

The Christology of the Lynching Tree: Barth's Crimson Thread, Mamie Till Bradley and the Indictment of White Supremacy

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ABSTRACT

In James Cone's The Cross and the Lynching Tree, the body of Emmett Till stands in a cruciform role; yet it is through the courage of Till's mother, Mamie, that God's revelation breaks into the world. Supplementing Cone's narrative with theologies of trauma and Till's memoir, new sites of Christic presence come into view. At the heart of this paper, as at the heart of Cone's Cross and Lynching Tree is the cruciform body of Emmett Till, cradled in the arms of his mother and raised to public witness as she indicted White supremacy in his torture and death. The cross of Emmett Till and The Cross and the Lynching Tree have played transformative roles in insisting that the cross of Christ recreates humanity with the indictment of White supremacy. The impact of Cone's work on the discipline of Theology, and Theology's way forward under this indictment close this investigation.

"LET THE WORLD SEE WHAT I HAVE SEEN"¹

God's life courses through creation and incarnates in the life-blood of humanity. We are, in the words of Katie Cannon, "beloved persons created in the image of God."² We are called to be, in Shawn Copeland's rendering, "person[s]-in-community, living in flexible, resilient, just relationships with others."³ Loved into becoming human we are an event, constituted by the multiple relationships that form us. As theological anthropology is linked with Christology, a social anthropology aligns with a corporate Christology, as the Christian witness to our humanity intimately joins the human and the divine.

While Christology invites us into a joyous celebration of who we can become in a humanity that is made in the image of God, it is not Christology without the full portrait of our inhumanity. In his Epistle to the Romans, Karl Barth identified the cross with the crimson thread that runs through all history.⁴ While the Crucified One raises before us a common humanity to share in our suffering, the cross simultaneously indicts those who stand at its foot complicit in its torture. Thus, Christology illumines a theological anthropology that is the best of who we can become as human beings, and the infinite opposite.

In James Cone's *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, it is the crucified body of Emmett Till that stands in this role. Yet the crucified Son we meet in Cone's text is incomplete without the joyous humanity that his mother, Mamie Till, provides in her memoir of his lynching.

Against the odds of Jim Crow America, nurtured in an extended network of community in Argo, Illinois, Emmett had grown from boyhood into a young man with "a sense of dignity, pride,

¹ Mamie Till Bradley with Christopher Benson, *Death of Innocence: The Story of the Hate Crime that Changed America* (New York: Random House, 2003), 139.

² Katie Geneva Cannon, "Transformative Grace," *Feminist and Womanist Essays in Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. Amy Plantinga Pau and Serene Jones (Louisville and London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 139.

³ Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race and Being* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 92.

⁴ Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, translated from the 6th edition by Edwyn C. Hoskyns (London: Oxford University Press, [1933] 1968), 96.

confidence [and] self assurance”⁵ as his mother describes. Anticipating the trip from his home in Chicago to visit his family in Mississippi, his mother cautioned him to conform his movements to the White supremacist culture. “Oh, Mama” Bo Till responded, “it can’t be that bad.”⁶

But when two Mississippi men (Mississippi Christians?)⁷ kidnapped, tortured and executed her only son, Emmett, Mamie insisted on showing the world just how bad White supremacy is. Ignoring the direction of the coroner, when Bo’s broken body was brought by train to Chicago, Till-Bradley insisted on gazing lovingly on her son’s corpse to take in the specificity and intimacy of the horror as real and irreversible, and simultaneously to insist on her son as the image of God.⁸ Instead of closing in on her grief, Mamie insisted further on the public viewing of an open casket and the publication of Emmett’s horrific disfigurement in the national press. Mamie’s words at the decision of revelation, “Let the world see what I have seen” can be read not only as a witness to White supremacy, but the refusal to erase Emmett’s beloved humanity and announce the full humanity of those crushed by White terror.

At the heart of his text, Cone describes a Christological source for Mamie Till-Bradley’s strength and courage: “For Mrs. Bradley, the voice that she heard was the voice of the resurrected Jesus. It spoke of hope that, although white racists could take her son’s life, they could not deprive his life and death of an ultimate meaning.”⁹ Witnessing her son as imago Dei and recognizing the Crucified One resident in bodies that are broken, Mamie Till-Bradley demonstrated the power of what Katie Cannon names “transformative grace” – the power of grace which is “a divine gift of redeeming love that empowers African Americans to confront shocking, absurd, death-dealing disjunctions in life, so that when we look at our outer struggles and inner strength we see interpretive possibilities for creative change.”¹⁰ Witness to Mamie’s courageous action of transformative grace, Cone recounts the hundreds of thousands of people who

viewed his bruised body and attended the funeral, and many millions more saw the Jet magazine photos [of September 1955] that traveled around the world. “This is not for Emmett,” Mrs. Bradley said, “because my boy can’t be helped now, but to make it safe for other boys.”¹¹

