because white supremacy exists, James Cone cites that omnipotence does not function in a way that allows for its complete obliteration by God. As God is Black, was oppressed, and is aligned with Black suffering, the dismantling of whiteness as a system is a protracted effort that must happen by Black bodies and bodies aligned with Black struggle and liberation, through any means necessary here on Earth. Cone writes: “Omnipotence does not refer to God’s absolute power to accomplish what God wants. As John Macquarrie says, omnipotence is ‘the power to let something stand out from nothing and to be’.”²⁶ Theodicy exists, which is why Black theology must be Black *liberation* theology, which is inherently concerned with the obliteration of white supremacist paradigms that hold Blackness back from complete and total liberation.

James Cone argues that Black bodies should not altogether eschew theology simply because it has been tainted by whiteness, but that we must instead cultivate a Black theology of liberation that obliterates all structures of whiteness. He writes:

Black theology cannot reject the future reality of life after death – grounded in Christ’s resurrection – simply because whites have distorted

²² Hari Ziyad, “My Gender Is Black.” *AFROPUNK*, 2017, <https://afropunk.com/2017/07/my-gender-is-black/>.

²³ Marquis Bey, “The Trans*-Ness of Blackness, the Blackness of Trans*-Ness,” *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 4, no.2, 2017: 277, doi:10.1215/23289252-3815069.

²⁴ C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: a Racial History of Trans Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

²⁵ This idea of black gender is attributable in large part to Hari Ziyad, as well as Hortense Spillers, Zenaïda Peterson, C. Riley Snorton, and Marquis Bey.

²⁶ Snorton, *Black on Both Sides*, 81.

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it for their own selfish purposes...What is needed is redefinition in the light of the liberation of the black community.²⁷

Cone emphasises that Black theology is the legitimate theology, white theology being itself a distortion: "To receive God's revelation is to become Black with God by joining God in the work of liberation."²⁸ On revelation, Cone continues:

There is no "abstract" revelation, independent of human experiences, to which theologians can appeal for evidence of what they say about the gospel. God meets us in the human situation, not as an idea or concept that is self-evidently true...Revelation as the word of God...is too limiting to serve as an adequate way of doing theology today. Theology...is the second step, a reflective action taken in response to the first act of a practical commitment on behalf of the poor.²⁹

In essence, under Black theology, revelation is a tangible and material action that leads to a higher paradigm of self-knowing and self-affirming. Revelation leads to the pursuit of the elimination of all shackles of oppression in the world, and within that, the annihilation of systems of anti-Blackness that delimit the movement, freedom, right to life, and quality of life of Black bodies on Earth. Black theology, as he writes, rejects theological imperatives held in hypothetical airs or in eventuality — those imperatives are ultimately unconcerned with the immediate and permanent freeing of Black bodies. If God is Black and divine revelation pushes us to annihilate the shackles of domination that God himself once wore and broke, Black theology mandates that Black liberation is a project that must continue *now*, on Earth. Cone writes that Black bodies encounter God on Earth through the recognition of their beauty and their chains, and that revelation pushes them to transform and transcend their condition, which inevitably means the destruction of whiteness by any means necessary.³⁰

I extend Cone's work to interrogate and find more resonance with the Black theological, and within that, epistemological concept of knowing that is cultivated through the process and pursuit of revelation. White

²⁷ Cone, *A Black Theology*, 141.

²⁸ Cone, *A Black Theology*, 66.

²⁹ Cone, *A Black Theology*, xix.

³⁰ Malcolm X, *By Any Means Necessary: Speeches, Interviews, and a Letter by Malcolm X* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970), 35-67.

notions or definitions of Blackness are also commensurate with other anti-Black and white supremacist notions, such as heteronormativity, cissexism, trans-antagonism or transphobia, ableism, and so on. These –isms inhibit us from imagining – theologically, ontologically, and in terms of Afrofutures – the fullness of a Black body unencumbered by the chains that Cone commands us to remove once and for all.

a gender in flux: black trans bodies and black liberatory discourses

In any consideration of Black liberation, there must be an expansion or a recognition of the expanded nature of Black gender that defies male/female dimorphism. In *Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe*, Hortense Spillers articulates that the inherent mutability of gender/s of/on Black bodies is, in part, a direct result of the colonial project of the trans-Atlantic slave trade that violently mapped Eurocentric gender formations onto Black bodies. She asserts that those gender formations, shaped by nation-state discourses, are violent fissures on our captive bodies, fissures that are reopened by the workings of neoliberal and necropolitical nation-states. In *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity*, published in 2017, C. Riley Snorton draws from Spillers to produce a racialised historiography of trans identity that understands Black gender as mutable, in part due to the slavery-industrial complex. Snorton quotes Spillers on a later section of *Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe*:

[T]he female, in this order of things, breaks in upon the imagination with a forcefulness that marks both a denial and an “illegitimacy.” Because of this peculiar American denial, the Black American male embodies the only American community of males which has had the specific occasion to learn who the female is within itself, the infant child who bears the life against the could-be fateful gamble, against the odds of pulverization and murder, including her own. It is the heritage of the mother that the African-American male must regain as an aspect of his own personhood – the power of “yes” to the “female” within.³¹

In order to reckon with the fissures created on captive flesh by colonial violence, both Spillers and Snorton argue that African-American men, imbued in contexts of cis-hypermasculinity and *misogynoir*, must accept and say “yes” to the Black femininity that is invested within their bodies. Spillers’ argument indicts what we, through the work of Moya Bailey and

³¹ Spillers, *Mama's Baby*, 80.

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@TheTrudz, would today term as “*misogynoir*,”³² a term with which Spillers’ work resonates, and anti-Blackness within the 1965 Moynihan report that her article takes up. *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, otherwise known as the Moynihan report, was written by Daniel P. Moynihan, assistant secretary of Labour to the Johnson administration. Released in 1965 by the Johnson administration, the report relies on racist, patronising metrics to explain deviations from white, nuclear family structures and rates of divorce and out-of-wedlock birth by Black American family structures. The report obfuscates and deliberately ignores structural, systemic anti-Blackness and racial capitalism during and in the afterlife of slavery (as Saidiya Hartman terms) which relies on the parsing apart of fundamental aspects of Black life.³³ Moynihan cites E. Franklin Frazier, a Black sociologist who relies on *misogynoirist* readings of what Frazier writes as “Negro family life.” Spillers articulates that Frazier conceives of a kind of Black women’s independence that is reliant or deferent to the whims of a master, whether that be on the plantation itself or through patriarchal formations of a lineage:

I support Angela Davis’s skeptical reading of Frazier’s “Black Matriarchate.” “Except where the master’s will was concerned,” Frazier contends, this matriarchal figure “developed a spirit of independence and a keen sense of her personal rights.” The “exception” in this instance tends to be overwhelming, as the African-American female’s “dominance” and “strength” come to be interpreted by later generations – both black and white, oddly enough – as a “pathology,” as an instrument of castration.³⁴

Undoubtedly Moynihan cited Frazier to feign for legitimacy in this abusive report, relying on his textual violence against Black women and *femmes* as material proof of the abjectness of Black bodies and familial structures; as an authentication that he uses to move forward with his own anti-Blackness and *misogynoir*. Moynihan’s report was described by many as a grotesque, state-sponsored attempt to victim-blame Black American descendants of slaves from non-nuclear, non-white family structures that depart from Euro-Western articulations of family, what Spillers terms as “the vertical transfer of a bloodline; from *fathers* to

³² Moya Bailey, “They aren’t talking about me...” *Crunk Feminist Collective*, 2011.

³³ Saidiya V. Hartman, *Lose your mother: A journey along the Atlantic slave route* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007).

³⁴ Spillers, *Mama’s Baby*, 74.

sons.”³⁵ In deference to white compulsory heterosexuality, the Moynihan report is a State-sponsored attempt to render Black bodies as errant, especially in the presence of what the State reads as an incohesive, inefficient, and “broken” attempt at normative white structures.

Spillers analyses how the *misogynoir* that is marketed by the State and by Black men – and, I argue, specifically cisgender and heterosexual Black men – is itself a kind of internalisation that ignores the lineage of the/a Black Mother that is constitutive to his being. Spillers speaks of a holistic reinscription of Black gender from the hegemonic fringes of cis colonialist male/female binaries: “This body whose flesh carries the female and the male to the frontiers of survival bears in person the marks of a cultural text whose inside has been turned outside.”³⁶ Black bodies carry, blur, and make indistinguishable or mutable the biopolitical/necropolitical bounds of how bodies can thus appear. Blackness, as Spillers and Snorton argue, has a mutable gender inherently, which whiteness indicts; and also due to the project of chattel slavery and necropolitical violence, like the 1968 Moynihan report itself, which ignores racial capitalism and refers to Black bodies as abject for refusing to silo ourselves into white configurations of gender. Black bodies, and especially Black trans and queer bodies, are conducting the vulnerable project of mimesis against this colonial hegemonic grammar.

