



Creating Ourselves

AFRICAN AMERICANS
AND HISPANIC AMERICANS
ON POPULAR CULTURE
AND
RELIGIOUS EXPRESSION



ANTHONY B. PINN AND BENJAMÍN VALENTÍN, EDITORS

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Introduction



Rarely have African American and Latino/a theologians and religious scholars inquired into the possibility and even necessity of cross-cultural communication with respect to the two communities and their scholarly traditions in theology and in religious studies.¹ This is the case despite the unique web of historical and cultural relations that links African Americans and Latinos/as; despite the parallel history of struggle against multiple forms of jeopardy that have variously threatened their well-being; despite the fact that they share a comparable history of both subversive activity and the preservation and celebration of life; despite the current growth in tensions developing between these groups and the consequent need for more communication and collaboration between them; and despite the many interesting and potentially advantageous themes and issues that can be comparatively and jointly explored by them. It is indeed surprising that African American and Latino/a intellectuals in general and theologians and religious scholars in particular have not made more of an effort to explore both the possibility and desirability of communicative exchange, comparative analysis, and collaboration. But while this lack is surprising, it is nevertheless an unfortunate fact that little substantive interaction has taken place.

The reality is that the academic exploration of African American and Latino/a religious expression has been carried out with little substantive cross-dialogue between the two groups. That is, although black and Latino/a scholars have worked under the assumption that theology and religious studies are best understood as a dialogical practice and best carried out *en conjunto*, the analysis of theologies and religious expression coming from these two communities has occurred independently of each other. Furthermore, even a brief perusal of the bibliographies and indexes of books and articles written within either one of these discursive traditions reveals a lack of attention to academic resources from the other tradition.

Given this regretful state of affairs and our sense of the advantages of further dialogue between the scholars of these two ethnic communities, we have in various instances sought to bring together African American and Latino/a theologians and religious scholars for the purpose of comparative dialogue. In *The Ties That Bind*, for instance, we sought to bring together for the first time the rich, complex, and mature theological discourses of these two groups. That project provided a view of the development of these two theological systems, and it compared and contrasted key issues and elements relevant to both forms of theological reflection. It also touched on the important theological and ethical messages that these two traditions offer not only to the African American and Latino/a communities but also to the larger community of the United States. But in addition to that work we have also made an effort to bring together scholars from these two communities to engage in broad and collaborative conversation by way of academic forums and symposiums, and as such we can say that this book represents another attempt along these lines.

We must admit that our involvement in this effort at cross-cultural or cross-group exchange is motivated by an impulse that is at once political and intellectual. Politically speaking, this effort is to a good extent fueled by our unwillingness to relinquish the utopian dream of broader-based public connection, collaboration, and coalition. We are of a mind that it is important that progressive intellectuals and scholars, who aspire to ameliorative and transformative social relevance in their work, seek to revitalize coalitional energies wherever and whenever possible. It seems to us that the need for connection, alliance, and coalition across racial, gender, class, and religious lines is especially pressing today as a result of the increase of social antagonism, the fracturing of social movements and progressive energies, the deterioration of a spirit of solidarity, the growth in economic insecurity, the waning of broad public sympathy for minority persons who have suffered the most from racial, cultural, and economic exclusion, and the surge in racial antagonisms and xenophobic reactions experienced in our era. In times such as these, coalition building is extremely important. It is perhaps especially so for those historically subordinated and disadvantaged persons and groups that may lack the power to single-handedly transform present institutional structures. And to be sure, it is not solely the members of racialized minorities and disadvantaged ethnic or cultural groups in society who stand to gain from the political empowerment that coalitions can engender; indeed, the inequities, antagonisms, insecurities, and pathological consequences that result from inequality and injustice

eventually affect us all in one way or another. Therefore, all who are concerned with the existence and effects of cultural and social inequality in our nation; all who are concerned with the fracturing of utopian energies in our time; all who are concerned with the deterioration of a spirit of solidarity; and all who remain committed to the ideals of equality, the common good, justice, and substantive democracy should be supportive of efforts at coalition building.

Still, although there is a definite need for coalitions today the truth is that we lack the holistic and integrative processes that can abet progressive connection and collaboration across lines of difference. And in the absence of these arrangements, the desire for transformative connection and coalition will remain at the level of wishful thinking. So before we can dream of collaboration and coalition building across lines of difference, we must first desire and foster cross-cultural and cross-group communication or dialogical exchange. We need, in other words, to get into the habit of engaging the “other” in substantive conversation. To put it boldly and simply, it would be premature to assume a collaborative or coalitional posture in the absence of the kinds of dialogical exchanges that can help us to know each other at least a little bit better. In a word, dialogue is essential. But the sort of cross-cultural dialogue we are talking about here is still a rarity in our time. This must change if we are to work toward mutually enhancing alliances.

For sure, occasional cases of meaningful communication and interaction can occur between members of these two cultural groups. But sustained dialogue is still not the norm between these two communities, even though they represent the two largest so-called minority groups in the United States and even in spite of many good (if not pressing) reasons for conversation. Dialogue has certainly not been standard among black and Latino/a theologians and religious scholars. And this communicative disconnect prevents us from more potentially fruitful cooperative interaction in our institutional efforts. How can we cooperate or collaborate with each other when we hardly know each other? We, if honest, know very little about each other, and we surrender against our better judgment to assessments based on stereotyping. This lack of awareness needs to be overcome if we are to collaborate with each other in our yearning for institutional change, and this rise above ignorance can only come through dialogue. Is dialogue “enough”? No it is not! But it is a vital starting point—one that allows us to compare experiences, exchange perspectives and opinions, and deliberate over our shared problems, aspirations, and hopes.²

For all that, it is important to mention that our involvement in this effort or experiment in cross-cultural or cross-group exchange is motivated not only by a political desire but also by an intellectual stimulus. It is our belief that there are many themes that scholarly members of these two communities can explore together. The fact is that the history and identity of African Americans and Latinos/as is inexorably linked. And so the material, symbolic, decorative, and expressive cultures of these two groups show similarities that can be analyzed. At the same time, a glance at the theological and religious scholarship produced by these two communities in recent times reveals comparability in the ways that these two discursive traditions have emerged and evolved both methodologically and thematically. Yet the differences or dissimilarities between these groups can also be explored. And it is our belief that both of these theological and religious studies traditions, though still relatively young, are developed enough to allow for fruitful and rigorous exploration. Black theology, for instance, has been in existence as an academic discipline since 1968 and can be said to be in its third wave of expression, while Latino/a academic theology has been around since 1975 and also reveals a kind of third unfolding.³ The broader explorations of religious studies coming from these two communities also would seem to roughly correspond in regard to historical development. Thus at this point in their respective histories it would be interesting to compare and contrast the scholarly production of African American and Latino/a theologians and religious scholars. Such an intellectual curiosity can only serve to expand the thematic and methodological considerations being explored by these two scholarly communities.

The discussion generated by our first edited volume *The Ties That Bind* (2000) has been highly beneficial. That book directly led to various moments of interchange between black and Latino/a theologians and religious scholars, including two dialogical sessions sponsored by the Association of Theological Schools in 2002 and 2006; an American Academy of Religion session in 2003; and a consultation sponsored by the Fund for Theological Education and the Hispanic Theological Initiative that in 2005 brought together African American and Latino/a Ph.D. students in theology and religious studies to engage in each other's work. Still, we believe that this dialogical exchange can go further. And so in this volume we have brought together a group of scholars to explore the religious and theological significance of cultural production, or what we can call "popular culture." The reason why we selected this particular theme for our comparative and collaborative analysis is simple: cultural production has historically been

of great importance to the theological and religious scholars in both communities. African American and Latino/a theologians and religious scholars have both in parallel ways converged on modalities of popular cultural expression coming from these two communities, and they have done so in an attempt to build theology and religious scholarship from the “stuff of life” that is to be distinctively found within black and Latino/a peoples. Hence, we perceive that the rubric of “the popular,” or the realm of popular culture in other words, can offer a good intellectual framework from which to engage each other in comparative and critical conversation.

