BLACKNESS AND THE PROBLEM OF BELONGING: A POLITICAL THEOLOGY OF RACE AND REPRODUCTION

By

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For all my friends trying to find their way

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Preface

I came to this dissertation through the work of Delores Williams. No matter where I tried to go in my work, I kept coming back to Williams and Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk. In this, her only monograph, she develops a method of Rereading that I've found invaluable for my own study. For Williams', rereading refused to arrive on the scene with the end already in sight, as theology is prone to do. Instead, Williams' method unsettles Christian assumptions and ends by reading Christian history and theology from the underside and with wider sources than traditionally employed in dominant readings. This raises the assumptions of the reader, the reading community, and the text itself into view. In addition to this method, Williams' begins elaborating on two concepts which she doesn't get to fully expand: reproduction history and reproductive technologies.

> Obviously, Beverly Harrison's work and other work in women's reproduction rights and in reproduction technology have a lot to say to my womanist suggestions that black women's history be understood as a reproduction history; that is, reproduction history that uses labor as a hermeneutic to interpret black women's biological and social experience of reproducing and nurturing the species and labor as an interpretative tool for analyzing and assessing black women's creative productions as well as their relation to power structures in both the black and white worlds. Certainly I need to give this more thought. This observation about black women's history as reproduction history, like some of the other ideas in the book, is suggestive. Though relevant to the content of *Sisters in the Wilderness*, some of these suggestive ideas will be developed more fully in another context. They are mentioned in this text because I think we womanist theologians must get as many ideas "out there" as possible when we have the change--that is, ideas relevant to whatever subject we are treating at the time. Most of us know racism and sexism in the publishing business and in theological education lets only a few black people (female and male) into positions that allow us to have a public voice and to publish. Therefore we must share as much with each other as we can so that many, many ideas relevant to our people can get abroad, even if the ideas are developed later by someone other than the original contributor.[1]

[1] Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Orbis Book, 1993), 6.

In rereading Williams, I was trying to extend these concepts and show their significance for political theological questions. In many ways, then, rereading Williams is the way that I came to this project.

Reading her over and over again in light of black feminist's work on reproduction by theorists like Hortense Spillers, sociologists like Dorothy Roberts, and religious historians like Alexis Wells-Oghoghomeh led to this project. I was trying to elaborate on what were generative concepts for me but whose implications were not fully developed in Williams own work. I was also trying to respond to and rearticulate "the challenge of Womanist God-Talk" that Williams' sets out in Sisters in the Wilderness, which I take as a doubled challenge. It's both the challenge of how to make theology work in a way that is adequate to the black situation, especially black women's, and it is a challenge to theology, or God-Talk, itself.

When I began to think about how I could apply this method and these concepts of reproduction history and technology, I turned to another scholarly investigation that had been staying with me throughout my studies: the relationship between modern ideas of race and Christian ideas of peoplehood. But in all these discussions, what was being lost, in my mind, was a critical interrogation of how a people is reproduced theologically. That is, you don't just make a people once and stop. Making a people requires reproducing a people. One must literally reproduce more people, but also reproduce enduring claims of kinship and community or belonging that defines who a people is, what the benefits are of belonging to that people, and the obligations that come along with membership in that people. To me, thinking about chosen peoplehood and race reproductively revealed the political theology of race as inseparable from the questions of reproduction that Williams and other womanists and black feminists were raising. So, my challenge was to figure out how to recast this scholarly discussion of peoplehood and race in terms of reproduction. In so doing, I was thinking reproduction expansively, trying to think about what all goes into the

reproduction of an antiblack social order? You need to manage sexual reproduction, cultural reproduction, economic reproduction, and the like, but also the reproduction of theological claims and how they find meaning and value and legitimacy. So how to think all these things together but also focus in on these questions in a precise and useful way?

In my study, the work of the Jewish philosopher of religion, Jacob Taubes, is important for how I understand political theology. In his work, he talks about how theology is a discourse that serves to resolve crises by rearticulating the terms of meaning and value within a community and enabling them to re-imagine the significance of their faith in changing historical situations. But, at the same time, he understands this work as always already political. The kinds of claims that theology serves to shore up are about life together and the governance that will best enable that life together to be made real in the wake of these historical breakdowns. In my dissertation, I understand the crisis that political theology is responding to reproductively. That is, there's a crisis and precarity that comes with the need to reproduce. Because you need all this reproductive labor to make claims of peoplehood real and enduring, there's always moments of breakdown occurring that need to be resolved. So, my political theological inquiry tries to understand how the shape of belonging that these Christian ideas of peoplehood reproduce creates a crisis of black belonging. Because blackness and the figure of the black maternal enables the reproduction of the illegitimate figure against which legitimate peoplehood finds its meaning, anti-black violence is necessary to the reproduction of chosen peoplehood.

Thinking this crisis reproductively, for me, was a matter of thinking about how this history of Christian peoplehood and race is a reproduction history and how theology works as a reproductive technology for re-articulating and re-imagining the meaning and value of distinctions between legitimate and illegitimate peoplehood that are made real in racialized flesh. In this way, I

was trying to think about the theological work that goes into making claims of chosen peoplehood. How does theology work to manage both the reproduction of literal people and the reproduction of an antiblack social order? On my reading, this is because the Christian imagination of peoplehood and redemption is doubly reproductive. It's reproductive in the sense that it needs to be re-made over and over again in human history to retain its meaning and value, and it's also reproductive in the sense that it draws on reproductive imagery like, blood, kinship, biology, milk and nourishment, to make its claims real and enduring. By rereading this reproductive imagination in light of Williams, Harper, and Grimke's work, my project tries to consider how their work of cultural reproduction is also political theological, and how they illuminate the reproductive life of the Christian method of people-making. In so doing, my project illuminates how racial claims of peoplehood are modeled on a reproductive Christian imaginary and how race comes to work as a way to reproduce the naturalization of Christian claims of peoplehood.

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Introduction:

Political Theology, Race, and Reproduction

Introduction: Peoplehood, Race, and Reproduction in New World View

When John Winthrop's fleet was departing for the New World in 1630, John Cotton preached his famed sermon, "God's Promise to His Plantation," as something of a blessing over the endeavor. Cotton opens with a passage from 2 Samuel 7:10 which reads: "Moreover I will appoint a place for my people Israel, and I will plant them, that they may dwell in a place of their own, and move no more." Building on this passage, Cotton also draws on the imagery of the wider chapter in 2 Samuel which also "included the promise of the millenium: 'And thine house shalbe stablished and thy kingdome for ever before thee, even thy throne shalbe stablished forever' (7:16)."[2] Cotton's sermon works not only as a send-off, but provides theological justification for Winthrop's mission, showing how the settling of the new world not only fits into God's providential plan, in which even non-Christian nations have a part, but is the fulfillment of God's promises to God's chosen people: "others take the land by his providence, but God's people take the land by promise: And therefore the land of Canaan is called a land of promise. Which they discerne, first, by discerning themselves to be in Christ, in whom all the promises are yea, and amen."[3]

In Cotton's Christian imagination, the promises that are made to God's people are secure, not simply because of their place in salvation history–God's providential plan–-but because of these people's distinctive inhabitation of the earth. In his estimation, one can discern not only the proper order of history, but the proper order of one's community through this theological procedure of

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[2] Sacvan Bercovitch, *American Jeremiad* (Univ of Wisconsin Press, 1980), 7-8.

[3] John Cotton and Reiner Smolinski, "Gods Promise to His Plantation (1630)," *Electronic Texts in American Studies*, January 1630, http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/etas/22, 6

reading. At root, the desire on display here is to show how God's promises result in the further propagation and peopling of the world. This reproduction is not a matter of expansion for expansion's sake, but a matter of living in accordance with the promise given in Christ, and thus requires an understanding of the proper guidlines by which to understand God's promise to His plantation and for understanding how to rightly read one's obligations as a member of God's people. Within the context of, not only God's providence but also, God's promise, Cotton reads the passage in 2 Samuel 7:10 as a doubled promise to David and the people of Israel, which becomes a figure of a doubled promise for Cotton, Winthrop's fleet, and the Puritan settlement of the New World: "First the designation of a place for his people. Secondly, a plantation of them in that place."[4]

Cotton's sermon provides an illustration of how the questions of Christian peoplehood and its effects on the shape of belonging in the United States is not only a matter for political theological inquiry, but also, at heart, a matter of *reproduction*. Here, God's election of a community is understood not only as the selection of a particular people, but the propagation of that people. God not only designates a specific place in the world for God's people, God also cultivates the people in that place such that the community becomes rooted and endures in the place designated for them. This plantation comes with "a threefold blessing" according to Cotton's exegesis, where by a "firme and durable" possession of the land is promised. The plantation of a people is thus an enduring promise–because God's promise endures, their tenure in the place they are planted endures. However, this promise comes with the obligation to properly manage this people's reproduction.

> Have a tender care that you looke well to the plants that spring from you, that is, to your children, that they doe not degenerate as the Israelites did; after which they were vexed with afflictions on every hand. How came this to passe? I planted them a noble Vine, holy, a right

[4] Cotton and Smolinski, 2

> seede, how then art thou degenerate into a strange Vine before mee? Your Ancestours were of a noble divine spirit, but if they suffer their children to degenerate, to take loose courses, then God will surely plucke you up: Otherwise if men have a care to propagate the Ordinances and Religion to their children after them, God will plant them, and not roote them up. For want of this, the seede of the repenting Ninivites was rooted out.[5]

Here the care of Puritan children is linked to a story of Israelitic degeneration. Using reproductive imagery, this story is figured through plants and seeds as a way of communicating the need for proper cultivation lest a species becomes malformed. The preservation of a people and their sense of belonging depends on the proper management of reproduction. Claims of kinship origin, and descent thus serve as rich resources for this political theological people-making. The employment of this reproductive imagery works to provide a natural picture for Cotton's audience and for his readers.[6] In this way, they are educated to perceive the sensible world according to this divine sense of plantation–according to God's revelation of His works in the created order. For God to plant God's people is for God to make a home for them. In making a home for them, God also makes fruitful conditions for God's people to inhabit. This divine cultivation is intended to multiply God's people. Each of these steps is also to be imitated by those who belong to God's people and the proper ordinances are critical to the proer reproduction of religion. Making a home, cultivating that home, and propagating it in an enduring way are a means of participating in God's redemptive economy. In this way, God's election of a people to receive the promises given in Christ is not only tied to God's promise to make home and an enduring homeland for God's people, but is also tied to making an enduring people–to the *reproduction* of a people.

From this foray into Cotton, my goal is to illuminate the reproductive sense of his theological claims such that the management and formation of the domestic can be understood as a

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[5] Cotton and Smolinski

[6] The sermon is appended with a message to readers of the sermon that sets out some key points for the reader to keep in mind in order to properly hear and understand the sermon.

key site in the formation of Christian and civic ideas of belonging. Christian belonging has long been figured, not just in terms of chosen peoplehood, but in terms of the household and family of God. Membership in the household of faith is critical for fashioning Christian identity, distributing Christian inheritance, and discerning Christian obligation. Discerning the benefits of belonging to God's people and discerning one's mission in the world is thus a matter of the proper domestic formation which ensures the proper order of reproduction. Even the earliest theological reflections on Christian claims of salvation found it crucial to preserve the purity of Christian claims through the management of various forms of reproduction.[7]

Not only is a sense of kinship established in the trinitarian relations ascribed to the Father, Son, and Spirit, but the maternal figure is crucial to the reproduction of Christian claims of peoplehood.[8] Alongside the literal functions of sexual reproduction, the mother operates as a central figure in the proper growth, cultivation, and education of her children which ensures a healthy propagation. Maternal functions and images such as breast feeding and breast milk are employed to articulate proper nourishment, education, growth, and maturity in one's Christian identity, one's understanding of one's Christian inheritance, and one's duties as a Christian.[9]

These uses of reproductive imagery, especially maternal images of birth and nourishment, in the American imagination are legitimated by their orthodox use through Christian history.[10] For

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[7] Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia, Pa: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006); D. Buell, *Why This New Race: Ethnic Reasoning in Early Christianity* (New York u.a.: Columbia University Press, 2007)

[8] A helpful recent inquiry into these kinds of claims can be found in Linn Marie Tonstad, *God and Difference: The Trinity, Sexuality, and the Transformation of Finitude* (Routledge, 2015)

[9] Buell, *Why This New Race*

[10] John David Penniman, *Raised on Christian Milk: Food and the Formation of the Soul in Early Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017); Nora Doyle, "'The Highest Pleasure of Which Woman's Nature Is Capable': Breast-Feeding and the Sentimental Maternal Ideal in America, 1750–1860," *Journal of American History* 97, no. 4 (March 2011): 958–73, https://doi.org/10.1093/jahist/jaq050; Buell, *Why This New Race*

instance, in early Christianity, the distinction between free and enslaved mothers was employed to manage reproduction of a Christian people. If Christians employed slave women as wet nurses it was a cause for concern because the undesirable character traits of slave women could be transmitted to the child.[11] This categorical distinction between the free and the slave mother will also gain significance in the wake of the Reformation and the advent of the New World project. In Early Modernity, for instance, distinctions between the Christian and the heathen woman were articulated through conversion motifs and romance literature. Alongside this, the project of enslaving Africans comes to coalesce around black women's sexuality as the key to the reproduction of the plantation order.[12]

That is, Christian articulations of peoplehood and belonging have long relied on a racial sense of peoplehood and the management of reproduction to maintain Christian claims of legitimacy and redemption. In recapitulating traditional Christian claims for their changing historical context, European settlers of the New World also employed these orthodox procedures of articulating and imagining Christian claims of peoplehood and legitimacy through reproductive images and the unique roles of proper paternity and maternity in reproducing correctly.[13] This

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[11] Penniman, *Raised on Christian Milk*; Jennifer A. Glancy, *Slavery in Early Christianity*, 1 edition (Minneapolis, MN: FORTRESS PRESS, 2006).

[12] Jennifer L. Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia: Univ of Pennsylvania Pr, 2004); Emily West and R. J. Knight, "Mothers' Milk: Slavery, Wet-Nursing, and Black and White Women in the Antebellum South," *Journal of Southern History* 83, no. 1 (February 2017): 37–68, https://doi.org/10.1353/soh.2017.0001; Katherine Paugh, *The Politics of Reproduction: Race, Medicine, and Fertility in the Age of Abolition* (Oxford University Press, 2017); Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2014); Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household*, First Edition (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

[13] See John Cotton and Paul Royster, "Milk for Babes. Drawn Out of the Breasts of Both Testaments. Chiefly, for the Spirituall Nourishment of *Boston* Babes in Either *England*: But May Be of Like Use for Any Children (1646)," *Electronic Texts in American Studies*, January 1646, https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/etas/18. The union of the theological education through catechesis and the reproductive imagery of milk is used to unite Puritan claims of peoplehood in New England with Puritan claims of peoplehood in the "old" England.

rearticulation of Christian theological claims in the New World context, importantly, includes the distinction between the slave and free mother.[14]

The need to establish a legitimate historical claim to New World geography was thus routed through claims of kinship with biblical figures which established a proper transmission of inheritance and set out the obligations for God's chosen people. In order to preserve these claims, Christian settlers took seriously the need to properly raise their children in order to ensure the endurance of this chosen peoplehood throughout historical time. The crisis situation that gives rise to the political theology of race that structures the New World project can thus be understood as the need for settlers to make real the claims of distinction that enabled enduring historical and enfleshed signs in the world of their participation in God's salvific activity. Race and its reproduction thus works as a means for ensuring the legitimacy of Christian claims of peoplehood and the settlements or plantations that membership in God's people justify.

As a whole, then, a constellation of images such as the propagation of plants and species, of kinship and blood through claims of biblical origins and history, and through the management of sexual purity and impurity through proper marriage and descent from the proper mother add up to a Christian education in belonging that is fundamentally reproductive. In each instance, the reproduction of an anti-black order of things finds theological coherence by according with orthodox order and interpretations. The theological reading of the world in light of God's salvific action in history, God's revelation in Christ and in nature, and God's work in the world to establish a new people through the power of the Spirit, all function in the New World context to reproduce

[14] A crucial point for this study is to intervene in the attribution of anti-blackness to something outside of Christianity that deforms it. That is, I aim to show how as a matter of reproducing Christian claims, Christian theology is employed in a way that is consistent with Christian proclamation in the colonial Americas. The problem, then, would not be a lack or failure of Christian thought and practice, but precisely its success in forming people and re-forming the world.

racial peoplehood as an enfleshment of legitimacy and redemption or illegitimacy and damnation. The sense of belonging that is produced by this order of things thus provides a means of articulating a sense of shared mission for whites, but, at the same time, a way of incorporating black slaves into a Christian story that figures blackness as the illegitimate heathen in need of Christianization. This dissertation aims to examine how these interwoven questions of legitimacy and redemption are articulated through race and reproduction and can be read from the underside of this chosen peoplehood and shared mission. By turning to black feminist and womanist resources in thinking about race, reproduction, and chosen peoplehood, however, another way into the question of legitimacy and meaning and value is charted.

Introducing the Aims of This Study

This study contributes to a diagnosis of how Christian ideas of peoplehood fund imaginations of race in the United States. Where scholars like Eddie Glaude, Sylvester Johnson, J. Kameron Carter, Willie James Jennings, and Kelly Brown Douglas have focused on how the Christian designation of "chosen peoplehood" is employed in the Western imagination to legitimate claims of racial belonging, I consider how these claims depend on a reproductive process of people-making.[15] This study examines how making a people requires the *reproduction* of a people, and so attends to how the reproductive implications of race animates political theological claims of peoplehood and the senses

[15] See Eddie S. Glaude Jr, *Exodus: Religion, Race, and Nation in Early Nineteenth-Century Black America* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2000); Sylvester A. Johnson, *The Myth of Ham in Nineteenth-Century American Christianity: Race, Heathens, and the People of God*, 1st edition (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); J. Kameron Carter, *Race: A Theological Account*, 1 edition (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven Conn.: Yale University Press, 2011); Kelly Brown Douglas, *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God* (Orbis Books, 2015). See also Terence Keel, *Divine Variations: How Christian Thought Became Racial Science* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2018); Dennis Austin Britton, *Becoming Christian: Race, Reformation, and Early Modern English Romance* (Oxford University Press, 2014); Vincent W. Lloyd, *Race and Political Theology* (Stanford University Press, 2012); Jared Hickman, *Black Prometheus: Race and Radicalism in the Age of Atlantic Slavery*, 1 edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

of belonging that are generated through them. I focus my inquiry on the scene of the domestic, or the household, for the ways that it makes the interarticulation of race and reproduction apparent in the formation of the United States' sense of peoplehood.[16] In so doing, I recast the scholarly conversation by considering not only the appropriation of biblical images to fund political claims, but how political theological claims of legitimacy are naturalized through the employment of a reproductive social imaginary. By reproductive social imaginary, I mean an imaginary that both needs to be reproduced in order to retain social legitimacy, and an imaginary that employs the images of social reproduction such as kinship, biology, and blood, to engender social cohesion.[17] The domestic and its economy thus stands as a crucial site in the management of various forms of reproduction (biological, cultural, economic, theological, etc). I show how, when reread through black feminist and womanist questions of domesticity, race, and reproduction, political theology becomes a useful heuristic for considering how an antiblack and white supremacist social order gets reproduced. This raises significant questions for a Christian redemption history and its adequacy for

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[16] See Hortense J. Spillers, *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (University of Chicago Press, 2003); Robert F. Reid-Pharr, *Conjugal Union: The Body, the House, and the Black American* (Oxford University Press, 1999); Wahneema Lubiano, *The House That Race Built: Original Essays by Toni Morrison, Angela Y. Davis, Cornel West, and Others on Black Americans and Politics in America Today* (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2010); Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage*; Stephanie McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations, and the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*

[17] See, for instance Eugene F. Rogers, "The Sociology and Theology of Creationist Objections to Evolution: How Blood Marks the Bounds of the Christian Body," *Zygon*® 49, no. 3 (2014): 540–53, https://doi.org/10.1111/zygo.12102; Buell, *Why This New Race*; Denise Kimber Buell, *Making Christians* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1999); Matthew Thiessen, *Paul and the Gentile Problem*, 1 edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); Caroline Johnson Hodge, *If Sons, Then Heirs: A Study of Kinship and Ethnicity in the Letters of Paul*, 1 edition (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Anni Maria Laato, "Biblical Mothers as Images of the Church," *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 0, no. 0 (March 2019): 1–15, https://doi.org/10.1080/1474225X.2019.1585039; Alicia D. Myers, *Blessed Among Women?: Mothers and Motherhood in the New Testament* (Oxford University Press, 2017); Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *Our Mother Saint Paul* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2007); William Lloyd Warner, *The Family of God: A Symbolic Study of Christian Life in America* (Greenwood Press, 1975); Cynthia Hahn, "'Joseph Will Perfect, Mary Enlighten and Jesus Save Thee': The Holy Family as Marriage Model in the Mérode Triptych," *The Art Bulletin* 68, no. 1 (March 1986): 54–66, https://doi.org/10.1080/00043079.1986.10788311; Thomas Weinandy, *The Father's Spirit of Sonship: Reconceiving the Trinity* (Eugene, Or: Wipf & Stock Pub, 2011); Michael Peppard, *The Son of God in the Roman World: Divine Sonship in Its Social and Political Context*, Reprint edition (New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 2012); Caroline Walker Bynum, *Wonderful Blood: Theology and Practice in Late Medieval Northern Germany and Beyond* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007); Bettina Bildhauer, *Medieval Blood* (University of Wales Press, 2010); Penniman, *Raised on Christian Milk*;

providing a theological account of black life and death. The pertinent question that is raised for me regards the need to abolish the redemption history that depends on the reproduction of racial peoplehood for its legitimacy.

Rather than tracing a historical development or expansive genealogy, this study proceeds through a series of close readings of the work of three black women writing at different moments of black crises of belonging in the United States. Through a political theological rereading of Delores Williams, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, and Angelina Weld Grimké, I show how key political theological questions regarding legitimacy and redemption are structured by reproduction. The goal in highlighting these individuals, is double. The first is to consider the significance of their thought as political theology. The second is to cast light on the reproductive operations that are underthought in the larger political theological frame. I situate my study in the cross-currents of political theology and black feminist studies by shedding light on the specifically Christian inheritance of our modern racial situation and the significance of black women's situation within it.

It bears underlining that this study is not an exhaustive quest for the origins of race and reproduction in the Christian imagination.[18] It is a consideration of pertinent themes in the formation of claims of legitimacy, meaning, and value in how the past, how history, is produced and reproduced in the now in order to legitimate the imagined futures of a people. A political theological analysis of Christian peoplehood, race, and reproduction thus troubles our relationship to history as a word for linear progress. It underlines, with scholars like Saidiya Hartman and Michel-Rolph Trouillot, that the past is not past, that it is constantly being reproduced, and that the afterlives of slavery continue to shape not only how we live in the present but also how we narrate histories and

[18] Importantly, the mode of this study is intentionally at odds with the quests for origins, especially as they pertain to the study of religion. For a helpful overview of the issues here, see Tomoko Masuzawa, "Origin," in *Guide to the Study of Religion*, ed. Willi Braun and Russell McCutcheon (2000). 204-209.

futures in theology, politics, and society.[19] In attempting to develop a black political theology that attends to the relationship between race and reproduction, it is thus necessary to read these materials against the grain as a means of placing the history of Christian peoplehood under a black political theological inquiry.[20] By recombining resources from black religious history, black theology, and black feminism and womanism, I create a critical vantage from which to spy out some of the significant political theological infrastructure in the reproduction of racial peoplehood.

Background and Motivations

This study is interested in scholarship that takes up the question of race, religion, and nation whether as a historical, theological, cultural, or political issue.[21] But, as this is a political theological investigation, it will be helpful to focus the issues I take up here in political theological terms. Defining political theology can present a challenge, as it is an interdisciplinary field with many

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[19] Saidiya Hartman helpfully articulates the problem: "How does one tell the story of an elusive emancipation and a travestied freedom? Certainly, reconsidering the meaning of freedom entails looking critically at the production of historical narratives since the very effort to represent the situation of the subaltern reveals the provisionality of the archive as well as the interests that shape it and thereby determine the emplotment of history. … Bearing this in mind, one recognizes that writing the history of the dominated requires not only the interrogation of dominant narratives and the exposure of their contingent and partisan character but also the reclamation of archival material for contrary purposes." Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, 1 edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 10. See also Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History, 20th Anniversary Edition*, 2nd Revised edition (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 2015) and Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (July 2008): 1–14, https://muse.jhu.edu/article/241115. Many thanks to Lucia Hulsether for helping me to think through the significance of a political theological analysis of the past in light of black studies and its questioning of the production of the past in light of the haunting afterlife of slavery and the enduring (or, theologically put: eternal) life of anti-blackness.

[20] See Saidiya Hartman: "The effort to "brush history against the grain" requires excavations at the margins of monumental history in order that the ruins of the dismembered past be retrieved, turning to forms of knowledge and practice not generally considered legitimate objects of historical inquiry or appropriate or adequate sources for history making and attending to the cultivated silence, exclusions, relations of violence and domination that engender the official accounts. Therefore the documents, fragments, and accounts considered here, although claimed for purposes contrary to those for which they were gathered, nonetheless remain entangled with the politics of domination. In this regard, the effort to reconstruct the history of the dominated is not discontinuous with dominant accounts or official history but, rather, is a struggle within and against the constraints and silences imposed by the nature of the archive—the system that governs the appearance of statements and generates social meaning." Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 11.

[21] As this dissertation will imply, the rigid distinction between these domains is not conducive to a more precise understanding of how racial peoplehood is reproduced.

competing articulations of its project.[22] At root, though, I find Vincent Lloyd provides a helpful summation of political theology

> as both a theoretical conversation (standing between Christian theology and the humanities) and a method that can be used in reading texts (in the broadest sense). As a method, political theology is useful for budding historians of religion, ethnographers, ethicists, religion and literature scholars, and many others because it develops attunement to the way that religious ideas are present but repressed in ostensibly secular contexts.[23]

Along these lines, articulations of political theology as related to genealogy's of the relationship between the political and the theological are helpful for foregrounding how

> the structures of governance are always necessarily caught up with questions of meaning and value and because the answers we offer to questions of meaning and value always have direct implication for how the world should be governed–in other words, the *structures and sources of legitimacy* tend to correlate conceptually… . [Political theology's] holism … serves as a heuristic device for uncovering sites of breakdown and contradiction within any given political theological paradigm.[24]

Adam Kotsko's definition helpfully illuminates the genealogical mode of inquiry as a way to situate political theology as "a heuristic device for uncovering sites of breakdown and contradiction within

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[22] For a range of political theological texts, see Carl Schmitt and Tracy B. Strong, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab, 1 edition (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2006); Ernst Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology* (Princeton University Press, 2016); Giorgio Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government*, trans. Lorenzo Chiesa and Matteo Mandarini, First Edition edition (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2011); Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity*, First Edition edition (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 2003); Jacob Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, trans. Dana Hollander, 1 edition (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2003); Paul W. Kahn, *Political Theology: Four New Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (Columbia University Press, 2011); Clayton Crockett, *Radical Political Theology: Religion and Politics After Liberalism* (Columbia University Press, 2013); Oliver O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology* (Cambridge University Press, 1999); Peter Manley Scott and William T. Cavanaugh, *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology* (John Wiley & Sons, 2008); Hent de Vries and Lawrence Eugene Sullivan, *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World* (Fordham Univ Press, 2006); Bonnie Honig, Peter Eli Gordon, and Hent de Vries, *The Weight of All Flesh: On the Subject-Matter of Political Economy* (Oxford University Press, 2016).

[23] Vincent W. Lloyd, "The Political Theology Syllabi Project: Vincent Lloyd Political Theology Today," accessed November 11, 2017, http://www.politicaltheology.com/blog/the-political-theology-syllabi-project-vincent-lloyd/

[24] Adam Kotsko, *Neoliberalism's Demons: On the Political Theology of Late Capital* (Stanford University Press, 2018), 128. Vincent Lloyd has a resonant account of political theology, genealogy, and the exploration of breakdowns in Lloyd, *Race and Political Theology*.

any given political theological paradigm." This dissertation is less interested in methodological faithfulness to the genealogical as much as it seeks to call attention to how the terms of history, genealogy, and origins are all related to the question of reproduction and peoplehood and thus illuminate how the reproductive animates the very terms of inquiry. Rather, it is interested in the cultural function of theology and how it relates to social reproduction by finding its significance in moments of cultural unsettling and during crises of legitimacy.[25] As the title of this dissertation signals, the site of breakdown and contradiction that I investigate is that of "belonging" in the US context and its political theological paradigm of anti-blackness. How is it, I inquire, that blackness is perpetually situated as a figure of non-belonging in relationship to the national imagination of who peoplehood? The position of blackness within the US racial economy suggests that there is a recurring problem in how belonging is generated that prevents blackness from attaining belonging in a real and enduring sense. In the terms of this study, then, political theology is a useful heuristic for examining the breakdowns occuring in the production and reproduction of US belonging. What is it about the structure of US peoplehood that prevents black belonging in a real and enduring way– even if there may be fleeting moments when it seems like belonging has been achieved?

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[25] See Jacob Taubes, *From Cult to Culture: Fragments Toward a Critique of Historical Reason* (Stanford University Press, 2010), 195-213. Taubes helpfully elaborates on the specificity of theology for Christianity as a means of resolving the crisis of continued existence after the appearance of Jesus in history the relationship of its theological resolution of crises to the Secular situation of modernity. "Christianity had to make use of theological interpretation already in its earliest stages because its symbols of faith expressing the expectations of the first generation conflicted very early with the actual sitaution of the community. For the Christian community was thrown into history against her expectations and against her will, and the hiatus between the eschatological symbols of faith and man's continuing existence in history is as old as the history of the Christian church. The function of theology in the Christian church remained the same throughout its history. Theology continually transformed the eschatological symbols to an ever-changing historical situation and carried through this transformation … turning the eschatological symbols into ontological symbols. Without this perpetual act of transformation, the Christian community would have degenerated into a 'narrow and superstitious' sect, and the general culture would have bypassed this community without paying a price for it. Secularization is the price the Christian community had to pay for its development from an adventistic sect to a universal church, and the history of theology is the spiritual account of this price." Perhaps, then, in some way this study aims to begin providing a spiritual account of the price from its underside.

Blackness, Politics, and Theology

Social changes like Emancipation and Reconstruction, the end of Jim Crow and School Integration often operate in national memory as shining victories, yet the moments of transformation that they open rarely last and, on the other hand, have often been an opening for a deep reentrenchment of anti-black violence and anti-black forms of governance.[26] Political theology can be a useful heuristic for examining the black crisis in the United States as a crisis of legitimacy and meaning and value. Belonging in the United States is thus a problem for blackness because the coherence of national community depends on the reproduction of black illegitimacy, black meaninglessness, and black devaluation. A significant corpus of work takes up these questions of legitimacy, meaning, and value by examining the question of race. While an understanding of the reproduction of a people implicitly operates in most of the literature that I have encountered concerning Christian peoplehood, Christian peoplehood's effects on the shape of US belonging, and its relationship to the racial sense peoplehood in modernity and the US, the effects of this reproductive sense rarely find extended consideration.

The examinations of the operations of Christian peoplehood and race tends to be articulated along disciplinary lines. Black religious historians, for instance, tend to situate the problem as a matter of political legitimacy. These scholars ask questions such as: what is the history of how these ideas of chosenness have operated as a designation of legitimate political representation? How have black people have employed these ideas of chosenness to gain political legitimacy?[27] How have black

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[26] For instance the failure of integration, the rise of the carceral state, the rate of black maternal deaths and black infant mortality, the situation of black poverty and homelessness all suggest the black situation in the United States has been one of ever transforming crisis.

[27] See Glaude Jr, *Exodus*; Johnson, *The Myth of Ham in Nineteenth-Century American Christianity*; Sylvester A. Johnson, *African American Religions, 1500-2000: Colonialism, Democracy, and Freedom*, 1 edition (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2015), Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp, *Setting down the Sacred Past: African-American Race Histories* (Harvard University Press, 2010).

