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RAGE WITH A PURPOSE, WEEP
WITHOUT REGRET:
A White Theology of Solidarity

Jim Perkinson

A “WHITE” THEOLOGICAL RESPONSE to North American racism at the turn of the millennium requires explicit construction of an anti-racist white identity. Against notions of identity that claim to be “color blind” and that focus exclusively on what all human beings have in common, a responsible “white” theology will unmask the specific ways white interest operates and will make the various meanings of white identity explicit. Its task is three-fold.

First, a white theology must become self-conscious. It must learn to confess and analyze the historical reality of whiteness as a social structure of oppression for people of color.

Second, it must deconstruct its cultural function. As indicating (for many white people) a kind of “presumption of what is typical” in North American experience, whiteness functions as a “myth of normalcy” that implies that non-white experience is abnormal and suspect. That function must be challenged and unmasked.

Third, a white theology adequate to the situation of race today must point to ways of living white identity that offer integrity and practice solidarity with other groups of people.

Only such a threefold transfiguration of white identity can lead beyond the dilemma that a self-conscious “politics of race” usually implies. I am not advocating a romantic commitment to an identity politics and spirituality (i.e., a white version of black power), or a radical post-modern celebration of “cultural difference.” The task of white theology is better conceived along the

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lines articulated by Black and Womanist theologians like James Cone and Delores Williams, who move back and forth between a more metaphorical understanding of privileged categories (of “blackness” and “sisterhood” respectively) and a more literal commitment to practices that counter white privilege and patriarchal power. Cone, for instance, allows that some people with “white” skin may fall within what he means by “blackness” if they struggle to achieve racial justice for black people. He recognizes that “black” and “white” are not biological terms denoting absolute physiological differences, but socio-cultural fictions (or “constructs”) that nonetheless have real historical effects (Cone 241).

The “dance” between the univocal and equivocal senses of the words Cone uses to articulate racial difference underscores the necessity of working within the mode of paradox. If the “problem” of “race” is itself a contradiction (a real effect of violence leveraged by a fictional category of difference), the solution will necessarily involve a multifaceted practice of struggle. Only by keeping the coercive power of *social structure* carefully in view alongside the elusive effects of *rhetorical signification* can white theology discern its own voice and task in the face of the increasingly complex and potentially violent negotiation of race.

WHITENESS AS SOCIAL STRUCTURE OF OPPRESSION

Habitual Misperception

Part of the conundrum of “race” in present-day North America is its status in popular culture as a synonym for blackness. When race is specified, it is largely in terms of “color” — the limit case of which is the supposed “blackness” of people identified as African American. “Whiteness,” on the other hand, “goes without saying.” It simply “is.” It is humanity in its “normal” expression. For most of its history, “America” has meant “white” so thoroughly as to constitute a virtually unthinkable — and thus uncontested — equation.

For this reason, as the film critic Richard Dyer has pointed out, the category of whiteness proves singularly difficult to work with theoretically because it is simultaneously everywhere and nowhere, everything and nothing (Dyer 44-45). Its invisibility combines unconsciousness of racialized particularity in cultural production with unremarkable normality in appearance. Historically, the dominant (white) culture in America has assimilated to

its own self-congratulation virtually every “American” achievement. Even today, a simple listing of inventions patented by “people of color” regularly occasions expressions of surprise on white faces. Whiteness is a cultural “position” that reproduces itself without noticing how it relies on and incorporates non-white creativity (in musical style, for instance, or in colorful colloquialisms). As the dominant, or “normal,” identity, it usually finds no need to mark itself publicly. Whiteness is just “natural”; it is what needs no explanation or special recognition.

Historical Confession

In historical perspective, white people have come to know themselves as “white” largely in the context of Christian mission to and colonial exploitation of people of color around the globe. In that encounter, white Europeans’ perception of the meaning of varied skin-tones was almost irretrievably bound up with their religious valuations of color (Bastide 270). European Christianity imagined goodness and purity as white, evil and sin as black, impurity as mixture. Jesus is (usually) blue-eyed; Satan is the Prince of Darkness; salvation is a progressive “enlightenment”; and heaven is as bright as the noonday sun (Bastide 273). The encounter of Euro-white culture with different cultures around the globe found its discourse of choice in talk about salvation (White 10-164).¹ Whether “black” or “yellow” or “red” bodies possessed a saveable soul decided much of the meaning of racial difference.² In a sense, the discourse of salvation initially determined the discourse about race. And white skin began to gather significance as a contrastive norm.

But theological whiteness did not leap full-blown from the heads of early explorers. It became part of European self-consciousness only gradually. When commercial interest in appropriating New World wealth dictated the exploitation of both (indigenous) native and (imported) slave labor, theology supplied the theodicy. Dark skins and different gods demanded a civilizing discipline.

By the 18th century, in the aftermath of the breakup of Catholic Europe and the push towards a secular society, race emerged as a major preoccupation. The medieval drive for salvific certainty found its this-worldly correlate in the modern drive for privileged identity. Accession to an eternal place in the commu-

nion of saints was reconfigured in terms of taxonomic racial supremacy. “Whiteness” emerged as the catch-all category for securing European anxiety against the terrors of otherness, with “racial superiority” serving as the ideology that secured the meaning of whiteness. In North America, white supremacy became, with the possible exception of that in South Africa, arguably the most virulent form of racialized pretension on the face of the earth.

Emblematic Representation

Today, the multicultural map of racialization in North America admits profound flux in its ethnic categories. But it remains determined in its hierarchical extremities by the mutually exclusive categories of “white” at the top and “black” at the bottom.³ The melting pot has in no way melted, but only muddied, the mixture. One can be Anglo-American, Asian-American, Latin American, Native American, African-American, etc. But no one, so far, is said to be white-black.