Much attention has been given to the fundamental nature and meaning of “the popular” within African American and Latino/a theology and religious scholarship. However, it is our view that much more work is possible and indeed necessary regarding the analysis of cultural production as popular expression within both of these communities. When African American and Hispanic and Latino/a scholars in theology and religious studies have dealt with the religious dimensions of cultural production their efforts have tended to be limited to music and to “popular religion.” Examples include Michael Eric Dyson’s *Holler If You Hear Me: In Search of Tupac Shakur* (2001); Anthony B. Pinn’s edited collection *Noise and Spirit: The Religious and Spiritual Sensibilities of Rap Music* (2004); and Jon Michael Spencer’s *Blues and Evil* (1993) and *Self-Made and Blues Rich* (1997). In terms of “popular religious practices” we might think in terms of the recent volumes on African-derived practices or Dwight Hopkins’s work on popular practice in African American religious history—for example, in his *Down, Up, and Over: Slave Religion and Black Theology* (2000). On the other side, Latino/a theologians and scholars of religion have mostly focused on the study of religious expressions that may be characterized as “popular,” such as Guadalupana devotion, patron saint devotion, and Afro-Caribbean religion. This focus is visible in texts such as Anthony Stevens-Arroyo and Ana Maria Diaz-Stevens’s edited volume *An Enduring Flame: Studies on Latino Popular Religiosity* (1994); Jeannette Rodriguez’s *Our Lady of Guadalupe: Faith and Empowerment among Mexican-American Women* (1994); Alex Garcia-Rivera’s *St. Martin de Porres: The Little Stories and the Semiotics of Culture* (1995); Virgilio Elizondo’s *Guadalupe: Mother of the New Creation* (1997); and Orlando Espin’s *The Faith of the People: Theological Reflections on Popular Catholicism* (1997), among others. Much work thus has been done in both communities to explore the possible religious meanings of music and some forms of popular religious practices. Still, many other examples of popular culture have remained underexplored.

What about literature, the visual arts, movie and television production, food, the body as a cultural signifier, and other such examples of the popular? Unfortunately, these areas have not received the attention they deserve as expressions of black and Latino/a popular culture and agency and as cultural signifiers with great religious and theological meaning.

In this book we are fundamentally concerned with unpacking, in a comparative manner, the religious and theological significance of diverse expressions of African American and Latino/a cultural production—expressions that often as a whole are referred to as “popular culture.” For the purposes of this project, popular culture is defined as the signs, symbols, aesthetics, behaviors, practices, and assumptions that disclose and explain the life and agency of a given community. The sections of this volume correspond to particular (and an admittedly limited number of) dimensions of cultural production as popular process, including body construction, Hollywood production, music, literature, visual arts, and the art of food. Other dimensions and modalities of “popular culture” can and should be explored. Here, however, we start with a fuller exploration of “the popular” found within these two communities by looking into these particular examples of popular culture, and we delve specifically into some of these because they have thus far been overlooked and underexplored within black and Latino/a theological and religious study.

More broadly, however, we undertake the exploration of these examples of popular culture with two guiding aims: first, we seek to better utilize popular cultural production and agency as a theoretical, methodological, and descriptive source in theology and religious studies; second, we aim to more appropriately undertake comparative analysis that cuts across communities of concern. Underlying the analysis of popular cultural production found in this text is a certain intuition: basically, we are of the mind that popular cultural production entails a useful way of framing and forging dialogue beyond wrestling for sociopolitical crumbs premised on a warped sense of entitlement vis-à-vis the size and depth of “battle scars” and markings of struggle. Such thinking is too often premised on at least a soft embrace of assumed ontological arrangements of race and ethnicity or of a rigidly construed politics of identity (e.g., “ontological blackness and brownness” and the type of essentialism, exceptionalism, and localism often entailed by these). We believe that the terrain of popular cultural production can offer us a more useful conceptual framework in which to house this proposed dialogue, given the fluidity of being it suggests in various forms. As we see it, engagement with popular culture can serve

to flood the frameworks of our often reified models of being and belonging—what it means to be “black” and “brown.” This is so because when we analyze black and Latino/a forms of popular culture we hit upon the fact that African American and Latino/a life and agency represent a messy blend of identity factors that cannot so easily be construed, circumscribed, and detangled. Thus the study of African American and Latino/a popular culture requires at least a subtle challenge to fixed boundaries to expose their porous and somewhat illusionary nature. Popular culture, then, puts us in touch not only with the stuff of African American and Latino/a life but also with the messy nature of life for African Americans and Latinos/as in the United States. And in this way it can serve to undermine the logic of limited identity politics and even notions of membership in the United States.

This last point brings up one other possibility that comes from engaged scrutiny of the contours and possible meanings of popular culture: the study of popular culture can point us in the direction of a more hemispheric orientation. This is so because popular cultural production, particularly as it is found to be created and expressed within these two communities, represents a modality of meaning making that is not restricted to the mechanism of race and nation in a strict sense. And this is quite understandable when it comes to African American and Latino/a cultural agency. For both of these groups life involves, after all, holding together distinct cultural worlds taking root not only in the American hemisphere—North, South, and points in between—but beyond it as well. So the very nature of African American and Latino/a popular culture requires confrontation with the messy exchange of ideas, languages, images, aesthetics, patterns, customs, identities, and so on. In exploring popular culture we confront each other, but we do so in the fuller sense of our hybridity.

In uplifting the category of culture and popular culture we do not mean to suggest that race and ethnicity do not matter. Rather, our effort aims to argue for an understanding of race and ethnicity as an unstable and “constructed” marker, one that is shot through with an assortment of messy arrangements and relationships. Hence, race and ethnicity are not to be excluded; to do so is to dismiss the manner in which the discussion of, for example, Puerto Rico in the early twentieth century played off notions of race at work within the United States. And issues of immigration and the like are often viewed and analyzed through a hermeneutic of race. So rather than exclude the category of race, we recognize the manner in which race and ethnicity is infused in thought and action in ways that

reinforce notions of belonging and meaning. The fact is that race and ethnicity shape and arrange the body (as both biochemical reality and symbol of sociopolitical arrangements) in ways that fix it as valuable or unimportant, as a source of normality or dis-ease. African Americans and Latinos/as to some degree have at points in history been viewed as “foreign” elements in the nation-state—that is, as persons whose presence and practices have been deemed to be a threat to national meaning. These ways of thinking still pop up from time to time today, and they must be counted against and resisted. And thus the category of race and ethnicity is still important as a critical construct. Yet we must admit that at times it can prove to be limited and more of a hindrance than a help in certain kinds of discussions, particularly when these are construed in ontological and narrow ways. And so, from time to time, it is good that we ask whether or not dialogue between these two particular social groups should either explicitly or implicitly maintain such narrow categorical arrangements. This is all to say that at least occasionally such categories or arrangements need to be troubled, and that more fluid ways of thinking about identity and meaning are necessary.

