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Citation: Pilot Scholars Version (Modified MLA Style)

Ahiokhai, Simon, "Black theology in dialogue with LGBTQ+ persons in the Black Church: walking in the shoes of James Hal Cone and Katie Geneva Cannon" (2021). *Theology Faculty Publications and Presentations*. 35.

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Black Theology in Dialogue with LGBTQ+ Persons in the Black Church: Walking in the Shoes of James Hal Cone and Katie Geneva Cannon

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Abstract

The contributions of theologians like James Hal Cone and Katie Geneva Canon to the broader theological project of Black liberational theology allows for a rich discourse on what it means to be Black in the world, In doing this, memories of trauma must be engaged head on in ways that they become anamnestic moments for reimagining a new way of being human that is inclusive of all persons, Consequently, this work argues for the reimagination of the Black Church and its theologies that speak to Black experiences in ways that do not reinstate the hegemonic power of Whiteness as a mode of being in the world. Furthermore, the content and hermeneutic spaces shaping Black theology is critiqued with the intent to create a healthy space for the experiences of Black members of the LGBTQ+ community.

Keywords: Black Church; Black Identity; Coloniality of Imagination; LGBTQ+; Theology of Recognition; Whiteness.

Introduction

The young Ghanaian novelist, Ayi Kwei Armah titled his 1968 novel, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. Though received globally as an insightful work that sheds light on the young soul of a nation struggling to find its bearing after the dark nights of colonial rule, it was criticized by some Africans, notable among them was Chinua Achebe, who saw in it a negative narrative of all that has gone wrong with Africa without the possibility of hope.¹ I am particularly interested in the response of Armah to the critics of his work because of what it reveals. In his words;

The phrase "The Beautiful One" is ancient, at least five thousand years old. To professional Egyptologists, it is a praise name for a central figure in Ancient Egyptian culture, the dismembered and remembered Osiris, a sorrowful reminder of our human vulnerability to division, fragmentation and degeneration, and at the same time a symbol of our equally human capacity for unity, cooperative action, and creative regeneration ... my first impressions of Osiris left me with vague notions of a primitive religious leader, a spirit roaming the cosmos, on a self-chosen mission of social construction without brutality, a creator of new societies who went out into the world leading no armies, carrying no weapons, his sole instrument his trust in the capacity of human beings to reorganize their lives intelligently, justly and harmoniously.

I remember no special attachment to the mythic figure in those days, but by the time I wrote the novel my impressions of Osiris, though still relatively disorganized, had evolved to the point where I was ready to recognize the image as a powerful artistic icon. Here, in mythic form, was the essence of active, innovative

¹ Chinua Achebe, *Morning Yet on Creation Day* (New York: Anchor Press, 1975), 40.

human intelligence acting as a prime motive force for social management. I have yet to come across an earlier, or more attractive, image for the urge to positive social change.²

While many may be fascinated by the deity, Osiris, they ought to be reminded that without the benevolent wisdom and generosity of Isis, Osiris would never have gained eternal life. Without Isis, Osiris would remain forgotten like all who enter the realm of eternal silence, where even the mighty are forgotten to the memories of history.

In 2018, the theological world lost two very prominent voices, James Hal Cone and Katie Geneva Cannon. At this moment of our collective history, we celebrate their legacies. As we do this, I am tempted to vocalize my thoughts, Are Cone and Cannon not our Osiris and Isis? Are they not the sources of hope and life for many of us who have joyfully embraced their theological insights? Who is Cone without Cannon? What is Black theology without Womanist theology? As though, their destinies are intricately linked as those of Osiris and Isis, Cone and Cannon spent many years articulating theological narratives that gave voice to the Black experience. When theology is used to silence the voices at the margins intentionally or unintentionally, a corrective measure calls for a prophetic stance. The structures of oppression that Cone and Cannon spent their adult lives deconstructing are like a complex web holding its victim hostage from many angles.

While Cone focused his effort at articulating a systematic approach to Black theology that helped to shed light on the hypocrisy of what has come to be called normative theology, which is

² Ayi Kwei Armah, “The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born,” *New African Magazine*, August – September 2009.

at best a colonizing theology that favored heterosexual White men, whose experiences in human history have come to be taken for granted as the universal norm, Cannon, on the other hand, focused her prophetic gaze on the terrain of feminist ethics, where the normative standard was still one that favored Whiteness and heterosexuality. The experiences, wisdom, and insights of Black women were at best judged to be subsumed by the universalizing experiences of White women. It took the courage of Cannon to announce to the world what it meant to be Womanish – a theological vision saturated with inclusivity as its way of speaking of the God-world reality. Her courage, as well as that of Cone best speaks to the hopeful expectations of Armah’s work. *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* is a novel that looks prophetically at post-colonial Ghana under Prime Minister Kwame Nkrumah, the great pan-Africanist, whose nostalgic hope for a United States of Africa came crumbling down even before he woke up from his dream state. Armah’s work reminds one of what happens to all liberation movements that ground themselves on the philosophy of exclusion. Ghana, like other African nations, worked tirelessly to get rid of the European colonial systems. However, unfortunately, Ghana forgot to create a more inclusive society. Independent Ghana was only free from foreign rule; however, its national mindset was still held captive by the divisive and colonial tendencies that tended to see Africans as members of tribes instead of a people unified together by the best ideals of the nation-state.³

In a similar fashion, the liberation of Black bodies and histories in White America is closely linked to the courage of many voices in the Black Church. For Blacks, the Church is not simply a place of private devotion to God. Rather, the Church is a place for renewal. It is a place for claiming one’s identity in the midst of the surrounding forests where Blackness is erased by the intentional

³ See John Reader, *Africa: A Biography of The Continent* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), 614.

bias for Whiteness. The Black Church is a place of life. However beautiful these functions of the Black Church are in the history of social interactions in American history, the Black Church has failed in key areas. Its blind-spot is reflected in its external focus on racial dynamics in the United States of America without much serious effort to look inwardly at its own structures of exclusion.