That Mamie’s witness and Emmett’s violent death were transformative is acknowledged in many writings on the civil rights era. As Michael Eric Dyson recounts, “[Emmett’s] death galvanized a people perched on the fragile border between heroism and fear to courageously pursue meaningful and complete equality.”¹² Rosa Parks, Medgar Evers, Martin Luther King, Jr. each drew new strength. The grace of the Crucified One, Cannon theologizes is “God’s freely given gift of grace [which] enables us to resist the forces of death and degradation arrayed against us and to affirm our dignity as beloved persons created in the image of God.”¹³ This is the grace that Mamie Till reveals, and it is through her courage that God’s revelation breaks into the world. In Cone’s description “she exposed white brutality and black faith to the world and, significantly

⁵ Mamie Till, *Death of Innocence*, 102.

⁶ Mamie Till, *Death of Innocence*, 101.

⁷ William Bradford Huie’s account of Emmett Till’s murder for *Look* magazine names Roy Bryant’s social life as consisting of visits to family, the Baptist church, and the drive-in. (January 1956)

⁸ James Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011), 67. Cone is citing Christopher Metress, ed., *The Lynching of Emmett Till* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2002), 21-32.

⁹ Cone, *Cross and Lynching Tree*, 69.

¹⁰ Cannon, 143-144.

¹¹ Cone, *Cross and Lynching Tree*, 67, citing Metress.

¹² Michael Eric Dyson, *Reflecting Black: African-American Cultural Criticism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 196-197.

¹³ Katie Geneva Cannon, “Transformative Grace,” *Feminist and Womanist Essays in Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. Amy Plantinga Pau and Serene Jones (Louisville and London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 139.

expressed a parallel meaning between her son's lynching and the crucifixion of Jesus. 'Lord you gave your only son to remedy a condition,' she cried out, 'but who knows, but what the death of my only son might bring an end to lynching.'"14 In the Cross of this Lynching Tree we see not only Emmett, but "the [countless] lost beloveds and the force that made them disposable."15 Yet, in this case we must recognize that the Cross of this Lynching Tree is the mother of the beloved who made a decision borne by the power of the cross. Cradled in the arms of his mother and raised to public witness, the Crucified One reveals the Crimson Thread which runs through all history reflecting back to us the depths of our sinful condition and offering the possibility of a faith that might save us from our violent mistreatment of others.16 While Emmett may be the crucified One, Mamie is the cross that revealed to the world its crimson thread. Through her agency and action, his life is given its full meaning revealing the God who resides in the tortured body and that God's indictment upon the torturers.

The Rev. Jesse Jackson places Mamie Till among God's magnificent women. Aligned with the mother of Moses, who crafted a plan to save her firstborn from a government plot that would kill him, and Mary, the mother of Jesus who "traveled to Africa"17 to rescue her child from the grip of a murderous King, Jackson also sees in Mamie Till a Christological expression. In his words of appreciation to her, Jackson evoked: "You gave your son so a nation might be saved."18 Jackson insists on the catalytic and committed action of crafty and courageous women as sites of God's power and presence in the world, without whom salvation would not come.

But our nation has not been saved. As we peer deeply into the sin of White supremacy in the death it has dealt on the Black body of our beloved Son Emmett; and we hear Mamie plea "to make it safe for other boys"19 yet, it remains unsafe for too many, for too long, still under the shadow of White supremacy. Kelly Brown Douglas witnesses the theological meaning of this condition in the murder of our beloved Son Trayvon. But where is the theological witness to Our beloved Son Tamir. And the theological witness to our beloved children Yusor, Razan and Deah. Our beloved brother Srinivas. Our beloved parents Vickie and Maurice. And too many to count.

By placing the murder of Emmett Till at the center of his 2011 *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* we have the heart of Cone's work across fifty years of relentless expression: unless the world sees what I see -- the White Christianity that maintains White supremacy which kills countless of our beloved -- we will not know the meaning of the cross. Cone recalls the impact of Mamie's revelation as a transformative trauma,20 in his words: "I remember saying to myself, 'Emmett Till could have been me!'"21 Only seventeen, a second year college student, Cone too was touched by the tentacles of this unique form of White violence; and in chapter 3 of *The Cross and the*

¹⁴ Cone, *Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 66-67.

¹⁵ Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and The Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 204.