On some level the pieces in this volume suggest motion or movement, the fluidity of identity and meaning, as the guidepost for dialogical exchange. Each in their own way points toward the potential viewing and use of popular culture as a dialogical mechanism that synchronously serves to note and trouble the construction of individual and collective identity, thereby allowing for visibility of like and dissimilar bodies without necessarily doing damage to them in the way that reified arrangements might. Popular cultural production is deeply entrenched in the “stuff” of life arrangements found in these two communities and in the American hemisphere, but it also serves in important ways to undermine the logic of limited identity politics and notions of membership in the United States. In this way, popular cultural production suggests the messy nature of life for African Americans and Latinos/as in and between our shared geography of the United States (and beyond).

Admittedly, we hint at something that is not developed adequately in this text: the ways that cultural production is or can be used to trouble assumed frameworks of nation-state and rigid or closed forms of group identity politics by maintaining a porous and more hemispheric orientation. In borrowing from Paul Gilroy we might talk in terms of the Religio-Atlantic as the conceptual framework and geography for a new study of religion in this hemisphere, with a theological underpinning that cuts in numerous

directions drawing from the Europe of Martin Luther to the language of balance in traditional African religion to the liberationist grammar of the Americas.⁴ Such a move has already taken place in other fields such as history and literature. This volume entails merely a nod in the direction of such a project, an invitation to converse in ways that we hope will force the next step by begging us to enquire whether our existing frameworks and assumptions in the study of religion do us a service or a disservice as we attempt to come to grips with the overall cultural agency and religiosity of peoples within the Americas.

Notes

- 1 Throughout this introduction we use concurrently the terms theology and religious studies (and theologians and religious scholars) because they are sometimes differentiated and because this volume includes articles written by individuals who identify with one or the other in terms of their approach to the study of religion—that is, the study of the perennial human effort to make sense of life and the world through observable patterns of ritual, stories, beliefs, and cultural expressions. As this definition indicates, we take the term religion to stand for a wide network of human doings or actions. Theology and religious study, however, are reflective practices that involve the description, comparison, interpretation, and critical analysis of these actions. This implies a distinction between religion and theology or religious study on the one hand, and a connecting line between theology and religious studies on the other. However, at times the enterprises of theology and religious studies may be otherwise differentiated. This issue of differentiation is deeply complex and unsettled, and we cannot here sort through all of the different attempts at its settlement. However, we will note that one approach suggests that theology deals with one particular religious tradition, while religious studies reckons with the phenomenon of religion more generally. Another pathway to the distinction suggests that theology contributes to the interpretation, evaluation, and extension of a religious tradition or the practice of religion, while religious study contributes to the description, comparison, and critical analysis of religion. This assumes that theologians are interpreters of religion or have an interest in the maintenance, nurture, and endurance of religion, while the religious scholar does not.
- 2 Michelle Gonzalez's *Afro-Cuban Theology: Religion, Race, Culture, and Identity*, published in 2007, pushes for a move beyond dialogue to collaboration. We too hope for meaningful collaboration between blacks and Latinos/as in every level of the academy and society in general. However, we believe that collaboration and coalition building require some degree of forethought and intention that is not possible without dialogical exchange between members of these two groups. In effect, collaboration and alliance presupposes dialogue,

and so before we can collaborate with each other we must first talk with each other.

- 3 For a helpful overview of the historical emergence and unfolding of black and Latino/a theology, see Anthony Pinn's "Black Theology in Historical Perspective: Articulating the Quest for Subjectivity" and Benjamín Valentín's "Strangers No More: An Introduction to, and an Interpretation of, U.S. Hispanic/Latino(a) Theology," in *The Ties That Bind*.
- 4 Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, chapter 1.

Anthony B. Pinn



CULTURAL PRODUCTION AND NEW TERRAIN:

THEOLOGY, POPULAR CULTURE,

AND THE CARTOGRAPHY OF RELIGION

This essay, drawing from and building on earlier work, involves an effort to correct what I consider the troubled relationship to popular culture (i.e., signs, symbols, behaviors, postures, and frameworks recognized by and used to express meaning and place) that shapes black religious studies in general and theological discourse in particular. The corrective I propose involves a change in the conceptual posture revolving around the significance of religious “cartography” as a plausible theoretical framing of the study of black religion. In addition, I will also give some attention to thinking through this proposed reframing in light of the purposes of this book—namely, the dialogical possibilities between African American and Latino/a scholars of religion. As a context for this constructive work, I begin with a few descriptive thoughts on the purposes of African American cultural production.

The Changing Purpose of Popular Culture

Classic works by African Americans during the early formation of the United States are marked by an effort to address existential and ontological discomfort through apologetics in the form of expressive culture. One might explain in this manner the eighteenth-century sermonic-like prose of Jupiter Hammon, an early literary figure who sought to understand the presence of Africans in North America but did so in ways that did little

damage to the religio-political and white supremacist paradigm used to structure the new nation.¹ Cultural production in this case sought to make sense of a rather absurd situation through the tools available. This eighteenth-century literary apologetic, a verbal alchemy, usually discounted (or at the very least did not adequately recognize) the significance of black bodies and the rights of those bodies to occupy with comfort and freedom this space called the United States. Poetry and prose framed a process of alchemy to transform into a meaningful existence by creative manipulation the terror and dread that marked the realities of the death and rebirth of life as chattel. African Americans made use of their historical memory and the culturally derived materials available in order to do this work. An apologetic, yet one more self-assured and assertive, is present also in the nineteenth-century autobiographical writings of Frederick Douglass. Such is also the case with the visual arts during the late nineteenth century as provided by artists such as Henry O. Tanner, whose *Banjo Lesson* (1893), for instance, portrays the humanity of African Americans to an American audience that held such a possibility suspect.

Following the tracks of the Great Migration and other historic developments after the socioeconomic and political reckoning called the Civil War and Reconstruction, the psychosocial posture of African Americans changed radically, particularly after the first decade or so of the twentieth century. That is, the emergence of the twentieth century is marked by a change in perspective—a movement of both bodies and ideas—expressed in significant ways through the increasingly unapologetic language of cultural production.

While the expression of cultural sensibilities has always served as an outlet for African American reflection on pressing existential questions and dilemmas, the twentieth century involved a shift in this work based on a new ontology—what Alain Locke noted as the emergence of the “New Negro.” Locke traced the rise of this new consciousness, this new personhood, via the cultural self-expression dotting the landscape of African American communities. This “New Negro,” representing more than simply a cosmetic makeover, marked a changed relationship between African Americans and themselves, and African Americans and the larger population of the United States. “The migrant masses, shifting from countryside to city, hurdle several generations of experience at a leap,” wrote Alain Locke in *The New Negro*, “but more important, the same thing happens spiritually in the life-attitudes and self-expression of the Young Negro, in his poetry, his art.”² There is something to be said

for the paradigm shift noted with such brilliance by Locke: it represented a new cultural period and, like a category five hurricane, it cut an impressive if not systematic path through the landscape, forever changing what could and would grow on the exposed cultural soil.