In this work, I intend to do the following; critique the current realities shaping the Black Church and its preference for heterosexuality as its normative view on human identity. Also, I will shed light on ways the theological insights of Cone and Cannon can be the springboard for an inclusive theology of recognition for the Black Church to gladly welcome members of the LGBTQ+ Black community to its fold.

Blackness and Identity Construction in America: Bridging the Gap between Heterosexuality and Homosexuality

What does it mean to be Black in America? Appropriating Frans Fanon's insight on the decolonial project, Cone attempts a response to this question by calling attention to the concrete experiences of Black persons in a society that affirms Whiteness through a systematic erasure of Black people's experiences.⁴ To speak of Black identity in the United States of America, one must necessarily enter into dialogue with all that Black bodies have experienced since the beginnings of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. These experiences include the political, social, cultural, sexual, and gender preferences for Whiteness. The indoctrinating agenda of Whiteness in ensuring the sustenance, preservation, and continuity of a world that legitimizes its vision can best be described

⁴ James Hal Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation. Fortieth Anniversary Edition* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2010), 88.

as a form of coloniality of knowledge. Walter D. Mignolo offers a good explanation of what coloniality of knowledge means within the framework of racial and colonial subjugation of the other. In his words:

Christian Europeans' conception and image of the world *were only their own conception and image of the world, and not the representation of a geohistorical ontology of the world.* this is what coloniality of knowledge means, and how coloniality of knowledge orients both geopolitical designs and body-political subjectivities (e.g., our senses, our emotions, our cosmo-vivencias). Obviously, Western Christian Europeans had the right to build their own image of the world, like anybody else who had done so before them. but it was an aberration to pretend and act accordingly as if *their specific image of the world and their own sense of totality was the same for any - and everybody else on the planet.* The strong belief that their knowledge covered the totality of the known brought about the need to devalue, diminish, and shut off any other totality that might endanger an epistemic totalitarianism in the making.⁵

Coloniality of knowledge means the intentional refusal to see the other as a custodian of knowledge. The other, being already reduced to a hierarchical being that lacks the dignities appropriated by Whites, is at best one that is always at the mercy of Whiteness. An insightful consequence of this posturing is that Whiteness creates an identity within the context of the manipulative relationships that benefits White bodies at the expense of those who are not White.

⁵ Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh, *On Decoloniality. Concepts, Analysis, and Praxis* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2018), 195.

When one looks closely at how Whiteness as a way of being in the world operates, one immediately sees this notion of dependency in full display. Whiteness can only be imagined in relation to those who are not White? What then is White? It is a myth. It only comes to mind in relation to the other. Albert Memmi states this pathological dependency very well when he sheds light on colonialism: "... it can be stated that colonization creates the colonized just as we have seen that it creates the colonizer."⁶ Memmi's insight calls attention to the fact that whatever is called identity or knowledge within the space of erasure that is brought to be by the perpetrators of racial superiority is itself an invented lie. It is this lie that is the basis for the entire educational project invented to serve and perpetuate the hegemony of Whiteness in such a society as the United States; one deeply rooted in a bias for all that is White.

Cone goes further by stating categorically that any reasonable anthropological discourse of the human that speaks to the God-human interactions must begin with the Black experience because Blackness embodies all the markers and contours of God's self-revelatory presence in the world.⁷ Black bodies and their experiences are therefore *epiphanic* revelations of God. Cone articulates this properly when he reflects on the production of the creation myth in Genesis that was done by the priestly class during biblical Israel's captivity in Babylon. Biblical theology on what it means to be human is intricately linked to the experiences of oppressed people and God's

⁶ Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized. Expanded Edition* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 91.

⁷ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 78 – 80.

preferential option to take their side.⁸ Consequently, “for blacks this means that God has taken on blackness, has moved into the black liberation struggle.”⁹

Cannon’s response to the question of what does it mean to be Black in America has two prong approach. On one hand, she intentionally deconstructs the false knowledge that coloniality of imagination produces in the psyche of the colonized. She calls attention to the erasing experiences of Black women both in the larger society that preferences Whiteness and within the Black community that has modeled itself on the structures of the world created for White bodies. The following lines help explicate the contours of coloniality of imagination. The colonized, insofar as they operate within the sphere of manipulation, whether epistemic, existential, religious, cultural, linguistic, economic, political, or hermeneutical that is created by the colonizer to serve its grand interests, will always experience the lack of imagination. Imagination is at the heart of knowledge production. Because the colonized is held captive on all fronts by the grand exploitation that is disguised as education, the colonized becomes characterized by what Memmi calls “the mark of the plural.”¹⁰ This means that the “colonized is never characterized in an individual manner; he is entitled only to drown in an anonymous collectivity (‘They are this.’ ‘They are all the same.’). If a colonized servant does not come in one morning, the colonizer will not say that she is ill, or that she is cheating, or that she is tempted not to abide by an oppressive contract... He will say, ‘You can’t count on them.’ It is not just a grammatical expression. He refuses to consider personal, private occurrences in his maid’s life; that life in a specific sense does not interest him,

⁸ Ibid., 79.

⁹ Ibid., 81.

¹⁰ Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, 85.

and his maid does not exist as an individual... the colonizer denies the colonized the most precious right granted to most men: liberty... The colonized has no way out of his state of woe – neither a legal outlet (naturalization) nor a religious outlet (conversion). The colonized is not free to choose between colonized or not being colonized. What is left of the colonized at the end of this stubborn effort to dehumanize him? He is surely no longer an alter ego of the colonizer. He is hardly a human being. He tends rapidly toward becoming an object. As an end, in the colonizer’s supreme ambition, he should exist only as a function of the needs of the colonizer, i.e., be transformed into a pure colonized.”¹¹ The collective, as a ploy to control the colonized, becomes an identity that dehumanizes. The rainbow of creativity; the breadth of experiences embodied by members of the society being colonized are simply reduced to a footnote; one that is intended to make them invisible. A critical quality that emerges from the coloniality of imagination resides in a cyclic form of being that replicates the very oppressive value systems introduced into the world of the colonized. Since the colonized is held hostage on many fronts, the ability to imagine new ways of being and of giving voice to their experiences, as well as their own creative processes of knowledge production, are diminished.