What is new in our day is the degree to which discourse about race is carried on in terms of tropes about space, a differential geography presumed to host a stereotypic set of behaviors. Our social system is rapidly reorganizing itself into separate worlds, structured by global economic asymmetries whose local meanings are largely coded in racial terms. Predominantly “white” edge city affluence is secured by state-of-the-art security technology against a demonized “black” urban core, policed as if it were an “internal” colonial state. Neither “black” nor “white” accurately designates the heterogenous nature (in terms of race, class, gender, ethnicity, etc.) of the population to which it refers. But the binary opposition of “black” and “white” does characterize popular and political perception of an intensely monitored structural divide, marking the social geography of race, class, and culture at its most radical moment of opposition and exclusion.

In our contemporary moment, Los Angeles in May 1992 stands as particularly emblematic. *Newsweek*'s first issue covering the Los Angeles disturbances contained a fold-out page with three high-gloss photos: Asian-looking women commiserating before a burning house, an auto being tipped over by what appear to be Latinos (with a pair of black arms showing in one corner, and a window being smashed by someone who could be Pacific Is-

lander, Latino, or even white. But the only text on the page says, in effect, “blacks take revenge” (Mathews 29). To the writers and editors of *Newsweek*, and to many other Americans, mixed groups of people “appear” black simply by virtue of their location; violence in the South Central neighborhoods of Los Angeles, whatever its actual forms, is presumed to be an expression of black discontent.

Despite our growing multi-cultural complexity, then, and a profusion of racial euphemisms, “white over black” continues to symbolize the “original sin” of America that has yet to be overcome. Whiteness by whatever name (“suburbanite,” “taxpayer,” etc.) presumptively signifies a right to property, privilege, and protection secured (in fact) at the expense of a blackness signified indirectly by terms like “urban,” “low income,” “teenage mother,” or “gang member” and presumptively rooted in poverty, pathology, and criminality.

WHITENESS AS CULTURAL EMPTINESS AND CULTIC EXCESS

Cultural Exhibition

In its first theological meaning, then, whiteness necessarily signifies a history of oppression and a politics of exclusion and fear. It is a meaning that demands public confession as long as it remains publicly virulent.

But in confessing the real historical effects and powerful structural constraints of white supremacy and white racism, it is also necessary to come to grips with the paradoxical nature of white racialization. Race as racialization — as a classificatory schema organizing our perceptions of social relations — functions almost outside of consciousness. In the common sense of the culture, it is a matter of normalized cultural patterns, of a constellation of expectations coded into our emotions and our very bodies in terms of styles and structures of expression, perceptions of beauty, appreciations of scent, capitulations to fashion and fantasy.⁴

Here, economics has intervened to organize desire and commodify the objects of allurements (Haymes 50-51). While stereotypical blackness has been normalized in mainstream political discourse as the sign of what is to be feared, its cultural valence is that of the “purchase-able primitive”: cap sideways, sneakers untied, head cocked, hands accompanying mouth in sharp punc-

tuated gestures of primordial attitude and aggression. The mass-marketing of the otherness of the urban black tamed by the dollar of sport, staged in the stadium, concentrated on the foot, circulated in safety on prime-time, “live.” The sneaker as sacrament. Yes, and the “street” as primal, as spectacle, as style, as fetish, as “mine.” As a “brand” on *my* feet — make me as a white man jump high!

Discursive Deconstruction

As they operate in discourse, blackness and whiteness are both empty signifiers that draw their meanings in part from their juxtaposition (Gilroy, *Black Atlantic* 39; Roediger 116, 95). “Whiteness,” whatever else it means, means “not black,” and vice versa.⁵ Cultural critics such as Paul Gilroy, Kobena Mercer, Stuart Hall, Tricia Rose, and bell hooks have clearly delineated the degree to which racial categories are “an effect of complex relationships between dominant and subordinate social groups” (Gilroy, *There Ain’t No Black* 149). They have a “strictly limited material basis in biology” and depend for their social efficacy on the ideological work that alone gives them binding force in the culture (Gilroy, *There Ain’t No Black* 39). Their content is “established” only in the course of historical struggle between political communities.

Dominant use of the term “black,” for instance, has carried different connotations in different contexts, but has almost always served to secure a white intention of self-differentiation and separation. On the one hand, the term has given expression to a whole sequence of historically negative stereotypes such as “bestial,” “inferior,” “lazy,” “ignorant,” “poor,” “criminal,” “riotous,” etc. — each of which served to secure a particular political agenda (of advantage or exploitation) in a particular context. On the other hand and simultaneously, blackness has also expressed a whole sequence of exoticizing stereotypes like “happy,” “soulful,” “sexually potent,” “musically prodigal,” “athletically prolific.” In the ambiguity common to most tendentious schemes of classification, it has served at the same time as a cipher of fear and of fascination, of aversion and of allure.

On the black side of things, however, the imposed meanings have, time and again, been crafted into various positive counter-meanings. Using the tools of the master against the master’s intentions, African Americans have struggled consistently to trans-

form the badge of shame into a badge of honor, to turn the term of exotic othering into an ironic space of familiarity and mutual recognition. The poet Gwendolyn Brooks, for instance, stands up at a coffeehouse reading in Chicago in 1995 and says, “I am not African-hyphen-American, but BLACK” (pronouncing it, “Baaaa-lack!”), and her meaning instantly resonates among the African American voices that immediately call out their agreement. The pejorative imposition is reversed into a positive identification. It is made to signal “hip-ness,” “beauty,” “blood relation,” “neighborhood affiliation,” “bodacious courage,” and “comic subterfuge” — all in defiance of white pretensions to know what “blackness” is. The very “presumption to know and control” coded into dominant uses of the term becomes the “cover” — the “hidden recess in plain view” — under which the community of the oppressed works out alternative modes of identity and support.

