

Beauty, Ugliness, and Black Theology: A Theological Aesthetics for Black Experience

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I argue that theological aesthetics speaks powerfully to black experience in light of this very situation. It does so, I find, through the Beauty of the Cross. While the Beauty of the Cross constitutes its own tradition developed through art, architecture, liturgics, and devotion, I use it to gesture broadly to the cruciform character of beauty in theology. The Beauty of the Cross shows how a theological account of beauty necessarily encompasses ugliness. I draw out the implications of this dynamic with regard to three doctrinal areas and related debates in black theology: theological anthropology, soteriology, and eschatology. I aim to show the utility of theological aesthetics for black experience, and center it as a vital resource for black theology.

INTRODUCTION

“What did it mean for a black woman to be an artist in our grandmothers’ time? In our great-grandmothers’ day? ...What has fed that muzzled and often mutilated, but *vibrant*, creative spirit that the black woman has inherited?”¹

Alice Walker asks these sobering questions in her 1974 essay “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens.” The grandmothers and great-grandmothers to whom she refers are those generations of black women who endured slavery and its immediate aftermath. What would it have meant to be an artist in that time—to desire beauty, to be called to give birth to beauty, in a world that legally, existentially relegates you to ugliness?

Insofar as these questions still apply, and apply broadly, to black women, men, and children, they begin to approach the larger situation of black people vis-à-vis aesthetics. This situation is one in which beauty has subsisted in the midst of oppression.

Beauty has been encountered in the midst of ugliness.

Not only that – beauty has at times been the costume in which ugliness has masqueraded. Consider the phrase “good hair.” In black experience, aesthetics is a double-edged sword. There is beauty; there is also ugliness. And the strict separation of the two is not always upheld.

In this paper, I argue that theological aesthetics speaks powerfully to black experience in light of this very situation. It does so, I find, through the beauty of the cross. While the beauty of the cross constitutes its own tradition developed through art, architecture, liturgics, and devotion, I use it to gesture broadly to the cruciform character of beauty in theology. The beauty of the cross shows how a theological account of beauty necessarily encompasses ugliness. I draw out the implications of this dynamic with regard to three doctrinal areas and related debates in black theology: theological anthropology, soteriology, and eschatology. I aim to show the utility of theological aesthetics for black experience, and center it as a vital resource for black theology.

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¹ Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1983), 233, 239

THE BEAUTY OF THE CROSS: A GROTESQUE RESOURCE FOR A BLACK THEOLOGICAL AESTHETICS

Echoing Karl Barth, Hans Urs von Balthasar declares the “inclusion in Christian beauty of even the Cross and everything else which a worldly aesthetics...discards as no longer bearable. This inclusiveness...embraces the most abysmal ugliness of sin and hell by virtue of the condescension of divine love, which has brought even sin and hell into that divine art for which there is no human analogue.”²

This quote presents a fundamental concept in theological aesthetics, which is that a theological account of beauty necessarily encompasses ugliness. What this means is that aesthetics, in theology, is not a binary. Whereas a “worldly aesthetics” may establish a binary accepting what is beautiful and rejecting that which challenges any sense of aesthetic integrity—ugliness—a theological aesthetics incorporates ugliness into its account of aesthetic integrity. Ugliness does not materialize beyond the interpretive reach of divine beauty but, instead, is comprehensively encompassed by it.³ And beauty, as both channel to and attribute of the divine, goes where God goes—even, and especially, to the cross.

Richard Viladesau identifies prolepsis and paradox as defining features for the beauty of the cross.⁴ The cross is beautiful, he states, only in light of the Resurrection. While temporality causes us to apprehend this relation as one of hindsight, there is no such thing as “hindsight” for God. The beauty of the cross is eschatological—it is proleptic, and not retroactive.