Importantly then, Snorton, Spillers, and Bey perform a necessary intervention to illuminate the historic and natural existence of Black trans and queer bodies, in a way that contests the lethal and historic tradition of pathologising Black bodies. They note that Black trans and queer bodies arise out of precolonial contexts – before the hegemonic and Eurocentric ordering of bodies into cis white men’s and women’s genders; and into hypermasculine or hyperfeminine genders – inasmuch as they arise in direct opposition to the demands of a neocolonial and necropolitical ordering of life. Snorton and Bey trans/queer the work of Achille Mbembe’s *necropolitics* by identifying a deep and inextricable connection between Blackness and transness, and highlighting a distinct persecution by the State – to invoke Bey’s terminology, the “Blackness of transness; the transness of Blackness.”³⁷ Together, Blackness and transness are all the more endemically persecuted by the wealthy and

³⁵ Spillers, *Mama’s Baby*, 74 (original emphasis).

³⁶ Spillers, *Mama’s Baby*, 67.

³⁷ Bey, “The Trans*-Ness of Blackness,” 277.

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powerful nation-state and their mandates on identity formation and visibility. Says Bey of Black trans (in)visibility in public arenas in their article, *The Trans*ness of Blackness, the Blackness of Trans*ness*:

The necropolitical and carceral state govern the politics of public space, which is a space predicated upon the assumption of the impossibility of Blackness, transness, and Black transness: a *hegemonic grammar* that utterly disallows the very possibility of transgender...This could also be said to be the case with Black bodies occupying space implicitly coded in and through whiteness.³⁸

Asserting a discursiveness and diffusiveness between Black bodies and trans bodies neither codes nor genders all trans bodies as Black, and *vice versa* – rather, a reading of this discursiveness recognises the relationality of disparate bodies spaced into disparate categorisations. There *is no* Blackness without a recognition of the dynamism that inherently resides within it, and without recognition of the way that Black bodies do gender differently. Transnational feminist and indigenous spirituality scholar Jacqui Alexander provides a way of seeing Black trans bodies in the context of Cone's Black theology of liberation, as bodies already committed to the tradition and power of self-knowing and self-venerating, and as the task of liberatory revelation commands. What becomes visible when we understand Black trans bodies as inherently connected to the transformative theological paradigm of revelation to its fullest potential? Can we see Black trans bodies as always-already committed to the very paradigms that Black theology commands of Black bodies – that revelation/revolution, that obliteration, that waymaking into divinity? Can we understand Black theological revelation as insufficient without the understanding and legitimate acknowledgment of Black trans bodies as intrinsic and inefaceable from Blackness?

In her 2006 book, *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred*, Alexander utilises African cosmologies and Christology to articulate an anti-imperial body politic that reformats theses of salvation and liberation. She blends a consideration of Black queerness (and, I read, transness) with her analysis of Black Christology. I borrow her articulation of the palimpsest, which is “a parchment that has been inscribed two or three times, the previous text having been imperfectly erased and remaining therefore still partly

³⁸ Bey, “The Trans*-Ness of Blackness,” 277 (original emphasis).

visible.”³⁹ She contends that this “imperfect erasure, hence visibility, of a ‘past’” is especially palpable in the context of bodies under domination and on demonic grounds, to invoke the language of Katherine McKittrick and Sylvia Wynter, wherein the suffering and violation of colonised bodies in their disparate locations is altogether imbricated and layered.⁴⁰ Black trans bodies exist as testaments to the ancestral project, lineage, and heritage of gender imbued with Blackness, or of *Black gender* as Hari Ziyad coins: “Black people are out of step with womanhood and manhood. Black gender is always gender done wrong, done dysfunctionally, done in a way that is not ‘normal’.”⁴¹

Hari Ziyad takes up Spillers’s work in their 2017 Afropunk article, “My Gender Black” in order to articulate a Black trans historiography that detects and emphasises the mutability of Black gender. They indict white and colonial formations of gender that are inherently foreclosed to the breadth, beauty, and generative nature of Blackness. Blackness alone creates space for myriad conditions of possibility for gender, ontology, and movement that has always existed outside of the Euro-Western terrain of limited, and essentialist dimorphic sex/gender formations. The article begins with Ziyad overhearing an interrogation spoken by a Black child on their gender and relationship with their partner, spoken to their Black woman mother, “Why can’t they be normal boys?”⁴² In the article, the mother brushes off the question, but looks at Hari in dismissal of their body:

Initially, I turned to whom I assumed to be his mother expected her to chastise him for the outburst, but she just stared at me as well with a slight grimace on her face. “Yes,” she said without saying, “why can’t you be a normal boy?” He had to learn it from somewhere, I realized. But where did she? And where did I learn what I know about my gender? And what do I know?⁴³

The dialogue against Ziyad here is similar to the interrogation posed by the white child to a Black man in Fanon’s “The Fact of Blackness.” In Fanon’s *Black Skins, White Masks*, a white French child illustrates the infantile processes of colonialism by forcing a Black man’s body into a

³⁹ Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, 190.

⁴⁰ Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, 190.

⁴¹ Ziyad, “My Gender Is Black.”

⁴² Ziyad, “My Gender Is Black.”

⁴³ Ziyad, “My Gender Is Black.”

third consciousness, calling to him in violent jest on the streets at his mother's side: "Look, a Negro!"⁴⁴ The contours of the white French child's interrogation of Fanon's Black cis man body are in parallel to the violent tropes that enforce the passivity and dehumanisation of Black women, to misreadings and exploitations of the Biblical chapter of Leviticus; to the misgendering in violent death of Black trans bodies; and is surmised in the interrogation and inquisition of the Black child wrapped up in the complex and violent lattices of cis- and heteronormativity, "Why can't [Hari] be a normal boy?"⁴⁵ The theological and linguistic attempts at unraveling and reclaiming bodies who are held up to impossible colonial metrics are fraught and difficult. Still, the thunders of the Civil Rights Movement mantra by Black men, "I am a Man," and Sojourner Truth's "Ain't I a Woman?" alongside June Jordan's proclamation that "wrong is not my name," echo in direct response to an anti-Blackness that kills.⁴⁶

In response to the violent inquisition Ziyad writes: "No matter how much I explained, the world never seemed to make enough room for my being. I am only now realizing that this is because Blackness ruptures the laws of gender just like the laws of the state seem intent on rupturing Black life. *My gender is Black.*"⁴⁷ Ziyad's gender is not blank, not an absence, but Black.⁴⁸ With Ziyad's work, I'm reminded of Afro-ontologist Jared Sexton's assertion that "Black life is not lived in the world that the world lives in, but it is lived underground, in outer space...Black life is not social, or rather that Black life is lived in social death."⁴⁹ Black trans bodies are palimpsests of liberation. Black trans bodies exist because of the gendering and ungendering in which Black bodies are bound, but also because of the palimpsest of Black gender that defies and always has resisted colonial gender markers. Black trans bodies are not to be understood as tragic, but rather as resilient, beautiful, and *real* products of the immemorial uniqueness of Blackness and the ungendering of Black bodies.

⁴⁴ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skins, White Masks* (London: Pluto Press, 1986), 112.

⁴⁵ Hari Ziyad, "My Gender Is Black."

⁴⁶ June Jordan, *Collected Poems of June Jordan* (Port Townsend: Copper Canyon Press, 2005).

⁴⁷ Jordan, *Collected Poems*.

⁴⁸ M. NourbeSe Philip, *Blank: Essays & Interviews* (Toronto, Canada: BookThug, 2017).

⁴⁹ Jared Sexton, "The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism," *Intensions* 5 (2011): 28-9.

Normative binaries can never fully encapsulate the moves, mimesis, presentation, and ontology of a Black body that is always in (ontological, physical, social, political, etc.) transition. The parroting of these normative confines and the adamant rejection of Black gender might be tantamount to Cone's mandate of dismantling structures of whiteness: "Black theology represents that community of Blacks who refuse to cooperate in the exaltation of whiteness and the degradation of Blackness."⁵⁰ To be invested in structures of whiteness or white gender formations that are expressly anti-Black-trans, is to be against the work of Black theology, which cannot exist divorced from Black ways of doing gender, and from pushing for the liberation of Black trans and queer bodies; of all Black bodies from garrotting by European gender construction. Can the Black Church truly articulate Black theology when it does not practice the epistemes of self-knowing that the Black body has so diligently cultivated? I suggest that legitimate revelation and revolution cannot occur – intimately, internally, in the space of the Church, and elsewhere – without those intimate and radical ways of knowing and seeing, ways that cannot operate so long as there exists a condemnation of Black trans life.