At the same time, while the dominant discourse secures white identity by leaving it unmarked and hidden, minority discourse usually re-marks and remakes whiteness, which is positively signified, even if it is signified as “negative.” Perhaps by direct description, perhaps only by ironic allusion, but in any case by clear implication, whiteness is called on stage and made to bear its meaning. It is not left simply as the reverse profile of what has been put down or exoticized.

But even given the differences in the way positions are marked and terms used in the respective communities, the categories “black” and “white” remain unfixed and create a site of contention. Neither term singly, or in juxtaposition with the other, secures a fixed meaning. The meanings brought into play are dependent upon their respective discourses and social contexts and may carry ironically opposing connotations. The relative power of either term to anchor an identity and leverage a politics is a matter of ongoing historical struggle.

In part, then, the task of an anti-racist white theology is one of deconstruction. It involves revealing racialization itself as an unstable rhetorical process, even while struggling explicitly against the structures of white social privilege and white political power. Not only must white racism be opposed, but the very categories of “whiteness” and “blackness” themselves must be called into question.

Ritual Exorcism

While seeking to deconstruct racial categories, however, we must simultaneously emphasize their virulent practical effects. “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me” is a fiction. Names do hurt, in their capacity to structure the operation of power and violence — and they hurt not only those who suffer the abuse they intend, but also the abusers themselves. Desire and the body, violence and physicality, are at stake, for both blacks and whites, in the very emptiness of the chain of racial signification. But the revelation of that hurt, as of the possibility of its overcoming, is the prerogative especially of those who have suffered most concretely and materially. Here, the hermeneutics of suspicion must be complemented by a hermeneutics of retrieval working at the level of myth and ritual. Conscious articulation and identification, as well as everyday practice and habit, must be interrogated.

In North America, the normative practice of white identity is never far removed from the myth of white supremacy. In this latter form, as a structure of anxiety about identity, whiteness has repeatedly attempted to secure its position by excesses of violent power. The lynch mob is perhaps its most graphic ritual expression. But clandestine night-time visits to the slave quarters by the master as well as the more subtle violence of the subservient intimacies required by the mistress also left their cultic signatures. In either case, whether public or private, savage or subtle, the most enduring legacy of white supremacy is psychic. Its most terrifying impact on black culture has been the memory of terror itself: the knowledge that violence could descend with irresistible swiftness and unpredictable consequence at any time. Today, it shows its face not only in the ashes of burned out churches in Alabama, but in the burning of a living body in Florida, not only in baton blows subduing a “gorilla in the mist” in Los Angeles, but in the gratuitous murder of a black man dragged behind a car in Texas and in regular beatings on the streets and in interrogation rooms all over urban America.

The quintessential expression of white supremacy is this indiscriminate, ritualistic violence towards the black body. Its quintessential power, however, has been the enculturation of terror — a terror that hovers about the least show of hostility in a white face, the most momentary flicker of anger in a store-clerk’s eyes. What

for Euro-Americans is very nearly unconscious, for African Americans is all too palpable and epiphanic. Despite the gains of the Civil Rights movement and their own increased confidence, African Americans can never be sure what will happen next or why. The memory is too deep, the reality too recent and too recurrent. Terror! — however tiny its opening, however unlikely its realization — remains the definition of the spiritual condition of white North American culture in generalized black experience.

African-American culture is in part constituted by — as well as against — the imposition of blackness by the majority white culture as a form of ongoing terrorism. In black aesthetic and religious attempts to excavate and rehabilitate the memory of that terror, no characterization is more potent or pervasive than that of “the demonic.” Black experience of white presence and power in this country has been an ongoing lesson in “spiritual warfare” — in the need to identify and combat inimical forces of spirit and substance in oneself and one’s community — as underscored, for instance, by Charles Long, the historian of religion. Long’s multivalent use of the term “demonic” offers important instruction on the depth and delirium of “the problem” and the trickiness of the tactics necessary to undo the damage.

In Long’s view, slaves and their descendants have had to reinvent themselves “as black.” Forced into a “scientific” category (“blackness”) that simultaneously objectivized their bodies as property and subordinated their souls as uncivilized, the slaves did art on science. They submerged themselves in the opacity and created on the sly. The “hush arbor” to which slaves retreated to pray under cover of night, for instance, was the site of a communal labor that transfigured terror into tenacity, brute force into psychic subtlety. Later black church practice — such as that stumbled upon by W.E.B DuBois in his wanderings in the rural south — continued the transformative tradition (DuBois 140-41).

In order to survive, black ritual practice developed the capacity to alchemize demonic incursion into *daemonic* vitality. White supremacist violence was not only resisted heroically in rebellions and underground railroads. It was also refigured and overcome in a collective apprehension of the *mysterium tremendum*. Black ritual intimation and communal expression of an *Ultimate Other-*

ness — a *Divine Dread* — reduced white otherness to a merely this-worldly bedevilment (Long 167).

In putting such an Absolute Face on its own experience of threat and contingency, the black community “did judo” on the master’s violence and relativized the power it seemed to encode. It empowered itself by “going over the head” of the plantation hierarchy to the ultimate source of terror. In working out its own status there, the community witnessed conversion “break-throughs” that often involved psychosomatic experiences of death and re-birth. These experiences of facing, and surviving, Divine terror created in each member of the community a second “creaturely self,” beholden only to the Creator and hidden from white eyes (Long 165). Once having passed through such a collective ritualization and transfiguration of what could perhaps be called “original dread,” the slave was no longer entirely subject to white threats.

In a similar analysis of what he calls “the slave sublime,” Gilroy extends the examination from the religious arena into black music. For Gilroy, slave practice actually *conserved* the memory of terror, rehabilitated its awfulness into an intensity of expression and counter-practice that remains recognizable today across the entire black Atlantic diaspora.