On the other hand, as a corrective measure to the effects of coloniality on the imagination of Black persons, Canon appropriates what Johann Baptiste Metz calls “dangerous memories.”¹² Metz argues that Christian understanding of God’s role in the world and solidarity with creation are not to be understood via a whitewash appeal to a historicity that is devoid of context. Rather,

¹¹ Ibid., 85 - 86

¹² For a detailed treatment of this phrase, see Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Toward A Practical Fundamental Theology* (New York: Seabury, 1980).

such an understanding must engage in concrete terms the histories of God's people who live in the world of structural evil. The memories of these persons or communities who live at the margins of society when re-lived through storytelling evoke a form of *kenosis* in them and a demand for justice and the undoing of all structures that diminish their lives. Dangerous memories are thus both *kenotic* and liberational. They make the victims become aware of traumas that have become normalized as well as taking the victims to a new place of being where they can tell their stories in manners that are authentically theirs. Creativity is at the heart of storytelling. While coloniality of imagination kills creativity, storytelling resurrects creativity, and, as it were, gives it a new life and purpose. Stories hold captive the storyteller who is recounting their stories as well as the audience who listens. Such stories demand a response rooted in justice for all. Appropriating this line of reasoning, Cannon brings to the center of her theological reimagination of the human condition the memories of Black women in America that sheds light on the concrete pathologies of Whiteness and their harm on all that is Black in the country. In the consciousness of Black women, the memories of Black persons in America are not lost. From the era of slavery down to present times, Cannon argues that Black women's consciousness sheds light on the intrinsic nature of the evil of the "rigid system of segregation;" one that compelled Black women to continue to seek ways of survival while also caring for their families.¹³ In her essay titled, *Racism and Economics. The Perspective of Oliver C. Cox*, Cannon gives voice to the insights of George D.

¹³ Katie Geneva Cannon, *Katie's Canon. Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community. With a Foreword by Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot* (New York: Continuum, 1995), 52 – 53.

Kelsey who alluded to racism “as an idolatrous religion and an abortive search for meaning.”¹⁴ Continuing with this thought process, Canon argues that “the faith character of racism within organized religion divides human beings as human beings. The racist glorifies in the *being* of Whiteness. What the racist scorns and rejects in Black people is precisely their *human beingness*.”¹⁵

Like Cone, Cannon appeals to the Bible as the place where Black women find an alternative vision that opens up a new horizon for being human as hoped for by Black women in America. In her words:

In essence, the Bible is the highest source of authority for most Black women. In its pages, Black women have learned how to refute the stereotypes that depict Black people as minstrels or vindictive militants, mere ciphers who react only to omnipotent racial oppression. Knowing that Jesus stories of the New Testament helps Black women be aware of the bad housing, overworked mothers, underworked fathers, functional illiteracy, and malnutrition that continue to prevail in the Black community. However, as God-fearing women they maintain that Black life is more than defensive reactions to oppressive circumstances of anguish and desperation. Black life is the rich, colorful creativity that emerged and reemerges

¹⁴ Katie Geneva Canon, “Racism and Economics. The Perspective of Oliver C. Cox,” in *Womanist Theological Ethics: A Reader*, Katie Geneva Canon, Emilie M. Townes, and Angela D. Sims (eds), (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 5.

¹⁵ Ibid.

in the Black quest for human dignity. Jesus provides the necessary soul for liberation.¹⁶

Thus, for Cone and Canon, Black identity cannot be found in an anthropological vision created by Whiteness. The place to find its validity lies in the ethical turn to the Biblical Christ. To be authentically human is to be made in the image and likeness of the Biblical Christ, the Christ that identifies with all that is Black.

Black women's consciousness, as articulated by Cannon, is a form of awareness that demands radical inclusivity for all persons in society and to allow for all of them to flourish and be nurtured by the collective social structures that define their societies. This radical inclusivity goes beyond the boundaries of hetero-normativity. This said, Cannon articulates a Womanist methodology to allow for the dismantling of systems that erase Black bodies in a White constructed society as is America. Just like Cone in his appeal for a theological discourse of the human that must be grounded in concrete experiences of Black persons, Cannon's Womanist methodology states that "Black women live out a moral wisdom in their real-lived context that does not appeal to the fixed rules or absolute principles of the White-oriented, male-structured society. Black women's analysis and appraisal of what is right or wrong and good or bad develop out of the various coping mechanisms related to the conditions of their own cultural circumstances. In the face of this, Black women have justly regarded survival against tyrannical systems of triple oppression as a true sphere of moral life."¹⁷ Womanist methodology is a methodology that seeks to tell all stories, including the ones that society has deemed to be irrelevant. As noted by Cannon,

¹⁶ Cannon, *Katie's Canon*, 56.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 60.

“the story of Afro-American has been told quite coherently but has repeatedly left out the Black woman in significant ways. Seldom in history has a group of women been so directly responsible for exerting indispensable efforts to insure the well-being of both their own families and those of their oppressors. At the same time the Black woman is placed in such a sharply disadvantaged position that she must accept obligingly the recording of her own story by the very ones who systematically leave her out.”¹⁸ Canon’s call for inclusivity opens up a new space to allow for the recognition of all whom Whiteness as a mode of being in the world has erased. While Canon may be speaking for the recognition of Black women, her methodology gives legitimacy to members of the LGBTQ+ community who belong to the Black Church. The erasing tendency of the vision of Whiteness operating in the Black Church affects all persons who are not male and heterosexual. While Blackness may be affirmed in the space created by the Black Church, it is still an erasing system. Who is fully human in such a world? It is the heterosexual Black male. Canon refuses to accept this limiting vision. Thus, she concludes that the attempt by womanist scholars to tell the stories of their Black communities must be taken seriously because “the work of Black women writers can be trusted as seriously mirroring Black reality. Their writings are chronicles of Black survival. In their plots, actions, and depictions of chronicles, Black women writers flesh out the positive attributes of Black folks who are ‘hidden beneath the ordinariness of everyday life ... Their ideas, themes, and situations provide truthful interpretations of every possible shade and nuance of Black life.”¹⁹ Womanist storytelling is thus prophetic. It unsettles and sheds light on all that is

¹⁸ Ibid., 61.

