BUT I COULDN’T KEEP IT TO MYSELF: JAMES H. CONE’S ARTICULATION OF RESISTIVE PROPHETIC RHETORIC

DiArron B. Morrison

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BUT I COULDN’T KEEP IT TO MYSELF: JAMES H. CONE’S ARTICULATION OF RESISTIVE PROPHETIC RHETORIC

by

DiArron M.

A Dissertation
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Communication Studies

The University of Memphis
Spring 2024
Dedication

To the Elders and the Ancestors moved

And to the Youths who move Onward and Upward toward the Light,

I humbly dedicate this dissertation.

Fight. Burn. Live.
Acknowledgement

Above all, I must give special and first thank you to my beautiful wife. Without your belief in me and your willingness to give me space to pursue what the ancestor left me as an inheritance, this document would be impossible. I owe you millions of debts that I cannot repay, but I will try.

Another special acknowledgement must go to the other members of ABD: Drs. Ayo M. Morton and Badu Smith. I am beyond grateful that you brought a confused 2nd year along with you as you made the next step. Your help to me throughout this process has scoffed in the face of the sinful and damned academic hierarchy which is built on the exploitation of graduate students. You all have been conversation partners, mentors, sparring partners, and an academic safe space. Most importantly, you all have been beautiful friends and companions.

Yet another special acknowledgement belongs to the rich soil from which my angry Black voice grows: my family. Thank you to my father, Gregory Morrison Sr. for imbuing me with a mind wired for critical examination. Thank you to my mother, Sheba Morrison, for modelling for me an indignance for injustice. Thank you to my brother, Gregory Morrison Jr. for showing me how to buck institutions and ultimately nurturing my distaste for worshipping them. Thank you to my nieces and nephew- Paris, Eli, and JuJu. Thank you for being my hope. I love you all. Thank you.

Thank you to my church: Gifts of Life Ministries. You all were manna in a very difficult wilderness. To Rev. Neely, Rev. Brown and all who pulled a young minister to the side, thank you.

To my congregation: Darren, Gloria, P, Lex, and Bay, thank you for being my escape, my recharging space, my recalibration with the divine, my reinspiration, my family.

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Thank you to my ancestors for an inheritance of resistance and a mission of liberation.

Finally, thank you to my beautiful wife. This would have been impossible without you. That is not just because of your willingness to move and support. But like many ministers, my best bars find their origin in conversation with you. I love you so dearly.
Abstract

James H. Cone is widely considered to be a forefather of Black Liberation Theology. Over the course of almost 50 years, he established himself as one of the world's most important theologians and a prophetic voice against anti-blackness and other forms of oppression in America. While his theology and career have received much well-deserved attention from religious historians and theologians, very few projects have engaged Cone rhetorically.

This dissertation will examine Cone’s first four books: "Black Theology and Black Power", "A Black Theology of Liberation", "The Spirituals and the Blues", and "God of the Oppressed." Using his final and unfinished memoir "Said I Wasn’t Gonna Tell Nobody: The Making of a Black Theology" as a narrative guide, I employ rhetorical history as a methodological framework that examines the progression of Cone’s prophetic rhetoric, specifically along the lines of what I call resistive prophetic rhetoric. Resistive prophetic rhetoric differs from existing prophetic frames because it places the secular, not the sacred, at the center of the study of prophetic rhetoric.

This dissertation investigates Cone's foundational text to unearth the ways he violated place and negotiated controversy in establishing a resistive prophetic rhetoric. More specifically, these foundational texts illuminate that Cone’s prophetic progression develops in four phases: persona, critique of the sacred, elevation of the secular, and commitment to the institution for the sake of the people. These four phases serve as the framework of resistive prophetic rhetoric.

Keywords: James H. Cone, Black Theology, Black liberation, resistive prophetic rhetoric, African American rhetoric, rhetorical history, place, controversy, Amos.
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**Introduction**

James Hal Cone’s 1969 offering of *Black Theology and Black Power* initiated an ongoing and ever-growing controversy within the field of theology. Trained as a classical systematic theologian, Cone’s contribution to the field before that only included transmitting the white theology he had learned in graduate school to his students. However, he explains, “when the Detroit rebellion, also known as the ‘12th Street Riot,’ broke out in July of 1967, the turmoil woke me out of my academic world.”¹ This eruption of racial tension and Black oppression catalyzed a shift in what Cone desired for his impact on theology, the academy, and the world to be. Or, in Cone’s words, “as a theologian, I felt compelled to write a manifesto to white churches announcing that Negroes could no longer tolerate the violation of their dignity. I had to give voice to the feelings of rage in the Negro community, and especially the rage inside of me.”² *Black Theology and Black Power* was the beginning of his voicing that rage. Over the next six years, he would release three more books: *A Black Theology of Liberation, The Spirituals and the Blues, and God of the Oppressed*, that articulated and further clarified what Cone coined as Black liberation theology or Black theology. With each book, Cone violated the place that theology relegated him and Blackness to. Therefore, each book was partly prompted by controversies surrounding the work that preceded it. Whether it was Black predecessors or peers, white detractors, or students, these spheres of controversy surrounding his work and theology shaped and formed Black theology and Cone’s prophetic persona, message, and mission.

For my dissertation, I propose a study of James Hal Cone’s first four books: *Black Theology, Black Power, A Black Theology of Liberation, The Spirituals and the Blues, and God of the Oppressed*. For more details, see the references below.

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the Oppressed. In addition, I draw from Cone’s final and unfinished memoir, Said I Wasn’t Gonna Tell Nobody: The Making of a Black Theology, as a narrative guide. I employ rhetorical history as a methodological framework that examines the progression of Cone’s prophetic rhetoric as process, specifically along the lines of resistive prophetic rhetoric. This lens will also allow me to explore my research questions: 1) How does Cone’s emphasis on the margin and critique of the elevated challenge our conception of the sacred and the secular in prophetic rhetoric; 2) How does Cone negotiate place and space as he crafts and recrafts his resistive prophetic rhetoric; and 3) How do various competing and intersecting controversy shape Cone’s prophetic progression.

Biography: James Hal Cone

James Hal Cone “was born in Fordyce, Arkansas, a small town about sixty miles southwest of Little Rock. [His] parents moved to Bearden, fourteen miles from Fordyce, when [he] was a year old.” According to Cone, Bearden was where he began to negotiate the dual realities of white racism and Black liberation. He recalls “my mother and father talked about it all the time. They told us stories about lynching.” However, in Bearden Cone also encountered Black people who “affirmed their dignity as human beings against great odds as they held on to faith in Jesus’ cross.” “Two important realities,” then “shaped [Cone’s] consciousness: the black church experience and the sociopolitical significance of white people.” As Cone launched his professional career these two realities would prove to be conduits for his greatest contribution to the academic world.

5. Cone, God of the Oppressed, loc 175 (1997 preface).
6. Cone, God of the Oppressed, 1.
Initially Cone sought a pastoral appointment in the A.M.E. church. However, he quickly realized that he “could not serve as a pastor under AME bishops who had no genuine system of accountability.” He deduced that “their demeaning disrespect for pastors reminded me of arbitrary white authority.” He would eventually become “an ordained minister in the African Methodist Episcopal Church.” However, left the AME church only to return after the sect began to wrestle with some of the fundamental assertions of Black Liberation Theology.

After his pastoral aspirations were dashed, Cone launched a career as a professor, then an academic. Pursing his education, “Cone did his undergraduate study at Shorter College and Philander Smith College (B.A., 1958) in Little Rock. He graduated from Garrett Theological Seminary with a Bachelor of Divinity degree in 1961 and received his M.A. from Northwestern University 1963. Two years later, the Ph.D. [in systematic theology] was conferred on him by Northwestern University.” He then spent the next five years at Philander Smith College then Adrian College of Michigan before joining he faculty at the prestigious Union Theological Seminary.

There in 1977, “he was awarded the distinguished Charles A. Briggs Chair in Systematic Theology.” Throughout the course of his career Cone authored “12 books and over 150 articles and lectured at many universities and community organizations throughout the United States, Europe, Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean.” He also received several awards

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7. Cone, Said I Wasn’t Gone Tell Nobody, 37
12. “In Memoriam: Dr. James Hal Cone.”
including “the American Black Achievement Award in religion given by Ebony Magazine (November 1992),” and “the Eliza Garrett Distinguished Service Award in recognition of seminal theological scholarship from Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary (2010).”

Through his academic work and teaching career, James Cone has “inspired generations of scholars, professors, pastors, and activists to work to dismantle white supremacy and helped to give birth to womanist theology and other liberation theologies.” Some of the most notable names were Jeremiah Wright, Katie Geneva Cannon, and Sen. Rafael Warnock. Perhaps most importantly Cone was a father to his children Michael, Charles, Robynn, and Krystal and a grandfather to his grandchildren Jolei and Miles. In 2018, James Hal Cone went on to be with the ancestors. He died with the distinct honor of having introduced and articulated Black Liberation Theology to the theological and academic world, and for many, the world.

**Literature Review**

I am most interested in the intersection between resistance and prophetic rhetoric. With good reason, James H. Cone’s work has received copious amounts of attention in theology and religion. However, Black theology does not only provide ruminations of religion and theology. Cone and his work also offer insight into several pertinent rhetorical intersections. Cone, along with other scholars from religion-based fields, has profoundly impacted the growing attention communication scholars give to the Black/African American prophetic tradition. For that reason, Cone’s work has already received some attention in rhetorical studies.