The point is underscored in Tricia Rose’s *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*, which presents a layered and vibrant analysis of hip hop culture. According to Rose, hip hop’s polyvocal aggressivity serves as an exorcism for black people despite its compromises with consumer capital and industrial production (17). Rap’s “spiritual power,” she says, resides precisely in its “syncretistic techno sampling,” its “fusion mix” of styles and structures that permit commercial crossover to white youth audiences and dollars, while maintaining a specificity and politics centered in the ghetto (xii, xv, 12). But even in secular guise, the subtext of ritual combat remains evident.

These analyses serve notice of a similar need for exorcism in the white community. Whiteness must be comprehended, precisely with the aid of black invocation and reflection, as a cultural force whose effect has all too often been “demonic.”

The certain witness of black religion — Christian and Muslim alike — is that health has required constant vigilance against an enemy of mythic proportions and pretensions, full of spiritual

subtlety and psychic insidiousness. If this testament be believed, white people must also face something like an “exorcistic break” in their own move away from whiteness as a structure of oppressive privilege and towards greater wholeness and spiritual responsibility. What shape might such a combat take on the white side of the divide of race? Whence the ritual wisdom to undertake the initiation and not get lost in even more white narcissism?

The difficulty of this process became evident in a collective form on May 4, 1969, when James Forman carried the Civil Rights struggle to its logical point of prophetic challenge: the liberal white Church. The disruptive public reading of the Black Manifesto in Riverside Church in New York was a moment of ritual revelation.⁶ Confronted with a demand for \$500,000,000 in reparations for the black community for slavery, the feeling-structures of white supremacy erupted through the liberal, egalitarian veneer. Rage was palpable. A mask slipped down. The “blue-eyed devil” of Black Muslim fame became almost visible. On the positive side, at the very least, some element of black mystification *was* exorcised. But white capacity to deal with its own potential deliverance lacked the necessary pastoral or theological reinforcement.

The moment required an analytical depth and practical perseverance capable of sustaining something like “the return of Nicodemus to the womb” envisioned in the third chapter of the Gospel of John. White American Christian identity was confronted here with the sudden revelation of its “other face” — its origins in blood and violence, its Faustian bargain with a familiar spirit consuming real flesh, its “black and red” guilt — and thus with the terrifying exigency of its own mythic dismemberment and death, the ambivalent urgency of crawling back into the womb of this national nightmare and coming out again, the embarrassing imperative of a painstaking re-education on the entirety of its history. But instead, whatever may have been briefly invoked and sent packing in that moment in Riverside Church returned with seven more and burrowed even deeper in and further down.⁷ The political backlash may not have become publicly evident until the 1980s. But the ghetto knew almost instantly.

In net effect, white involvement in the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s remained captive to a utopian dream of quick fixes. When the problem was not resolved after a few years of naively

good-willed effort, most of the white community exonerated itself of further responsibility, absolved itself of history, and believed any further manifestation of trouble was “their” (the black community’s) fault. In reality, however, the regime of remedy was woefully short-lived. The cult of white Americana remained shadowed by untamed and unrehearsed spirits.

Whatever our practical answers to this question of ritual deliverance — and there are some — I would suggest that white theology here must learn to straddle the ambivalence of its own identity. White identification is indeed a discursively empty position that is only worthy of having its privileged “essence” deconstructed. And yet it remains mythically potent and dangerously patent in its cultural presuppositions, its bodily habituations, and its normative presumptions. At the very least, white people must anticipate racial encounter as a form of experience that has as one of its practical subtexts something like “exorcistic challenge” or “mythic initiation” — a moment of harsh self-revelation to which we must be open and vulnerable if we would be healed and come to a mature self-recognition. Anti-racism is not only about political justice and interpersonal respect. It also cuts as deeply as what lives under the skin and shows its face in spite of good intentions. In the moment of *krisis*, whiteness is numinous, ugly, and “other.” It must be faced as such — *before* it can be foregone.

WHITENESS AS POST-SUPREMACIST PRACTICE

The Priority of Struggle

What would a critical practice of whiteness as a possible form of integrity in history look like? In taking public responsibility for its historical position, self-consciously “white” theological production must be both self-referential and other-oriented. In calling attention to the constant rearrangement of resources and power in favor of the “haves” of our society, white self-confession requires more than mere self-naming or “me too-ism.” It also demands clear steps of conversion away from the historical intentions and material privileges of white self-interest. Such a conversion requires a kind of hermeneutics of contraction, able to analyze privilege in all of its historically specific formations. White supremacy is not the same in working-class articulations as in middle-class institutions. Nor is it the same over time. It oper-

ates differentially across gender lines, within religious traditions, between sexual orientations, over the course of generations. It cannot be simply comprehended and countered as a monolithic social formation. And as a recent *Harper's* article demonstrated clearly, the primary axis of differentiation is undergoing profound re-organization as we head into the new millennium (Klor de Alva, Shorris, and West 59). The new "dominant minority" will be Latino by approximately 2010 CE. A whole new set of exploitable fault lines between disadvantaged groups will undoubtedly give rise to new "divide and conquer" strategies at the top levels of society.

The white working class as well as white women have historically shared many economic interests with the black community. Labor unions have (at times) been able to struggle for concerns common to workers otherwise polarized by racial identification; affirmative action policies have, in fact, benefitted white women even more than blacks. However, it seems likely that the great divide of the future will become increasingly spatial — enclosed communities of affluence defended by high-tech security systems whose profile of "membership" is not exclusively decided by race, but rather by a combination of acquired characteristics defined overall by technocratic norms of competence in symbol manipulation and access to data banks. Dark skin-color alone will not necessarily exclude as long as the other signifiers of sophistication (clothing styles, speech patterns, modes of transportation, networks of professional association, etc.) are in place.