Christian women mobilized notions of Christianity, womanhood, and racial uplift to legitimate their authority?[28] How do these histories of Christian peoplehood as racial peoplehood continue to mark the production of knowledge today?[29] At root, these inquiries are primarily concerned with the designation of peoplehood (often articulated via expositions on manhood and womanhood), how it signals legitimacy, and how black people have gone about claiming and transforming ideas of legitimacy with this conception of peoplehood and its specific gender roles. This scholarship has provided rich resources for study and made us aware of significant historic debates around black nationalism, women's place in the movement for black emancipation and uplift post-emancipation, and black formations of US political culture. However, the lack of theological engagement in many of these texts limits their ability to attend to the effects of these claims of peoplehood and legitimacy as it pertains to how black people are engaging in a political theological act of people-making. Johnson's analysis in *Myth of Ham* helpfully provides a way forward by noting the importance of ecclesiology to understanding the employment of Hamitic identity. He also has an entire section on "Gender and Illegitimacy" as it relates to the Myth of Ham and the competing claims of origins that get tied to black sexuality and black devaluation.[30] Johnson's insights are so incisive precisely because he recognizes how the historical claims regarding biblical peoplehood and legitimacy are articulated as *theological* claims and how sexuality works to suture political and theological legitimacy, meaning, and value. In that way, he does not hold the historical and the theological as competing claims and so provides a helpful model for approaching the key issues of this study.

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[28] Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920*, Revised edition (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994); Elizabeth Lindsay Davis, *Lifting as They Climb* (G.K. Hall, 1933); Beverly Washington Jones, *Quest for Equality: The Life and Writings of Mary Eliza Church Terrell, 1863-1954* (Carlson Pub., 1990); Anthea D. Butler, *Women in the Church of God in Christ: Making a Sanctified World* (Univ of North Carolina Press, 2012); Judith Weisenfeld, *African American Women and Christian Activism: New York's Black YWCA, 1905-1945* (Harvard University Press, 1997)

[29] See Keel, *Divine Variations* and Judith Weisenfeld, *New World A-Coming: Black Religion and Racial Identity During the Great Migration* (NYU Press, 2018)

[30] See Johnson, *The Myth of Ham in Nineteenth-Century American Christianity*, 94-108

Scholars in theology primarily situate the racial of effects of God's designation' of a chosen people as the Christian problem of supersessionism and thus as a problem of Christianity's legitimacy.[31] Christian ideas of chosen peoplehood emerge as Christians imagine themselves as having replaced the Jews as the people of God. European Christians displaced the Jews within God's providential history and situated themselves as its primary subjects. This supersessionist procedure employs race as a means of preserving the Christian body as distinct from the raced body of Jews, Blacks, and Indigenous others. From early modern coloniality to the Enlightenment and the contemporary era, these scholars note how race emerges as a form of "pseudo-theological" discipleship where the formation of subjects works through the misapplication of theological procedures. In these theological works, the terms of kinship are employed quite heavily in their constructive accounts of belonging in Christ. Carter, Jennings, and Bantum all make use of familial metaphors and raise questions of intimacy, parentage, miscegenation, reproduction, and "joining" as a way of articulating the new kinship announced in Christ and how a baptismal identity can overcome the production of race in modernity.[32]

However, the effects of employing such terms and the consonance with accounts of Christian peoplehood that have been used to reproduce Christians as a distinctive race of people are never made explicit in their analysis. The uninterrogated use of these terms often works to undercut

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[31] Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*; Carter, *Race*; Brian Bantum, *Redeeming Mulatto: A Theology of Race and Christian Hybridity* (Baylor University Press, 2016)

[32] For instance, Bantum writes, that James Cone's black theology is one of "modernity's progeny" that, just like white Western theology, as figured by Radical Orthodoxy, "resists the birth of children who do not look like them, who do not recite their words. Contextual Theology and Radical Orthodoxy are theologies of reproduction that ultimately foreclose the mulatto, the child among them born from the transgressions of modernity and the presence of God upon Mary." Bantum, 9. While Bantum perceives the entanglement of race and reproduction as a theological problem, even as a problem related to the reproduction of theological claims, the assumption of a Christian redemptive order to resolve the problem reproduces an antiblack narrative of overcoming that also collapses the reproduction of minoritarian knowledge that black theology represents and the reproduction of dominant knowledges that Radical Orthodoxy represents. In this way, questions of power in the reproduction of knowledge seems to have fallen out of view.

many of the serious questions regarding how Christian theology reproduces claims of legitimacy, meaning, and value precisely through the announcement of new terms of kinship and peoplehood in Christ. Instead, these studies tend to resolve the problems of race through a Christian redemptive or baptismal economy. That is, by reading race as a failure of Christian historical witness and a misarticulation of Christian proclamation, they recover pre-modern Christian theological sources as a way to re-legitimate Christian claims of redemption in light of its antiblack and colonial violence. The difficulty with these attempts is that they aim to do justice both to the preservation of Christian accounts of redemption as legitimate and the historical predicament of the modern racial imagination which seems to bring the legitimacy of a Christian account of redemption into question. In giving primacy to Christian claims of redemption as determining how to resolve the crises of legitimacy, meaning, and value opened up by enduring life of race, these scholars depend on a narrative overcoming of blackness that reproduces the problem of belonging for blackness.

For instance, Bantum writes of James Cone's black theology that

> Cone's theological vision has also served to enclose the image of God within the lives of the oppressed, and it rendered primary a different particularity in reflecting upon who God is in the world and for us. While Cone rightly points to the contextual reality from which all theology is done, the question remains whether God is also bound by those contexts and if the church might imagine not only the transformation of the oppressed into those who are free, but what that transformation might mean for all people.[33]

Here, Bantum renders black theology as an imprisoning figure that holds the image of God captive to its contexts. In so doing, he positions his mulatto theology as providing a way of overcoming black theology's narrowness by reconciling the slave ship and Western Christianity through the mulattic Christ.[34] Jennings repeats the problem in the form of his argument, which preserves a

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[33] Bantum, 4.

[34] Carter's reading of Cone is consonant with Bantum's in that he see's Cone's black theology as not properly Christian enough. See Carter's chapter on Cone in Carter, *Race*.

supersessionist development wherein the *new* kinship announced in Christ overcomes the *old* ways of constructing kinship that Jewish claims of kinship figure and that the modern racial imagination purportedly repeats.

> If Joshua at the entrance to the promised land demanded that the households of Israel choose to serve YHWH as his household would do, now Jesus demands that those in the land of Israel choose this new household with God his father. To break the power of death, the power of the kinship network would have to be rerouted through the very life of the Son of God. Jesus did not seek to destroy kinship, to undermine its defining power rooted in story, memory, and cultural practice. Rather, he drew it to a new orientation, a new determination. The family must follow him. The one family must follow from him— flow from his life as its new source. The kinship network in Israel would now be profoundly qualified. Jesus came first— not husband or wife, not mother, father, sister, brothers, not familial obligations and demands, not cultural conventions, and not social responsibilities. If the strongest bonds of relationship were qualified through commitment to Jesus, then the entire socioeconomic and political structuring processes deeply woven inside these bonds came into qualified view and ultimately unrelenting challenge.[35]

Here Jennings' Christian figural repetition of a founding of a people and a promise depends on a Christian order of lines of descent and obligations as structuing the socioeconomic situation. However, Jennings' critique of Israelitic and supersessionist kinship seems to recapitulate the modern racial imagination in its recapitulation of the announcement of *new* kinship in Christ. That is, it is precisely this network of kinship in Christ that seems to perpetuate the modern Western racial imagination, as Jennings book itself sets out.[36]

There is thus a problem of Christian peoplehood and its sense of belonging at the conceptual level–at the level of its constituting frame within Christian redemption history–that produces an incompatibility between the Christian terms of order, the peoplehood that it makes, and

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[35] Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 264.

[36] For helpful considerations of the announcement of new kinship in Christianity, the production of damnation, and supersessionism, see Sean Capener, "The Literality of Credit: Anselm, Analogy, and the Production of Damnation," accessed April 12, 2017, https://www.academia.edu/15021238/The_Literality_of_Credit_Anselm_Analogy_and_the_Production_of_Damnation. See also Daniel Colucciello Barber, *On Diaspora: Christianity, Religion, and Secularity* (Eugene, Or: Wipf & Stock Pub, 2011).

blackness. Thus, I aim to examine how Christian peoplehood is theologically reproduced as racial peoplehood, not just as a problem of Christianity's historical witness, but as a problem of how Christian economy legitimates the reproduction of peoplehood in order to legitimate itself as meaningful and valuable. I posit a questioning of the terms of order by which Christian claims are made real and enduring.[37] By turning to the question of reproduction as it relates to Christian peoplehood, I confront these difficulties in the historical and theological analyses.

Several interdisciplinary texts have emerged in recent years that provide the framework for a black political theology of race and reproduction. Edited volumes on race and political theology and race and secularism draw together a multitude of insightful essays on problems of race, religion, and nation. These volumes are especially helpful in considering how the management of race and religion are intertwined in the reproduction of the terms of order that permeate both fields of study.[38] Additionally, Jared Hickman's *Black Prometheus* and J. Kameron Carter's "Paratheological Blackness" provide significant excavations into the conditions of possibility for modern thinking about race as a question of political theology and the world reproduced by the crisis of knowledge that emerges with "discovery" of the New World.[39] Gil Anidjar's *Blood: A Critique of Christianity,* also notes the significance of kinship as figured through the blood in Christian thought but intentionally witholds an examination of the reproductive and sexuality in order to make his project more manageable.[40] While I share many of Anidjar's questions in producing a critique of Christianity, the

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[37] For a necessary and urgent investigation of the political terms of order, including some discussion of their modeling on Christian terms, see Cedric J. Robinson and Erica R. Edwards, *The Terms of Order: Political Science and the Myth of Leadership*, Reprint edition (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2016).

[38] Jonathon S. Kahn and Vincent W. Lloyd, eds., *Race and Secularism in America* (Columbia University Press, 2016); Lloyd, *Race and Political Theology*

[39] J. Kameron Carter, "Paratheological Blackness," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 112, no. 4 (September 2013): 589–611, https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-2345189

[40] Gil Anidjar, *Blood: A Critique of Christianity*, Reprint edition (Columbia University Press, 2016)

suspension of the reproductive and sexual for structuring the critique seems to obfuscate precisely the operations of the Christian distinctions of blood that Anidjar wants to raise, particularly how a distinction between mothers (which will be explored later in the dissertation) attains theological significance in Christian thought as a means of reproducing racial distinctions of blood. Dennis Austin Britton's *Becoming Christian* and Vincent Lloyd's *The Problem With Grace* also stand as two texts that are consonant with my own aims in this study.[41] Britton's is an examination of Early Modern drama that shows how Protestant theological debates regarding race and peoplehood are articulated through a romance of conversion.[42] He includes a very insightful chapter on gender and sexuality's work in these narratives and the differing function of desire in women and men works to figure the possibilities of heathens achieving conversion. Lloyd's text helpfully notes how the reproduction of supersessionist assumptions in secularism requires a critical interrogation and rereading of theological claims that both displaces them from their meaning in Christian terms of redemption but also refuses to reduce their theological meaning and value to terms that legitimate secular order. In that sense, these texts are most formally similar to the project I undertake.

Womanist and black liberation theologians also provide helpful insights into the questions of reproduction as I explore them here. Kelly Brown Douglas and Dwight Hopkins note the relationship between black sexuality and the reproduction of anti-black social order in order to develop positive accounts of black sexuality and a theology of justice and reparations, respectively.[43] However, neither examine the *theological methods* of reproducing legitimate peoplehood and its

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[41] Britton, *Becoming Christian*; Vincent W. Lloyd, *The Problem with Grace: Reconfiguring Political Theology* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2011)

[42] For more on early modern political theology, see Victoria Kahn, *The Future of Illusion: Political Theology and Early Modern Texts* (University of Chicago Press, 2014)

[43] Kelly B. Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective*, 59011th edition (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1999); Dwight N. Hopkins, "Enslaved Black Women: A Theology of Justice and Reparations," in *Beyond Slavery: Overcoming Its Religious and Sexual Legacies*, ed. Bernadette Brooten (Springer, 2010)

underside as much as they aim to construct liberative theologies in light of black women's reproductive situation.[44] Douglas also takes up the question of peoplehood and its racial logics in *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God.*[45] Douglass argues that American exceptionalism and its unique merger of race and religious logics is rooted in Anglo-Saxon chauvinism that legitimates the sense of belonging and mission at the core of American identity. For Douglas, this union of race and religion is evidenced in how both Pilgrims and Puritans and secular humanists like Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson appropriated biblical images to fashion a narrative of American identity. Douglas' turn to the production of an Anglo-Saxon myth is certainly a contributing factor to the racial formation of the United States, however, I would argue that an evaluation of the theological histories that ground white U.S. exceptionalism would provide a clearer sense of how a *theological* analysis of the situation can proceed to interrogate the reproduction of white supremacy and antiblackness.[46]

Of considerable import for this study is the work of Delores Williams, which will be explored in depth throughout this dissertation, Emilie M. Townes, and Hortense Spillers. In their examinations of the relationship between race, gender, and sexuality the themes of history, imagination, kinship, and tradition that I take as necessary to the reproduction of claims of belonging come into view. Townes' insights into the cultural production of antiblack images, especially images of black women, is critical to the connections this study makes between sexual,

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[44] For instance, Douglas argues that the Platonic dualisms of Christian theology are at the root of its denigration of the body. However, this reading seems to

[45] Douglas, *Stand Your Ground*

[46] To be clear, I do not think Douglas is attempting to be exhaustive in selecting this example, but it seems to oddly displace the problem of racial peoplehood to something *external* to Christian theology that gets *imported into* or *united with* Christian. This seems to preserve an untainted, liberative "core" of Christianity that grounds her claims of God's justice. But as I will argue in chapter four, it may be that such grounding further extends the reproduction of antiblack grounds of redemptive claims.

biological, and economic reproduction and the Christian imagination. Foregrounding "the interplay of history and memory as a critical frame," Townes' work examines "how the imagination works within this to create images that buttress evil as a cultural production."[47] This study thus combines Townes' insight into the cultural production of evil and images of black women with Kathryn Tanner's insight into theology as a cultural production to consider how the Christian imaginary works to culturally reproduce antiblackness.[48] By uniting these questions of race and peoplehood with black feminist and womanist insights into reproduction, I make a more critical interrogation of the Christian imagination *as a reproductive imaginary* available for thought.

Finally, Hortense Spillers significance for this study is also extensive. In particular, her perception of how the reproduction of the word is tied to the reproduction of the static image that black people, and black women especially, labor under provides the groundwork for many of my insights regarding the racial reproductions of word and image that circulate around Christian peoplehood and its recapitulation in the New World project. Her work exposes how the common sense produced by the white Western governance of the word and the image requires a method of inquiry that does not assume the legitimacy of the frame within which those words and images commonly find their meaning:

> Clearly, "gender," as well as "race," is manuevered between these horns of a dilemma, situated in the world of material culture, political choice, and historical contingency. But the point was to try to understand the *manuever,* the colonial "choreography" that rendered subjects dominant and subordinate not because some were inherently better than others, but, rather, because some were *installed*—a political decision reinforced by words, words, words—over others. To break into the view, then, that what we see is transparent, or that what we see is what we get, I aimed to translate certain subjectivities back into modes of

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[47] Emilie M. Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*, 2006 edition (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 7.

[48] Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Fortress Press, n.d.)

> abeyance, in which case we would have to await a content, ideally, in contradistinction to arriving on the scene with one already in hand.[49]

In questioning the transparency of what we see and what we get, Spillers provides insights into how "metonymic figure" of the black woman functions within the racial economy.[50] The metonymic here can refer to the procedures by which black personality is substituted by the range of associations enabled by the slave trade. The situation of black flesh as chattel within the ledger books and alongside animals and other property gives rise to antiblack names, images, and meanings that are then read off of black flesh as a way to legitimate antiblack violence. Spillers thus shows how reading the relationship between the production of the metonymic figure and the economy within which she has meaning reveals the procedures by which installation of certain subjects within certain positions occurs in the first place.[51] On my reading, Spillers opens a path to interrogate how this racial economy and its metonymic figures are inscribed within this economy through Christian terms of order.[52] While this study is only the beginning forays into such a project, it is meant to begin some of

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[49] Spillers, *Black, White, and in Color*, 22.

[50] See Spillers, 312.

[51] See Spillers, 302-3.

[52] See Spillers account of the rended and wounded black flesh as a way into the significance of black homilectic instruction in the word for more on the relationship between the inscription of the word and the inscription of black flesh. Hortense J. Spillers, "Moving on down the Line: Variations on the African-American Sermon," in *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (University of Chicago Press, 2003), 251–76. Considering the significance of sacramental metonymy for the metonymy of racial modernity also gives insight into how racialized figures have meaning within the New World project. The figural will be explored more significantly in the next chapter. However, here I will simply say that while Spillers' sense of the metonymic primarily references Roman Jakobsen, and perhaps latently Jacques Lacan and Kenneth Burke in her reading of metonymy, at key junctures, her insights into the sacramental metonymy that Christianity installs occurs. See her notation in "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" regarding how the middle passage transubstantiates African personality into black flesh and, in "Notes on an Alternative: Neither/Nor" where she notes how the claims of kinship and community that race and sexuality enable are modeled on Christian brotherhood and the governance of the great chain of being. Spillers, *Black, White, and in Color*. See also Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits: A Selection*, trans. Bruce Fink, 1st edition (New York; London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004) and Kenneth Burke, "Four Master Tropes," *The Kenyon Review* 3, no. 4 (1941): 421–38, https://www.jstor.org/stable/4332286. Additionally, Spillers' dissertation on black preachers presents a thorough engagement with the figurality of their imaginations which speaks to their situation within a world and imaginary shaped by Christian theological procedures of people-making even as they attempt to articulate the position of those disinherited by the very project of Christian coloniality. Hortense Jeanette Spillers, "Fabrics of History: Essays on the Black Sermon" (PhD thesis, Brandeis University, 1974). Finally, for more on the metonymic structure of Christian practices and theology, specifically in Calvin

the ground clearing work by focusing on the political theological questions of legitimacy, meaning, and value that attend this reproduction of black women's metonymic figure and strategies for rereading that figure. If black culture is, as Spillers argues, a critical culture, then the cultivation of a critical black theology must always begin again with a critical examination of the means by which its an/originary knowledge, here theological knowledge, is produced and reproduced.[53] A deeper inquiry into these questions of legitimacy and meaning and value will thus situate my concerns with how racial peoplehood and reproduction are significant as black political theological inquiry.

Legitimacy, Meaning, and Value in the Problem of Belonging

The question of legitimacy is a question of rule or governance. In political theology, the question of legitimate governance might examine homologies between divine and earthly rule to consider how theological and political concepts of sovereignty, for example, may share structural resonances that influence the development of the other.[54] Meaning and value has to do with how the various claims one makes about existence at a particular historical moment gain significance and shaping power over life, death, the organization of society, and other aspects of existence on the earth. In political theology, the question of meaning and value (to extend the example of sovereignty), might examine how God's sovereignty means theologically and how sovereignty means politically. Comparing the

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and their relationship to Puritan and Enlightenment culture, see Ann Kibbey and Kibbey Ann, *The Interpretation of Material Shapes in Puritanism: A Study of Rhetoric, Prejudice, and Violence* (Cambridge University Press, 1986) and Ronald Paulson, *Hogarth's Harlot: Sacred Parody in Enlightenment England* (JHU Press, 2003).

[53] See Hortense J. Spillers, "The Idea of Black Culture," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 6, no. 3 (2006): 7–28, https://www.jstor.org/stable/41949535. See Nahum Chandler's and Fred Moten's work as well for its questioning of the the relationship between blackness and origins in thought. Nahum Dimitri Chandler, *X-the Problem of the Negro as a Problem for Thought*, 1 edition (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013). Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (U of Minnesota Press, 2003).

[54] See Schmitt and Strong, *Political Theology*; Carl Schmitt, Tracy B. Strong, and Leo Strauss, *The Concept of the Political: Expanded Edition*, trans. George Schwab, Enlarged edition (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007); Vries and Sullivan, *Political Theologies*; Adam Kotsko, *The Politics of Redemption: The Social Logic of Salvation* (London ; New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2010); Kotsko, *Neoliberalism's Demons*; Devin Singh, *Divine Currency: The Theological Power of Money in the West* (Stanford University Press, 2018); Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory*; Lloyd, *The Problem with Grace*.

resemblances between the two shows how the meanings of these terms have value for the shape of Christian and civil life and are influential of each other.[55] A common way of parsing out the relationship between political legitimacy and Christian theological meaning and value has been through this question of racial peoplehood as a re-articulation of Christian conceptions of chosen peoplehood.[56] In religious historical scholarship, then, this scholarly inquiry primarily examines how claims of political legitimacy are funded by Christian images. In theological scholarship, the question of supersessionism, or how Christians come to imagine themselves as replacing the Jews as God's chosen people, takes center stage in discerning the origins of the modern racial imagination. As it pertains to this study, the dual question of legitimacy and meaning and value emerges in the image of legitimate peoplehood as chosen peoplehood. This study examines how this image requires the reproduction of a racial sense of peoplehood.

In the European colonial project of settling the Americas, the influence of Christian settlers, especially Puritans, is on display in the founding of US civil society.[57] More particularly, their imaginations and theological rationale for the settlement the colonial Americas was understood as a means of participating in God's divine plan of redemption. As an extension of the Christian West's imperial power, then, the articulation of the mission to settle the New World relied on Western European theological claims to legitimate the taking of land, the displacement of people, and the

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[55] See Schmitt and Strong, *Political Theology* for the classic iteration of this kind of inquiry. Vincent Lloyd helpfully illuminates the racial stakes of Schmitts conception of the political and the theological in Lloyd, *Race and Political Theology*.

[56] See Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*; Carter, *Race*; Glaude Jr, *Exodus*; Johnson, *The Myth of Ham in Nineteenth-Century American Christianity*

[57] See Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (Yale University Press, 1975); E. Brooks Holifield, *Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War* (New Haven, Conn. u.a.: Yale University Press, 2005); Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse, *The Imaginary Puritan: Literature, Intellectual Labor, and the Origins of Personal Life* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1992).

naturalization of Europeans as the proper governors of the New World.[58] In this way, settlers modeled themselves as the people of God by seeking to participate in God's work in the world as the source of salvation. The ability to participate in God's salvific management of world history through the spreading of a Christian people was a foundational theological claim for the individual believer, the communal body of believers, and the universal church's place and role in the world.[59] As a marker of Christian identity, imitating God's providential stewardship of the earth was critical to the understanding of peoplehood that shaped the early US. The making of belonging was thus an effect of a shared Christian mission. Having been reborn into the family of God, one's new identity in Christ came with the inheritance of the benefits of salvation and the power to live out one's Christian obligations by faith through grace.

In much of the religious historical scholarship regarding blackness and this sense of peoplehood, the question of who is a legitimate people frequently emerges as a question of *who has a legitimate history?*[60] Showing the biblical origins of a people and their history was the way to legitimate those people as capable of governance and was thus crucial to articulating who was naturally

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[58] See the chapter "When Image Unmakes the Man" in Richard A. Bailey, *Race and Redemption in Puritan New England* (Oxford University Press, 2011). Bailey helpfully shows how Puritan's theological imagination, perception of Africanity and Indigeneity, and Christian sense of governance coalesce in the establishment of civil laws and governance in Puritan New England. See also Hickman, *Black Prometheus*. Hickman provides a helpful analysis of the crisis of governance that the New World project installs and how race emerges as a political theology in the Atlantic World. Finally, see Charles H. Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion*, 2nd edition (Aurora, Colo: The Davies Group Publishers, 1999). Long writes, "The important fact discerned here is the reliance on nature as the mediator of the divine. It is this theme which has been definitive for Americans," 155. Long further notes the relationship between the production of knowledge and the production of the history of a people in America: "In the telling of the story of America and American cultural reality, we have been dominated by one tradition. … The telling and the retelling of the American experience in this mode have created a normative historical judment and ideology of the American experience. The *historical* telling of this story has in the form of historiography relegated itself to a position of objectivity in terms of the canons of scholarship; it has become identified with truth and legitimacy," 167. Long's theory's of signification, critique of the production of knowledge, and engagement with the image in the construction of America is very important, however, because he does not primarily focus on the claims of peoplehood as I am trying to examine them here, he is mostly a latent conversation partner, rather than explicit.

[59] See Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*.

[60] Glaude Jr, *Exodus*; Johnson, *The Myth of Ham in Nineteenth-Century American Christianity*; Maffly-Kipp, *Setting down the Sacred Past*.

enslavable and who was not.[61] That is, because European Christianity had come to imagine itself as the chosen people in God's plan of salvation, the terms in which legitimate peoplehood was imagined had to accord with a Christian theological production of this European people's place in salvation history through recourse to the bible. Interweaving biblical images with their colonial movements alongside the strange imagery that the New World project provided, a theological perception of the sensible world occurred in and through a Christian theological mode of typological exegesis.[62] Here, the legitimacy of the Christian mission to settle the New World operated in tandem with the meaning and value of peoplehood as found in Christian theological conceptions of salvation history. To put it another way, the shape of belonging in the New World generates its sense according to the Christian grammar of redemption, the salvific order of things wherein the claim and image of chosen peoplehood finds its meaning. We must now consider how to read the implications of this Christian political theological inheritance for this study.

Method

My approach in this dissertation builds on the method of rereading articulated by Delores Williams in her text *Sisters in the Wilderness*. Williams employs this method in her rereading the biblical story of Hagar and attending to the resonances in Hagar's situation and black women's situation in racial modernity.

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[61] For instance, a part of why Las Casas believed the Indians were not suitable for slavery was because they showed that they had orders of governance. See Lawrence A. Clayton, *Bartolomé de Las Casas: A Biography* (Cambridge University Press, 2012). See Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation–an Argument," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 257–337, https://doi.org/10.1353/ncr.2004.0015 for more on the racial implications of the Las Casas/Sepulveda debates for the governance of the New World.

[62] See Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity : Consent and Descent in American Culture: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (Oxford University Press, USA, 1986) and Glaude Jr, *Exodus*. They provide helpful information on how the typological imagination influences the racial imagination of peoplehood in the US. See Jennings, *The Christian Imagination* for more on how this Christian imagination affected perception of place.

> Rereading does not mean changing the text as it appears in the Bible or adding 'characters' to the Hagar-Sarah stories that do not appear in the biblical accounts. Within the context of African-American interpretation, rereading can mean bringing in more nontraditional sources to aid in the interpretation than have been used by … leading Western exegetes.[63]

Williams combines this womanist re-reading with a "Identification-ascertainment Hermeneutic", whereby she distinguishes the subjective (with whom one identifies as a reader), communal (with whom one's community identifies), and objective (with whom the text itself identifies) levels of reading that enable the reproduction of normative Christian theological interpretations, or even the dominant perspectives in black liberationist and femininst interpretations.[64] The point is to raise the assumptions of the reader, reading community, and author to the level of critical interrogation in order to examine throughways in the text that have perhaps gone underexplored when read from the dominant or assumed perspective.

Williams' method is significant for my political theological reading of race and reproduction because it provides a means of attending to how theological identifications are precisely where naturalizations of power, claims of kinship, and the management of sexuality occur. The practice of identification and disidentification that Williams posits in her womanist hermeneutic is also significant for this study because it enables us to perceive the reproduction of *a sense* of belonging. That is, by placing Williams' hermeneutic in context of the economy of redemption, I examine how a Christian grammar ensures proper subjective feelings and formation through the management of proper theological identifications and disidentifications. For instance, Paul, by making a theological announcement that those who are in Christ are children of the free mother rather than children of the slave mother, works to ensure the reproduction of the proper order of truth and knowledge. This insight is crucial for understanding how Christian claims of chosen peoplehood are made real

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[63] Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Orbis Book, 1993)

[64] Williams, 6.

and enduring in the US through the reproduction of race. It is not only that the governance of racial peoplehood enables the reproduction of an anti-black order, but that the governance of racial legitimacy depends on a theological formation of feeling to make its claims of peoplehood real and enduring.

Alongside this method and hermeneutic, Williams also notes a helpful heuristic for framing the unexamined data that these rereadings bring to light. She argues for understanding black women's history as a *reproduction history* as a way of foregrounding her interest in the *reproductive technologies* that operate to oppress black women.[65] In this study, I also extend these heuristics as a way to recast the question of how Christian peoplehood comes to shape the United States' racial imagination of belonging. If we understand the history, the claims of biblical origins, blood, and kinship, that legitimate Christian claims of peoplehood as a *reproduction history* we can also understand theology and its work to manage and ensure the proper reproduction of these claims as a *reproductive technology*. In so doing, what becomes apparent is how theology operates as an applied science, not mechanistically, but dynamically to the living and organic situation of created existence.[66] By interlinking the sensible, historical world with God's divine plan, Christian settlers retained the ability to reproduce a coherent order of things in the wake of unsettling events and encounters. Yet, by figuring black and indigenous persons into the Christian story of redemption as the slave and the heathen in need of Christianization, the legitimacy of the Christian story and the Christian peoplehood it established was made real and enduring in *their* flesh.

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[65] Williams, 6

[66] Kathryn Tanner's articulation of theology as a cultural production is resonant here. Tanner, *Theories of Culture*. Hans Frei's insights into typology and Christian ideas of providence are also significant for my understanding of the plasticity inherent to Christian productions and reproduction of the history of God's people. See Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics*, Revised ed. edition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980); Hans W. Frei et al., *Reading Faithfully, Volume 1: Writings from the Archives: Theology and Hermeneutics*, ed. Mike Higton (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2015).

Chapter Outline

As this dissertation does not attempt an exhaustive historical overview, the slow rereading of select texts by black women is employed to illustrate how a political theology of race and reproduction clarifies the operations of legitimacy and meaning and value in racial modernity. Each chapter in this study is thus a prism, refracting the main question of this study through a particular focus that is illuminated by a slow reading.[67] For instance, I use traditional theological locii such as redemption, revelation, and theodicy to consider the meaning and value of racial reproduction for political legitimacy in US conceptions of peoplehood.[68] At the same time, this view provides a consideration of the second sense that Delores Williams gives to black women's *reproduction history*–not just how black women's reproduction is made use of to legitimate an anti-black social order, but also how these black women write as acts of transmission. They create alternative means for the reproduction of political theological claims regarding blackness and belonging that are antagonistic to those that ensure white Christian chosenness as the basis of black belonging.

Chapter One considers theology as a reproductive technology by showing the naturalizing effects of theological claims and how reading claims of racial peoplehood in light of the domestic recasts our understanding of how claims are made real and enduring. By examining Christian figural methods of reading, the Christian perception of the created image in light of nature and revelation, and the function of the figure of the mother in Christian claims of peoplehood, I show how various Christian *theological* procedures of thought enable the reproduction of racial peoplehood and a racial economy of redemption. In this way the political theological function of the figural, the natural and

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[67] For more on the difference between close reading and slow reading, see ESHKOLOTnew, *Даниэль Бояри. О Медленном Чтении / Daniel Boyarin. On Slow Reading*, accessed June 7, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q-plSI_pkwU.

[68] In addition to Williams' sense of rereading, this is also resonant with Vincent Lloyd's approach. See Lloyd, *The Problem with Grace*

revealed image, and the maternal function is taken as significant for a political theology of race and reproduction.

Each subsequent chapter will provide a deeper dive into each of these reproductive technologies. However, it is crucial to note that, even as I distinguish them to analyze them, they operate in tandem, and thus traces of one are found in the others. Still, for the purposes of illustrating my claims, I take them up in turn. *Chapter Two* takes up Delores Williams' rereading of the biblical figure of Hagar as a way to illuminate the reproduction of the redemption history within which chosen peoplehood has its meaning. In particular, I read with Williams to show how the figural enables the inscription of black flesh within a Christian economy of capture. In this view, the theological function of black women's surrogacy experience pertains to the reproduction of the US' racial economy by ensuring the reproduction of the illegitimate peoplehood against which chosen peoplehood has its meaning. That is, the theological significance of the slave woman's flesh is made to figure in black women's flesh through the violent technologies of slavery. With this economic view in hand, I turn to how this racial economy of redemption reproduces the anti-black image of peoplehood and belonging as legitimate.

Chapter Three takes up the question of the natural and revealed image–of revelation and theological anthropology–as a way into the reproduction of the image of chosen peoplehood and the reproduction of the anti-black image. Providing a political theological rereading of Frances EW Harper's *Iola Leroy,* I consider how the crisis of black belonging in Harper's novel can be understood as raising the crises of legitimacy and meaning and value that slavery installed at the heart of the national project. Harper's work recasts natural and divine revelation of blackness as the hermeneutical key to reading God's providential plan and mission of redemption aright. Taking up the disfiguring effects of anti-black images for black persons, especially black women, Harper's

novel reveals the theological and scientific as co-conspirators in legitimizing racial peoplehood. That is, she illuminates how anti-black modes of governance operate by making claims to both natural and supernatural knowledge of the human. Writing in the wake of Reconstruction's failure and with racial science proliferating, her apocalyptic indictments of the plantation economy and its aftermath, calls into question the legitimacy of white governance. Her writing thus stands as a black political theological question of knowledge and epistemology. The white Christian nation and its reproduction of natural and supernatural knowledge of black people is shown to be inadequate to black flesh, and thus Harper's employment of revelation acts as a moment of decision that re-orients proper perception, or reading, of the world through black flesh. By considering Harper's recasting of the black image, I show both Harper's political theological imagination as significant for thought, and also the limitations of legitimizing black flesh through their inscription within a Christian narrative of redemption and uplift.