13. Ibid.
15. In Memoriam: Dr. James Hal Cone.”
James Cone in Rhetorical Studies

Thus far, only marginal attention has been given to Cone in rhetoric. Most of that attention has centered on his contribution to the Black prophetic and spiritual rhetorical tradition. Andre E. Johnson’s “The Prophetic Persona of James Cone and the Rhetorical Theology of Black Theology” employs Cone’s prophetic persona to flesh out what Johnson calls rhetorical theology. Johnson argues that “without Cone's emphasis on the rhetorical, he would not have found space to voice and articulate his views.” Here, Johnson lays the groundwork to understand Cone’s theologizing as rhetoric. Johnson’s article remains one of the few, if not the only, pieces of rhetorical scholarship that centers on Cone. Diana Watkins-Dickerson, however, also connects Cone to rhetoric. In examining Rev. Henry Logan Starks, DMin she employs Cone’s A Black Theology of Liberation to highlight theology’s rhetorical function or God-talk. She argues that Cone’s “theoriz[es] God-talk by situation God on the side of the oppressed,” and claims “that not only must Black theology reject a colorless God, but it also must identify God encapsulated in the condition of oppressed people.” Watkins-Dickerson, then, presents Cone and his work as a discursive anchor through which Black God-talk can be negotiated. Earle Fisher offers a nuanced critique of Cone’s theological and rhetorical contribution as he elevates that of the Rev. Albert Cleage. He says that “Cone’s rendition of Christianity appeals to Martin [Luther King Jr.’s ideals of racial inclusion and equality but stops short of a demand for black liberation ‘by any means necessary,’” and perhaps “Cone’s black theology is still a theology of integration with white repentance as a prerequisite.”

Cone’s theology as a rich rhetorical space of discursive potentiality. Much of that potentiality lies in its ability to unearth aspects of the African American rhetorical tradition.

The African American Rhetorical Tradition

The African American Rhetorical Tradition emerges from a similar discursive space as the exigence that inspired W.E.B. Du Bois’s famed theory of double consciousness. Du Bois explains this phenomenon as the Black person feeling “his two-ness, — an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.”19 In rhetoric, the two-ness descends not from some natural delineation, but rather from an artificial disconnection manufactured between the African American and rhetoric. This artificial disconnection materializes due to what Andre E. Johnson describes as “the dominant (an exclusively white) notions of public address and rhetorical praxis.”20 Because rhetoric as a field is born out of this notion, African American Rhetoric is often processed as marginal and marginalized because it does not emerge from whiteness. Ronald L. Jackson II explains that “African American Rhetoric is a derivative of ancestral oral traditions, discursive practices, and cultural nuances” that emerge from Black ontological epistemologies born in America and emerging across the diaspora.21 It is worth mentioning that these traditions, practices, and cultural nuances impact how we understand the world and how we exist in it and explore it. We are again petitioned to understand the African American rhetorical tradition in terms of its twoness. Like the double-conscious Black agent, African American

rhetoric survives as a Black being in a world constructed by whiteness that simultaneously insists upon and protects whiteness.

For many, the most logical place to begin a study of African American Rhetoric is Africa and the broader African rhetorical legacy. Maulana Karenga explains that engaging “in rhetoric as an African is to enter an ancient and ongoing tradition of communicative practice, a practice that reaffirms not only the creative power of the word but also rootedness in a world historical community and culture, which provides the foundation and framework for self-understanding and self-assertion in the world.”22 For me, this striving toward self-understanding and self-assertion undergirds the project of African American rhetoric. That is why I later emphasize Johnson’s narrative which places history as a discipline at the beginning of the African American rhetorical tradition.23 I agree with Karenga when he insists that when thinking about African American rhetoric he is “interested not so much in canon as technique and rule as I am in rhetoric as a communicative and communal practice to build community and bring good in the community and world.”24 This counter perspective from canonizing- a mainstay in rhetoric as a whole- to community building establishes a foundational distinction in African American rhetoric’s core values. Adisa A. Alkebulan explains “crucial to our understanding of the spiritual essence of African American rhetoric are the Kemetic (ancient Egyptian) concept of Maat and the Dogon concept of nommo.”25 Maat and nommo lie at the center of a main theory that collaborate to ground African American rhetoric: Afrocentricity.

Afrocentricity

African American rhetoric draws upon a tradition that is centuries years old and spans across the globe. Its study likewise spans centuries and geographic locations. The Johnson article argues, people like Carter G. Woodson studied African American rhetoric long before the discipline began to acknowledge and capitalize off that work. However, as Keith Gilyard reminds us, “Woodson reveals himself to be of a classical bent methodologically. He liberally invokes such authorities as Demosthenes, Quintilian, and Cicero.” In fact, the introduction and articulation of Afrocentricity by Molefi Kete Asante marked a shift within the study of African American rhetoric and the birth of a paradigm that emphasizes a Black grounding within Black (rhetorical) study.

According to Asante, Afrocentricity is a “mode of thought and action in which the centrality of African interests, values, and perspectives predominate.” The paradigm begins with “the belief in the centrality of African’s post-modern history. It is our history, our mythology, our creative motif, and our ethos exemplifying our collective will.” Given this emphasis on history, Afrocentricity often looks to Africa’s rhetorical phenomena (such as the aforementioned Maat and nommo) to articulate African American (and other diasporic) rhetorical phenomena such as call and response. In that spirit, Jackson reminds us that “it is also necessary to contextualize contemporary paradigmatic revisions of African oratorical traditions found within African American rhetoric by revisiting ancient African sources and concepts.” Janice D. Hamlet explains that by connecting the African American oratorical tradition to Africa,

African American’s generate a firm grounding that allows us to reimagine history and retell our narrative. Talking specifically about the African American oral tradition, she explains, “in African American culture, the oral tradition has served as a fundamental vehicle for cultural expression and survival. This oral tradition also preserved the cultural heritage and reflected the collective spirit of the race. It has a powerful history, beginning with Africans’ preslavery existence.”

Thinking back to Afrocentricity’s emphasis on a Black grounding in a study of Blackness, we see that this is the paradigm’s generative potential. Karenga explains that by turning to Africa, “African Americans reaffirmed our commitment to our social justice tradition, a social justice tradition that is the oldest in the world.” What Karenga describes as reaffirmation empowers Black rhetors and rhetoricians alike to engage the rhetoric through the lens of what Jackson describes as “the fundamental axis upon which…Afrocentricity…lies: liberation.”

Hamlet reminds us “During the Africans' transportation to America, their language, primarily their dialect, was one of the first overt African cultural traits slave traders tried to suppress.” Baruti N. Kopano explains that as a result, “Enslaved Africans found themselves in the "new situation" of existence in America. Consequently, their ‘new situation’ produced a new rhetoric, one used primarily as a form of protest.” That rhetoric grounded in protest, grounded in what Asante calls a need to “respond to the external forces, [because] there is no escaping that responsibility,” imbues African American rhetoric with a specific flavor that widely permeates

Black cultural phenomena. Through the African American rhetorical tradition, liberation and the striving toward liberation become a onto-epistemological foundation that allows for and invites Black people into a critical existence and reading of the word and world. This critique calls us to challenge spaces of erasure and exclusion, even as they exist within our own cultural expression. After all, what is liberation but “power to the powerless to fight here and now for freedom?” The question then becomes, by what source does the power come? Within African American rhetorical history, a pantheon of answers have emerged. The African American Prophetic tradition gives us a uniquely tenured look at that question and its various answers.

The African American Prophetic Tradition

In his anthology of African American culture, Amiri Baraka asserts that the enslaved African’s religious meeting house was the only place an enslaved Black person could “go for any semblance of social intercourse.” This set the stage for religious thought and institutions to become a funnel for African American rhetorical expression and development. Watkins-Dickerson explains “African American rhetoric, though not always distinctly religious, is characteristically connected to a broader spiritual spectrum of discourse.” If we take Baraka seriously, the church was, at least for a time, the only place rhetorical forms we identify with the African American rhetorical tradition could develop. Therefore, any unique element found in the African American version of Africa’s call and response tradition was likely squeezed through and transformed by the African American religious tradition, specifically the African American Christian tradition.

38. Watkins-Dickerson “‘You Are Somebody,’” 104.
History tethers us to culture, and culture tethers us to history. That is why voices such as Katie Geneva Cannon, James Hal Cone, and Cornell West become so pivotal to understanding the African American rhetorical tradition. It is also why many Black scholars who are situated in rhetoric proper, such as Andre E. Johnson, Kimberly P. Johnson, and Dianna Watkins-Dickerson, draw upon and analyze religious texts and phenomena as they work to make sense and advance the African American rhetorical tradition. The African American prophetic tradition, then, is a distinct cultural and rhetorical emergence from the historical interaction Black people have had with Christianity (and other religions). And much like the African American rhetorical tradition, the study of African American Prophetic rhetoric is a distinct cultural and rhetorical emergence from a Black scholars’ historical interaction with the academy.

James Darsey’s 1997 book *The Prophetic Tradition and Radical Rhetoric in America* helped to introduce prophetic rhetoric to the communication discipline. Here Darsey positions the prophetic tradition as rhetoric in two significantly distinct ways. First, it was “a steadfast refusal to adapt itself to the perspectives of its audience, a rhetoric in extremis.” For him this “indicates something more complex than the breakdown of order.” Instead, prophetic rhetoric is a unique form of rhetoric imbued with its own norms and desired outcomes that more traditional takes on rhetoric cannot account for. This arises partly because, and second, prophetic rhetoric emerges from “a rationality not accounted for in the Graeco-Roman model.” Therefore, “the theory that we are likely to find implied in the rhetoric of Old Testament prophets will be foreign and alien when compared to our accustomed theories” because they arise from a Hebrew instead of a Greek rhetorical tradition.

