

Living Beyond Death: Engaging the Christo-logics of Cone's God of the Oppressed after Williams's Sisters in the Wilderness

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ABSTRACT

This paper retrieves and develops the Christo-logics of James Cone's God-of-the-Oppressed by reading it through Delores Williams's Sisters-in-the-Wilderness. The paper will argue that the different perspectives between these two path-breaking texts offer complementary emphases on a singular thematic focus: living beyond death. Cone emphasizes that Christ's resurrection affirms and provides an eschatological excess to "death-bound" life. Williams emphasizes that Christ himself lived from this excess, a mode of relational life the resurrection affirms. The paper will develop this Christo-logics of eschatological life in light of both of their concerns to avoid enclosing or capturing the opening of God in Christ. Christological reflection does not ground human social life in the transcendent but rather invites and affirms a deeper entry into the disgrounded and therefore communally self-creative mode of life together.

INTRODUCTION

Thank you. This paper was written and is given in honor of the 40th anniversary of James Cone's *God of the Oppressed*. In the 1997 preface to this remarkable book, James Cone criticizes his original Christological emphasis, stating, "No one people's language and experience are capable of capturing the full reality and presence of God" (xiv). Christology, in this modality of capture, becomes a strategy of grounding, that is, of situating a particular cultural formation in and as the divinely instituted form of human life, as *the* origin and goal. Christology as a mode of capture is a regulative discourse, and as such, another imposition of limits, another way to securely hold, to place in (the) hold, the diffuse mobilities and relations that are creaturely life. It would be, therefore, a Christology still in the hold of, or the hold that is, white supremacy.

Cone's concerns over theology in the mode of capture are well-founded; however, there are aspects of his earlier Christology that also elude this pretense toward capture without relying, as Cone does in 1997, on a more general dialectic of transcendence and human finitude. Part I of this paper will develop this aspect of Cone's earlier Christology, noting in particular how his Christology is oriented toward a negative, critical displacement of the power of and over death, a critical displacement that unhinges the ways in which global capitalism operates through the production and maintenance of racial violence, or more simply, through the destructive expropriation of black life. Part II will turn to Delores Williams's Christological ethics, showing how Williams's text discloses a way to live within this negativity, within and beyond, in excess to this scripting of black death. Cone and Williams, in short, offer different emphases on the same complex theological practice, what can be called *living the excess to death within death-bound life*. The conclusion will briefly suggest that we white theologians ought to emphasize *the critical, negative* aspect in Cone's Christology so as to avoid attempts to incorporate, and thereby regulate or capture, these practices of black living in excess to the death that sustains white life, or sustains whiteness as what holds life.

Part I: James Cone, Christology, and the Excess to Death-Bound Life

In a singularly important sentence, James Cone wrote: "Christ is the *otherness* in the black

experience that makes possible the affirmation of black humanity in an inhumane situation” (*GO*, 105). Although often read as identifying Jesus directly with some essentialized notion of blackness, Cone consistently resists a dyadic relation between two discrete entities, Christ and the black experience, marking it in this quotation by that third term, ‘otherness’. This otherness indicates a between, not a separate third thing, but the gap or absence whose presence is also inherent within the appositional relationship between the other two terms, Christ and the black experience. Otherness is a term in common, expressing a common or commons neither held nor possessed by one or the other. This otherness marks an excess in relation, a movement between, in or rather as the between of these two terms, such that the two terms—Christ and the black experience—are also already split open, and in this way, not enclosed but already in relation beyond themselves.

This otherness, this excessive relation or relation as excess, takes many names throughout Cone’s work: “more,” “transcendence,” “eschatological reality,” “future,” “freedom,” “possibility,” and even “blackness.” Various named, this otherness marks a presence within a situation that is not captured or defined by it. The inhumane situation to which Cone refers is a situation of capture, a world of—or *the world* as—the regulative destruction of black life. Racial capitalism, or what Cone simply calls whiteness or white supremacy, was formed and still reforms itself through the violent regulation of black sociality, labor, and sexuality.