The beauty of the cross is also paradoxical. Gesa Thiessen puts it well when she states that “the utter distortion of divine-human beauty [is also its] complete fulfilment. This paradox is the basis of Christian faith and cannot be overlooked, not even and especially in a theological aesthetics.”⁵

In light of such statement, and particularly in light of its paradoxical crux, I claim that the beauty of the cross is grotesque. The grotesque is an aesthetic genre premised on paradox and contradiction. In the grotesque, the beautiful is displayed alongside the repulsive. This display is no mere presentation of ugliness but rather, through juxtaposition, is a critique of ugliness as such. The grotesque is thus a powerful aesthetic tool of protest. Perceiving the beauty of the cross to operate on this logic of the grotesque clarifies its aesthetics. Ugliness in the cross is not made out to be beauty in disguise, but rather is asserted to the highest degree.

And it is precisely in that maximal assertion that ugliness is found to have no defining power for the cross. Viladesau states that the beauty of the cross is “already a kind of ‘theodicy’: it shows evil overcome, transformed into good.”⁶ I agree that the beauty of the cross is theodicy but I differ in my assessment of what this theodicy shows. The beauty of the cross does not show “evil overcome, transformed into” goodness but rather, shows evil *as evil*—and in that, as nothingness. I claim the theodicy of the beauty of the cross to be evil as nothingness. A theodicy of nothingness defines evil as that which God does not will. It thus has negation as its fundamental character. Evil *is* only insofar as it *is not*. The character of this “isness” is eschatological: on the fundamental level of being that follows from God’s will, evil *is not*.

In defining the cross as beautiful, the beauty of the cross proclaims this message aesthetically. Ugliness truly manifests at full force in the cross—and in this very manifestation it is fully and totally exhausted by divine beauty. Recalling the words of the prophet Isaiah: ugliness is “swallowed up in victory” in the beauty of the cross.⁷ In the confrontation with divine beauty, ugliness—evil—is shown to have a *defeated* character. This is the critical power of harnessing the grotesque for a theological aesthetics, and realizing the cruciform character of beauty in God.⁸ This is why I find the beauty of the cross to be a vital resource for black experience.

Three doctrinal areas focus my application.

In theological anthropology, the beauty of the cross approaches an established debate in womanist and black theology about the proper place of oppression in accounts of personhood for black people. Scholars such as Eboni Marshall Turman and Victor Anderson have helpfully flagged the issues that arise when oppression is centered in black

² Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord*, Vol. One, *Seeing the Form*, trans. By Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis, edited by John Riches (Edinburgh: T&T Clark Ltd., 1982), 124.

³ Like sin and hell, ugliness is never understood outside of reference to Divinity; these have no sense or being apart from God.

⁴ Richard Viladesau, “The Beauty of the Cross,” in *Theological Aesthetics after von Balthasar*, ed. Oleg Bychkov and James Fodor (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008).

⁵ Gesa Elsbeth Thiessen, ed., *Theological Aesthetics: A Reader* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 6.

⁶ Viladesau, “The Beauty of the Cross,” 144.

⁷ Cf. Isaiah 25:8; 1 Corinthians 15:54. The beauty of the Resurrection does not evacuate the ugliness of the Cross but rather, explains what that ugliness actually is.

⁸ James Luther Adams and Wilson Yates, eds., *The Grotesque in Art and Literature: Theological Reflections* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997).

being.⁹ An identity based on oppression does not exist outside of that oppression. The DuBoisian notion of double-consciousness reflects this problematic centering as it locates the intrusive, oppressive white gaze within the black self. Double-consciousness, on this view, inhibits constructive accounts of black personhood and therefore must be de-centered.

The beauty of the cross offers a different assessment. Insofar as double-consciousness represents the paradoxical clash of a black self-regard of beauty and a white gaze of ugliness, resolution comes through the confrontation. Language from Charles H. Long helps to illustrate this. Long writes that in the encounter with Western civilization, black people were re-created as oppressed. Black people were not only placed under oppression; their very ontology underwent a second creation and gained new articulation through the “universalizing and critical structures of the modern Western consciousness.”¹⁰ For black people, this second creation is double-consciousness. Scholars who call for a de-centering of double-consciousness are, in effect, wanting to get back to the original creation and worried that centering the second creation will thwart that return. I argue that, from the beauty of the cross and the dynamics of the grotesque, we know that the second creation will not hold. The second creation is fallacious: its very establishment ensures its defeat. Centering double-consciousness in accounts of black personhood is not problematic because it is through such “centering” that it, as an issue, is reckoned with and ultimately resolved as not determinative of black being.