Chapter Four returns to the question of redemption through the theological question of God's justice, or theodicy. Reading Angelina Weld Grimké's early 20th century play, *Rachel: A Play in Three Acts*, I consider how, Grimké's political theological imagination provides a black queer pre-figuration of reproductive justice that animates both the refusal to reproduce according to the white Christian economy of redemption, and a practice of otherwise reproductions that find their meaning and value in the joy of black flesh. As Grimké's protagonist goes from identifying with the white image of the Virgin Mary to the Jewish Rachel, weeping for her children, Grimké illuminates how the refusal to justify God and the white Christian nation is antagonistic to the reproduction of a Christian racial economy of redemption and its supersessionist sense of chosen peoplehood. Against the reproduction of chosen peoplehood through riches, power, and redemptive suffering, Grimké shows how a black maternal function provides an alternative political theological education in the blackness of belonging. Here, belonging is not predicated on a redemptive narrative, but on the

practice and cultivation of joy in the flesh. By considering Grimké's refusal of theodicy, I show how her work presents a challenge to the Christian narrative of redemption, but also a challenge to a black political theology that would reproduce either romances of redemption and reconciliation or melancholic resignation as the work of a black political theology.

My conclusion situates each of the three chapters on Williams, Harper, and Grimké as the beginning of a conversation on the political theological questions that pertain to black women's reproduction history. Questions of how the US' racial economy is modeled on a Christian economy, how the transmission of a disinherited status of non-belonging recurs through the cultural reproduction of anti-black images, and how the reproduction of a social order that terrorizes black people in the name of reproducing white salvation all come to the fore. At the same time, each chapter serves double duty, illuminating the reproduction of race as a means of establishing political theological legitimacy and illuminating the reproduction of a black political theology that is antagonistic to the legitimacy of white Christian governance. Each of these women provide–sometimes harmonious, sometimes clashing–possible interventions in the reproduction of racial peoplehood as a political theological claim. I sketch some possibilities for further study and note how a black political theology must become antagonistic to the Christian order of reproduction that legitimates claims of chosen peoplehood. This would not require the discarding of Christian theological materials, so much as thinking them according to a black procedure of thought that disfigures them, marks them as at odds with the proper order. In this way, the goal of this dissertation is not only to show how these women's contributions are worthy of study, but recast the field of political theology and the questions of legitimacy, meaning, and value around the reproduction of racial peoplehood in modernity.

Chapter 1.

Making a Claim: Rereading Racial Reproduction History in US Claims of Chosen Peoplehood

The reproduction of the divine image onto the human is the unique birthright that distinguishes human life from all antecedent creatures that populated the pre-Adamite world.[69]

Introduction

In his 2018 text, *Divine Variations: How Christian Thought Became Racial Science,* Terence Keel illuminates how Christian claims of common descent, ontological distinctiveness of the human, and the stability of nature, became the basis of modern racial science. Keel argues that:

> the ancestors of Europe did in fact pass down stories about the origins of human life that continue to inform modern science. These narratives do not have a pure secular origin. Instead, they draw from Christian patterns of reasoning about the abrupt solemnity of creation, human difference, and the universal applicability of a Christian worldview. Collectively, these concepts enable the belief that human races descend from a common ancestor (monogenism) and that modern science must tell a story about the origin of all people.[70]

Noting how purportedly secular scientists reproduce Christian claims in their observations and claims, Keel deftly exposes the regnant Christian theological rationale that legitimates contemporary scientific accounts of biological peoplehood and its racial assumptions.

While Keel notes some crucial ways that reproduction structures the enduring legitimacy of racial peoplehood, he does not make reproduction an explicit effect of how theological claims produce and reproduce a sense of kinship or common descent, human distinction, and the stability

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[69] Keel, *Divine Variations*, 37

[70] Keel, 5.

of nature. Reproduction primarily serves as secondary evidence of his larger point. Still, I find Keel's insights necessary as they clarify what kind of theological claims a political theology of race and reproduction needs to account for in order to show a significant relationship between Christian theology and the reproduction of racial peoplehood. One must consider how theology reproduces claims of common descent, of human distinctiveness, and of the stability or preservation of nature. In this chapter, I begin this undertaking by focusing on three reproductive technologies and reproductive protocols in Christian theology that are significant for the reproduction of racial peoplehood. This chapter is examining how the application of theological knowledge operates reproductively and also relies on things like orthodoxy as a protocol for insuring the reproduction of proper theological speech but also proper Christian community and its sense of peoplehood. This will provide a starting place for further study and a closer view of the naturalizing effects of Christian theological claims. By understanding how theological claims operate as reproductive technologies, we can better understand how the processes of racial legitimation occur through a theological management of reproduction, with an eye to what this means for black women's reproduction in the forthcoming chapters.

The three reproductive technologies that I examine in this chapter are Christian figural methods of reading, the relationship between the revealed image and the natural image, and the theological function of the figure of the mother. The goal is to provide a baseline understanding of the key ways that these technologies are both central to Christian theology with an eye to the reproduction history of US peoplehood. In each section of this chapter, I interweave the theological, the historical, and the cultural together to show how Christian theological claims are reproduced in the 19th Century US imagination in order to legitimate and manage claims of racial peoplehood. This chapter is thus meant to clarify the stakes and interventions of my rereadings in the forthcoming chapters.

Figuring Legitimacy: Reading Redemption History in Human Nature

Studies of how Christian peoplehood legitimates national claims of belonging regularly reference the influence of typological, or figural, modes of reading in imagining US peoplehood as a chosen peoplehood. Typology is "a form of prophecy which sets two successive events into a reciprocal relation of anticipation and fulfillment."[71] The figural is the close relative of the typological, if not quite synonymous. According to Erich Auerbach, *figura* "is something real and historical that represents and proclaims in advance something else that is also real and historical."[72] However, Auerbach notes that *figura* takes on this unique use as "historically real prophecy" within a Christian understanding of the world and he situates the apostle Paul as its founder. Ursula Brumm further confirms this view of the figural as a union of the providential and historical, noting that

> though both events are embedded in the course of history, the theological notion of figural prophecy links them up with the more encompassing vista of divine providence. In their historical reality, both poles of the figure remain anticipatory and incomplete. They reach out beyond historical events toward eternal fulfillment in the kingdom of God."[73]

That is, it is by a *theological* act of apprehension that the two, history and God's providential acts, are understood as one. Christian typological or figural readings thus depended on their situation within Christian redemption history for their significance.[74]

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[71] Ursula Brumm, *American Thought and Religious Typology* (Rutgers University Press, 1970), 27.

[72] Erich Auerbach and Paolo Valesio, *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature*, Minnesota Archive Editions ed. edition (Minneapolis: Univ Of Minnesota Press, 1984), 29.

[73] Brumm, *American Thought and Religious Typology*, 27

[74] Kevin Vanhoozer notes this as much: "It is the redemptive-historical context that both enables and constrains the spiritual sense. What spiritual significance things have is not a function of their sheer createdness but rather their role in the ongoing drama of redemption." (Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "'Ascending the Mountain, Singing the Rock: Biblical Interpretation Earthed, Typed, and Transfigured'," *Modern Theology* 28, no. 4 (2012): 781–803, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0025.2012.01784.x, 793. One might note here a general anxiety that pervades Christian claims regarding scriptural interpretation as related to the reproductive structure that I am attempting to illuminate, that is the question of proper goernance on meaning in order to properly reproduce Christian claims of redemption.

Hans Frei further illuminates how the figural sense of fulfillment is distinct from a prophetic sense of fulfillment, writing:

> Typology as a literary exercise in the interpretation of providential history is more important than the old-fashioned prophecy-fulfillment scheme for the connection of earlier and later events. For "prophecy fulfilled," in addition to looking troublingly like a magical view of miracle, never allowed the plea that history, while providentially governed, is nonetheless an open-ended course, whereas figural interepretation does allow precisely that conjunction.[75]

Here, Frei illuminates how the figural combines open-endedness and historicity in non-competitive terms, thus allowing for a "complex interaction of the providential action of God in Christ, the governor of nature and history."[76] For Frei, as above, the centrality of Christ and his identity which is narratively rendered in the gospels is the crux of Christian typological readings of history and nature. Here we begin to see how this figural mode of reading is tied to the legitimacy of Christian claims of redemption in Christ and the peoplehood established upon those claims. In what follows, I consider how the significance of *reproduction* for these claims of legitimacy and thus how a theological mode of *reproducing* legitimacy is illuminated in the historical situation of US peoplehood.

As Auerbach notes, Paul is often read as the crucial actor in legitimating the typological or figural mode of interepretation and its basis for Christian theological claims. The significance of this method for Paul's emerges within his own situation of crisis. The burgeoning community of Christ followers, consisting of Jews and Gentiles, is in need of a way of understanding the sense of belonging that Christ announces. Are Gentiles to become Jews? How does Christ reconcile Jew and Gentile to each other? For Paul, the figural is crucial to creating legitimate belonging for Gentiles. According to Matthew Thiessen, Paul understood the ethnic difference between Jews and Gentiles

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[75] Frei et al., *Reading Faithfully, Volume 1*, 34

[76] Frei et al., 160.

as an essential difference.[77] That is, Paul did not see Gentiles as able to become real descendents of Abraham *according to the flesh*. Thus, Paul's theological innovation comes in his understanding of Christ as providing a way for Gentiles to become real descendents of Abraham, real children of God and members of this chosen people, *according to the spirit*. This *pneuma,* or seed, provided the means for Gentiles to really claim their inheritance as children of God.

On Paul's reading, and in the figural's Christian afterlife, the figural procedure of reading, rather than overcoming the historical, redirects or renarrates how historical figures and history itself finds meaning and value. That is, a key aspect of *figura* is that both the figure and the fulfilling figure have meaning for themselves within the concrete shape of the story wherein they are rendered. At the same time, they have a meaning that extends beyond themselves, linking them to one another, which is only perceivable by reading them in light of salvation in Christ.[78] In the case of Adam, for instance he has his own concrete significance within the creation story in Genesis, but his concrete significance is further illuminated and fulfilled by Christ's coming as the second Adam. By reading the narratively rendered shape of Adam's character in light of Christ, both Adam and Christ's identity's comes to have meaning and significance. In this way, the figural structure of promise and fulfillment depends on the formation of perception. Only by perceiving figures in light of Christian redemption history does this structure of promise and fulfillment legitimate its claims. A key effect of the figural, then, is how it works as a way of appropriating and acclimating prior claims of legitimacy to Christian claims of legitimacy.[79] It is by giving these historical figures theological

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[77] Thiessen, *Paul and the Gentile Problem*

[78] For a clarifying historical survey of figural interpretations, see James Samuel Preus, *From Shadow to Promise: Old Testament Interpretation from Augustine to the Young Luther* (Belknap Press, 1969).

[79] Where several scholars have attempted to respond to Christian supersessionism or its replacement of the Jews as the people of God by arguing that Gentile Christianity forgets its link to Israel, on my reading, they miss how it is precisely the figural preservation of a link between the two that grounds supersessionist imaginations of Christian peoplehood because it is the preservation of Jewish flesh that legitimates Christian claims. However, the Christian innovation is how

significance within a Christian order of things that a new kinship in Christ is annouced as possible. This new kinship in Christ is the basis of Christian belonging and its sense of chosen peoplehood.

Attending to the theological sense of the figural provides a deeper sense of what reproductive work this theological technology does in establishing and legitimating national claims of peoplehood that themselves are legitimated by recourse to biblical origins and racial peoplehood. The making of belonging in the US thus requires legitimation according to this procedure of thought. We can see this first illuminated by turning to Puritan employments of the typological and figural to make a New World chosen people.[80] Secondly, we can do so by examining the nineteenth century theological science of Noahic origins, especially the Myth of Ham, and black people's work to re-narrate Hamitic origins such that it justified their legitimate claims to the benefits of US citizenship. In each of these cases, biblical figuralism grounds the political theological articulations of legitimate peoplehood in a community's attempt to resolve crises of belonging.

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the terms of order that make a people come to be governed by spiritual descent as opposed to fleshly descent and it is Christ who provides the grounds for this order. For this standard view, see Katherine Sonderegger, *That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew: Karl Barth's "Doctrine of Israel"* (University Park, Pa: Pennsylvania State Univ Pr, 1992); Scott Bader-Saye, *Church and Israel After Christendom: The Politics of Election*, Radical Traditions (Boulder, Colo: Westview Press, 1999); R. Kendall Soulen, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology* (Fortress Press, 2009); Eugene F. Rogers Jr, *Sexuality and the Christian Body: Their Way into the Triune God*, 1 edition (Oxford, UK ; Malden, Mass: Wiley-Blackwell, 1999); Carter, *Race*; Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*.

[80] For more on the relationship between Puritanism and slavery see Betty Wood, *The Origins of American Slavery: Freedom and Bondage in the English Colonies* (Macmillan, 1998); Wendy Warren, *New England Bound: Slavery and Colonization in Early America* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2016); Tamara Lewis, "'Wherefore She Made Suit': African Women's Religious and Spiritual Determinism in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century England," *Religions* 8, no. 11 (November 2017): 251, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel8110251, and Tamara E. Lewis, "'"To Wash a Blackamoor White": The Rise of Black Ethnic Religious Rhetoric in Early Modern England" (PhD thesis, Vanderbilt University, 2014).

Figuring Descent: Blackness, Biblical Origins, and the Theological Reproduction of Legitimacy

Deeply shaped by the Christian typological readings of scripture and the sense that one should perceive their world and other humans in light of biblical images and their true figurations of redemption history, Puritans practiced reading their historical situation and actions in light of biblical figures and events. For instance, Werner Sollors notes that

> Puritan theology related the secular history of the American colonists to biblical types. … The events of early American history were, with the help of typology, rhetorically transformed and elevated into biblical drama, as New Englanders interpreted their transatlantic voyage as a new exodus, their mission as an errand into the wilderness, and their own role as that of a new chosen people.[81]

Biblical figures of Christ, Moses, Adam and Eve, City on a Hill, the Exodus, or God's plantation, and an exhausting amount of others were read as illuminating the significance of colonial American settlers like John Cotton, John Winthrop, and others. As Brumm notes, because figures are, of necessity, incomplete until the end of history, Puritans understood themselves as participating in the fulfillment of the redemption pre-figured by biblical characters and events.[82] This participation in a divine mission was, importantly, only possible because of God's work of salvation in Christ, which revealed the significance of human history and the possibility of participating in this divine plan. Appeal to these biblical figures thus worked to legitimate European Christian's claims to be not only justified, but pre-ordained to fulfill the divine mission of spreading the gospel and propagating a Christian people by settling the Americas. In each case, the Christian redemption historical significance of each figure provides the shape by which early American imaginations of peoplehood

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[81] Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity*, 41. It seems important to note that the distinction between secular and sacred history is fraught here. The Puritans did not imagine earthly history as somehow devoid of redemption history, but precisely the place wherein redemption history is made real because of God's incarnation in Christ.

[82] Brumm, *American Thought and Religious Typology*

were illuminated as legitimate leaders and by which each plantation was read as a legitimate settlement.

Establishing legitimate origins was crucial for the Puritan missions to the New World. Strangers in a strange land, Puritans were anxious to show how their inhabitation of this New World strengthened their ties with fellow the Church of England rather than being a radical separation.[83] Biblical figuralism, along with practices like a Calvinist theology of fellow feeling, provided them with a way of solidifying their shared mission with the Church of England while also establishing their participation in Christian history as a matter of fulfillment. As Ursula Brumm notes, this sense of fulfillment is not the advent of the totally New as much as a recapitulation of what was prophesied or pre-figured in biblical history. "In order to prove to themselves and to those who remained at home that their exodus and colonization were both justified and important, they related them to the history of Christianity and also enhanced their leaders with historical and biblical parallels."[84] In this way, the figural helped to stabilize the crisis of legitimacy that Puritan's experienced in the wake of their departure from England. We can begin to see one key way that the figural was employed reproductively. For the Puritans, typology enabled the establishment and strengthening of theological claims of kinship both across space (between them and England) and time (between them and biblical figures).[85] At the same time, this figural practice of people-making, what Werner Sollors calls "typological ethnogenesis," comes to act as America's common sense

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[83] Abram Van Engen, *Sympathetic Puritans: Calvinist Fellow Feeling in Early New England*, Religion in America (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 5

[84] Brumm, *American Thought and Religious Typology*, 49.

[85] This is illustrated pertinently by the title alone of Cotton and Royster, "Milk for Babes. Drawn Out of the Breasts of Both Testaments. Chiefly, for the Spirituall Nourishment of *Boston* Babes in Either *England*.". Even moreso by the work of this catechism to establish kinship between the "old" and "new" Englands within a Christian history and mission that is figured reproductively through breastmilk, nourishment, and education.

procedure for legitimating claims of peoplehood by providing an origin story that finds its meaning and value within Christian salvation history.

In the nineteenth century, this biblical figuralism was employed to resolve the existential question of human origins that emerged on the basis of the US' racial hierarchy. Due to its fittingness for constructing legitimate origin stories, the figural in this situation works to resolve the theological question of where different races came from and how they were related.[86] The Noahic account of racial origins was the established common sense of the early American imagination well into the 20th century.[87] This theology accounted for the different races by showing how each of Noah's sons was the progenitor of the white (Japheth), black (Ham), and yellow (Shem) races. Significantly, this Noahic origin story functioned for white Christians as a means of explaining black illegitimacy through their figuration as descendents of Ham. The "Myth of Ham" and the attendent curse of Ham operated in the US imagination as a way of articulating black people's heathen status. It is precisely because white Europeans were the one's Christianizing enslaved Africans, that they wrote black flesh into Christian history through the figure of Ham and the curse he carries. That is, Ham's curse was taken as the theological rationale for black heathenness and established their need for Christianization and subjection to Christian, civilized governance.

Theological claims of Noahic descent and the Hamitic myth thus functioned as a way of naturalizing racial origins by reading different racial peoples in light of Christian redemption history. This practice worked to articulate white anxieties about the place of blacks in the social order at the

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[86] As Sylvester Johnson notes, the myth of Ham was less a response to slavery and more a response to the crisis of origins that different races posed. Johnson, *The Myth of Ham in Nineteenth-Century American Christianity*. This reading also aligns with Taubes' sense of theology as a discourse of resolving crises of history and God claims. Taubes, *From Cult to Culture*.

[87] A common sense that continues, in some circles, through to today. Johnson, *The Myth of Ham in Nineteenth-Century American Christianity* and Keel, *Divine Variations*. But see also creationist accounts of race and kinship as they relate to salvation in Rogers, "The Sociology and Theology of Creationist Objections to Evolution.".

same time that it left theirs unquestioned. Additionally, the figure of Ham and recourse to Noahic origins operated theologically to resolve conflicts regarding the proper terms of peoplehood and the maintenance of legitimate governance on the basis of race. In this way, the reproduction of an anti-black social order depended on the claims of kinship that could be biblically and theologically legitimated and this Christian figural practice of producing kinship provided the protocol and picture for legitimizing claims of racial origins. These claims both set in place and solidified the need for the proper management of blood, sexuality, and the boundaries of belonging. As Sylvester Johnson argues, then, it is important to understand the Myth of Ham as less a means of defending slavery, than as an attempt to parse out fundamental questions of existence, humanity, and its origins.[88] Indeed, even black people accepted this claim of descent as a fact. "Hamitic identity, as sensus communis, was primarily about originary concerns, not slavery apologia" Given the agreed upon common sense, understanding the relationship of Hamitic identity to Christian peoplehood was a fundamentally theological question.

A difficulty that emerged for black Americans was the fact of being written into this story of Christian redemption through the slave ship.

> Because black Americans encountered Christianity as a racial group, they had to explain the "problem" of not having been people of God prior to the American experience. The situation is one of a non-biblical, heathen people encountering or negotiating the symbolic, narrative world of Christianity. The context imposes a peculiar liminality; in this situation, a problematic folk comes to occupy an ontological fissure or disjuncture between (legitimate) divine identity and racialized, heathen existence. There persists a nagging uncertainty or irresolute, anxious regard for the condition of the race because of this complex past. This anxiety constitutes an existential crisis of Hamitic identity.[89]

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[88] Johnson, *The Myth of Ham in Nineteenth-Century American Christianity*, 5.

[89] Johnson, 12

Reappropriating the biblical figure of Ham thus became necessary for articulating black legitimacy, while at the same time it preserved the legitimacy of the Christian narrative world wherein Hamitic origins had meaning as the heathen.[90] That is, as Johnson notes, the need to gain political theological legitimacy through the re-appropriation of Ham and Hamitic claims of origins both provides black people with some basis on which to ground their claims of equal personhood, while it also extends the structure of legitimacy and illegitimacy that requires they develop a theology that can account for how these illegitimately originating people are not destined by God to be governed by white people. By attending to this procedure of reading, though, we can see how the figural has implications for this study. In focusing our attention on how Christian theological claims of peoplehood work reproductively, we can see how they naturalize claims of origins that work to legitimate the modern racial imagination. In this way, Christian designations of chosen people as opposed to heathen people become historically actualized in racialized flesh. The figural enables historically real flesh to give form to theological claims of peoplehood even as the theological is employed to manage the terms of order—to manage the reproduction of meaning and value in the flesh.

Here, the Christian figural imagination makes its claims real primarily through a continuity in how sense is made from images according to its proper procedure of thought, which is discerned according to the salvific claims of Christianity. In this sense, reproduction of Christian images of belonging also depends on the reproduction of an incarnational reading practice—a procedure of perceiving the image and likeness between figures, dynamic living images in history, and the invisible truth of these living images that God has revealed. Still, it is the form of the historical material that provides the shape in which one perceives the reality and truth of Christian claims. Thus, the figural is a method for reproducing not only a Christian image of belonging, but a practice of perceiving the

[90] Laurie Mafflie-Kipp helpfully illuminates numerous texts that reproduce a sacred history for black people as a means of resolving the crisis of black belonging in the United States. See Maffly-Kipp, *Setting down the Sacred Past*

likeness between concrete historical figures and events, the flesh and living form of history, that enables the generation of meaning in the first place.

We can thus see how this conception of the *figural* also has implications for the interpretation of black flesh in history. As Ann Kibbey elaborates, "for the Puritans, the concept of *figura* was a means of interpreting the human shape, whether as artistic image or as living form."[91] This theological practice of interpreting the body in this way recurs in Puritan readings of indigenous flesh, and throughout the 19th century debates over human origins and race.[92] In interpreting black flesh as figuring the Hamitically descended heathen, the US racial economy re-articulated its Christian theological sense of kinship as a means of marking out the chosen and redeemed people from the figure of the heathen, in need of white Christian governance. We can now turn to how this Christian economy and its figural procedure of people making has implications for the reproduction of anti-black senses of belonging. We can understand how the figural mode of reading enables the interpretation of black skin as both a sign of hamitic descent, as a natural sign of inferiority, and thus as a means of affirming a divinely legitimated anti-black order of things.

Incarnating a People: Nature, Revelation, and the Reproduction of White Governance

> *We recognize the fact of the inferiority stamped upon that race of men by the Creator, and from the cradle to the grave, our Government, as a civil institution, marks that inferiority. In their subject and dependent state, they are not the objects of cruelty as they would be if left to the commission of crime, for which they should be incarcerated in penitentiaries and work-houses, and put under hired overseers, having no interest in them and no relation to them, no affiliation, growing out of the associations of childhood and the tender care of age.*[93]

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[91] Kibbey and Ann, *The Interpretation of Material Shapes in Puritanism*, 3.

[92] However, the convergence of theological interpretation and the image repeats the Puritan practice as noted in Bailey, *Race and Redemption in Puritan New England*. For more on theology, race, and interpretation of the body, see Brian Bantum, *The Death of Race: Building a New Christianity in a Racial World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016).

[93] Senator Jefferson Davis, April 12, 1860, 37th Cong., 1st sess., *Congressional Globe* 106, 1682.

> *The European race owes its superiority in mental powers to the circumstances which have called these powers into action. The efforts to obtain personal liberty, and the influence of the Christian religion have been the chief means of perfecting the faculties of the white man. Let him then, as far as possible, plant the seeds of freedom and Christianity in the hearts of every people; and then the brown, the red, the black, and the tawny, man will assimilate with each other and with the more favored white race, till they learn to feel as well as to acknowledge that "God hath made of one blood all nations of men." … God grant that [the white race] improve their privileges, so that their example may be a light to the world, teaching all men, that, to gain rational freedom, and to preserve it, is the greatest perfection of human nature on earth. No nation can [gain freedom by spread] unless they understand and conform to the laws of the Creator as they are revealed in his works and in his word. The book of Nature and the book of Revelation must be the text-books of a free people.*[94]

If the Christian imagination is a means of making a sense of belonging through naturalizing and familial images of peoplehood, then theology manages the proper perception and sense of these images in order to legitimate their use and show how Christian claims of belonging are real and enduring over time and space. Theological procedures of reading, writing, and imagining work together to produce the meaning and value of these images in and through the shared or common sense that they create for the community. The production and perception of images is also the production and perception of a set of claims about who belongs to the community. The Christian imagination is thus concerned with the production of a people who imitate Christ and so image him in their lives. Such imitation requires a perpetual education in how to read one's place in history such that a shared perception of peoplehood and a sense of belonging to this people becomes real.

But, as I have argued, this imagination is not only productive, but reproductive. In order for Christian claims to hold they must be repeatedly made. In order for the image to retain power, the sense it makes for those it bonds in common must be reproduced. In order for the imitation and perception of these living images to be legible, there must be a continual education of those who belong into the community's sense-making procedures–a cultivation of their reason, senses, and

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[94] Anonymous, "Are the Human Race All of One Blood?" in *The American Ladies' Magazine*, ed. Sarah Josepha Buell Hale, vol. VI (Boston: : Putnam; Hunt [etc.], 1828), http://archive.org/details/americanladiesma06hale, 362

actions that is directed towards making the claims of the community real in their lives. The common sense of the Christian community does not simply employ reproductive images, but is an imaginary modeled on literal reproduction. It imagines belonging in words and images of reproduction. Through words it images belonging in terms of family and kinship, plants and propagation, milk, food, and nourishment, sonship, adoption, and inheritance.[95] Through images, it gives its words power to insure the claims to belong to this family. Through the reproduction of a claim that is imaged by literal forms of reproduction, the Christian imaginary also installs a procedure of reading whereby the legitimacy and authority of its claim is reproduced.

The figural in its Christian register thus works as a mode of perceiving likeness between images and making meaning from that resonance through apprehension according to the proper (read: orthodox) theological sense.[96] As I noted above, a figural procedure of reading enables the transmission of a theological governance that is able to reproduce a coherent and enduring claim between the living and dynamic images of biblical figures or events and the sensible historical world and human forms. In this way, divine and natural revelation mutually affirm each other: "[Nature is] a key to understanding who God is and what he does in Christ, and, on the other hand, … Christ [is] the key to understanding the purpose of the first creation, which preceded it in time."[97] This

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[95] Glancy, *Slavery in Early Christianity* and Penniman, *Raised on Christian Milk* have very insightful commentary on these images as they pertain to slavery.

[96] See Preus, *From Shadow to Promise*. See also Hans' Frei's essay on Barth and Analogy in Hans W. Frei and Mark Alan Bowald, *Reading Faithfully, Volume 2: Writings from the Archives: Frei's Theological Background*, ed. Mike Higton (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2016). Here, Frei gives significant attention to the relationship between faith, as a united act of perception and apprehension, and analogy in Barth. I think this helpfully illuminates one way that sense is made in Christian theology.

[97] Anglican-Roman Catholic Dialogue, *Images of God: Reflections on Christian Anthropology*, #4-7, http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/ecumenical-and-interreligious/ecumenical/anglican/images-of-god-anthropology.cfm. See also Kathryn Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 1 edition (Cambridge, UK ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010) for a somewhat resonant account of how Christ is the key to understanding human nature. However, Tanner would give primacy to human nature's plasticity as a means of accounting for how it is able to participate in a weak and strong sense in the divine image.

relationship between revelation and nature and vice versa works to both illuminate God's order in creation and also to affirm the primacy of a Christian order of reading the world. By perceiving the natural created order through God's economy of salvation, which is established in history by Christ, both the image of the created world and the human created in the image of God are instructive.[98]

The instructiveness of the image of God's plantation, for instance, also extended to the 19th century as legitimation of white governance. White governance was theologically articulated as the work of Christian mission and providing a Christian education to black heathens. This image was especially proliferating in the genre of plantation novels, which merged Southern, pro-slavery political investments with the stylistic influences from romance and domestic literature. In these cultural reproductions of anti-black images, pro-slavery sentiment is deftly tied to a theological interpretation of the black inferiority as divinely and naturally revealed in black skin.

In the 1854 plantation novel, *The Planter's Northern Bride*, for instance, Caroline Lee Hentz seeks to provide a rebuttal to popular abolitionist texts like *Uncle Tom's Cabin,* which depict slavery as harmful to the enslaved.[99] Rather than portraying Northerners as meddlers in Southern affairs, Hentz depicts them through the bride in the title, Eulalia, as well meaning but misguided and in need of proper instruction from those who have firsthand experience of the Southern slave economy. This firsthand experience is provided through the character Moreland, the master of the plantation. In an illuminating scene, Moreland informs Eulalia of his certainty that she will make an excellent mistress of the plantation, but that she will need to learn to be near black people without

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[98] For a recent overview and constructive engagement with the image of God in Christian theology, see Ian Alexander McFarland, *The Divine Image: Envisioning the Invisible God* (Fortress Press, n.d.). See also Vladimir Lossky and John Meyendorff, *In the Image and Likeness of God*, ed. John H. Erickson and Thomas E. Bird, New edition edition (Crestwook, N.Y: St Vladimirs Seminary Pr, 2001).

[99] Of course, the difficulty with such texts is that they also reproduce anti-black images as a means of creating a white sense of mission in saving black people from slavery. See Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*

repulsion. The free black people she has encountered in the North, so goes Moreland's argument, have become socially degenerate without the white paternity of the South. Thus, while Northern abolitionists may assert kinship with black people, saying things like, "we are all children of God," they never actually practice the kind of intimacy with black people that is common on the plantation because they are secretly repulsed by them.

As a husband and master, Moreland will help Eulalia overcome this difficulty. The hierarchical intimacy of the plantation, unlike the false equality of the North, reveals the proper divine and natural order of things.

> My dear Eulalia, God never intended that you and I should live on equal terms with the African. He has created a barrier between his race and ours, which no one can pass over without incurring the ban of society. The white woman who marries a negro, makes herself an outcast, a scorn, and a byword. The white man who marries a negress forfeits his position as a gentleman, and is excluded from the social privileges of his brethren. This is the result of *an inherent principle of the human breast,* entwined, like conscience, with our vitality, and inseparable from it. The most ultra Northern philanthropist dare not contradict this truth. He may advocate amalgamation with his lips, but in his heart, he recoils from it with horror. … *Nature has marked a dividing line, as distinct as that which separates the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fishes of the sea.*[100]

Here the Southern plantation owner educates his new spouse in the proper order and throughout the novel, he figures himself as a sympathetic father and missionary to the enslaved in need of proper oversight by white masters. This passage intertwines God's intentions and nature's law with a racial economy scaled from black to white and the prohibition of marriage between them. This Christian management of reproduction thus works to naturalize the plantation master and mistress' role as stewards of black well-being.[101] Indeed, this is not just a matter of reason or conscience, but

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[100] Caroline Lee Hentz, *The Planter's Northern Bride* (Philadelphia: T.B. Peterson, 1854), https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/012189113, 202-3. Emphasis mine.

[101] Here, a question about the relationship between nature and providence is helpfully illuminated by Eugene Rogers, who shows how God's work on the world is precisely what makes nature natural. "Whatever God does with [the world] becomes natural to it. When we come to the law of human nature, we see that its plasticity is what grace requires, so that

one of the heart and "*an inherent principle of the human breast.*" In participating in this task of mastery, that is governance, they imitate God in being a good master. Because God has established this order and nature confirms it with "a dividing line, as distinct as that which separates the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea," the image of blackness "stamped" on black flesh serves as a theological sign of the natural division between kinds and the necessity of a slave economy.