¹⁹ Ibid., 68.

hidden in the Black community. Toxic masculinity, bias for hetero-normativity, classism, and sexism are called by their names in the stories told by Black womanist scholars.

Why must the oppressed, when free, replicate oppression towards itself and those who look up to him to end the enduring oppression that has held them captive for too long? This question is posed differently by Toni Morrison as she reflects on the experiences of old Black women raised in the southern part of America. In her words:

Edging into life from the back door. Becoming. Everybody in the world was in a position to give them orders. White women said, "Do this." White children said, "Give me that." White men said, "Come here." Black men said, Lay down." The only people they need not take orders from were black children and each other. But they took all of that and recreated it in their own image. They ran the houses of white people, and knew it. When white men beat their men, they cleaned up the blood and went home to receive abuse from the victim. They bear their children with one hand and stole for them with the other. The hands that felled trees also cut umbilical cords; the hands that wrung the necks of chickens and butchered hogs also nudged African violets into bloom; the arms that loaded sheaves, bales and sacks rocked babies to sleep. They patted biscuits into flaky ovals of innocence - and shrouded the dead. They plowed all day and came home to nestle like plums under the limbs of their men. The legs that straddled a mule's back were the same ones that straddled their men's hips. And the difference was all the difference there was.²⁰

²⁰ Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970), 109 – 110.

Morrison's insightful observation of the experiences of Black women in America sheds light on the deficiencies inherent in a racialized society that embodies and perpetuates the dynamics inherent in the colonial agenda – the imprisonment of the imagination of the victims of racism themselves. This claim is not lost to Cannon herself. In her prophetic reminder to the Black community to be watchful of effects of racism on the psyche of the community, she writes:

Black female writers, as participant observers, capsulize on a myriad of levels, the insularity of their home communities. Due to systemic, institutionalized manifestations of racism in America, the Black community tends to be situated as margined islands within the larger society. The perpetual powers of white supremacy continue to drop down on the inhabitants of the Black community like a belljar – surrounding the whole, yet separating the Black community's customs, mores, opinions and systems of values from those in other communities. Black female authors emphasize life within the community, not the conflict with outside forces. In order to give faithful pictures of important and comprehensive segments of Black life. These writers tie their character's stories to the aesthetic, emotional and intellectual values of the Black community.²¹

Distinguishing herself as a prophetic writer in her own right, Canon makes a distinction between the Black male writer and the Black female writer; a distinction that helps to shed light on the experiences of LGBTQ+ persons present in the Black Church. She writes:

²¹ Katie Geneva Canon, *Black Womanist Ethics* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2006), 87.

[Black] male writers tend to focus their literature on the confrontation between the white and Black worlds. Black women writers concentrate more intensely on the Black community and the human relationships within that community. Using the subject matter close to the heart of Black America, the Black woman's literary tradition shows how the results of slavery and their consequences forced the Black woman into a position of cultural custodian. Black female protagonists are women with hard-boiled honesty, a malaise of dual-allegiance, down-to-earth thinking, the ones who are forced to see through shallowness, hypocrisy and phoniness in their continual struggle for survival.²²

Canon's keen observation speaks to the disconnect that exists within the Black Church as it pertains to the experiences of its members who identify with the LGBTQ+ community. These persons experience a sense of double negation. While their humanity is denied them within the larger community and the gay community at large, they also experience a sense of erasure as sexualized humans within the Black Church or the African American community.

In a 2007 graduate thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of a master's in social works by Benjamin Aaron Kudler at Smith College School for Social Work, Kudler presents the results of his ethnographic study within the LGBTQ+ community with a special focus on the experiences of African American men living in the Boston area to understand how they construct their social identities as they navigate the homophobic world of African American communities and the gay culture that favors whiteness. He noted that the participants of his research spoke of the strong homophobic bias present in the Black Church they grew up in. This made it very hard for these

²² Ibid., 89.

men to ‘come out’ to their loved ones and thus had to live closeted lives.²³ It is worth noting the response of one of those Kudler interviewed; “I just want to reach out and tell church folks: How dare you turn your backs on us- you’re supposed to be saving us. And you know, I say, that’s discrimination within the church. How you gonna discriminate against your Father’s children, and you’re supposed to be preaching against discrimination? But look what’s happening! ... You see, I’m getting all red up in here...but that really pisses me off. It’s a contradiction.”²⁴

Kudler’s findings show that the participants in his research speak of the endemic racism present in the gay community in Boston. His research concludes that the Boston gay community is one of exclusion. Kudler notes in his findings that African American gay men are expected by many of their white counterparts to be “hyper-masculine and ‘thuggish’ ... who speak and carry themselves [in] a certain way.”²⁵ Kudler makes an important point when he argues, “African American gay men are cultural outsiders, often made to feel unauthentic as gay men because of their race and/or cultural or class perspective. Simultaneously, African American gay men face homophobia from African American communities, and thus are often selective about with whom and in what circumstances they can be open about their attractions and/or relationships.”²⁶

²³ Benjamin A. Kudler, “Confronting Race and Racism: Social Identity in African American Gay Men,” (Master thesis, Smith College, 2007), 37.

<https://scholarworks.smith.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=&httpsredir=1&article=2418&context=theses> (accessed November 23, 2020).

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., 46.

²⁶ Ibid., 61.