In presenting this option, I offer an approach that acknowledges oppression, but does not essentialize it. The historical construction of blackness as a liability of being cannot be avoided in black theological anthropology. Emerging through the “universalizing and critical structur[e]” of race in the modern Western consciousness, blackness was construed as ugly, with ugliness implying ethical, ontological, and epistemological negativity such that to be black is to be, ethically, bad; ontologically, bereft; and epistemologically, a dead end. This construal of black being persists today and we must address it. However, such a strategy need not ontologize oppression and double-consciousness; or rather, it ontologizes them only to reveal their fundamental character to be utter vapidness. Nothingness. I center oppression in order to deal with it and reveal it as inherently defeated. As ugliness, as evil, oppression and double-consciousness are only insofar as they are *not*. Double-consciousness is a viable starting point as it *necessarily* gives way.

Soteriology is the second doctrinal area for my application of the beauty of the cross. In light of the lived realities of suffering in black experience, scholars such as Delores Williams have found redemption through the cross offensive and irredeemable.¹¹ The notion of suffering as redemptive has been used to legitimate the oppression of black women specifically, and black people as a whole. It is thereby anti-liberative and untenable. Williams suggests identifying salvation in Jesus’s life ministry, and not in his suffering and death on the cross.

I find that the beauty of the cross challenges this reading of soteriology. Traditional atonement theories idealizing suffering are problematic; however, I find that such theories misread the liberation the cross *does* proclaim. The beauty of the cross does not glamorize suffering but displays it at full force: as evil and ugly. And it is in the full manifestation of horrific ugliness that beauty prevails: the beauty of God encompasses it. Barth puts it this way: God “involves Himself to the utmost” in the encounter with evil.¹² God suffers. God dies, taking the full extent of evil into God’s Self. It is through God’s comprehensive embrace of suffering that salvation occurs. The ugliness and evil of suffering is underscored, not deemphasized, in the beauty of the cross seen as grotesque.

As a tradition closely linked to the beauty of the cross, the Pietà demonstrates this and provides a powerful resource for black experience and theology. The Pietà is an artistic tradition depicting the suffering of Mary, mother of Jesus – that is, her *compassion* in his suffering and death. This image of a mother’s suffering in the killing of her child is all too familiar in black experience, where lynchings in the 19th and 20th centuries, and legal and vigilante executions today, have caused the suffering of innumerable black mothers, fathers, and families. The Pietà recognizes the communal nature of ugliness and suffering, the pain that wrenches the soul and very being of the one who beholds their beloved deemed ugly, and treated as such. Ugliness lacerates communally.

Seen as grotesque, the Pietà is not just a portrayal of suffering but can be harnessed as a protest against it. This perspective undergirds the actions of Mamie Till Mobley in demanding an open casket at Emmett’s funeral. Mamie sought to have the full force of the ugliness done to her son *seen* and *felt*—not in order to glorify it, but in order to critique it. Furthermore, in the full force of that display Mobley perceived ugliness as *nothing*. Looking down on the desecrated, decaying body of her son, she calls him “Darling.”¹³ Emmett remains beautiful, not in spite of ugliness but *in it*. In the full force of its manifestation, ugliness dissipates in the face of love.

A soteriology that embraces suffering thus not only meets the lived experience of black people, but also can be profoundly subversive, enabling not just resistance but ontological defeat declaring ugliness as nothing.

⁹ Victor Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness* (New York, NY: Continuum, 1995); Eboni Marshall Turman, *Toward a Womanist Ethic of Incarnation: Black Bodies, the Black Church, and the Council of Chalcedon* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

¹⁰ Charles H. Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 166.

