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NEWSLETTER ON PHILOSOPHY AND THE BLACK EXPERIENCE

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LETTER FROM THE NEW EDITORS

We would like to say that it is an honor to assume, as new editors, the helm of the *APA Newsletter on Philosophy and the Black Experience*. Editors Leonard Harris and Jesse Taylor have done a consistent job of providing us with articles and reviews that reflect the importance of philosophy vis-ā-vis the Black experience. We thank them for their commendable efforts. Recognizing the significance of this very important philosophical venue for critical reflection and philosophical exploration, we hope to provide informative and insightful articles and reviews that speak to and speak from the Black experience. We do not conceptualize the Black experience monolithically; indeed, "the Black experience" is a diverse, complex, and variegated phenomenon. As such, we hope to provide a variety of articles and reviews that reflect the view that "the Black experience" is to be understood as dynamic and multi-dimensional. We believe that such an approach enhances the normative framework of Africana philosophy. We strongly encourage potential authors and book reviewers to submit their work for possible publication. We also encourage any suggestions that you think might help toward creating a more discursively and dialogically diversified *Newsletter*. Having said this, we are happy to introduce our first issue with an article by John McClendon. McClendon's article "Black and White contra Left and Right?: The Dialectics of Ideological Critique in African American Studies" examines the role of ideological critique by reviewing race and class analysis in African American Studies. McClendon accents how ideological critique is in essence a form of external critique. George Yancy follows with an article that provides an introduction to womanist philosophy of religion/theology. The article opens some new avenues for reading womanist Christology. Working primarily within the context of womanist Jacquelyn Grant's work, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus*, and to the extent that womanist scholarship still requires attention from a reading public, the article deepens our understanding of Grant's work and reframes the discussion of her work in terms of postmodern theology, and also teases out the meaning of her work for the problem of whiteness vis-ā-vis a hermeneutics of location that emphasizes the importance of Black women's experiences. McClendon also provides a review essay of Mark David Wood's new book, *Cornel West and the Politics of Prophetic Pragmatism*. McClendon's review investigates Wood's thesis that West in his intellectual formation moves from a progressive (Marxist) posture to a more conservative philosophical perspective. McClendon explains that West, in his initial efforts to outline his relationship to Marxism, assumes what is an anti-Marxist position. Finally, Arnold Farr provides an insightful review of

George Yancy's recent groundbreaking work, *Cornel West: A Critical Reader*. Farr particularly highlights the revolutionary historical importance of Yancy's book.

For submissions to the APA newsletter on Philosophy and the Black Experience, book reviews should be sent to George Yancy at Duquesne University Philosophy Department, 600 Forbes Avenue, Pittsburgh, PA 15282; and he can be e-mailed at georgeandsusany@aol.com. Articles for submission can be sent to John H. McClendon, Associate Professor of African American and American Cultural Studies, Bates College, 223 Pettengill Hall, Lewiston, ME 04240 or e-mailed to jmcclend@bates.edu. We welcome any suggestions with regard to improving the quality of the newsletter. The deadline for submissions for the spring is January 7, 2003.

ARTICLES

Black and White contra Left and Right? The Dialectics of Ideological Critique in African American Studies

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> The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it. The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas; hence of the relationships which make the one class the ruling one, therefore, the ideas of its dominance.
>
> Karl Marx and Frederick Engels,
> *The German Ideology*

Theoretical and Methodological Considerations: Dialectics and African American Intellectual Culture

This is an essay that is philosophical in its method and political in its objectives. Philosophically, I employ a dialectical materialist analysis to explicate the nature and function of ideological critiques in African American Studies (AAS). I give

specific attention to how social constructionism or conventionalist epistemologies of race (CER) along with racial/racialist ideology consistently obscures the nature of the material contradictions underscoring race, racism and white supremacy.

I argue that CER along with racial/racialist ideologies primarily fail as philosophical/ideological interventions due to their roots in philosophical idealism. The theoretical weaknesses connected to philosophical idealism render CER and racial/racialist ideologies inherently incapable, respectively, of providing a scientifically grounded epistemology for ideological critique and a viable ideological critique of white supremacy. The aporia of the former emanates from its subjectivist epistemology and the latter's theoretical impotence is because of its misapprehension of the fact that white supremacy is a form of bourgeois ideology. These theoretical weaknesses, I claim, stem from the fact that conventionalism is a form of bourgeois philosophy and racial/racialist ideologies are themselves no more than species of bourgeois ideology. Hence, I conclude that conventionalism and racial/racialist ideologies in AAS are politically rightist in character, i.e., conserve bourgeois society.

I should add that, in more general terms, my notion of critique falls within the philosophical tradition of German dialectical criticism. With his three *Critiques*, Kant initiates this conception of critique on an idealist basis (Morton 1993). Hegel offers a seminal and even more advanced contribution to this dialectical practice, albeit while remaining within the confines of idealism. It is, of course, Karl Marx's materialist conception of history and dialectics, which represents the apogee of dialectical critique, viz. we have the advent of a scientific mode of analysis for social relations and history. And it should not be lost on the reader how this idea of critique is prominently part of the subtitle to Marx's magnum opus, *Capital* (Lenin 1973a, b; Murray 1990).

My commitment to dialectical critique, given its German philosophical origins, ought not give rise to the conclusion that dialectical critique is foreign to African American intellectual culture (AAIC). A number of African Americans have contributed to the general understanding and broader comprehension of dialectical critique and its import. For example, African American philosopher, Charles Leander Hill in his *A Short History of Modern Philosophy from the Renaissance to Hegel* (Hill 1951) profoundly situates Hegel and his dialectics as the culminating point within the modern Western philosophical tradition and C. L. R. James, the Marxist philosopher of African descent, astutely links Hegel's dialectics to Marx and Lenin's philosophy (James 1980).

My evaluation that Hill's periodization of Hegel is profound derives from the fact that he understood that Anglo-American philosophy, in the post-Hegelian period, was preeminently anti-dialectical. Bertrand Russell's pioneering works in logic and philosophy of mathematics ushered in the analytical movement, which, in many respects, is today almost synonymous with what is considered Anglo-American philosophy. Arguably, besides his own philosophical work, it was Russell's student, Ludwig Wittgenstein, via his *Tractatus*, who catapulted the linguistic turn so pivotal to analytic philosophy's formation. Wittgenstein, in his earlier period, followed Frege's prior lead and made logicism and the analysis of language the centerpiece of analytic philosophy. Wittgenstein, along with Bertrand Russell, dismissed Hegel's dialectical logic as a species of metaphysics. For analytic philosophers, Hegelian dialectics became, in Marx's words, 'a dead dog.'

What transpired in this transition from Hegelian dialectic to contemporary philosophy in its analytic from was the transformation of bourgeois philosophy as capitalist ideology. This transformation represented bourgeois philosophy's transition from its modernist and progressive focus on *reason* (in contradistinction to scholasticism's fideism) to its decline into the period of contemporary philosophy's linguistic *analysis*. The age of reason reflected the rise of capitalism over feudalism, while analytic philosophy corresponds with bourgeois society's declination into the era of imperialism.

In contrast, African American intellectual culture was deeply influenced by the Hegelian dialectical tradition. Hill, himself, was a dialectician and recognized that Hegel's place in modern (read bourgeois) philosophy represented its zenith. James, in turn, openly dismisses the linguistic turn as an unnecessary metaphilosophical presumption. For James, philosophical tasks are not essentially and intrinsically rooted in language, whether the method employed is of syntactical, semantic or pragmatic derivation. James opinions, "[T]oday the great stream of European philosophy has various evil-smelling stagnant pools or little streams that babble as aimlessly and far less usefully than Tennyson's Brook. One of the stagnant schools...begins from the premise that all previous philosophies misconceived language, and they have set out to make language more precise." James graphically describes this state of affairs as "The End of a Philosophy"(James 1958, 65).

My assessment of Cornel West's argument to the effect that Du Bois was a pragmatist draws on the importance of this dialectical tradition in AAIC and how pragmatism parallels analytic philosophy's dismissal of Hegel and dialectics (McClendon 2001). As dialecticians, Hill and James were light-years in advance of West in his retrogressive efforts to merge pragmatism with dialectics; something which Sidney Hook so miserably failed at during an earlier period.

Other African American philosophers such as Adrian M. S. Piper makes available helpful explications into the Kantian origins of the notion of critique (Piper 1997) and Eugene C. Holmes presents valuable insights into its materialist (scientific) moorings in Marx via W. E. B. Du Bois' dialectical formulations (Holmes 1965). In the area of political economy, Abram Harris' 1934 article, "Economic Evolution: Dialectical or Darwinian" (Harris 1989) is one of the first treatments of dialectics among African American intellectuals; while arguably, C. L. R. James' *Notes on Dialectics* remains the most exhaustive philosophical treatment of dialectics, as a mode of critique, among those contributors originating from AAIC (James 1980; Robinson 1983).

Moreover, Henry Olela, Theophile Obenga, Cheikh Anta Diop and Innocent Onyewuenyi demonstrate that the origins of dialectical logic, if not dialectical critique, are rooted in African philosophy. Obenga's research is particularly important in as much as his translation and interpretation of the *Papyrus Bremmer Rhine* discloses the presence of dialectical logic among the ancient Egyptians (Olela 1979; Obenga 1989; Diop 1991; Onyewuenyi 1994).

Significantly with respect to a dialectical tradition in AAIC, earlier scholars and intellectuals such as Alexander Crummell (Moses 1989),[1] W. E. B. Du Bois, (Hill 1965; Gooding-Williams 1987; Williamson 1984), William Ferris (Ferris 1913), Gilbert Haven Jones (Jones 1919), C. L. R. James, (James 1992; James 1980) Claudia Jones (Jones 1945), Charles Leander Hill (Hill 1951), Frantz Fanon (Sekyi-Out 1996) Louise Thompson Patterson (Solomon 1995), Martin Luther King, Jr. (Ansbro 1982), and Abram Harris (Harris 1989) were substantially involved in employing the dialectical method in their research,

teaching and political work (McClendon 1996). Despite this relatively rich intellectual tradition of dialectical thinking in AAIC, only a comparatively few of our contemporary AAS intellectuals are so engaged and consciously devoted to dialectical logic and the dialectical method of analysis.

Angela Davis' "Women and Capitalism: Dialectics of Oppression and Liberation" (Davis 1998), Julian Ellison's "Formulating the Negation: Abram Harris, Jr. as Critic" (Ellison 1997), and Cornel West's works in prophetic pragmatism are notable exceptions. However, West adopts the dialectical method in an ostensibly subjectivist manner. West, following in the Sartrean tradition, denies any ontological status to dialectics. He states, "Again, for me the dialectic is understood in a heuristic way rather than in an ontological way, and what I mean by that is that it is a dialectic that is positive in order to keep the process going rather than a dialectic that this is somehow inherent in and implanted within the real" (West 1993, 67-8).

This subjectivist form of dialectics facilitates West's alignment with conventionalist epistemology. Hence, West's subjectivist dialectic is instrumental to his advocacy of social constructionism. As for the connection between West and Sartre, Satre's following statement is instructive with respect to the idealism informing his idea of Marxism. Sartre utters, "Thus living Marxism is *heuristic*; its principles and its prior knowledge appear as regulative in relation to its concrete research. In the work of Marx we never find entities" (Sartre 1963, 26; Sheehan 1985). [Italics J.H.Mc.]

I argue it is this relative absence of dialecticians in African American intellectual culture, which accounts, in part, for why today so many of our AAS intellectuals and scholars are comparatively impoverished with regard to their treatments of race, racism and white supremacy. While it has become rather fashionable to discuss and debate, for example, W. E. B. Du Bois's theories about race, few have arrived at his level of dialectical erudition, let alone pass beyond his theoretical and scholarly accomplishments (Bell 1996; Posnock 1998; Appiah 1995).

West, along with Ross Posnock (Posnock 1998), argues that Du Bois belongs to the pragmatist tradition. I claim that pragmatism in at least its Jamesian/Deweyan branch, more so than found in its Peircean counterpart, is decidedly anti-dialectical. The very origins of Jamesian/Deweyan pragmatism, like analytic Anglo-American philosophy, were founded on dismissing Hegel and dialectics. West, by way of syncretism, imposes a unity on what are mutually exclusive schools of philosophical thought. West's pronounced pragmatism runs counter to his *prima facie* adoption of the dialectical method. West, in forcing this pragmatist albatross on our great dean of African American scholarship, ignores Du Bois' significance to the dialectical tradition in AAIC (West 1989). Consequently, West's own allegiance to pragmatism effectively colors and eventually occludes his appreciation of Du Bois' abiding philosophical alignment with dialectics (Gooding-Williams 1991-1992; Zamir 1995).

Conceptualizing Ideological Critique: On the Difference Between Internal and External Criticism

By ideological critique, I mean a level of criticism that aims to disclose the worldview attached to a given set of formulations, theses, paradigms or theoretical frameworks. Ideological critiques are therefore directed at the fundamental presuppositions, assumptions and presumptions shaping and grounding one's formulations, theses, paradigms or theoretical frameworks. If and only if the fundamental presuppositions, assumptions and presumptions engaged are foundationally different than those informing the critique then what results is an external criticism. Consequently, by external criticism I mean a critique, which is foundationally different from the ideology under review. Here, by definition, external criticism is synonymous with ideological critique.

In contrast, if the critic shares the same ideological commitments with the one under scrutiny, what occurs is an internal criticism and de facto we do not have an ideological critique. Instead the criticism is either an *empirical* critique, at the level of observation and factual matters, and/or it is a *conceptual* critique calling into question the issues relating to logical reasoning, theoretical consistency, systemic conceptual contradictions and interpretative evaluations adjoined to given formulations, theses, paradigms or theoretical frameworks. In AAS, William R. Jones imparts to us one of the first scholarly efforts in utilizing this method of internal criticism. Jones' powerful text, *Is God A White Racist*, is an illuminating (internal) critique of Black liberation theology (Jones 1973).

Ideological critique, however, need not be devoid of empirical or conceptual criticism. The only qualification is that in the case of ideological critique, we discover all conceptual criticism follows from an external vantage point. Matters of logical reasoning, theoretical consistency, systemic conceptual contradictions and interpretive evaluations affixed to and adjoined with given formulations, theses, paradigms or theoretical frameworks derive ultimately from ideological differences or fundamental divergences in worldview.