¹⁶ Cone's embrace of Mamie Till as a Christic agent may represent a culmination of his engagement with womanist theologies. In his 1984 *For My People: Black Theology and the Black Church, Where have we been and where are we going?* Cone recounts the development of his engagement from a 1976 paper presented at the invitation of Jacquelyn Grant to a turning over "Only black women can do black feminist theology...If theology arises from the attempt to reconcile faith with life, and if black women have an experience of faith in God that is not exhausted by white women or black men, then there is a need to articulate the faith fo black women so that the universal church can learn from their experience with God." Cone, *For My People* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1984), 135.

¹⁷ Rev. Jesse L. Jackson, Sr., *Foreword to Death of Innocence: The Story of the Hate Crime that Changed America by Mamie Till-Mobley and Christopher Benson* (New York: Random House, 2003), xi-xii.

¹⁸ Jackson, xiii.

¹⁹ Cone, *Cross and Lynching Tree*, 67.

²⁰ In paralleling Emmett Till's murder with the events of 9/11 Cone does not use the words 'transformative trauma' but names the full-scale societal impact of both of these events. David Crum, "ReadTheSpirit Editor David Crumm interviewed James H. Cone" <https://www.readthespirit.com/explore/interview-with-james-h-cone-on-cross-lynching-tree/>

²¹ Cone, *Cross and Lynching Tree*, 67.

Lynching Tree Cone shows how the lynch-death of Emmett Till – like the crucifixion of Christ – embodies not the singular death of a fourteen year old beloved Son, but the concentrated humanity and inhumanity of White terror. It is not just Emmett, but Martin Luther King’s father who came face to face with the White supremacy of lynch culture;²² and it is not just King’s, but Cone’s father, too, who was threatened with lynching as retaliation for placing his name on a lawsuit demanding integrated schools.²³ It is not just Daddy King and Charlie Cone but the innumerable men and women of color terrorized, brutalized and traumatized by White American Christians who embraced ‘justice’ in the form of mob violence. In Cone’s words,

The claim that whites had the right to control the black population through lynching and other extralegal forms of mob violence was grounded in the religious belief that America is a white nation called by God to bear witness to the superiority of ‘white over black.’...It was the moral and Christian responsibility of white men to protect the purity of their race by any means necessary.²⁴

The Cross and the Lynching Tree represents an attempt to articulate the universality of lynch culture in the United States in a book that commentators note becomes a “full-scale indictment of white American Christianity.”²⁵

But, the Cross and the Lynching Tree is only Cone’s mature work of full-scale indictment. Indeed, we might remember the entire body of Cone’s work precisely as the indictment of White American Christianity alongside the evidence of grace in the refusal of Black Americans to allow White supremacy to have the last word. From their witness in the Black Christ, through their expression in The Spirituals and the Blues, to the leaders of the Black civil rights movement in Martin and Malcolm James Cone never took his eyes off a cross that reveals the God who stands on the side of the suffering.²⁶ In affirming a God who takes sides, Cone also never took his eyes off those who were the cause of Black suffering, and the mode by which the cross reveals God’s indictment on the torturers. Like Mamie Till gazing insistently on the broken body of her beloved Son, and requiring that the world too see what she had seen, Cone required in his lifetime of work that the White world of Christian theology see what he had seen, the reality of White Christian supremacy. For over fifty years, Cone required that we relentlessly gaze on the bodies that were disfigured by the sin of White supremacy.

From his very first published work he revealed the “ugly contrast between the sweet nonviolent language of white Christians and their participation in a violently unjust system.”²⁷ What Cone had in view were the systems created by White Christian America which refused the well-being of people of color through the dispossession of land from the original peoples; the illicit gain of stolen work and wealth through systems of enslavement and sharecropping; the slow death in unjust systems of Jim Crow legislation and White Christian practices that kept people of color from social security, homeownership and access to education; the violently unjust systems of police brutality and mass incarceration that surged in 1971 and remains with us today. Cone asked his colleagues to witness their Christian faith and to see that God resides among the oppressed – “the people of the black ghettos, the Indian reservations, the Spanish barrios, and other places where whiteness has created misery.”²⁸ James Cone could see realities to which his White colleagues seemed to have been blind: that the fabric of our nation had been created with a White

²² Cone, *Cross and Lynching Tree*, 77.

²³ James Cone, *My Soul Looks Back* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1986), 21. Cone’s father was part of the lawsuit in *Bearden*, Arkansas four years prior to *Brown v. Board of Education*

²⁴ James Cone, *Cross and Lynching Tree*, 7-8.