Here Moreland provides a theological education that naturalizes the common sense of the plantation and so becomes the new common sense for Eulalia. That is, the romance between Eulalia and Moreland is meant to figure a national romance of white kinship, where Northerners and Sourtherners are reconciled in their shared kindly governance of enslaved Africans. This depends on a spiritual sense of belonging that is predicated on the shared mission of governance that whiteness embodies. Whites belong to the class of free Christian people and blacks, in belonging to whites as property, belong to the class of free Christian people whose freedom is expressed as servility to white governance. In this way, Hentz depicts the work of master and mistress as the work of making a Christian family and running a Christian household, including the proper management of slaves. Here the plantation becomes the site of God's civilizing activity as Moreland describes his role as a master:

> "I look upon myself as a missionary," replied Moreland, with a kindling countenance. "I look upon every master and mistress in our Southern land, as missionaries appointed to civilize and christianize the sons and daughters of Africa. To them Ethiopia is stretching out its sable hands, and through them they are lifted to God. If all the efforts of all the missionaries in our country were concentrated in the dark regions of Africa, they could not, judging of

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grace can elevate nature without violating or exploding it." Eugene F. Rogers Jr, *Aquinas and the Supreme Court: Race, Gender, and the Failure of Natural Law in Thomas's Biblical Commentaries* (John Wiley & Sons, 2013), 300. On my reading, this plasticity of human nature resonates with Frei's sense of the fittingness of the figural as a means of interpreting the uniqueness of individuals as narratively and communally rendered. Reading with the two, we can perceive how the narrative rendering of the black in the Christian imagination works to inscribe the meaning of black flesh as a figure of the natural slave. The Christian imagination thus works to narratively render the dynamic shape of enfleshed black people as naturally obedient and subservient. Thinking more extensively in further study about the reproductive relationship between grace and nature would provide more generative means of exploring the questions raised here.

> the success of their labours elsewhere, make one-tenth part of the number of converts that are found in our households and plantations. In our towns and villages, the churches of the negroes rise side by side with our own. Their prayers of faith, their hymns of praise, ascend on the same breeze, and are borne upward to the same heaven. Once more, then, I entreat you, give me your daughter, and look upon her evermore as the wife of a Christian missionary."[102]

By weaving claims of kinship together with sentiment, claims of marriage and attraction with biblical images of nature, Hentz's novel suggests the common ground for the North and the South is in the shared feeling of kinship and governance that whiteness provides. This is a catechetical act, as both Hentz and Moreland provide instruction for her Southern readers in converting Northerners and provides instruction for her Northern readers in coming to share the proper Christian feeling of whiteness.[103] In all these instances, a theological claim of white kinship is assimilated in the relays between the theological and the natural, the sentimental and the rational, the romance of proper order, or law, and repulsion at the moral and sexual degeneration, or anarchy, that occurs when the common sense of the plantation is inhibited by Abolitionist miseducation in divine and natural law.

The role of the reproduction of the anti-black image here becomes pertinent to the maintenance of a white supremacist racial order. Crucially, the free black person is figured as a threat to the reproduction of the social order through images of marriage, sexuality, and romance and the possible degeneration and alienation that attends white people who would attempt to establish a legitimate union across racial lines. As Moreland notes, "the white woman who marries a negro, makes herself an outcast, a scorn, and a byword. The white man who marries a negress forfeits his position as a gentleman, and is excluded from the social privileges of his brethren." It is only slavery

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[102] Hentz, *The Planter's Northern Bride*, 109-110

[103] Many thanks to Lucia Hulsether for helping me to clarify this insight. Brian Bantum notes the ways that racial discipleship imitates Christian discipleship in Bantum, *Redeeming Mulatto*. However, on my reading, Bantum doesn't contend with how race is legitimated precisely as a success of Christian discipleship, as he positions racial discipleship as a failure of Christianity. My argument here, however, is that such formation marks the *success* of Christian mission and the task of Christianization.

that preserves the precarious order of things from degenerating.[104] Blackness functions as a disinheriting image, and union with blackness fails to reproduce legitimate claims of kinship. Instead, the fear of degeneration through black self-determination works to legitimate the plantation as a mission field that sutures white chosen peoplehood. The shared sense of belonging to a white chosen people is generated by the natural and divinely created dividing line that blackness figures.

Choose Your Mother, Lose Your Mother: A Theological Education in Feeling

> *There was a woman once who was marked out from all others on earth, and all generations have called her blessed. The Virgin Mary had a wonder place assigned her, but she was not vain of her privileges….She had no thought of herself at all…. She stood by the cross, if her presence might support him in his dying agonies, heedless of her own sorrow, self-forgetful, self-sacrificing…And the women who walk in her footsteps are blessed still, blessed in every generation as it comes and goes.*[105]

As noted in the previous section, the preservation of sexual purity works to ensure the proper transmission of the social order. Marriage and its conferral of legitimacy is crucial for properly ordering the wife's contribution to the reproduction of the social order. She insures the continuity of the patriarchal line by reproducing an heir and raising him. This reproductive sense of the transmission of identity, inheritance, and obligation is also a common image in Christian theology that is figured by the Mother. For instance, the church is frequently figured as both bride of Christ

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[104] It's also significant to note that the figure of the mulatto was often represented as degenerate and recognizing interracial relationship as legitimate social unions was understood as a threat because of the degeneracy that would be introduced to the social body. Here, the sense of a degenerating threat to the social body also corresponds with a degenerating threat to the Christian body. See Keel, *Divine Variations* and Yii-Jan Lin, *The Erotic Life of Manuscripts: New Testament Textual Criticism and the Biological Sciences* (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), for more on the relationship between the management of domains of knowledge and fears of racial degeneracy. See also Jr, *Sexuality and the Christian Body* for a helpful insight into the theological significance of marriage in liberal and conservative views and how it pertains to sexuality and the figural fulfillment of the flesh in Christ.

[105] W. (William) Cunningham, *True Womanhood* (New York : T.Y. Crowell & Co., 1897), http://archive.org/details/truewomanhood00cunn, 10. Also Cited in Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness* 123. Williams misidentifies the author as the Rev. W. Cunningham, but this W. Cunningham was actually a British economist, which, in my mind, is all the more interesting.

and mother of Christians by properly educating believers in the way of Christ and by ensuring the purity of the church. Augustine is instructive here:

> The whole Church itself is a virgin espoused unto one Husband Christ, as the Apostle says, of how great honor are its members worthy, who guard this even in the flesh itself, which the whole Church guards in the faith? Which imitates the mother of her husband, and her Lord. For the Church also is both a mother and a virgin. For whose virgin purity consult we for, if she is not a virgin? Or whose children address we, if she is not a mother? Mary bare the Head of This Body after the flesh, the Church bears the members of that Body after the Spirit. In both virginity hinders not fruitfulness: in both fruitfulness takes not away virginity. Wherefore, whereas the whole Church is holy both in body and spirit, and yet the whole is not virgin in body but in spirit; how much more holy is it in these members, wherein it is virgin both in body and spirit?[106]

The maternal figure, both bride and mother, is also significantly imaged by the Virgin Mary, whose sexual purity, willingness, and womb is the vehicle for communicating a perfect reproduction of the second person of the trinity in the flesh of Jesus.[107] Also seen as a figure who is a "second Eve," Mary's role in the economy of salvation undoes the disregard for God's word found in Eve's decision to eat the fruit from the serpent.[108]

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[106] Augustine, "Of Holy Virginity," in *The Early Church Fathers–Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: First Series: 14 Volumes*, ed. Philip Schaff (Hendrickson Publishers, 1886), #2, 417-438.

[107] This will be further elaborated below in discussing the Cult of True Womanhood, but see also Amey Victoria Adkins, "Virgin Territory: Theology, Purity, and the Rise of the Global Sex Trade," 2016, https://dukespace.lib.duke.edu/dspace/handle/10161/12176; Anna Rebecca Solevåg, *Birthing Salvation: Gender and Class in Early Christian Childbearing Discourse* (Leiden ; Boston: BRILL, 2013), Laato, "Biblical Mothers as Images of the Church.". My point here is not that feminist theologians haven't worked to re-signify Mary, but I am drawing attention to what is the common sense view of Mary's theological significance not only in the 19th century, but throughout Christian history, including today as seen in Irenaeus, *Against Heresies,* in Philip Schaff, *Ante-Nicene Fathers, Volume 1* . Augustine, "Of Holy Virginity."; *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church: Lumen Gentium* (Pauline Books & Media, 2000); Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *Mary for Today*, 1st English ed edition (San Francisco, Calif: Ignatius Press, 1988) for a sampling of theological interpretations of Mary. For more on shifting imaginations of Mary, see Myers, *Blessed Among Women*; Miri Rubin, *Mother of God* (Yale University Press, 2009); Beth Kreitzer, *Reforming Mary: Changing Images of the Virgin Mary in Lutheran Sermons of the Sixteenth Century* (Oxford University Press, 2004). These shifting imaginations highlight the retention and reconfiguration of the sense of obedience, purity, and salvation in childbirth that Mary figures.

[108] See Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.22. "Like the Lord, the Virgin Mary is also found obedient when she says, 'Behold your servant, Lord, may it be for me according to your word' (Luke 1:38), but Eve, disobedient, for she disobeyed while still a virgin. For just as Eve had Adam for a husband but was still a virgin . . . and by disobeying became the cause of death for herself and the whole human race, so also Mary, with a husband predestined for her but yet a virgin, was obedient and became the cause of salvation for herself and the whole human race." This notion of typological fulfillment also extends to Eve as a figure of the Church. See also Augustine, *Exposition on the Psalms* 41.9. "Wherefore

In all, images of mothers in Christian theology often work to communicate both the stability and precarity of transmitting Christian identity. As Denise Buell notes, this is due to the history of Christianity being imagined as a developmental history and thus relying on reproduction for its articulation.[109] The role of the mother through Christian history has thus been shaped by the need for proper order due to mothers ability to properly form or malform Christian children. As Buell points out, in late antiquity

> the mother, as the purported contributor of the material substance of the child, seems to have been often credited with the ability to determine the likeness of the child either through imagination, emotion, or visual image. Thus, a woman can cause her child to resemble someone who is or is not its father if she loves, thinks about or looks at someone or something else at the moment of conception.[110]

In Christian theology, the link between proper learning and proper growth and maturity was frequently figured through the language of divine paternity, obedient maternity, and legitimate sonship.[111] Childbirth was linked to salvation, both as the means by which salvation entered the world, thus providing the possibility of becoming legitimate sons of God through reception of their inheritance in Christ, but also as the unique way that women would gain their salvation.[112] This concern about the proper mother and the proper role of the mother coincides with Christian

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slept he? Because'Adam is the figure of Him that was to come'. And Adam slept, when out of his side was made Eve. Adam in the figure of Christ, Eve in the figure of the Church; whence she was called 'the mother of all living'. When was Eve created? While Adam slept. When out of Christ's side flowed the sacraments of the Church? While He slept upon the cross." For more on this notion of Christ's womb/wound and its relationship to how sexuality is theologically interpreted, see Tonstad, *God and Difference*.

[109] Buell, *Why This New Race*, 27. See also Buell, *Making Christians*.

[110] Buell, 63. This is also the case in medieval theology, too. See @bynum_fragmentation_1991.

[111] See Buell, *Why This New Race*; Hodge, *If Sons, Then Heirs*; Sam Tsang, *From Slaves to Sons: A New Rhetoric Analysis on Paul's Slave Metaphors in His Letter to the Galatians* (Peter Lang, 2005); John K. Goodrich, "'As Long as the Heir Is a Child': The Rhetoric of Inheritance in Galatians 4: 1-2 and P. Ryl. 2.153," *Novum Testamentum* 55, no. 1 (2013): 61–76.

[112] See 1 Timothy 2:15, *NRSV*; Solevåg, *Birthing Salvation*; Taylor Petrey, *Resurrecting Parts: Early Christians on Desire, Reproduction, and Sexual Difference* (Routledge, 2015); Mark Forman, *The Politics of Inheritance in Romans* (Cambridge University Press, 2011).

anxieties regarding the possible degeneration of Christian peoplehood that heresy and heathenism present for the purity of belonging in Christ.[113] In many ways, it is precisely through managing the figure of the mother that the possibility of racial articulation of peoplehood emerges in the West.[114] When Mary obediently accepts her divine election to birth Jesus, Mary becomes a exemplary student in submitting herself to God's will. Her obedience is thus instructive to the church in modeling, especially to women, the proper feminine function.[115] In this way, we can understand the racial reproductions of Christian belonging less as new inventions of modernity as much as theological reconfigurations of Christian claims for a different historical context and the crises of legitimacy that attending this situation.

Indeed, we can understand the convergence of motherhood, salvation, and childbirth as a form of racial reproduction in Early Modern debates over baptism. As Dennis Austin Britton notes,

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[113] Buell, *Why This New Race*; Petrey, *Resurrecting Parts*; Gaventa, *Our Mother Saint Paul*; Elizabeth Anne Castelli, *Imitating Paul: A Discourse of Power* (Westminster John Knox Press, 1991); Elizabeth Anne Castelli, "Paul on Women and Gender," in *Women and Christian Origins*, ed. Ross Shepard Kraemer and Mary Rose D'Angelo (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 221–35.

[114] An influential example, for instance, is in Augustine who takes up this distinction in City of God and his sermons. See Saint Augustine, *City of God* (Penguin UK, 2003) and Wendy Elgersma Helleman, "Casting Out Hagar: Anti-Judaism in the Sermons of Augustine," *Calvin Theological Journal* 51, no. 1 (April 2016): 20–36, http://proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLAn3878354&site=ehost-live&scope=site. For helpful overviews of the figure of Hagar in Christian imagination see both John Riches, *Galatians Through the Centuries*, Wiley-Blackwell Bible Commentaries (Wiley-Blackwell, 2007), http://gen.lib.rus.ec/book/index.php?md5=01c0cdf35425a9d5d6a06ba5a2730ce9 and John L. Thompson, *Writing the Wrongs: Women of the Old Testament Among Biblical Commentators from Philo Through the Reformation* (Oxford University Press, 2001). See also the forthcoming Nyasha Junior, *Reimagining Hagar: Blackness and Bible* (Oxford University Press, 2019). Finally, while some like Brigitte Kahl, *Galatians Re-Imagined*, Reprint edition (Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 2014) attempt to read Hagar's appearance in Galatians as establishing possibilities of reconciliation rather than exclusion, The problem here is with the terms of the debate. That is, my contention here is not a matter of reconciliation between the included and the excluded but a matter of the governance of the terms of order, how meaning is even given to the terms insider and outsider in the first place, and how the meaning of those terms is managed so as to perpetually legitimate the grammar or economy within which they find meaning. See my article Amaryah Armstrong, "Of Flesh and Spirit: Race, Reproduction, and Sexual Difference in the Turn to Paul," *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 16, no. 2 (2017): 126–41

[115] The sections on Mary in *Lumen Gentium* and *The Catechism of the Catholic* are instructive for the pedagogical function I mean to highlight. *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*. U. S. Catholic Church, *Catechism of the Catholic Church: Second Edition* (Crown Publishing Group, 2012). But, as I noted with Cunningham and Stowe's work, this is not simply a Catholic practice as the image functions to educate in numerous ways. For a recent theologically instructive reading of Mary, see Natalie Carnes, *Image and Presence: A Christological Reflection on Iconoclasm and Iconophilia* (Stanford University Press, 2017).

these debates between the Church of England, divergent forms of Protestantism, and the Catholic church over the role of infant baptism saw English theologians developing a theology of baptism that sought to put anxious parents at ease regarding assurance of children's salvation who were not baptized while, at the same time, maintaining their distinction from the Catholic view that baptism was necessary for salvation. The solution of these theologians was to articulate Christian identity as

> a genealogical trait that is passed from parents to children; they pointed to God's promise to Abraham, in Genesis 17, that he would be the God of Abraham and his seed. English Protestants appropriated this promise, emphasizing the ways in which God made a promise with an entire race and lineage of people, in order to assure the salvation of their children. At the same time, English theologians were very quick to define the limits of this promise; they asserted that salvation was only assured to the children of Christians and not to the children of "heathens" and "infidels," the words that most frequently appear in these discussions.[116]

Here Christian peoplehood and the figural linkage between European Christians and Abraham works to establish the legitimacy of the promise of salvation as real and enduring in its efficacy even in the absence of infant baptism. The point here is less to place the burden of race in modernity on Protest theology than to consider some of the significant influences on American theology. Catholicism and its theological responses to heathens, infidels, and the question of conversion had its own uniquely racial ways of reproducing its claims of Christian peoplehood. As we see again, theology's role during crises of legitimacy is primarily tasked with ensuring the proper production of Christian peoplehood which is figured in terms of racial reproduction. In this sense, "Protestant theology and early modern understandings of sexual reproduction converged in three ways: one, in describing the role of the male seed in creating a child's identity; two, in articulating a belief that women could be redeemed through childbirth; and three, in asserting that marriage and sexual reproduction were the chief means of producing Christian identity."[117] This linkage between

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[116] Britton, *Becoming Christian*, 10

[117] Britton, 143.

salvation, childbirth, and the unique role of women as wives and mothers recurs throughout Christian history.

As it pertains to this study, it is important to note that a key distinction in the preservation of Christian peoplehood was in theological narrations of the difference and dangers of the slave or heathen Mother as opposed to the free Christian mother. While the Apostle Paul establishes this distinction in Galatians, it recurs throughout Christian history as a means of narrating domestic Christian conduct in homes, the ecclesia, and eventually in civil society. For instance, Augustine "divides biblical, and even post-biblical, people between two mothers: one mother has given birth to Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Moses, all the prophets, apostles and martyrs and all good Christians, though in different times; the second mother has given birth to Cain, Ham, Ishmael, Esau, Dathan, Judas the false apostle, Simon Magus and all the false Christians, both Donatists and some inside the Church."[118] This categorical distinction between mothers is thus employed to ensure that Christians properly discern which figures are ensure the Christian order of things by ensuring the proper order of reproduction. In this way, the figure of the mother is instructive. Through categorical distinction of the mother one is able to discern with whom one should identify as a Christian.

In situating women's proper theological formation as imitating biblical figures of the mother, the Christian imagination operates as a key mode of domestic formation.[119] A key way this Christian domestic formation works is by establishing the obligations of belonging. In the nineteenth century imagination of the US, mothers were taken as critical to the proper cultivation of children and their maturation into proper Christian men and women. This is exemplified in Victorian norms of

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[118] Laato, "Biblical Mothers as Images of the Church.", 7. This also occurs in Augustine, *City of God.*

[119] Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," *American Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (1966): 151–74, https://doi.org/10.2307/2711179; Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Woman in Sacred History: A Series of Sketches Drawn from Scriptural, Historical, and Legendary Sources* (J.B. Alden, 1888); Myers, *Blessed Among Women*; Doyle, "'The Highest Pleasure of Which Woman's Nature Is Capable'.".

sexuality and reproduction as figured in the "Cult of True Womanhood."[120] Modeled on Christian theological conceptions of the proper role of a mother and wife, American Christian gave theological sense to birth, to the mothers nourishment, and her ability to transmit qualities to a child through her proper instruction. In this way, the domestic economy mirrored the economy of salvation. The image of the Mother and her task of ensuring proper reproduction of a people through proper nourishment and education in the obligations of white Christian peoplehood thus played a crucial part in establishing the domestic reproduction of racial peoplehood in the US.[121]

Black people, especially those seeking social legitimacy through practices of Christian virtue and mission, frequently assimilated these ideals of domesticity to black family life after slavery's end. Domestic manuals and social campaigns centered around black reproduction and sexuality worked to establish black uplift and black destiny as a theologically legitimated task.[122] This animated everything from black women's political activism to their campaigns for literacy, to their theological imaginations of black womanhood and vocation. While Chapters Three and Four will examine two nineteenth century black women's work at length, here I simply aim to show the contours of the political theological situation within which their work was produced, especially the theological significance of the figures, or living images, that get taken up in their work. As Johnson notes with

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[120] See Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood." and also Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2008) and CLAUDIA STOKES, *The Altar at Home: Sentimental Literature and Nineteenth-Century American Religion* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt7zw777

[121] See Doyle, "'The Highest Pleasure of Which Woman's Nature Is Capable'." for more on the literality of breastfeeding and the reproduction of the social order and West and Knight, "Mothers' Milk." for more on the racialized dimensions of feeding.

[122] See Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*; Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, "African-American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 17, no. 2 (January 1992): 251–74, https://doi.org/10.1086/494730; Cheryl D. Hicks, *Talk with You Like a Woman: African American Women, Justice, and Reform in New York, 1890-1935*, 1st New edition edition (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010); Davis, *Lifting as They Climb*; Michele Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation: African Americans and the Politics of Racial Destiny After Reconstruction* (Univ of North Carolina Press, 2005); Keel, *Divine Variations*.

the myth of Ham, the assimilation or naturalization of these claims of domesticity as a way to legitimate black peoplehood within a white Christian nation serves to both make black peoplehood legible in some sense, while also reproducing the racial economy, modeled on a Christian economy, wherein these particular performances of womenhood and peoplehood have meaning and value.

Conclusion

The goal of this chapter was to show how the figural making of descent, especially through the interpretation of the living human image in general and the figure of the mother in particular, have their meaning in light of the revelation of redemption in Christ and can be examined as reproductive technologies. To that end, I examined how attending to the figural enables a rereading of redemption history as a reproduction history. As the theological method of reading which preserves Christian claims of peoplehood as legitimate, it provides a structural view of how claims of racial peoplehood in the US come to have enduring legitimacy, meaning, and value. In considering the relationship between the natural human image and the revelation of its meaning in Christ, I showed how a Christian sense of natural creatured images as revelatory of the divine order was employed to legitimate the reproduction of an anti-black social order. By interpreting black skin as a natural sign of heathenism, white Americans could read God's divine intent to keep the races distinct in the sensible world. This natural difference provides the justification for prohibitions against interracial marriage, highlighting how the boundaries of belonging to a chosen people are managed through the legitimate unions, or marriage, between people of the same race. Situated in the plantation economy, these images continue to link the domestic order with the divine order, God's mastery and management of creation with white mastery and management of civil society and its originary seed, the home. Finally, I considered the theological role of the mother and her significance for the US context in reproducing peoplehood through her proper role as wife and mother and fulfillment of

her proper task, the education and upbringing of children to know their proper identity, inheritance, and obligations. The goal here was to gain a view of the theological formation of each of these reproductive technologies such that we can begin to understand how black women's reproduction gets figured into the US racial economy by *theological* means.

To that end, the next chapters provide my rereadings of Delores Williams, Frances EW Harper, and Angelina Weld Grimké serve to show how Christian theological claims create the crisis of belonging for blackness and how, this crisis of belonging is the site from which these black women practice alternative forms of reproduction. By turning to these women, I will consider how these black women intervened in these reproductive technologies through their literary contributions. While, according to a linear conception of history, reading Williams would take place last, in the following chapter I show the significance of her method of rereading the figure in light of black women's situation as a pivot that provides insights into the stakes of legitimacy, meaning, and value that I will attend to in Harper and Grimké. Writing in the wake of the crisis of belonging that these reproductive technologies make repeated, these black women provide an illuminating reframing of the order of operations in the US' racial economy of redemption. By considering their thought, I seek strategies for a political theology of race and reproduction.

Chapter 2.

Hagar's Children: Slavery, Legitimacy, and the Reproduction of Redemption History

Introduction

> *Just as the Hagar-in-the-wilderness symbolism helps us see models of black womanhood in a new way, it also helps us gain more insight about America's historic way of governing the African-American community and about the resistance strategies black women and the black community have used to oppose oppression.*[123]

In this chapter we will more closely examine how the figural works as a reproductive technology that structures black women's situation in the US racial economy. In Chapter One we examined how Christian figural readings work to create a chosen peoplehood. I argued that the figural enables the establishment of claims of kinship and inheritance, and descent and destiny, by enabling the relation of biblical figures, European settlers, and their Others within a Christian redemption history, or economy of salvation. To understand how the figural affects black women's reproductive situation and how the figural can be recast in light of political theological questions, I turn to the work of Delores Williams. One of the founders of womanist theology, Williams *Sisters in the Wilderness* remains an inescapably incisive and resourceful text. In this chapter, I will examine how Williams' rereading of the biblical figure, Hagar, provides a way of attending to the reproduction of legitimacy with which political theology is concerned. By reading Williams through this political theological lens, fresh insights emerge regarding the significance of her questioning the reproduction of legitimacy in black liberationist and black uplift imaginations of overcoming. In her interrogation of how black women become surrogates for a redemptive narrative, Williams highlights the reproductive structure of the US and its Christian imagination of peoplehood and belonging.

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[123] Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 130

Against acclimating blackness to a Christian redemption history, Williams illuminates alternative modes of reproduction that are reconfigured in a Hagaritic vein.

Figuring Legitimacy: Method and Political Theological Imagination

Williams' grounds her analysis in black communities' historical use of the bible. In attempting to articulate a theological perspective that could account for black women's situation as an illegible figure within the normative order of things, Williams found the dominant tradition, black liberationist, and (white) feminist theological inquiry inadequate for such a task. However, by examining black historical employments of the Bible, a different picture came into view. Williams notes how what has been taken as the normative black appropriation of the bible, rooted in a black liberationist narrative, was primarily employed by black men who took significant biblical figures like Moses, Jesus, Paul, and others and recast them within a political theological narrative of black liberation. It is in the union of black men's historical situation with the legitimating power of the Christian imagination that Williams sees the emergence of the black liberation tradition of theology out of the "liberation tradition of African-American biblical appropriation."[124]

However, in addition to this tradition, Williams notes another tradition that "emphasized female activity and de-emphasized male authority." Rather than a primacy of black male representation and heroicism that the Exodus narrative legitimated, Williams saw how

[124] Williams, 2. "Black male theologians had reflected upon these sources and also had been inspired by the liberation emphasis in the 1960s black cultural and political revolution. So they produced black liberation theology. Their validating biblical paradigm in the Hebrew testament was the exodus event. … Their Christian testament paradigm was Luke 4, when Jesus described his mission and ministry in terms of liberation. Their normative claim for biblical interpretation was 'God the liberator of the poor and oppressed.' I reasoned that it is possible, then, to name this tradition the *liberation tradition of African-American biblical appropriation.*"

> the community had appropriated the Bible in such a way that black women's experience figured just as eminently as black men's in the community's memory, in its self-understanding, and in its understanding of God's relation to its life.[125]

It is this tradition that "lifted up from the Bible the story of a female slave of African descent who was forced to be a surrogate mother, reproducing a child by her slave master because the slave master's wife was barren."[126] Given these historical appropriations of Hagar, Williams argues that "her story must be the community's analogue for African-American women's historic experience." A sense of non-belonging permeates this tradition of appropriation. It does not belong to black liberationist tradition or a dominant or non-dominant white one. Rather, Williams argues that this tradition which establishes a kinship between figures of non-belonging, Hagar and black women, should be understood as a *survival-quality of life* tradition of appropriation.

In rereading Williams, I want to draw attention to how this Hagaritic tradition of biblical appropriation illuminates an employment of the figural that does not assume the legitimacy of Christian theological claims of governance, origins, and descent. Instead, it draws attention to the dependence of this redemption history on black women's, and the black community's, situation of non-belonging. In this way, Williams' recovers an alternative tradition that is not only inscribed as illegitimate within Christian redemption history, but raises the question of how the distinction between legitimacy and illegitimacy is reproduced.[127] In so doing, Williams does not aim to overcome black non-belonging by providing an orthodox articulation of black claims through the

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[125] Williams, 1-2

[126] Williams, 2

[127] Which perhaps provides a sense of why it was not the popular tradition for black men's articulation of political theological claims.

legitimate figures in Christian salvation history. Rather, the illegitimate figure, the enslaved woman who has no belonging for herself, becomes the site from which theological inquiry proceeds.[128]

In so doing, Williams helps us consider how black attempts to assimilate the claims of US belonging to blackness run aground of the difficulty of legitimacy as routed through Christian redemption history and its mode of reproduction. Having been written into the story as illegitimate figures, one tradition of reading attempts to overcome this illegitimacy by naturalizing Christian claims of legitimacy to black figurations of Ham, or the Exodus, for instance.[129] However, on Williams reading, the alternative Hagaritic tradition, makes use of the figural to ground illegitimate theological claims. This figural deployment is not just a challenge to which figures get to claim legitimacy, but to the redemptive narrative that governs the meaning of legitimacy and illegitimacy and the means by which that distinction is reproduced. In this way, the Hagaritic tradition undercuts investments in something like biblical narrative because what become's apparent is how the biblical narrative as read through a Christian economy of redemption is actually what produces and reproduces the anti-black sense of belonging that shapes the American production of a legitimate people.

Williams method of rereading thus helps us to consider how the Christian sense of peoplehood and belonging that is emergent in the 19th century nationalist discourses that Glaude and Johnson track can be more extensively understood when cast in terms of reproduction and how appeals to the family, kinship, and its attendant domestic images shapes the sense of belonging.

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[128] Here, Williams provides a significant insight into the 19th century black political theological imagination. as it primarily has been explored from black men's theological appropriations. But what is made available for study when turning to black women's political theological imaginations? By this I don't primarily mean mean their political activism, as has been well documented by scholars like Evelyn Higginbotham, Anthea Butler, Judith Weisenfeld, and many others. Rather, I mean the ways that they employed a *theological* imagination to legitimate their claims. See Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*; Weisenfeld, *African American Women and Christian Activism*; Butler, *Women in the Church of God in Christ*.

[129] Glaude Jr, *Exodus*; Johnson, *The Myth of Ham in Nineteenth-Century American Christianity*

Reading with Williams makes us attentive to how the theological claims of peoplehood that shape nationalist visions of race are inflected, indeed animated by, theological questions of legitimacy, meaning, and value which are naturalized through images of kinship and reproduction. Here I will consider Williams application of her method of rereading to the biblical figure of Hagar and her understanding of Hagar's story as "a route to black women's issues."[130] In doing so, I show that Williams' rereading of Hagar provides significant insights into the reproductive operations of chosen peoplehood by showing how the figure of the slave woman serves to undergird the promise that Christian peoplehood purportedly fulfills.

Disfiguring Christian Claims of Peoplehood: Identifications, Disidentifications, and The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk

As I noted in the introduction, Williams' womanist identification-ascertainment hermeneutic points out how theological approaches are often inappropriate for attending to black women's situation because of the tendency to leave assumptions regarding reading and identification unchecked. Interpretive and textual tensions get overlooked when readers start from the assumption that we know what a biblical story is about, that we know whose side God is on, that we know who the oppressed are. Williams' practice of rereading experiments with reshaping theological attention in light of the elisions of black women's situation that recur in theological practices of reading the event as a liberatory occasion.[131] Williams procedure of rereading thus retools Christian figural sensibilities but makes them ungoverned by an investment in a Christian redemptive narrative as the grounds for its theological claims. Instead the sense that theological claims produce is made

[130] Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 15

[131] Williams, 7

accountable to black women's reproductive histories, which, for Williams, is "the challenge of womanist God-talk."

This reorientation of theological claims does not ignore the sense that is produced by the dominant order of theological claims, but reads them from then underside in order to perceive the significance of these claims as they legitimate the inscription of black flesh with the theological meaning of illegitimacy as imaged by the figure of the slave woman. In this chapter, I extend Williams rereading to consider how her insights illuminate some key ways the US racial economy is modeled on the Christian economy or redemption history. It is from in the context of the union between redemption and history that the relationship between literal blackness and figural slaveness is worked out. Depending on a social order that reproduces this union, Williams illuminates how black flesh becomes the surrogate for modern theological and political narrations of redemption.

Importantly, Williams notes how it is Paul's influence on Christian theology that establishes the *theological* significance of Hagar's non-belonging:

> Another aspect of Hagar's predicament was made clear in the Christian testament when Paul relegated her and her progeny to a position outside of and antagonistic to the great promise Paul says Christ brought to humankind. Thus in Paul's text Hagar bears only negative relation to the new creation Christ represents. In the Christian context of Paul, then, Hagar and her descendants represent the outsider position par excellence. So alienation is also part of the predicament of Hagar and her progeny.[132]

While, today, we would not read Paul himself as Christian, Williams' insight still holds with regard to the Christian tradition that repeats the announcement of this promise in Christ and the claims of disinheritance from this promise that those who are not in Christ inhabit. Paul's figural mode of

[132] Williams, 4-5

reading gave influential shaping to the articulation of Christian claims of legitimacy.[133] This influence not only establishes this figural method of reading as crucial to the reproduction of Christian claims of salvation, but is exemplified by the Pauline argument in Galatians where the figure of the slave woman is prominently written out of the story of the promise of faith in Christ to establish who receives the benefits of belonging.[134] In pointing out Paul's theological act of writing the slave woman as *the* illegitimate figure par excellence, Williams illuminates how Christian authority gets distributed on the bases of claims of kinship. The distinction between the free and slave mothers in Paul is meant to educate readers in properly identifying with the mother whose children are free– locating one's self within Christ's promises by identifying as a child of the free woman.[135] On my reading, Delores Williams' draws attention not just to how Paul's claims get taken up in Christian history as a matter of Anti-Jewish thought in Christian theology, but also how the figure of the slave woman works as that figure against whom redemption and the belonging it establishes comes to have meaning. By learning to feel an identification with the proper mother, these naturalizing claims of theological descent establish the common sense of the community against the slave mother. In rereading with Williams, then, one can perceive the structural antagonism between the terms of Christian theological order of redemption and the situation of figure of the slave and her progeny within its economy of salvation.