In fact, with respect to our prior example of William R. Jones' self-consciously devised internal criticism, we discover it takes a particular twist when James Cone negatively responds. Cone insists on defending his own Black liberation theology on the grounds that Jones's humanist presuppositions dispose an external critique. Cone's central premise resides in the assertion that his Christology overrides Jones's claim to having presented an internal criticism. Cone argues that Jones's humanism neglects the centrality of Christ (which grounds Cone's Black theology) and it therefore follows that Jones' critique is not internal, as he claims, but rather an external one. Or according to my definition, Jones's criticism, in Cone's estimation, would therefore ultimately constitute an ideological critique (Cone 1975).

Granting the determinate scope of this essay, I will not venture any further for a resolution to what are antithetical arguments about internal/external criticism. Of import to our discussion is the looming philosophical task and need for locating where a critique originates vis-ā-vis empirical, conceptual and ideological levels of criticism.

There is also another instance of *internal criticism*, which does not rely upon the *prima facie* exclusive utilization of empirical and/or conceptual critique. The key concept here is the caveat, '*prima facie.*' If it is assumed one is engaged in ideological critique or external criticism, and yet, for whatever reason, the critic overlooks or fails to comprehend there are in fact shared ideological commitments with the ideology under investigation, then this putative ideological critique is *objectively* an internal criticism. The prior biconditional stipulation (if and only if the fundamental presuppositions, assumptions and presumptions engaged are foundationally different than those informing the critique) cohesively outlines the conditions for ideological critique. Given we operate with a biconditional stipulation, then such requirements are both objectively and absolutely mandatory.

What we have in this second instance of internal criticism is a contradiction between *intended* ideological *functions* and *objectively* rendered ideological *practices*. This is what I designate as the *dialectics* of ideological critique in AAS. The

dialectical contradiction of intended ideological critique and de facto ideological commitment of racial/racialist ideologues to bourgeois ideology is the substance that forms the basis for this essay. The racial/racialist critique is constituted in a kind of dichotomized theoretical modus operandi, wherein Black intellectual/cultural paradigms stand contra white intellectual/cultural paradigms (Asante 1987; Karenga 1988). Subsequently, despite all intended purposes, this modus operandi undermines the critique of white supremacy and racism when understood as forms of bourgeois ideology. Hence, this kind of critique defaults in its attempt to be specifically *ideological* in character (McClendon 1995; Palermo 1997).

Under this grid of materialist critique, grammatical form (and the related semantics) ancillary with racial/racialist ideology give way to logical requirements, which are more rigorously formulated than grammatical form. Merely stating, 'This is an ideological critique,' or that my theory is a 'materialist critique of hegemonic idealist social theory' ought not and does not make it so. Subjective declarations point to ideological *intent* but not to ideological *impact* or *function*.

Specifically, where one assumes an ideological position that is opposed to white intellectual culture or ideology, this cannot appropriately substitute for an anti-racist posture or the ideological critique of white supremacy. What we have when anti-white intellectual propositions are deemed sufficient, as constituting the ideological critique of white supremacy, is not just a failure in ideological perspective; but also what becomes, in essence, the very nullification of ideological critique as ideological in nature.

Charles W. Mills is a more recent exemplar of how internal criticism masquerades as ideological critique. Mills fervently argues that his political theory of *The Racial Contract* is in "the best tradition of oppositional materialist critique of hegemonic idealist social theory" (Mills 1997, 129-30). Nevertheless, Mills states that he "criticizes the social contract from a normative base that does not see the ideals of contractarianism themselves as necessarily problematic but shows how they have been betrayed by white contractarians" (Mills 1997, 129).

For Mills, the problem is not the fact that contractarianism is, more fundamentally, a form of bourgeois ideology; his concern is only that contractarianism has been corrupted by 'white contractarians'. What becomes immediately transparent is that Mills undermines his own claim to 'oppositional materialist critique'. Mills's assumption is simply that contractarianism is formally a credible political theory; and with the injection of a Black perspective as content, the path is paved for the ideological critique of white supremacy. Mills's Black philosophical perspective of contractarianism or his racial contract theory thus assaults white supremacy from, nevertheless, within the confines of contractarianism. I argue, along with Marx, contractarianism is a form of bourgeois ideology. Marx states,

> The object before us, to begin with, is *material production*. Individuals producing in society, and hence socially determined production of individuals, is of course the point of departure. The solitary and isolated hunter or fisherman, with whom Adam Smith and Ricardo begin, is one of the unimaginative fantasies of the eighteenth century romances a la Robinson Crusoe; and despite the assertions of social historians, these by no means signify simply a reaction against over-refinement and reversion to a misconceived natural life. No more is Rousseau's *contrat social*, which brings naturally independent, autonomous subjects into relations and connection by contract, based on such naturalism. This is an

illusion and nothing but the aesthetic illusion of the small and big Robinsonades. It is, on the contrary, the anticipation of "bourgeois society," which begins to evolve in the sixteenth century and in the eighteenth century made giant strides toward maturity (Marx 1970, 188).

With Mills, therefore, we have a concrete case of the second instance of internal criticism, i.e., the contradiction between the intended functions of ideological critique and the actual (objectively) rendered ideological practice. Among AAS scholars, Mills is not alone in erecting his theoretical stance on contractarian grounds. Bill Lawson in his polemics with Harvey Natanson, the social contract theorist, presents an internal critique within the (John) Lockean framework. Lawson, more closely in intellectual kinship with William R. Jones, does not presume, as in Mills's instance, to be involved in an ideological critique (McGary 1992).

George Carew, within AAS, correctly points out that liberalism underlines all forms of contractarianism, and Patricia J. Williams discusses contract theory from the perspective of critical race theory (Carew 1997; Williams 1991). Marx and Lenin, in turn, offer a materialist (ideological) critique of social contract theory (Marx 1970; Lenin 1973). Mills, nonetheless, is not ideologically disposed to following in Marx and Lenin's path. Mills's racialist ideology reduces Marxism to just another form of white ideology. Mills posits, "White domination, white power (what one writer in 1919 called the 'whiteocracy,' rule by whites) and the political system of exclusion and differential privilege, [is] problematically conceptualized by the categories of either white liberalism or white Marxism" (Mills 1997). In addition, Mills seems to be squarely in line with Cedric Robinson's criticism of Marxism. Mills declares, "Robinson suggests that the African critique of Marxism would be a more external critique, challenging Marxism from a position outside Western thought. For the Black experience in this case starts from an ontological status of official nonpersonhood, and as such the alienation is more fundamental and far-reaching than anything that can be spun out of Marxist concepts of estrangement" (Mills 1998, 37). So Mills, on the one hand, finds Marxism too infected with racism, an intrinsic property of Western thought, to be a viable social theory against white supremacy and on the other hand, nonetheless, seeks to revamp contractarianism although it is equally a part of Western thought (more specifically *bourgeois* thought) via *The Racial Contract*.

This practice of counterposing African (continental and diasporan) to Western thought as a mode of ideological critique neglects two crucial points. First, Western thought encapsulates more than capitalism and the ancillary rise of white supremacy. The perspective that Western thought equals white supremacy is problematic because this thesis is ahistorical, as well as too indeterminate and vacuous. It leaves out the crucial details of Western thought and history that would enable us to mark African slavery's emergence into the arena of world capitalism. Capitalism is only a definite stage in, and not the complete history of, the Western world.

Second, in the history of Africana thought and practice, many of the most progressive among anti-imperialist movements, organizations and leaders eagerly adopted Marxism as an ideological tool to combat white supremacy along with colonialism, neo-colonialism, national oppression, and class exploitation. It has been empirically demonstrated that the ideological divide between left and right, in the Africana world, rests on the fact that the left has advocated Marxism and the right — in conformity with ruling class ideology and interests — has been opposed to it. Throughout

the historical legacy of Marxism, the capitalist ruling class and its ideologues have consistently battled against Marxism and Marxists. Only in the rare case of fascism has contractarianism ever been thought of as a threat to the status quo.

My philosophical method is an ideological and dialectical critique of epistemological theories of race, and racial/racialist ideologies in AAS. With suitable warrant, one could claim that my criticism, given its dialectical nature, amounts to a meta-critique of racial/racialist ideology in AAS. For it calls into question the racialist ideologue's presumption about the exercise of ideological critique. And moreover, my meta-critique theoretically establishes the criteria for determining the very nature and function of ideological critique.

The philosophical requirement and demand for objective criteria supplants subjective intentions or aims. This requisite for objective criteria is at heart a direct expression of having established a philosophical anchor in materialism. Objective criteria for ideological critique are constraints, which derive from assuming a philosophical (scientific) materialist perspective. We will soon observe how idealism relinquishes such constraints by resort to conventionalist epistemology.

Conventionalist Epistemology: The Foundation for Social Constructionism

Black Feminist theorist Patricia Hill Collins argues, "[Material] conditions of race, class and gender oppression can vary dramatically and yet generate some uniformity in the epistemologies of the subordinated. Thus the significance of an Afrocentric feminist epistemology enriches our understanding of how subordinated groups create knowledge that fosters resistance" (Collins 1991).

We should take note of Collins' presupposition that knowledge is created rather than discovered from examining material, objective conditions. This presupposition clearly indicates that she is committed to conventionalist epistemology or the social constructionist conception of knowledge. From the materialist perspective, two very significant outcomes emerge from this social constructivist theory.

One, social constructionism denotes conventionalism wherein conventions as constructed concepts immediately lead to the denial of objective knowledge and truth. Two, social constructivism in its emphasis on social context as the primary determination for knowledge conflates and reduces the contextual basis for social consciousness, as a more *general* category, to the *specific features* of knowledge as a *particular form* of social consciousness. While all forms of social consciousness derive from definite social contexts, the specificity of the content of which constitutes knowledge, must be differentiated from other forms of social consciousness and determinately established as epistemé or knowledge.

What follows from the latter point is Collins' failure to demarcate how *knowledge* that fosters resistance differs from, let's say, *religious beliefs*, which are not epistemologically grounded, but are rooted in fideism. Nevertheless, although religious beliefs are forms of social consciousness, which foster resistance, they do not constitute knowledge. The sociology of knowledge and the sociology of faith, *prima facie*, on Collins's account, concomitantly mark the same path. However, epistemology does not have faith (or *unjustified* beliefs) as its subject matter. The domain of epistemology is directed at theories of *knowledge* as *justified* belief. Consequently, the possibility remains for Collins to conflate fideism and other forms of social consciousness with knowledge.

The fact remains, in African American history, the rise of resistance struggles often resulted from an act (or acts) of religious faith rather than knowledge. This distinction between faith and knowledge leads to a qualification of Collins' starting proposition. Different material conditions surrounding class, race, and gender need not alter common beliefs, i.e., common beliefs *outside* of the realm of knowledge, such as a common *religious* faith.

Patricia Hill Collins, in her attempts at an elaboration of a Black Feminist epistemology, includes a criticism of positivism. This criticism appears to be intended as an ideological critique. Nevertheless, her critique is rather weak and half-hearted. Indeed, Collins demonstrates a certain ambiguity toward positivism. She argues,

> The criteria for the methodological adequacy of positivism illustrate the epistemological standards that Black women scholars would have to satisfy in legitimating Black feminist thought using a Eurocentric masculinist epistemology…[M]y focus on positivism should not be interpreted to mean that all dimensions of positivism are inherently problematic for Black women nor that nonpositivist frameworks are better (Collins 1991).

If we return to the above citation, then it becomes evident that radiating from its first part is the central problem, viz., the methodological adequacy of positivism for Black feminist thought. This problem directly relates to the issue of the epistemological standards which Black woman scholars would of necessity have to satisfy in order to establish a legitimate Black feminist epistemology. Although Collins assumes positivism is both Eurocentric and masculinist, she, nonetheless, neglects the fact that positivism is ideologically bourgeois in its substance. The reader may ask, 'how do you reach the conclusion that she neglects bourgeois ideology?'

My answer is simply that Collins thinks positivism is not all together and inherently problematic for Black feminist epistemology. Furthermore, she adds, we ought not to assume nonpositivist frameworks can serve any better than positivist epistemologies. We find that positivism, via this methodological adequacy test, on the one hand, forces Black women to accept what would constitute their distinctive "epistemological" position as ultimately an illegitimate one. This constriction is the immediate upshot of Eurocentric and masculinist biases embodied in positivism as an epistemology. On the other hand, we have the argument that positivism in all of its dimensions is not inherently problematic for Black women. And for that matter, the non-positivist frameworks are not any better than positivism for establishing a Black feminist epistemology. Therefore, Collins is caught in the paradox of conflicting theses.

These conflicting assumptions, with respect to positivism, render Collins' critique of positivism as weak and indeed ambiguous. Ultimately, these ambiguities issue forth as an internal criticism. Collins' concerns about the influences of Eurocentric and masculinist ideological biases as intrinsic and resulting in the need for a distinctive Black feminist epistemology, nevertheless, is not, at base, ideological. This is due to her argument that positivism is not problematic in all of its dimensions. Furthermore, Collins even admits that nonpositivist theories are not necessarily better alternatives to the positivist. So therefore we can only conclude that Collins offers an internal criticism. Given the incorporation of Afrocentricity into her Black feminism, Collins' contribution to AAS is an expansion on the racialist conception of ideology. And inscribed in this gender-expanded racialism are the same

epistemological traps we discovered with our prior Black social constructionists.

Hill Collins, in fact, travels the same road as Charles Mills in rejecting Marxism. However, her dismissal of Marxism flows not from racialism but rather from interpreting Marxism as a species of positivism. On this interpretation, Marxism spawns standpoint theories that in effect "essentially reversed positivist science's assumptions concerning whose truth would prevail. These approaches suggest that the oppressed allegedly have a clearer view of 'truth' than their oppressors because they lack the blinders created by the dominant group's ideology. But this version of standpoint theory basically duplicates the positivist belief in one 'true' interpretation of reality and, like positivist science comes with its own set of problems" (Collins 1991 235).

Of course, Marxism does not argue that the dominant ideology is absent from working class consciousness; to the contrary, Marx recognized there was the distinction between a class-in-itself and a class-for-itself. This distinction, in turn, rests on the notion that false consciousness attaches to working class consciousness. False consciousness acts as a subjective condition, which is an obstruction to the proletariat's realization of its objective interest.