²⁵ David Crum, “ReadTheSpirit Editor David Crumm interviewed James H. Cone” <https://www.readthespirit.com/explore/interview-with-james-h-cone-on-cross-lynching-tree/>

²⁶ Cone, *For My People*, “Jesus’ death on the cross represented God’s boundless solidarity with the victims”, 32.

²⁷ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 1969.

²⁸ James Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (1970), 227

supremacist ideology which dealt death to God's beloveds. Seeing clearly the systems of oppression, Cone could write with clairvoyant clarity in 1970: "What we need is the destruction of whiteness, which is the source of human misery in the world."²⁹

It was against the backdrop of the crimson thread of White supremacy that Cone honed in on the transformative grace of Black Americans and sung the resilience and transformative presence of God in the world in *The Spirituals and the Blues* [1972]. Here, again, the resilience of a people was never without the indictment on those who made the spirituals and the blues a necessity for survival: "The spirituals are songs about black souls, 'stretching out into the outskirts of God's eternity' and affirming that divine reality which lets you know that you are a human being – no matter what white people say." In placing the spirituals in the wider world of slave culture he was unafraid to theologize a "White people" who were "after all, Satan's representatives on earth"³⁰ And he connected White sin to the salvation wrought through the singing of the spirituals and the blues."³¹

In the 1970s White Christians could not hear his prophetic call. So, like any prophet, Cone persisted, in *God of the Oppressed* to heighten the theological paradox of White Christianity as it escaped to the suburbs, where "the values of white culture [were] antithetical to biblical revelation" and so, "it is impossible to be white (culturally speaking) and also to think biblically."³² Meanwhile as cities burned we hear Cone's frustration of his need to defend his narrative choices, insisting that "God is found among the black oppressed who were being destroyed by 'respectable' white murderers. I did not have time to develop my theological argument in a way that would be acceptable to the academic expectations of white biblical and systematic theologians. The ghettos were burning and my fellow blacks were being shot dead in the streets by white law-enforcement officers."³³

James Cone's five decades of repeatedly sounding the gospel call of transformative grace in the post-civil rights era of unending racial injustice drew attention as well to what is only now being recognized as 'white fragility'; White persons' inability to look squarely on at the sin of White supremacy in which they themselves participate. Notice the White fragility at work in the 1960s, when the young Cone decided as a graduate student (quote): "to make the connection between racism and theology in a highly provocative manner, by saying to one of my professors that he was racist, since he could easily talk about the injustice that Roman Catholics inflicted on Protestants in the sixteenth century, but failed to say a word against white Christians (Protestants and Catholics) who openly support black suffering in the world today. There was a complete silence in the classroom, followed by a sudden outburst of anger from the professor: "That's simply not true! Class dismissed!"

Instead of submitting to White fragility and White supremacy, Cone used his historical scholarship to introduce the White theological world to Malcolm X, who too was unafraid of White fragility and White supremacy. A fellow prophet, "Malcolm did not speak as an academic theologian but rather as a grass-roots activist whose critique was defined by his solidarity with the victims of white Christians."³⁴ This choice in 1991 to re-introduce (or perhaps to introduce for the first time) Malcolm X and to place him alongside the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, crystalizes Cone's commitment to seeing the God who restores broken communities at work at Dexter Baptist

²⁹ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 193.

³⁰ Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues*, 29.

³¹ Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues*, 77. "The thing that goes into the blues is the experience of being black in a white racist society."

³² Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (1975), 97.

³³ James Cone, *For My People: Black Theology and the Black Church* (Where Have we Been and Where are We Going) (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1984), 34.

³⁴ James Cone, *Martin and Malcolm and America: A Dream or a Nightmare* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991).

Church”³⁵ and in “Black Muslims Temples”³⁶ And both King and Malcolm X enable us to see the fight against White supremacy as a global network, whether in the transnational connections with Gandhi’s campaigns, or Malcolm’s “Message to the Grass Roots”

through which, Cone writes, “blacks in America [would] know that they were not alone in their fight for justice but were part of a worldwide black liberation movement in Asia, Africa, and Latin America.”³⁷ With this global liberation movement in view, we can situate Cone’s impact, even as he continued to work to transform the North American White theological academy, his writings oriented activism against White supremacy in the late 20th South Africa.