Locke's Renaissance: The Texture of Cultural Epistemology

What Locke speaks to is a change in the nature of cultural production within African American communities—change that is marked in substantial ways by a move from apologetics, say in literature, to realism, to an appeal to the full range of emotions, thoughts, and activities framing African American life. For the purpose of this essay, of paramount concern is the manner in which this cultural creativity informed and was informed by the religious sensibilities and the religiosity of African Americans. Locke gave attention to the manner in which African American cultural production spoke to an alternate, defiant, and proud shaping of the geography of American life in spiritual terms. That is, “gradually too,” according to Locke, “under some spiritualizing reaction, the brands and wounds of social persecution are becoming the proud stigmata of spiritual immunity and moral victory.” As of the early twentieth century African Americans are, Locke continues, “at last spiritually free, and offer through art an emancipating vision to America.”³

Harlem, for Locke, was during the early twentieth century a “prophetic” place—a special geography marking cultural energy and creativity from the African diaspora. It is in New York, Locke reflects, that African Americans built “fuller, truer self-expression” beyond the confines of the racial status quo. Yet, this has not simply involved the reconstituting of individual self-recognition and understanding on the part of African Americans *for* African Americans. Rather, this renaissance—the period of this profound artistic growth—marking the intellectual terrain of African American communities involved the “enrichment of American art and letters and . . . the clarifying of our common vision of the social tasks ahead.”⁴ It called forth a reenvisioning of American life, one that recognized without flinching and as a matter of psycho-cultural realism the full range of life activities and of group promise and foibles.

There developed during the early twentieth century an alternate aesthetic by which African Americans understood the maturation of their socio-political, economic, and cultural selves as a project of “wholeness” and beauty. It exposes beauty embedded in “raw” life episodes rehearsed,

celebrated, and at times lamented. And the dimensions of this aesthetic were presented in the various layers and levels of African American cultural production. Thereby African Americans began a transformation with deep ontological and existential consequences—a transformation that marked a revised sense of self, and of self in relationship to community and world.

No wonder Locke comments near the end of his foreword to *The New Negro* that “negro life is not only establishing new contacts and founding new centers, it is finding a new soul. There is a fresh spiritual and cultural focusing. We have, as the heralding sign, an unusual outburst of creative expression.” And those coming of age during the period of which Locke speaks are credited with ushering in a new ontology and a radicalized reworking of existential themes and categories filled “with arresting visions and vibrant prophecies; forecasting in the mirror of art what we must see and recognize in the streets of reality tomorrow, foretelling in new notes and accents the maturing speech of full racial utterance.”⁵ The shattering of old notions of African American life undertaken through these cultural developments spoke in graphic terms to the depth of the yearnings within African Americans for a fuller sense of meaning and “space.” And this shattering and reconstitution of life is based on a deep feeling for and expression of the world as encountered by African Americans *and* as recounted for the benefit of African Americans.

Theological Imagination and Popular Culture

Scholars of African American literature and history, for instance, have mined African American cultural production, particularly the developments stemming from the two waves of the “Harlem” renaissance and the cultural geography of New York City. However, the significance of cultural production for an understanding of the religious yearnings and experiences of African Americans has not been lost on theologians and other scholars of African American religion.

One finds particularly intriguing examples of this recognition beginning in the late 1960s within the theological discourse known as black theology of liberation. In fact, this modality of theological discourse lists as a primary resource for the doing of theology the culture and cultural production of African Americans. In an effort to move beyond European theological models as well as to deconstruct American theology’s relationship to the status quo, African Americans began to assert theological independence and to seek alternate modes of construction. Such a move

involved a process of introspection—a searching through the “stuff” of African American life.⁶

James Cone penned *The Spirituals and the Blues* after joining the faculty of the Union Theological Seminary in New York during the early 1970s. Within this text, his third major publication, Cone responded to the critics who argued that his first two books failed to specify a theological framework that was deeply connected to and grown out of the intimate details of the African American experience. That is, the critics lamented the lack in those books of a deeply recognized “blackness”—cultural and otherwise—as the organizing principle of theological discourse. According to his brother, Cecil Cone, James Cone’s theological formulations were much more indebted to the neo-orthodoxy of Karl Barth than to the theological formulations found implicitly and explicitly in African American religious culture. Further, Cecil Cone notes, black theology during its early phase carried the imprint of European cultural and religio-theological sensibilities deep in its organizational matrix, in its “soul.” Hence the question arises: What is “black” in and about black theology?

The apparent theoretical and methodological genealogy of black theology, the critique goes, made the religious sensibilities and outlook of white Westerners the lens by which the world was viewed. Consequently, white supremacy in the realm of religious reflection was reinforced. This move, from the perspective of the critiques, was odd considering James Cone’s broad appeal to African American culture as a major source for the doing of black theology. For Cone black culture is “the creative forms of expression as one reflects on history, endures pain, and experiences joy. It is the black community expressing itself in music, poetry, prose, and other art forms.” And, he continues, in order to be organic to the black community, black theology had to take seriously black cultural production because “black culture . . . is God’s way of acting in America, God’s participation in black liberation.”⁷

With the critique made and its legitimacy recognized, Cone attempted to reverse this theological trend by turning attention to musical production—namely, spirituals and the blues. In doing so he sought to mine from these forms the theological insights and liberation agenda of the African American community prior to the development of formal modalities of theological inquiry (e.g., churches). According to Cone it was through these musical forms that African Americans expressed their theological and religious sensibilities and presented an alternate ontology and epistemology. While Cone gave little attention to the visual arts for their

theological insights, music and literature of various kinds served to enliven his presentation of a black theological epistemology. In moving from the spirituals and the blues as modalities of theological discourse, Cone gives attention to literary genres such as the slave narratives, autobiographies, folk wisdom, and other “texts” outlining the relationship of African Americans to the world and the divine.

James Cone’s students have continued this tradition of exploring various types of popular culture, particularly music and literature, for their theological wealth. James Evans, for instance, has given considerable attention to the theo-religious qualities and pronouncements of African American literature.⁸ More recently, Evans’s work has branched out to include issues of the theoretical framework and methodological sensibilities informing black theology. Furthermore, Cone’s student Dwight Hopkins has given consistent attention to an explication of the cultural sources (e.g., slave narratives) for black theology, at times to the exclusion of other vibrant source materials.⁹ Like Cone, Hopkins argues that the basic dimensions and characteristics of black theology as a formal enterprise are found in the nascent theological discourse of African Americans housed in their popular expressions and modalities of engagement. Hence, according to Hopkins, contemporary black theology in part must concern itself with mining early sources and thereby building a theological discourse that mirrors and is consistent with the development of the African American community. In this way Hopkins seeks to promote the doing of theology as a reflexive enterprise that is community committed and community responsive.

At times Hopkins’s work implies a connection between African American cultural production and theological discourse so intimate and strong that no real distinction need be made—that is, cultural production *is* theological discourse. Literature and other forms of the arts thus become simple carries of a particular cosmic message. I believe this link is made, for example, because of the slippage between popular culture and popular religion found in some of his work. That is one way to interpret the following statement by Hopkins: “If religion suggests a sacred, comprehensive, and integrated style of being for all reality[,] and culture suggests the site of popular religious dimensions of black experiences, then black theology claims its God-talk and God-walk from the popular religion of the folk’s total way of life.”¹⁰