Proletarian class interests are materially grounded in social relations of production and consciousness of those interests requires both an ideological and practical struggle to overcome the ruling (bourgeois) ideology and the conditions that engendered it. The truth of capitalist exploitation cannot be revealed by means of bourgeois ideology (such as positivism) hence this objective truth is grounded in material relations independent of one's consciousness. Objective truth is constituted in the contradictions holding between the material interests of contending classes. Knowledge of objective truth, for the proletariat, is a matter of becoming aware of those contradictions and gaining the practical knowledge for their resolution i.e. the overthrow of capitalism and the implementation of the dictatorship of the proletariat. The standpoint of the proletariat, from the Marxist perspective, is not merely a matter of having a "clearer view". The proletariat's "clearer view" i.e. Marxist ideology is not "reverse positivism" instead it is the wholesale rejection of positivism as bourgeois ideology, something, which we earlier discovered, Hill Collins openly admitted she was not willing to do.

Race: Social Construct or Social Category?

As I have demonstrated, in present day AAS circles, this propensity for conventionalist epistemology is popularly expressed in terms of social constructionism. Some AAS scholars, for example, argue that race is an invention, social construct or construction (Lott 1999; Morrison 1997; Mills 1998; Moody-Adams 1997; Cha-Jua 2000). In my estimation, when AAS intellectuals resort to social constructionism, for the most part, they are trying to avoid viewing race as essentially natural or biological in makeup. I term this social constructionist move, *the avoidance of the naturalistic fallacy*. By naturalistic fallacy, I do not mean G. E. Moore's refinement of Hume's fork, where the purpose at hand is the demarcation of prescriptive and descriptive propositions. Better yet, I want to convey a different sense to this expression; wherein there is a teleological impetus affixed to avoiding the reduction of social categories to natural ones.

If we recognize race as a social *category*, contra as social *construct*, we then avoid the naturalistic fallacy without resorting to conventionalism. Race as a social category is ontologically valid and true, if and when our starting point is material relations of production. The material reality of race

as social category does not require an appeal to nature. Just as value, a political economic category, is not rooted in any state of nature but instead in a given set of social relations of production (Marx 1973).

Yet race and value both possess definitive forms of ontological rank due to being grounded in materially determinate sets of social relations. These materially determinate sets of social relations thus anchoring race and value mean they are not mere constructions, but more appropriately, objective reflections of material reality. As for value as a social category, Marx comments,

> [A]s a value, the commodity is an equivalent; as an equivalent, all its *natural properties* are extinguished; it no longer takes separate special, qualitative relationship towards the other commodities... Its property of being of a value not only can but must achieve an existence different from its *natural* one ...[O]nly if the commodity achieves a double existence, not only a natural but also a purely economic existence, in which the latter is a mere symbol, a cipher for a [*social*] relations of production, a mere symbol for its own value. As a value, every commodity is equally divisible; in its *natural existence* it is not the case (Marx 1973).

Moreover, there is a second aspect for the appeal of conventionalist epistemology. Construction, invention and convention all implicitly contain a certain mutability and flexibility, which, sequentially, fosters a sense of voluntarism. This protean ethos accents willful action and a commitment to 'praxis'. This seemingly allows for a greater immediate connection or unity between political practice and theoretical work.

In AAS, there has been a greater propensity, than in the academy generally, to accent and amplify practice and social change. What conventionalist epistemology, in AAS, has helped spawn is what amounts to a voluntaristic ethos. So we get proclamations to the effect, 'the construction of knowledge opens the door to transforming if not creating reality.' My point of contention is not over the need for the unity of theory and practice. Rather it is that such declarations are, more often than not, incomplete if not vacuous. The alternative question before us is a more comprehensive and concrete one, '*what is that theory*?' that will guide the *kind* of practices, which will lead to the *eradication* of racism and white supremacy.

Now that I have outlined the teleological backdrop, which informs the argument about the social construction of race, we must examine its limitations with respect to a materialist approach to race and specifically race as a social category. Phenotypic descriptions in their reliance on naturalistic presuppositions mistake appearance for essence. This allows discussions on race to proceed in an anti-scientific fashion. Karl Marx's comments on appearance and essence are most appropriate here. Marx in *Capital* makes it transparent, "All science would be superfluous if the outward appearance and the essence of things directly coincided" (Marx 1967, 817). The *essence* of race (as a theoretical category) is *social* in character. However, phenotypic descriptions (of appearances) do in fact have a very important role, but this is a subordinate role because its function is *instrumentally* determined and consequently cannot serve as *ultimate* aim or purpose. More specifically, phenotypic descriptions of appearances are the necessary *form* of the social *content* constituting race as a social category.

Following from my comments with respect to value, the value-form of the commodity, as exchange value is a *necessary* form, which ultimately *appears* as the money-form of value. This appearance is not merely an ideological illusion but is a *real* aspect of the commodity. Relevant to our discussion of phenotypic description as appearances and the adjoining social content of race, we find the same dialectical relation between appearance and essence is expressed in the corresponding dialectic of form and content. Thus phenotypic descriptions as appearances, on this account, hold ontological status, i.e., they are real and not mere phantasms. As forms, phenotypic descriptions are the *necessary* expression or *manifest* form of race as social content.

Phenotypic description functions as a *means* for locating groups of people within the context of racially derived *social* relations. Social relations serve as both the grounds for and purpose of phenotypic description. The aim of social location is the primary purpose and social relations are its material foundation. Hence phenotypic descriptions are then instrumental, which of necessity means they are secondary in the order of logical rank.

The case of Homer Plessy graphically amplifies this point. Despite his phenotype, Plessy's minimal amount of African ancestry (genotype) was a sufficient condition for socially locating him among Black people. Here, genotypic classification augments phenotypic description. The essence of Plessy's Blackness, if you will, derived from his designated social position and not from his physical appearance. Race is a social place, within an objective set of social relations, of which phenotypic description is but a means to that end. When phenotypic descriptions fail, then genotypic classification ensures the reproduction of social relations founded on race. The one-drop rule (any African ancestry is a sufficient condition to be identified as black) is the popular expression for genotypic classification. Race, in this instance, is dialectically apprehended as a concrete expression of the contradiction between appearance and essence, as in embedded in material relations, institutions and practices.

Ideological critique must start from these material conditions and then move to their conscious expression in the form of ideology. Given that its starting point is material relations, ideological critique, for example in the form of philosophical investigations, must be supported by first-order studies into the concrete configuration of material relations. Recognition of white supremacy and racism as bourgeois ideology, in all of its theoretical complexities, presupposes comprehending the nature of bourgeois society in all of its material complexities. Herein is the import of Marx's thesis concerning philosophers interpreting the world in various ways and the task of changing it. Marx is not discarding philosophical interpretation; rather he is carrying out an ideological critique of philosophical idealism. For idealism, even Black forms of it, overlooks the material grounds of ideology and ideological critique. Marx is thus grounding philosophy and ideological critique in materialist philosophy. This grounding is not the same, however, as the first-order investigation of material relations.

Here, in this essay, I do not inquire into the concrete configuration of material relations, for that would require first-order investigations, e.g., political economy, historical research, sociological analysis or more broadly the social sciences. The social sciences are the appropriate disciplinary foci because only through empirical research can we uncover material relations in their concrete configuration. Of course, this is not what this inquiry into epistemology and ideological critique aims to do, what is in play here is a conceptual analysis via philosophical investigation.

Black Ideology and the Idea of a Black Social Science

From the very beginnings of the Black Studies movement during the 1960s, Black nationalist proponents declared there was an inextricable tie connecting white ideology and white academics. In part, the critique of mainstream or white scholarship centered on how ideology was couched in terms which attempted to camouflage its presence as ideology. Traditional academic arguments supporting value-free scholarship, objectivity, non-partisanship, and universality were all scrutinized and such claims, themselves, were ultimately uncovered as preeminently ideological. The principal point of departure for a number of African American Studies advocates was the academy's white character and how its attendant scholarship fostered and reproduced a white ideology.

Nathan Hare expressed the sentiments of a significant segment of Black Studies scholars when he argued that the "black scholar can no longer afford to ape the allegedly 'value-free' approach of white scholarship. He must reject absolutely the notion that it is 'not professional' ever to become emotional, that it is somehow improper to be 'bitter' as a black man, that emotion and reason are mutually exclusive" (Hare 1969; Bailey 1967).

This white ideology, they proclaimed, gave intellectual legitimacy and support to white supremacist policies at all levels of civil society as well as the state. Objectively, they were responding to the pervasive presence of racism and national oppression. Racial tensions and conflicts on and off campuses and throughout the country motivated some students and scholars to declare there was an urgent need for devising a race ideology.

They thought the ideological struggle against white supremacy and chauvinism, both inside and outside the academy, required the development of a militant Black ideology. Floyd McKissick, the former National Director of CORE, in his 1969 article, attempted to explain 'The Way to a Black Ideology' in the pages of the newly formed journal, *The Black Scholar* (McKissick 1969). Many African American Studies advocates, in their ideological counterattack on white supremacist cultural norms, procedures and practices, thus embraced nationalist, racial, and racialist ideologies (Cruse 1967; Clarke 1984; Gordon 1981).

These AAS proponents especially viewed the social sciences as bastions of white ideology; the social sciences were historically infected and contemporarily saturated with white ideology. Some of the early advocates of Black Studies were trained in sociology and geared their intellectual efforts on the dangers of white sociology. Joyce Ladner declared *The Death of White Sociology* (Ladner 1973) and Robert Staples went on to develop a text, *The Introduction to Black Sociology* (Staples 1976; McClendon 1980). Nathan Hare, James Turner, Delores Aldridge and Abdul Alkalimat (all sociologists) played leading roles as intellectual pioneers and theoreticians in AAS (Turner 1969; Hare 1974; Aldridge 1992).

Of course, Black sociologists were not the only social scientists intent on erecting a Black ideology for theory in AAS. The political scientist Mack Jones elaborated on "The Epistemological Vacuum in Black Critiques of Contemporary Social Science" (Jones 1976) and, in turn, economist Vernon J. Dixon wrote, in the *Review of Black Political Economy*, about "African-Oriented and Euro-American Oriented World Views" (Dixon 1977).

This critical concern about the social sciences, I should point out, was not something new among African American intellectuals. Ralph Bunche, Doxey Wilkerson, Abram Harris, and Oliver C. Cox were extremely critical of the dominant

social sciences and excavated their basis in bourgeois ideology (McClendon 1980). However, the African American Studies movement generated a qualitatively different critical conception of the social sciences. While the former group of pre-AAS scholars advanced the need for linking racism to capitalism, the new trend embraced racial categories and race for their pivotal points of departure.

Arguably, Alkalimat (Gerald McWorter) was the vanguard of this intellectual trend, commencing with an article appearing in only the second issue of *The Black Scholar*. Alkalimat in his 1969, "The Ideology of Black Social Science" forcefully asserted,

> Our search for understanding through social analysis is conditioned by how we resolve several longstanding controversies, not the least of which is the relationship between ideology and science…this has all too often been resolved by Black intellectuals acquiescing to a white social science… Many black social scientists seemingly have not really known the extent to which science is inevitably a handservant to ideology, a tool for people to shape, if not create, reality (McWorter 1969, 28).

Although I am not sure if, after over thirty years, Alkalimat would today embrace such a perspective on ideology and science, what is significant is that this proposition best encapsulates the subjectivism attendant with social constructionsm, and as well the racialist notion of ideological critique.

From the survey of works under review, Alkalimat's contribution to this intellectual legacy of subjectivist social science and the racialist ideological critique is alive and festering. Seven years later, Robert Staples followed Alkalimat's suit with a full-fledged text on Black sociology grounded on Black ideology. Staples asserted that the description of 'white sociology' was legitimate because it pointed to ethnocentrism. Yet he contended, "not all of them, white sociologists, have participated in the academic assault on the black population. And a few black sociologists were part of this process" (Staples 1976). So clearly, Staples admits, the racial categories are inadequate for the task of ideological critique. It is not after all about Black and white people. So where is the real problem?

I pointed out in the conclusion of my 1980 review of Staples' *Introduction to Black Sociology*,

> The efforts of Mr. Staples are part of a greater trend of petty bourgeois Black radical thinkers who eclectically incorporate Marx, then reject the kernel of its revolutionary theory — the dictatorship of the proletariat — in an effort to create a black social science. The key feature of this new leftism is its subjectivism, ignoring the fact that sociology is a class phenomenon. Just as bourgeois society breeds racism, bourgeois sociology is racist. The issue of hand is not sociology's whiteness, but its racism. The chief ideological weapons used by the bourgeoisie to contain the class struggle of the proletariat are racism and anti-communism. Only the exposure of these weapons will open the door to ideological clarity and unity of the working class (McClendon 1980, 59).

Since that time, scores of racialist ideologues have emerged, and while proponents of Afrocentricism are probably the most vocal and public, we discover some of AAS's most prominent Marxist-Leninists have joined the ranks of racialist ideologues. One notable example is Clarence J. Munford. After leading the way in 1978 with one of the most penetrating Marxist texts in AAS (Munford 1978), we sadly find Munford in his *Race and Reparations: A Black Perspective for the 21st Century* joining the chorus of race ideologues in 1996 (Munford 1996; Monteiro 1999).

In conclusion, the philosophical task we face today in AAS is to uproot this dangerous ideological weed of racialism. How can we do this? We must use as our theoretical instrument the philosophy of dialectical materialism. Furthermore, issuing from this instrument will be the understanding that the real nature of ideological critique rests not in the putative Black/White antithesis. Instead we will see that politically the contradiction is the *left* in opposition to the *right*. More concretely, this mandates the adoption of ideological critique from the standpoint of Marxism-Leninism as our scientific world outlook.

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Notes

1. Crummell's affinity for Hegel was rooted in his abiding allegiance to idealism and faith in the historical progress attached to the modernity of Western civilization. Wilson J. Moses argues, nevertheless, that Crummell is more closely linked to the Cambridge Platonists. Moses contends William Whewell's revival of this school of thought was not lost on Crummell. Crummell, a former student of Whewell at Cambridge, assimilated this Platonic idealism and it remained a critical part of his thought to the very end. I do not contest Moses' claim, I will only add that Crummell's allegiance to Hegelianism does not in any manner contradict Moses' thesis. For in both Plato and Hegel, Crummell found the basis for his own ontology of objective (absolute) idealism. For Crummell, in his interpretation of the history of philosophy, objective idealism binds Hegel to Plato, thus they travel along the common path of objective idealism in their philosophical undertakings. What is operative here for Crummell is the isomorphic relationship of Platonic *divine mind as reason* and Hegel's *absolute mind as absolute reason*. The propensity to adopt absolute idealism, during the last two decades of the nineteenth century, and into the early part of the next century was a salient

characteristic of African American philosophers. Also consult, William D. Johnson, "Philosophy" *Afro-American Encyclopedia* (Nashville, TN: Haley and Florida, 1893) and J. C. Price, "The Value of the Soul" *Afro-American Encyclopedia* (Nashville, TN: Haley and Florida, 1895) both reprinted by Xerox University Microfilm, 1976. Thomas Nelson Baker, the first African American to earn a doctorate in philosophy from an institution in the United States, was also a minister. His dissertation topic was *The Ethical Significance of Mind and Body* (Yale University, 1903). For a very important contribution to the scholarship on Dr. Baker, see George Yancy, "On the Power of Black Aesthetic Ideals: Thomas Nelson Baker As Preacher and Philosopher."