Observing the resilience of the African American gay men in his study group, Kudler makes the following conclusions:

In spite of the hardships participants felt, the level of resiliency exhibited amongst these men is noteworthy. Through solidarity, self-sacrifice and compromise, and faith participants have maintained a sense of pride in themselves. Many of the participants relocated just before they came out to family and/or friends, and were able to reestablish themselves in new, often foreign communities that weren't necessarily welcoming. The majority of participants reported building their own communities, learning to assess for safety, developing language to discuss their multi-faceted identities, and finding others who could look at their many parts and embrace them. While many participants still struggle to find a balance of being out in all of their social identities (gay, a proud African American, HIV-positive, religious), participants have showed a sense of ingenuity and creativity in creating families and communities that will celebrate them.²⁷

It is important to also state that the larger framework of social identity construction that favors Whiteness has become the normative lens of identity construction within the LGBTQ+ community. The same can be said of the Black Church because it is a church that, though it resists racism, its anthropological vision of the human is still conditioned by the vision of the human in the White world. It is a vision that is reactionary to the stimulus of Whiteness and thus lacks the breadth of creativity that a freed imaginative power brings about. This shallow response to

²⁷ Ibid., 62 – 63.

Whiteness without a deliberate reorientation of the cognitive and existential habits is what Amah alluded to in his literary work, *The Beautiful Ones Are not yet Born*. Post-colonial Ghana lacked the ability to reimagine itself on its own terms because it spent its energy being reactionary and built a world that was on the surface reactionary but, within, upheld the vision of statehood crafted for it by the British colonialist. It is one radically defined by exploitation and violence. In comparison, one can conclude that the inability of the Black Church to acknowledge the need for a hermeneutic of generosity that gives voice to and sheds positive light on the experiences of LGBTQ+ persons in the Black community is that the said Church has appropriated an exclusivist hermeneutic framework that is found in the master-servant narratives of the dominant culture that speaks of identity construction always in the subject – other competitive space. Racism originates from a vision of competition and erasure. Thus, identity construction within the world created by racist ideologies is always shaped by notions of scarcity. For Blacks to be fully human, Whites have to be diminished. For Whites to be fully human, Blacks have to be diminished. For maleness to be fully recognized, femaleness has to be diminished. For heterosexuality to be fully recognized, homosexuality has to be diminished. No balance can ever be achieved in such a world defined by unhealthy competitions. This binary approach to identity construction is deeply rooted in the Cartesian bias for subjectivity. Hence, to speak of the ‘I’ is to silence the ‘Other.’

To understand this deficient vision that always erases otherness, that both Cone and Canon call attention to, one has to look closely at the systematic erasure of the Civil Right activist, Bayard Rustin, a gay man, from the narratives of Black male historians and public figures who told the incomplete story of the movement for Black liberation in America. Even in the 1960s, Dr. Martin Luther King, jr.’s affiliation with Rustin was weaponized by the homophobic Rev. Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., the pastor of Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem. He accused King of having

homosexual relationship with Rustin as a way of preventing King from organizing a “civil rights protest planned for the Democratic National Convention in Los Angeles in August 1960.”²⁸

Angelique C. Harris calls attention to the homophobic bias that radically defines the Black Church. In her words; “all seven of the historically African American Protestant denominations; the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AMEZ) Church, the Christian Methodist Episcopal (CME) Church, the National Baptist Convention, USA, Incorporated (NBC), the National Baptist Convention of America, Unincorporated (NBCA), the Progressive National Baptist Convention (PNBC), and the Church of God in Christ (COGIC) still view homosexuality as “an abomination” and do not see it as an acceptable ‘lifestyle’.”²⁹ Harris concludes that the attack on homosexuality by the Black Church is not directly linked to hatred of homosexuality. Rather, it is linked to centuries of African Americans distancing themselves from the enslavement of their bodies by Whites and a strategic reclaiming of their bodies, and, in the process, have appropriated a form of toxic masculinity that preferences heterosexuality; a point mutually shared by Kelly Brown Douglas and slightly nuanced by Patricia Hill Collins and Cornell West. These figures argue that Black middle class intentionally used the ethical concepts of “decency and respectability” as a way of reclaiming Black bodies and Black sexuality (heterosexuality) from the erotic fascination of Whites.³⁰ These nuanced reading of a bias for

²⁸ See Angelique C. Harris, “Homosexuality and the Black Church,” *The Journal of African American History* 93, no. 2 (Spring 2008), 262.

²⁹ Harris, “Homosexuality and the Black Church,” 263.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 266. See also Kelly Brown Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective* (Maryknoll, New York, 2003); Cornell West, “The Black Church Beyond

hetero-normativity in the Black Church does not capture fully the decolonial insight that Canon uses to describe the paradoxes inherent in the Black Church and African American community. As she rightly states, the creativity inherent in the works of Black women writers comes from a prophetic observation rooted in an embrace of new imaginations. As she writes: “The special distinctiveness of most Black women writers is the knack to keep their work intriguing and refreshing amidst its instructiveness. They know how to lift the imagination as they inform, how to touch the emotions as they record, how to deliberate specifics so that they are applicable to oppressed humanity everywhere. In essence, there is no better source for comprehending the ‘real-lived’ texture of Black experience and the meaning of the moral life in the Black context than the Black woman’s literary tradition. Black women’s literature offers the sharpest available view of the Black community’s soul.”³¹

Validating Canon’s view, Douglas asks a very important question that is worth repeating here:

Homophobia,” in *Though I stand at the Door and Knock: Discussions on the Black Church’s Struggle with Homosexuality and AIDS*, ed. Julia Walker (New York: The Balm in Gilead, 1997), 13 – 20. Michele Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation: African Americans and the Politics of Racial Destiny After Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2004). Kevin K. Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century, second edition* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 45.

³¹ Canon, *Black Womanist Ethics*, 90.