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While groundbreaking, Darcey’s contribution was incomplete as it purposefully omitted women and perhaps less thoughtfully, excluded the African American rhetorical tradition. Within our discipline, Andre E. Johnson has been pivotal in filling that gap with brief examinations of James Cone and W.E.B Du Bois and book-length explorations of Henry McNeal Turner as prophetic voices. Through this he helps to provide a fuller look at the prophetic and African American rhetorical tradition. He defines “prophetic rhetoric as discourse grounded in the sacred and rooted in a community experience that offers a critique of existing communities and traditions by charging and challenging society to live up to the ideals espoused while offering celebration and hope for a brighter future.”

It is interesting to note that “the prophetic voice [has] neither mainly nor exclusively [been] defined as foretelling (the principle narrative strategy for the religious right). Prophecy [is] about ‘forth-telling,’ bold and brazen discourse against the precepts, principles, and practices of the status quo.”

It is an opportunity or perhaps a call to stand “in vigorous opposition,” so that we might “(re)invent those principles that define us as a people.” As Andre E. Johnson explains “here, rhetoric transforms the audience into redefining and reshaping their situations and even themselves. It allows the audience to see themselves in a different light, and in so doing, the audience can begin to reclaim agency and create spaces to act and, more importantly, to be.”

When placed into conversation with the exigence of being Black in America, and the history of the church as providing “the relative autonomy” to the enslaved Black person and being “one of the only areas in the slave’s life

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44. Darcey, The Prophetic Tradition and Radical Rhetoric in America, loc 37.
45. Johnson, No Future in this Country: 98.
where he was relatively free of the white domination,” we begin to see the seeds of the African American rhetorical tradition emerge.46

If the church was one of the only places of refuge and relatively full freedom, it means the vast majority of African American existence emerges in relationship to what Baraka describes as white domination. Understandably that experience bore fruit as African Americans began to negotiate faith practices and traditions of our own. While it is not the only faith expression and tradition that emerged from this negotiation, the African American prophetic tradition remains one of the most impactful for me. Watkins-Dickerson explains that

By its nature, the [African American Prophetic Tradition] is bound to an ethical contract that calls to its purpose a collective memory and understanding of injustice across race, class, and gender constraints, both social and rhetorical. This not only exists in the social movements and historical pushes against powerful systems and institutions, but also partners with a priestly and prophetic purpose to create a rhetorical persona that produces and projects an ethical voice for those captured in the snares of injustice.47

Cone further explains that “related to the ethics of black resistance were the religious forms that slaves developed. Slaves were able to live a different ethical style than their masters because they constructed a different religion.”48 Through Watkins-Dickerson’s and Cone’s assertions about the seat of ethics within African American religion and prophetic rhetoric, we begin to understand the ethical grounding of both. Because it was birth in slavery’s hell, the African American prophetic tradition heeds Moses’s call to remember.49 “Through struggle and sacrifice,” Andre E. Johnson explains, “this tradition has expressed Black people’s call for unity and cooperation as well as the community’s anger and frustrations.”50 Within this tradition

46. Baraka, Blues People, 40.
47. Watkins-Dickerson ‘‘You Are Somebody’’, 101.
49. Deuteronomy 24:18, NIV.
50. Johnson, No Future in this Country, 10.
prophets “must make clear that the gospel of God stands in judgment upon the existing order of injustice…disclosing that God is not indifferent to suffering and not patient with cruelty and falsehood.” 51 This is “an active effort to reclaim what has been broken from particular exigencies.” 52 Like the urge that grounds Afrocentricity, African American prophetic rhetoric calls Black people to center our own experience, history, and efforts toward liberation. It petitions us to retell our own faith story from our own perspective, starting with the acknowledgment that “framing God as white inevitably leads to feelings of inferiority.” 53 Like womanist rhetoric, African American prophetic rhetoric insists that any striving for liberation must not draw boundaries between any positionality and full human expression on one’s own terms. Much like what Kerith M. Woodyard describes as the “prophetic liberating” or depatriarchalizing principle” African American prophetic rhetoric and “rhetorical theorist… “reject configurations of prophecy that exclude the rhetorical activities of women or other marginalized groups.” 54 Such an orientation is born out of the distinct experience of being enslaved in Egypt; in America. That is important because “for prophetic discourse, the discerned context helps shape the discourse.” 55

I agree with Earle J. Fisher when he asserts that “[Darsey’s] oversight is somewhat understandable because to do so would require an intimacy with the Black experience that cannot be replicated by non-Black people.” 56 For that reason I privilege Andre E. Johnson’s framing of prophetic types. He initially identifies two types of prophetic rhetoric: apocalyptic or the jeremiad. Citing Barry Brummett, he explains that apocalyptic rhetoric is a “mode of thought and

51. Cone, God of The Oppressed, 8.
52. Watkins-Dickerson “‘You Are Somebody,’” 102.
53. Johnson, No Future in this Country, 38.
discourse that empowers its audience to live in a time of disorientation and disorder by revealing to them a fundamental plan within the cosmos.” 57 It also “promises the ‘inevitable cataclysmic end of the oppressor’ through some major act of God” 58 The Jeremiad “became part of the American rhetorical tradition around the seventeenth century among the New England Puritans as a way to express their self-identity as a chosen people.” 59 The prophet in the jeremiad tradition leans into an established covenant that provides the people with their chosenness and activates the covenant to chastise, correct, and provide hope.

While these two types of prophetic rhetoric certainly exist within the African American rhetorical tradition, as Johnson’s Puritan example shows, they do not necessarily emerge from the tradition. However, he identifies celebratory, disputation, pessimistic, and mission-oriented prophecy emerging from the African American prophetic tradition. He explains that celebratory prophecy is “typically grounded in a sacred covenant that calls the people to celebrate an event that leads the people to celebrate the sacred (covenant).” Disputation “occurs when the speaker offers a ‘quotation of the people’s opinion’ within the speech context and offers a refutation ‘which corrects this opinion.’” Pessimistic prophecy arises when the Black prophet finds “the racism too entrenched and the American covenant ideals not realistic for black Americans to ascertain [and] become wailing and moaning prophets within …the lament tradition of prophecy.” Finally, mission-oriented prophecy “is a constitutive rhetoric that calls a people to participate in a divine mission by reconstituting the people from their perceived identities.” 60

59. Johnson, “‘To Make the World So Damn Uncomfortable’,,” 20.
60. Johnson, “‘To Make the World So Damn Uncomfortable’,,” 23-4.
In that same article, Johnson notes of Alan D. DeSantis’s work which “argues for the inclusion of a third type within the wider prophetic tradition, Amostic prophecy.”⁶¹ DeSantis argues “Amos [is] a text previously overlooked by rhetorical critics for its persuasive potential.”⁶² He says that in this type of prophecy “the speaker (prophet) speaks as one outside the covenant as she exhorts the audience to live up to their own covenant.”⁶³ For me the potential of this sort of prophetic tradition provides an opportunity for a crucial contribution to African American prophetic rhetoric. Here, DeSantis draws comparison’s between Amos and Frederick Douglas. He observes the experiential similarities between both prophets who emerge from conditions that, at one time, rendered them “poor, uneducated, and lived in indigent circumstances.”⁶⁴ Simultaneously by choice and circumstance this sort of prophet finds themselves as an outsider, with no meaningful connection to any covenant as grounding. Sure, existence within an oppressive society might give them knowledge of a covenant, but that same existence gives them no meaningful access to it. It also calls us to wonder how many more people find themselves on the margins of the place that the covenant creates. This is why, speaking on God’s behalf, Amos petitions Israel’s sacred people to do “away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps.”⁶⁵ Like the African American prophetic tradition, a prophetic rhetorical tradition rooted in Amos would fundamentally push any boundaries between the marginalized and liberation. However, Amos’s call to stop singing provides prophetic rhetoric with an opportunity to question the sacred and the discursive formation of the covenant entirely.

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⁶⁵ Amos 5:23, NIV.
While Cone’s contribution to theology and religious studies is evident, rhetoric scholars have yet to thoroughly examine his enormous contribution to the African American rhetorical tradition. Returning to Jackson’s assertion about the African American rhetorical tradition, we only need to unearth how Cone has advanced our oral tradition, impacted our discursive practices, and/or contributed to our cultural nuances to begin understanding the depth of his contribution to the rhetorical tradition. This dissertation explores ways that Cone does all three of these things. For now, a brief examination of how his prophetic contributions advance the African American rhetorical tradition by promoting the oral tradition will provide rich soil for later explorations.

In explaining the relationship between the church and the enslaved Black person, Baraka asserts that Africans came from an intensely religious culture. In this society, religion was a daily, minute-to-minute concern and not something regulated to a specious once-a-week affirmation.” Here, Baraka draws out the deep connection between diasporic Africa and religion and provides an important note about an element of the African American rhetorical tradition that Cone’s work engages. If we take Baraka seriously, it requires no extreme leap to assert further that how such a people understand their relationship to the divine religious presence would profoundly impact their self-perception and cultural development. This is one of the main reasons that Cone’s Black theology extends beyond theological musings and contributes to the African American rhetorical tradition. As Watkins-Dickerson asserts, one of Cone’s significant contributions to the African American rhetorical tradition is again his “theorizing God-talk by situating God on the side of the oppressed,” which calls Black people to a “core theological understanding of God’s uplift for those unfairly and unjustly persecuted

pushed forth the prophetic optimism of being able to make a way out of no way.” Baraka asserts that initially, our enslaved ancestors might have converted to Christianity for many reasons. Amongst those reasons was their status as conquered. More specifically, he says, “the African has always had a traditional respect for his conqueror’s gods. Not that they are always worshiped, but they are at least recognized as powerful and placed in the hierarchy of the conquered tribe’s gods.” The question, then, becomes what happens when such a religious people see themselves as the conquered and the divine presence they worship as the one that authorized that torturous capturing and its aftermath? What kind of oral religious tradition emerges and evolves from that idea?