Black Women's Experiences, Philosophy of Religion and Womanist Theology: An Introduction Through Jacquelyn Grant's Hermeneutics of Location

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> *Much of what womanist thought seeks to debunk is the notion of universals and absolutes.*
>
> - Emilie M. Townes

> *Womanist theology claims the experiences of Black women as proper and serious data for theological reflection.*
>
> - M. Shawn Copeland

Introduction

Womanist theologian Jacquelyn Grant's *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus* is undergirded by a christological hermeneutics of location. The text is a womanist apologia regarding the *sui generis* nature of Black women's suffering and pain. The practice of many white feminists to homogenize differential experiences of pain and suffering tends to de-politicize and render benign the gravity and specificity of non-white women's unique experiences of oppression. In the spirit of Christian social ethicist Emilie M. Townes, Grant is aware of the *troubling in the souls* of Black and other non-white women. Framing her discussion of suffering and evil within the overall womanist philosophy of African-American writer Alice Walker, Townes reflects:

> Perhaps the most common understanding of womanist is that she is a woman committed to an integrated analysis of race, gender, and class. This arises from a deep concern to address the shortcomings of traditional feminist and Black theological modes of discourse. The former has a long legacy of ignoring race and class issues. The latter has disregarded gender and class. Both modes of discourse have begun to address these internal flaws. Yet womanist reflection maintains its critical perspective of feminist and African-American traditional ways of analytical reflection.[1]

Given the above, I will explore Grant's critique of *whiteness* within the framework of white feminist christology. How, in other words, does whiteness get *performed* within the context of feminist christology? Though she shares many of the assumptions undergirding white feminist christology, particularly with regard to its critique of androcentric theology and christology, Grant finds it limiting in terms of its christological, theological liberationist capacity to address the specific and historically concrete experiences of Black women living within the context of white racist America. On this score, issues of location, power, positionality, and knowledge production (religious and theological) are intimately interwoven. As Joe L. Kincheloe and Shirley R. Steinberg have argued, "Positionality involves the notion that since our understanding of the world and ourselves is socially constructed, we must devote special attention to the differing ways individuals from diverse social backgrounds construct knowledge and make meaning."[2] More specifically, the "whose knowledge?" or "whose experience?" question has tremendous implications for all of our epistemic endeavors. After exploring what Grant sees as the limits of white feminist christology, I will delineate what she constructs as a "womanist christology." I will also provide a sketch of the experiential and historical context of Black women, according to Grant's genealogy, within which a womanist christology is shaped and rendered intelligible.

White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus is a philosophical, theological, and political text. *A fortiori,* it is a profoundly womanist, *theological liberationist* polemical text. Grant is not simply interested in the task of faith searching for understanding (*fides quaerens intellectum*); rather, she is interested in the existential and more dynamic issue of faith searching for liberation (*fides quaerens liberationem*). In short, the socio-political and existential reality of Black women in America frames theology, christology, and religious experience within the context of urgent and immediate *liberation*, not simply soteriology and eschatology. Consistent with the inductive *modus operandi* of liberationist theology, Grant stresses the contextualization of theological and religious meaning within the framework of concrete experience. Black women's experiences are fundamentally shaped by particular experiential contexts. As such, their experiences constitute a significant *locus theologicus*. It is instructive, therefore, that Black women engage in critical biblical reflection in the light of their concrete being-in-the-world. This requires an experientially context-bound hermeneutic openness to God's revelation, a revelation that speaks directly to raciated Black women. On this score, theological theory or reflection and concrete praxis are dialectically related. Grant writes:

> To do Womanist Theology, then, we must read and hear the Bible and engage it within the context of our own experience. This is the only way that it can make sense to people who are oppressed. Black women of the past did not hesitate in doing this and we must do no less.[3]

In other words, experiences help shape the religious and theological questions asked, as well as the answers provided. In this way, theological reflection is not construed ahistorically and decontextually. From a womanist theological perspective, christological truth is not a universal datum. Hence, one might say that womanist theology is a species of postmodern theology. As Townes maintains, "Postmodern theology has a radical historicity in which plurality, particularity, locality, context, the social location of thought, and serious questioning of universal knowledge are key features."[4] The point here is that womanist theory, like postmodernism, calls into question the meta-narrativity of truth-claims. On a womanist-postmodernist reading, truth-claims are contextual, localized and are impacted by a hermeneutics of finitude. All of our epistemic claims to know are deemed penultimate. Of course, one should be careful. This does mean that Grant is a prisoner of deep pessimism, and committed to a world-view where God is dead. On the contrary, God, for Grant, is very much

alive. Her point is that theology is not value-neutral, free to understand religious reality *simpliciter*. Such presumed value-neutrality, upon analysis, is shown to conceal values that express the views of those who happen to be in power. Hence, Grant adopts a hermeneutic that is sensitive to the ways in which truth-claims are shaped by differential experiences, embodied selves, gendered selves, raciated selves, etc. Indeed, theological claims speak to individuals differently (Black women, for example) once appropriated and theorized/theologized within the context of a different community of intelligibility as structured by radically different historical experiences. The meaning and reality of God, for example, do not simply turn on a *vertical*, metaphysically other-worldly axis. God is not simply onto-theologically Other, or pure divine thought thinking itself, residing outside of space and time, and having no concern with things of this world. On a liberationist theological model, God is a key player in the *horizontal* drama of human history. God might be said to breathe the air of history, as it were. Hence, framing Grant's womanist christology, as with liberationist theology, is an emphasis placed on social, experiential and existential location, "democratizing" revelation (that is, understanding God's reality as mediated by the semantics and semiotics of experiential context and cultural situationality), and radicalizing God's *involvement* with social justice. As Grant argues:

> Data out of the experience of Black women provides the basis for beginning the construction of a womanist theology and christology that emerges from a tri-dimensional reality of Black women which is characterized by the convergence of racism, sexism, and classism.[5]

Feminist Christology and Androcentricity

Grant is hermeneutically suspicious of a christology that is undergirded by androcentric norms and constructed within homosocial spaces of biblical exegesis. She demonstrates this awareness where she writes:

> Even our sisters, the womanists of the past, had some suspicions about the effects of a male image of the divine, for they did challenge the oppressive use of it in the church's theology. In so doing, they were able to move from a traditional oppressive christology, with respect to women, to an egalitarian christology.[6]

Hence, Grant welcomes the theological and theoretical work of feminists who have argued for a viable, pragmatic theology and philosophy of religion done within the framework of women's particular gendered configurational experiences. She is aware that "throughout the history of Christian theology, European and American white men have formulated christologies in the continual response to Jesus' question, 'Who do you say that I am?'"[7] Feminist theologians have found it necessary to answer that question within the context of their own experiences. Therefore, feminists have interrogated many androcentrically biased christological formulations that have been oppressive toward women, theologically sanctioning them as the "second sex," "inferior," and as responsible for "The Fall" of man. In short, historically, patriarchal theological formulations have fundamentally shaped the discourse of theology and christology. Grant is aware of the enormous psychological and deconstructive task that is needed. She writes:

> For women, nothing short of a shaking of the male universal foundation of theology is required to construct an adequate feminist christology. Since experience is the context in which christological

interpretation takes place, before women begin to reflect on Jesus Christ, they must claim the power to name themselves and their experiences so that their christological reflections would be authentically theirs. Historically, the woman's experience has been consumed by 'generic' (male) experiences and camouflaged by generic (male) language regarding that universal (male) experience.[8]

Feminist theologians call for the disruption of androcentric theological and christological discourse, a movement toward her-story within the context of Judeo-Christian theologizing. As Grant maintains:

> Christian feminists tend to agree upon the following: (1) Even when experience has been considered a source for theology it has actually invoked an abstract experience or it has spoken of it as if human experience equaled a 'phantom' universal male experience; (2) The use of the Bible in much of the white, male-articulated theologies has reinforced the oppression of women; and (3) Appeals to tradition in mainstream male articulated theologies often have been nothing more than a way of reinforcing male patriarchal history.[9]

The point here is that "experience," within the context of theology and christology, is uncritically assumed to be synonymous with a masculine, homosocial axiological point of reference. Grant concludes that a "feminist theology, as a theology of liberation, is concerned about exposing this false universalism and reinterpreting the experiences of women. In so doing, it is following the lead of liberation theology."[10]

Even within the traditional area of philosophy of religion, a subfield of philosophy, the impact of androcentricity is prevalent. Feminist philosopher Nancy Frankenberry, writing some years after the publication of Grant's text, asks:

> What gets valorized as worth knowing? What are the criteria evoked? Who has the authority to establish meaning? Who is the presumed subject of belief? How does the social position of the subject affect the content of religious belief? What is the impact upon religious life of the subject's sexed body?[11]

Comprehending the close link between knowledge and power, Frankenberry argues that within the philosophy of religion, particularly of the Anglo-American sort, the divine, despite de-anthropomorphizing efforts, "remains stubbornly gendered male."[12] She argues, "the metaphors and models employed by mainstream philosophers of religion often trade uncritically on intrinsically hierarchical patterns of relations. Metaphors such as Father, King, Lord, Bridegroom, Husband, and God-He go unmarked."[13] And with respect to the so-called divine attributes, "none receives more discussion in the literature than that of 'omnipotence,' by which some version of 'perfect power' is meant."[14]

The point here, and Grant would agree, is that androcentric interests impact the way theological/religious/philosophical problems and questions are framed. Frankenberry states, "The very form of the question, How can an all-powerful deity permit evil? implies a meaning of 'all powerful' that is embedded in a discourse of domination."[15] Even debates on the issue of immortality "have also been deeply shaped by androcentric interests — centering on self-perpetuation and individual, rather than collective survival."[16]

Working with a gynocentrically and cross-culturally robust conception of the divine and religious praxis, Frankenberry draws upon feminist Elizabeth Johnson's work and from cross-

cultural religious studies. God as "Holy Mystery" captures the dynamic and immanental nature of God. According to Frankenberry:

> Dynamic and living being is yet elusive. Signifying the moment-to-moment reality in virtue of which everything exists, the philosophical concepts of creativity (as explicated by Whitehead) and *esse* (as explicated dynamically) are useful for interpreting what philosophy of religion in a new and different voice could mean by "divine reality," "holy mystery," "empowering spirit," and a variety of other metaphors and symbols.[17]

Moving away from speculative metaphysics and natural theology, modes of inquiry associated with mainstream philosophy of religion as mostly practiced by Anglo-American and European males, philosophy of religion "will be required to elaborate new models of interpretation, a broader theory of evidence, a cross-culturally adequate conception of human rationality, and a more complex appraisal of the norms applicable to cases of divergent, rival religious claims and disagreements."[18]

Unlike the white feminist theologians critiqued by Grant, with the exception of perhaps Rosemary Radford Ruether, though Grant still finds aspects of her theology and christology wanting, Frankenberry is aware of the theological and religious implications of multiply oppressed, womanist subaltern voices. She writes, "African-American women are developing a wealth of writings around Womanist theology and ethics, as evident for example, in Jacquelyn Grant's *White Women's Christ and Black Woman's Jesus* and Delores Williams's *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*."[19] She is also aware of the importance of the global impact of Latina, Asian and African women's religious and theological discourse.

Given the pervasive reality of male hegemonic power, christology has been fundamentally shaped by male interests, values and concerns. "It is not surprising then," according to Grant, "that the development of theology and christology in this context of patriarchalism has meant that Jesus Christ has been interpreted to fit into the *Weltanschauung* of patriarchy."[20] This has had severe implications in terms of preventing women from holding leadership positions in the church and from receiving ordination. Theologian Reginald Fuller states the reasoning behind patriarchal christology as follows:

> The recorded calls of disciples were all of men… Jesus in his earthly life chose Twelve for a particular role — to be signs of the New Israel that would come into being with the advent of God's Kingdom. The Twelve were men. If Jesus intended his church to have women ministers (leaders), it is argued, he would have included women among the Twelve.[21]

The christological, ecclesiastical and psychological arguments against the leadership roles of women in the church were clearly stated by an Episcopal priest who wrote under the pseudonym David R. Stuart:

> Christ himself chose men to be apostles, the early church ordained men to be priests and consecrated men to be bishops. For generations the worshipper has heard the sounds of a male voice reading the prayers of consecration, for centuries the priest-confessor has been a man. Men were and continue to be the leaders, initiators, the heads of households familial and ecclesiastical and it would be psychologically confusing as well as historically disruptive to substitute women for that office. The

long history of the Holy Catholic Church has been that of a male priesthood — this tradition is not hastily or lightly to be broken.[22]

Even the Eucharist, within the framework of patriarchal christology, becomes a site of androcentric semiosis. Pope Paul VI, on October 15, 1976, sanctioned a declaration that read:

> …when Christ's role in the Eucharist is to be expressed sacramentally there would not be this "natural resemblance" which must exist between Christ and his minister if the role of Christ was not taken by a man. In such a case it would be difficult to see in the minister the image of Christ. For Christ himself was and remains man.[23]

Grant responds:

> Patriarchy virtually insured that women's questions would be irrelevant to christological concerns. If women are indeed to be saved they must begin to re-articulate christology starting from the questions which arise out of their experiences. Some women have begun the process of rethinking christology.[24]

Strengths and Limitations of Feminist Theology

At this juncture, I will briefly explore what Grant identifies as three broad perspectives in feminist theology: (1) Biblical Feminist Christology; (2) Liberationist Feminist Christology; and (3) Rejectionist Feminist Christology. These three feminist christological perspectives have attempted to rethink the ideological and narrative structure of christology. I will note in particular what Grant sees as their limitations vis-ā-vis a (Black) womanist liberationist christology.