Black trans poet Zenaida Peterson's body exemplifies Alexander's palimpsest, and the mutability of gender due to slavery, systems of anti-Blackness, and out of both survival and love by Black trans bodies. In the tradition of Spillers and Snorton, Peterson inscribes the notion of Black gender as mutable in a new, succinct grammar through spoken words. In their poem, *My Pronouns are Black*, Peterson interrogates this relationality of Blackness and transness, or the mutability of Black gender against the hegemonic constructions of gender that have been forced onto their body: "How do you go from a slave to a gendered thing / from a mule to a person / and expect gender to function the same across race?"⁵¹ Peterson begins and ends with a tracing of their mother. They inaugurate their work with dawn, dusk, and rupture: "I woke up to my mama's voice and it wasn't erasure. / Sometimes I wake up a boy, switch to nothing by noon, go to sleep a girl. / My pronouns are Black. My pronouns code-switch."⁵² Peterson closes the piece with,

⁵⁰ Cone, *A Black Theology*, 55.

⁵¹ Peterson, "My Pronouns Are Black."

⁵² Peterson, "My Pronouns Are Black," 0:03 to 0:21.

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My gender starts every poem about my mama, who don't wanna hear about the things white people taught me anymore. I say, white people didn't teach me how to be brown, how to overcome, how to gender. Mama, my body taught me that. Our ancestors taught me that. You taught me that. I watched you.⁵³

Peterson performs a necessary, rhetorical inquiry directed at Black bodies who only accept or acknowledge conventionally-normative, or cis and heterosexual Black bodies. Black trans and queer bodies are most importantly and inalienably committed to disrupting and destroying gender that disallows the mutability of gender on Black bodies or Black gender itself – cisgender. Black trans and queer bodies are some of the only bodies committed to this total obliteration of the confines of Eurocentric, sexual-dimorphic gender configurations that impede true Black liberation, and beyond that, an honest liberatory theology that is committed to the destruction of all structures of power.

Normative and hegemonic considerations of the Black body require a singularity of spirit, in direct contrast to Black and indigenous genders that allow for a multiplicity of soul.⁵⁴ What would it mean to understand the impossibility of separating the body and the soul, as colonialism demands and as Black transness rejects? Is it to understand physical elements like the Eucharist or communion as bodywork that follows the lineage of bodywork and self-knowing that Black trans and queer bodies produce?⁵⁵ What would it mean, in tandem, to comprehensively transition spirituality out of the physical space of the Church to our bodies, as Black transness so cosmically does? Peterson and Ziyad offer us, as Toni Morrison articulates about the late James Baldwin, “a language in which to dwell,” or a language that offers up the revelatory and liberatory work that Black trans and queer bodies are already protracting.⁵⁶ They lay out the ways in which normative Black bodies,

⁵³ Peterson, “My Pronouns Are Black,” 2:18 to 2:42.

⁵⁴ Tony Enos, “8 Things You Should Know About Two Spirit People,” *IndianCountryToday.com*, 2017, <https://newsmaven.io/indiancountrytoday/archive/8-things-you-should-know-about-two-spirit-people-294cNolj-EGwJFOWEnbbZw/>. Enos describes an indigenous gender, two-spirit, wherein bodies possess two spirits, or both the man and woman genders within their bodies. The gender is expressly non-cis and defies colonial gender markers.

⁵⁵ This idea was developed through the writing of M. Shawn Copeland.

⁵⁶ Toni Morrison, “James Baldwin: His Voice Remembered; Life in His Language.” *The New York Times*, 20 December 1987, <http://movies2.nytimes.com/books/98/03/29/specials/baldwin-morrison.html>.

and I extend, cis-hetero-normative bodies in the Black Church, eschew epistemological ways of knowing Blackness and doing freedom-work through the abjection of non-cis and non-queer Black bodies.