In such a future, "blackness" will likely continue to take its primary range of significance (in dominant culture discourse) from the conditions of living in impoverished urban spaces outside enclosed suburban communities. Pressure will continue to fall on the black middle class to try to secure its place in this arrangement by demonstrating its distance from the "thicker" meanings melanin is made to carry, such as "unemployability," "uneducability," "promiscuity," "illicit reproduction," "drug use," "criminality," "violence," etc. At the same time, the privatization of the prison industry reinforces the need to find these meanings "verified" in actual dark-skinned people.⁸ In many communities, the availability of both jobs and cheap labor depends on it. This version of the future also requires white-skinned poor people (and lighter-skinned "ethnics" of various backgrounds) as buffers be-

tween criminalized blackness and enclosed (affluent) whiteness. Their presence serves as “evidence” that poverty can be survived without turning to crime, reinforcing the idea that “blackness” is the “cause” of criminal behavior and legitimating the arrest of black youth largely on the basis of their skin color.

While nothing in the picture just sketched is presupposed as a form of conscious conspiracy or inevitability, this vision of the future does suggest the likely social valence of racial appearance in the new millennium. White people will have to recognize where and how wealth concentrates itself and how skin is made to fit into the system by which the legitimacy of that accumulation is fashioned. The counter-word to the easy reference of skin color is undoubtedly “struggle.” The search to uncover histories of struggle against domination and exploitation of all kinds, to clarify the particularities of the struggles involved and thus of the structures and interests struggled against, and to link the various histories of those efforts in a broad-based cultural ethos privileging such struggle as the paradigmatic humanizing quality across all the registers of human difference, is the task of conscience in the 21st century. The key here is “particularity.”

Struggle is inevitably very specific to the particularities of historical context and thus to the problematics of the kinds of oppression characterizing that context (theologically, one could say that struggle is profoundly “incarnational”). What remains vulnerable to the “divide and conquer” manipulation by the powers that benefit from oppression could become the source of coalition and mutual respect. Efforts to transform suffering into viable forms of resistance, to transfigure constraint and stereotype into means of survival and codes of creativity, demand appreciation wherever encountered.

The great temptation — usually encouraged and exacerbated by the structures of domination — is to try to evaluate such suffering, and the struggles it gives rise to, in a comparative frame. Disadvantaged groups are invited to dissipate energies and confuse priorities in competing with each other for the “privilege” of claiming the greatest victimhood. The need is rather for a contemplative eye that is quick to see pain and passionate in appreciating resistance wherever encountered. The recognition of “other” forms of human dignity hammered out in other historical crucibles of struggle can itself give rise to a renewed resolve to

identify more clearly and engage more concretely one's own particular battles.

One of the personal effects of my own investigation of African-American resistance and creativity has been a sharpening of my appreciation for the Irish side of my personal ancestry and a growing affinity with certain forms of Irish endurance and insurgency even in the absence of sure knowledge of how my own Kelly ancestors actually lived. I now read of the struggles against British domination during the potato famine with a sense of personal pride. I also listen differently now to Polish friends who can spell out for me the precise way "Polish" humor was used with corrosive political effect, or to Hungarian students of mine who recount the way poetry kept hope alive in desperate circumstances.

There are vast histories of struggle resident in the labor movement and the woman's movement, in Native American resistance to massacre, migrant worker efforts to elude poisoning, Asian-American efforts to overcome the memories of the camps of WWII (whether Chinese, Japanese, or American), Jewish-American efforts to anathematize "holocaust" anywhere, Palestinian-American efforts to end the exploitation of relatives in Israel, Lebanese-American efforts to elude being thought of as Iraqi, Chaldean-American efforts to avoid being thought of as little Saddam Husseins, efforts all over the globe to resist being taken over by American interests, and, yes, Puritan efforts to elude English prisons and early colonial efforts to resist George III. The history of struggle is virtually ubiquitous. But learning to honor its ubiquity means precisely an ongoing struggle to understand the particularity which alone gives any struggle its power.

However, the particularity of being "white" in contemporary North America means taking with great seriousness the fact that "whiteness" (as opposed to "Irishness," "Polishness," "Jewishness," etc.) has been established in history as a form of identity arising not out of struggle but out of plunder. It emerged as a ticket to admission to "Americanness" more by way of fiat than work, more as a presumptive negation than a positive creation, more as a matter of at least being "not black" than as a proud conquest of some hardship resulting from having light-colored skin. It has conferred multiple and taken-for-granted rights of access to an institutional life whose wealth and power has been (and contin-

ues to be) in part secured by appropriating the lands and resources of native inhabitants (in this country up through the 19th century and around the globe in the latter half of the 20th) and the labor of both chattel and wage slaves.

Even if, for instance, my family's inheritance is not immediately indebted to the asset formation arising from slave-labor, some of the economic infrastructure and developed public resourcefulness that I have immediate and relatively unfettered use of does. My own enfranchisement also has an intimate relationship to the ongoing appropriation of values created by the labor of a working class whose vulnerability to exploitation depended, in part, on the threat (or actuality) of replacement by black migrant labor from the south. And it continues to be consolidated at the expense of people of color whose wherewithal is constantly expropriated to subsidize white well-being (through higher insurance rates, lower pay for the same work, banks that accept savings deposits while refusing loans, etc.). In short, the social function of my light-colored skin privileges my existence with various recognized and unrecognized benefits disproportionately conferred at the expense of less "congenially" endowed peoples, and it thus enjoins upon me a very particular and peculiar ethical and political struggle.

Practical Contraction

For most white people today, anti-racist conversion implies some measure of real material contraction expressed as a form of social expansion. It implies pursuing a more equal circulation of assets, opportunities, and power that will simultaneously be experienced as a form of loss. Sharing control is also giving up control, at least in the moment of fear.

Seen in this way, whiteness emerges theologically as a task of mourning. It involves learning to see where, in one's own life-world, whiteness as a naive (or perhaps not so naive) practice of terror intersects with one's own personal struggles with fear, and getting help in not contributing that fear to the practices of exclusion that already structure our common social field. In a finite world, expanded forms of solidarity and political community cannot be created without real loss for many people and without serious negotiation of that loss. Here, the relevant strategies are limited only by the imagination of the actor.