So, given the "maleness" of Jesus (and God), around which powerful theological narratives have been built, how have some feminist theologians avoided male oppressive concepts? Working within an evangelical Christian community, feminist theologian Virginia Mollenkott's *Women, Men and the Bible* explores the issue of male/female relationships. She attempts, on the basis of a feminist exegesis, to redefine what it means to be in relationship. Relationships of domination are not Christian in character. For Mollenkott, "Christian equality is never a matter of jockeying for the dominant position. Christian equality is the result of mutual compassion, mutual concern, and mutual and voluntary loving service."[25] Elaborating upon Mollenkott's position, Grant writes:

> Contrary to the traditionalist who masculinizes God, Mollenkott believes that God does not merely possess masculine qualities, but feminine ones as well. Based on her discussion of the creation story in Genesis 1, she believes that since the text uses the word "anthropos" (human) rather than "aner" (male) then both human, male and female were created in God's image.[26]

Theologian Paul Jewett, who influenced the work of Mollenkott, also argues for redefining what is meant theologically and christologically by the male/female relationship. Grant writes:

> The matter of relationship as spurred on by the recent raising of the "woman question" must be viewed with greater theological understanding. This is why Jewett claims that "the woman question" is a "man/woman" question which has roots, theologically speaking, in the doctrine of the "*imago Dei*." Just as God's relationship is essentially fellowship in himself (as in

the Trinity), so man's relationship is essentially fellowship in himself (male and female).[27]

In many ways, Jesus was an iconoclast. Hence, as Grant makes clear:

> Because Jesus was not afraid to defy established codes of his time some scholars have been prompted to re-examine the character of Jesus himself, to determine if there is a relationship between who he was (his psychological make-up) and what he demonstrated regarding women.[28]

According to Grant, theologian Leonard Swidler, arguing along lines similar to Mollenkott and Jewett, "affirms the Nicene Creeds statement that Jesus became *human*. He argues that the composers of the creed wrote 'et *homo* factus est,' meaning 'and he became human.' They did not say 'et *vir* factus est' meaning 'and he became male (virile)'"[29] Within the context of historical Rabbinic literature, the birth of a female was looked upon as something to be saddened by. Women could not study and certainly could not teach the Scriptures (Torah). However, Swidler notes the historical record has it that "women became disciples of Jesus not only in the sense of learning from him, but also in the sense of following him in his travels and ministering to him."[30]

Mollenkott, Jewett and Swidler all focus on the androgynous christological characterization of Jesus (God). Each hermeneutically allows for the possibility of reading Jesus (God) in a non-hegemonic, non-androcentric fashion. But what does Grant find problematic here? She argues:

> In the work of biblical feminists we find little interstructuring of oppression but rather a single line of argument geared to the elimination of sexism from theology and christology. The lack of a broader analysis leads to proposals which are too simplistic in nature and inadequate in scope. Certainly it is too narrow and simplistic to adequately embrace the multi-dimensional critical needs of Black women's traditions.[31]

Grant also notes:

> Black women's role in society has been neither feminine nor masculine. That is to say, in the same way that Black men were denied masculinity, Black women were robbed of femininity. Conditions made the question of Jesus' androgynous or even his male existence irrelevant.[32]

Rosemary Radford Ruether's feminist liberationist theology is complex. Within the scope of this article, therefore, I will limit my brief comments to her work in terms of its application to christology. Ruether is aware of the implications for both men and women resulting from a deconstruction of male dominant christology. She notes:

> Every aspect of male privilege loses its authority as natural and divine right and is reevaluated as sin and evil. This is deeply frightening to males. Consequently, they have been quick to slam the door on the slightest beginning of such questioning and to mount counter-revolutionary campaigns of resubjugation of women whenever feminist movements have begun. But it is also frightening to women. They have to question all the ways they have traded a diminished humanity for dependent forms of security.[33]

Within the framework of these "dependent forms of security," Ruether critiques the limits of what is called the "Mariology doctrine." This doctrine basically includes "Mary as the new Eve, her perpetual virginity, her divine maturity, her bodily assumption in heaven, Mary as the Mediatrix of all graces, and her immaculate conception."[34] Beneath this splendiferous theological discourse, however, is found male hegemonic values. Mary as the epitome of "womanly virtue" is also symbolic of "womanly passivity." Grant summarizes Ruether's point:

> Because Mariology perpetuates the feminine passive traits for Mary in particular and women in general, it also preserves the social dualisms which are destructive to women. This is true in both dominant and suppressed Mariology, as put forth in Catholicism and Protestantism, respectively, both of which, although in different ways, employed Mariology as a theological doctrine (Catholic) and symbol (Protestant).[35]

Thus, women will need to caution against the symbolic passivity of Mary and perhaps look to Mary Magdalene. Ruether writes:

> But Mary whom we should venerate may not be Mother Mary, the woman who represents the patriarchal view that women's only claim to fame is the capacity to have babies, the relationship which Jesus himself rejected. The Mary who represents the Church, the liberated humanity, may, rather, be the repressed and defamed Mary of the Christian tradition, Mary Magdalene, friend and disciple of Jesus, the first witness of the resurrection, the revealer of the Christian Good News.[36]

Within the broader context of Ruether's liberationist project, however, she is also aware of the impact of racism and classism. She argues that a "monolithic analysis of sexism as the ultimate oppression obscures the way in which sexism is structurally integrated with class and race."[37] Ruether is also critical of the Black church and the Black nationalist movement for their perpetuation of male hegemony. For Ruether, "the black church has traditionally been highly patriarchal and has served to integrate the black family symbolically into the Western patriarchal family norm."[38] Ruether's liberationist feminist christological/theological project is laudable in terms of its attempt to forge an emancipatory agenda. And, unlike biblical feminist christology, Ruether provides us with a more thick, layered analysis of oppression. Grant would agree with Ruether's contention regarding the power of androcentricity in the Black church. Grant is also cognizant of the masculine norms historically undergirding Black liberation theology. Nevertheless, she is doubtful "if even liberationist feminists are able to understand the particularity of non-white women's experiences."[39] She relates this suspicion to two points. First, she argues:

> Whereas Ruether correctly critiques the Black nationalist movement and the Black church for its lack of sex and class analysis, she incorrectly locates the tension between Black churches and the women's movement at the point of sexism and Black men. One could argue that Black men's responses to the women's movement are due equally to the racism of the women's movement as to the sexism in the Black movement. There is no reason to believe, as Ruether seems to make it appear, that white women are more concerned about Black women and the Black lower classes than are Black men.[40]

Second, Grant calls into question Ruether's suggestion that a better paradigm for women would be Mary Magdalene as opposed to the Virgin Mary or Jesus. Grant concludes "there is little reason to believe that a white woman salvific model would be any more liberating of Black women than a white male model."[41] Solidarity around Mary Magdalene might create a sense of "sisterhood," but need not entail a viable praxic christological orientation for Black women. In short, Black women might be allowed into the theological fold, but racist oppression will go on as usual.

This brings us to the rejectionist feminist christological perspective as represented in the work of Mary Daly. Grant moves the reader through Daly's reformist views to her more radical rejectionist perspective. It is the latter that is of interest here. Grant succinctly and insightfully summarizes Daly's position as follows:

> The primary contribution of Daly is that she calls attention to the fact that aspects of reality cannot totally escape the general characteristics of reality as a whole. Jesus, as an entity of patriarchal religious traditions has not escaped the demonism of that reality. Daly challenges reformist Christians to examine the context within which they have chosen to function, for it may well be that the context as well as the content are enslaving for women. That is to say the religion of Christianity itself may be as enslaving as its patriarchal context. If Daly's analysis is taken seriously, one is forced to ask fundamental questions, such as, does it make sense for women to adhere to a religious tradition which enslaves women?[42]

In other words, for Daly, the issue is not one of sexual oppression in this or that community. She argues that sexual oppression is part and parcel of the very structural core of Christianity. She maintains, "the problem lies in the exclusive identification of this person with God, in such a manner that Christian conceptions of divinity and of the 'image of God' are all objectified in Jesus."[43] Grant teases out the implications of this view where she writes:

> Because the divinity came in the form of male, the male has been divinized. Consequently, to argue that Jesus is universally for all is to ignore the fact that it is because of Jesus' maleness that women are "universally" excluded from the hierarchy of the church (particularly mainline denominations). It is this very "maleness," in spite of arguments for universalism, which has been problematic for women.[44]

Daly's rejection of Jesus *qua* hegemonic male symbol is dialectically linked to her rejection of the Virgin Mary. Both Mary and Jesus, according to Daly, are linked to a theological holism that is permeated with male values and interests. Daly's *Pure Lust: Elemental Feminist Philosophy*, as Grant makes clear, continues the theological saga of Daly's movement out of the confines of androcentricity "into a new world of women in the process of be-friending."[45] For Daly, the Virgin Mary, as an oppressive form of *christolatry*, inhibits the creation of this be-friending process. Daly maintains that the doctrine of the "immaculate conception" of Mary did not become Catholic dogma until 1854. This leads her to speculate that this "official act was intended to undercut the rise of the first wave of the feminist movement."[46] So, given the above, to whom should women look for "redemption"? Why, themselves! For Daly, this involves "a communal process, affirming the flow of connectedness within each woman — her Presence of

Presence."[47] This be-friending process involves transcending the limitations of patriarchal consciousness. For Daly, according to Grant, "at this level women become deviant/defiant taboo breaking, rejecting sadomasochistic existence and lusting for happiness."[48] Daly construes patriarchy as an oppressive regime where women are forced to engage in self-erasure, resulting in a form of ontological vacuity and psychological displacement. She writes:

> Patriarchy is designed not only to possess women, but to prepossess/preoccupy us, that is, to inspire women with false selves which anesthetize the Self, breaking the process of be-ing on the wheel of processions. This condensing and freezing of being into fragmented being is the necessary condition for maintaining the State of Possession.[49]

In short, in order to move beyond the universe of discourse of patriarchy, women must deconstruct, reconstruct and transform themselves within the space of their own be-friending *Lebenswelt*.

As indicated, Daly's approach to christology is fundamentally rejectionist. And though insightful and intriguing, "most of her energies are spent addressing sexism, the oppression of women as the problem of theology."[50] What of racism and classism? According to Grant, Daly believes that "racism does not have a life on its own; it is merely a subsidiary of sexism. Racism and slavery are described as patriarchal institutions as is marriage."[51] The equation of racism with patriarchy, it seems to me, is fundamentally misleading, conceptually misguided, and historically problematic. White men as well as *white women* have performed and benefited from their whiteness. Simply stated, many white women performed and continue to perform their *whiteness* against non-white women, the so-called "comrades" of white women. Historically, white women have helped to perpetuate the image of the Black woman as promiscuous, bestial and immoral. Moreover, many Black women have physically suffered from the brutality of white women.[52]

As a result of not acknowledging the independent reality of racism, what implications will this have for including Black women (or other non-white women) within the be-friending process? Grant's critique of Daly is on target where she reasons, "Black women may be participants in the Be-Friending process as women but they are excluded as Blacks. Therefore, defined merely as a function of patriarchy it is impossible to grasp the true experiences of racism."[53] Grant concludes:

> Because Daly structures racism as a part of patriarchy (sexism) it is impossible to give Black and other third world women equal participation in her system. *Salvation* for Black women and other non-White women means giving up racial identity (or at least de-prioritizing it) in order to participate fully in the redemptive community — Sisterhood/Be-Friending.[54]

Audre Lorde, as Grant cites, critiques Daly's *Gynecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* for its racist pantheon. According to Grant, Lorde maintains that Daly "uses only European goddesses as her images."[55] In other words, there are no positive uses of the African pantheon. As such, whiteness gets performed at the level of deification and iconography. This further problematizes the "democratic openness" of the be-friending process. Lorde critically asks:

> …why doesn't Mary deal with Afrekete as an example? Why are her goddess images only white, western european, judeo-christian? Where were

Afrekete, Yemanje, Oyo, and Mawulisa? Where were the warrior goddesses of the Vodun, the Dahomeian Amozons and the warrior-women of Dan?[56]

Christology From the Edge: Locationality and Black Women's Jesus

Phenomenologically, what does Jesus *mean* to Black women? What does the life, death and resurrection of Jesus symbolize within the oppressive existential context of Black women? What is it about being a Black woman in racist America, with its long history of *Othering* Black bodies, that provides the basis for Black women's shared structures of meaning? The answer to these questions will be framed within the context of what Grant sees as the limitations of white feminist theology and christology. Grant writes, "Although feminist theology has made an important critique of the sexist limitations of dominant theologies of Europe and North America, it is not without serious limitations, especially when evaluated in the light of Black women's experience."[57] Grant charges many white feminist theologians with lacking critical self-reflexivity. For Grant, "they do not transcend their own criticisms of other christologies." She elaborates:

> The seriousness of the charge white feminists make regarding inappropriate male universalism is undercut by the limited perspective which presumes the universality of women's experience. White feminism does not emerge out of the particularity of the majority of women's experiences.[58]

Although white feminist christology and theology ought to be taken seriously, Black women "should not allow themselves to be co-opted on behalf of the agendas of white women…"[59] Within this context, Black feminist theorist bell hooks captures the social core of American racism and its implications for the feminist movement where she writes:

> Throughout American history, the racial imperialism of whites has supported the custom of scholars using the term "women" even if they are referring solely to the experience of white women. Yet such a custom, whether practiced consciously or unconsciously, perpetuates racism in that it denies the existence of non-white women and denies their racial identity. White women liberationists did not challenge this sexist-racist practice; they continued it.[60]

Similarly, Grant's contention is that feminist theology and christology are limited and inadequate because they are, as she argues, "white and racist."[61] Grant's critique of feminist theology should be understood within the larger context of her critique of the feminist movement. Speaking of white feminists, she writes:

> They have misnamed themselves by calling themselves feminists when in fact they are white feminists, and by appealing to women's experience when in fact they appeal almost exclusively to their own experience. To misname themselves as "feminists" who appeal to "women's experience" is to do what oppressors always do; it is to define the rules and then solicit others to play the game.[62]

Hence, as womanist theologian Delores S. Williams maintains, "Womanist theology also critiques white feminist participation in the perpetuation of white supremacy, which continues to dehumanize black women."[63] On the above reading, white feminist theologians *perform* whiteness both in terms of their shared raciated identification, and in terms of the repetition of their experiential sources. White women, in short, see their own whiteness as neutral with respect to their theological reflections. And within a context where whiteness signifies the norm of human experience, the performative reiteration of those experiences reinforces the assumption that such experiences are the defining benchmarks of reality itself. On this score, the very structure of whiteness involves the process of undercutting its locationality. Whiteness becomes the universal norm against which every facet of non-whiteness is differentiated. Despite postmodernist and deconstructionist emphases on locating meaning within a system of differences, whiteness attempts to transcend differences, constituting itself as the transcendental signified. In short, whiteness irrupts difference and attempts to fix reference or meaning around its raciated (white) center. To veil its own historicity and experiential finitude, whiteness constructs itself as *the* sovereign voice. Hence, whiteness, on this reading, is a form of bad faith. As Grant says:

> …what is often unmentioned is that feminist theologians' sources for women's experience refer almost exclusively to white women's experience. White women's experience and Black women's experience are not the same. Indeed all experiences are unique to some degree. But in this case the difference is so radical that it may be said that white women and Black women are in completely different realms.[64]

Although Grant's use of race (whiteness, in this case) smacks of a "naturalist" paradigm, her brief historical contextualization of racism in America demonstrates her awareness of its "reality" as political, cultural, and semiotic performance. The reader should note that the rejection of race as a *natural kind* (its de-naturalization), on the basis of certain empirical criteria, does not diminish the significance of race as a *social kind*. In short, the scientific bankruptcy of the concept of whiteness (as a biological essence) does not alleviate its performative consequences, either by direct conscious intent or by complicity, on the somatic and psychological lives of Black people. Grant's awareness of whiteness as performance is also indicated where she says that racism "is not only individual acts but a collective, institutionalized activity."[65] On this score, whiteness (*not* raciated "white" women or men) is idolatrous and anti-Christian. It is whiteness as a signifier of power, privilege, universality, superiority, and anti-Blackness that creates the problem. Critiquing Black liberationist theologian James Cone, theologian Alfred T. Hennelly maintains, "Cone needlessly exaggerates where he states flatly that 'Christianity and whiteness are opposites.' As it stands, this statement is a classic example of reverse racism, an insult to every white Christian in the world."[66] Simply stated, Hennelly's critique of Cone is absolutely misguided. As a signifier of exploitation, terror, anti-Blackness, invasion and superiority, whiteness is indeed the opposite of Christianity.