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[133] Auerbach and Valesio, *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature*; Frances M. Young, *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture* (Place of publication not identified: Baker Academic, 2002); Daniel Boyarin, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (University of California Press, 1994); John David Dawson, *Christian Figural Reading and the Fashioning of Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001)

[134] Indeed, the reception history of this passage in Galatians plays out Williams' claim. See Riches, *Galatians Through the Centuries* and Thompson, *Writing the Wrongs*.

[135] See Tsang, *From Slaves to Sons*; Sheila Briggs, "Galatians," in *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Commentary*, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 218–36; Bradley R. Trick, *Abrahamic Descent, Testamentary Adoption, and the Law in Galatians: Differentiating Abraham's Sons, Seed, and Children of Promise*, Supplements to Novum Testamentum, Vol. 169 (Leiden ; Brill, 2016); Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Pub, 1996).

This Christian structure of identification, disidentification, and the common sense that it establishes works because the economy of salvation, or redemption history, works to ensure that the proper order of identification attains between reader and biblical figure. In ensuring Christian identification with the free woman, this Pauline tradition of people-making disidentifies Christian belonging with the slave woman, Hagar, and her progeny. By reproducing Christian kinship with the proper figures, Christian theology works as a means of ensuring proper feeling of belonging is established, that a proper common sense is cultivated and maintained, and thus, that the proper order is reproduced. As scholars like Elizabeth Castelli and Sheila Briggs have noted, however, Paul's attribution of non-belonging to Hagar reveals how his authorial decisions within the biblical story of Abraham, Hagar, and Sarah, installs an alternative form of authority.[136] For instance, Hagar receives a promise from God and names God, where in Paul's recitation of the story, she serves to figure an enduring belonging according to the flesh that cannot be reconciled with the kinship that Christ brings in the spirit.[137] In Paul, then, the problem of belonging is resolved not according to the the flesh but according to the spirit. This theological distinction is figured by a distinction in maternal descent. The slave mother reproduces enslaved children where the free mother reproduces children of the promise.

This Pauline rearticulation of the terms of order establishes the common sense in Christian theology where the spirit governs the determination of legitimate kinship and belonging. The figure of the slave woman and her reproduction of enslaved children thus serves to figure a natural disinheritance from the promises of God and a situation outside of the family of God. Hagar's figuration of non-belonging is not solely based on the narrative of the Hebrew Bible, which sees her

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[136] Briggs, "Galatians."; Castelli, "Paul on Women and Gender.".

[137] Genesis 16, *NRSV*.

receiving her own promises from God and enacting a sense of her own authority in naming God. Rather, her figuration of non-belonging depends on her being read in light of the new order of things announced in Christ. Paul, in trying to do justice to the new sense of belonging established in Christ, attempts to theologically resolve the problem of Gentile belonging by making a *new* people. He recasts Abrahamic descent so that Gentile's can also be read as *real* children of Abraham in Christ.[138] Thus, the combination of this figural method of reading and the announcement of the new order of legitimacy, meaning, and value in Christ, Paul establishes the terms of order which legitimate the history of a people and their sense of belonging.[139] As I showed in Chapter One, The shaping influence of this method and its significance for making the history of *New World* Christian people, cannot be overstated.

By returning to the animating image of Christian notions of chosenness via the domestic economy and drama of Abraham's household, Williams enables a restaging of the scene that grounds Christian theological claims of identity, inheritance, and obligation. Williams' return to this scene with an eye toward Hagar, however, exposes several important operations in the claims-making procedure of this Christian practice of reading. As I established in Chapter One, a key part of Christian people-making in the New World project repeats the legitimation of Christian claims of peoplehood through a figural establishment of biblical origins. The figural transmission of descent claims authority in such a way as to justify authority and legitimacy in Christ. This authority and legitimacy is secured by the reproduction of redemption history, or the recapitulation of redemption in narrative form. Thus because Christian people-making depends on repeated narrations of Christ's spirit as governing the terms of order, the economy of salvation establishes the repeated relation of

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[138] See Thiessen, *Paul and the Gentile Problem* and Hodge, *If Sons, Then Heirs.*

[139] See Jacob Taubes' work for more insight into how Paul "ups the ante" on the law and Abrahamic descent. Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*

all things to another in Christ and works to consolidate the legitimacy of this measure for, not just a particular existence, but a particular existence that imagines itself as a universal existence unconstrained by fleshly distinction. However, in incarnating the spiritual reality in the flesh, a real enfleshed distinction maintains, but is obfuscated. Against this obfuscation of the flesh, Williams' employment of the figural stands as a means of questioning the Christian reproduction of peoplehood and belonging through its racial distinctions of the flesh.

Surrogate Flesh: The Slave Woman and the Reproduction of Illegitimate Figures

Slave births and deaths were not recorded in the family Bible but in the slaveholder's business ledger.[140]

As Williams shows, Christian notions of chosenness and redemption depend both on the surrogate function of the slave woman and her disinheritance. This can be illustrated in the plantation economy of the US. As a strategy of governance, the US racial economy depends on the original sense of economy, or *oikonomia,* household management and its theological sense as God's action to bring about salvation in history. As I noted in examining *The Planter's Northern Bride,* the stewardship the master and mistress practiced over the plantation was imagined as recapitulating the divinely and naturally established order. A crucial site of governance in the plantation economy was over black women's reproduction. As Dorothy Roberts notes,

> Because female slaves served as both producers and reproducers, their masters tried to maximize both capacities as much as possible, with labor considerations often taking precedence. Even then, the grueling demands of field work constrained slave women's experience of pregnancy and child-rearing. Every aspect of slave women's reproductive lives was dictated by the economic interests of their white slave masters.[Roberts, *Killing the Black Body,* 25]

[140] Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body,* 24

By considering the plantation economy in terms of political theology we can understand how the establishment of legitimate and illegitimate families is a key effect of reproducing racial peoplehood. Furthermore, we can read the plantation as a site of the political theological inscription of black flesh as the slave and the heathen, in need of Christianization in order to perfect her function as the slave. The plantation economy thus works to reproduce a claim to black flesh.[141] But this reproduction of a claim to black flesh depends on reproducing the enslaved as having no legitimate kinship claims.[142]

Here, the figural kinship that reproduces the legitimacy, meaning, and value of chosen peoplehood finds its significance against the reproduction of illegitimacy, meaninglessness, and devaluation, that black kinship comes to figure.[143] Because black people were written into this history from the underside and so inscribed as the illegitimate figure of the heathen, the enslaved's relations could not be primarily legitimated in terms of relations between themselves. Rather, sense had to be made of their relation by recourse to their function *for* their masters and the larger slave economy.[144] But, because this economy is modeled on Christianity, Christian terms of servitude and obedience are what legitimate the proper position of the enslaved.

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[141] Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage*; Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2014); Anthony Paul Farley, "Perfecting Slavery.(Race in Education Policy Symposium)," *Loyola University of Chicago Law Journal* 36, no. 1 (2004): 225–55.

[142] Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe:" in *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (University of Chicago Press, 2003), 203–29; Morgan, *Laboring Women*

[143] Johnson, *The Myth of Ham in Nineteenth-Century American Christianity*, 94-108

[144] While Williams makes the distinction between coerced and "voluntary (though pressured) surrogacy," on my reading, a conception of the economic view helps cast the coercive structure of production and reproduction without diminishing the range of agency that attended black women post-Emancipation. However, in light of current black studies, it seems difficult to authenticate the claim that these black women were "[adjusting] to live in a *free* world"(emphasis mine). As Saidiya Hartman and others have noted, while the world may have been free for free (read: white) subjects, the conditions of emancipation employed the language of freedom precisely as a means to extend anti-black protocols of governance, only this time in the name of liberty and responsibility. Continuing to think the relationship between Christian and Secular articulations of freedom would go a long way to clarifying how freedom as servitude is articulated with regards to emancipated slaves.

Since Williams' writing, extensive work has been done on black surrogacy experience during slavery and in its aftermath.[145] But the main insights of Williams articulation of surrogacy remain in accordance with subsequent data. Her noting how black women experience, not only a biological surrogacy but what she calls "social-role surrogacy" is also of significance here. For Williams, social-role surrogacy pertains to the fact that black women operated as substitutes for numerous kinds of labor such as serving as wet nurses, literally nourishing white children. Furthermore, they operated as domestic surrogates. As white women managed the household, black women did the actual labor. Finally, they operated as surrogate "men" in laboring in the fields and other intensive labor that went into producing and reproducing the plantation. In this sense, the norms of femininity and womanhood that accrue to white women do not attain to black women, constituting black womanhood as a position unto itself.[146] In part, what Williams highlights with this notion of social-role surrogacy is what Saidiaya Hartman terms the fungibility of the enslaved. The social-role surrogacy Williams names can thus be read in terms of the "interchangeability and replaceability" of

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[145] For some key works, see Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage*; Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*; C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (U of Minnesota Press, 2017); Sarah Haley, "'Like I Was a Man': Chain Gangs, Gender, and the Domestic Carceral Sphere in Jim Crow Georgia," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 39, no. 1 (September 2013): 53–77, https://doi.org/10.1086/670769; Sarah Haley, *No Mercy Here: Gender, Punishment, and the Making of Jim Crow Modernity* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2016); Sarah Haley, "This Is Your Afterlife: Gender, Slavery, and Televisual Subjection," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 27, no. 1 (January 2017): 35–44, https://doi.org/10.1080/0740770X.2017.1282118; Tiffany Lethabo King, "The Labor of (Re)reading Plantation Landscapes Fungible(ly)," *Antipode* 48, no. 4 (September 2016): 1022–39, https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12227; Tiffany Lethabo King, "Black 'Feminisms' and Pessimism: Abolishing Moynihan's Negro Family," *Theory & Event* 21, no. 1 (February 2018): 68–87, https://muse-jhu-edu.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/article/685970; Christina Sharpe, *Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects* (Duke University Press, 2009); Alexis S. Wells, "The Gendered Ethics of Female Enslavement: Searching for Southern Slave Women's Religions in the African Atlantic," *Journal of Southern Religion* 18 (2016), http://jsreligion.org/vol18/wells/; Alys Eve Weinbaum, *Wayward Reproductions: Genealogies of Race and Nation in Transatlantic Modern Thought* (Duke University Press, 2004); Alys Eve Weinbaum, *The Afterlife of Reproductive Slavery: Biocapitalism and Black Feminism's Philosophy of History* (Duke University Press, 2019); Paugh, *The Politics of Reproduction*, 2017; Sasha Turner, *Contested Bodies: Pregnancy, Childrearing, and Slavery in Jamaica* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017); Deirdre Cooper Owens, *Medical Bondage: Race, Gender, and the Origins of American Gynecology* (University of Georgia Press, 2017); Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (U of Minnesota Press, 1997)

[146] See the essays "Interstices" and "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" in Spillers, *Black, White, and in Color*.

the enslaved.[147] In considering this surrogacy, Williams notes how black women's experience of surrogacy can act as a heuristic for understanding the political theological legitimacy that the slave trade and the reproductive life of slavery installs at the heart of US belonging. The plantation economy in this view becomes the site for not only the production and reproduction of financial order, but the reproduction of theological order of meaning and value that is made available in the fungibility of black flesh.

In light of the figural sense of descent that enables black inscription into the Christian imagination as the heathen and the sense of surrogacy that Williams illuminates, we can understand the reproduction of black people in terms of the US racial economy of redemption. A Christian figural interpretation of African flesh enables its conversion into image of the heathen and the slave.[148] In being re-imagined in terms of Christian salvation history, black flesh is converted into the body of the slave and given its meaning as surrogate which can substitute for a range of objects in God's plan of redemption, of which the American plantation economy is a key player. Property, breeding machine, laborer, permanently exiled, medical instrument, all the uses of black flesh find sacred authorization in their service to the mission of redemption that the national project extends.[149] The management of the claims of peoplehood and belonging thus depends on black reproduction in order to ensure the proper order endures. By inscribing black flesh with the meaning and value of the heathen it is rendered in need of Christianization, which requires figuring it into the necessary role within Christian economy. Within this racial order, blackness is an

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[147] See Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*. Thinking the relationship between the fungible and the figural may be generative for future study.

[148] See Spillers on transubstantiation of the flesh in Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe.".

[149] And this missional project of managing reproduction extends beyond the US as the transnational scope of the trade leaves its marks on British colonial rule in the Caribbean and Africa. See *The Politics of Reproduction* on Methodist Mission and the management of reproduction. Katherine Paugh, *The Politics of Reproduction: Race, Medicine, and Fertility in the Age of Abolition* (Oxford University Press, 2017)

incarnation of the image of the natural slave and blackness as a natural sign of heathenness and slaveness becomes the nothingness against which the white chosen community's sense of belonging—their common sense-is established.[150] Slavery and black captivity can thus be understood as a procedure of stamping black flesh with the image of the slave, as a means of inscribing black flesh with its new meaning in the Christian economy of redemption.[151]

Williams' turn to the figure of the slave woman, Hagar, thus provides us with a path for understanding the relationship between biblical peoplehood, legitimacy, and belonging. In particular, she shows that attention to the reproductive life of chosen peoplehood reveals its dependence on slavery for the reproduction of its claims of identity and belonging.[152] With Williams, we can consider the role of the figure of slave, and her modern incarnation in black flesh, in the contemporary theological imagination of the US. Rereading the figure of Hagar, Williams shows how the slave is necessary for an economic operation to take place. In particular, her concept of social-role surrogacy notes the relationship between the economy which reproduces a claim to black flesh, the structures of legitimacy that depend on this claim, and the use of reproductive technologies like the figural reproduction of kinship to maintain a claim of salvation.[153]

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[150] For more on the relationship between being, nothingness, and blackness see Calvin L. Warren, *Ontological Terror: Blackness, Nihilism, and Emancipation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018)

[151] See Spillers on the transubstantiation of black flesh in the middle passage. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe.".

[152] Some implications of this insight for broader study are that it shifts the critique of supersessionism from a question of erasure to a question of management—especially, the management of fleshly difference. On my reading, we can see how Jewish and black flesh is what Hortense Spillers might call that "raw material" which funds the Christian imaginary. Indeed, while the Christian sense of chosen peoplehood relies on a supersessionist conception, the idea that Christian's have replaced Jews as the people of God, it is important to note that this is not finally an overcoming of fleshly claims of peoplehood. Rather than erasing fleshly kinship and descent, the flesh and its ability to mean comes under governance by the Christian economy of salvation. That is, the fleshly shape of legitimacy and illegitimacy is necessary for the reproduction of claims of chosen peoplehood.

[153] However, the point is not that the same technologies are necessarily always employed, by that different technologies are created to reproduce the *same effect*. See Sylvia Wynter's work for more on the shift from Christian to biological legitimacy. Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom.".

Reading black women's reproduction history as inscribed within the eternal life of Christian redemption history illuminates how the figure of the slave woman and the assumption of her disinheritance in Christian redemption history provides the common sense of non-belonging and illegitimacy that black flesh is made to signify. At the same time, her function as surrogate also articulates the accumulation and fungibility that attends black reproduction.[154] In rereading William's account, then, I argue that she provides the necessary insight into how chosen peoplehood only finds meaning within the reproductive structure of redemption. More particularly, she shows how the reproduction of this redemptive story depends on the enslaved's reproductive and productive surrogacy in order to legitimate the redemptive possibility of its claims of origins and descent. Since the chosen peoplehood that the Christian economy of redemption produces depends on the figure of the slave to make real its claim, then the historical actualization of this chosen peoplehood in the New World project required the repetition of this founding narrative. The preservation of the claims of Christian peoplehood in the American context, like all claims of Christian peoplehood, need to be repeated in order to be made real.[155] The theological significance of black flesh as a natural mark of the slave thus provides a material form with which to inscribe the figure of the slave in history. Slavery and its economy of capture thus provides the means to reproduce the truth of Christian proclamation against the figure of the slave. At the same time, this slave economy provides the ground which legitimates the claims of promise and fulfillment that white Christian peoplehood expropriates from Jewish flesh. The preservation of the flesh by the figural imagination is not somehow the absence supersession, but exposes precisely the how the Spirit's freedom works on

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[154] See Frank B. Wilderson III, *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Duke University Press, 2010)

[155] It would be interesting to think further on the Christian theological mechanism by which repetition and naturalization occurs–which is to say, grace. Grace, as the means by which what is supernatural or alien to the human becomes naturally held by them, through the power of the Spirit of Christ, provides an underexplored way of thinking about race, reproductive technologies, and theology. See Jr, *Aquinas and the Supreme Court*.

Jewish and enslaved flesh. This reproductive necessity is how the allegorized Israel is made to reproduce, to birth, the universal "in Christ Jesus." The figure—as in the form, image, or shape—of Jewish fleshly claims to legitimacy as the people of God are expropriated by linking them to the disinheriting functions of the slave. This disinheriting function is a doubled function, though, as it is this disinheritance that, at the same time, gives birth to the promise that grounds Christian identity as a spiritual kinship that fulfills the fleshly reality that Jewish flesh images. With the endurance of particularity that is always narrated as in need of fulfillment, perpetually captive to finding its meaning in the shadow of Christ's body, Christianity can perpetually secure its sense of inheritance, belonging, and freedom in the spirit.

Rereading Black Peoplehood

> *If black liberation theology wants to include black women and speak on behalf of the most oppressed black people today—the poor homeless, jobless, economically 'enslaved' women, men and children sleeping on American streets, in bus stations, parks and alleys—theologians must ask themselves some questions. Have they, in the use of the Bible, identified so thoroughly with the theme of Israel's election that they have not seen the oppressed of the oppressed in scripture? Have they identified so completely with Israel's liberation that they have been blind to the awful reality of victims making victims in the Bible? Does this kind of blindness with regard to non-Hebrew victims in the scripture also make it easy for black male theologians and biblical scholars to ignore the figures in the Bible whose experience is analogous to that of black women?*[156]

One of the effects of applying a political theological reread to Williams' account of Hagar and black women's surrogacy experience is that it challenges the procedure for legitimating claims articulated in black liberation theology. In the above passage from *Sisters in the Wilderness*, Delores Williams deftly diagnoses the methodological, doctrinal, and ethical oversights in black liberation theology. In particular, Williams notes the challenges of identification. Black liberation theologians "thorough" identification with the theme of Israel's election and liberation has left them unattentive

[156] Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 149

to the discontinuities between black experience and Israelite experience. Moreover, it is precisely this over-identification that stops the perception of a stronger family resemblance in scripture—with the oppressed of the oppressed, the woman cast out from the family of God—the figure of Hagar. In light of this chapter's argument, we can understand her criticism as a womanist critique of the figural reproduction of Christian claims of chosenness which serve to also legitimate a liberationist perspective. At the same time we can extend her critique to question some of the logic of surrogacy and redemption that still pervades the work of more recent authors like Carter and Jennings. The point of extending Williams' intervention is not to discard a black liberationist theological tradition or what was once termed the "new black theology", but to critically examine their possibilities and limits in light of black women's reproduction–a task I undertake through this political theological question of legitimacy, meaning, and value. In this way, Williams questions how a black liberationist view works by extending a Christian structure of legitimacy that obfuscates the historical resemblance between Hagar and the black community while I also extend her work to note how the assumption of a Christian structure of legitimacy in the work of J. Kameron Carter, for example, reveals the limits of seeking to recover Christian legitimacy as a way of overcoming the problem of race.[157]

Williams' goal in this critique is to introduce protocols for reflection on the reproduction of images internal to black theology. Williams argues for the importance of reading holistic stories produced by biblical and theological narratives rather than isolated events, such as the event of

[157] In this way, there's a failure in black liberationist thought to align the black community with "illegitimate" women. This insight might speak to derogatory portrayals of black women who do things like sex work as harmful to black communities. See Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation* and Christina Simmons, "African Americans and Sexual Victorianism in the Social Hygiene Movement, 1910-40," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 4, no. 1 (1993): 51–75, https://www.jstor.org/stable/3704179.

liberation and the over-identifications with Israel that is present in black liberation theology.[158] On my reading, then, Williams here illuminates the *economic* structure within which images of legitimacy are produced and reproduced as meaningful and valuable within the black community.[159] That is, the challenge she issues to black liberationists is one that requires questioning the naturalized assumptions that grant legitimacy, meaning, and value to certain images and obfuscate or ignore others, thereby rendering them as illegitimate, meaningless, and devalued. As numerous black feminist literary theorists have noted, black men's political imaginations of gaining legitimacy through assimilation in the US, black nationalism, or other such trajectories, frequently coincides with images of black women as threats to black political movements (if they haven't simply ignored black women's presence as a whole).[160] But in reading with Williams, a question emerges regarding the problem of legitimacy, meaning, and value that black liberationist figuralism reproduces.

Maternity, Economy, and Legitimacy in Black Theological Imagination

This black economic imagination and its dependence on the legitimacy of a redemptive narrative and surrogacy also coincides with its dependence on the legitimacy of its figuration of the mother to ensure the reproduction of the proper order. Not only the provenance of black male liberationist, Williams examines how it is the image of Victorian True Womanhood, modeled on the Virgin Mary,

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[158] Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 150.

[159] We might note the political theological significance of reproducing images by rerouting the method of reproduction through the Hagaritic imagination.

[160] For an incisive analysis of this matter see "Reading Family Matters" in Deborah E. McDowell, *The Changing Same": Black Women's Literature, Criticism, and Theory*, First Edition edition (Bloomington, Ind: Indiana University Press, 1995) and Wahneema Lubiano, "Black Nationalism and Black Common Sense: Policing Ourselves," in *The House That Race Built: Original Essays by Toni Morrison, Angela Y. Davis, Cornel West, and Others on Black Americans and Politics in America Today* (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2010), 232–52.

that is in conflict with the Hagaritic symbol and its resemblance in the black community.[161] As Williams' lays it out:

> The Victorian true woman was described as one "who, through Christ, blesses man and helps make his home a joy and life a privilege." … Further, the true "woman's… sphere is the home. It is there that she has the opportunity of exercising, to best purpose and in its fullest extent, her distinctive and special gifts." She "stands for home, tenderness, gentleness, unselfish love and sacrificial care." The proper vocation for this idealized woman was motherhood and, of course, "wifehood." The most prominent biblical figure advocated as modeling true womanhood was the Virgin Mary.[162]

As the model for 19th century womanhood, female figures in the bible, especially the Virgin Mary, became crucial for illustrating the proper form and performance of womanhood. For instance, Williams proffers the treatise *True Womanhood* by William Cunningham, a British economist, who writes:

> There was a woman once who was marked out from all others on earth, and all generations have called her blessed. The Virgin Mary had a wonderful place assigned her, but she was not vain of her privileges….She had no thought of herself at all…. And thus it was that she could, in a measure, sympathize with her dear Son…. She stood by the cross, if her presence might support him in his dying agonies, heedless of her own sorrow, self-forgetful, self-sacrificing…And the women who walk in her footsteps are blessed still, blessed in every generation as it comes and goes…. their sympathy sustains all that is most noble and and godly in other lives. For they too are the handmaids of the Lord, and strive to use the gifts and graces with which he has dowered them, not for themselves, but in his service and to his glory.[163]

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[161] See Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood.". Of related interest is how Dianne Stewart illuminates Williams' insights. While assessing the significance of Williams work, she also shows critical places where Williams's own acceptance of a Christian salvation history hampers some of her insights. Dianne M Stewart, "Womanist God-Talk on the Cutting Edge of Theology and Black Religious Studies: Assessing the Contribution of Delores Williams," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 58, nos. 3-4 (2004): 65–83, http://proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLA0001597831&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

[162] Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 123.

[163] ^ Cunningham, *True Womanhood*, 10. Cited in @williams_sisters_1993, 123. Williams misidentifies the author as the Rev. W. Cunningham, but as he died in 1861 and this was published in 1897, it seems that this W. Cunningham was actually the British economist who lived from 1849-1919.

This sensibility recurs throughout the 19th century imagination of womanhood. And female figures in the bible were employed to legitimate a wide variety of claims from upholding white women's place in the family to arguing for their unique role in God's providential plan, like Mary and other biblical matriarchs, and thus the significance of their work in the public sphere.[164]

Williams thus notes how, in undergoing the work of racial uplift, the significance of gendered domestic labor became crucial and had significant shaping influence on images of black womanhood and their relationship to redemption in black social life.[165] Williams, however, provides an important insight, building on the work of Darly Dance, by noting how images of Eve and the Virgin Mary seem to provide the types or figures by which black authors often image black women in literature.[166] With the theological overview of the previous chapter in mind, we can also understand the figural implications of black portrayals of black mother's as either Eve or Mary. Held together within a Christian redemption history, the figural connection between Eve and Mary establishes the proper narrative order narrates the proper fulfillment of the legitimate woman as properly obedient wife and mother.[167] However, for Williams, such images ignore the ways that "these [struggling black] women resemble Hagar in the wide, wide world as they try to make a life

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[164] See Stowe, *Woman in Sacred History*. See also STOKES, *The Altar at Home*, Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs*

[165] "Though black men and black women were both involved in the work of racial uplift immediately after the Civil War, racial uplift gradually became the work of black women. This was primarily because uplift began to be defined exclusively in terms of black people's social needs, like education of children, moral instructions for moral reform, household management, adjustment to American standards of cleanliness (hygiene), community organization and so on." Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 124. See also Keel, *Divine Variations* and Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*; Simmons, "African Americans and Sexual Victorianism in the Social Hygiene Movement, 1910-40.", and Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation* for more on how these black employments of sexual victorianism became significant to articulating the obligations of freedom in the wake of emancipation.

[166] "Perhaps what Darly Dance sees in black literature as the portrayal of the black mother as either Eve or Madonna is, in actuality, a conflict primarily in black male literary consciousness and imagination between Hagar and the Madonna." Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 129.

[167] See Benjamin H. Dunning, *Christ Without Adam: Subjectivity and Sexual Difference in the Philosophers' Paul* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014) for extensive exploration of the significance of the typological relationship between Adam and Christ and Eve and Mary in contemporary thought.

for themselves and their children."[168] In becoming aware of this Hagaritic tradition of biblical appropriation, Williams begins to parse out the resemblance between Hagar's and black women's situation. However, it is precisely in the conflict between the Hagaritic figuration of black women and the figuration established in images of Eve and Mary that Williams locates a gendered conflict:

> I think we can suggest that some of the historic tension that has existed in the African-American community between black men and black women about the nature of black women's femininity may stem from conflict between the Hagar-in-the-wilderness model of black womanhood (emerging from the grassroots of black heritage) and the Victorian "Virgin-Mary-true-woman" model of womanhood imported from the white community through black middle-class channels.[169]

This internal conflict of imagining black women's theological significance sheds light on how the kind of legitimacy that is imaged through recourse to Christian redemption history depends on the proper maternal figure in order to function. Whether in a liberationist vein or through an attempt to recover Christian legitimacy as a way to overcome race, the lack of critical attention to how matters of gender, sexuality, and reproduction shape the articulation of Christian ideas of redemption deepens the captivity of the flesh and figure of the slave woman in Christian redemption history.

For example, J Kameron Carter offers a rereading of Jarena Lee (1783-1864), the first woman authorized to preach in the AME church, in in his *Race: A Theological Account*. He argues that Lee performs a figural imitation of Christ's cruciform body that enables the overcoming of the modern problem of race:

> In figuring the body as cruciform and as the site of God's labor to bring forth a different form of the self by means of a different form of birth or reproduction, … Lee's discourse reclaims in performance a premodern approach to Christian spirituality but as specifically

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[168] Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 129

[169] Williams, 129

> attuned to a modern problem: namely, the racializing of the body and the gender protocols inherent in this.[170]

On Carter's reading, Lee's figuring of the body in imitation of Christ's works to confront the modern problem of race by providing a vehicle to rebirth the free subject within the grammar of Christian economy.[171] Indeed, In Carter's account, Lee's cruciform flesh comes to figure as a surrogate for the social, or ecclesial, life of the church.

> Lee's Christological account of the self addresses the matter of modernity's configuration of the black feminine as the deeper, structural dilemma of modern racial reasoning. One might say that, for her, the problem of black female flesh in modernity and thus the problem of modern racial reasoning are tied to the loss of a Christological doctrine of Mary as the one who in summing up, or recapitulating, Israel's history ties Jesus to that history. … Lee's spiritual narrative imagines, through its retrieval in a Protestant context of the Christological doctrine of Mary as the theotokos, the utter centrality of female flesh as tied to the economy of Christ's flesh. Lee not only reclaims a classical Mariology to do the important modern theological work of unmasking and addressing modern racial reasoning, she also enters it, understanding it as a reimagining of the body and thus of social space.[172]

While Carter admirably attempts to confront the unique situation of black female flesh in modernity, his attempt to overcome this through a Christiological doctrine of Mary works to deepen the redemptive economy within which black female flesh has been inscribed and made to figure. By reading Lee Mariologically, Carter attempts to provide Christian legitimacy to Lee, but to do so he

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[170] Carter, *Race*, 336.

[171] "The story of the birth of Christ is the inner grammar by which Lee makes interpretive sense of her call to preach. In addition, at the same time that the story of the birth of Christ proves to be the grammar of her call to preach, it also returns her to the moment of her initial awakening at the beginning of her narrative, the moment in which she narrated her existence within a different economy of birth and reproduction: namely, the birth of Christ. It is now apparent that Lee's Christological account of the self relocates her not only with respect to modernity's economy and protocols of race but also with respect to how gender functions within and as an articulation of modernity's racial economy and protocols. To enter into Christ's flesh through the Holy Spirit's pentecostal overshadowing is to exit the gendered economy and protocols of modern racial reasoning." Carter, 340

[172] Carter, 340

must make her the surrogate of the very redemptive terms of order that ground her surrogacy in the first place.[173]

On my reading, then, Carter's Christian theological reading of Jarena Lee highlights precisely the limits of an approach to Christian supersessionism and race that proceeds to measure its adequacy in terms of adherence to orthodox Christian doctrinal positions. Given the extent to which a Christian economy provides the structures of legitimacy and meaning and value for the racial economy, narrating racial modernity as the employment of Christianity in non-Christian ways is inadequate to the historical record. Instead, rereading Williams' politically theologically challenges us to critically engage with how it is precisely by means of Christian theological orthodoxy and its protocols of reading that race is enfleshed, legitimated, and given meaning and value.

The goal here is not to set up Carter as the figure to be overcome, as much as it is to note how his attempt illustrates precisely the paradoxical and precarious situation of black attempts to gain legitimacy within the terms of order due to their Christian shape. As I briefly examined in the previous chapter, this problem attended both the quest to figure Hamitic descent as a way of legitimating black peoplehood and it recurs in attempts to figure black women as models of Christian womanhood through the figure of the Virgin Mary, Victorian ideals of womanhood, or Carter's Christological and Mariological reading. The paradox of legitimacy and illegitimacy, belonging and non-belonging, that has characterized the history of black Christianity, is on display.

However, I find that Williams' Hagaritic reading provides the necessary leverage to undo the assumption of a Christian economy to give sense to black peoplehood, manhood and womanhood included. By revealing the problem that Christian economy makes as the interpretative lens for the

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[173] Moreover, it is unclear how this reading is not supersessionist in a strong way given it relies on a Christian economy of redemption for its sense?

black maternal, Williams reveals the resemblance between Hagar and Ishmael and black women and the black community as more adequate to the actual enfleshed existence of black people and the enduring non-belonging that they inhabit.[174] Because Williams structures her attention around poor black women without accepting the assumptions of the terms of order–that they are illegitimate women and thus threatening figures–she is able to attend to them seriously.[175] Yet, this also makes apparent the internal conflict in black imaginations regarding how claims ought to be made real and enduring.

On my reading, Williams' perception of the economic structure within which legitimacy, meaning, and value is reproduced, grounds her perception of this conflict. By showing the centrality of the figure of the mother for claims of legitimacy, meaning, and value, Williams helps us recognize how the figurations of black women in terms of their legitimacy and illegitimacy works to consolidate the reproduction of an antiblack economy of salvation, or redemption history, that is predicated on the management of reproduction through the figures of the legitimate and illegitimate woman and the preservation of this distinction.