With such a history of the Bible being used against them, it seems abhorrent for Black people to be steadfast in their use of the Bible against other Black persons, in this case, gay men and lesbians. How can a community that has suffered under an oppression covered with a sacred canopy inflict the same oppression upon others? How can such a community be so unwilling to reevaluate its use of biblical authority? How can it remain so closed to new understandings of problematic texts?³²

In an attempt to address these paradoxical questions, Douglas chooses to engage in dialogue with biblical scholars whose interests address the significance of the Bible in African American identity construction. One of these is Vincent Wimbush. Wimbush postulates that African American hermeneutic appropriation of the Bible ought to be seen from the locus of exiles. In his words, as “Africans in America.”³³ He argues further that faced with a systematic silencing of African slaves by White slaveholders through the redistributing of Africans into a social system characterized by alienization, “the Bible became a ‘world’ into which African Americans could retreat, a ‘world’ they could identify with, draw strength from, and in fact manipulate for self-

³² Douglas, *Sexuality and The Black Church: A Womanist Perspective*, 91.

³³ Lynne St. Claire Darden, *Scripturalizing Revelation: An African American Postcolonial Reading of Empire* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2015). See a detailed treatment of this topic in, Vincent Wimbush, “The Bible and African Americans: An Outline of An Interpretative History,” *Stony The Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Cain Hope Felder (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 81 – 97.

affirmation.”³⁴ Again, the vision of Wimbush does not address fully the radical reimagination of what it means to be Black as articulated by Cone in his liberational anthropology that seeks to call Christ a Black Messiah, in fidelity to “Albert Cleage’s description of Jesus as the Black Messiah,” and Canon’s Womanist turn to a radical reimagination of the Black world and Black identities and bodies.³⁵ Both Cone and Canon call for a radical reorientation that allows for authentic embrace of creative imaginations needed to construct a world where the broad expressions of Blackness are embraced. In other words, they seek to argue for what NoViolet Bulawayo stylistically states in the form of a request in her work, *We Need New Names*.³⁶ Cone and Canon demand of the Black community to embrace new visions, new names, new sense of selves that are grounded in narratives of surplus. For this to happen, an intentional overthrow of the world and logic of thinking that Whiteness has constructed, which continue to operate in the Black world, must be done completely.

Heterosexuality has been constructed as a mode of being in the world constructed for Whiteness in a way that homosexuality must necessarily be invalidated. Does this mean that there is no escape from this totalizing preference for heterosexuality by the Black Church? Cone and Canon refuse to accept the claim that it is a permanent imprisonment. Cone is firm about the need to reorient our entire epistemic framework. This is at the heart of one of his famous works, *A Black Theology of Liberation*. Canon insists that the double marginalization experienced by Black

³⁴ Wimbush, “The Bible and African Americans,” 83.

³⁵ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 120; Canon, *Black Womanist ethics*, 90.

³⁶ NoViolet Bulawayo, *We Need New Names: A Novel* (New York: Reagan Arthur Books, 2013).

women, from Whites and Black men, has allowed them to have a keen and broad perspective that is accessible by those who stand constantly at the margins of society.

Towards A Theology of Recognition: Walking in the Shoes of Cone and Cannon

How should the Black Church respond to the needs of its members who are also members of the LGBTQ+ community? To address this question, I propose a theological orientation that I have labeled a theology of recognition. This theological orientation is very much in agreement with the insights and contributions of Cone and Cannon to the contemporary theological discourses. While racism seeks to erase the being of Black persons; silence their voices; negate sexualities that are of themselves constituted of a spectrum of queerness; invalidate the knowledge production of communities that are otherized by Whiteness, Cone and Cannon insist on making space for new and creative imaginations that are radically inclusive. Thus, a theology of recognition takes diversity seriously. In fact, it roots itself in a world radically defined and sustained by difference. Difference is here understood to mean a deliberate affirmation of all that is other, unlike the manipulative erasure of otherness that racism or colonialism evokes. A theology of recognition seeks to reflect on what gifts and challenges are faced by societies that are today radically defined by cultural, racial, religious, and political pluralisms. It recognizes the fact that insular theological discourses must be rejected because they fail to give voice to the rainbow experiences of collective humanity. A theology of recognition has as its starting point an affirmation of all things that define otherness as a mode of being in the world. Human beings are sexual creatures who embody a rainbow expression of what it means to be sexualized creatures. Thus, a theology of recognition insists that all persons ought to learn a new way of being in society, one that rejects a leap to judgment. Consequently, this form of theology seeks to celebrate all that constitute our diverse human

existence as gifts from a Trinitarian God that embodies in Itself, diverse personhoods. Just as the Father is not the Son; the Son is not the Father; the Spirit is neither the Father nor the Son, yet, in their differences lies the bond of divine friendship, so also is our humanity as creatures who embody the spectrum of sexuality. These ought not to disunite us. Rather, they ought to be the pathways for human solidarity and friendship as they exist in the Trinitarian communion

A theology of recognition is radically defined by the virtues of courage and gratitude. Courage speaks to the prophetic dimension of this theological turn to all things human, while shedding light on the paradoxes of the dehumanizing structures operating in society and within the religious space. Gratitude speaks to the response to the gift of new ways of seeing and imagination that comes from the God that constantly renews God's world to allow for new ways of living to be experienced by all.