For instance, one could choose one's bank on the basis of its lending practices in minority communities. One could choose where to reside based on a neighborhood's mix of population by ethnicity and class. One could select a school for one's children based on its commitment to educate in ways that do not reinforce racialized divisions. There is much work to be done — both within and outside of the workplace — for forms of affirmative action that counter the *de facto* operation of policies of white male affirmative action that have been normative in most institutions in this country for much of its history.

There is a need to lobby for forms of political representation (even if they are, from one point of view, "gerrymandered") that do not simply recapitulate the power of exclusionary social formations (e.g., enclosed communities that are largely, though "unofficially," white). Collaborative ventures like the Industrial Areas Foundation offer opportunities for long term involvement in community organizing initiatives across ethnic and class divides that mobilize people of varied interests in a participatory process around issues of common concern identified by that constituency. There are organizations (already existing or waiting to be created) that seek to combat the conspicuous racialization of waste management practices that legally or illegally target unorganized minority communities, or even Third World countries, as sites for dumping (as happened recently in Haiti with a boatload of municipal waste from Philadelphia).

In focusing on imaginable changes in the circulation of assets, opportunities, and power, however, I do not want to sidestep the bigger and much less imaginable issue that haunts us all: the critical need for a radically different form of socio-economic production. Whether capitalism will generate enough of a contradiction of its own bases of organization and reproduction to offer real hope of something less monstrously competitive remains to be seen. Religious faith dare not cease to imagine and work with that hope. But it must also remain realistic enough to continue to work for change on a more "human" scale of small, incremental innovation. The models here include various "cooperative" and "community land trust" experiments, seeking to embody different principles of ownership than either the current private or public models offer, while simultaneously granting their supporters a viable (even if not market-rate) return on investment.

Once again, the African American community bears a witness that is crucial. Historically, white mainstream North American culture has not integrated into either its vision or its practice the reality of the socio-historical tragedies upon which it is in part founded and by which it is constituted. Tragic vision and defiant rhythm, however, are gifts that African American activism in particular knows much about, as Cornel West, among others, has asserted time and again.⁹ At this level, white theology faces a task of great tension — of learning to project persuasive ideals of utopian hope that simultaneously license practical acts of compassionate realism and even “faithful” failure. In a sense, the image here is that of a white version of DuBois’s double-consciousness: a lived tension between what is and what could be, that is carried with both indignation and forgiveness and crafted into a personal politics of resilient vitality. There is a profound need for religious communities in this country to take responsibility for the specific tragedies of our common history in ways that incorporate both tragic vision and practical wisdom. There is need to dream big, act relevant, celebrate small, rage with a purpose, and weep without regret.

Personal Re-Identification

In the crucible of an exorcistic experience of difference, whiteness can be discovered as “something else,” as a more human and humane fragility of being. The watchword of this possibility is something like “improvisational vulnerability.” In *Black and White Styles in Conflict*, Thomas Kochman relates the experience of one Tom Wicker, a white soldier placed in charge of a railroad passenger car with two other white and twenty-seven black soldiers on a train moving troops from Seattle to Virginia in 1946. The trip was to take about two weeks and would conclude with the soldiers’ discharge from active duty. Soon after the train started moving, a tall black soldier called out to Wicker, “Hey you, Red!” and immediately a “silence fell on the car like soot from a steam engine.” When Wicker replied, “Yeah,” the black sailor responded with an obscene sexual insult. Wicker found himself suddenly “on the cusp,” having to decide how to respond to an obvious provocation. Kochman writes:

Wicker said half the blacks laughed, a little uncertainly, and one or two eyed him stonily. He could not tell whether he was being

teased or challenged. Nonetheless, he was “astonished . . . that the tall black thought there was any reason to be hostile, even more astonished that a black man would dare to speak so to a white.” He had to respond, but how? He could deal with this black youth as a “Southern white man would deal with a colored person, whether nigger, nigruh, or Negro, and back it up; or else he would have to deal with him as one human with another and live with the consequences.” (57)

Wicker decided to risk the latter course and managed to come up with a humorous come-back. They then sparred verbally for another round, with the black audience laughing at each “cap,” until another black interrupted “amiably,” asking when dinner was going to happen, the train suddenly lurched, and everyone rushed toward the dining car.

That split-second decision to enter into verbal play — risky as it was — marks a quintessential instance of verbal *reciprocity* between black and white. It constituted a kind of “turn-about” on black terms, a white person confronted with a black speakerly protocol, forced, on the spot to “declare himself,” to make a tiny, but momentous, decision. He could either perform his own identity afresh in that moment, entering into a charged encounter he did not control; or he could refuse, fall back on “white” authority, and thus exclude himself from any but a hierarchical relationship, placing himself “outside” of blackness altogether.

The choice to enter into play — really, “to be put into play” himself — was a choice to submit to blackness as “one human being to another.” The initial challenge by the black soldier was a provocation at once expressing the hostility between white and black and, in that very hostility, inviting the white person into an arena of parity where the hostility could be “worked with.” It offered a verbal format that *might* have, as its possible effect, the creation of a certain level of reciprocity, an exchange of respect in the very act of exchanging calculated put-downs. In any case, Wicker clearly sensed he would have “to live with the consequences.” But he would have had to do that whichever way he chose to respond.