Against the figure of the Victorian True Woman, Williams' constructs a figuralism that is adequate to black women's experience of surrogacy with the Hagaritic image of motherhood which "provides a historically realistic model of non-middle-class black womanhood."[176] Williams would

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[174] What seems novel about the modern theological figuration of enslaved flesh is that this non-belonging provides the license to treat black flesh as fungible.

[175] I would want to say they are threats precisely because, in attending to their situation without accepting the assumed terms of political theological order, the structure of legitimacy is called into question. See Robinson and Edwards, *The Terms of Order*

[176] The longer quote continues: "Contrary to Anglo-American ideals about"true womanhood," this African American notion affirms such qualities as defiance; risk-taking; independence; endurance when endurance gives no promise; the stamina to hold things together for the family (even without the help of a mate); the ability, in poverty, to make a way out of no way; the courage to initiate political action in the public arena; and a close personal relation with God. Her field of activity is both the private and public domain. Affirming this model of womanhood, the black community can celebrate the moral, intellectual, spiritual and emotional strength poor black women have exercised as they withstood

agree with argument's like Hazel Carby's, that the political strategy on display in these novels is more than meets the eye, but she remains discontent with naturalizing images of Victorian womanhood or Christian typological images of Eve and Mary as most adequate to depicting black women's situation.[177] Thus, my rereading of Williams in political theological terms illuminates how William's rereading of this Hagaritic image of womanhood calls into question the production of political legitimacy and the theological meaning and value that enable the coherence of anti-black governance and images of womanhood in the first place. The point here is not to discard the contributions of these black women invested in black Victorian womanhood, uplift, and respectability, but to reread them with an eye to these questions of economy and legitimacy and meaning and value. Such a questioning would be the beginning of an abolition of the redemption history that depends on the reproduction of racial peoplehood.

Conclusion | Womanist Reimagination as Abolitionist Reproduction

> *Our re-imaging of Christianity is necessary in order to redeem it from the desecrated imagery of White Christians who snatched Black Africans from Africa in slave ships named Jesus, Mary, Liberty, John the Baptist, and Justice. Almost two million Blacks died in the middle passages of those ships due to the cruel, inhumane treatment they received from White, male Christians. As a result, we Blacks (who became Christians with historical memory) re-imaged Jesus, Mary, John the Baptist, justice, and liberty. From this centuries-long re-imaging of Jesus emerged a beautiful, redemptive, black liberation theology.*[178]

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trouble and trials in a hostile world. Thus, Hagar in the wilderness models a kind of womanhood compatible with the historical facts of the lives of many rank-and-file African-American women." Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 122. Here, Williams also does work to re-image womanhood within an economy that is re-ordered in light of black women's situation.

[177] Hazel V. Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1989)

[178] Delores Williams, "Re-Imagining the Truth: Traversing the Feminist Christian Backlash," *The Other Side,* 30 (May-June, 1994), 53.

> *One of the results of focusing upon African-American women's historic experience with surrogacy is that it raises serious questions about the way many Christians, including black women, have been taught to image redemption.*[179]

I understand Williams' womanist rereading of Hagar as an abolitionist reproduction of redemption. Here, redemption is not imaged by the salvation history of a chosen people, but in the crisis installed in this history's underside. Williams' emphasis throughout her work on reimagining should thus be taken seriously as an alternative reproductive technology. In *Sisters,* Williams uses this reimagining to recast redemption in terms of Jesus' life and ministry, that is the living image that he figures in the gospel. However, coupled with her rereading of Hagar, such a reading does not work by reconciling Hagar's situation to Christ's, but by utilizing the image of surrogacy and reproduction as that which reveals the significance of Christ for her theology. On my reading, then, reimagining in Williams is not simply the encouragement of the reproduction of figures in terms that accord with the current anti-black economy. Rather, recasting the image requires an alternative mode of production and reproduction.[180] That is, not just a resignification of the terms while preserving the order, but a fundamental abolition of the order within which these terms find their legitimacy, meaning, and value.[181] In this way, the challenge of womanist God-talk is confronted by making the legitimacy,

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[179] Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 161.

[180] See Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*

[181] The failure of abolition in the 19th century is that the terms of governance by which slavery was legitimated were never abolished. In that sense .. See Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*; Frank Wilderson III, "Gramsci's Black Marx: Whither the Slave in Civil Society?" *Social Identities* 9, no. 2 (June 2003): 225–40, https://doi.org/10.1080/1350463032000101579; "Sexton," accessed November 2, 2016, http://lateral.culturalstudiesassociation.org/issue1/content/sexton.html; Warren, *Ontological Terror*, and Farley, "Perfecting Slavery.(Race in Education Policy Symposium).". While I would not identify as an afro-pessimist, when put in conversation with Christian theology, their work reveals a structural antagonism between the black and the grammar of the Christian theology which grounds civil society in the West. On my reading, this is the aspect of their work which I find most accurate, and which I think reveals the structural antagonism between Christian theological terms of order and blackness. However, I frequently disagree with narrative of social death in which they attempt to communicate the force of their claims as they can become inadequate to the force that is issued by black flesh. For an understanding of social death, see Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*, 1st edition (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982). For a critical evaluation of Patterson, see also Sara-Maria Sorentino, "The Sociogeny of Social Death: Blackness, Modernity, and Its Metaphors in Orlando Patterson," *Rhizomes: Cultural Studies in Emerging Knowledge*, no. 29 (2016): 1–1, https://doi.org/10.20415/rhiz/029.e04.

meaning, and value of her theological claims ungoverned by the Christian terms of order. Thus, Williams helpfully illuminates two trajectories that will be explored in the following chapters. First, she provides a deeper perception of how the governance of black reproduction works to legitimate an anti-black political theological paradigm. Secondly, she allows a greater appreciation and more attentive engagement with how black women's re-imaginations of redemption are worthy of serious engagement for political theology. By modeling an alternative form of reproduction in her method of rereading and re-imagining, Williams also models the power of the word and the image to be reshaped by black imaginations of survival and quality of life.

Still, the lingering question remains whether black redemption can be re-imagined in terms that do not cohere with, and thus reproduce, the Christian terms of order that legitimate the meaning and value of antiblackness for the social order. As Dianne Stewart notes, the places where Williams' assumes a Christian salvation history work to undercut the critical implications of many of her claims.[182] In light of these possibilities and difficulties, the final two chapters test the significance of Williams' womanist re-imagination and the reproduction of redemption by trying to consider how theological materials might be employed without reproducing the Christian terms of order that give legitimacy, meaning, and value to antiblackness. Of key interest to me are the possibilities and limits of such an approach for a black political theological study of legitimacy, meaning, and value. I reread Frances EW Harper's *Iola Leroy, or Shadows Uplifted* and Angelina Weld Grimké's, *Rachel: A Play in Three Acts,* formerly titled *Blessed are the Barren* as a way to consider these questions of legitimacy, meaning, and value, from within the crucible of Reconstruction's failure and the crisis of belonging that black writers were seeking to ameliorate.

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[182] Stewart, "Womanist God-Talk on the Cutting Edge of Theology and Black Religious Studies.", fn11, 73.

In this way, I consider the limits and possibilities of the strategies emergent in re-imagination and, in my conclusion, will use these rereadings to argue that a black political theology of race and reproduction is significant for study because it brings the question of economy in view. I consider these questions of the image not solely in terms of representation, but in terms of the economy in which the living images that the flesh figures has value, the concrete cultural practices that render living images as legitimate or illegitimate, and the forms of governance that determine the meaning of the flesh's figurality. Thus, what Williams calls, the holistic view, is gained in perceiving more clearly how antiblackness is reproduced. We can thus see the political theological function of antiblack images in establishing legitimacy, meaning, and value for US belonging precisely by reproducing a figural interperetation of black flesh as illegitimate, meaningless, and devalued. At the same time, we can see how a reimagination without a confrontation with the governance of reproduction and *how* terms find legitimacy, meaning, and value, will continue to repeat the crisis of legitimacy that depends on black captivity.

Chapter 3.

Recasting the Image: Reproduction, Revelation, and Black Redemption in Frances EW Harper's *Iola Leroy*

Introduction: Reading and Revelation

Iola Leroy is a novel that follows the protagonist, and the novel's namesake, through her situation as the daughter of a slaveowner who married one of his slaves and started a family with her. Upon his death, her father's cousin, Alfred Lorraine, steals Iola's patriarchal inheritance by revealing that Iola's mother and her children, following the condition of the mother, are black. This moment of revelation is the initial moment of revelation that instigates Iola's re-education and Harper's re-imagination of the redemptive narrative. Having tricked Iola into returning home, Lorraine captures Iola and remands her into slavery. Separated from her mother and brother, Iola has a moment of awaking that sends her on a journey of political theological re-education. Through the story, Iola works to unlearn her justification of anti-blacknes and slavery in the process of learning what it means to be a black woman in the world and discerning her unique place in the world. Through the reunion and recreation of bonds of kinship between black people on her journey from slavery to freedom, Iola's story dramatizes the redemptive vision of black uplift that animated so much of the 19th century black political theological imagination but recasts it through the struggles inherent to black women's reproduction.

Writing in the shadow of Reconstruction's failure and increasing disenfranchisment of black people, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's *Iola Leroy; or, Shadows Uplifted* stands as a significant

intervention in the means that reproduce antiblackness by taking up the power of the word.[183] Indeed, the text, a domestic sentimental novel, was written "to intervene in and to influence political, social, and cultural debate concerning the status of"the Negro" as "Jim Crow" practices threatened to extinguish the last hopes for a black political presence in the South."[184] On my reading, the novel provides an incisive way into how the questions of legitimacy, meaning, and value can be thought in light of the racial reproduction of peoplehood. As both a historical and a sentimental domestic novel, *Iola Leroy* highlights the ways that caring labor and the formation of feelings of belonging and non-belonging, the common-sense of civil society, is formed through the intimate acts that take place in the household. Claims of family and kinship, legacy and lineage, and descent and desire intermingle as a romance of national belonging.

Harper weaves together a black political theological imagination of black uplift rooted in black Christian order of things that is antagonistic to white Christian governance. P. Gabrielle Foreman notes how

> Harper merges past and present referents to effect change in a not-yet-determined future. She thus moves beyond the conventions of the classic historical novel that… incorporate the past as a prehistory to explain present contending forces, though the outcome is already known. Unlike the historical novel, *Iola Leroy*'s literary strategies direct social empathy and model social intervention to affect a not-yet-determined outcome.[185]

On my reading, applying a political theological rereading to this novel illuminates the sense of revelation that shapes Harper's re-imagination of black redemption and its undetermined future. Harper rearticulates the common-sense notion of belonging by retooling the 19th century

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[183] For more on Harper's popularity and historical significance, see Frances Smith Foster, ed., *A Brighter Coming Day: A Frances Ellen Watkins Harper Reader* (New York: The Feminist Press at CUNY, 1993)

[184] Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood*, 64

[185] Pier Gabrielle Foreman, *Activist Sentiments: Reading Black Women in the Nineteenth Century* (University of Illinois Press, 2009), 78

sentimental novel. While authors like Foreman and Claudia Tate note the religious concepts of respectability and moral uplift, they share a tendency to understand the religious language in Iola Leroy as deployed primarily for its moral or rhetorical force. Here I show how reading this language with a deeper sense of its theological purchase enables us to understand this work as intervention in the political theological reproduction of a people by taking over the production and reproduction of the image of black peoplehood and its sense of belonging.[186]

By reading the novel in terms of revelation and theological anthropology, a deeper sense of its political theology emerges. As a story that imitates a redemptive narrative of creation, fall, and redemption, Iola Leroy, is not just a historical novel, but something of a pilgrimage that works to unveil the order of white Christian governance that is founded on a crisis of black belonging. Journeying with Iola, the reader learns with and from Iola as the various figures in the novel provide a theological education of the *true* and *living* image that black flesh figures. In Harper's living images, these figures disclose the racist reality of the nation. Here, the project of moral uplift and black vocation is articulated in terms of a theological mission against white governance. The white Christian nation is indicted for failing to "read aright" the natural signs warning of God's judgment against their rule. And, black people are imagined as tirelessly striving to make the family from which they have been separated. In Harper's novel, through the education and the cultivation of black literacy, one's perception is retrained to see black people rather than the anti-black images that the nation is invested in reproducing. In this way the flesh is redeemed from conditions of captivity to white rule over its legitimacy, meaning, and value.

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[186] This reading also resonates with John Ernest, "From Mysteries to Histories: Cultural Pedagogy in Frances E. W. Harper's Iola Leroy," *American Literature* 64, no. 3 (1992): 497–518, https://doi.org/10.2307/2927749 where he discusses the relationship between revelatory mystery and cultural history in the novel.

Index and Icon: Iola Leroy as Site of Revelation

Reading *Iola Leroy* in terms of revelation and theological anthropology illuminates how her person is a site of revelation. This is illuminated in the double title that Harper's novel carries: *Iola Leroy; or, Shadows Uplifted*. This doubled character implies the figural mode in which the novel joins the theological meaning of the protagonist and her historical rendering. The title thus situates the person indexed by the name, Iola Leroy, as a site of disclosure, the incarnation of a revelation. And the story that she indexes is the site of an uplifting of the shadows. It is precisely in the depiction of her in the realist mode of the sentimental and historical novels that Iola is rendered as a fulfillment of the ideals and vocations that some black women's flesh figures in Harper's imagination. what Iola Leroy provides is a recasting of black flesh and its figuration as the slave and heathen in black terms. Rather than reproduce anti-black images of black women's sexual deviance, Harper seeks to reveal the sexual violation that attends black women's situation under slavery.[187]

The doubled inflection of the name, Iola Leroy, thus makes present a person overshadowed by the national sin of slavery. It is precisely by Harper's deployment of as a site of revelation that black women's figuration as sexually licentious slaves is rebuffed and the reality of Iola's personhood and the violent reproduction history that she indexes are able to be seen and confronted. Thus, while Iola's capture and experience of enslavement is a fall that results in suffering true duress, because of its unveiling, Iola also sees this fall as a necessary moment of revelation. By falling into slavery, Iola is forced to contend with her own education in anti-blackness and determines to re-educate herself, to come to know and lover her own blackness, which is also tied to her strong push for education in general. But for Harper, this fall also enables her to reveal the terrors of slavery that

[187] Harper does, however, reproduce an anti-black sense of governance in her desire to further the Christianization of black "paganism" and "disorder" (portrayed against the figure of the anarchist).

legitimate white Christian governance. The notion of shadows uplifted in Iola's living image, then, also brings to mind the notion of *figura* that Auerbach develops. The sense of a shadowy character of a person or thing, some lack, in need of fulfillment by a fully-rendered and solid form.

However, the notion of revelation in Iola Leroy suggests an indictment of "the glamour" by which slavery casts black people as shadowy figures, both threatening and ignorant in need of white Christian governance to be fully rendered as obedient slaves and servants. Rather than black flesh being a shadowy figure in need of fulfillment by white Christian governance, its shadowy figurations are here understood as the product of a white social order and its regime of controlling anti-black words and images. Thus, Harper's recasting of the mulatta image employs the mediating function of the redemptive narrative to indict the notion of white Christian legitimacy.[188] Thus, rather than a cruciform figure who overcomes blackness through reconciliation in Christ's mulattic flesh, Iola's fall figures a moment of decision, where even those have the ability to pass or to figure themselves as saviors and mediators–who can manage the conversion of blackness into reconciliation with whiteness–become students of blackness so as to come to love their own and other's blackness and unlearn the justification of anti-blackness that governs the world.[189]

Harper uses this to illuminate the unique suffering black women experience and the structure of reproduction that legitimates the order. For instance, Harper shows how the institution

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[188] For more on Harper's creative uses of the mulatta and her relationship to citizenship, see Michael Borgstrom, "Face Value: Ambivalent Citizenship in "Iola Leroy"," *African American Review* 40, no. 4 (2006): 779–93, https://www.jstor.org/stable/40033753 and Teresa C. Zackodnik, *The Mulatta and the Politics of Race* (Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2010)

[189] It is important to note that reconciliation in this novel happens on black terms. Even though I want to argue that the reconciliatory political theology is ultimately not adequate to the nature of anti-black oppression, I also disagree with dismissing this work for those reasons alone. There is much to be learned about what work the desire for reconciliation and redemption does within black imaginations of freedom and why reconciliation, redemption, and sovereign forms of claims-making and mission seem to go together. The difficulty seems to be a desire for a black form of sovereignty that I see rendering Harper's and black nationalism claims making procedure imitative of the mode of governance. That is, the notion of governance sovereignty forwards is also taken as something to be retooled rather than understanding it as productive of a kinds of claims making that is anti-thetical to the aims of deciding for blackness that Harper sets up.

of slavery reproduces the image of black women's sexuality as impure and uses Iola's experience of sexual vulnerability as a way of revealing the real source of this impurity as the slave economy. When a white suitor, Dr. Greshem, offers Iola marriage, he also suggests that other white men tried and tempted her through threats to her womanhood and purity. Defending her dignity and challenging his assertion that she may have become sexually impure under slavery, she says

> "Tried but not tempted…; I was never tempted. I was sold from State to State as an article of merchandise. I had outrages heaped on me which might crimson the cheek of honest womanhood with shame, but I never fell into the clutches of an owner for whom I did not feel the utmost loathing and intensest horror. I have heard men talk glibly of the degradation of the negro, but there is a vast difference between abasement of condition and degradation of character. I was abased, but the men who trampled on me were the degraded ones."[190]

Here, Iola asserts her authority based on her revelatory experience to judge the character not just of white men like Dr. Greshem, but of the nation.

Indeed, Dr. Greshem tries to separate himself from the men who harmed Iola by articulating Iola's grievance as one against individuals: "But Iola," he states as though injured, "you must not blame all for what a few have done." Refusing to lessen her indictment, however, Iola responds: "A few have done? Did not the whole nation consent to our abasement?" By linking the degraded character of white men to membership in the nation, she situates Dr. Greshem among the rest of those (the nation, Western civilization, his family) who, at any other time, he would happily count himself a member and makes a broader political indictment in her indictment of Dr. Greshem. By locating him as a citizen of the nation, she names him as a participant in the atrocities visited upon black people, particularly herself. In this moment, her flesh makes a demand upon him that cannot be satisfied with his white conceptions of justification, authority, and legitimacy. It is this demand

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[190] Frances E. W. Harper, *Iola Leroy, or Shadows Uplifted*, Reprint edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 96

made by black flesh that also requires a political theological re-education in reading the flesh and the living image it figures.

Instructive Flesh: Black Literacy and Revelation

Against the anti-black education that whiteness derives from black flesh, such as the image of impure woman, but also other sterotyped images, Harper offers numerous ways of recasting the image through a black political theological sense of literacy. One way Harper accomplishes this is by deploying the figure of the mulatto to provide a re-education in the learning that black flesh provides. As many black feminists have noted, the mulatt@ figure acts as a mediating figure.[191] As Emilie Townes notes, authors like Harper constitute an employment of the mulatto figure who was created by the white Christian nation to manage the boundaries of belonging.[192] Here, Harper takes up this figure and her mediating function in order to redirect the common-sense that she conjures. Rather than a narrative of passing or betweeness and hybridity, which would preserve her role as mediatrix and the structural anti-blackness such a salvific role depends on, Harper's mulatt@ characters undergo an epistemic shift that demands re-education and a redistribution of literacy. The emphasis on education and literacy can thus help us understand the sense of revelation as a radical epistemological shift, or inhabiting of the breakdown in the coherence of the terms of order.

Harper's rendering of Iola's fall and re-instruction is meant to reveal a higher process of instruction for the reader. Through imitating Iola, readers enter into a process of re-education and a deconversion from the white theological protocols of meaning-making. Iola's education takes place

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[191] See Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood*, 70. See also Spillers, the figure of the mulatt@ was invented as a mediator to overshadow, and thus obfuscate, the real violence done to black women by white men and the disinheritance their children lived under. See "Notes on an Alternative: Neither/Nor" in Spillers, *Black, White, and in Color*

[192] See Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*, 87.

in numerous settings, but often in places of intimacy like the home or the hospital, two sites of gendered labor and domesticity. The situation of Iola's transformation in this way suggests Harper's concern with how sites of caring labor are also sites for the reproduction of the common sense of the race. Leaving these sites untouched in intervening against white supremacy would fail to get at the heart and hearth of the matter. Thus, Harper's illustration of the bonds of blood and spiritual kinship that are broken by white supremacy and reunited by the providential hand of God and the caring labor of black people carrying out their vocation is meant to encourage imitation by black people while indicting white readers with this revelation of the costs of white Christian governance.

Where Moreland in *The Planter's Northern Bride* employed the sense of divine and natural revelation to provide a political theological education to Eulalia, his Northern Bride, Harper recasts the right reading of divine and natural revelation to re-educate the reader. At the end of the first chapter, Harper writes that

> slavery had cast such a glamour over the Nation, and so warped the consciences of men, that they failed to read aright the legible transcript of Divine retribution which was written upon the shuddering earth, where the blood of God's poor children had been as water freely spilled.[193]

What it means to properly "read God's word and God's works" is thus recast by Harper. Rather than blackness as a threatening shadow in the blood, the literality of black blood demands a disclosure of the truth of the white racial order's violence that spills black blood (and as we will see in Hopkins, that traumatically produces).

Black blood also comes to figure as an indictment of white governance of reason and knowledge. This has significance for theological anthropology's question, what does it mean to be human in light of who God is? While theologians have attempted to answer this question through

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[193] Harper, *Iola Leroy, or Shadows Uplifted*, 20

recourse to reason, feeling, and various other capacities of the human, *Iola Leroy* provides a sense that a black theological anthropology is less interested in locating the meaning of the human than it is in stopping the meaning of the human installed by white reason.[194] Toward the end of the novel, an interaction between Iola's black suitor, Dr. Latimer, and Dr. Latrobe, a white scientist convinced of black inferiority, is meant to trouble the racial science that reproduces the image of black blood as a taint and threat to social body. Harper depicts the conflict of descent through the question of the blood. Convinced that he can recognize black blood by appearance Latrobe states:

> There are niggers who are as white as I am, but the taint of blood is there and we always exclude it. … there are tricks of blood which always betray them. My eyes are more practiced than yours. I can always tell them. Now, that Johnson is as white as any man; but I knew he was a nigger the moment I saw him. I saw it in his eye.[195]

While Dr. Latrobe suggests that black blood can be recognized by appearance, Dr. Latimer's self revelation that he is black works to silence both Dr. Latrobe and the racial science that he figures.

> Dr. Latrobe had thought he was clear-sighted enough to detect the presence of negro blood when all physical traces had disappeared. But he had associated with Dr. Latimer for several days, and admired his talent, without suspecting for one moment his racial connection. He could not help feeling a sense of vexation at the signal mistake he had made.[196]

White objectivity and reason are here cast as instruments that have developed for the measurement and management of black people in ways that are inadequate to the actual living images that black flesh figures. In this way, Harper shows that the meaning of blackness can't be calculated or generated from scientific data without disavowing scientific knowledge. Rather, science is another tool that needs to be "read aright" by questioning the common sense assumptions of racial origins and white reason that it rests on.

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[194] See also Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom."

[195] Harper, *Iola Leroy, or Shadows Uplifted*, 229

[196] Harper, 239

Harper does not only make literacy and education the provence of the black middle class that Iola and Dr. Latimer represent. She also takes pains to reveal the multiple forms of literacy and education that black people employ to navigate what the white Christian nation reproduces as a mystified social order.

> Literacy, the power of the word, becomes in Harper's text a lesson for her black readership to learn, not fear. … In Harper's legitimation of the "colored man's word," she was demystifying the ideological power of langauge and literacy to liberate as well as subordinate.[197]

This revelation of multiple black literacies occurs in the opening chapter's depiction of enslaved black folks using the coded language of the market to discuss the ongoing war, to Aunt Linda reading of her mistress' face, to Iola's own education in the plight of black people after her fall into slavery, and her work as a teacher. Additionally, the various literacies that the black folk wield come to be just as important in the downfall of slavery as Iola's literacy with the word. As Carby notes, the political significance of these allegiances is strongly communicated:

> In contrast, then, to [William Wells] Brown's picture of jealousy, hypocrisy, and internally reinforced stratification among the folk, Harper dramatized organized group resistance. This drama Harper used to illustrate the potential basis of alliance between intellectuals and the folk, between the literate and the illiterate. Slaves recognized that they and their owners had very different interests in the social organization of the society they shared, whereas Harper showed white peple attempting to establish that the interested between owners and owned were the same. Masters and mistresses had no knowledge of the hidden community of slaves, a community that gathered together in secret and possessed an autonomous means of communication. The united action of Harper's folk defeated white surveillance and control of black lives.[198]

Here, the drama of black resistance can also be read political theologically. The novel recasts the social body produced by Christian story of redemption, showing an organized black social body

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[197] Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood*, 83

[198] Carby, 82

which reveals black resistance.[199] Where for authors like Carter, Jennings, and Bantum, the Christ's economy provides a sense of shared interest, or joining, that reconciles black and white in Christ's "mulattic" Jewish flesh, here Harper's depiction of the mulatta figure undercuts the need for reconciliation. What is revealed in Christ, rather, is the sociality of blackness, the multiple histories that find their sense of belonging in the shadow family created in the disinherited non-place that the slave mother marks. The education that Christ's provides is thus not one that overcomes the specificity of blackness, but only available through a black political theological re-education. For Iola, then Christ's suffering educates by revealing the specific shape of black suffering:

> And is there," continued Iola, "a path which we have trodden in this country, unless it be the path of sin, into which Jesus Christ has not put His feet and left it luminous with the light of His steps? Has the negro been poor and homeless? The birds of the air had nests and the foxes had holes, but the Son of man had not where to lay His head. Has our name been a synonym for contempt? 'He shall be called a Nazarene.' Have we been despised and trodden under foot? Christ was despised and rejected of men. Have we been ignorant and unlearned? It was said of Jesus Christ, 'How knoweth this man letters, never having learned?' Have we been beaten and bruised in the prison-house of bondage? 'They took Jesus and scourged Him.' Have we been slaughtered, our bones scattered at the graves' mouth? He was spit upon by the mob, smitten and mocked by the rabble, and died as died Rome's meanest criminal slave. To-day that cross of shame is a throne of power. Those robes of scorn have changed to habiliments of light, and that crown of mockery to a diadem of glory. And never, while the agony of Gethsemane and the sufferings of Calvary have their hold upon my heart, will I recognize any religion as His which despises the least of His brethren."[200]

Like Williams' location of redemption in the living image figured by Jesus' life and ministry, Harper also shows how the shape of Jesus' life is tied to the specific situation of black people. Rather than naturalizing the terms of Christian order, however, this reading of Jesus and blackness in light of each other communicates James Cone's sense that revelation is a black event. The emphasis on the polyvalent forms of black literacy suggests that Harper is attempting to do justice to the numerous

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[199] As P. Gabrielle Foreman notes, "Careless readers… blind to historical scars and wounds, see only exteriors, missing the multivalent meanings embedded in resistant speech and in textual meditations and manipulations that make up a"legible transcript." Foreman, *Activist Sentiments*, 77

[200] Harper, *Iola Leroy, or Shadows Uplifted*, 256-57

ways blackness is revealed and revelatory. Thus, we can see that there is a sense of a natural revelation and special revelation that shoots throughout the book and the special revelation with both providing a purview of blackness that demands one make a decision against white Christian governance and for black life, dignity, and freedom. In this way, Harper interrupts the white Christian naturalization of antiblack images that work to reproduce an antiblack epistomology and interpretation of black flesh. And, in so doing Harper shows the need for a black political theological re-education. Following Iola, readers are led to imitate her in reflecting on their situation, analyze it for how power is at work there and their unique contribution to black uplift, and making a decision to join the fight.

Inheriting a Disinheritance: The Condition of the Mother and Revelation as Moment of Decision

Revelation also works in the novel as a moment of deciding on the maternal figure which dramatizes the political theological questions of legitimacy, meaning, and value that are reproduced through the distinction between free or, legitimate, and slave, or illegitimate, mothers. This is a theological decision, a claim regarding the economy according to which one's sense of belonging is received. Moments of tension and decision in the novel turn on invitations to choose the figure of the white maternal over following the condition of the black maternal. Such decisions for the white maternal would require the secrecy of the mulatt@ characters, having to hide their blackness in order to pass and receive the benefits that whiteness entails. Drawing to mind images of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness, these scenes serve to educate the reader into an alternative system of value wherein honor and dignity lies with making a decision for blackness, even with all of the burdens it brings. For there, Harper seems to suggest, also lies the joy of belonging and a sense of mission and vocation that gives purpose to all those who belong to blackness, both those whose blood and skin

has no hint of "admixture" and those who are able to pass though they have "a cross in their blood".

As has been previously discussed, the maternal figure here is responsible for transmitting crucial parts of the child's identity, the education they receive which shapes their ability to become full participants in the nation, church, and the home, and providing important stewardship and stability that insures the fulfillment of the promise that the children represent. However, rather than accepting the common Christian theological identification with the free (here white) mother whose son inherits the promise, Harper shows how Christian and national governance collude to disinherit black people of their rightful claims to themselves, to their kin, and to an education. Just as the death of Iola's father throws the whole family into a crisis , Iola's decision for blackness and her maternal inheritance of the disinherited status of blackness throws the terms of order into crisis.

For instance both Iola, her brother Harry, and her eventual spouse, Dr. Latimer, are offered chances to pass for white. For Iola, this possibility is depicted in terms of romance between her and Dr. Gresham when he offers her a surrogate family through marriage. According to Carby, this is a standard trope of women's novels of the 19th century: "When the kin of a heroine failed her, a network of surrogate kin was developed which was institutionalized through marriage."[201] However, Iola takes Dr. Greshem's offer as an obstacle to her sense of mission that was revealed in her fall into slavery.

> "Doctor, I did not choose my lot in life, but I have no other alternative than to accept it. The intense horror and agony I felt when I was first told the story [of disinheritance and remanding into slave] are over. Thoughts and purposes have come to me in the shadow I should never have learned in the sunshine. I am constantly rousing myself up to suffer and be strong. I intend, when this conflict is over, to cast my lot with the freed people as a helper, teacher, and friend. I have passed through a fiery ordeal, but this ministry of suffering

[201] Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood*, 77

> will not be in vain. I feel that my mind has matured beyond my years. I am a wonder to myself. It seems as if years had been compressed into a few short months. In telling you this, do you not, can you not, see that there is an insurmountable barrier between us?[202]

Iola thus shows how the difference between her an Greshem is a matter of the incommensurability in their perceptions of the world and sense of proper order. For Dr. Greshem, blackness and its disinherited status is in need of pity and aid or ignoring in order to continue to legitimate the status that he occupies and his sense of self and belonging. In this way, Greshem wants to love Iola in isolation from her kinship with blackness, in abstraction from her disinherited status. Harper labors here to reveal how such an offer requires black people sacrifice what is understood as their illegitimate kinship ties in order to receive the benefits of the white Christian order. Through Iola's refusal, however, Harper shows a black political theological demand fora radical reordering of society that is not predicated on the preservation of white governance and its legitimacy.[203]

In Harper's view, white governance is not suitable for reproducing black equality. Iola points how how Dr. Greshem's feelings of compassion and pity are not sustainable for the an enduring companionship between them given all the struggles she must face. "When that [pity and compassion] subsides," she asks pointedly, "might you not look on me as an inferior?"[204] Here, Harper exposes how the terms under which their union would take place would require her subjugation and an intimate enactment of her inferiority. In some sense, this is Iola's learning from her mother's situation. Her mother Marie and sister Gracie (Mary and Grace), are cautionary figures rather than models for Iola. Carby reads Iola's refusal to marry Dr. Greshem "as a direct comment

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[202] Harper, *Iola Leroy, or Shadows Uplifted*, 114

[203] Not because white people are the measure, but because white people foreclosed the avenues for black people to exercise their full desires. And still black people accomplished amazing feats of life and care for one another. Imagine if black people were truly free to reach their full potential without white people throwing obstacles in their way.

[204] Harper, 96

on her own mother's decision to marry a white man for love and her compliance in concealing their black heritage from her children."[205] Rather than reading Harper's depiction of love and marriage so straightforwardly, however, we might consider the incommensurability of the social role that Marie, as Mr. Leroy's former slave, occupied. While Marie's position in the Leroy family cannot interrupt the reproduction of slavery's economy, we can reveal this as a situation of coerced surrogacy that occurs when black women are made to inhabit that valorized domain of womanhood under white Christian current terms of order.

