

***Mulatto Bodies and the Body of Christ:
The “New Black Theology” Ten Years Later***

Nathaniel Jung-Chul Lee

ABSTRACT

*Ten years ago, in an article for *The Christian Century*, theologian Jonathan Tran heralded the work of three black theologians—J. Kameron Carter, Willie J. Jennings, and Brian Bantum—as inaugurating a “new black theology.” According to Tran, these three thinkers represented “a major theological shift that [would]—if taken as seriously as it deserve[d]—change the face not only of black theology but theology as a whole.” Now that ten years have passed, this paper asks: Has it? And arguing that it has not, I offer reflections on why it has not. At the center of my argument will be a critique of the way Carter and Bantum offered their revised understanding of racial identity and hybridity by reimagining the identity Jesus through mulatto/a bodies and persons. This, I will claim, is a dead end. It is a project that fails to do the very thing it sets out to do, and ultimately, collapses in on itself. My aim in making this critique is less refutation and more redirection. More specifically, I will hope to resolve some of the problematic impulses in their appeal to mulatto identity, and in so doing, clear the way for a new direction in Black Theology.*

Keywords: Black Theology, New Black Theology, Christology, Black Christ, Mulatto Christ, Mulatto, Bodies, Body of Christ, Mulatto Theology, J. Kameron Carter, Brian Bantum, James Cone, John Milbank, Willie J. Jennings, Jonathan Tran.

INTRODUCTION

Good morning. I’m grateful to be with you all today. Thank you especially to Drs. Clark and Turman for inviting me to share about a few matters that are close to my heart.

So, if I may—I wanted to begin this morning by making a few introductory comments in order to situate my paper.

First and foremost, I wanted to share something straight away that I know will shock everyone: I’m not black, but rather, a second-generation, biracial Korean-American. I say that as more than just a “tongue-in-cheek” comment, but to emphasize a crucial reality that drives this paper. As a second-generation, biracial Korean-American, I write and reflect on race, in part, because of the ways that Black Theology *saved* me—that is, *liberated* me from the shame and the trauma I had internalized by growing up in white, fundamentalist Christianity. I am forever grateful for this. And yet also, at the same time, I write and reflect on race because of the ways theologies of race have sometimes made Asian-Americans in general—and HAPA Americans in particular—*invisible*, deepening the trauma of invisibility we experience in a white Christian world. In that sense, I am here, to put it bluntly, to ask for more.

That’s a good segue to the second thing I want to say out of the gate—namely, that this is a very personal paper for me. In part, I confess, this is because I have a personal connection to its subject. As a student at Duke Divinity School, I was grateful to be included in a small group of Asian-Americans who read and reflected on questions of race with Drs. Jennings and Carter. And every day, Dr. Bantum inspires me with his incredible bike rides on Strava. (I mean my God man, is there an inch of pavement in Seattle that you haven’t covered on your racer?) This paper is also personal to me because I initially encountered the “mulatto theology” of Drs. Carter and Bantum as a kind of “new hope”—for a theology that might somehow “intersect” my second-generation, biracial Korean-American existence. Therefore, where it succeeded, it felt of existential importance to me. And where it failed or has been abandoned, the crisis has also been existential. In a sense, I am, in this paper, chasing after hope. And I’ll only add—I don’t think I’m alone in chasing after that hope, once offered, yet still deferred.

Finally, a note on the paper itself. This paper is actually the short form of a paper I'll be presenting in two months at the Society of Christian Ethics, and I'm looking forward to being corrected by Dr. Bantum on everything I've gotten wrong today, so that I can fix the longer version in advance of the SCE. Given the time limits today, rather than developing the whole argument step by step, what I'm going to do is make a series of claims about the (so-called) "New Black Theology," and then raise what I hope are constructive questions about these claims.

NAVIGATING THE POLES OF DISEMBODIMENT AND CONTAINMENT

So, here's the first claim: What was once called the "New Black Theology" was a shared attempt by a few black theologians to offer a theological response to Victor Anderson's famous charge that James Cone's conception of "blackness" was fundamentally "ontological"—in that it mirrors white racial ideology's metaphysical determinants. Overdetermined by its opposition to whiteness, Anderson writes, Cone offers a "blackness that whiteness created."¹

However, in attempting to answer Anderson's challenge, theologians J. Kameron Carter and Brian Bantum had to navigate two equal and opposite problems—we could call these problems, *disembodiment*, on the one hand; and *containment*, on the other. On the one hand, Cone had argued that the viciousness of whiteness was in its presumptions of universality—to be the backdrop against which all other peoples stand out—built upon a conception of whiteness as an "immaterial abstraction." Against this, Cone offered a theology located in the particularity of black bodies, and warned against any theology that did not allow (to quote Willie Jennings) for "the genuine historic entrance of the divine into space, time, and body."² That's the problem of *disembodiment*. However, on the other hand, Carter and Bantum also wanted to acknowledge Anderson's claim that by locating both *black* identity and *divine* identity in black *bodies*, Cone's conception of blackness became fully immanentized—that is, *trapped* within embodiment—in that it couldn't "point to any transcendent meaning beyond itself without also fragmenting."³ That's the problem of *containment*.