God is Black. That was one of Cone’s major reinterventions into the African American religious oral tradition. As Watkins-Dickerson explains, Cone argued that the Christian God aligns with the oppressed and identifies with the enslaved and not the human trafficker. Cone called for a complete renovation of our God-talk and oral tradition about understanding our relationship with the divine presence.

Resistive Prophetic Rhetoric

Given Johnson’s definition of prophetic rhetoric, much of this rhetorical tradition thus far has emphasized the sacred. But what happens when the sacred itself needs to be resisted? Grounding an African American prophetic rhetoric in Amos provides an opportunity to examine the exigence of the prophetic as an outsider to the sacred or, as secular. This negotiation between the sacred and the secular sets the foundation for what I describe as resistive prophetic rhetoric. This prophetic rhetoric critically examines the sacred and interrogates oppressive ideographs, values, and discourses that uphold it. Resistive prophetic rhetoric looks to Amos as a prophetic

67. Watkins-Dickerson, “You are Somebody,” 94.
68. Baraka, Blues People, 33.
starting point, just as the Jeremiad draws upon Jeremiah. Like many prophets, Amos’s message centers on mistreating the poor and vulnerable as catalyst for God’s judgment. Amos’s resistive prophetic message consists of four parts: his persona, his critique of the sacred, his magnification of the secular, and his ultimate commitment to the people which drives him to commit to the institution thru resistance.

What Amos engages is a resistive prophetic rhetoric that acknowledges the exigence of exclusion and potential harm inherent in the project of sacredization. As Watkins-Dickerson reminds us,

the African American rhetorical tradition …also functions in the world of semiotics by signaling and signifying beyond the words uttered. Not only are these utterances inherently sacred, they also are intrinsically calculated to move into a realm that is almost comparable to the relationship of blues and gospel music. They are both secular and sacred … and always spoken from the existential outskirts of the Black experience.69

At this juncture, it makes sense to pause here and define sacred and secular more clearly. The most sensible pathway to accomplish this lies in Walter Rodney’s conception of underdevelopment. He explains “at the level of social groups . . . development implies an increasing capacity to regulate both internal and external relationships.”70 On the other hand,

Underdevelopment is not absence of development, because every people have developed in one way or another and to a greater or lesser extent. Underdevelopment makes sense only as a means of comparing levels of development. It is very much tied to the fact that human social development has been uneven and from a strictly economic viewpoint some human groups have advanced further by producing more and becoming more wealthy.71

Development and underdevelopment exist in a dialectic of economic elevation. Rodney argues that Europe built a world economy that revolved around its own interest, thus elevating itself.

69. Watkins-Dickerson “‘You Are Somebody’,” 103.
The sacred and secular exist in a similar dialectic. To be sacred is to be elevated and made special. People and people groups elevate certain values, epistemologies, ontologies, customs, etc. above others. In the process of creating the sacred, the secular emerges. Sylvia Wynter describes this process as overrepresentation.\(^{72}\) Rodney further explains that “one has at least to recognize the full human, historical and social dimensions of development before it is feasible to consider ‘underdevelopment’ or the strategies for escaping from underdevelopment.”\(^{73}\) In the same way that underdevelopment only makes sense comparatively to development, secular only makes sense compared to sacred.

Cone’s discourse on the connection between the spirituals and blues strengthens our examination of this process. He says, “unfortunately, it is true that many black church people at first condemned the blues as vulgar and indecent. But that was because they did not understand them rightly. If the blues are viewed in the proper perspective, it is clear that their mood is very far to the ethos of the spirituals.”\(^{74}\) For the Black church people Cone describes, the Blues represents an other to the spirituals’ sacred position. Certainly, vulgarity and indecency may be justifiable reasons to understand a musical form as outside the umbrella of the sacred. However, that reflects more upon the society that has provided a definition and bounds around sacred than some universal understanding of what it means to be sacred. To Rodney’s point, sacredness emerges from a historical and social dimension of cosmological development. So too, does the secular. It simply becomes all that is left outside the bounds of the sacred.

Wynter’s and Rodney’s work petitions us to understand that this process of sacredization does not happen on neutral terms and does not produce an equitable outcome. The process of

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elevating comes at the cost of de-elevation. Moreover, there is a practical and material human cost to that elevation- to that sacredization. When one people or peoples elevate their own epistemology and ontology, they necessarily pathologize the other. Necessitated by the historical and social exigence of slavery, Black people developed their own ontologies that dictated an epistemology. Angela Davis speaks to this as she explains the differing developments of womanhood between Black and white women during and following slavery. She says, “the slave system defined Black people as chattel. Since women, no less than men, were viewed as profitable labor-units, they might as well have been genderless as far as the slaveholders were concerned.”75 However, this engagement with womanhood as a phenomenon became pathologized to make room for a sacred one built in the broader society’s conception of white women. Resistive prophetic rhetoric would then center Davis’s framing of womanhood to elevate the secular onto-epistemological position from the throws of enslavement.

Through his analysis of Africa’s underdevelopment and Europe's overdeveloping itself, Rodney establishes a dialectic that he describes as development and underdevelopment. The shout, however, does not exist in the dialectic but what emerges from it. The rhetorical situation that is underdevelopment and development begs for a third solution. It demands a new normal that will not only consider the context that produced underdevelopment but also respond according to that context. Rodney describes this third emergence as a “new stage of human development.”76

Resistive prophetic rhetoric exists in a similar dialectic between the sacred and the secular. Here, the prophet is called to respond to how the overrepresentation of the sacred has underdeveloped the secular. The prophet then is called to identify the issue and prophesy a third

76. Rodney, How Europe Underdeveloped Africa, 16.
solution. As in Amos, this third solution does not prefer the salvation of the oppressive sacred. Instead, it is wholly concerned with the salvation of the secular. And that is by any means necessary. The third solution then prescribes a new ontological norm for the secular.

At this juncture, the prophet has three states of being that they can propose: resistance, emancipation, and liberation. Ideally, this new way of being would be liberation. However, liberation is the most difficult to define because it often emerges as a type of freedom that neither the sacred nor secular have ever experienced. Does that make it otherworldly? Indeed, it does. Does that make it eschatological? By no means! Liberation is the existence that is hoped for and fought for. Every generation defines and redefines it as the struggle of that era is lamented, prescribed, and ultimately picked up. Liberation moves like the wind; it goes where it needs to be, and those who fight for freedom chase it. It does not go because it wishes to avoid us, but rather because every new emergence of the secular in every society has more to teach us about what liberation is.

I am indebted to Earle Fisher for identifying emancipation as a part of this liberatory triangle. When I described my previous definition of liberation, a life without the oppressor, he challenged me to think more deeply about the implications of that definition. He also argued that what I was describing was emancipation. We must remember that Africa existed and had the right to exist before Europe’s treachery. In that same way, the secular, in nature, have an existence that is not tied up in their relationship with the sacred. Of course, the concepts of secular and sacred are naturally tied together, but the people whose history and culture’s pen casts in those roles exist beyond that relationship. When the secular manages to rise and free themselves from daily interaction with the sacred, the work of liberation has perhaps just begun.
Or perhaps it begins with resistance. Resistance can often feel more pragmatic than emancipation and far more pragmatic than liberation. The enslaved person need not throw off their chains or escape to Midian or Pennsylvania to begin liberation’s work. Perhaps they work slowly or break tools or escape or poison their human traffickers. Perhaps they resist. Perhaps they run for office and change oppressive policies. Perhaps they resist. Perhaps they silently quit. Perhaps they resist. Resistance is practical because sometimes emancipation is as much of an ideal as liberation. It is something to be worked toward but not conceivable at the moment.

The resistive prophetic rhetoric realizes that caring for the people, for the secular, means engaging the sacred superstructure. It means resisting and calling the people into resistance. This resistance is not the end goal. Perhaps for that generation, it is equality or emancipation, or liberation. Whatever the goal is, resistance serves as the prophetic call and vision for a new and more human relationship with the sacred.

This prophetic lens then resembles what Kent A. Ono and John M. Sloop describe as pastiche which “may borrow from, without mimicking, popular culture.” Pastiche tows the line between membership and non-membership. With a sobriety, it acknowledges that to be oppressed means to be in this world but not of this world. In defining pastiche Ono and Sloop articulate the oppressed and pop culture as a part of a dichotomy. Like all African American rhetoric and prophetic rhetoric, resistive prophetic rhetoric is marked by an interaction with other cultures. African American prophetic rhetoric is simultaneously Hebrew and Black, pulling from the former, while grounding itself in the latter. Heeding Fisher’s assertion, it does so from an African American perspective, privileging African American histories, epistemologies, ontologies, and voices. Because, as Black histories reveal, privileging the sacred creates a

stumbling block to cultural critique. That block grows into a wall, behind which the voices of prophets of the secular is drowned out. The sacred, then, progresses in the revelry of privilege, never stopping to consider what the sacred position might be missing in the human trudge toward wholeness.