On one level the approach outlined above runs the risk of doing precisely what Cone warns against: an equating of human words and wants with divine will or, in the language of Karl Barth, a neglecting of the in-

finite and qualitative distinction between God and humans.¹¹ On another level it seeks to limit to one dimension (i.e., the institutionally and doctrinally recognizable as “religious”) of the range of African American creative responses to existential conditions and metaphysical questions. Based on certain religious assumptions held by black theologians of liberation, this is most commonly articulated in terms of the Christian religiosity celebrated in popular culture. At the very least it is a (mono)theistic reading that privileges notions of a loving and liberative divinity. This issue is depicted in Riggins Earl’s reading of folk wisdom accounts of Brer Rabbit in which he sees nascent forms of contemporary liberation paradigms. Regarding “Brer Rabbit’s Hankering for a Long Tail,” for instance, Earl interprets the story as possessing a clear moral: “God in the primal act of Creation had given the oppressed the necessary intelligence for its own preservation.”¹² However, lines such as the following might suggest an alternate reading, one that is more concerned with a type of religious naturalism than with traditional notions of a transcendent divinity. In what follows, Brer Rabbit has completed all the tasks required by God in order to secure the long tail he desires. But rather than an exercise of divine power resulting in the growth of the desired appendage, he is first ignored by God. Then, after nearly being struck by lightning, finally he receives this word: “You are so smart get your own long tail.”¹³ The actual story, as summarized here, suggests other alternative readings—ones that do not privilege a positive take on theism. While Earl paints this as a story of the resources for survival that God provides, as well as God’s great wisdom in denying certain forms of assistance in order to foster human growth, the story also allows for religious naturalism as the proper reading. Attention to this story is not meant as an apology for a particular reading of Brer Rabbit as religious devotion. Rather it is meant to point to the potential of multireadings of popular culture and to the fact that black theological discourse tends toward a rather myopic approach to the religious meanings of cultural production.

Studying popular culture as a theological exercise can become a way of simply establishing signposts for certain understandings of the encounter between human and divine. The study of popular culture is appreciated, in such instances, to the extent it serves traditional theological reflection and religious sensibilities. This effort, however, can easily result in a distortion of popular culture’s depth and competing robust intentions and meanings. Often when this type of reading cannot be easily accomplished, popular culture is relegated to the background of theological discourse. This, for instance, accounts for the general disregard for rap music by

most scholars within black religious studies. It can be difficult to wrap the conservative religious mind (e.g., those thinking about religion in strict institutional terms) around the bald and raw depictions of life found in the music and lyrics of figures such as The Game. In such instances when the rapper asks an epistemologically driven question put simply as “Ya heard?” the black scholar of religion might respond, “No, thank God!” This is problematic in that the scholar believes herself or himself to have opened academic exploration to the realities of popular culture, but this is done without allowing popular culture to actually penetrate and inform the academic’s work.

Black male theologians are not the only scholars to engage popular culture in various ways with varying degrees of success. Unlike black (male) theology, womanist theology is premised on a direct appeal to popular culture for its theoretical and methodological foundation. In fact, womanist scholarship argues that black women have been excluded from the more traditional modes of power, and that they have voiced their theo-religious sensibilities through creative outlets. Cultural production for womanists, as their name would suggest, draws its epistemological sensibilities and posture from the popular writings of Alice Walker, particularly *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*, where she defines and applies the term *womanist* as a style of life and as a hermeneutical device for dissecting the experiences of black women in the United States:

1. From *womanish* (opp. of “girlish,” i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious). A black feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mother to female children, “you acting womanish,” i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or *willful* behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered “good” for one. Interested in grown-up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: You trying to be grown: Responsible. In charge. *Serious*.

2. Also: A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women’s strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to revival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally universalist, as in “Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige, and black?” ans.: “Well, you know the colored

race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented." Traditionally capable, as in "Mama, I'm walking to Canada and I'm taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me." Reply: "It wouldn't be the first time."¹⁴

Based on this early association of womanist scholars in religious studies to African American literature, it was a natural move to highlight for investigation the fiction (and to a lesser extent the nonfiction) writings of black women as a way of framing theological studies. Using these materials has been important from their perspective because such texts house the voices of black women, indicating "the operations of the ordinary theologies of black women's daily lives as rich sources for theological constructions, emphasizing the importance of spiritual and communal life."¹⁵ One sees this, for example, in the early work of the pioneering figure Katie Cannon, who maps out a womanist approach to ethics using the writings of Zora Neale Hurston. Hurston's writings, according to Cannon, exposed the "elaborate façade of myths, traditions, and rituals erected to couch systems of injustice in America." And, while so doing, she celebrated the creative ethical and audacious ways in which African Americans express "understanding and manifestations of courageous living."¹⁶ For Cannon, close attention to the voices of black women expressed in short stories, etc., can foster the formation of religious studies as an intellectual practice that is community responsive and liberating.

For Delores Williams, more so than for some other womanists, this work does not distinguish particular cultural sources as much as make available a proper hermeneutic for the exploration of all source material: "Where would I be in order to construct Christian theology (or god-talk) from the point of view of African American women?" In responding to this question, Williams recounts the following exchange: "I pondered this question for over a year. Then one day my professor responded to my complaint about the absence of black women's experiences from *all* Christian theology (black liberation and feminist theologies included). He suggested that my anxiety might lessen if my exploration of African-American cultural sources was consciously informed by the statement 'I am a black woman.' He was right. I had not realized before that I read African-American sources from a black male perspective. I assumed black women were included."¹⁷ Mindful of this need for a mode of interpretation in favor of black women, Williams explores the unexceptional stories of black women, such as the biblical figure Hagar, for the exceptional

qualities of creativity, ingenuity, and perseverance they present to the careful reader. In this way Williams undertakes the development of a theological discourse that is healthy for the African American community because it takes seriously the voices of those most often forgotten.

*A Cartography of the Religious through the Popular:
An Alternate Conceptual Posture*

While womanist scholarship is creative and insightful, much of it is insular and tends to shape popular culture to fit the religio-theological sensibilities of the scholar as opposed to allowing cultural production, or popular culture, to influence in a deep sense the work of the scholar of black religion. Furthermore, it seems that many womanist scholars make use of a hermeneutic of familiarity when drawing on popular culture to inform their understanding of the history, experiences, thoughts, and voices of black women. By this I mean that many womanists siphon into comfortable existential containers the “raw” material of life presented in literature, music, and so on regardless of “fit.” Hence, for example, the character Celie from *The Color Purple* can provide a strong critique of the traditional Christian doctrine of God and theological anthropology without it having any visible impact on the manner in which womanist scholarship by and large understands the nature and meaning of religious experience.¹⁸

Furthermore, Alice Walker’s panentheism is noted, at times, without challenging the existing narrow theories of religion and religious experience popular with womanist scholars, although Walker’s thought frames womanist methodology and theory.¹⁹ To put it bluntly, the typical theories of religion within womanist scholarship remain deeply (and often narrowly) Christian in spite of Walker’s openness (in fiction and nonfiction) to a more naturalistic conception of divinity and religion.²⁰ Walker and her characters such as Celie recognize the plurality of ways in which the significance of the universe is expressed, but many of her interpretations do not.

The vague shape of this dilemma is present, it seems to me, in the work titled “Roundtable Discussion: Christian Ethics and Theology in Womanist Perspectives,” which was published in the *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* in fall 1989. In this publication, Cheryl Sanders raised questions concerning the appropriation of Walker’s womanist concept in light of its departure from traditional (read narrow) Christian theological sensibilities. This critique represented a minority opinion to be sure, but we still await the formation of a response to Sanders that offers a deeply concep-

tual pluralistic sense of religious experience and a comparative theological framework. While the cultural production that black women offer to the world is diverse and at times contradictory, the interpretation of this material by womanist scholars of religion is often singular in focus and teleological in perspective.²¹

Both womanist scholarship and black male scholarship within the arena of theology in particular and religious studies in general harbor a similar problem—namely, a notable discomfort with popular culture. Cultural production is touted as a means by which to explore and unpack the depth and texture of African American religious thought and experience. However, it often is handled poorly in both theological camps in that the deep richness and variance it represents is not fully depicted. This being the case, popular culture as a theological tool for black male theologians and womanist scholars does not inform in a significant way epistemology of African American theological life. It strikes me that theological work has involved in large part an attempt to explain away the messy nature of existence, to make sense of complexity and paradox. It often understands history as being teleological in nature and provides a rather “flat” depiction of the African American religious landscape.