The question this naturally raises is: Did they? Were they able to successfully navigate the opposite poles of "disembodiment" and "containment"? Well, that of course depends on *how* they tried to do so, which leads me to claim number two.

REIMAGINING THE JEWISHNESS OF JESUS

Here's the second claim—Carter revised Cone's conception of "blackness" by improvising upon Cone's Christological analogy between "blackness" and "Jewishness." More specifically, whereas *for Cone*, Jesus' first century Jewishness is his twentieth century blackness—"he is black because he *was* a Jew," as Cone wrote in *God of the Oppressed*—and so again, *for Cone*, Jesus' Jewishness is a *racial* identity—by contrast, *for Carter*, Jesus' Jewishness was a *covenantal*, and thus, a *theological* identity. Carter further developed this covenantal/theological identity of Israel by "spatializing" it as an identity that is "simultaneously a leaving behind and an entering into."⁴ This is Israel as fundamentally a people "on the way"—a pilgrim or diasporic people—making its covenantal identity, not an identity of "closure," but of "openness"—a "light to the nations," which will draw all peoples together around the mountain of God.

The obvious benefit of Carter's move here is that it explicitly marks Israel's identity out over and against any form of containment. Nevertheless, it also opens up a whole host of questions with respect to embodiment (especially "genuine" "historic" embodiment). For instance: How does identity "move from" and "enter into" without the loss of itself? That is, in order to avoid becoming an "immaterial abstraction," would not this departure still require the connection to or the bearing forth of some historic forms of life? If not, then what maintains its "genuine historic" existence? Is it departure itself? An identity secured in perpetual departure? If so, then how can "leaving from" ever be a genuine "entering into"? Or, if not *perpetual* departure, then how do we account for the identities that appear in other spaces that do not occur as part of this *particular*, historic departure? Are all identities that are not included in this particular departure (the one narrated by Israel's covenantal story) considered essential identities by default? If so, what makes them so? If not, then how are they to be differentiated *from* Israel

if Israel's identity becomes one of departure all the way down? How, at the end of the day, are we to think of other bodies generally, and Israel more specifically?

A MULATTO CHRIST

And these questions lead me to a third claim. As I read them, it's at this point that Carter first, and Bantum in a more developed fashion, both appeal, not to a "black" Christ (as in Cone), but to a "mulatto" Christ—in order to locate (as it were) the leaving from/entering into of Israel's identity in mulatto bodies. That is to say, Carter and Bantum seem to be offering "mulatto" as a theological matrix through which to imagine the genuine historic entrance of the divine into space, time, and body. As Bantum writes: "[T]he interracial body takes...decentering reality and locates it within one's very body. Their bodies become the location of this geographic dislocation. The possibility of departure and return latent in the lives of those who can pass reverberates back to the impossibility of a homeland."⁵ So—mulatto identity is deferred identity, or identity in exile.

Here's my question: Doesn't this appeal to mulatto merely push the question back? That is, does the appeal to "mulatto" here genuinely clarify anything? Or is the appeal to mulatto simply a sort of slight of hand, in which in the "intermixture" mulatto represents is instrumentalized to obfuscate the question? Well, that all depends on what is meant by "mulatto"—which is why I say this appeal really only pushes the question back. Admittedly, the question of what we mean by "mulatto" will always run into (what Bantum rightly calls) the "impossibility of claims concerning the self."⁶ And yet, despite this impossibility, the theologian does say something, and Bantum has written an entire book on "mulatto." So what, in the end, does he mean by it?

As I read him, he seems to mean two things. On the one hand, mulatto identity seems to mark a kind of racial reality—it is the transgressing of the lines of racial purity that makes that myth of racial purity incoherent. Perhaps this is obvious enough. However, given that "mulatto" identity has these overt ties to racial identity, several questions emerge. First and foremost: If "mulatto" assumes certain racial categories, does it not also rely on them? Can the lines of racial fidelity ever be really (fully) transgressed and "made incoherent" through the language of mulatto? Is there not an implicit essentializing—and perhaps even, an ontologizing—of racial categories in place as long as mulatto has a racial reference?