Against the white Christian patriarchal terms of order that Dr. Greshem attempts to establish, then, Iola shows their inadequacy for funding a sustainable love of black people and work for black uplift. Greshem is shocked at Iola's decision and does not understand why she would not choose a surrogate family, but for her, this would be to legitimate the antiblack terms of white Christian governance. Her decision thus sets the stage for the multiple forms of revelation that will emerge in the wake of that initial moment of revelation that Iola is black.[206] To make a decision for blackness is to throw the white Christian patriarchal terms of order into crisis. In this, Harper's notion of the blackness of revelation is tied to a moment of decision that upsets the governance of the order of things. One must decide for blackness or against it, and there is no in between.

This decision is also an acceptance of the alienation that black non-belonging figures for the white Christian order. Dr. Greshem, frustrated by Iola's invocation of the national regime of slavery to rebuff his offer of marraige, asks: "But, Iola… what has all this to do with out marriage? Your complexion is as fair as mine. What is to hinder you from sharing my Northern home, from having

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[205] Harper, 76

[206] Indeed, there is an intermingling of things being revealed and character's revealing themselves throughout the novel.

my mother to be your mother?"[207] Here, Harper deftly links Dr. Greshem's offer of a home, the traditional patriarchal provision of the man in heterosexual unions, with the choice of the white maternal figure. Against his offer, Iola argues that Dr. Greshem cannot insure that his family would be able to accept "the story of [her] life, … ignore all the traditions of [her] blood, [and] forget all the terrible humiliations" that she suffered.[208] We can here see the Hagaritic tradition and its shaping influence in Iola's experience. In figuring descent through the traditions of black blood, Iola's refusal of the terms of order means she will have to experience alienation and the non-belonging of a wilderness experience with only the hope of being reunited with her family. As Carby notes, "as slave, Iola could not inherit from her paternal ancestors but had to follow the condition of her mother. Iola was, then, an heiress but also an orphan, for she had no legally recognized father." As Williams might say, then, Iola's wilderness experience and the lack of patriarchal protection means she has to "trust the end to God."[209] Against this offer "of marriage at a point in the text when she was friendless and alone, … the conventional option, [Iola's] adoption of a surrogate family, was firmly rejected. Instead, Iola found paternal protection from a black soldier, Robert Johnson, who was revealed to be Iola's uncle, her mother's"lost" brother."[210] Here, the lost mother that the slave woman figures reproduces a sense of kinship that is not legitimate according to the terms of order. Yet, this illegitimate kinship is enacted even without the revelation of known biological kinship. Throughout the text, black kinship is shown to be made over and over again through caring practices of domestic labor as well as political struggle. Thus, in Iola's arguing against Dr. Greshem and all his protests, Harper reveals how he is still trying to govern the terms in which the social

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[207] Harper, 97

[208] Harper, 117

[209] See Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 239

[210] Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood*, 77

order is reproduced by trying to control the measure by which he is judged. This would allow him to hold on to his sense of himself as a good person. Here, Harper is shows how white feelings of belonging and ideas of peoplehood are not credible in black terms of self-determination. On my reading of Harper, black people can't depend on white sentimentality, they can only depend on their action for justice.

A similar sense of the revelation of blackness as a moment of decision with regard to the mother is shown in the life of Iola's suitor, Dr. Latimer.

> Dr. Frank Latimer was the natural grandson of a Southern lady, in whose family his mother had been a slave. … He was a man capable of winning in life through his rich gifts of inheritance and acquirements. When freedom came, his mother, like Hagar of old, went out into the wide world to seek a living for herself and child. … After his graduation he met his father's mother, who recognized him by his resemblance to her dear, departed son. All the mother love in her lonely heart awoke, and she was willing to overlook "the missing link of matrimony," and adopt him as her heir, if he would ignore his identity with the colored race.[211]

Harper's work here to dramatize the competing claims of kinship that structure claims of political theological legitimacy, meaning, and value, thus become apparent here in her invocation of Hagar and Ishmael. Thus Harper establishes a resemblance between Ishmael and Hagar and Dr. Latimer and his mother that outweighs Latimer's resemblance to his white father. Harper thus juxtaposes the alternative images produced by Latimer's life with his mother against his biological resemblance with his father.

> The blood of a proud aristocratic ancestry was flowing through his veins, and generations of blood admixture had effaced all trace of his negro lineage. His complexion was blonde, his eye bright and piercing, his lips firm and well moulded; his manner very affable; his intellect active and well stored with information.[212]

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[211] Harper, *Iola Leroy, or Shadows Uplifted*, 239

[212] Harper, 239

Here, Harper shows how the common sense interpretation of his appearance presents the possibility of him enjoying "all the possibilities which only birth and blood can give a white man in our Democratic country."[213] However, Latimer has an alternative sense of value located in his honorable sense of character and allegiance to his mother.[214]

Thus, rather than accepting adoption into the legitimate family that marriage would offer, both Iola's and Dr. Latimer's choice *against* passing and *for* casting their lot with black people is a political theological decision. Rather than upholding the white Christian patriarchal governance of the terms of order which make passing a possibility, Iola and Dr. Latimer seek to cultivate kinship with their mother's people. While, by passing, Iola and Dr. Latimer may have been able to recover some of the comforts of a patriarchal inheritance, by accepting their maternal inheritance of a disinherited status they refuse the legitimacy of the terms of order and seek another way to find belonging. In choosing to marry Dr. Latimer rather than Dr. Greshem, then, Iola refuses to occupy the position that her mother was coercively held.[215] The model of black matrimony posited here is less an affirmation of the proper redemptive order through the free mother, then, and a re-ordering of things through the claims of kinship and belonging established through the disinheritance of the slave mother. Rather than a cruciform and Mariological figure that finds its fulfillment in Christian economy, then, the proper womanhood that Iola models is cast in light of Hagar and her experience in the wilderness. In this sense of womanhood, Iola's vocation is not to become a vehicle that

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[213] Harper, 240

[214] "[He] was a man of too much sterling worth of character to be willing to forsake his mother's race for the richest advantages his grandmother could bestow." Harper, 240

[215] While the novel doesn't depict Iola's parents' marriage as coercive, the terms under which consent could happen were such that Iola's mother didn't really have a choice if she was to have her freedom under the terms of order. See "Seduction and the Ruses of Power" in Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection.*

communicates the name of God the Father or the patriarchal father. Instead, Harper establishes a black order of things established through a matriarchal kinship and inheritance.

Conclusion

Through this choice of the slave mother, Harper denaturalizes the common-sense with which the free white woman has been reproduced as the proper and desirable mother. That is, Harper shows how various forms of intimacy and union can be extended on white terms, and repeatedly eschews them. The narrative of reconciliation, then, while still deploying a heterosexual vision of marriage as the vehicle for racial uplift, does occur on different terms than those produced by the white Christian nation. The black performance of marriage between Iola and Dr. Latimer is meant to signal a decision for black social life, black community, and black family. The theological importance of the choice of one's maternal figure has already been explored in the early chapters of this dissertation, but its depiction within the literature of Harper is a crucial foundation for the notion of revelation at work and the epistemological awakening that black struggles for freedom and justice engender.

Harper pushes a redemptive narrative to its blackest form, using a figural reading of history to imbue black life with theological significance. The narrative of providence thus provides a stable sense of identity, kinship, and belonging for black people. A provision which has been an all too uncommon feature of black life. In particular, Harper intends to stir the reader's emotions, drawing them in, whether black or white or otherwise, to a narrative of black struggle for freedom as indexed through the figure of Iola Leroy and the multiple forces and people who converge upon her life. Still, this is not a romance of a white Christian order, but of a black Christian order. The assumptions of Christian redemption that shoot throughout the narrative continue to reveal the

limits of this redemptive narrative at the edges of the story. Harper's depiction of Iola's parents union as a loving marriage, for instance, sidesteps the difficult questions of coercion and love in interracial sexual interactions under the conditions of slavery. The questions of power can never call into question the reality of love between Iola's parents, and thus, even in his absence, Iola's father is a figure who, while having some moral failures, is redeemable in part through his family's love, especially the love of black women.

Additionally, the goal of Christianizing pagan Africans and black slaves recurs throughout the text even as it no longer works to justify black enslavement. Instead, the missiology installed by black Christian naturalization of a redemptive terms of order continues to extend a practice of governance that retains some anti-black elements.[216] To consider these questions regarding re-imagination, redemption, and the reproduction of the terms of order, the next chapter will consider Angelina Weld Grimké's *Rachel: A Play in Three Acts,* and its questioning of theodicy. This chapter will consider further possibilities for a black political theology that would also question the *Christian* terms of order, not just *white Christian* terms of order. In this this way, I offer a deeper exploration of how a black liberative narrative of uplift continues to reproduce Christian hegemony.

[216] Additionally, Harper's insistence that black order is not anarchy could be further reread in light of recent attempts to think about the relationship between blackness and anarchy. Considering how an anarchist black political theology might be fostered is also a significant source of further study. See William C. Anderson and Zoé Samudzi, *As Black as Resistance: Finding the Conditions for Liberation* (AK Press, 2018).

Chapter 4.

Reproducing Justice: Theodicy and the Awful Queerness of Black Joy

Introduction

In 2010, when conservative anti-abortion groups paid for billboards across Georgia with the provocative slogan "Black Children are an Endangered Species" emblazed on them, reproductive justice movements quickly mobilized to respond with the Trust Black Women campaign. Another billboard campaign that appeared in New York in 2011 read, "The Most Dangerous Place for an African American Is in the Womb."[217] Arguing that these billboards framed black women as untrustworthy and incapable of discerning their own reproductive concerns, reproductive justice advocates critiqued the billboards for displacing the threat against black children from an oppressive and violently anti-black state to black wombs. Indeed, for reproductive justice advocates, the billboards extended the long legacy of anti-black attacks on black women by situating black women as threats to their own families. While these billboards conjure shades of the Moynihan Report and its portrayal of black women as an emasculating threat in the household, they also provide an occasion to think about the long history of policing that has been imposed on black wombs since slavery. It also enables us to rethink the political theological implications of popular conservative arguments against abortion that link it to slavery.[218]

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[217] See "NYC Billboard Opposing Abortion Stirs Debate - the New York Times," accessed March 28, 2019, https://cityroom.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/02/23/billboard-opposing-abortion-stirs-debate/. and "Abortion Billboards: Strong Words Spark Debate in Atlanta's Black Neighborhoods," *ABC News*, March 2010, https://abcnews.go.com/WN/billboard-controversy-signs-atlanta-black-children-endangered-species/story?id=9888149

[218] These arguments are proffered by white and black conservatives who argue that abortion amounts to black genocide. See Tierney Sneed, "Carson: Black Lives Matter Should Include Those 'Eradicated by Abortion'," *Talking Points Memo*, September 2015, https://talkingpointsmemo.com/livewire/ben-carson-abortion-black-lives; Titania Kumeh, "Conspiracy Watch: Is Abortion Black Genocide?" *Mother Jones*, accessed March 28, 2019, https://www.motherjones.com/media/2010/10/abortion-black-genocide/; Emily Crockett, ""All Lives Matter" Is Now

Turning to the still underexplored work of 19th century of poet, novelist, and playwright, Angelina Weld Grimké, I argue that her dramatic staging of racial oppression and motherhood in terms of theodicy provides a unique vantage from which to develop a black political theology. Rereading her politically theologically also sheds light on how the crisis of lynching post-Reconstruction is figured in terms of reproductive justice and is structured by political theological questions of legitimacy, meaning, and value. In refusing theodicy, Grimké provides a questioning of the ends of redemption.[219] By considering the political theological implications of black queer joy, I consider the political theological significance of its refusal to justify an anti-black order of things through the devalorization of birth and natality in light of anti-black violence.[220] This chapter thus develops a black political theological account of reproduction by asking how socially constructed obligations of race and gender relate to divine justice.

Through a consideration of Grimké's work, I will examine how her staging of black oppression in terms of black women's frustrated maternal desires links questions of theodicy to reproductive justice. Under conditions of anti-black violence, Grimké sees the dilemmas that attend black women's reproduction as God's doing–a cruel and violent joke. Considering the contours of social, familial, and theological obligations that link blackness, motherhood, and divine justice can

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Being Used Against Abortion Rights," *Vox*, January 2016, https://www.vox.com/2016/1/10/10745722/all-lives-matter-abortion.

[219] Two pieces on Grimké's work were of particular use in thinking about her use of theodicy. Craig R. Prentiss, *Staging Faith: Religion and African American Theater from the Harlem Renaissance to World War II* (New York ; London: NYU Press, 2013) and Elizabeth L. Jemison, "Gendering the History of Race and Religion," in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Race in American History*, ed. Kathryn Gin Lum and Paul Harvey (Oxford University Press, 2018)

[220] For more on the politics of Grimké's play, see Claudia Tate, *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire: The Black Heroine's Text at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), http://proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk,e000xna&db=nlabk&AN=169707 and Gloria T. Hull, *Color, Sex, and Poetry: Three Women Writers of the Harlem Renaissance*, 1st edition (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).

prove instructive for a black political theology.[221] By analyzing how Grimké figures black obligations to nation, community, and self, through conflicts in the black maternal, I argue that the imagination of justice in her work highlights the need for a black political theology to think relationship of legitimacy, meaning, and value through black reproduction. Grimké's blackqueer re-imagination thus provides grounds for a black political theology that doesn't reproduce according to the Christian terms of order and its governance of belonging in a white Christian nation.

Rereading Rachel

Formerly known as *Blessed Are the Barren,* Grimké's play *Rachel* gained significant critical attention when it first appeared in 1916. Grimké's drama works with many conventions of sentimental domestic literature in order to stir the emotions of its audience in regards to black oppression and its domestic affects. However, writing in the long shadow of Reconstruction's end, increasing anti-black violence such as lynchings, and black economic depression post-emancipation, Grimké's writing is also notably more existential than Harper's.[222] *Rachel: A Play in Three Acts*, highlights curious interplays of desire, maternity, and obligation alongside an enduring imagination of black death and finitude. Described as a play of racial "self-genocide", the drama is set in the home of the Loving's.[223] Mrs. Loving and her children Rachel and Thomas Loving are the picture of a loving

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[221] While many authors posit a critique of black liberation theology in terms of theodicy, they tend to do so from a black humanist lens. In my mind, given the extension of humanism as a discourse of the Secular, it does not evade the problems that emerge in God-talk, either. Given recent black critiques of the human, then, there needs to be another way of working with God and the human that does not assume Christian or Secular terms of order. See William R. Jones, *Is God A White Racist?: A Preamble to Black Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997); Anthony B. Pinn, *Why, Lord?: Suffering and Evil in Black Theology* (New York: Continuum, 1999); For critiques of the human see Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom."; Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*; Warren, *Ontological Terror*

[222] See Robin M. Bernstein, "'Never Born": Angelina Weld Grimké's Rachel as Ironic Response to Topsy," *Journal of American Drama and Theatre*, 2007, https://dash.harvard.edu/handle/1/4322924

[223] Angelina Weld Grimké, *Selected Works of Angelina Weld Grimké*, ed. Carolivia Herron, 1 edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 17

black family, though a dark family history increasingly casts a shadow over the happy household. Mrs. Loving eventually reveals that Rachel and Thomas' father and older brother had been lynched by a mob of white men upset with Mr. Loving's anti-lynching newspaper publications. These white men were, Mrs. Loving states, "Christian people–in a Christian land. We found out afterwards they were all church members in good standing–the best people."[224] Mrs. Loving's announcement acts as a moment of revelation where Rachel, formerly convinced of the beauty of the world, of her call by God to be a mother, is no longer able to ignore the effects of racism on black life.

Playful, kind, thoughtful, and respectable, Grimké's depiction of the Loving's is understood as an intentional attempt to combat the racist imagery that was proliferating in the wake of D.W. Griffiths' film *Birth of a Nation* and has also been read as an indictment of the "pickaninny" stereotype[225]. As a propaganda play, *Rachel* is meant to proliferate political images as an indictment of anti-blackness. Reading these images theologically as well also draws out the significance of Grimké's employment of biblical figures of the Madonna and Rachel as a way of dramatizing the relationship between the black maternal and the black child. The play debuted in the historical moment when DW Griffiths' film "Birth of a Nation" based on Thomas Dixon's "The Leopards Spots" was highly popular and influential.[226] Grimké's drama, whose production was originally backed by the NAACP, was written to counter the spread of those negative sterotypes. Indeed,

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[224] Grimké, 145

[225] See Prentiss, *Staging Faith* and Bernstein, ""Never Born".". For more on the pickanniny and cultural production see Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*

[226] Bernstein provides a helpful overview of this context, noting how Griffiths own literary production is spurned on by his witnessing a staging of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Bernstein, ""Never Born".".

Grimké's play is understood to have initiated a tradition of propaganda plays countering the drama of anti-blackness in the cultural imagination.[227]

Over the course of the play, Rachel transforms from a fun-loving and playful girl to a mournful and depressed young woman. She gains the gift of motherhood as an adoptive mother to a little black boy, Jimmy, whose parents die from small pox. Depicted as having a full family life both in her domestic family and in her doting on black neighborhood children, Rachel is also increasingly aware of her inability to protect them. When her brother's friend, John Strong, presents the possibility of marriage, it seems at first that Rachel will be able to imagine a future of happiness with him. But a visit to the house by a black mother and her young black girl who has been traumatize by racist violence reminds Rachel of how deeply anti-blackness wounds black children. The inescapable harm of anti-blackness to black children leads to Rachel's refusal of marriage, promising to keep the children she imagined birthing safe by never bringing them into the anti-black world. Accepting the loss of that future with John, Rachel continues to care for Jimmy while also contending with the anxiety and depression that comes from confronting the anti-black world.

Theological Descent/Dissent and God's Justice: Peoplehood, Degeneration, and the Reproduction of Black Damnation Through Childbirth

In Grimké's play, the refusal to reproduce is articulated as a direct challenge to God, with the protagonist accusing God of playing cruel jokes on black people, especially black women, for giving them maternal desires in an anti-black world. The wounds of anti-black racism are understood as wounding the souls and flesh of black people, creating an unjust situation in which to raise black children. Rachel, witnessing how anti-blackness violates her own family and her adopted son refuses

[227] Prentiss, *Staging Faith*

to get married and reproduce as an act of defiance against God and the world. While Grimké's work can at times appear to be a simple affirmation of the obligations of motherhood, this chapter wonders whether the contiguity she expresses between theodicy and the black maternal predicament actually troubles the coercive obligations of birth and biological reproduction.[228] Rather than linking figurations of the black maternity to the family in a heterosexual consummation, Rachel's refusal of marriage exposes how white theological imaginations of the family govern the common sense of reproduction and benefits an antiblack social order.

Two helpful interlocutors for a black political theological rereading of the meaning of this refusal in Grimké's play are Leo Bersani and Lee Edelman, who helpfully illuminate how the cultural and the political are oriented by a redemptive order and the desire for the reproduction of futurity. Bersani questions the cultural production of literature as a redemptive act, arguing that "the culture of redemption" "depends on even more fundamental assumptions about authoritative identities, about identity *as* authority."[229] On his reading, the subjectivity that this culture of redemption reproduces is legitimated by a "sacrosanct value of selfhood, a value that may account for human beings' extraordinary willingness to kill in order to protect the seriousness of their statements."[230] For Edelman, the figure of the Child comes to be a constituting feature of political and its operation because it communicates an image of the future that legitimates the violence of the political. Reference to the figure of the Child thus works to ensure the proper heteronormative order of civil society is reproduced against the threatening negativity and finitude represented by the queer. By rereading Edelman and Bersani in from the underside of cultural production and the political, a

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[228] Attending to the inflections of Grimké's own personal desire and attraction to women throughout her work may trouble a compulsory heterosexual reading of desire and the maternal here.

[229] Leo Bersani, *The Culture of Redemption* (Harvard University Press, 1990), 3

[230] Bersani, 4

black political theology clarifies how the reproduction of antiblackness is the unthought condition of possibility for the redemptive engine of the cultural and the reproductive futurity of the political.

Rereading them in this black political theological sense, we can espy the disfiguration of cultural production as redemptive and of politics as future oriented. This is not so much a black rejection of the political (as Mr. Loving's anti-lynching activism would attest) as it is a revelation of how the political, the white Christian nation, is predicated on the reproduction of a foreclosed *now* and the imaginary's the reproduce the order of the now.[231] Rachel's regression from a hopeful mother fulfilling the promise of maternal desire to anxious mother who would rather her children not be born, provides a unique vantage on the relationship between race, redemptive economy, and reproduction. Here we can refract my insights through this study regarding the maternal transmission of values and proper formation to the child through education as linked to what Bersani notes as the cultural transmission of authority through identification. Through her questioning of God, Rachel delinks her identification from the Madonna and, rather than accomplishing a supersessionist fulfillment of biblical Rachel, the question of God's justice becomes a question of salvation and its economy.

Importantly, there is an implicit temporality to this linkage. That is, we can think together the narratival reproduction of time or history that Christian supersessionist peoplehood installs (the announcement of the new and the designation of the old) with the modes of governance that work to legitimate the meaning and value of heterosexual domesticity and the Child in order to ensure the reproduction of an antiblack order.[232] Read in this light, Grimké's questioning of God's justice in the

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[231] For more on Christianity, Secularity, and the foreclosure of the now, see Daniel Colucciello Barber, "The Immanent Refusal of Conversion," *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 13, no. 1 (2014): 142–50

[232] For more on queer temporalities and race, see Valerie Rohy, *Anachronism and Its Others: Sexuality, Race, Temporality* (Albany, N.Y.; Bristol: SUNY Press, 2010). For more on supersessionism and temporality, see Kathleen Biddick, *The*

play becomes a question of when that justice will arrive and the inadequacy of its non-arrival for the conditions of black life.[233] This questioning off justice is linked to the question of redemption and its arrival through children. Instead of the (white) Child who legitimates the reproduction of the antiblack order of things, the figure of the Black Child in the play short circuits the reproduction of a redemptive narrative through domesticity. Rachel's experience of mothering Jimmy and neighborhood children does not strengthen her faith but is precisely what increases her doubt and eventual antagonism toward God. Her loving care and concern for living black children also translates to loving care and concern for her imagined black children, who she would keep safe by never bringing them into the antiblack world. Thus, *Rachel* reveals the racial underside of the Christian theological claim that women will be saved through childbirth by revealing the reproduction of the damned that the black maternal figures.[234]

Grimké's play with the biblical figures of the Madonna and Rachel thus renders redemptive narrative of domesticity is rendered incoherent and inadequate to black life. As mentioned above, the play was formerly titled, *Blessed are the Barren*, playing on the biblical Rachel's infertility. In continuing to think with Grimké's linkage of blessing and barrenness, we can read *Rachel* as a blackening of the figure of the mother and the Child with racial melancholy. This blackening works to devalorize the natality that undergirds reproductive futurity and its funding the reproduction of (white) redemption.[235] What first appears as a redemptive narrative, turns out to be one of

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Typological Imaginary: Circumcision, Technology, History (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003); Kathleen Biddick, *Make and Let Die: Untimely Sovereignties* (Punctum Books, 2016), and Lloyd, *The Problem with Grace*

[233] See Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, trans. Patricia Dailey, 1 edition (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2005) for more on the relationship between time, justice, and salvation.

[234] Timothy 2:15 and Solevåg, *Birthing Salvation*

[235] For more on the white Christian production of redemption see Timothy McGee, "Against (White) Redemption: James Cone and the Christological Disruption of Racial Discourse and White Solidarity," *Political Theology*, January 2017, http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/EbbFtAU62ZamZX7jW5Gx/full

regression. Beginning with the figuration of Rachel as identified with the Madonna, the play's confrontation of anti-blackness stops the Christian order of promise and fulfillment and its narration of salvation through childbirth. Engaging her refraction of theodicy and the question of God's justice through the figure of the Madonna and Rachel, we can read the enduring links between salvation and slavery in its afterlife (or perhaps everlasting) through the frame of reproductive justice. Moreover, we can see how the failure of heterosexual union in the play works to prevent a supersessionist narrative of peoplehood and the legitimation of reproductive futurity, from ever having been born. In this way, the play shows how the conditions under which black women's reproduction occurs is structured by their reproduction of the damned for the antiblack racial economy of redemption.

Grimké renders the promise and fulfillment of redemption incoherent by dramatizing the obstacles to Rachel's maternal desire. Rachel's love of children is depicted from the beginning of the play, where she returns home late because she ran into a neighboring black child, Jimmy, and couldn't resist playing with him. Her playfulness with Jimmy and other neighborhood black children is cast as a natural disposition for Rachel. Indeed, motherhood is aligned with the divine as Rachel, explicitly links her desire for motherhood to a calling by God.

> "I think the loveliest thing of all the lovely things in this world is just (*almost in a whisper*) being a mother!"[236]

When her mother laughs at this statement, Rachel responds: "It is not kind to laugh at sacred things. When you laughed, it was as though you laughed–at God!"[237] Her mother is startled by this response and Rachel goes on to explain herself:

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[236] Grimké, *Selected Works of Angelina Weld Grimké*, 134

[237] Grimké, 134

> It's true. It was the best in me that said that–it was God! (*Pauses.*) and, Ma dear, if I believed that I should grow up and not be a mother, I'd pray to die now. I've thought about it a lot, Ma dear, and once I dreamed, and a voice said to me–oh! it was so real–"Rachel, you are to be a mother to little children." Wasn't that beautiful? Ever since I have known how Mary felt at the "Annunciation." (*Almost in a whisper*) *God spoke to me through someone, and I believe.*[238]

This deep sense in Rachel that God has spoken to her, figuring her as a black Madonna at the annunciation, is legitimated by recourse to a theological structure of feeling. Rachel's resonance with Mary juxtaposes Rachel's desire for children with the idea of motherhood as a sacred and divine gift. These feelings continue to be elaborated by Rachel as a part of why she relates to black and brown children as she does.[239]

Here, Rachel's desire to care for children is related to the feeling of the child such as having "its little warm body against" her. Rachel's imagination of caring for children is further specified through these feelings as she notes the special pathos that black and brown babies engender. "There is something about them" that clutches at her heart.[240] This feeling surpasses rationality and is linked to a foreboding sense that they are under threat by some invisible danger. Grimké uses feeling to forward a refusal of theodicy that is rooted in black mother's care. Where the anti-abortion billboards cast the threat to black babies as the criminal figure of black women, Grimké's drama both depicts the black maternal figure as deeply caring while also revealing the true threat to black children as coming from elsewhere–the anti-black world. Protecting black children is no laughing

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[238] Grimké, 135

[239] "And it has explained so much to me. I know now why I just can't resist any child. I have to love it–it calls me–it draws me. I want to take care of it, wash it dress it, live for it. I want the feel of its little warm body against me, its breath on my neck, its hands against my face. (*Pauses thoughtfully for a few moments.*) Ma dear, here's something I don't understand: I love the little black and brown babies best of all. There is something about them that–that–clutches at my heart. Why–why–should they be–oh!–pathetic? I don't understand. It's dim. More than the other babies, I feel that I must protect them. They're in danger, but from what? I don't know. I've tried so hard to understand, but I can't. (*Her face radiant and beautiful.*)… . And, Ma dear, because I love them best, I pray God every night give me, when I grow up, little black and brown babies–to protect and guard. (*Wistfully*) Now, Ma dear, don't you see why you must never laugh at me again?" Grimké, 135

[240] Grimké, 135

matter for Grimké, it is the task of mothering. Yet it is precisely this task which is impossible for the black mother. Rachel's realization of this at the end of Act I initiates her doubt of God's goodness.

> Why—it would be more merciful—to strangle the little things at birth. And so this nation—this white Christian nation—has deliberately set its curse upon the most beautiful—the most holy thing in life—-motherhood! Why—it—makes—you doubt—God![241]

It is in this indictment of God that Rachel begins to more fully figure biblical Rachel who mourns for her children.

Rachel is not the only member of the Loving family whose relationship to God is strained. Her mother admits to having had difficult praying after the loss of husband and son. More, in Act II which takes place four years after Mrs. Loving reveals that their father and brother were lynched, Tom, Rachel's brother brings God's justice into question, saying "I hear people talk about God's justice—and I wonder."[242] Having inquired into the status of the men who killed his family members, Tom exclaims:

> And, in the South today, there are white men—(Controls himself). They have everything; they're well-dressed, well-fed, well-housed; they're prosperous in business; they're important politically; they're pillars in the church. I know all this is true—I've inquired. Their children (our ages, some of them) are growing up around them; and they are having a square deal handed out to them—college, position, wealth, and best of all, freedom, without galling restrictions, to work out their own salvations. With ability, they may become—anything; and all this will be true of their children's children after them. (A pause). Look at us—and look at them. We are destined to failure—they, to success. Their children shall grow up in hope; ours, in despair. Our hands are clean;—theirs are red with blood—red with the blood of a noble man—and a boy. They're nothing but low, cowardly, bestial murderers. The scum of the earth shall succeed. —God's justice, I suppose.[243]

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[241] Grimké, 149

[242] Grimké, 160.

[243] Grimké, 160-61

Tom's sarcastic mention of God's justice is linked to white freedom to work out their own salvations. The working out of salvation and the question of justice is reiterated by Mrs. Loving when, after she encourages Tom not to lose faith, he says that he will try: "Each one, I suppose, has to work out his own salvation," she resigns.[244] The domestic situation of this play thus does double work. The antagonism between black life and God's justice and promise of salvation is both rendered inadequate against the loving portrayal of a family in the Loving's while at the same time, their love for each other continues to provide sustenance through the upheavals of life in an antiblack world. Even as Tom agrees to keep trying to believe for his mother, his mother responds by refusing to impose her sense of faith onto him. In this way, Grimké refuses to paint a black political theology as predicated on a defense of God.[245] Indeed, Mrs. Loving seems aware of the extent to which she cannot justify God's allowance of anti-black violence.

In many ways then, the inability to justify God reveals Grimké's use of irony to question of justice. The repeated revelation of God's inaction in stopping antiblack violence becomes increasingly ironized and it is clear that God's justice cannot be justified. Here, Lee Edelman's argument on the queerness of irony can be coupled with Robin Bernstein's illumination of irony's

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[244] Grimké, 161

[245] Here we might think Grimké's work as a way into a black political theology that is unafraid of the gnostic/heretical designation. Instead, such refusal of the Christian terms of order opens of possibilities for black meaning making that is antagonistic to an order of redemption that reproduces antiblackness. This black gnostic refusal of theodicy has curious resonances with Francois Laruelle's sense that the most radical atheism is not disbelief in God, but disbelief in a good God. "the true atheism is not as simple as philosophy imagines it to be. It occurs in two stages: the banal refusal to believe in a God is self-contradictory and satisfies those who think little, but the refusal to believe in a good God is the true rebellion. There is always a God lying in ambush, preparing his return in whatever negation is made of his existence, even a materialist one, but it is important that it be a malicious God, a thesis that only an 'ultra'-religious heresy can face." François Laruelle, *General Theory of Victims* (John Wiley & Sons, 2015), 21. This links up well with Toni Morrison's recounting of the fourth face of God: "In their world, aberrations were as much a part of nature as grace. It was not for them to expel or annihilate it. They would no more run Sula out of town than they would kill the robins that brought her back, for in their secret awareness of Him, He was not the God of three faces they sang about. They knew quite well that He had four, and that the fourth explained Sula. They had lived with various forms of evil all their days, and it wasn't that they believed God would take care of them. It was rather that they knew God had a brother and that brother hadn't spared God's son, so why should he spare them?" Toni Morrison, *Sula*, Reprint edition (New York: Vintage, 2004), 118.

function in *Rachel*. For Edelman, irony is the undoing of narrativity and its production of tropes.[246] Bernstein sees irony in *Rachel* as Grimké's means of figuring white women as active enemies to black people as opposed to innocent colluders.[247] The pairing of the two is helpful for understanding the blackqueer antagonism figured here, not as fulfillment, but as a negative political theological force that embraces finitude but, in so doing, is also an entry into a black joy in the flesh, ungoverned by the coercive redemptive narrative that reproductive futurity imposes. Bernstein notes how kisses are repeated throughout the drama, but increasingly losing their potency, until the power of the mother's kiss is revealed to be unable to stop the harm that anti-blackness inflicts on black children. This enduring ineffectiveness, however, is the underside of the enduring success of the white Christian nation and its racial order of redemption. In this way, Grimké links the reproduction of the narrative and tropes that white domesticity depends on a problem for black life and flourishing.