Popular Culture

Popular culture studied within the context of black religious studies can provide thick and textured examples of the ways in which humans make meaning. In this regard, popular culture might offer an open and public discourse on the large questions of life, even when these questions are covered in such nonspectacular ways as a Jerry Springer wrestling match, a *Fear Factor* meal of something decayed, or the vexing refrain of a disco-era hit. The point is not acceptance of particular approaches to questions framing life and relationship but rather the various and messy ways in which people seek to uncover who, what, when, and why they are invaluable to the scholar concerned with issues of ultimate concern and orientation. Popular culture is a public and rich terrain, it is a space where so many find themselves, and it is a varied and complex development. Paul Gilroy is correct in his view that cultural production connects social groups and communities in a web of mutuality and ontological and existential concern that merits attention.²²

The geography of human creativity and angst takes on a different look when popular culture is given serious attention. And some of what this

geography entails via popular culture is deeply religious and is the proper business of those whose professional lives are committed to better understanding religion and religious experience. In light of these views, questions naturally come to mind: What are the key issues and questions one should address in the study of religion and popular culture? What methodological issues need to be clarified and addressed to enable increasing sophistication in advanced research in this field? I would like to combine these questions by asking: What are some key theoretical and methodological considerations needing attention as we push forward the study of religion and popular culture? With respect to this question, I would like to offer a particular way of framing black theological studies of popular culture by way of a metaphor. I do so because I believe that a significant hindrance to such work involves the problematic nature of our theological vocabulary and grammar.

Popular culture is messy, contradictory, confusing, and complex. And so traditional elements of black and womanist theological vocabularies do not adequately, or even necessarily, address this messiness without doing damage to it. This is certainly the case with discussions of theodicy. Furthermore, does soteriology really capture what 50 Cent might mean by “Get rich or die trying”? No, it does not. Or does theological anthropology as often formulated adequately address the nature of self and self-consciousness sloppily noted in shows like *The Bernie Mac Show*, or *Run’s House*? I doubt it. Furthermore, does our theological discourse that privileges the written word have the flexibility and creativity necessary to properly handle nonwritten texts?

Popular culture—say, in the form of visual arts—holds in tension material existence and nonmaterial impulses, and it brings to the mind of the viewer the presence of this nonmaterial impulse in ways that influence relationships with historical realities and materials. Like the paintings of Jean-Michel Basquiat, it has the ability to affect us by drawing into the open concealed realities, possibilities, and meanings, and thereby teach us about the connections between historical developments and inner urges. In the area of theological and religious studies what is perhaps necessary is a rethinking of our grammar and vocabulary in ways that allow our work to be deeply influenced by the public sensibilities of popular culture. Mindful of this challenge I favor a mutlidisciplinary approach whereby the various layers, textures, and tones of popular culture are unpacked.

I suggest an alternate posture concerning this enterprise—one that involves viewing this work as a type of religious cartography. There has been

spotty use of this term in some black and womanist theologies, yet it is typically meant to resemble a teleological depiction of black life—a charting of God’s cropping up in human affairs.²³ By way of a working definition, however, I mean by cartography a less Christian-specific presentation of material—an arranging and fixing in time and space of the contours and routes of meaning making. The term connotes by way of relationships between various elements the parameters and shape of reality. By so doing cartography frames our sense of ontology as well as our awareness of and response to existential situations. This metaphor of cartography might also suggest a mode of analysis, one that is comfortable with the tensions, paradoxes, inconsistencies, and often nonwritten nature of popular culture in that it allows for a visual description of the religiously centered concerns, questions, and so on that mark popular culture.

The novelist Peter Turchi is correct when he notes that there are ways in which the writer can be understood as a cartographer. For the writer involved in religious studies, this might involve using signs and symbols along with words and rituals as a means to express by charting the nature and meaning of the religious sensibilities and activities of various communities. This is a rather loose use of terminology—one that involves some linguistic slippage that professionals in cartography might find troubling—but I think it is a potentially important application for those of us in theological and religious studies.

Religious and theological studies as cartography (combined with what I noted a few years ago concerning theology as archaeology)²⁴ is a vital shift in symbolism and metaphor in that the process of mapping is sensitive to the more straightforward dimensions of religious experience (such as location of rituals and doctrine). Furthermore, it hints at a corrective for the inadequacies of our language for capturing what I have described as the significance of religion in a more general quest for complex subjectivity—the elemental nature of religion not completely known through physical structures, rituals, doctrine. In this sense religious studies as cartography both marks the known and is sensitive to what is beyond our ability to fully comprehend.

Plotting Out the Religious and the Popular

On our metaphorical map there are blank spots that play a role in pointing out patterns of life and the arrangement of relationships. These spots correspond to the activities for transformation operating outside the status

quo and outside the normative structures of society, and these developments are precisely those with which liberationists are concerned. Expressing this concern as a liberation theologian involves mapping the efforts on the part of the oppressed that resonate with what Rolland Paulston notes as a turn in his own work as a cartographer to a focus on “current efforts by individuals and cultural groups seeking to be more self-defining in their sociospatial relations and how they are represented.”²⁵ Such a mapping, I believe, allows for a vital tension and an important two-way focus on both the center and periphery of meaning-making efforts, and as such recognizes the situational nature of religious developments manifest in this case through popular culture.²⁶ Yet, mapping does this in a way that sees the significance of both the content and form of this meaning making without trying to flatten out, for the sake of consistency and uniformity, the rough terrain that is religiosity in popular culture. In this case, popular culture serves as the material for this new mapping, this detailed cartography of religion and religious life.

Signs and symbols, words and rituals, are used to chart the nature and meaning of the religious sensibilities and activities of various communities. For the scholar concerned with issues of transformation or liberation, for one with a sense of the historical development of terror, this might involve mapping the tone and texture of meaning making or sketching the geography of what Charles Long labels the crawl back through history toward the first creation of the self.²⁷ Such a thick analysis allows for perspective and for a framing of life in the context of our portion of the world that notes the pleasures and tensions premised on the logic of construction resulting in what we know and feel as “black” and “brown” bodies. Yet, it does so in a way that sees the significance of both the content and form of this meaning making. It involves a thick, complex, and dialogical process of recognition.