So, how does Grant support her contention that white women and Black women are in "completely different realms"? The answer has to do with the dialectics of Black women's self-context reality vis-ā-vis whiteness. Hence, how have Black women been constructed and treated within the performative spaces of whiteness? Grant writes:

> As a collective "I," Black women have been saddled with labels and definitions. They have been called matriarchs; they've been blamed for the ills of the Black community; they've been considered sexually promiscuous; and to facilitate the needs of whites,

they were reduced to maids, mammies, and other service workers.[67]

In the eighteenth-century, Black men were deemed three-fifths of a man (read: *white* man). One can only wonder about the substantially lower fractional status of Black women. Unlike the "princess" status of little actress Shirley Temple, Black girls were taught to think of themselves as "servants" and "pickaninnies." Under the regime of white American slavery, young Black girls underwent a process of epistemological self-degradation, coming to *know* themselves as aesthetically inferior vis-ā-vis the aesthetic "superior" ideal of white women. As with Toni Morrison's fictional character Pecola Breedlove, as depicted in *The Bluest Eye*, and Harlem Renaissance writer Wallace Thurman's fictional character Emma Lou Morgan, as described in *The Blacker the Berry,* young Black girls came to internalize a negative and internally self-destructive image of themselves as ugly. Linking whiteness with a form of idolatry, Cheryl Townsend Gilkes observes, "Visual conformity in the United States, of course, is tied to an idolatry of whiteness. African-American women, in terms of their color alone, stand in opposition to the culture's idolatry of whiteness."[68] "The Victorian concept of ladyhood," according to Grant, "was not applied to slave women. They were treated like slave men as a lower species of animals."[69] "Ladyhood," in short, was an elliptical expression (in relation to Black women) that meant "white women" and the performance of whiteness. Grant elaborates:

Because Black women were not considered the sisters of white women during slavery, they were not exempt from the tyranny of this system. In fact when we read narratives of slaves and ex-slaves, current "sisterhood" rhetoric appears simply as one of two possibilities: (1) a crude joke, or (2) the conciliatory rhetoric of an advantaged class and race.[70]

Black women were introduced to America through the Middle Passage, a voyage of death, bodily objectification, humiliation, dehumanization, geographical and psychological dislocation. Sold from auction blocks, Black women were commodified, defined and sold as chattel. Within the context of this economy of Black bodies, "advertisements announcing the sale of black female slaves used the terms 'breeding slaves,' 'child-bearing woman,' 'breeding period,' 'too old to breed,' to describe individual women."[71] Standing naked on the auction block, witnessed by both white men and women, the Black woman became a blood and flesh text upon which whites could project all of their fears, desires and fantasies. The Black female body became the atavistic trope, subject to the white gaze. The Black female body was an "open" site of sexual exploitation. As hooks notes, "Rape was a common method of torture slavers used to subdue recalcitrant black women. The threat of rape or other physical brutalization inspired terror in the psyches of displaced African females."[72] White women were of very little help in situations involving the rape of a Black woman. hooks observes:

Often in desperation, slave women attempted to enlist the aid of white mistresses, but these attempts usually failed. Some mistresses responded to the distress of female slaves by persecuting and tormenting them. Others encouraged the use of black women as sex objects because it allowed them respite from unwanted sexual advances.[73]

hooks also notes that "in most slaveholding homes, white women played as active a role in physical assaults of black women as did white men. While white women rarely physically assaulted black male slaves, they tortured and persecuted black females."[74] hooks suggests that white men and women formed an alliance against Black women on the grounds of shared racism (whiteness). Both performed ritualized acts of whiteness with impunity. The rape of Black women, on the above reading, was not just an act of male domination and violence, but served the institution of whiteness by extinguishing, as Angela Davis has noted, the will of Black women to flee conditions of slavery and by specifically demoralizing Black men. All acts of rape violate a woman's spiritual and bodily integrity, but when mediated by whiteness, under the institution of American racism, the rape of a Black woman by a white man is structured by more complex psycho-sexual, racial dimensions. But even "after" slavery, the experiences of Black women, and Black people in general, remained substantially the same. Grant notes three realities that remained:

(1) Physical brutality toward Blacks was continued, and even extended to violence outside of the work context. (2) The immediate relationship between white women and Black women did not change; Black women were still the oppressed. (3) As part of this continued relationship, Black women were still treated as property.[75]

Critiquing racism within the context of certain "Christian" practices, womanist ethicist Katie G. Canon asks:

Where was the Church and the Christian believers when Black women and Black men, Black boys and Black girls, were being raped, sexually abused, lynched, assassinated, castrated and physically oppressed? What kind of Christianity allowed white Christians to deny basic human rights and simple dignity to Blacks, these same rights which had been given to others without questions?[76]

Given the above historical context, and given the mighty struggle that Black women have had to wage against the oppressive performances of whiteness, fighting for their status as *subjects* of their own experiences, what is the relevance of christology for Black women? This places us within the context of structures of meaning as embedded within the linked matrices of racism, sexism, and classism. This brings us back to Jesus' question: "Who do you say that I am?" Grant (1989) elaborates as follows:

When John asks Jesus, "Are you the one or shall we look for another?" the subject is called upon to identify himself. Jesus in turning the question around to the disciples makes them the subjects. "Who do you say that I Am?" This question is posed anew in each new generation and in each new context. Just as the disciples were called to answer, to be subjects, so we must also be subjects.[77]

As subjects of their own religious experiences, Black women, according to Grant, should follow Alice Walker's example by describing their theological praxis-reflection as "womanist." Agreeing with Walker, Grant understands a womanist as one who is "responsible, in charge, outrageous, courageous and audacious enough to demand the right to think theologically and to do it independently of both white and Black men and white women."[78]

But what is this womanist context? It is the context and history of Black women's tri-dimensional oppression: racism, sexism, and classism. Grant:

To ignore any aspect of this experience is to deny the holistic and integrated reality of Black womanhood. When Black women say that God is on the side of the oppressed, we mean that God is in solidarity with the struggles of those on the underside of humanity.[79]

Out of this multiply oppressive context, there emerges a *situational*, christological symbolism, a form of God-talk that carries an illocutionary force that speaks directly to the existential plight of Black women. Jesus becomes "the Black Messiah, the Liberator, the Redeemer. You are the Christ, the Savior, the sister."[80] In short, Jesus is symbolically reflective of the pragmatic needs and situational reality of Black women. This is one reason that Black people have always spoken of Jesus in very intimate, personal and immanent terms. In African-American spirituals, for example, Jesus is a co-sufferer. Perhaps this is one reason why, as Delores S. Williams notes, "Jesus seems to have taken over all concepts and functions of the divine in the narratives of the ex-slaves."[81] Jesus is spoken of as both comforter and liberator. Grant writes:

> For Christian Black women in the past, Jesus was their central frame of reference. They identified with Jesus because they believed that Jesus identified with them. As Jesus was persecuted and made to suffer undeservedly, so were they. His suffering culminated in the crucifixion. Their crucifixion included rape, and babies being sold.[82]

Phenomenologically, Jesus is experienced as one who is able to empower and strengthen the dispossessed and derailed. It is believed that through Jesus "all things are possible." When Black women speak out against the racist images that have been superimposed upon them (inferior, ugly, lascivious, unworthy, etc.), they are symbolically enacting Jesus' iconoclastic tendencies to destroy false images. Moreover, Black women's spiritual encounter with Jesus provides them with an internal experiential healing encounter, a sense of worthiness and self-esteem. Speaking of this, Williams observes, "Black women could survive and achieve well-being in spite of the devaluation of Black womanhood, which white America incorporated in its social ideology of white supremacy."[83]

African-American worship services might serve as a reliable index of the profound personalist theology running through womanist christology. The activity of praise and worship creates a spiritual and cultural vortex, pulling together metaphysical, existential and historical elements to create a communal ecstatic experience, an experience of shared joy and pain. James Cone insightfully relates this experience to eschatology and identity transformation:

> The eschatological significance of the black community is found in the people believing that the Spirit of Jesus is coming to visit them in worship service each time two or three are gathered in his name and to bestow upon them a new vision of their future humanity. This eschatological revolution is not so much a cosmic change as it is a change in the people's identity, wherein they are no longer named by the world but named by the spirit of Jesus.[84]

This naming is itself a form of empowerment and renewed self-understanding; it is a movement toward agency and restored hope. Unlike the myth of Sisyphus, Jesus is believed to transform the existential bleakness of life into a celebration of hope. And contrary to Jean-Paul Sartre's "no exit" trope, it is believed that Jesus *will* provide an exit. As Grant writes:

At last! Black women are indeed becoming subjects. More and more they are resisting the objectification by those whose histories and her-stories continue to render them invisible. And so to question, "Who do *you* say that I am?" Black women say that you are the one who is with us and among us in our community as we struggle for survival. You are the one who not only is with us, but you are one of us.[85]

Black women give their troubles to Jesus. After all, Jesus is said to understand their plight. Jesus embraced and identified with the destitute, the women and the stranger. In other words, Jesus identified with "the least" of those during his own time. Within the framework of her womanist hermeneutic, Grant appropriates this notion of *the least* "because it descriptively locates the condition of Black women."[86] *The least*, however, does not constitute an essentialist notion, but a *historically* rich notion; it captures the horrendous historical experiences of Black women. She elaborates:

> Black women's experience in general is such a reality. Their tri-dimensional reality renders their particular situation a complex one. One could say that not only are they the oppressed of the oppressed, but their situation represents "the particular within the particular."[87]

But as Grant makes clear, "To affirm Jesus' solidarity with the 'least of the people' (Matt. 25:31-46) is not an exercise in romanticized contentment with one's oppressed status in life."[88] Indeed, there is no glorification or valorization of pain, victimization, suffering and oppression. It is not as if Black women have chosen to be oppressed or chosen to wallow in the vicissitudes of being a Black woman in white racist America. For Black women, the existential reality of the cross (racism, sexism and classism) should not be divorced from the miracle of the resurrection (liberation) and the power of redemption. In short, the Good News of the Gospel speaks to the hearts and minds of Black women seeking freedom from oppression. And it is the resurrection that confirms for Black women that their liberation from oppression is assured.[89] Focusing on the *redemptive* aspects of a theology of suffering from a womanist perspective, M. Shawn Copeland notes:

> A theology of suffering in womanist perspective is *redemptive*. In their narratives, Black women invite God to partner them in the redemption of Black people. They make meaning of their suffering. Over and over again, Black women under chattel slavery endured pain, privation and injury; risked their very lives, for the sake of the lives and freedom of their children. Praying in her garret, Linda Brent [Harriet Jacobs] offers her suffering as part of the price of the emancipation of her children. Mattie Jackson recounts that during their escape, her mother fasted for two days, saving what food she had been able to carry away for Mattie and her sister. And, by their very suffering and privation, Black women under chattel slavery freed the cross of Christ. Their steadfast commitment honored that cross and the One who died for all and redeemed it from Christianity's vulgar misuse.[90]

On this score, God is not a white racist. As Williams notes, "God did not intend the defilement of their [Black women's] bodies as white men put them in the place of white women. This was rape. Rape is defilement, and defilement means wanton desecration."[91] *Black women's Jesus*, therefore, is not

simply a member of the metaphysical Godhead. Jesus is a comrade in the fight for social justice. Jesus works in the existential trenches alongside Black women who are ensconced in everyday historical reality, a reality filled with oppression, physical abuse, dehumanization, sexual exploitation, etc. Jesus, however, functions as a disruptive and consoling reality within the historicity of Black women's experiences of pain, suffering and injustice. Jesus is involved in the revolution and struggle of liberating Black women from their multi-faceted oppression. In short, this is another variation on the theme of the Absolute becoming concrete. Grant argues:

> Black women have said and continue to say that Jesus Christ is one of us. When we use Jesus Christ, we see both the particular Jesus of Nazareth and the universal Christ of faith. In Jesus Christ, we see an oppressed experience and at the same time we see liberation. When we see Jesus Christ, we see concreteness and absoluteness, for in Jesus Christ, the absolute becomes concrete.[92]

Hence, for Grant, Jesus' significance is threefold:

> First, he identifies with the "little people" — Black women — where they are and he accompanies them in their struggles. Second, he affirms the basic humanity of these, "the least," and affirming them he empowers them to gain "more." Third, he inspires active hope in the struggle for resurrected, liberated existence.[93]

For Grant, it is not Jesus' maleness that is important, but his humanity,[94] compassion and love. More radically, Grant argues, "Christ, found in the experiences of Black women, is a Black woman."[95] The identity relation (Grant's use of the copula "is") between Christ and Black women, it seems to me, is neither an exclusionary nor an ontological relation. Theoretically, Native Americans could also say, "Christ, found in the suffering and oppressive experiences of Native Americans, 'is' a Native American." The point here is that Grant is concerned with the symbolic appropriation of Jesus vis-à-vis a certain set of existential experiences endured by *Black women*.