Thus, both the failure of God and the divine idea of motherhood that Rachel was given–the gift turned curse–indicts the redemptive narrative that reproductive futurity depends on. Grimké's depiction of how neither God nor motherly affection can shield the black child from the suffering and wounds caused by anti-blackness–from the damage the anti-black world does to the flesh and spirit of black children–points to the anti-black world and its governance by white power as the most unsafe place for a black child. In this way, the black household is neither a site of degradation as in anti-black propaganda, or redemption, where the child is educated in their proper vocation, as in black narratives of social uplift for the race and the nation. As Grimké deftly shows, there is no promise for black people that their training and education will be rewarded with jobs adequate to their skill. In this sense, though, Grimké also indicts the redemptive narrative of black respectability

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[246] Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2004), 23.

[247] Bernstein, "'"Never Born".", 68.

and its universal vision of a common human vocation (as in Harper) to which black people can contribute. What is revealed, rather is the extent to which no amount of becoming respectable will overcome an anti-black order of things and that attempts to affirm the authority of God and the nation as a way of justifying motherly vocation or black uplift through the figure of the Child, is impotent in Grimké's play.[248]

Rachel's refusal to have children is thus tied to her refusal to have her children have to learn of the evil of the antiblack world.

> (*To [John] Strong*) If it nearly kills me to hear my Jimmy crying, do you think I could stand it, when my own child, flesh of my flesh, blood of my blood–learned the same reason for weeping? … I am afraid–to go–to sleep, for every time I do–my children come–and beg me–weeping–not to–bring them here–to suffer. Tonight, they came–when I was awake. (*Pauses.*) I have promised them again, now–by Jimmy's bed. (*In a whisper*) I have damned–my soul to all eternity–if I do.[249]

Recalling the former title, *Blessed are the Barren, Rachel* reverses the Christian economy of redemption that would enable one to figure the black Madonna and her reproduction as fulfilling a future promise of salvation through childbirth. Instead of birth being the blessed state, Grimké revalorizes barrenness as blessed for black women. In this sense, Rachel depicts the position of the black parent who is left with the task of having to justify black existence for their children who exist in an anti-black world. Instead of giving herself over to the fantasy of heterosexual domestic happiness and the reproductive future with John Strong, the demand from Rachel's imaginary children results in her trying to keep them safe by never allowing them to be born. Strong takes this refusal, in the namelessness of her imagined children, as a sign that Rachel has gone mad:

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[248] However, if the goal is not the overcoming of antiblackness, other possibilities emerge. See Ashon T. Crawley, *Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility*, 1 edition (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016).

[249] Grimké, *Selected Works of Angelina Weld Grimké*, 208

You're sick; you've brooded so long, so continuously,–you've lost-your perspective.[250]

But Rachel's refusal calls into question the legitimacy of the perspective that the white Christian order of things and its narrative of redemption through heterosexual reproduction. By countering the imagination of domestic bliss with the imagination of her children weeping and begging not to be brought into the world, the play shows how it is the world, not the black womb, that is the most dangerous place for the black child and it legitimates this claim by countering the theo-logic of reproduction as redemption.

Here, biological reproduction invites the question of theodicy and, standing under the judgement of anti-blackness and its mocking of motherhood, God is found guilty rather than justified. In this way, *Rachel* interrupts the figure of the Child's operation as an agent of a redemptive narrative and, by blackening this figure, gives attention to the literal existence and condition of enfleshed black children and the conditions of anti-blackness that they live under. Thus, the sentimental attachments of the imagined child and future are rerouted through blackness by Grimké, and made to attend to the literality of anti-blackness that the fantasy of reproductive futurity cannot justify. This is an indictment of both the nation and God. The "white christian nation" and the "laughing God" operate in tandem to blight black children and to frustrate Rachel and her desire to be a mother. At the same time, we might understand Rachel's refusal of John Strong as a refusal of the reproductive futurity that often operates under the aegis of black uplift. *Rachel*'s dramatization of a young black women's confrontation with the reality of race and its harm to her own girlhood, causing her to grow up, and the childhood of the black children she cares for indicts this kind of narrative as fanciful. In its failure to confront the white Christian nation and the laughing God who originate the desire to reproduce and also visit harm on black children and constrain the "now and

[250] Grimké, 208.

future" for black people, the play shows the cruelty of anti-blackness as an orchestration between the political and the theological.

"We Would Learn Again": Blackened Justice and the Joy of Black Flesh

> *How can life be so terrible when there are little children in the world? Terrible! Terrible! That's the reason it is so terrible.*[251]

It is easy to read Grimké's play as melodramatic and caught in racial melancholy. Yet I want to suggest, in closing, that such a reading misses the alternative forms of transmission and reproduction made available without natality or reproductive futurity. At the same time Rachel's melancholy and rage at the end of the play seems to overdetermine the work, I read her continual care for Jimmy as an attempt to cultivate joy in the flesh of the literal black Child rather than the coercive ends in the anti-black figure of the Child. Thus, I posit that Grimké's refusal to justify reproductive futurity through the sentimental literary conceit of heterosexual marriage suggests the queerness of blackness is both a no to justifying the anti-black world and a yes to the uselessness of the joy in the flesh. In the final act of the play, redemption and its necessary companion, theodicy, is refused for a life of joy in the flesh. When Jimmy asks Rachel for a story, she tells him about two little black boy's journay to the Land of Laughter. Here, revisiting the theme of laughter again, Grimké provides a parable that I read as illuminating the anti-natality that animates black study and affirms, preserves, and protects the joy of literal and imagined black flesh against the coercive birthing protocols of reproductive futurity.

In the story two little black boys lived with a cruel old man and woman who abuse them. One night when the little boys are crying, an old woman appears to them and asks them why they

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[251] Grimké, 180

are crying. Their reasons include that being "all alone in the world; and we don't know how to laugh anymore. We should so like to laugh again." The kind old woman tries to show them how to laugh, but when they attempt to imitate her, "they made horrid sounds" because "their laughing boxes were very rusty." The old women tells them that they should go away to the Land of Laughter so that they can learn how to laugh again. The boys express a disbelief in the Land of Laughter, and Grimké also links the boys disbelief in the Land of Laughter to their not knowing about the beauty of flowers and birds. "We never heard of such a thing" is their reply to the possibility of there being beauty and laughter in the world.

The parable proceeds as a lesson in how to laugh and also in the perseverance of the two boys through numerous ordeals. They also encounter kind people who house them and feed them. However, they also encounter those who try to discourage them in their journey. One man asks where they are going and he tells them that it is foolish to go to the Land of Laughter. "Come with me," he says, "and I will take you to the Land of Riches. I will cover you with garments of beauty and give you jewels and a castle to live in and servants and horses and many things beside." But the boys refuse to go with him because they "wish to learn how to laugh again." The man pointedly tells them that they will regret not going with him, but the boys continue on in their journey. They encounter another man who finds their journey foolish and tells them: "Come with me, and I will give you power. I will make you great men: generals, kings, emperors. Whatever you desire to accomplish will be permitted you." But the boys repeat their desire to learn to laugh again and continue on their journey. Finally, they encounter a man who is "clad in rags and his face was thin, and his eyes were unhappy." Upon hearing that the boys are journeying to the Land of Laughter, the old man responds "without a smile."

> Laughter! Laughter! that is useless. Come with me and I will show you the beauty of life through sacrifice, suffering for others. That is the only life. I come from the Land of

> Sacrifice." And they thanks him kindly, but said: "We have suffered long enough. We have forgotten how to laugh. We would learn again."(186)

This third encounter is a surprising appearance and troubles readings of the play as solely about racial melancholia. Indeed, Grimké's parable is clear that unjust suffering *needs to end*. But also, that even if the world doesn't end suffering, the journey to relearning joyous laughter persists. This persistent desire to learn to laugh again leads the boys at last to the Land of Laughter. However, there is a guard at the gate and she requires them to smile first. "I sit at the gate and no one who does not know how to smile may enter the Land of Laughter." When the boys try and fail to smile, she kindly tells them: "Go away and practice, and come back tomorrow." The boys practice all night and return. "Better, much better. Practice some more, and come back tomorrow." The boys go to practice again, and on the third day, they try again.

> And tears of delight came into her eyes. "Those were very beautiful smiles," she said. "Now you may enter." And she unlocked the gate, and kissed them both, and they entered the Land–the beautiful Land of Laughter. Never had they seen such blue skies, such green trees and grass; never had they heard such bird songs. And people, men, women and children, laughing softly, came to meet them, and took them in, and made them at home; and soon, very soon, they learned to sleep. And they grew up here, and married, and had laughing, happy children. And sometimes they thought of the Land of Riches, and said: "Ah! Well!" and sometimes of the land of Power, and sighed a little; and sometimes of the Land of Sacrifice–and their eyes were wistful. But they soon forgot, and laughed again. And they grew old, laughing. And then when they died–a laugh was on their lips. Thus are things in the beautiful Land of Laughter.[252]

This ending to Grimké's parable is deeply suggestive of how black queer joy emerges in a black political theology and its refusal of justification. In particular, the boys return on the third day creates a parallel structure to Christ's resurrection. This suggests that the practice of joy and the cultivation of "beautiful smiles" is a resurrection for the boys, not because they have finally achieved perfection of happiness, but because they can have joy together with others who desire to learn to

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[252] Grimké, 187

laugh again and again. The soft laughter of the people in the Land of Laughter is accompanied by practices of caring and homemaking together. However, the phrasing of the sentence regarding the boys growing up, marrying, and having children makes it unclear who they marry and have children with. Indeed, when thinks with Grimké's own desires and troubles heteronormative assumptions of heterosexuality, it can easily be read as the boys growing up, marrying, and having children *with each other*.

The boy's persistant desire, that: "we would learn again," suggests repetition without reproductive futurity–what Edelman and Bernstein note as irony–and the queerness of black joy as a way into a repeated re-education in the joys of the flesh. The lesson that Rachel imparts to Jimmy is not solely that of the world's anti-blackness, but of the possibility of black joy even in a world ruled by money, power, and suffering. That Grimké rejects riches, power, *and* sacrificial suffering as the route to the good life points to the uselessness of joyous laughter in the terms given by the world. What would it mean for joyous laughter to be the model for practice for thought for a black political theology?

In a world of abuse and suffering, the homosociality of these boys holding each other suggests what Christina Sharpe calls "care as an antidote to violence."[253] However, the fact of the boys journeying to the Land of Laughter together also points to the possibility of practicing joy, as a fugitive movement that does not disavow the suffering and abuse of the anti-black world, but refuses to let it govern its senses, touching, feeling, smiling, and laughing. After the story is finished, Jimmy asks Rachel why she's crying and she uses the woman at the gate in the story as a way of explaining that the tears in her eyes were tears of joy. Jimmy responds, "It must be awful queer to have tears of joy, 'cause you're happy."

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[253] Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, Reprint edition (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2016).

Here the linkage between the awful queerness of tears of joy and the joy that Rachel depicts the boys in the story as seeking and learning to practice counters the idea that Rachel refuses motherhood itself. What she refuses is the imperative to give birth. She mothers Jimmy and other little black children. Mothering here is thus a practice and a form of relation not only of care, but of education. But here, the education is in black joy. The boys disbelief in the beauty of the world and in their ability to laugh is linked to the education that Grimké, and Rachel in the play, seeks to give the little black boys. Here the sentimental education does not justify suffering through the coerced reproduction of a redemptive narrative, and does not seek power as its end, or riches as providing security from the violence of the world. Instead, the joy of learning, of study, and becoming a student of joyous laughter results in the embrace of failure, the practice of joy, and the acceptance of death.[254] Rachel attempts to equip Jimmy with what he will need to survive the anti-black world since he is already born, but she refuses to justify bearing children in the name of Jimmy's future.

The black child's inheritance of black disinheritance from the world and from God's justice is the beginning of an otherwise black education.[255] Rachel linking herself to the woman at the gate who guards the Land of Laughter is telling. The gate preserves the joy and entry to it is not gained simply by arrival, but by practicing joy and laughter and happiness. This suggests that Grimké sees the task of motherhood as no longer justified by a divine vocation, but the uselessness of joy, and the fostering of a re-education in joy and its uselessness after the revelation of redemption's

[254] For a helpful reading of the difference between the work of mourning, melancholia, and its significance for political theology see Lloyd, *The Problem with Grace*.

[255] See Spillers, "The Idea of Black Culture.".

failure.[256] To preserve the happiness of the place requires practicing joy.[257] Not as an otherworldy escape, but for the making of a place in the midst of an anti-black world in which to enjoy the flesh.

[256] See Crawley, *Blackpentecostal Breath* and Ashon Crawley, "Held in the Vestibule," *Modern Believing* 60, no. 1 (January 2019): 49–64, https://doi.org/10.3828/mb.2019.6 for more on black a/theological and a/philosophical thought.

[257] It may be helpful to place this conception of joy in conversation with discussions of womanist theology and ethics and dangerous memory in M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being*, 60351st edition (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009) and Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*.

Chapter 5.

Conclusion: Absenting the Father, or, Reimagining Black Political Theology as Disinherited Knowledge

However the image enters / its force remains within.[258]

Introduction

Having reached the end of this study, it is now necessary to consider the implications of how Christian ideas of peoplehood reproduce imaginations of race in the United States. As a political theological investigation, this dissertation has examined how Christian ideas of peoplehood are tied to the reproduction of claims of legitimacy, meaning, and value. I have shown how Christian peoplehood is not simply a matter of a people's designation as chosen by God, but also a matter of how that claim of chosenness is *reproduced* as legitimate, as meaningful, and as valuable. In rereading the shape of peoplehood in the United States, this study has worked to illuminate the application of *theological* technologies and procedures in order to make enduring claims of peoplehood. In Chapter One, I considered how Christian figural methods of reading, Christian conceptions of the relationship between the revealed image and the natural image, and the Christian theological significance of the figure of the mother work to provide a means of racially articulating and reproducing the terms of order that found white governance in the New World. By showing the theological means by which the reproduction of a people occurs, I aimed to show how the management of blackness within this order of things is crucial to its legitimation and the preservation of the meaning and value of belonging.

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[258] Audre Lorde, "Afterimages," in *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2000)

I gave primary attention to the situation of black women within this racial economy and have noted how the racial distinction between black and white enables a theological distinction between mothers to be incarnate in white Christian flesh and black heathen flesh. In so doing, I reread the work of Delores Williams, Frances EW Harper, and Angelina Weld Grimké as a way of both confronting dominant modes of reproduction and attending to alternative modes of reproduction that are significant for thinking about the political theology of race in the aftermath of the New World project. In Chapter Two, I showed how Delores Williams attends to a Hagaritic or disinherited sense of blackness in *Sisters in the Wilderness*. By tracking the illegitimate figure of the slave woman with Williams, I show how her insights can be extended to understand black surrogacy's role in the reproduction of an antiblack order of legitimacy, meaning, and value. Moreover, my rereading of Williams foregrounds how the racial economy is modeled on a Christian order of redemption. I thus reread Williams work and its womanist re-imagining of redemption as a way into an abolitionist conception of redemption. For, Williams draws attention to the work that black people have done to re-image Christian theological materials *as culture work*. At the same time, this illuminates the work of imaging that has been done to reproduce a Christian theological imagination that is antiblack. Rereading Williams in this way highlights how the work of re-imaging is not only a matter of resignification, but also requires a different order of legitimacy, meaning, and value.

Chapters Three and Four turned to read the work of Frances EW Harper and Angelina Weld Grimké in light of Williams and the relationship between the illegitimate figure of the black woman and the economy that she illuminates. Taking the theological locii of revelation and theodicy as a lens through which to reread their work, I show how the political theological implications of their work are clarified by reading them in terms of race and reproduction. Taking up Harper's notion of revelation and its relationship to a political theological anthropology, I show how she

develops a critique of the reproduction of antiblack knowledge and the antiblack image that white knowledge of God and the natural world legitimates and gives meaning and value to. Against these assumptions of knowledge, Harper indicts white Christian conceptions of revelation and personhood. Through her focus on Iola's plight, Harper reveals the antagonistic claims of kinship that attend the formation of identity, inheritance, and obligation in the United States. Harper thus shows how Christianity and the science work in tandem to legitimate antiblack knowledge and educate members of the United States' social body in antiblack perceptions of personhood. Against this order of things, she forwards a black conception of revelation through her emphasis on literacy and develops a black theological anthropology that recasts the image. Through this act of re-imagination, Harper works to fund a distinctly black order of reproduction and its claims of kinship and belonging. However, I raised questions about the possibilities and limits of Harper's approach given its framing in terms of a black uplift narrative.

My rereading of Angelina Weld Grimké attempted to consider possibilities for a black political theology that reject redemptive narratives. I argue that Grimké's play pre-figures a black feminist reproductive justice framework and a blackqueer critique of reproductive futurity. I show how she uses theodicy to link the indictment of God with the indictment of a white Christian order of things. Dramatizing her critique through the shadowed history of a black family, Grimké highlights how a political theological history of black people is necessarily irreconcilable with the redemptive history that is the common sense of the white national body. Against the romance of redemptive order as figured through marriage and the attainment of proper womanly vocation, Grimké's refusal of marriage and married motherhood enacts a blackqueer regression that refuses the supersessionist narrative of promise and fulfillment on which Christian redemption depends. Instead, Rachel's failure to fulfill her identification with the white Madonna leads to a black

inhabitation of the flesh and the work of mourning.[259] Rather than reading Grimké's play as a nihilistic or melancholic work, however, I show how Rachel's reorientation of motherhood to instruction in the joys of the flesh opens up otherwise possibilities of reproduction for a blackqueer political theology that works to abolish the reproduction of an antiblack order of things.

One goal of this study was also to show how Williams, Harper, and Grimké can be the foundation for a conversation on the political theological questions that pertain to black women's reproduction history. By examining how the US' racial economy is modeled on a Christian economy, how the transmission of a disinherited status of non-belonging recurs through the cultural reproduction of anti-black images, and how a social order that terrorizes black people is reproduced in the name of salvation, I have worked to recast the scholarly conversation on race, religion, and peoplehood. Each author provides a unique intervention in the reproduction of racial peoplehood that grounds an antiblack political theological paradigm. Instead, their sometimes discontinuous strategies and imaginations all take seriously the need to think race, religion, and domesticity together as a way of re-imagining and changing or trying to abolish the antiblack means of reproduction. While this dissertation challenges a Christian order of things as foundational to the reproduction of antiblackness, I do not take this as equivalent to discarding Christian theological *materials*. Rather, reading these women together was also an attempt to show how they disfigure Christian theological materials in order to make them available for black thought. In this way, I not only show how these women's contributions are worthy of study, but re-imagine the field of political theology and its questions of legitimacy, meaning, and value around the *reproduction* of racial peoplehood in modernity. Having revisited the argument of this study, I now examine some of the

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[259] In this sense, my reading is resonant with Vincent Lloyd's reading of Gillian Rose's work in Lloyd, *The Problem with Grace*. See also Gillian Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law: Philosophy and Representation* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996) and Gillian Rose, *Love's Work* (New York Review of Books, 2011)

implications of this dissertation for further study. Here, I consider three further avenues for study as it relates to a black political theology of race and reproduction.

Prospects For Further Study

First, I will consider how rereading black women's texts with a political theological examination of race and reproduction proves instructive. By refusing a redemptive narrative as the grounds for the history of a people, the valorization of origins and ends is challenged. Instead, rereading provides a way of re-inhabiting the world of these texts with our senses attuned to the underexamined assumptions that lend themselves to the production and reproduction of political theological claims held within. This is especially helpful with texts like Harper's and Grimké's which have at times been typecast or not taken seriously as producing and reproducing thought due to their genre conventions such as sentimentality and feeling. However, understanding how the formation of feelings functions to reproduce claims of peoplehood and belonging sheds light on the significance of their work on its own terms. Deeper engagement with black women's work here, then, is not simply a matter of reproducing the "new" in black women's work, but a way to wrestle with the demand their work places on our assumptions regarding the production and reproduction of political theology in the first place. To do so would be to take hold of their work as an inheritance of a disinherited position and to practice thinking from that situation of disinheritance.

Such an approach is also significant for engaging with more recent scholarly work and how they reproduce claims of legitimacy, meaning, and value. For instance, Womanist theological texts like *White Women's Christ, Black Women's Jesus,* by Jacquelyn Grant and *Power in the Blood?* by JoAnne Marie Terrell could be reread as relating to race and reproduction by drawing attention to the

question of *adequacy* rather than *orthodoxy* as a measure for a black political theology.[260] In each of these texts, the question of how theological claims are reproduced and measured is evaluated according to their adequacy for black women's life. Obviously questions emerge about the sometimes essentializing conceptions of black womanhood that are assumed in such arguments, but the general point of *adequacy* remains helpful to think with as it resists the terms of order that orthodoxy is predicated on. On this point, as in Grimké's text, a black political theology might consider how adequate its account is for reproducing justice.

Second, especially in light of Delores Williams' work, fresh lines of thought open up for thinking the relationship between economy, race, and reproduction. Continuing a political theological investigation along this route might see an engagement between genealogies of economy in critical theory, Continental philosophy of religion, and a black political theology, black Marxism, and black feminist and womanist theory and theology.[261] Rereading a genealogy of economy in this way might shed light on how the economy of capture that slavery installs is critical to the development of capitalism from Christendom and a better understanding of how economy relates not only to matters of financialization but also of racialization and gendering. In so doing, we would be better able to consider how race, reproduction, and economy are not competitive terms, but are interarticulating procedures of governance and valuation.

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[260] For instance, Terrell argues that "anyone's death has salvific significance if we learn continously from the life that preceded it." That is, the claims regarding Jesus that are often reproduced in womanist theology do not depend on a Christian redemptive economy for their meaning. In the same way, Williams' reading of Jesus' life and ministry also does not require the affirmation of a Christian order of things for its legitimacy. Yet they refuse to cede these images as significant even while refusing the terms of order that give them their common sense. JoAnne Marie Terrell, *Power in the Blood?: The Cross in the African American Experience* (Wipf; Stock Publishers, 2005), 142. See also Jacquelyn Grant, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response* (Scholars Press, 1989)

[261] See Marie-Jose Mondzain, *Image, Icon, Economy: The Byzantine Origins of the Contemporary Imaginary*, 1 edition (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2004); Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory*; Dotan Leshem, *The Origins of Neoliberalism: Modeling the Economy from Jesus to Foucault* (Columbia University Press, 2016); Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Univ of North Carolina Press, 2005); Denise Ferreira da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race*, 1 edition (Minneapolis: Univ Of Minnesota Press, 2007)

Additionally, we can reread something like James Cones' black theology of liberation in light of the reproductive economy and imaginary that Williams' contends with. Doing so undoes the supersessionist narration of Williams' and Womanist work as an overcoming of black liberationist work by seeking to understand how each scholars' work enables us to inhabit the other's with more attentiveness and precision. For instance, Delores Williams' notes that a key place of resonance between black liberation and womanist theology is in their revaluation of value.[262] Rereading Cone in light of Williams' insights into race and reproduction provides alternative ways of examining how he reproduces claims of legitimacy, meaning, and value. Additionally, rather than simply noting the scholarly absence of women in much of his work, we might consider how a reproductive reading of his work might shed light on how it is touched by a disinheritance. Rather than recuperating Cone's failure to deeply examine the shaping force of that touch, we can find it instructive for how his theological claims reproduce the force of black belonging that is antagonistic to white theology and its means of reproduction. At the same time, rereading in this way would also work to dislodge some of the cult of personality that can gather around figures like Cone. Because rereadings work to resituate a work within its particular historical moment, we can further re-examine the internal conflicts and crises as a matter of reproduction. Thinking the dynamism of black theology as presented by Cone, Albert Cleage, and J. Deotis Roberts, for instance, in light of reproduction sheds light on the emergence of black theology as a disciplinary field as a matter of transmitting claims of authority and power not only textually, but in the communities that emerge through the reproduction of the political theological claims of these texts.[263]

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[262] Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 150

[263] James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 20th Anniversary edition (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1990); Roberts, *A Black Political Theology*; Albert B. Cleage, *The Black Messiah* (Africa World Press, 1989)

Finally, rereading black texts political theologically without assuming their significance in terms of Christian order also makes Christian theological terms available to be reproduced otherwise.[264] Rather than simply reproducing the Christian terms of order as given, a black political theology can deepen consideration of what a Hagaritic, disinherited, sense of black theology might require of our thought and practice. The point here is not that there aren't any scholars engaging in non-Christian theology, but that one way of continuing to bring the Christian hegemony that shapes interpretive assumptions in black theology to the fore is by examining the reproduction of the terms of order through the distinction between *heresy* and *orthodoxy*.[265] Reading more widely in gnostic texts, for instance, would provide more avenues for thinking with the theological materials and imagery that emerge in black thought whose legitimacy, meaning, and value has been assumed to find significance within a Christian order of thought. In this way, rather than fostering an assumed conflict between black theology and gnostic Christianity that recapitulates a Christian scapegoating of gnosticism, we might reread the resonances between black political theological claims and *heretical* Christian claims as generative. Gnosticism, as a designation of knowledge that has also been disinherited from the proper reproduction of Christian order might provide a means of rethinking

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[264] See Crawley, *Blackpentecostal Breath* and Crawley, "Held in the Vestibule." for more on otherwise possibilities and alternative means of reading practices and thought that has gone on under the name of black Christianity.

[265] The point here is that there is also an immanent black political theological critique to be made of Christianity that refuses to justify itself in terms of Christian order and its assumptions., If black theology is, as J. Kameron Carter has called it, a ghosting of theology, than perhaps this antagonistic and otherwise inhabitation of Christian theology is one way of continuing to haunt it. See Carter, "Paratheological Blackness." For examples of the many black scholars are challenging the Afro-phobic and Christian assumptions that pervade black theology, see the work of Tracey E. Hucks and Charles H. Long, *Yoruba Traditions and African American Religious Nationalism*, Reprint edition (University of New Mexico Press, 2014); Dianne M. Stewart, "Womanist Theology in the Caribbean Context: Critiquing Culture, Rethinking Doctrine, and Expanding Boundaries," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 20, no. 1 (2004): 61–82, https://www.jstor.org/stable/25002490; Marcus Harvey, "Engaging the Orisa: An Exploration of the Yoruba Concepts of Ibeji and Olokun as Theoretical Principles in Black Theology," *Black Theology* 6, no. 1 (September 2008): 61–82, https://doi.org/10.1558/blth2008v6i1.61; *Black Religion and the Imagination of Matter in the Atlantic World J. Noel Palgrave Macmillan*, accessed May 11, 2019, https://www.palgrave.com/us/book/9780230615069; *Indigenous Black Theology - Toward an African-Centered Theology of the African American Religious Experience J. Clark Palgrave Macmillan*, accessed May 11, 2019, https://www.palgrave.com/us/book/9781137002822.

the questions of legitimacy, meaning, and value that operate in a black political theology.[266] Rather than seeking to prove the legitimacy of black political theological thought in terms that are legitimated by their assumption of proper Christian order, working to critique the production and reproduction of that order and the categorical distinctions that enable it to extend its life would make black political theology an enactment of the risk of faith demanded by black disinherited existence. At the same time, it would allow us to better attend to the shape of black theological claims and the ways that they are continuous and discontinuous with Christian claims of redemption even when they employ Christian theological materials.

Moreover, cultivating a black political theology that continues to engage the question of supersessionism and race but without the assumptions of Christian order would open up ways of thinking the relationship between blackness, Jewishness, Islam, and Indigeneity on their own terms and in light of their situation within the Christian order of the West. As I've already begun here, engaging with the work of Jewish scholars like Jacob Taubes provides a different starting place for a black political theology, such as the apocalyptic, but also, as W.E.B. Du Bois' short stories, Vincent Lloyd's engagement with the philosopher Gillian Rose and Law show, there are rich possibilities for engaging with Jewish thought and practice that can contribute to a decolonization of Jewish thought and a de-Christianization of black theology.[267] In so doing, we may better understand how the figural Jew and the figural black find meaning within a Christian economy and on their own terms.[268] Also, increasing amounts of scholarship on black Islamic traditions of thought and practice can gain more

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[266] For more on gnosticism, see David Brakke, *The Gnostics: Myth, Ritual, and Diversity in Early Christianity*, Reprint edition (Cambridge, Mass; London: Harvard University Press, 2012); Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity* (Beacon Press, 2015); Karen L. King, *What Is Gnosticism?* (Harvard University Press, 2005)

[267] See Lloyd, *The Problem with Grace*; William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil* (Harcourt, Brace; Howe, 1920)

[268] See Sarah Hammerschlag, *The Figural Jew: Politics and Identity in Postwar French Thought* (University of Chicago Press, 2010)

prominence within a black political theology.[269] One way forward is to think with the tradition of Hagar and the employment of "Hagarites" as a name for Muslims as a further line of study about the race and the reproduction of knowledge, especially the category of religion, and what assumptions shape these genealogies. Perhaps in so doing we might begin to reclaim the indigenous knowledges and practices that have been disinherited in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.[270] Blackness and the disinheritance transmitted by the marked mother thus becomes a means of absenting the patriarchal white Father and the order, economy, and grammar that He governs through the Son and the power of His Spirit.

Conclusion: Disinheriting Black Political Theology

> A politics of abolition could never finally be a politics of resurgence, recovery, or recuperation. It could only ever begin with degeneration, decline, or dissolution. Abolition is the interminable radicalization of every radical movement, but a radicalization through the perverse affirmation of deracination, an uprooting of the natal, the nation, and the notion, preventing any order of determi-nation from taking root, a politics without claim, without demand even, or a politics whose demand is 'too radical to be formulated in advance of its deeds.'[271]

In conclusion, this dissertation has been an attempt to recast some key assumptions about how Christian ideas of peoplehood shape the racial life of the United States. At the same time, this study has aimed to show how a black political theology can better understand how these Christian ideas of peoplehood operate to make antiblackness an enduring, or everlasting, crisis for black existence. By turning to the reproductive imaginary and economy of Christian claims of redemption, I hope to

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[269] For some examples of this see

[270] For helpful decolonial critiques of West, whiteness, and its obfuscation of the indigeneous histories of Jewish life and practices see Houria Bouteldja and Cornel West, *Whites, Jews, and Us: Toward a Politics of Revolutionary Love*, trans. Rachel Valinsky (South Pasadena, CA: Semiotext, 2017) and S. Slabodsky, *Decolonial Judaism: Triumphal Failures of Barbaric Thinking* (Springer, 2014).

[271] ^ Jared Sexton, "The Vel of Slavery: Tracking the Figure of the Unsovereign," *Critical Sociology* 42 (December 2014): 11, https://doi.org/10.1177/0896920514552535.

provide paths forward for attending to how sexuality and gender, history and culture, and theological and political economy work together to enable the articulation, imagination, and governance of people. In rereading Delores Williams, the crucial throughline of my argument lies in the conviction that the Hagaritic sense of disinheritance is more adequate for shaping a black political theology as it is more adequate to the shape of black life and death in the wake of the New World. While challenging the Christian order, my hope is also to take seriously the ways that black people have been acclimated to a Christian theological imagination and its procedures for reproducing claims of legitimacy, meaning and value. But seriously attending to their appropriations of these terms and how they made claims of kinship and belonging from them cannot be employed to justify or redeem the Christian terms of order. Instead, I see their inscriptions as disfiguring marks on the narrative order on which Christianity depends.

The black political theology of race and reproduction that I've set out here can thus be understood as a procedure for evaluating how claims of meaning and value are legitimated and reproduced in the absence of the Father and family that white theology establishes. By proceeding in the namelessness of the marked mother of black theology, one can be claimed by a disinherited theological lineage.[272] Rather than seeking to construct a black patriarchal father and heterosexual future, becoming stuck in the melancholy of a lost inheritance, or seeking to restore sonship through the legitimacy of respectability, the disinheritance of the slave mother–of black maternal claims that persist without the security of sovereignty–provides a lesson for how claims of black theology and black belonging must be made adequate to black existence. Without the presumption of sovereignty or salvation through belonging to the proper body, there opens up a practice of preservation

[272] As Hortense Spillers writes, such disinherited histories mark "our mutual entanglement in a fabric of feeling and effort that had claimed us even before we knew our own names." Hortense J. Spillers, "Kinship and Resemblances: Women on Women," ed. Erlene Stetson, Barbara Christian, and Sandra R. Lieb, *Feminist Studies* 11, no. 1 (1985): 111–25, https://doi.org/10.2307/3180138

without the coercion of redemption. This disinherited existence is not a victorious overcoming of death through redemption, but a joyous embrace of the enfleshed finitude that is animated in black life and an attentive mourning of premature black death. It is a work of love, care, passion, and a fierce defense of blackness. It is the cultivation of a practice of re-education. It is a means of learning again, working again to do justice to the demand issued by black life in the flesh and the cry issued in the shedding of black blood.

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