This violence, this production of death, social and physical, orients Cone’s Christology. Or rather, what is central to Cone’s Christology is this otherness to and within this violence, this presence that cannot be made present to, that is, determined by and therefore rendered legible through violence. In characteristic style, Cone puts it very concretely: “If one has a relationship with the Resurrected One, then one can know that one has an identity that cannot be taken away with guns and bullets” (*GO*, 132). The resurrection opens creaturely life beyond the violent and destructive closures wielded through the various technologies of death. Cone’s repeated emphasis on black suffering and death is significant, for Cone is tracking an excessive relation to these violent delimitations of black life.

In the guiding quote for this section, Cone suggests that this *otherness* is the condition of possibility for the affirmation of black life: “Christ is the otherness in the black experience that *makes possible* the affirmation of black humanity in an inhumane situation” (*GO*, 105). It is unclear whether Christ provides this otherness or if the otherness is the aspect of black experience with which Christ is identified: “Christ is the otherness in the black experience.” The ambiguity of the sentence is vital, for the excessive relation, the between that moves or constitutes the two terms in their mutual excess, cannot simply be placed on one side, as Christ, or the other, the black experience. The otherness, as it were, does not “belong” to either but marks what Cone calls a dialectic or paradoxical connection. On one side, Cone will refer to this connection as God’s election or appropriation of the struggles of the oppressed: in this sense, God *identifies* with the oppressed. On the other hand, Cone will argue, Christologically, that these struggles are *identical* to the activity of God, an activity that is God’s very life and being. This spacing or gap between identity and identification is this opening, this excessive relation, and it is this relation, this otherness in or rather as the common(s) is possibility, or freedom, that is, the affirmation of black life beyond racial capitalism.

Cone often emphasizes the negative or critical element of this excess. The notion of freedom, or liberation, is not oriented toward self-possession—toward the owned *product* of self-production—but is in fact, at many points, a negative term, pointing to what defies, displaces, or destroys the attempted delimitation of black life. The resurrection, in this sense, affirms that the captivity mobilized and structured through anti-black violence is never determinative, though its markings must still be worked through, in precisely the same way that the notion of self-possession cannot simply be negated via a dialectics of dispossession but must be, more carefully and strategically, displaced. It is here that I think Delores Williams’s work can offer us tremendous insight and assistance, for *Sisters in the Wilderness*, among its many other accomplishments,

offers us a way to engage the communal ethics that arises within and from this displacement of the violence inherent in white supremacy.

Part II: Williams, Christology, and the Excess to Death Lived Within Life

If Cone emphasizes the cross and resurrection as pointing to this excess to racial violence, Williams emphasizes Jesus Christ's ministerial vision so that we recall that this excess to death is lived within this life. In *Sisters in the Wilderness*, Williams writes, "The resurrection does not depend upon the cross for life, for the cross only represents historical evil trying to defeat good" (SW, 165). The cross does not represent the famous Hegelian "labor of the negative," a labor through which life or Spirit must pass in its journey to concrete self-determination, that is, in its self-production within and through self-dispossession. The resurrection is not a dialectical reversal of evil because then the resurrection life would always remain bound to and determined by—that is, dependent on—what it negates (suffering, evil). The cross is insufficient in itself: it only represents historical evil *trying* to defeat good. The resurrection is an affirmation of the goodness of creaturely life in the face of—but not beholden to—the diverse, life-denying operations of racial capitalism.

The resurrection, for Williams, is first and foremost an affirmation of Jesus's ministerial vision, his gift of "new vision to see the resources for positive, abundant, relational life" (SW, 165). The resurrection affirms the relational goodness of this life, experienced in, and even in, the wilderness. The resurrection affirms creation's excess to the powers and structures of death, an excess that does not glorify death but rather entails a whole vast terrain of "ethical thought and practice upon which to build positive, productive quality of life" (SW, 165).