Resistive prophetic rhetoric is a call to the wider swath of prophetic rhetoric. As Watkins-Dickerson reminds us, the African American prophetic tradition “builds from understanding the phenomenological truths that have been told by those afflicted and subjugated to the violence of social sin and the difficulties typically guaranteed by an ontological disposition of Blackness.”78 However, an emphasis on the sacred might impede our ability to do this important prophetic work if we are not careful. Resistive prophetic rhetoric critiques prophetic rhetoric’s assumption that the sacred is at the center because what and who gets to be sacred is a construction. As Cone’s prophetic progression and message highlight, this construction often comes at the price of isolating Black ontological dispositions. By favoring the sacred, prophetic rhetoric runs the risk of committing a similar social sin. Like the African American rhetorical tradition, resistance prophetic rhetoric emerges from an exigence of erasure and exclusion and asserts its right to be an insider while embracing its history, culture, and position as an outsider. Perhaps most importantly, resistive prophetic rhetoric commits to the humanity of outsidersness.

This dissertation will examine James Hal Cone’s prophetic progression along the lines of resistive prophetic rhetoric. Beyond Cone’s persona, his constant critique of the sacred and illuminating of the secular position, and his commitment to the people whom sacred institutions victimize work in chorus to etch out a role for the secular in theology, prophetic rhetoric and African American prophetic rhetoric. Interestingly, Cone’s relationship with place is a primary

78. Watkins-Dickerson, “You are Somebody,” 100.
and unique justification for studying his prophetic persona and trajectory. Johnson explains, “Cone adapted a prophetic persona, which created the place or the location for him to be heard.” Taking Johnson’s assertion seriously, this project examines how Cone and his prophetic rhetoric create and violate place for articulating a new place.

**Cone and Place**

Throughout Black history, place has served as one of many battlefields in which the war of oppression, resistance, and liberating has been fought. Discourse of place often co-narrate how Black people negotiated their daily lives and their future. In America, racial place remains and ongoing conversation with a long history and varying perspectives. Kirt H. Wilson provides a comprehensive look at a moment in American place discourse. In his study of the reconstruction desegregation debate of 1870-1875, he provides a glimpse into the grounding racial logics that dictated racial discourse. He explains that “the modified rhetoric of place” during this period affirmed that physical racial differences signified deeper intellectual and spiritual differences that kept the races forever separated. These differences were established by God and nature and they constituted a social order in which each person, as well as each race a unique position . . . furthermore, each person’s location implied specific duties, and each role entailed a code of conduct. Everyone, African and European alike, was subject to this order and the implications of its class hierarchy structure.

Here, place describes a hierarchy in which the European is elevated and the African is brought low. This phenomenon is not exclusive to America. In fact, it is a necessary element of Africa’s aforementioned underdevelopment that Walter Rodney articulates as a phenomenon occurring between Europe and the rest of the world. As Wilson explains, this conception of Africa’s and

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79 Johnson, “The Prophetic Persona of James Cone,
81 Rodney, How Europe Underdeveloped Africa.
Europe’s respective places permeates interactions between the two at both the interpersonal and cultural levels. Here, Wilson echoes Wynter’s assertion that theology or God talk provided an undergirding for the process of creating these racial places.\textsuperscript{82} Because, according to the racist logic, God ordained these places, if “individuals or groups ignored their place or attempted to redefine it, they violated the natural order, making “harmony” impossible.”\textsuperscript{83} What emerges then is an imagining of place rooted in the assignment of roles within a fixed hierarchy. This hierarchy and its fixedness is why Asante asserts that within Afrocentricity “any interpretation of African culture must begin at once to dispense with the notion that, in all things, Europe is teacher and Africa is pupil.”\textsuperscript{84} In our necessity to respond, reimagining place and doing so through our own onto-epistemological position becomes crucial.

The way that Cone negotiated place resists this stuckness, therefore. It more closely resembles how Douglass Powell describes place when he says,

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“place” is more complicated than anything about the physical nature of the place, the social practices of its inhabitants, or the qualities of the individual observer, taken singly, will account for. Rather, place is suspended somewhere between the absolutes of objectivity and subjectivity, of geography or sociality, a quality geographer Nicholas Entrikin terms the “betweenness of place.”\textsuperscript{85}
\end{quote}

This betweenness means that place, despite the oppressor’s lies, is an ongoing negotiation rife with resistance and liberation potential. I agree with Greg Dickenson when he asserts that “place is also always politically organized. Place’s contingency demands constant decision making about past, present, and future.”\textsuperscript{86} Therefore, “the experience of place is more metamorphic than sedimentary: the layers have been bent, folded, broken, and melted into each other; they are

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transformed and transforming.87 This dissertation argues that Cone calls theology out of its sedimentary self-framing for the purpose of articulating Black place on Black terms. This Black place has been and is currently being etched out of the Black experience and religious experience. That place is resistive and demands resistance. It is a response. For Cone, it begins with a response to whiteness’s overrepresentation in theology. Both the overrepresentation and Cone’s response resonate outside of theology and even the academy as Cone publicly engages the process of prophetic progression. That progression and Cone’s prophetic persona violates place in order to articulate and regenerate place anew.

In doing so, Cone’s prophetic persona serves as a vehicle for creating place out of place. Place as Wilson examines it is a relegation. It is a box that traps Blackness and Black people as objects of white necessity. However, by violating that place Cone builds something. Black life is swarmed and burdened by built things that have no physical manifestation. Look no further than both Wynter’s and Rodney’s detailed explorations of how overrepresentation and underdevelopment were built (constructed). However, by transgressing his place within theology and thereby transgressing Black place as Wilson describes it, Cone articulated another place for Black people and Black God-Talk to potentially occupy. He then invited others to join him in the centuries-old effort of further fleshing that place out.

Cone’s particular interaction with place makes a rhetorical study of his prophetic progression all the more intriguing. In particular, he makes it clear that his and his rhetoric’s place is in the academy. The academy and theology are ground that he refuses to yield to whiteness. Cone’s final memoir, Said I Wasn’t Gonna Tell Nobody: The Making of a Black Theology reads as much as a narrative of a Black man negotiating the white academic space as

87 Powell, Critical Regionalism, 35.
an examination of his theological progression. In fact, those two realities cannot be separated. As a resistive prophet, Cone’s prophetic persona and message begins with a commitment to an oppressive institution. Perhaps this is what Fisher observed in Cone’s rhetoric: the way his framing of theology negotiates place that necessitates oppressive institutions. For this reason, Cone asserts “I knew that Black Power advocates, like Stokely Carmichael, and militant black ministers, like Albert Cleage, had no interest in debating white religious scholars or well-schooled white ministers. But I did!”88 In fact, this desire to debate is a recurring theme in Cone’s retelling of his personal history. He explains that he “always liked critical debates, and have enjoyed representing the minority, unpopular view, especially in defense of black dignity.”89 Much like Amos, Cone’s prophetic persona, message, and moment is fundamentally grounded in engagement with the hegemonic institution. What is more, that persona and message provide the moment with significance by violating the place that the sacred assigns and creating place for the secular. In the process he joins in a centuries-old project to articulate and further constitute Black place. Like the oppressive space, the walls of this new place were not wood and drywall, but rather books and sermons. It was conference presentations and debates in the hallways that produced understanding and reunderstanding. Cone’s resistive prophetic rhetoric quite literally called a new place into existence. That place was a field; a field built in the fires of controversy.

**Controversy**

Controversy as a methodological phenomenon within rhetoric emerges from the Roman practice of controversia. Michael Mendelson explain that within controversia Roman students

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preparing for law “would have to be prepared to argue both for and against.” He explains that “they were encouraged to contemplate the competing claims at issue,” and through that engagement “The student is consequently building a composite narrative of the circumstances, a narrative that attempts to respond to the situation in all its contextual richness.” Controversia, then grounds controversy in an assumption that conflict can be generative. In controversia, two forms of conflict help the student grow into a contributing citizen. First, external conflicts of view help to expand the student’s understanding of the complex and ever growing exigences that surround any phenomenon. Additionally, internally conflict within the student’s contemplative process- a clashing of competing ideas within one mind- allow for more rich deductions on any topic. As a result, the student is able to argue both (any) side of an issue(s).

Conflict and clash connects controversia as both ancient practice and rhetorical methodology to controversy as phenomena in our modern context. Kendall R. Phillips defines “rhetorical controversy” as “those places where arguments and the speech acts forwarding arguments are opposed, [and where] the process of public deliberation is problematized, the background consensus is obscured, and the search for common ground is halted.” G. Thomas Goodnight adds that “cultures generate controversies to the extent that norms of understanding and conduct remain contingent choices for individuals but at the same time important to the collective wellbeing of society.” For Goodnight, we currently live in what he describes as a pluralistic society which “encourages alternative lifestyles…in practice pluralism generates controversy as each group affirms its own identity by commenting on the inappropriateness of

the other.”93 Ono and Sloop add that “rhetorics of controversy can also include investigations of the rhetorics of incommensurability.”94 Taking all these points together, we begin to see that controversy, like controversia, is a point of conflict and clash. Whereas controversia focuses mainly on the individual’s clash-based ruminations, controversy locks in on a culture’s development through conflict. What happens at the intrapersonal and interpersonal level in controversia, happens at the interpersonal, small group, and cultural level in controversy. Phillip’s point, then, about the suspension of the search for common ground becomes all the more important because it calls us to interrogate the concept of common ground all together. In the creation of this pluralistic society, how has common ground been achieved? What anchors it? Who anchors it? And perhaps most importantly for our look at controversy, how does common ground point to the process of groups affirming their “own identity by commenting on the inappropriateness of the other?”