Along the trajectory mapped by Peterson, I argue that there must be a dialogic and paradigmatic shift from hegemonic renderings of Black gender articulated by Black bodies deemed normative within Black theology. Peterson and Ziyad emphasise that the movements and motivations behind their bodies are inherently survival theologies, given the transformative and spiritual bodywork that they perform and embody towards their freedom and maintenance of life. They extend Cone's articulation that resistance against all forms of violence and systemic oppression is a spiritual mandate for all bodies, under Black theological paradigms. It would be an oversimplification and generalisation of the works of Peterson, Ziyad, Bey, and Snorton to truncate the languages that they offer us as *only* calls to undo systems of anti-Black-trans violence. That work is indeed absolutely crucial, but Peterson and Ziyad emphasise a necessary understanding of gender as Black, and Blackness as constituting a gender; as never outside of any contours of possibility nor actuality; and Black trans bodies as inherently connected to any utterance of a Black theology of survival and liberation. True Black revelation rests in a resignification of the flesh (to return to Spillers) that allows for understanding of the flux and the spiritual and ontological moves that all Black bodies endure as a result of gender and bodywork across generational lines, and as a result of the ontological gymnastics that Black bodies must perform in order to live.

Placing Peterson and Ziyad in context with departed ancestor Cone makes visible the need for a radical reinterpretation of Black gender and the mandates of survival theology that must state the power of "yes"⁵⁷ to the multitudinous potential and actuality of Blackness within, in order to articulate a Black body that *lives* in order to seek a survival theology and, as Peterson writes, "long enough to have an identity politic."⁵⁸ The survival theologies of Black trans bodies exist as ontological predecessors to heteronormative liberation theologies. In order for Black theology to position itself as a truly generative site of liberation, there must be an arraignment that situates Black trans life as the fulcrum of Blackness and any survival theology that dwells within it. There must be

⁵⁷ Spillers, *Mama's Baby*, 80.

⁵⁸ Peterson, "My Pronouns Are Black," 1:11 to 1:14.

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a reunification of the body to the soul under Black Christological paradigms, a union that Black transness offers by virtue of our very being. The *bodies* of Black trans poets, eulogisers, and organisers must be understood as expressly spiritual and transformative, and belonging to the archive of Black theology as much as cis and heterosexual preachers and writers have been situated.

Black non-cis bodies are simply open about the ways in which that ontological movement occurs. Ziyad and Peterson make visible the multiplicity of gender within Blackness that is as much intrinsic to Blackness as it is ancestral. Blackness reveals itself as a gender for Black bodies given the legacy of fugitivity, transition, and breadth that exceeds the limitations of white gender binaries. Gender as Black, or the Blackness of gender, is forged out of Black trans and queer technologies of survival. Peterson navigates the world in a way that necessitates both fugitive transformation and resurfacing of ancestral ties to Black gender.

Peterson's mediations on movement and being, mediations that seem to rest at the very core of Blackness itself, are active, and can be categorised as a kind of bodywork in protraction of freedom. Peterson joins Black theologian M. Shawn Copeland in describing bodies as directly invested in the cosmological and theological work of protracting freedom. In *Enfleshing Freedom*, Copeland inscribes the Eucharist as bodywork that, at its core, is positioned to transform bodies or galvanise them towards salvation.⁵⁹ What is the Eucharist but bodywork? Similarly, what is Peterson's body of work and body's work but an act of transformation and a continual spiritual practice? Peterson allows us their body as a lens through which we might see and accept the integrity of Blackness as trans, and of transness as Black; as a medium that displays Black gender as the palimpsest of Blackness. Their poem mandates a teleological reconfiguration of Blackness as intrinsically trans. If, for Cone, Black theology is survival theology, we might also understand Peterson's Black transgender and trans-ancestral mediations on being, body, gender, and movement, and towards freedom, security, and liberation of their Black trans body, as survival theology at work, or a central component of Black theology in its own right.⁶⁰ Peterson exalts

⁵⁹ M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009).

⁶⁰ Cone, *A Black Theology*, 17.

themselves towards not towards subsistence, but survival and liberation in full:

I know how to survive myself. /
My gender is my mama and every other Black woman calling me
“girl.” /
My gender sees themself in the callouses of people who call me
lovely. /
My gender loves my body so much; it sticks to me under all these
clothes. /
In-between my legs, there is a nonbinary brown love letter written
to the multitudes of me.”⁶¹