What is more, for the religious scholars mapping the religious landscape or world of particular communities, this cartography is shaped or influenced in some ways by forces that transcend the individual. Even for the ethical humanist, such a mapping even when premised on the rightness of naturalistic sensibilities is informed by the push and pull of the unseen and the transcendent, but in this case such a reality is framed by the large sense of community of which the individual is a part but whose logic supersedes his or her own reasoning. Whereas the theist might note the need for faith as the proper posture toward this grand otherness, the humanist or religious naturalist might push for imagination or, more

important, a sense of fantasy as providing needed flexibility when approaching the contours of our strange world. I find Turchi's words to be a suitable framing of this process for the cartographer of religion when dealing with the religious landscape of any community. "It seems," he writes, "that no matter how many discoveries we make, we tell ourselves we've reached the end of the knowable world. Maybe some of us are always inclined to claim we've done all we can do, while others of us refuse to rest; or maybe it's that one day we're defiant, the next we're humbled, awed by the scope of the mysteries around us."²⁸

What is of fundamental significance is the manner by which exposing or rendering radically visible social boundaries through mapping allows for a questioning of their necessity and their permanence. Boundaries are chosen. What we have is recognition of the various fields of power as well as their logic. Such cartography of the religious is best, I believe, when it puts in relief a cross-section of communities involved in this enterprise. By its representation of sameness and difference, the cartography metaphor may in fact provide deep value in the ability to present comparative and complex arrangements of "realities," contested sites of knowledge and meaning, as well as competing conceptions of socioeconomic want and need.²⁹

The Challenge of Mapping Twos

In a somewhat horrifying way, mapping with respect to the Americas is stamped on the bodies of African Americans and Latinos/as, thereby providing the manner in which these bodies are read and regarded. Such a plotting provides an alternate, nonspoken vocabulary and grammar for the articulation of certain formations of the real, the visible, and by extension the invisible. Yet there is a tension in that these bodies have never been content with the traditional mapping—the mapping of conquest through the logic of (re)construction. Rather, by their very existence they propose other mappings, at times in conflicting formulations, and other possible directions and routes for meaning making. That is, the presence of African Americans and Latinos and Latinas serves as an example of the truth of any mapping—there are alternate possibilities and the authority of one over others is contested and must be fought for continuously.

Mindful of the above, the essays in *The Ties That Bind* as well as in this volume are for me first an exercise in negative cartography—that is, the recognition of the limits or "lies," to borrow from Mark Monmonier, that

shape the process of re-presenting reality. Or in more explicit terms, “a good map,” writes Monmonier, “tells a multitude of white lies; it suppresses truth to help the user see what needs to be seen. Reality is three-dimensional, rich in detail, and far too factual to allow a complete yet uncluttered two-dimensional graphic scale model. Indeed, a map that did not generalize would be useless. But the value of a map depends on how well its generalized geometry and generalized content reflect a chosen aspect of reality.”³⁰ In applying cartography as metaphor, Turchi makes a similar remark when he states, “How we see depends, in part, on what we want to see . . . Every map intends not simply to serve us but to influence us.”³¹ While Monmonier and Turchi note the presence of “deliberate falsification or subtle propaganda in map making,” I want to highlight and problematize the presence of these distortions. In short I value a heightened skepticism concerning map making. Based in part on my appreciation for Paul Gilroy’s reframing of modernity through the black Atlantic as heuristic device, I want to hold in tension, to see as the source of the problem, Monmonier’s understanding of certain lies as required and his rendering of value based on how well the “lie” addresses a “chosen aspect of reality.” Further, I want to think this through in terms of the realities and theological mission of African Americans and Latinos and Latinas.

Perhaps some shortcomings in mapping are unavoidable in order to adjust for scale, loss of dimension, etc., but the general idea of deception is given weight and a charge by sociopolitical connotations and a historical context (Why are certain dimensions of reality distorted; and what guides this process?). This process of distortion, in other words, buttresses certain sociopolitical arrangements and sensibilities. Should a member of a community that is in part shaped through such a lie written across a certain arrangement of sociopolitical, economic, and cultural frameworks see the ability to render visible and invisible, to enlarge or shrink, elements of reality any other way?

Religion in the Americas, in this case the portion called the United States, involves certain “lies.” This involves a mapping of reality that gives central importance to the “city on a hill” ideology that guided many early colonists—one that allowed for the use of slave labor and the destruction of indigenous populations. In short, a religious mapping of the Americas gives some shape to the realities of Latinos/as and African Americans. Even more recent mappings of life in the United States—ones that seek to be multicultural in orientation are often drawn from older mappings—are never completely free from the flaws that marked earlier interpretations of

life and reality in the United States. Yet this status quo mode of mapping is not the only possibility. It is not the only way to articulate and arrange the meanings of existence.

Mapping Twos and Studying Religion

It became clear to me, and remains so, that there are shared existential and epistemological realities that the “children” of the New World such as African Americans and Latinos/as might discuss and utilize in theologically productive ways in order to begin a process of undertaking a more positive cartography of the religious landscape of the United States. However, such mapping, if it is to have felt meaning, must involve more than narrowly contextual materials and insular conversations. We must face and address the silences that punctuate our collective reality, and maneuver through the uncomfortable, and at times awkward, gaps in our mutual knowledge that represent another dimension of what it has meant to be “othered.” Mindful of this need, as well as of an already shared theological language and grammar, the next effort should be a reimagining of the religious landscape of the United States in part through the often overlapping movements of the popular cultural production of both groups.

There is little doubt that within the United States Latinos/as and African Americans share a similar socioeconomic and political position—that is, related existential and ontological “spaces” and a certain mapping of reality. To borrow from Charles Long, both communities have undergone a certain type of “creation”—a second creation—by which the contact and conquest that marked the formation of the New World overdetermined and fixed their identity.³² In simple terms, both communities bear in their flesh even today, perhaps to differing degrees, the consequences of the travel across the Atlantic. Both wrestle against the terror and dread associated with the warping of self-consciousness, of one’s sense of being, that stem from being rendered the “other.” Both face destruction of their physical bodies stemming from an unequal distribution of economic resources, while both are plied with the rhetoric of politicians who recognize the significance of these voting blocs but who offer little in the way of renewed and vibrant life options. Both groups have responded creatively to ontological and socioeconomic trauma through the praxis of liberation theology shaped in part through attention to cultural production.

Within this theological work of liberation there is a concern with sustained reflection on the proactive dimensions of humanity and well-being

captured in both communities' religious life. In this way, theological studies at their best within both communities have highlighted the manner in which African American and Latino/a religious experience and identity entails a creative tension between reaction and creativity (or initiative) within a troubled historical moment. In fact, a comparison of the theological books and articles by thinkers within these two communities reveal substantial similarities in their theoretical framework and approach. But a shared sense of what it means to do theology, how one does theology and for whom theology is done, has seldom resulted in theologians initiating and sustaining deep or "thick" exchange.

Some might speak of this disconnect as the result of differing cultural sensibilities that promote, if not necessitate, insular conversations and encourage the maintenance of an insider-outsider paradigm for discourse. Yet even if one recognizes cultural distinctions this should not point to an inability to converse but rather to rich differences that might play a role in healthy and complex theological exchange. Furthermore, theologians from both communities operate from a position of stability and intellectual "legitimacy" that makes dialogue possible. That is, the theological work of both communities is recognized in the academy—with the presence of groups devoted to both within the American Academy of Religion serving as only one example—and this provides a space in which to wrestle with theological issues of mutual concern. At its best the exchange generated by these and other questions has involved a genuine, "gloves-off" approach to exchange—the sharing of theological agreement and disagreement—with the intention of increased understanding and greater cooperation.

I would like to begin this process with some attention to the religious terrain marking this dialogue. Christianity dominates the religious terrain of both groups, but there are other traditions that are supple, vibrant, and very much alive. And the boundaries between these various traditions are soft, thereby allowing for some ritual, theological, and doctrinal exchange between them. That is, the process of making meaning, of developing a fuller sense of humanity, that marks all of these traditions allows for overlapping intent that on some level makes some of the "soft" elements of these various traditions translatable and transferable. For example, physical bodies have merit and theological weight. Yet the sense of embodiment articulated in connection to liberation theology is highly spiritualized and discussed in terms of the historical (i.e., sociopolitical and economic) placement of these bodies. I suggest that theologians from both communities have fallen short through their inability to articulate theologically the value

of these bodies as both sources of pleasure (including the relationship with the “divine”) and as pleased, within the context of the erotic, in the sense put forth by Paul Tillich.