Kochman himself glosses his own experience of such ventures into black cultural norms by summarizing at the outset of his work:

Black culture has given me a powerful appreciation of qualities and concerns that my own white middle-class culture tends to

downgrade: individual self-assertion and self-expression, spiritual well-being, spontaneity and emotional expressiveness, personal (as opposed to status) orientation, individual distinctiveness, forthrightness, camaraderie, and community. Black affirmation of these qualities in myself has strengthened them, increased my estimation of them, and enriched my life considerably in the process of doing so. (5)

While such a personal summary of encounter across racial lines runs the risk both of reinforcing certain stereotypes and of yet one more time appropriating black substance for the sake of white enrichment, it presents perhaps the only viable alternative to continued disassociation and ignorance . . . and the eventual translation of racio-cultural difference into violence.

If white-identified people are, in fact, to engage with blacks in a manner that does not overtly or covertly reinforce hierarchy and exclusion, they will necessarily have to discover forms of exchange that allow black difference to be expressed “inside” their own sense of whiteness. Exchange that is genuinely respectful honors rather than just acknowledges: it both learns from and in some measure incorporates what is respected, rather than leaving it “outside” and at a distance. To some degree, racial encounter that is historically therapeutic requires of white people exploration of parts of themselves they may have unconsciously rejected and habitually projected as (vaguely) “dark” . . . or “black.”

White culture has a long history of doing this surreptitiously, of course. Rock and roll music, for instance, represents a recasting of (black-created) rhythm and blues into white forms of embodiment and capitalization. The dominant culture in North America has always been profoundly fascinated with and energized by experimentation with “going black” (Roediger 115-31), as evidence by the ritual practice of blackface minstrelsy in the 19th century. In the absence of social and economic reciprocity, however, such cultural borrowing is nothing more than the “theft” of black productivity, the appropriation of the aesthetic capital of the subordinate in order to further the accumulation of capital in the dominant sectors of society — as in the contemporary use by corporate interests of forms of rap music to market everything from luxury cars to women’s lingerie. What is needed today is not wholesale repudiation of such borrowing, but rather sustained self-confrontation and self-exploration, on the one

hand, and public acknowledgment and economic return to the black community (commensurate with what was borrowed), on the other. This process of honoring influences and securing just compensation constitutes the real task of inter-cultural exchange.

In sum, white healing in relationship to black people is necessarily both exorcistic and humanizing. Even the most painful encounters can be embraced as pedagogically initiatory. When white people are confronted with black anger or rejection, for example, the experience can be understood as a small personal introduction into the irreducible depths of the racial dilemma faced by black people every day. The anger in the situation may or may not be “individually” warranted; but at the level of social structure and cultural ambiance it remains necessarily and pointedly prophetic.

Part of the meaning of taking responsibility for the history of white supremacy as a white person is understanding that the problem is one of the “ecological whiteness” of America today. It requires recognizing that the work to be done on oneself as inescapably “part of the problem” is constant as long as any black persons have to question whether their blackness is part of how they are being treated in public or private encounters with whites. White insistence on being treated only as individuals by blacks — on not being “unfairly” lumped together with other white people — is itself a demand for a privileged exemption from racial stereotyping that no black person can yet dare hope for in everyday life in this country (except at the price of painful and perhaps dangerous miscalculation). Race remains a reality in our social life — but whites have yet to sound its depths.

Encounter can also offer the possibility of growth. The challenge is that of learning a different form of white embodiment, of risking new modes of expression and a new range of sensibility. Whiteness as a repressively patriarchal *codification* of the body — whether habituated in belligerence or stiffness or timidity — must be faced and grieved. The “white body” must be returned to its pain — and to its powers of ecstasy. Healed whiteness implies a recovery of the body from the pretensions of the commodity form. Pursuing this recovery means re-encountering and therapeutically re-working the abuse of one’s childhood, as feminists such as Rita Nakashima Brock have so persuasively argued

(Brock 50, 53-66). It also entails experimenting with a widened range of gesture and physical expression out of a concern to “know,” in one’s very cells, that whiteness is not master, that it is possible to be, as a Euro-heritage person, more than merely white.¹⁰

Interpersonal Confrontation

Finally, a white theological practice of anti-racist solidarity with people of color demands a new interpersonal politics. When invited to join the ranks of “the white and the right” — the legendary legions of the rational, the ordered, the civilized, and the normal — how do we respond? A friend tells an off-color joke, a relative uses the “n_____” word, a co-worker grumbles about gangbangers and welfare queens, a neighbor laughs about walking into the “wrong” bar and, in the dim lighting, not being able initially to see if anyone is there. A spider web of white inclusion offers itself, a subtle “feeler” for racist camaraderie. Do we play? Or pay?

One writer I know speaks about cutting through that little toxic cloud by claiming kinship in whatever group is being put down. “Did you know my grandmother was African-American?” “My uncle from Tunisia just arrived yesterday.” “My sister is on welfare now — has been for five months.” The responses reportedly are bathetic: sad and funny all at once. Coughs, splutters, apologies, corrections in profusion. But the tactic is vastly more effective than argument in raising instant issue with the fiction. There is no absolute line between white and black. At one level, we *are* all related. Go far enough back in any of our ancestral data banks and you get to Africa and a black Eve. All of us who are tempted to think of ourselves as white are in fact merely “passing”; anti-racist forms of whiteness would then emerge as the practices of “recovering passers.” Whiteness is a choice, at some level, to deny a mixed heritage that includes some measure of black blood, however dilute. Perhaps white people are simply “post-black” people, with all that means for dissimulation and disownership. Saying such does not presume to license facile claims for inclusion in ethnic exceptionalism, nor to buttress liberal notions of color-blindness. It is rather to assert that the real problem of the color line, the real aberration needing explanation and elimination, is whiteness, not blackness.