Peterson’s body of work *and* bodywork is a necessary contribution and intervention on Black theology, and an emphatic reminder that Black trans reconfigurations and resignifications of the body are practices of the self-knowing and self-veneration that Cone inscribes as part of liberatory theological revelation. Across the poem’s lines, Peterson charts their body’s movement across volatile public spaces, limiting home spaces that seek to disrupt their Black gender, and the interstices and fissures in which they find themselves most visible and mine for a gender that is constantly in flux. Peterson’s work re-inscribes Black liberation theology to understand Black trans bodies as intrinsic to the formation of Blackness. They illuminate Black trans bodies as arbiters of a Black liberation theology that truly understands the urgency surrounding resignification of the flesh, that acknowledge the unfixity and multitudinous potential of Black gender. This understanding of urgency is expressly related to an understanding of the totality of Blackness itself and is expressly related to Cone’s interpretation of revelation: “To know God is to know about ourselves, our beautiful Black selves. This is what revelation means to Blacks. It is a contemporary decision about a contemporary event, the event of Black and white beings.”⁶²

If revelation is about unveiling, about the process that unveils knowledge about the Black body, or if the uncovering of true and intimate knowledge about Black bodies by Black bodies is inherently revelatory, then there must be an understanding of the relationality of Blackness to transness given Black fugitivity and the ontological legacy of Black bodies

⁶¹ Peterson, “My Pronouns Are Black,” 1:54 to 2:18.

⁶² Cone, *A Black Theology*, 54.

negotiating selfhood along lines of flesh and gender. We might interpret Peterson's resounding call to their mother as both an indictment as well as an illumination – "You taught me that"⁶³ – of the ancestral knowledge that is both known and aged, and informs the gender and body of Peterson. In a December 2000 guest editorial in the *Theological Studies* journal, Copeland indicts the intellectual obfuscation of Black theology by white Catholic theologians: "When will White Catholic theologians acknowledge the insights of Black theology as a permanently valid theological achievement? What other name can one give to this refusal and exclusion of Black insights but scotosis?"⁶⁴ I borrow her use of the term "scotosis," or intentional intellectual and social obfuscation, to conceptualise the Black Christology's refusal to detect the legibility of Black gender in its discourses on liberation. Scotosis might be understood as a metonymy for the palimpsest – that indigenous, original terrain that is obscured and overwritten – as I employ it: it is upon the present-absence of Black gender that heteronormative Black Christology founds its liberation ideology.

Peterson's haunting call to their mother, "You taught me that,"⁶⁵ is an objection against the scotosis being conducted upon their body by their mother. Their body is the palimpsest, containing knowledge that undergirds the body even throughout its continual process of radical, Black, and trans resignification by Peterson. Ziyad also does visibility work through the affirmation that their gender is Black, which is a powerful teleological indictment of an anti-Black-trans reduction of their body to colonial formations of gender. These indictments are expressly configured for people who adamantly subscribe to a neat configuration of all gender, and specifically for white bodies who have never made the ontological journey through a colonial dissecting enterprise predicated on servitude and dehumanisation.

If the Black Church is unwilling to assist in this process of resignification of the Black body, is a Black theology even at play? Can the Black Church do or assist in this work of resignification?

⁶³ Peterson, "My Pronouns Are Black," 2:36 to 2:39.

⁶⁴ M. Shawn Copeland, "December 2000 editorial," ed. Michael A. Fahey, 12 January 2000, <http://theologicalstudies.net/2000/12/01/december-2000-editorial/>.

⁶⁵ Peterson, "My Pronouns Are Black," 2:36 to 2:39.

Cone asks us to hold on to the future, and to understand the work of Black theology as interpreting and moulding the future. In *A Black Theology of Liberation's* discussion of eschatology, he writes: "This is precisely the meaning of our Lord's resurrection, and why we can fight against overwhelming odds. We believe in the future of God, a future that must become present."⁶⁶ He continues:

The future is still the future. This means that Black theology rejects elaborate speculations about the end. It is just this kind of speculation that led Blacks to stake their whole existence on heaven...Too much of this talk is not good for the revolution. Black theology believes that the future is God's future, as are the past and present. Our past knowledge and present encounter with God ground our confidence that the future will be both like and unlike the present – like the present in the encounter with God, and unlike it in the fullness of liberation as a reality.⁶⁷

For Cone, the past is prologue, to echo the language of Julie Dash, and remains visceral and present as Black bodies articulate a future free of chains.⁶⁸ Cone moves to unmoor Black liberation from the chains of a white and Eurocentric eventuality that seats Black bodies in perpetual eventuality. A lack of acknowledgment of Black trans and queer bodies, and plain understanding of the mutability and malleability of Black gender inhibits the Black Church from inciting true revolution and Black liberation. Commensurately, without an understanding of Black trans bodies and Blackness as gender, and a willingness to address the epistemic violence of anti-Black-trans- and anti-Black-queer-antagonisms, any articulation of Black liberation actively recreates fissures, to draw from Spillers, that bind Black bodies to white notions of gender.