Whereas Cone connects this excess to eschatology—cross and resurrection—Williams links it more closely to the incarnation and the doctrine of creation. The incarnation is "a continuum of the manifestation of divine spirit beginning with Mary, becoming an abundance in Jesus and later overflowing into the life of the church" (SW, 168). The resurrection is not what breaks open the closure of history, as it was occasionally and problematically phrased by Cone, but is the affirmation, the amen, spoken to this creaturely life in spite of the powers of death "trying" to have the final word. Using Williams's notion of the "arts" used to "keep the community alive and hopeful" (SW, 236), Jesus of Nazareth is this artful living within and beyond the realities that make life and hope difficult to sustain. As Williams says, "Jesus is whoever Jesus has to be to function in a supportive way in the struggle" (SW, 203), which is to say, Jesus is a mode, or a practice, of artfully living together beyond the threat of death through which white supremacy continues to structure itself as what captures—regulates and secures—the life of the *human*.

Surrogacy is a relational logic of replacement organized for the sake of production: the surrogate "stands in" for another *and* produces what it does not and cannot own or control. This relational logic of surrogacy is always predicated on an attempted restriction, control, management, ordering, or regulation of the relationality it seeks to exploit or expropriate. It is this relational exorbitance to surrogacy—on which surrogacy in fact depends—that is, for Williams, the central logic and point of Christology: Jesus Christ does not save through substitution but in the relational excess that "rights relations" beyond and against the patriarchal surrogacy of racial capitalism.

The strategies of survival that black women forged and with which Jesus is identified—and identical—are relational modes that renegotiate the devaluing of black women's bodies and labor for the sake of *all* of their relational connections and desires, which is to say, they are relational strategies that refuse and alter the continuing violence, in its various forms, designed to produce surrogacy. If Cone offers a profound critical negativity, showing Christologically the limitation to the violence inherent in the regulative social order of racial capitalism, Williams here offers a profound ethical reflection on the strategic modes of inhabiting this beyond, an inhabitation that is relationally diffuse, and through this relationality, contests *both* the expropriation *and* the regulation of bodies and desires that marks racial capitalism. The excess to death is lived within death-bound life, in the face of the massive orchestration of racial violence that sustains racial

capitalism, and not simply lived passively but constructively and creatively, artfully.

Conclusion: Christological Critique of Whiteness

The preceding two parts have outlined a reading of the Christology that differs from or moves otherwise than a theo-politics of capture, of grounding and securing *the proper form* of the human. Christology functions not so much as a regulative ideal but as a principle of critique, the refusal of what delimits and constricts—destructively expropriates—black life. Williams brilliantly charts the relational ethics that arises among those who live in excess to this regulative order. The movement in, of, or as this *between*, this *otherness*, is what could be called a critical, affirmative practice, wherein the affirmation of black humanity in an inhumane situation is not just a verbal feat but names practical modes of life that exceed—that are in the hold but remain, or are in remaining, unheld even within the hold of—racial capitalism.

The critical negativity in Cone’s Christology—which he draws on again, even in that 1997 preface, so as to locate transcendence concretely and materially “where dominant theologians do not look” (xiv)—this critical negativity is shared and elaborated by Williams. However, I want to suggest that for us white theologians, we must more clearly and directly engage this negative or critical aspect and not simply move directly to the “ethics of Jesus,” relational or otherwise. As Cone argues, the divine otherness or critical distance—the negation—is mobilized against those of us more solidly hailed by or entrenched within the orders of racial capitalism, which means, we affirm this “otherness” between Christ and the black experience—and thereby confess faith in Christ—through a *negative practice* that works against the destructive expropriation inherent in racial capitalism. *God of the Oppressed* is a forceful reminder of the necessity to account for our differential relations to this violence, for without such attention, we white theologians risk performing another attempted regulation or capture of the otherness between—in or as the between of—Christ and the black experience.

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