The virtues of courage and gratitude also define the theological insights of Cone and Canon. Cone was courageous enough to call out the hypocrisy of what was erroneously termed traditional theology that preferences the experiences of White bodies while being loudly silent towards those who are not White. This prophetic stance comes from a place of gratitude to the God who allows Cone and Canon to see the unseen, notice the erased, and make space for the voiceless to speak loudly their truths as they join hands in constructing a more inclusive world. As Cone stated clearly while reflecting on the lynching of Blacks in America: "When we look at a lynched black victim transfigured as the re-crucified Black Christ, we might as well be looking at a 'colored woman ... stripped naked and hung in the country courthouse yard and her body riddled with bullets and left exposed to view'" Quoting Jacquelyn Grant, Cone goes on to say that "The significance of Christ is not found in his maleness, but in his humanity. This Christ, found in the experiences of black women, 'the oppressed of the oppressed' is a black woman. Unfortunately, the powerful

image of Christ as a Black Woman has been left out of our spiritual and intellectual imagination, needing further theological imagination.”³⁷ On the part of Canon, entering a field monopolized by voices of men, first, by those of White men, and in the Black Church, by Black men, she embraced her prophetic vocation and insisting on being the trailblazer for creating the space for the silenced voices and wisdom of African American women to be heard and appreciated by all who dared to ask the question: How is theology to be done from the perspectives of African American women? Operating from the locus of a theology of recognition, Canon embraced the friendship she fudged with the men she encountered on her own theological growth. Cannon, in her deep sense of gratitude, taught us how to work together.³⁸ That approach continues to bear fruits today in the theological circles that have seen many African American women come to the table of discourse and offer life-giving insights to all of us.

Again, inclusivity is at the heart of a theology of recognition. Inclusivity speaks to the divine truth that God uttered at the time of creation; all that God creates God declares to be good. Canon takes this truth very seriously in her deliberate attempt to locate herself within the Womanist theological tradition. A fact that is stressed by Alice Walker when she writes the following,

³⁷ James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2013), 121.

³⁸ See Matthew Wesley Williams, “Rev. Katie Geneva Cannon – In her Own Words,” *The Forum for Theological Exploration (FTE)*, August 17, 2018, <https://fteleaders.org/blog/rev.-dr.-katie-geneva-cannon-in-her-own-words> (accessed November 30, 2020).

“womanism gives us a word of our own.”³⁹ Less, one thinks that Walker is advocating for a separatist ideology, womanism is a praxis of bridge-building that intentionally aims to seek moments of intersectionality between African American women perspectives and other feminist perspectives in their effort to critique the oppressive structures of race, gender, and class.⁴⁰ What womanist theology is today doing to the anthropological discourse in theology that previously favored maleness, can be said to be what queer theology aims to do for persons who identify with the LGBTQ+ community. Previously, maleness/masculinity and heterosexuality were considered to be the full expression of God’s vision for humans. All that is changing. In the words of Patrick S. Cheng, “...queer theory challenges and disrupts the traditional notions that sexuality and gender identity are simply questions of scientific fact or that such concepts can be reduced to fixed binary categories such as ‘homosexual’ vs. ‘heterosexual’ or ‘female’ vs. ‘male.’ As such, this third definition ... refers to the erasing or deconstructing of boundaries with respect to these categories of sexuality and gender.”⁴¹ The life-giving possibilities that one can derive from this theory are unlimited. A queer theological anthropology attempts to erase binary notions of identity. A theology of recognition makes a home with queer theology because they both attempt to give voice

³⁹ See Gloria Steinem and Diana L Hayes, “Womanism,” *The Reader’s Companion to U.S. Women’s History*, 639 – 641, edited by Wilma Mankiller, et al. (Oakland, New Jersey: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1999).

⁴⁰ See Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas, ed., *Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2006).

⁴¹ Patrick S. Cheng, *An Introduction to QUEER Theology. Radical Love* (New York: Seabury Books, 2011), 6

to multiple perspectives that allow for the flourishing of all lives, be they those of Whites, Blacks, LatinX, Asians, members of the LGBTQ+ community and so on.

A theology of recognition speaks of a God who became human in all its expressions to bring about our salvation. Some of God's creatures experience their humanity as males, females, and queers. The correct response to such experiences ought not to be one of judgement but of gratitude. A theology of recognition makes the claim that no anthropological vision is complete, because to be human is to embody complexities, known and yet unknown. In the past, homosexuality was considered unnatural and an attack to the natural order inherent in humans as God's creatures as though one knew definitively what and how that nature ought to be expressed. A similar bias for Whiteness has played itself out in human history. Did many western theologians, particularly those involved in the great debates at the City of Valladolid not argue passionately to delegitimize the humanity of the Indigenous people of the Americas?⁴² Did the European slave-traders not extend this anti-human bias towards the enslaved Blacks in the Americas?⁴³ Today, any reasonable person would laugh at such stupidities. Something seems constant about how most humans have addressed alterity, they quickly want to deny its legitimacy. If God cannot be reduced completely to human intelligence, why then do humans think they can reduce those God has made in God's image and likeness to their limited hermeneutic analyses?

⁴² See Dinesh D'Souza, "Ignoble Savages," in *Critical White Studies: Looking Behind the Mirror*, eds. Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997), 59 – 60.

⁴³ Ibid.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick makes an important observation as she critiques the racial biases that play out within the LGBTQ+ community in relation to how White gay persons perceive their Black companions:

Our need to be exemplary bodies sprang from the history of radical denial of exemplary function to black gay bodies at the intersection of two kinds of community that seem so often to carve each other out of perceptual existence: a tacitly racist white gay community for whom a black queer body, however eroticized, might stand as a representation of blackness but could never seem to embody queerness itself, and a more or less openly homophobic African American community by whom queerness of any black figure must be denied, suppressed, or overridden for that figure to be allowed to function as an embodiment of black identity or struggle.⁴⁴

In other words, the LGBTQ+ Black community experiences multiple experiences of rejection; one from those who identify as heterosexuals, the second from those who identify with the White gay community, and the third, the Black Church community. Just as the gay community, whether White, Black, LatinX, interracial, or Asian must work intentionally at not using the vision of heterosexuality to define itself, one that has led to their own alienation, the Black Church and its leaders should intentionally work towards deconstructing how they perceive themselves in the world where alienation and discrimination have come to be accepted as the ways of being in the world. The Black Church ought to ask itself the following question: What new insights are out

⁴⁴ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003), 31.

there that it can appropriate as it attempts to create a world that is radically inclusive and different from what it currently operates under? The Black Church should turn to Cone and Canon, whose theological creativities allowed for a disruption and negation of hegemonic validation of Whiteness and heterosexuality as the only ways of being in the world. Should the Black Church take seriously the theological insights of Cone and Canon, it has to then address the following issues: First, the Black Church should critically deconstruct its theologies and all theologies of creation. It should be encouraged to do this, not from the place of comfort and the familiar, where it thinks it knows what and how God has created the world, but from a place that allows it to be open to new insights and ideas. It ought to embrace interdisciplinary approaches to studying creation in ways that humans and their sexual possibilities are at the center of the discourse. At the heart of a theology of recognition is the constant desire to seek new ways of thinking of how God operates in God's world. A theology of recognition deliberately seeks to understand humanity not as a predictable creature defined by singular ways of being; rather, it affirms the fact that to be human is to be complex. Complexity becomes an exciting motif for speaking of a creature made in God's image and likeness.