In other words, can we say "mulatto" without also speaking about some other essentialized category of race? Think again of those equal and opposite problems of containment and disembodiment. Is it a problem—namely one of containment—if we cannot get beyond—cannot *transcend*, in Anderson's terms—the racial reference implied in "mulatto"? And yet, *at the same time*—regarding embodiment—is there something lost if this racial reference *is* left behind?

So that's the first thing Dr. Bantum seems to naming by mulatto—a racial identity that transgresses and makes incoherent the myth of racial purity. However, when seeking to translate the work that mulatto bodies do in disrupting lines of *racial* fidelity into some *larger* frame, the "mulatto" trope starts to disconnect from its racial references, and becomes instead a sort of placeholder for a way of thinking about the "sheer performativity" of all lives. Mulatto, to quote Bantum, "is not a positive identity...not an identity that can posit what it is,"⁷ but rather, is "a personhood born of *utter* difference."⁸ Here, to speak of "mulatto" is no longer to speak of "biracial" or "interracial" persons *per se*, but rather, to speak more generically about the "constant inter-mixture and perpetual reconstitution"⁹ that binds and looses *all* peoples over time.

The value of reframing mulatto in this way, of course, is that moves us away from essentializing mulatto identity into a form of containment. The question is: Where does this move take us? If the very shape of mulatto existence is "constant inter-mixture and perpetual reconstitution"—if, that is, "interruption," "disruption," and "perpetual transgression" are the very shape of mulatto existence—then doesn't mulatto identity imply the destabilizing of *all* identities (racial, or otherwise)?

But if this is the case, we are left with all kinds of other questions. In the first place, how does the appeal to mulatto *do the very thing it was deployed to do*—namely, offer true embodiment—figure the genuine historic entrance of the divine into space, time, and body? Mulatto identity may figure something, but what it figures remains elusive, and just beyond our reach. It never quite "enters in," having either just left, or never fully arrived.

Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, this opens up onto deeper questions as to how “race” is figured (and utilized) by Carter and Bantum more broadly. The question could be put as simply as this: Do they need to appeal to “mulatto”? Do they need to appeal to the mulatto matrix in order to make the conclusions that they do? If, on the other hand, mulatto loses all its racial referents, what does the appeal to mulatto actually add? How does this mulatto theology, for example, genuinely move us beyond what we already have in Judith Butler? Or is mulatto simply an “instancing” of “sheer performativity,” performing the same basic function as any other instancing of it?

To press the question the other way around: Why a theology of *race* and Christian hybridity? How does the appeal to “race” specifically shape what Bantum means by “a theology of Christian hybridity?” What would change if we were to talk about a theology of gender and Christian hybridity? How—concretely, in terms of *embodiment*—would a book entitled “Redeeming Transgenderism” be different than the one written by Dr. Bantum?

BETWEEN CONE AND MILBANK

Here’s my fourth and final claim and then I’ll be done. According to Carter and Bantum, all of this is theology’s fault. In other words, the problem of race is a *theological* problem—because the racial construction of the world was a theological project, birthed in heretical Christology. That, it seems to me—that racism is a species of heretical Christology—is still one of the most important and interesting claims of the “New Black Theology,” and one I think worth preserving. Carter implicitly, and Bantum explicitly, go on to describe this problem as taking place within the theological trajectories set out by Cone and, we should note, John Milbank. As Dr. Bantum writes: “These two theological giants have effectively marked *the* theological trajectories before the contemporary church.”¹⁰ Both Cone and Milbank, according to Bantum, subject the modern theological world to forms of “enclosure” along the lines we have been describing—namely, disembodiment or containment. They leave us “with the options of becoming embodied without hope or with no body of hope. We are bodies or minds. We are thoughts or justice.”¹¹

My question here is: *Why Milbank?*

Now—I ask that not only because this association with Milbank is part of what many feel hasn’t aged well about “The New Black Theology” ten years later. I ask it because I think there is a *good* answer—namely, that there were obvious points of connection between both the aims and the resources used by Milbank and the forms of “Critical Race Theory” that paved the way for the emergence of “The New Black Theology.” For example, both Milbank and Critical Race Theory utilized narrative theory in projects of “counter-storytelling.” Both offered substantive critiques of political liberalism. Both—in their own ways—are “antiessentialist.” And both are so because they are either influenced by, or in conversation with, the same thinkers—namely, postmodern critical theorists.