We should keep in mind that Grant does not maintain the *a priori* paramount significance of Black women's experiences. But given the above sketch of her womanist christology, how does she prevent the reality of Jesus from becoming exclusively meaningful and relevant to Black women? Grant writes:

> Black women share in the reality of a broader community: they share race suffering with Black men; with white women and other Third World women they are victims of sexism; and with poor Blacks and whites, and other Third World peoples, especially women, they are disproportionately poor. To speak of Black women's tri-dimensional reality, therefore, is not to speak of Black women exclusively, for there is an implied universality which connects them with others.[96]

Hence, Grant avoids myopia and exclusivism from developing at the very core of her womanist theology. In other words, and in conclusion, Grant argues that at the very heart of a womanist theology and philosophy of religion is a form of universal acceptance and openness to all those who suffer.

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BOOK REVIEWS

An Essay-Review of Mark David Wood's *Cornel West and the Politics of Prophetic Pragmatism.* University of Illinois Press, 2000

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Wood's fine text, *Cornel West and the Politics of Prophetic Pragmatism* (2000), is in my estimation one of the best critiques of West's *oeuvre* to date. Wood structures his text with an introduction, "Prophetic Pragmatism and the Future of Revolutionary Democratic Politics," and includes eight chapters. Wood notes in the introduction the growing acclaim afforded to West and his place as a major public intellectual. Wood surveys how supporters and critics have engaged West's corpus and political viewpoints.

Wood states his 'Central Project' is a critique of "West's theory of this prophetic pragmatism and his concept of the critical organic catalyst. To the extent that West is profoundly informed by and significantly contributes to the progressive pragmatist tradition, my work is equally a critique of this tradition." (Wood 2000, 6)

Wood brings an interdisciplinary approach to the investigation of West's work. This is extremely important because West's corpus expands beyond traditional disciplinary boundaries. A strong point about Wood's critique is that he is grounded in philosophy, Religious Studies and Africana Studies, thus he can migrate easily within West's intellectual terrain. Wood's examination of prophetic pragmatism brings together sociological, philosophical and political premises, which function methodologically to provide the following grounding theses:

> First, individual self-creation depends on satisfying basic needs and having access to the resources required to engage in creative work. Second, the building of a society in which all human beings may enjoy creative work—the basis of individuation—in a manner that is responsible to an empowering of society as a whole can be accomplished only on the basis of public ownership of productive property and democratic planning of societal development. Third, capitalism, as the dominant mode of global social economic organization, is *structurally* incapable of achieving these goals (Wood 2000, 6).

It is most transparent that Wood's political standpoint is anti-capitalist and hence his critique of West issues from the left and not from right-wing conservatism. Moreover, Wood is an ardent supporter of socialism; he does not fall into the ranks of those who have succumbed to defeatism in view of the demise of the Soviet socialist system. Wood correctly observes, "Just as capitalism did not come to the world with one great revolution, so it will not pass out of existence with one mass strike. Nor, for that matter, will a new genuinely socialist society be created overnight. The abolition of private ownership of productive property would merely liberate the resources to build such a society" (Wood 2000, 6-7).

In these times, when Lenin is often treated as a dead dog and where Cornel West specifically views Leninism as some

kind of 'right wing Marxism,' Wood, refreshingly, even advocates certain Leninist principles. He openly states, "Although resistance to oppression and exploitation is dramatically expanding around the world, this resistance does not inevitably develop into a self-consciously revolutionary movement. To paraphrase Lenin, no such movement develops without the development of revolutionary theory. Developing such a theory requires discerning the extent to which competing theories accurately grasp the social, political, and economic conditions of subjection and liberation" (Wood 2000, 7).

Wood employs what he terms an '*immanent* reading' with respect to the conceptual frameworks of prophetic pragmatism and a '*contextual* reading' with regard to the development of the social context that grounds intellectual work (Wood 2000, 7). With respect to the former task of an immanent reading, I think that in his first chapter, "the Christian-Marxist dialogue and the End of Liberation theology," Wood ought to have discussed West's review, in *Prophetic Fragments*, of Sharon Welch's *Communities of Resistance and Solidarity: A Feminist Theology of Liberation.*

Here, as with West, Welch emphatically indicates in her title a commitment to liberation theology. So first, she shares a common affiliation with West to liberation theology. Secondly, Welch also holds the same philosophical perspective with regard to historicism. Welch is a proponent of the historicist claim that Western intellectual culture has undergone a paradigmatic shift from foundationalism to historicism (West 1988). Surprisingly, West, in his review of Welch's text, is highly critical of her historicism, for Welch applies the radical historicist outlook to Christianity itself. This is surprising because West in his *Ethical Dimensions of Marxist Thought* strongly argues for radical historicism in ethics. It becomes most evident that West's radical historicism is not after all so "radical."

West's conveys to us that the outcomes associated with the paradigmatic shift from foundationalism to historicism, "Results in a wholesale nihilism, skepticism, and relativism and the concomitant stress on practices…" He further remarks, "Welch argues that the rise of liberation theology exemplifies this shift in models. Liberation theology constitutes what Foucault terms as 'insurrection of subjugated knowledges'" (West 1988, 208). So far, so good, Welch's position is prototypical of historicism. Then we encounter a stumbling block, West informs us, "Welch goes so far as to reject both Scripture and the person and work of Jesus as grounds for her theology. Rather she justifies her viewpoint by appeal to the practices and experiences of communities of faith struggling against sexism and other forms of oppression" (West 1988, 209).

Does West seek foundation in Christian Scripture? Is there some metaphysical grounding in the person and work of Jesus? Or do the following, Scripture and Jesus, provide us with an absolute morality or a transcendent ethics beyond the scope of human history? I know these are rather strange questions to pose to a radical historicist. But they are mandatory given West's response to Welch's radical historicist treatment of Christian Scripture and the historical person and work of Jesus. West suggests the appeal to such communities, in and of itself, is not so harmful as the fact Welch is committed to open "pretheoretical" or "intuitionist" allegiance with the oppressed. This intuitionist commitment presumes the "self-evident truth" of the cause and the aims of the oppressed. This reaction to Welch's radical historicism seems to replicate the conflation of radical historicism with moral relativism, which West alerted us to in *The Ethical Dimensions*. We need not assume radical historicism is without a theoretical framework and is merely pretheoretical and intuitionist because Welch chooses not to assume Christian metaphysical foundationalism.

West argues that there is a critical need to adopt a "communal language," something Welch rejects on the basis that it would lead to "universal discourses, absolute values and ahistorical grounding of beliefs" (West 1988, 210). West retorts that the oppressed often use universal and absolutist discourse. He says, "To link all forms of universalism and absolutism to domination is to overlook how some forms have and can morally regulate and politically mobilize people to resist domination" (West 1988, 210). It's quite obvious; West has abandoned his radical historicism.

Now we find there is no place for discourse emanating out of a historicist approach affixed to Christianity. Could it be that Christian theology, even as liberation theology, must necessarily find its theoretical anchor and its metaphysical supports in Scripture? Since Welch argues that the proof of any doctrine is "successful historical actualization," then she is consistently a radical historicist. A glaring contradiction appears when West finds space for absolutism as consistent with radical historicism. Especially when what we had discovered in *The Ethical Dimensions* was a theoretical assault on absolutism by way of foundationalism, objectivity and epistemological certainty. In fact, to argue for universalism and absolutism and yet maintain radical historicism seems to conflict with West's stringent call for overturning philosophical necessity and objectivity by embracing political utility.

What Welch offers is a utility criterion for Christian doctrine. If biblical doctrines of male supremacy do not work for woman's liberation, then throw them away. Universalism and absolutism require philosophical foundations and this would dictate a particular kind of metaphysics. What Welch rejects is Christian metaphysics; she rejects upholding Christian doctrine as a source of truth. It is at this juncture that West wants to depart from radical historicism.

He states, "It is at this point that I find her theology too thin, her faith too fragile and her sense of struggle too abstract"(West 1988). It is understandable that West would find Welch's theology too thin or her faith too fragile, for they lack his precious scriptures and the person of Jesus as metaphysical foundations. Yet it is incomprehensible that West would charge Welch's notion of struggle as being *too abstract* given that her starting point is radical historicism. West in his reading of Marx, presented in *The Ethical Dimensions*, finds no need for moral objectivism and epistemological certainty, for they become discarded in view of the historical contingency attached to radical historicism. It seems quite out of place to argue that Welch's notion of struggle is too abstract and concurrently claim, "Faith based solely on contemporary struggle for liberation is too presentist and unmindful of unpredictable future developments" (West 1988, 211).

But is not this the point of all historicism, and more especially radical historicism, that the quest for certainty applies to the present as well as the future? And as well, foundations cannot anchor the struggle against possibility of future setbacks and defeats? Is not the search for foundations (even the search for Christian doctrinal foundations in Scripture) a way of anchoring human history in certainty? Is not this aim, merely an abortive act, the reflection of the 'philosophers' dream,' which radical historicism seeks to put to rest?

Why now jump ship when historicism is directed at faith in Christian metaphysics? Furthermore, does not Marxism have as its anchor the struggle for liberation based on scientific materialism rather than fideism? Where such struggles are

grounded in the material conditions of social relations in production and seek to overthrow all exploiting and all oppressive classes? Nevertheless, the subordination of Marxism to Christianity and the undermining of its scientific character by way of pragmatism is in substance what West's syncretic philosophy is all about. He cannot respond to Welch in terms of Marxism. West can only rely on Christian foundationalism. The contemporary struggle for liberation, in West's estimation, does not provide an ultimate telos on which we can hold our faith and from which there is a guarantee for the eventual victory of the oppressed. Welch would no doubt agree, for this is, of course, consistent with radical historicism's rejection of foundationalism and epistemological certainty. Nonetheless, West cries out for such guarantees and a transcendent yet historical telos. I believe Wood's omission of West's review of Welch and its immanent implications is due to a conceptual problem emanating out of how Wood seeks to establish the periodization of West's corpus.

I think Wood concedes too much to West's early works and furthermore dislocates what are constituted as early works. Mark David Wood's assessment is that West's earlier works are more in the tradition of Marxist thought than what one finds in the writings after the publication of *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (1989). Wood's periodization of West's intellectual sojourn furnishes an interpretation, which suggests West essentially moves from a position that is closely aligned to Marxism to post-Marxism or anti-Marxism in the post-*Evasion* works (Wood 2000, 92-3).

A crucial factor in my differences with Wood converges on his periodization of West's corpus. Wood improperly locates the text, *The Ethical Dimensions of Marxist Thought*, according to its date of publication (1991) and accordingly fails to realize this work is in fact West's doctoral dissertation. Hence, it is prior to *Prophesy Deliverance* in terms of West's intellectual formation. What transpires in Wood's employment of the publication date for periodization is he assumes *The Ethical Dimensions of Marxist Thought* follows *Prophesy Deliverance* by way of West's theoretical formulations with respect to Marxism.

Although Wood cites page xxi of the introduction to *The Ethical Dimensions of Marxist Thought* (see p. 93 in Wood), he does not take notice of West's remarks on this and the previous page with regard to the context of *The Ethical Dimensions* as a doctoral dissertation "written over a decade ago when I was in my mid-twenties." Of course, over a decade ago would mean before 1981 and consequently, prior to *The American Evasion of Philosophy* (1989), and as well before *Prophesy Deliverance* (1982).

This misunderstanding becomes apparent when Wood assumes West has different epistemological conceptions of Marxist theory in each respective work. Wood states, "the interpretation of the epistemological status and critical significance of Marxist theory that West offers in *The Ethical Dimensions of Marxist Thought* differs from the interpretation he offered in *Prophesy Deliverance*. Again, in the latter work [*Prophesy Deliverance*] West's argues that Marxism provides not just one among many productive critical theories but the best theory for advancing the goal of human liberation." After this citation, Wood references West's caveat, "He added, however, that although Marxism 'provides the most powerful and penetrating social criticism in modern times,' it is problematic to the extent that it claims to be 'the master discourse on capitalist society' …For Marxism to remain politically useful, it must be understood as providing one among many productive critical theories, rather than being the 'master discourse on capitalist society'" (Wood 2000, 92).

Wood further argues, "In the works following *Prophesy Deliverance* West has articulated increasingly elaborate justifications for placing Marxism alongside, rather than above, other critical theories" (Wood 2000, 92). To support this argument, Wood cites *The American Evasion of Philosophy* (1989) and West's arguments for multiple descriptions, non-privileged representations, and anti-foundationalism. Under the assumption that *The Ethical Dimensions of Marxist Thought* (1991) follows both *Prophesy Deliverance* (1982) and *The American Evasion of Philosophy* (1989), Wood offers:

> He contends that Marx's 'turn toward history resembles the anti-foundationalist arguments of the American pragmatists.' Like James and Dewey, Marx also believed that 'Philosophic claims must no longer be scrutinized in terms of their objectivity, validity or necessity, but rather described and explained in terms of their function and role in relation to groups, communities, societies, and history.' For a radical historicist such as Marx, the criteria for adjudicating between competing claims are not epistemological but rather sociological, not philosophical but political. Critical of traditional philosophical conceptions of truth, Marx held that 'objective truth' should not be associated with copying the world, but rather with coping in the world, that 'objective truth' should not be associated with representations agreeing with the world, but rather *with people transforming* circumstances and conditions in the world (Wood 2000, 93).

It is Wood's considered opinion that *The American Evasion* is the pivotal text in West's evolutionary turn away from Marxism to liberalism. The assumption that *The Ethical Dimensions* follows *The American Evasion* clearly indicates Wood dislocates *The Ethical Dimensions* from its status as an early text. West plainly states in the introduction to *The Ethical Dimensions*, "And though I wrote *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* six years after my dissertation [The Ethical Dimensions], there is no doubt that my interpretation of Marxist thought is influenced by the works of John Dewey, the early Sidney Hook, and Richard Rorty." In fact, this citation from West is precisely the statement he made just prior to Wood's summary presented in the above remark from West, namely Marx's 'turn toward history resembles the anti-foundationalist arguments of the American pragmatists.'