¹¹ Delores Williams, “Black Women’s Surrogacy Experience and the Christian Notion of Redemption,” in *Cross Examinations: Readings on the Meaning of the Cross Today*, edited by Marit Trelstad (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 19-32.

¹² Karl Barth, “III. Nothingness,” in *Church Dogmatics*, ed. Helmut Gollwitzer (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 137.

¹³ James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 67.

The “nothingness” of suffering and ugliness is perceived only in eschatological frame, and accordingly, eschatology is the final doctrinal area for my thesis. Like soteriology, eschatology is contested in black theology. Heaven and ideas of a final rest have been used throughout history to dissipate black resistance to oppression in the present by assuring black folk that all freedom and reward is future. Even when not intended to oppress, such ideas still produced an anti-liberative theology that ignored the material reality of black people. Given this history and the inherent future orientation of eschatological concepts, scholars such as Delores Williams and Anthony Pinn find eschatology to have nothing to offer for black theology.¹⁴

What I have presented with the beauty of the cross holds the opposite view: what happens in the end is of the utmost importance to present experience. The proleptic beauty of the cross speaks truth into the present, declaring evil and ugliness as fundamentally overcome by virtue of their very being. The eschatological frame of this realization does not fail to see the evil that takes place in the present, but rather, sees it clearly, affirming the paucity of its presence and the futility of its pretensions to final meaning. Seeing evil and ugliness as such declares the ultimacy of being and beauty; it declares that being and beauty *are* eschatologically. As theodicy is an account of God’s justice, justice likewise emerges as eschatologically grounded. Ethics thus materializes on an eschatological basis and crystallizes in hope, the ethical posture rooted in God.

James Cone in *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* corroborates this argument. Cone likewise finds an eschatological declaration of triumph in the suffering of black people and God, and from this claims eschatology as essential. In affirming Martin Luther King, Jr.’s pursuit of a seemingly impossible “ultimate justice” over Reinhold Niebuhr’s recommended path of attenuated “proximate justice,” Cone identifies the necessity of eschatology, affirms it as the proper frame for ethical action, and discerns hope as its vital key.¹⁵

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I briefly review my argument. I have argued that theological aesthetics is a vital resource for black theology, and that the cruciform character of beauty gives it particular resonance for black experience. Divine beauty is not solely found in the Crucifixion; however, it cannot be understood apart from this event. I have taken this insight and applied the beauty of the cross to black experience and theology. I interpreted the beauty of the cross as grotesque and linked it to a theodicy of nothingness. Many theodicies incorporate evil into God’s “divine plan” and thus, aesthetically, make ugliness out to really be beauty. I here made it grotesque and revealed it as nothingness. I developed this argument and showed how the nothingness of ugliness proclaimed in the beauty of the cross speaks to established debates in black theology around personhood, salvation, and ultimacy. The beauty of the cross overturns numerous assumptions and conclusions around these issues by reestablishing perspective from the vantage point of eschatological being. The good, the true, and the beautiful prevail in black experience, I have shown, even and especially in the face of ugliness.

¹⁴ See discussion of and quotes from Delores Williams in Monica Coleman, *Making a Way Out of No Way* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 19-24. See also Anthony Pinn, “A Beautiful *Be-ing*,” in *Black Religion and Aesthetics: Religious Thought and Life in Africa and the African Diaspora*, edited by Anthony B. Pinn (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009). Pinn summarizes that black and womanist theologies reject an eschatological frame of justice, stating: “Clearly neither theological camp is interested in talking about heaven or the Kingdom of God as anything more than a metaphor for a transformed and historically situated reality... An argument is made against otherworldly orientations... In the words of the spiritual, ‘You can have all this world, just give me Jesus.’ To this sentiment, Black and Womanist theologies say ‘no—hell, no!’” Pinn, “A Beautiful *Be-ing*,” 22.

¹⁵ James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 71-73.