**Conetroversy**

This dissertation will argue that through its violation of place, Cone’s resistive prophetic rhetoric created a multiplicity of controversies. Not only was his prophetic message a continuous commentary on the inappropriateness of the other, but it was also an evolving critique of interlocking culture’s discourses of inappropriateness. Interestingly, Cone’s message, which frequently called for halts in the search for common ground, hinged on common ground. These controversies served as the water and feed which sponsored Cone’s theological growth and prophetic progression. They also rendered Blackness, liberation, and theology forever changed.

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As Wilson explains, in “moments of controversy, political cultures may evolve in drastic ways.”

In *Said I Wasn’t Gone Tell Nobody* Cone highlights conflicts and clashes that he had with the white theological institution, Black religious, academic, and political voices, and students—specifically students from other marginalized identity groups. He points to these places of controversy as explanation for what I understand to be his prophetic growth. However, even as his controversies demand a halt to the search for common ground and examination of common ground as a concept, common ground tethers him to these places in which his prophetic growth and development occurs. Blackness ties him to the Black religious, academic and political voices. Liberation ties him to his students. And theology—specifically his academic training—ties him to the white theological institutions. These points of common ground connect the parties involved in the conflict and controversy while simultaneously being called into question. In this way, Cone’s resistive prophetic rhetoric reflects Ono and Sloop’s assertion that “criticism should not only discuss the ways in which politics occurs in controversy and the ways in which various positions can work within existing structures; it also can, and should, investigate the development of logics and understandings that are incommensurable with current systems.”

Conetroversy, or the specific brand of controversy that Cone’s prophetic progression points to, draws upon an African American experience with common ground. Conetroversy does not simply borrow from the literature of controversy. Rather, it challenges it to escape any leaning it might have toward neutrality. Controversia called students to investigate every angle of any controversy to get a greater view of the issue.

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This dissertation contributes to scholarship surrounding controversy by examining and complicating how common ground might function in controversy. While I agree with Phillips that the search for common ground is halted, I also wonder to what extent common ground helps to imbue controversy with its generative potential. In what ways does common ground act as place, being both metamorphic and malleable enough for the drastic evolution to which Wilson points to, while remaining solid enough for those negotiating the terms of change to stand on? This project follows how the controversies surrounding Cone’s prophetic rhetoric help to drive his prophetic progress and build an aspect of Black liberation theology’s and African American history.

A Black Rhetorical Narrative and History

In My Sanctified Imagination Johnson challenges rhetoric’s popular origin story. To do so, he compares the work of two potential cornerstones for rhetoric as a discipline: Herbert Wichelns and Carter G. Woodson. Johnson explains that Wichelns’ The Literary Criticism of Oratory rests, for many, as the corner stone upon which rhetoric was built. “In that same year,” Johnson explains, “historian Carter G. Woodson published a collection of speeches delivered by African Americans titled Negro Orators and Their Orations.” Johnson argues, that this narrative which privileges Wilchelns helps to initiate a practice of racial exclusion. As Walter R. Fisher reminds us, “when they are so experienced, they are constitutive of people, community, and the world.” This exclusion, then, led the field to disregard contributions that African American scholars were making to rhetoric decades before they began receiving acknowledgement.

Describing African American rhetorical scholarship done outside of the discipline in the wake of Woodson’s work, Johnson says:

African American scholars also began to interpret for themselves this valuable material. No longer would they be comfortable in allowing white scholars to interpret or nullify the Black experience. They would argue that the Black experience was valuable and the texts that scholars discovered were also worthy of study. In so doing, they expanded the notion of scholarship and provided avenues for many of us to follow today.99

Given rhetoric’s resistance to do just that, Johnson’s argument for rhetoricians, specifically Black rhetoricians, to reimagine the field’s origin becomes all the more potent. For him, rhetoric’s disciplinary origins impact this retelling greatly. He advocates that “understanding the role of historians in the field of African American rhetoric and public address would give us another origin story.”100 Johnson’s emphasis on history as an origin not only aligns with Jackson’s call to recasts narrative, but also aligns with Afrocentricity’s broader mission to center Blackness in Black life and research.

The reality of ignored history haunts African American existence. In fact, Afrocentricity’s call back to African rhetorical and cultural centering arises partly out of a desire to understand our history and tell our story more fully. According to Asante “African American culture and history represent developments in African culture and history, inseparable from place and time.”101 This emphasis on place and time leads me to the intersection of history and rhetoric. History does not simply serve as the Black rhetorical tradition’s place of origin; it also is crucial in any project of liberation. How can we know self, enter self, and honor our own discourse if we are trapped in the hegemonic narrative? For that reason, this dissertation will adopt rhetorical history as a methodological framework. In doing so, I position this project as an

100. Johnson, “My Sanctified Imagination,” 44.
101. Asante, Afrocentric Idea Revised, loc 211.
answer to Johnson, Jackson and Asante to construct our narrative through our experience(s) while centering ourselves in any response.

Methodology: Rhetorical History

In her introduction to Doing Rhetorical History: Concepts and Cases, Kathleen J. Turner rather famously argues that “historical research provides an understanding of rhetoric as a process rather than as simply a product.” As the frequent citation of this quotation in that book’s recent follow up attests to, Turner’s framing of rhetorical history has helped to expand the sub-field enormously. Additionally, Jane Mills argues that “methodology determines how the researcher thinks about a study, how they make decisions about a study, and how they position themselves to engage firstly with participants and then with the data generated/collected.” While Mills’ method is more qualitative than rhetorical, I think her definition still gives us meaningful insight into rhetorical history as methodology. In this dissertation I will turn toward thinking about process as my how. For me, rhetorical history’s turn toward process, makes it a prime candidate as a methodology to study Cone’s prophetic persona and progression. Through his memoirs and introductions to later editions of his first four books, Cone provides a wealth of autobiographic and autoethnographic material. As Christina L. Moss explains, “this rhetorical process weaves in and out of the social and cultural context in which it develops, and rhetorical analysts add to this process by affecting, reflecting, and sometimes rejecting the social and cultural context in which they write.” I argue that this material can further illuminate not only what Cone wrote in the pages of his books, but also his why. As I asserted above, resistive

prophetic rhetoric centers the prophet’s why and for whom. Rhetorical history as method allows me to begin negotiating that space.

Rhetorical history will also determine how I make decisions about the study. I employ rhetorical history in a similar manner to Brian Crable who explains that this methodology invites researchers to engage the important work of “playing with the past in order to reconceptualize a vital issue of [the text’s] (and our) present.” Rhetorical history as methodology, then insists that I not only examine the past, but that I also turn a special eye to how rhetoric serves as a conduit for the process of history becoming culture and culture becoming history. Rhetorical history as methodology examines either “1) the ways in which rhetorical processes have constructed social reality at particular times and in particular contexts,” or “2) the nature of the study of history as an essentially rhetorical process” or some combination of both. Leaning upon Turner, I turn to rhetorical history to integrate Cone’s construction of a resistive prophetic rhetoric as a process birthed and shaped by a particular span of time and shifting contexts. As Cone’s context changes over time, so too does his rhetoric’s engagement with the institution. That is because process, like nommo, maintains a necessary heir of mobility. Therefore, rhetorical history as methodology allows me to trace that mobility as process and progression.

**Rhetorical History and The Study of Cone**

As I mention above, Cone has understandably received much attention from the field of theology. His work in that realm remains groundbreaking and innovative. However, just has Cone has not received much attention from rhetorical studies, his work has gone mostly unnoticed by history as well. Much of this can be contributed to two factors. First, Cone’s major

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contributions to scholarship and Black liberation began in 1969. That means that as I sit and write, his earliest and most foundational works are just now reaching the 50-year mark which would allow them to be considered history. This is one of the reasons that a rhetorical study of Cone’s work makes sense. While many historians acknowledge that this 50-year measure is arbitrary, all traditional historical studies require some meaningful temporal distance between the researcher and the researched. Though rhetorical history would do well to grapple with the spirit of this requirement, the rhetorical element of rhetorical history pushes us to extend past what might traditionally be considered history in order to more completely trace rhetorical progression. Said another way, rhetorical studies demands that we pursue the connections between history and culture. Therefore, a rhetorical historical study of Cone has the ability to trace his rhetorical progression all the way to his final work even though it was published less than a decade ago. That rhetoric is also important for understanding and analyzing the history.

The second reason that Cone has likely received marginal attention from history is because he is situated within a broader religious scholarship landscape. Throughout this dissertation I will argue that Cone’s work reaches far beyond the realm of religion and religious studies. However, it is also logical that the historians to attend to Cone’s work would be church historians. Church history as a field can be extremely denominational. That is why in my research of church history’s treatment of Cone, the most noteworthy exploration of Cone comes from a AME historian, Dennis Dickerson. Dickerson seeks to contextualize Cone within a wider AME history. After explaining that Cone briefly left the sect due to denominational politics, he says that Cone “returned to African Methodism in the 1970s when the bishops began to wrestle with his scholarship on Black Theology and wanted the AME church to have ‘a new self-understanding more consistent with its historical origins.’” According to Dickerson, the
denomination began this wrestling because “Cone’s book clarifies the meaning of Black Power and its relationship to Black Theology.” AME historians, however, are not the only ones who have examined Cone’s impact on a denomination. Baptist historian William Brackeny employs Cone’s theology as a tool to measure the denomination’s progress in breaking white supremacy’s hold. To that end, he says, “the ultimate answer to James Cone’s challenge, on the 400th anniversary of slavery being introduced to the English colonial civilization in America, would be to prepare an entirely new narrative of Baptist history that is comprehensive, as well as theologically and ethically balanced.” Here, Brackney highlights the way that much of church history has employed Cone thus far: as a continual call for reform.