The hope that Cone inspires his readers to feel, is towards an Afrofuture wherein Black bodies, including all oppressed bodies on Earth, are free. Actively working towards this freedom is an act of divine revelation: God is Black, Black bodies are God. Moving towards freedom is in alignment with unlocking divinity for bodies on Earth. I would argue that, through their works that articulate the complex epistemes of self-knowing and self-affirmation, Peterson and Ziyad are already passionate Black

⁶⁶ Cone, *A Black Theology*, 141.

⁶⁷ Cone, *A Black Theology*, 141.

⁶⁸ David Carter, "What's Past is Prologue: Julie Dash, Daughters of The Dust, and Building a Solid Foundation for the Future," 8 December 2016, <https://blogs.iu.edu/aplaceforfilm/2016/12/08/whats-past-is-prologue-julie-dash-daughters-of-the-dust-and-building-a-solid-foundation-for-the-future/>.

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theological bodies. But can the Black Church meet them where they are? Is it too late? Can this radical paradigm shift that Black trans and queer bodies articulate be actualised by normative bodies in the Black Church who have never wanted to deal with Black gender that does not configure itself with ease?

Cone writes that the Church, including the Black Church, “must rebel against evil so all citizens may know that they do not have to behave according to unjust societal laws.”⁶⁹ I ask, how committed is the Black Church to dispelling the evils that are articulated inside their own walls?

Perhaps my questions are leading – they should be more transparent. Cone’s hope and faith in Black theology and in a radical reworking of the Black Church, in order to move away from white gradualism to immediate work towards Black liberation, is warming. It is a condition of possibility – which he might have seen as an actuality – that is what I want: to have the Black Church understand Black genders, from infancy onwards, known as in harmony with divine revelation because we know ourselves, love ourselves, is dreamlike. But the remnants of pandering – to whiteness and white gender formations – keep honest Black theology within the Black Church as but a dream.

I remember my mother, whose body was the roadmap for my own gender that defies white and colonial anticipations. She herself is a “marked woman,”⁷⁰ as Spillers writes, who will always understand me as, as Peterson lists, “the Belle, the Peach, the ‘yes, ma’am’ [I] need to be.”⁷¹ I am still working on not drowning under the weight of her language, and our A.M.E. church’s lace head coverings, the white Easter and church pageant dresses of my youth that foreclosed the possibility of me not being a girl in the conventional sense for too long, a forced hyper-femininity that precluded me from locating my current reality sooner, and less desperately. Eddie R. Bradford and Byron Cage sing two of my mother’s favourite gospel hymnals, the ones that she listens to as she careens down the wooded highways of North Florida. Bradford, with a voice weary, cries: “*Because He lives / I can face tomorrow / He came to love, heal and forgive / He lived and died to buy my pardon.*”⁷²

⁶⁹ Carter, “What’s Past is Prologue,” 130.

⁷⁰ Spillers, *Mama’s Baby*, 65.

⁷¹ Peterson, “My Pronouns Are Black,” 1:49 to 1:52.

⁷² Eddie R. Bradford, “Because He Lives,” *Too Close to the Mirror*, Juana Records, 2003.

Cage and his choir sing a triumphant hymn that compels every able foot to stand, women in white to stroll down the aisles, grand(mother) to drive a speed far past what is indicated on the limit sign a while back – “*I can feel the presence of the lord / And I'm gonna get my blessings right now.*”⁷³

When the bread is broken in my palms every First Sunday, and I drink from the wine gauntlet, should it taste acridly to my tongue? Should the white lace that covers my feminised scalp feel funny? For whom is this pardon? If this pardon is preordained through the routine that has been etched into this flesh, that is as Black as it is trans as it is queer; do I, too, get my blessings right now? Can I?⁷⁴

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⁷³ Byron Cage, “The Presence of the Lord,” *Live at New Birth Cathedral*. GospoCentric Records, 2003.

⁷⁴ *Acknowledgements*: There’s no world wherein this work, this perilous yet freeing project could be done in isolation. I am endlessly grateful to my mentors, Dr. Myriam J.A. Chancy, Dr. Maryan Soliman, Profé Jared Rodriguez, Dr. Jon Ivan Gill, and to the community of Black and brown trans-queer scholars and folks whose existences allow me to write this work.

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