Furthermore, the kind of dialogue we undertake ought to be sensitive to and comfortable with paradox and difference—the complex nature of relationship. Hence we must recognize the theological weight and epistemological centrality of competing claims if theological education is to progress in ways beneficial to the dialogue recently started by Latino/a and African American theologians. In other words, this dialogue must grow to encompass a comparative component—one that recognizes the diversity of religious experiences. I have made this argument before and I restate it here.

I am pushing for a mode of discourse framed by a post-apologetic modality of inquiry that entails a method of exploration that can respond to our religiously complex and shifting terrain. This is not to suggest the complete removal of liberation theologies, for instance, as a method of exploration. Rather, I am calling for the “death” of a certain illusion regarding theology’s work, and a deconstruction of a myopic, religiously chauvinistic, and provincial understanding of theological discourse. This entails a movement beyond theologies as a general (and religiously biased) theory of religious experience, along with the recognition that Christian liberation theology speaks to and about only one dimension of what it means to be and to be religious.

It strikes me that theological dialogue sensitive to competing religious claims can only develop through a willingness to creatively adjust both theological language and grammar. A case in point is that the transformation as expressed in liberation theologies done by these communities—even in its limited articulation as two-dimensional—is housed in flesh. That is, these two modalities of liberation theology are in fact theologies of embodiment. There is an explicit and profound appreciation for the physical form, for black and brown bodies. By body I mean both the physical form (flesh) and the megasymbol connoting all things foreign and dangerous in the popular imagination of modern (white) America. In this sense the body rendered visible through a certain history of race and ethnicity represents the physical world of work and pleasure, and it also serves as a prime symbol of chaos. In either case, in physical terms or as symbolic representation African Americans and Latinos/as connote something both appealing and repulsive within the historical development of North America, and serve as “things” to be controlled vis-à-vis their

categorization as inferior. Hence, the language used to discuss the placement of bodies serves to reinforce social sensibilities and structures. As David Davis reminds us, language has often been religious and theological, and the implications of this practice should be a part of the ongoing dialogue between these two communities.³³ It is in response to the terror and dread of this predicament that we react in our religions and find representation in our popular culture, and it is these various responses that we should appreciate and map in our theological and religious studies.

Finally, liberationist scholarship as done in both communities has involved, to some extent, an expansion of the language of theology to include culturally informed nuances of and alterations to categories of meaning and perception. Yet, we have maintained the same theological grammar, with the same rules of usage for mapping out patterns of meaning. This can change, and popular culture may provide both the content and form of this linguistic transformation. This is because complex cartographies of religiosity using the resources of popular culture promise thickness of discourse as well as a deeper appreciation for the varied and fluid nature of the boundaries between the ways in which we express our lives.

Notes

This essay, particularly the last section, is drawn from Anthony B. Pinn, "Facing Competing Claims," *Theological Education* 38, no. 2(2002): 87–95.

- 1 See Jupiter Hammon, *America's First Negro Poet: The Complete Works of Jupiter Hammon of Long Island*.
- 2 Locke, *The New Negro*, 4–5.
- 3 Ibid., 53.
- 4 Ibid., 10.
- 5 Ibid., xvii, 47.
- 6 The genealogy of black theology has been examined in various publications. See, for example, Pinn, "Black Theology in Historical Perspective," 23–35; Cone and Wilmore, *Black Theology*; and Hopkins, *Introducing Black Theology of Liberation*.
- 7 Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 27–28.
- 8 See, for example, Evans, *Spiritual Empowerment in African American Literature*.
- 9 See Evans, *We Have Been Believers*; Hopkins and Cummings, *Cut Loose Your Stammering Tongue*; and Hopkins, *Shoes That Fit Our Feet, Down, Up, and Over*, and *Being Human*.
- 10 Hopkins, "Black Theology on God," 99.
- 11 Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 27–28.

- 12 Earl, *Dark Symbols, Obscure Signs*, 154.
- 13 Abraham D. Rogers, *African Folktales*, cited in Earl, *Dark Symbols, Obscure Signs*, 55.
- 14 Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, xi.
- 15 Mitchem, *Introducing Womanist Theology*, 72.
- 16 See Cannon, "Resources for a Constructive Ethic," in *Katie's Canon*, 89.
- 17 Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 1.
- 18 See, for example, Walker, *The Color Purple*, 175–79.
- 19 See, for example, Walker, "The Only Reason You Want to Go to Heaven Is That You Have Been Driven Out of Your Mind," in *Anything We Love Can Be Saved*.
- 20 More recent womanist voices, such as that of Melanie Harris (who teaches at Texas Christian University), have raised questions concerning the nature of womanist appropriations of Alice Walker. However, as opposed to the conservative and narrow Christological critique offered by Cheryl Sanders in the 1980s (see the discussion below), Harris's critique is meant to enlarge the use of Walker and the religious meaning of this appropriation. See Melanie Harris, *Uncovering Womanism*.
- 21 An exception to this posture is presented in Stewart, *Three Eyes for the Journey*.
- 22 See Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*.
- 23 See, for instance, Dwight Hopkins's passing reference to cartography in "Black Theology on God," 109, 110.
- 24 Pinn, *Varieties of African American Religious Experience*, chapter five.
- 25 Paulston, *Social Cartography*, xviii.
- 26 Smith, *Map Is Not Territory*, 101.
- 27 See Long, *Significations*.
- 28 Turchi, *Maps of the Imagination*, 225.
- 29 See Paulston, "Preface: Four Principles for a Non-Innocent Social Cartography," in *Social Cartography*.
- 30 Monmonier, *How to Lie with Maps*, 25.
- 31 Turchi, *Maps of the Imagination*, 78, 88.
- 32 Long, *Significations*; see the chapter titled "The Oppressive Elements in Religion and the Religions of the Oppressed."
- 33 See David Davis, *Inhuman Bondage; The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture*; and *In the Image of God: Religion, Moral Values, and Our Heritage of Slavery* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).

Benjamín Valentín



RESPONSE TO THE ESSAY BY ANTHONY B. PINN

Anthony Pinn's essay emboldens my belief that there is much that relates black theology and Latino/a theology in the United States, and it strengthens my hope for further comparative and collaborative work between representatives of these two theological communities. The reason for my views is that the essay makes it clear that these two discursive traditions not only share similar and estimable developmental trajectories, methodologies, and aspirations but also similar limitations and inadvertencies. Clearly, black theologians and Latino/a theologians in the United States have analogously granted the realm of culture great importance in their theological undertakings. It seems clear too that this convergence on culture is equally motivated by a shared concern and aspiration—namely, the felt need to counter an unjust cultural-valuational structure in an attempt to remedy gender, sexual, and racial-ethnic injustice, and the desire to allow for the assertion and vindication of group identity. In this sense representatives of these two intellectual communities correspondingly view the realm of culture as neither an optional extra nor an idealist distraction for their “liberationist-inspired” theological enterprise but rather as a terrain for both political struggle and communal empowerment. And so both of these theological traditions in the United States share not only a methodological turning to the realm of culture from very early on in their developmental stages but also similar reasons for doing so.

According to Pinn's essay as well as my essay in this volume it would seem that both of these theological communities unfortunately share a similar problem in regard to their treatment of popular culture and culture more generally. In Pinn's essay he laments a problem that he sees