Despite the worldwide influence, Cone needed still to announce the sin of White supremacy that infected our nation – not in its most visible form of White nationalisms that we encounter today, but in the subtle, pervasive and therefore more insidious form of White ignorance that characterized White theology in its inattention to the real suffering of people of color in the systems that prioritized White humanity and dealt-death to its others. Thus, in the *Cross and the Lynching Tree*, Cone’s mature work circles back to the Christology that has been at its heart, and the failure of White Christians to see the meaning of the cross:

“White theologians in the past century have written thousands of books about Jesus’s cross without remaking on the analogy between the crucifixion of Jesus and the lynching of black people. One must suppose that in order to feel comfortable in the Christian faith, whites needed theologians to interpret the gospel in a way that would not require them to acknowledge white supremacy as America’s great sin.”³⁸ ³⁹

For fifty years, James Cone allowed the world of White theology to see what he had seen: that “When theologians and churches interpret and preach the gospel in a way that ignores society’s systematic denial of a people’s humanity...their gospel and their theology are antithetical to the message of Jesus Christ.”⁴⁰ Given the realities of systemic injustice and the suffering of people of color in this country, and the theological production that turns its eyes away from it, we hear with Mamie Till and James Cone together a call to White theology that cannot be averted: *Let the World See What I Have Seen*. But when a lifetime of sermons in White Christian Churches and an adulthood of White theological education yield less time peering into the wounds of White supremacy than a single hour with Shaun King’s Twitter feed, we might still wonder whether White Christians have eyes to see, and whether our theology does not remain antithetical to the message of Jesus Christ.

THE IMPACT OF CONE’S WORK ON THE DISCIPLINE OF THEOLOGY,

Cone’s work is the foundation from which White theologians might contemplate the wounds ever-more deeply to recognize White supremacy is embedded in White America’s theological outlooks as a ‘White Christian Nation’ and the responsibility of White theologians in taking seriously the indictment that Cone’s writing. Only recently have White theologians taken seriously that the chasm created by White supremacy originates with and is sustained by patterns in our own theological thinking.⁴¹ Yet, how can we experience transformative grace when a

³⁵ Cone, *Martin and Malcolm*, 127.

³⁶ Cone, *Martin and Malcolm*, 158.

³⁷ Cone, *Martin and Malcolm*, 165.

³⁸ Cone, *Cross and the Lynching Tree*.

³⁹ Cone, *Said I wasn’t Gonna Tell Nobody*, “How did African Americans survive and resist the lynching terror, while maintaining enough sanity to love each other and marry, raise their children, and teach them love and respect? Faith in God and in themselves is what kept many blacks emotionally and spiritually healthy enough to love not only themselves but also to reject hatred. Whites often used Christianity to justify the lynching of blacks, while blacks found in Christianity the resources to survive and resist.”

⁴⁰ Cone, *Said I Wasn’t Gonna Tell Nobody*.

⁴¹ See, for example, Katie Grimes, “Breaking the Body of Christ: The Sacraments of Initiation in a Habitat of

lifetime of sermons in White Christian Churches yield less time peering into the wounds of White supremacy than a single hour with Shaun King’s Twitter feed?

We cannot make meaning out of the death of beloved Black Sons without simultaneously committing ourselves to the unwavering gaze on the sin of White supremacy, and seeing them within the wider social frame of all those for whom they are lost beloveds and all those responsible for their death. In chronicling the life’s work of James Cone – propelled by the cross of Emmett Till and the cross of Christ – we come full circle to his insistent gaze on the sin of White supremacy and the contradiction of White Christianity:

If we didn’t think Black Power was Christian it was because we had accepted an interpretation of Christianity derived from the culture of white supremacy. When theologians and churches interpret and preach the gospel in a way that ignores society’s systematic denial of a people’s humanity, as in slavery, Jim Crow segregation, and lynching, their gospel and their theology are antithetical to the message of Jesus Christ.⁴²

And so, theologians must stand in the place of James Cone, in the posture of Mamie Till refusing to allow White America to turn their gaze from White devastation of her beloved Son Emmett -- “Let the World See What I Have Seen”⁴³ – James Cone too insisted, “Let the World See What I Have Seen.”

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White Supremacy,” *Political Theology*, vol. 18 no 1 (February 2017): 22-43. A new generation of theologians are asking us to do an accounting of the sin of White supremacy and how pervasive it has been. See also Kevin Consadine, “To Resist the Gravity of Whiteness: Communicating Racialized Suffering and Creating Paschal Community through an Analogia Vulneris” *Black Theology* (2017); John Slattery, “Dangerous Tendencies of Cosmic Theology: The Untold Legacy of Teilhard de Chardin” *Philosophy & Theology* 29.1 (2017): 69-82.

⁴² Cone, *Said I Wasn’t Gonna Tell Nobody*, 37.

⁴³ <https://lens.blogs.nytimes.com/2017/04/05/controversy-contexts-using-emmett-tills-image/>