So, it’s not surprising that a theology that attempted to put Milbank and Critical Race Theory in conversation emerged. The question I think that needs to be asked, ten years later, is: Given these shared resources, were they able to balance and correct each other *enough*? Put the other way around, did the aims and the resources that made them natural conversation partners also limit them from being able to fully address the issues of enclosure and transcendence?

The answer, in my view, is: *yes*. When it comes to thinking about transcendence—when it comes to navigating the opposite poles of containment and embodiment—the overlap in philosophical aims and resources between Milbank and Critical Race Theory is too limiting. Here I have in mind Stanley Cavell’s claim that the “the Platonist and the deconstructionist are closer to each other than they think.”¹² Or, behind it, Ludwig Wittgenstein’s famous claim that metaphysics—and by extension, we could say white racial ideology’s metaphysical determinants—is really a “building of air”—such that both its assertion and its denial (*or* “deconstruction”) are equally meaningless.

Now—to lay my cards on the table—what’s (perhaps obviously) suggested in these appeals to Cavell and Wittgenstein is that a more productive conversation might have been had between Cone and the Wittgensteinian postliberals, and were this a different paper, I’d say more about my personal lament that the conservative reading of Wittgenstein offered by George Lindbeck made it difficult to see just how much of an ally Wittgenstein can be to the work of Black

Theology. However, I don't actually think one needs to go as far afield as Wittgenstein in order to get help. I think the help is actually much closer to home.

CONCLUSION

It should perhaps come as no surprise that Willie Jennings, whose work does not bear the same Milbankian baggage, also appeals to some more generative categories. Here I have in mind the work Jennings does with *language* and *translation* in thinking about identity and identity formation. I don't have time here to do Jennings justice—nor, for what it's worth, to demonstrate why I think that there are underdeveloped aspects in both Carter and Bantum's work that point us to the same generative space.

Instead, I want to suggest that the difference of Jennings presses one, final question: Might we not better navigate the limitations of language about Jesus' life—that leave us with the options of “becoming embodied without hope” or “with no body of hope”—if we start by calling our language to attend to the fullness of human life available in the ordinary forms in which it is expressed? Might *language* give us a better way to imagine a hybridity that first *identifies with* tragic forms of delimiting, but then also, *resists*, *transgresses*, and finally, *transcends* those identifications?

And might, therefore, reconceptualizing the identity of Christ in terms of how language operates amidst translation and translation's communal maintenance of difference—conceptualizing Christ as the Divine Word spoken as a human word—offer a better way forward? Might, to put it simply, we get further by thinking of Christ, not as “mulatto,” but as “creole”?

* Nathaniel Jung-Chul Lee is a priest in the Episcopal Diocese of New York, and a member of the contingent faculties at Drew University and St. John's University. He has a Ph.D. from Baylor University, and a Th.M. from Duke Divinity School. His dissertation—“Toward a Creole Christ: A Theology of Language & Christian Hybridity”—navigates questions of individual and collective identity in relationship to the identity of Christ, giving special attention to issues surrounding racial identity. Correspondence should be sent to the Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, 209 Madison Ave, New York, NY 10016. Email: nathaniel.j.lee@gmail.com

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¹ Victor Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness: An Essay on African American Religious and Cultural Criticism* (New York: Continuum, 1995), 92.

² Brian Bantum, *Redeeming Mulatto: A Theology of Race and Christian Hybridity* (Waco, TX.: Baylor University Press, 2010), 133.

³ Victor Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness*, 92.

⁴ J. Kameron Carter, *Race: A Theological Account* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 356.

⁵ Brian Bantum, *Redeeming Mulatto*, 133.

⁶ Brian Bantum, *Redeeming Mulatto*, 150.

⁷ Brian Bantum, *Redeeming Mulatto*, 96.

⁸ Brian Bantum, *Redeeming Mulatto*, 98 (*emphasis mine*).

⁹ Brian Bantum, *Redeeming Mulatto*, 164.

¹⁰ Brian Bantum, *Redeeming Mulatto*, 2-3. It is worth noting, at least in passing, that this is a potentially controversial claim. However, I cite it here without defense, as what is salient to my current project of excavation is not whether Bantum is correct in what he thinks, but merely that Bantum thinks it. That is to say, what is salient here is not the legitimacy of Bantum's vision of the theological landscape, but that this vision of the theological landscape as divided in this way shapes how he attempts to bridge the divide in his own work.

¹¹ Brian Bantum, *Redeeming Mulatto*, 6-7.

¹² Torril Moi, *Revolution of the Ordinary: Literary Studies After Wittgenstein, Austin, and Cavell* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 27.