While Dickerson’s and Brackney’s work examples the powerful potential for impact that Cone’s work has, it also examples the problem with church history being the exclusive realm of history to examine Cone. The denominational and Christian-oriented nature of church history may mean that Cone’s work, which has liberative implications far beyond religion, remain boxed within that context. I posit that if we explore Cone’s rhetoric outside of this context that we will gain a much richer grasp of those liberative implications. Rhetorical history as a methodology provides an opportunity to push the boundaries of the existing rhetorical and historical studies of Cone.

Rhetorical history as methodology also demands that I examine my own relationship with the texts and the context. Elsewhere, I have credited Cone with saving my faith. However, like Cone’s own progression that has been a process. Like Cone, this process has challenged me to

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think beyond the boundaries of how I see the world. For me, Cone’s work served and serves as a first shot in a paradigm shift. Even up into this time his framing of liberation and the openness with which he approached crafting his theology (theory) remain staples in how I think, teach, minister, mentor, lead my community, and pick my leaders. That, however, is one of the main reasons this project must happen. I am not alone in this regard. Whether it is preachers who ministered to presidents, theologians who crafted new paradigms which articulate place left out by Black liberation theology, or (at the time of writing) sitting United States Senators, James Hal Cone’s prophetic persona, message, and why has reached across the world. This dissertation studies the grounding of his prophetic rhetoric.

Chapter two examines Cone’s first book, *Black Theology and Black Power*. Using Johnson’s framework for pessimistic prophetic rhetoric, I argue that Cone adopts a resistive prophetic persona. He does so by accepting the prophetic plight of exile. Without the protections of job security or tenure, he defies the place assigned to him and Black people by the field of theology and launches a sober and jarring critique of whiteness and theology. That critique is so jarring that it creates realms of controversy that would surround him and inform his work for the reminder of his life. Through this critique, Cone establishes his persona as not only a prophet, but as a resistive prophet who is committed to critiquing the institution.

In chapter three, I examine his second book, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, as a formal critique of the institution. In this book Cone adopts the oppressor’s language for the purpose of addressing them and their damnable treatment of the poor directly. Spurred partially by the encouragement of more tenured Black scholars and partially by the controversy created by his first book, Cone critiques white theology and the way that it establishes itself as sacred. I argue that through this critique Cone begins to explicate an inherent issue with prophetic rhetoric being
rooted in the sacred. That is, that the sacred is a construction of the privileged and most often benefits the sacred at the expense of the other or the secular.

Chapter four examines *The Spirituals and the Blues* as a response to a realm of controversy that was unexpected for Cone: his Black critics. Having now established himself and his theology Cone found himself answering accusations that his theology was not Black enough. In response he steeps himself in the Black experience. *The Spirituals and the Blues* emerge as an elevation of the secular that the white sacred seeks to silence and abuse. Given that this book is written in response to Black critics, I read *The Spirituals and the Blues* alongside *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*. I do so because this text written is by a critic and inspiration of Cone, Amiri Baraka.

In chapter 5, I investigate Cone’s commitment to the institution of theology. Here, I analyze his fourth book, *God of the Oppressed*. This return to a more systematic theological elucidation examples not only Cone’s commitment to theology, but why. I argue that Cone’s commitment to those who the sacred victimize, the secular, drives him to commit to theology for the purpose of articulating a new place: Black theology. As a result, Black theology grows into a new place of resistance that formerly did not exist.

My concluding chapter briefly examines Cone’s persona beyond the timeframe analyzed in this space. I argue that the controversies that his prophetic rhetoric produced and his commitment to resisting on behalf of the secular lead his prophetic persona to continue to evolve along the lines of resistive prophetic rhetoric. This happens even as he becomes more and more accepted within the very institution against which he prophesied.
Mask off,
f*ck it,
Mask off
-Future

When I picked up my pen to write Christianity and Black Power, I vowed that I’d never wear my mask again when Black dignity was at stake.

-James H. Cone

Chapter 2

Unmasking: Black Theology and Black Power and The Resistive Prophetic Persona

James Cone was a theologian. While that seems obvious in retrospect, upon the release of his first book, *Black Theology and Black Power* that fact did not seem so obvious. I attribute this dissonance between Cone’s work and what was previously understood to be theology to Cone’s commitment to another tradition: the Africana political tradition. Whether or not Cone might have articulated his foundational commitment that way is unknown to me. However, even a cursory glance at the Africana political tradition will find that Cone frames his theological emergence using a metaphor common in Africana politics: the mask.

The most obvious example of this is Frantz Fanon’s Black Skin white Mask. Here Fanon begins to parse out the process and reasoning of a person living in a state of colonization to adopt the culture and cultural expectations of the colonizer. He says:

Every colonized people- in other words, every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality-finds itself face to face with the language of the civilizing nation; that is, with the culture of the mother country. The colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country’s cultural standards. He becomes whiter as he renounces his Blackness- his jungle.\(^\text{110}\)

What Fanon reveals about the Africana political tradition here is that its conundrum lies, at least in part, in the question of what to do about colonization’s masking mechanism. How does a person, community, nation, etc. depathologize the jungle? How do we unmask?

Cone opens the first chapter of Said I Wasn’t Gone Tell Nobody: “Couldn’t Keep It To Myself: Removing My Mask” saying “When the Detroit rebellion, also known as the “12th Street Riot,” broke out in July of 1967, the turmoil woke me out of my academic world.”111 Up until that time Cone had been hiding behind a mask that provided him opportunity and safety in white spaces. This mask was first forged in his hometown of Bearden, AK. Cone’s description of his upbringing in Bearden reveals a complexity of conflicts that nurture ideological roots. On the one hand, he credits the Macedonia AME church for being the place he first witnessed Black Theology in action. On the other hand, he says “as a child, I learned to wear a mask whenever I went to town in Bearden—careful always not to show my real self, for fear of offending white people.”112 Here, we see that from a young age Cone learned to both appreciate Black cultural expressions and hide himself and his jungleness due to fear.

Arkansas is a state that truly depicts what Malcom X describes as “the south.”113 In fact, Cone published Black Theology and Black Power just twelve years after the events of the Little Rock Nine. Therefore, in that den of oppression where his childhood progressed and his worldview was formed, Cone crafted a mask. He says “when I was around whites, I was mostly silent, spoke only when spoken to, and showed the deference expected of me: head down, never looking any white person in the eyes, for only ‘uppity niggers’ would be so bold.”114 In Bearden,

112. Cone, Said I Wasn’t Gone Tell Nobody, 3.
114. Cone, Said I Wasn’t Gone Tell Nobody, 3.
Cone learned a pattern of communication that would inform and enforce almost all his interaction with the white world until the Detroit rebellion in 1967.

I say almost all of his interactions because Cone identifies one instance in which his mask slipped off. Cone describes an incident in graduate school in which the fire that he would later become associated with slipped through the sliver of a mouth hole in the white mask. The freedom rides of the Civil Rights Movement coincided with Cone’s time in graduate school. He describes his frustration with his advisor and other faculty on their silence to not only the violence that Black liberation workers endured and accusations that these liberation workers were “outside agitators.” During one of his advisor’s lectures Cone interrupted and made an accusation that deserves to be reprinted in full:

“You are a racist!” I shouted, my voice growing louder. “You have been lecturing for days about the violence of Catholics against Protestants during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in Europe, and you’ve said nothing about the violence of white Protestants against blacks in the South today!”

This moment is crucial to understand as we build a rhetorical history of Cone’s foundational books. Anyone who is familiar with Cone’s work understands that this is a textbook version of the type of accusation that Cone makes of white theology. But this slipping of the mask comes years before he sits to write. This helps to establish a theme that remains consistent throughout Cone’s foundational texts. In these books, much of what Cone does is bring to the fore those things that the mask forces the Black person to hide and attempt to suppress. The demasking process is a rejungling process.

The relationship between Bearden and Cone’s mask reveals something relatively distinct about the African American mask. Or rather, it shows something rather distinct about the African American jungle. Unlike most and maybe all other stations in the African diaspora, African American

115. Ibid., 5.
Americans struggles from a disassociation of the land from which what Fanon might describe as their jungle grows. Haiti, beaten, bullied, and isolated as it is, is associated with melanated people. Jamaica, exploited and deprived as it might be, is associated with melanated people. But what land is associated with this strange tribe, the African American? Sure, music emerges from our neighborhoods that find its way to South Korea to be frequently imitated. No doubt, our children create dances, put them on Tik Tok and people worldwide spend hours trying to perfect and reproduce them. But where is our land? It does not seem to be Arkansas. Do you associate Arkansas with Black people? Maybe to an extent. But like the rest of the American South, I primarily associate Arkansas with racist white people. So, what does it mean for the jungle to which an unmasker seeks to return to be growing intertwined with the oppressor’s association?

It means that unmasking is no simple task. Unmasking requires more than simply returning to the jungle. It means dissecting the jungle from the junk. That is the junk within one’s self that demands deference to whiteness. Unfortunately, deference seems to be as foundational to the Bearden experience as Blackness. It is deep down in the culture itself. The mask, then, does not only temporarily and situationally protect from violence but gives the masked justification for fleeing the jungle. For Cone, his justification was surviving and gaining opportunities in white spaces. Immediately after prophesying to his professor in class, he followed his angered advisor to his office and apologized. He did so not because his assessment was wrong, but because “I’d taken off my mask too soon.”\textsuperscript{116} He needed to finish graduate school. He needed to secure a job. He needed to make sure he got tenure. He needed to leave the door open for full. He needed to be sure that he was invited to places to speak. He needed to leave the mask on for now.