Wood, after critically summarizing the problems inherent in *The Ethical Dimensions*, rhetorically poses, "If there is no determinate reality described by theories of the world, then it is not clear how one determines whether one theory is more right/true/correct than another. How does Marx justify the superiority of his theory of capitalism over others? For that matter, how does West justify his claim in *Prophesy Deliverance* Marxism is 'the most powerful and penetrating social criticism in modern times…'" (Wood 2000, 93)

Notice how Wood's rather penetrating insights are marred by his periodization scheme. First, his primary thesis, "West has articulated increasingly elaborate justifications for placing Marxism alongside, rather than above, other critical theories" presupposes West actually begins by privileging Marxism over other critical theories. The scenario attached to Wood's schema is thus predicated on the continual shifting of Marxist theory, in West's works, away from an alleged initial place of centrality to just one among other critical theories. This assumption, in my estimation, obscures the pivotal fact that West's starting point is anti-Marxist.

If we take *The Ethical Dimensions of Marxist Thought* as prior to *Prophesy Deliverance,* then the problems under critique viz. pragmatic relativism, or what I think is more precisely West's subjective idealism, can be disclosed and thus aid us in making better sense of the pronouncements in *Prophesy Deliverance*. In accenting West's subjective idealist reading of Marx in *The Ethical Dimensions*, contra Marx's actual materialism, we uncover how anti-Marxism is pervasive in West's initial undertaking.

Wood's first question, "How does Marx justify the superiority of his theory of capitalism over others?" clearly indicates the need to reference Marx's texts (recover Marx's actual materialist dialectic) to obtain a satisfactory answer. In other words, West's interpretation occludes any real understanding of Marx's philosophy and theory. Here we must cast aside West's distorted interpretation of Marx's philosophy and return to Marx's actual treatment of philosophy and his theory of capitalism. The rhetorical use of the question indicates West only gives us confusion and muddled thinking. Hence, he lacks clarity on the crucial issue of how Marx goes about the selection (formulation) of the needed critical theory of capitalism, i.e., dialectical and historical materialism. For Wood's question itself is one that results not from any problems with Marx but rather from West's interpretation of Marx on the basis of subjective idealism. Moreover, it is West's contrived interpretation of Marx's philosophy, the presumption that Marx's theory has some kind of kinship with pragmatism, which enables West to pass his own liberal pragmatism as falling in concert with Marxist philosophy via radical historicism.

Given my response to his first question, then Wood's second question, "how does West justify his claim in *Prophesy Deliverance*, viz. that Marxism is ' the most powerful and penetrating social criticism in modern times…'" must be put into proper context. I submit this proper context derives from starting with *The Ethical Dimensions* as prior to *Prophesy Deliverance*, for this would facilitate a more comprehensive understanding of Wood's earlier citation from *Prophesy Deliverance*. In the earlier citation, we have not only, "West argued that Marxism provides not just one among many productive critical theories but the best theory for advancing the goal of human liberation" but also "it [Marxism] is problematic to the extent that it claims to be 'the master discourse on capitalist society.' For Marxism to remain politically useful, it must be understood as providing one among many productive critical theories rather than being the 'master discourse on capitalist society.'"

The problem, of course, with viewing Marxism as 'the master discourse on capitalist society' would be that it places Marxist theory above all other critical theories. So in effect we discover that the second proposition not just qualifies the first proposition, it indeed nullifies it. The second proposition places Marxism along side and not above other critical theories. Now, we observe, the shift in the locus of Marxist theory takes place from the first to the second proposition. The transition is not a matter moving from one text to another, Wood's underlying presupposition with respect to his periodization scheme, instead it happens within the putative near 'Marxist' text itself, *Prophesy Deliverance*. So we have the same thesis of 'one critical theory among others,' the placement of Marxism along side of critical theories in *Prophesy Deliverance*, despite lip service to the effect that 'Marxism is the most powerful and penetrating analysis.'

The proposition that "for Marxism to remain politically useful, it must be understood as providing one among many productive critical theories" follows from a certain reading of

Marx. And this reading of Marx begins with West's primary thesis in *The Ethical Dimensions*. The primary thesis, "For a radical historicist such as Marx, the criteria for adjudicating between competing claims are not epistemological but rather sociological, not philosophical but political" is homologous with (structurally or isomorphically consistent with) West's application of Marxism in terms political utility. "For Marxism to remain politically useful, it must be understood as providing one among many productive critical theories rather than being the 'master discourse on capitalist society.'" Once Marx is read as a pragmatist (the putative radical historicist) it follows that any practical application of Marxism ought to be governed under the lights of a pragmatic (radical historicist) conception of Marxism. Here is the import of West's metaphilosophical move in *The Ethical Dimensions* for *Prophesy Deliverance* and all other works that follow.

The text, *The Ethical Dimensions*, constitutes the theoretical basis for the practical application of Marxism to the African American experience via *Prophesy Deliverance*. Rather than, as Wood argues, "the interpretation of the epistemological status and critical significance of Marxist theory West offers in *The Ethical Dimensions of Marxist Thought* differs from the interpretation he offered in *Prophesy Deliverance*," we have the same epistemological status afforded to Marxism in both texts. The difference in the texts is the concern with the level of inquiry. The former is a metaphilosophical undertaking and the latter the practical application to the African American experience, hence the latter is logically derived from the former. The sequence of publication dates cannot serve as the basis for periodization of West's corpus. To do so, as Wood has done, occludes our grasping both the real process of West's intellectual formation and the logical connection between his metaphilosophical work and its practical application.

Although, West, in *The Ethical Dimensions*, omits any reference to Lenin's locus within the Marxist philosophical tradition, his views on Lenin (in association with his examination of Black Marxist-Leninists) become most transparent in *Prophesy Deliverance*. West entirely buys into Harold Cruse's idea, "American Marxism has virtually co-opted Afro-American nationalism." West asserts, from the standpoint of his Social Democratic reformism and Prophetic Christian idealism, that Afro-American Marxist-Leninists were ideologically prisoners caught "in Leninist captivity." West then pejoratively evaluates and judges this group as adhering to "Right-wing Marxism." This list includes, James Ford, Benjamin Davis, Merrill Work, James Ashford, Manning Johnson, Abner Bracey (sic) (here I think West is referring to Abner Berry), Bonita Williams, Claudia Jones, Eloise Moore, Audley Moore, Henry Winston, Paul Robeson, W. E. B. Du Bois, Claude Lightfoot, and Angela Davis (West 1982).

West goes on to say:

This Leninist dominance of the Marxist tradition in the Afro-American experience is attributable primarily to the relative absence of *progressive* Marxism in American life. *Left-wing* Marxism has been nearly nonexistent in American society. Therefore the only Marxism that most Americans—educated or uneducated, black or white—are ever exposed to or hear of is *right-wing* Marxism, and especially Leninism.[1] [Italics added]

West adopts what are typical and timeworn liberal terms such as 'Leninism is right-wing Marxism.' (How often did bourgeois news commentators use this expression when reporting of the Soviet collapse?) West's overriding assumption

is that 'progressive' Marxism is anti-Communist in its political point of view, Social Democratic in its aims, and idealist in philosophical perspective. This compendium of ideas easily allows him to join comfortably with Cruse's right-wing ideological assault on African American Marxists and Marxism, more generally. West follows Cruse in the inability to discern his right from his left. We can see Wood's location of *Prophesy Deliverance* as a Marxist or near-Marxist text obscures its saliently anti-Marxist character. There is no doubt, as my prior comments demonstrate, Wood's own views on Lenin and Leninism are far in advance of West's notions about Leninism.

In conclusion, my criticisms not withstanding, Wood's has offered us a very important critique of West and the philosophical limits of prophetic pragmatism. This book is a must read for all of those seeking the needed theoretical and philosophical tools for the scientific critique of capitalism. My review of Wood's offering is to advance our understanding from the standpoint of Marxism-Leninism, the ideological basis of a scientific critique. I'm sure we will hear more from this promising scholar in the future.

West, Cornel. 1982. *Prophesy Deliverance: An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity*. Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press.
———. 1988. *Prophetic Fragments*. Trenton: Africa World Press.
Wood, Mark David. 2000. *Cornel West and the Politics of Prophetic Pragmatism*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois.

George Yancy (ed.) *Cornel West: A Critical Reader.* Malden, MA: Blackwell Publisher Inc., 2001. XV+380pp.

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George Yancy's book *Cornel West: A Critical Reader* is a political and revolutionary act. This book is revolutionary and transformative for two reasons. First, the subject matter of the book, the thought of Cornel West, is revolutionary and transformative. The work of Cornel West is revolutionary to the extent that he constantly challenges present structures of domination which exclude racial minorities, women, the poor, and those of alternative sexual orientations from the benefits of justice and democratic processes. Secondly, to publish a book about a prophetic black philosopher and cultural critic adds legitimacy to the voice of the oppressed and marginalized persons for whom this philosopher speaks. It raises the significance of the black intellectual to a status that was previously enjoyed only by white intellectuals. As Yancy states in his introduction:

As a political act, *Cornel West: A Critical Reader* is a variation on the theme of moving the center of conversation raised in my first book, *African-American Philosophers: 17 Conversations*. The idea here, one consistent with West's historicist and pragmatist sensibilities, is that philosophy is not an ahistorical project. Rather, philosophy is deeply embedded within particular configurations of racial, gendered, class, and cultural experiences. To raise the issue of moving the center of conversation of much modern (especially, European) philosophy is consistent with West's motif of "evasion," of stripping the profession of philosophy of its pretense. Undergirding the theme of moving the center of conversation is the recognition of the deep historical, experiential

embeddedness and radical contingency of philosophical systems; hence, it is to recognize the reality of multiple philosophical voices and the importance of their being heard. [p. 5]

Yancy's book is an important contribution to the African-American community as well as to the academic world. West himself has made an important (although complex) contribution to both worlds. West's complexity lies in his ability to inhabit several seemingly different and incommensurable theoretical worlds. As a well-trained Ivy League intellectual, West is equally at home in the African-American community, grass roots emancipatory politics, and the black church and preaching tradition. For West, we learn very little about the human condition and can do even less about it if we conform to the narrow, specialized intellectual inquiry that is in fashion in the academy. Therefore, to engage West is to confront a multiplicity of traditions, concerns, intellectual trajectories and discourses. The multiplicity of interlocutors that one finds in West's critique of American society often leaves one puzzled.

It is to Yancy's credit that he made the call for and compiled a collection of essays that capture the complexity of West's intellectual and political project. The essays in this volume disclose the very important contributions made by West, but they also challenge West by exposing some of the problematic areas in his project. Importantly, the book ends with a response by West to his critics.

Yancy's book is divided into four sections, each of which grapples with one aspect of West's complex and multifarious project. Part One examines the relationship between West's project and the uniquely American school of philosophy, pragmatism. West sees himself as a new generation of the American pragmatist tradition. The main influence on West from this tradition is John Dewey. With respect to West's pragmatism Hilary Putnam writes in Chapter One: "But West has never forgotten Dewey's injunction to "deal with the problems of men [human beings]" and not simply with "the problems of philosophers." [p. 20] Too often the problems with which philosophers are concerned are of no consequence to the daily struggles and toils of everyday people and especially oppressed people. West's pragmatism is also the foundation for his grass roots political activism.

Part Two of the book deals with the influence and importance of religion for West. By remaining connected to the black church, West stays in solidarity with the black struggle for emancipation. While Marxism and American Pragmatism are the most important philosophical influences on West, the most important religious influence is the black church and liberation theology. In Chapter Five of Yancy's book the black liberation theologian James Cone writes about West: "His main concern is not to become a great scholar in an academic guild. On the contrary, he views himself as a prophetic Christian freedom fighter who uses his intellect as a weapon against oppression in all its forms and to inspire ordinary people to believe in themselves, and their ability to make a difference in their lives and the world." [p. 108] As this passage indicates, as a prophetic Christian, West has as his primary goal the freeing of those who are held captive by western forces of domination and oppression. It is for this end that West synthesizes so many intellectual traditions.

While the attempt by West to synthesize a number of seemingly incommensurable traditions is admirable, it is filled with tensions which must be addressed. In Chapters Six and Seven respectively, George Yancy and Victor Anderson call on West to resolve some of these tensions in the context of his Prophetic, Pragmatic Christianity. Both Yancy and Anderson

problematize West's attempt to avoid religious realism through religious historicism. That is, for West, no religion contains an Archimedian point whereby it may ahistorically validate its claims to truth. Consequently, religious truth is a function of the existential needs and practices of a particular religious community. As Yancy points out, this leads to a religious pluralism wherein there are no epistemological foundational grounds for the allegiance to one religion as opposed to another. One who sympathizes with West might retort that religious pluralism is fine insofar as particular religions serve to meet the needs of its followers. However, Yancy's point is that if religious belief is to enable one to deal with the tragic side of life one must still be able to argue why one religious tradition is more helpful than another. Hence, the internal justification of a religion is questionable.

In Chapter Seven, Victor Anderson raises criticisms of West that are very similar to those raised by Yancy. The key criticism in Anderson's essay lies in his claim that West understands the Christian notion of transcendence in a way that is too limited. The ideas of transcendence and the "essence" of the Christian life advocated by West seem to be limited to democratic participation and "an ethical disposition toward humility of expectations, hope against the threat of nihilism and fatedness, and active engagement in the political pursuit of social transformation." [p. 151] Anderson argues that Christian faith pushes transcendence beyond Christian ethical consciousness. That is, for Anderson, the Christian still seeks union with God. The theology of West stands outside of the traditional understanding of Christian theology to the extent that it is merely ethical and not relational.

Part Three examines West's political philosophy while Part Four deals with West as a cultural critic. In the Afterword, Cornel West responds to the criticisms offered by his colleagues. As we read the essays on West and his response, we see that just as humanity is an unfinished project, West himself is also an unfinished project. However, this is no cause for a pessimistic attitude but rather, for a realistic optimism. West stresses the value of the creative struggle for liberation and an undying faith in the future of the human race.

In this book George Yancy has successfully brought together a collection of significant essays by a group of prominent scholars. It is indeed a great pleasure to read essays about a great mind like Cornel West by a group of well-respected scholars. This book puts the reader in touch with the most important problems facing black intellectuals as they struggle to carve out their place in academic institutions dominated by white interests while remaining in solidarity with their own people. Cornel West is indeed a revolutionary event in American society. Such a thorough treatment of West as we have in Yancy's book makes this book also a revolutionary event.