It finally is a matter of choice. Whiteness has never been a stable category. Historically, white self-identification has functioned largely to palliate personal anxiety and displace political fear. Demographically, in this country at least, it may ultimately be doomed to disappear. But if so, it likely will not go quietly. It may rather escalate the stakes and increase the violence. At some level, “white power” is the responsibility of all of us — white, yellow, tan, red, brown, and black — who are caught in its maw. The grading system of color that whiteness operates — standing at its furthest pole like Aristotle’s Final Cause and attracting all to its privileged position without itself moving an inch — is ubiquitous. It whispers its privilege of “I’m lighter than you-ness” at every point along the scale, even inside the black community. It is one of the modern-day sites of idolatrous seduction, a place where many of us are summoned by Caesar — or Caesar’s investment banker — to pinch incense to the god. Whether we choose to be included in the empire or not — to honor the sovereign and embrace the discipline, or turn to a different power — is a theological decision.

Theological Explication

I have not talked much explicit theology. But its outline has already been intimated. Race began as a theological question. Skin-difference was deciphered in eschatological discourse. Surface signs augured ultimate predilections. In more recent figurations, the symbiosis of the signs has not been relaxed. Black theology in our day — typical of all apocalyptic conjuration — has reversed the valence. James Cone argued as early as 1969 that blackness in North America was soteriological. His formulation raised the question in the starkest theological terms. He excavated blackness as a term of oppression by making it a term not just of liberation, but of salvation. It became a christological title (Cone 133-37). White theology scarcely responded — and certainly not as if it were itself in question at the level of destiny. How could a black Christ save a white man? The whole racist, patriarchal conundrum in a nutshell.

Delores Williams carries the confrontation to a new quarter. Blackness is not only saving; it is saving in a very non-saving way (Williams 161-67). Reading divine suffering in black women’s never-finished serving, and divine indignation in their never-

ceasing fight for dignity, Williams cites black salvation as non-substitution. The black savior does not offer surrogate wholeness, or substitute love, does not go bail for black male power trips or white male power monopolies or for white women's complicity in the mix. Rather, *she* demands reciprocity and mutuality: forms of saving that syncopate life between self and other, individual and community, human struggle and divine grace — and that do so in the mode of simple survival as well as celebrated transfiguration. Salvation is posited here in its starkest existential terms: it wears the wizened face of Hagar and works powerfully in the ambiguous struggles of everyday life (Williams 20-29). It is not merely heroic and confrontational; it is complex and subtle. White feminist theology has read *Sisters in the Wilderness* and recognized a simultaneous sameness and difference. White male theologians have remained largely silent. But we remain in a wilderness that respects no person. That wilderness is global capital as realized in local culture at the millennium. One of the strategic sites for resisting the global power and rebuking its pretension to sovereignty is the local site of racialization.

CONCLUSION

A white theological practice of anti-racist solidarity with people of color can neither deny the present determining effects of past identifications nor dismiss the contingency of identification in the politics of the present. In struggling to find balance on the razor's edge between those two "realities," theological whiteness will learn its own name. Ironically, white theology can emerge with integrity only in a double articulation. It must be at once confessionally activist and courageously agnostic. It will mourn its history even as it disavows its certainty. Simultaneously *kenotic*, *exorcistic*, and *apophatic*, its destiny is finally to disappear in the ongoing struggle against the organization of whiteness as oppression.¹¹ Its ultimate joy, however, remains that of meeting an "Other" God — discovered only in retrospect, in struggling alongside of its historical others — as a saving unknown.

NOTES

1. Hayden White traces a typology of European responses to “otherness” under the twin rubrics of “Wildness” and the “Noble Savage” in chapters 7 and 8 of *Tropics of Discourse*. Each theme is linked to questions of salvation in different ways in different social contexts over time.
2. For instance, Roger Bastide brings out the way Puritan predestinarian ideologies read black skin as a presumptive sign of a soul rebellious against God (281).
3. For instance, less than two weeks after finishing an early draft of this essay, the *Chicago Tribune* ran an article on the effect of casino gambling on the Keweenaw Bay Ojibwas. Recalling a time when the most serious threat came to the community from outside in the form of white racism, tribal member Helene Walsh remembered whites who called her people “little black Indians.” “Now,” she said, “the newer generations have put a lot of faith in money. I guess we’re becoming whiter all the time” (Salopek).
4. Haymes, for instance, citing Dyer, points out that in contemporary society, white supremacy operates by way of the power of normativity rather than overt superiority (42; Dyer 45).
5. For notions of how whiteness constitutes itself negatively vis-à-vis blackness, see Roediger 116; Dyer 47. For discussion of how it operates, but in a different manner, the other way around, see Dyer 47; Haymes 54; hooks 169-70; and Baker 139.
6. The Black Manifesto essentially articulated the idea of reparations, due the Black community from white churches and synagogues, for the labor and suffering of slavery and since. The amount of \$500,000,000 — at the time of its presentation, \$15 per black person in the United States — was to be spent in establishing institutions like a Southern land bank, publishing and printing industries, audio-visual networks, a research skills center, an organization for welfare recipients, a National Black Labor Strike and Defense Fund, an International Black Appeal, and a Black University (Wilmore and Cone 80-89).
7. A reference to the idea presented in Matthew (12.43-45) and Luke (11.24-26) that a spirit once exorcized from a generation of people will seek to return to its host society with seven more spirits and make the last situation even worse than it was before the exorcism.
8. Just as the beating of Rodney King apparently “verified” his supposed violence in the eyes of the Simi Valley jury that acquitted the police officers involved. He was being hit by officers of the law; therefore he must have been a threat.
9. See, for example, West’s *The American Evasion of Pragmatism* 226-35.
10. Modern dance experimentation beyond the protocols of European traditions of ballet is an example here in its willingness to create hybrid forms of movement signifying across a number of different cultural registers at once.
11. *Apophysis* is a term used in Christian mystical theology for the experience of God in darkness, inside the cloud of unknowing that is said to have descended on Moses on Mt. Sinai. Literally, it signifies the paradox of mentioning something in the very act of disclaiming the intention to mention it, as in the phrase “I am color-blind,” which necessarily states the very subject (“color”) that is being disavowed.

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