Second, notions of natural law ought to be addressed for what they are; they are theological and philosophical insights contextually conditioned with their inherent political, cultural, hermeneutic, and linguistic biases that have come to favor Whiteness in God's world of diversity. To simply appeal to natural law when speaking of human sexuality is to deny human dignity to those who are different from one, and thus, become intellectually dishonest. A theology of recognition seeks to find traces of knowledge and truth about the human being as a sexualized person as understood in other disciplines. In other words, a theology of recognition is interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary. While weaving together different strands of knowledge on

the human (interdisciplinary), it moves into a new horizon, one where new knowledge of the human is created, validated, and embraced (transdisciplinary).

Third, a theology of recognition affirms the truth that all theologies are contextually produced and speak to particular contexts. Consequently, it rejects the postulation of normative or universal theology. This fact has to define the approach of the Black Church in its articulation of what human sexuality looks like. The Black Church ought to seek ways to pastorally care for its members who identify as persons who belong to the LGBTQ+ community. To ignore this fact is to be a church that does not take seriously the demands of reading the signs of the times.

Fourth, a theology of recognition grounds itself on the claim that identity is performative. What we call ourselves, and who we claim to be are radically defined by the relational responses they evoke in the context of social interactions. This insight is in line with what Judith Butler terms, “performative identity.” Butler’s insights can be helpful to the Black Church as it works towards understanding and embracing a liberating vision of the human, one radically defined by the vision of surplus that is a proper response to the anthropological vision of scarcity that operates in racist ideologies favoring Whiteness as the only way of being in the world. The Black Church can learn something new from the following insights of Butler: “Identity categories tend to be instruments of regulatory regimes, whether as the normalizing categories of oppressive structures, or as the rallying points for a liberatory contestation of that very oppression.”⁴⁵ Gender, “in other words, rather than being expressions of an innate (gender) identity, acts and gestures which are

⁴⁵ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 13 – 14.

learned and are repeated over time create the illusion of an innate and stable (gender) core.”⁴⁶ Though Butler is speaking of the binary gender constructions of male-female, this logic of reasoning pertains also to the social reality of queerness as well. In a similar manner, the binary construct of gender and the inherent preference for maleness against femaleness in the world of heterosexuality plays itself out as well within the racial discourses of Whiteness and all that is not-White. This should not be alien to the members of the Black Church, whose identity as persons with Black bodies have been used for centuries as means for instantiating their oppression. Should the Black Church refuse to acknowledge this insight of Butler, it can then be legitimately accused by its members who identify as members of the LGBTQ+ community as having created a new erasing hegemonic narrative of what it means to be Black. Such a narrative serves the same purpose as does the erasing tendencies of colonialism and racism (Whiteness).

Conclusion

To be Black in America comes with its own burden; one defined by narratives of erasure. Black bodies and their experiences are sometimes devalued, prejudiced, and out rightly judged to be outside of the expected norms of society. The Black Church for decades, if not for centuries, has been a safe place where Blacks embrace their Blackness without fear of being discriminated upon. The civil right movement in America would not have been possible were it not for the Black Church that became the moral conscience of this nation. Today, the Black community can boast of a Black president, Barack Obama, one of the very best of the 21st century, who called us to be

⁴⁶ Nikki Sullivan, *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 82.

persons of hope when hopelessness seemed to be the prevailing vice; and a Black female vice president-elect, Kamala Harris, America's first female to ever hold such a position. While we rejoice for all that and many more, it must be said clearly, a church that chooses to use the same narratives that silenced its members cannot hope for a different outcome. Though M. Shawn Copeland's focus is on the experiences of Black women in the racialized history of America, one can see some parallels with the Black members of the LGBTQ+ community within the context of the Black Church. In her words, "The body provokes theology. The body contests its hypotheses, resists its conclusions, escapes its textual margins. The body incarnates and points beyond to what is 'the most immediate and proximate object of our experiences' and mediates our engagement with others, with the world, with the Other... always, there is a 'more' to you, a 'more' to me: the body mediates that 'more' and makes visible what cannot be seen."⁴⁷ Similarly, I would argue that our sexualities compel us to embrace an inclusive theology, one that rejects the binary vision of human sexuality as heterosexuality vs. homosexuality or straight vs. gay. Queer theological anthropology seems to be the most viable corrective vision to such binary sexual locations. To be queer is to be political. To be queer is to be radically inclusive. To be queer is to be open to difference. To be queer is to see the world as a place where all of God's children are invited to live lives that flourish. To be queer is to express gratitude to a God, whose economy in the world has given validity to queerness as a mode of being in the world. The humanity of the Second Person of the Trinity is not defined by its male genitalia. Rather, its incarnation is defined by the totality of all that constitutes our human experiences, be they sexuality, socially constructed genders, and

⁴⁷ M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 7.

all that we are yet to understand of ourselves as children of God made in the humanity of the incarnate Christ.

Finally, the Black Church should reflect on how its message of discrimination and outright condemnation of members of the Black community who identify as LGBTQ+ persons help to instantiate the very hateful message and narratives that continue to erase the presence of Blackness from our national memory. Until that time when the Black Church can authentically articulate a theology of love that recognizes all persons without discrimination, one can conclude, as did Armah, that *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*.

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