\textsuperscript{116} Ibid., 5.
Then, in 1968 an assassin murdered Martin Luther King Jr., which profoundly impacted Cone. He writes,

The King assassination was a turning point in my life. As long as King was alive I had hope that white America could be converted to seeing Negroes as human beings. Without King, where was the hope? Malcolm repeatedly told King and the Negro masses that white America had no conscience and would never treat blacks as human beings unless we forced them. Malcolm's words were ringing true.\textsuperscript{117}

Cone’s loss of hope seemed to coincide with a loss of faith. He was still a Christian, but if white liberals, as he accused, could kill King, whiteness cannot to honor the humanity of even a masked Black person. We can name Black people who “did everything right” and were still denied a job or tenure or associate or full or administration or worse, were given a bullet.

King’s death marked another shift in Cone’s demasking process. At that point, he began to accept the plight of the resistive prophetic prophet more fully. the prophet first and most fundamental task is soberly accept the consequence of exile for their prophetic rhetoric. This could manifest as being exile from society; or even life. First and foremost, the prophet accepts this as not a possibility but a probability. For Cone, this manifested in defiance of expectation. Deference is an expectation. The mask is an expectation. “Quietly teaching white students at Adrian College (Michigan) about Karl Barth, Paul Tillich, and other European theologians while Black people were dying in the streets of Detroit, Newark, and the back roads of Mississippi and Alabama” is an expectation. That was what it meant to be a theology professor and a theologian.

As we seek to understand what could have driven him to adopt such a persona two other event should be highlighted in addition to the Detroit Uprisings and Martin Luther King Jr’s assassination. Cone also identifies the encouragement of two Black senior scholars as crucial in his early scholarly development and the ultimate commissioning of \textit{Black Theology and Black

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{117} Ibid., 33.}
Power. “A chance encounter in 1965 with Dr. Benjamin E. Mays,” Cone explains, “started me thinking about teaching and scholarship as ministry.” 118 Following a lecture that Cone gave at Morris Brown College, Mays invited Cone to have breakfast with him and his wife. There, “Dr. Mays did nearly all the talking, telling me about the quality of my mind and that I had an important future as a scholar.” 119 This proved to be vital encouragement because “Dr. Mays was telling me about my potential to become a first-rate scholar even before I had published anything.” 120 Likewise, C. Eric Lincoln’s encouragement also proved to be crucial. In 1968, Cone wrote his first essay, “Christianity and Black Power.” 121 That same year one of Cone’s friends who knew Lincoln, Negail Riley, convinced a reluctant Cone to allow Lincoln to read his essay. According to Cone “after about an hour, Lincoln sent for me to come to his hotel room” where Lincoln told Cone that he had “written a very good essay” that is “‘what the black and white church communities need a this moment in American history.’” 122 Cone said “I told Lincoln that I was going to expand my essay into a book during the summer. He looked at me with an encouraging smile but also with a facial expression that said I might be biting off more than I could chew. He nodded, as if to say ‘‘show me what you can do.’” 123 What he did was write Black Theology and Black Power. These two meetings are crucial in understanding Cone’s prophetic persona. The prophet Amos emerges from the shepherds with a word from the Lawd and from the shepherds. Cone does as well. These interactions provide evidence of proactive encouragement Cone received from his community. Both Mays and Lincoln knew how important Cone’s message was and they beckoned him to go forth with it.

118. Ibid., 38.
119. Ibid., 39
120. Ibid., 39
121. Ibid., 16.
122. Ibid., 19-20.
123. Ibid., 20.
Theirs was not the only interaction that helped to inspire the book. In 1968, following Lincoln’s recommendation, Cone was invited to lecture and interview for a theology teaching appointment at Colgate College. Cone importantly notes that “Black students were demanding the appointment of a black professor who represented their intellectual and spiritual interest in black church studies.”\(^{124}\) Here, Cone further “developed his theological perspective through intense debate.”\(^{125}\) He recalls that “Black students were enthralled by my lecture. White faculty and students seemed more amazed by my self-assurance.”\(^{126}\) He was also “surprised at what white people seemed to hear in my lectures. When I spoke of loving blackness and embracing Black Power, they heard hate toward white people…any talk about the love and beauty of blackness seemed to arouse fear and hostility in whites.”\(^{127}\) These interactions at Colgate helped to initiate a theme of Cone’s career and prophetic persona: growth through challenge. Cone writes “I have always enjoyed representing the minority, unpopular view, especially in defense of black dignity.”\(^{128}\) Throughout his career engaging debates like the ones he encountered at Colgate helped his theology and prophetic persona to evolve.

In *Black Theology and Black Power* Cone defied this expectation. At the time he was not an established professor with tenure or security. He was an angry ass Black man in the basement of his brother’s church prepared to release as much jungle on white America as he could muster. Defiance of expectation is fundamentally an interaction with the institution that defines expectations. It is confronting the oppressor to his face by breaking norms. This is a rejection of the oppressed person’s previously prescribed place and is an unmasking; a revelation that I

\(^{124}\) Ibid., 31.
\(^{125}\) Ibid., 32.
\(^{126}\) Ibid., 32.
\(^{127}\) Ibid., 32.
\(^{128}\) Ibid., 17.
thought you were racist the whole time. Amos’ prophecy and prophetic persona takes on a strikingly similar tone.

Resistive Prophetic Rhetoric: Prophetic Persona

Amaziah, described as a priest, confronts Amos for his prophecy. The priest, of course, serves as the official representative of the sacred institution. He is the hegemony parading around as the representative of the people. His position makes it possible for “the people” to become a demarcator for the privileged and privileged alone. Therefore, he sends word to the king, describing Amos’s prophecy as treason. The king, after all, is Amaziah’s top authority. The king and the privileged people the king identifies with are Amaziah’s god. On the other hand, Amos was “no prophet, nor a prophet's son, but I was a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore figs. But the Lord took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me, ‘Go, prophesy to my people Israel.”’129 Here, he positions himself as an outsider and identifies with the people negatively impacted by the injustices he prophecies. Amos’s very existence in the space indicts the religious institution. What does it mean when the shepherd has to prophesy? He was, in fact, a prophet, but he says he was not a prophet because he has no formal connection to the religious institution. But somebody had to say something damnit!

To this, the institution replies, “‘Do not prophesy against Israel, and do not preach against the house of Isaac.’”130 Amos predicts this attempted silencing when he earlier accuses Israel of commanding “the prophets, saying, ‘You shall not prophesy.’”131 For Amos, silencing the prophets is problematic because “the Lord God does nothing without revealing his secret to his servants the prophets.”132 This establishes a foundational element of both resistive prophetic

129. Amos 7:14-15a (NIV)
130. Amos 7:10b (NIV)
131. Amos 2: 12b (NIV)
132. Amos 7: 3 (NIV)
rhetoric and Black theology. The powerful seek to silence God because God identifies with the people and the powerful need to oppress the people. Therefore, they raise their own gods and their own prophets. To sacredize their own power, the institution has eliminated the prophet, consolidating her role with that of the priest, who becomes the official version of what the prophet should be. Amos’s status as unofficial makes him all the more repulsive to the institution. How dare this shepherd! Who is he anyway? The answer then and the answer now is nobody. But that is the problem. In the process of sacredization—elevating itself, its epistemologies, symbols, ontologies, and language—the institution has put boundaries on somebodiness. Through those boundaries, it constructs masses of nobodies, who have absolutely no right nor position to speak truth to the holy of holies; whose connection to the holy of holies has been rhetorically cut. If the legions of people knew what was good for them, they’d take their ass down to Judah and talk that ruh rah shit down there before the holy of holies shows up and does them something. (7:12-13)

**Prophetic Persona Scholarship**

Unfortunately, the current scholarship examining prophetic persona is sparse. It is clear, however, from the existing scholarship that prophetic persona connects the prophet with two sources. The first is the audience or, in our case, audiences. The second is moment. The moment and audience collaborate to create an impetus for the prophetic moment and the fragments that become the prophet’s persona.

In her examination of President Lyndon B. Johnson’s address to Howard University, Windy Y. Lawrence explores the connection between the audience and prophetic persona. Citing Darsey, she asserts that “the prophetic persona must place a people within a time of crises and ‘a
sense of overwhelming threat... a threat to the self-definition of a people."\(^{133}\) In Lawrence’s evaluation of prophetic persona, the prophet’s mission and perhaps role is to bring attention to some threat to the people. Phyllis M. Japp examples this in her examination of Angela Grimke. She explains that “via prophetic [persona] . . . Grimke admonished the uncommitted, exhorted the faithful, and rebuked the opposition."\(^{134}\) Japp’s categorizes Grimke’s prophesying with each kind serving a different purpose and addressing a different audience. Each works toward the same implication and prophetic outcome. Kristen P. Treinen sheds light on how and why a person adopting a prophetic persona might do this. Treinen writes “the authority invoked upon the prophet allows him/her to define moral and immoral behaviors from past teachings."\(^{135}\) For Treinen, the why is similar to what Japp sees in Grimke: the prophet’s role is defining morality. Nevertheless, the how, which comes through examination of past teachings, reveals something else about prophetic persona. Dealing with both the past and the present, the prophetic persona serves as a conduit through which something old -past teachings- can be made new or different to create a moment of examination and possible change for the audience.

Andre E. Johnson also connects prophetic persona to the moment. More specifically, he highlights the impact the prophet’s moment might have on their prophetic persona. Here Johnson examines Bishop Henry McNeal Turner’s prophetic persona and argues that different historical events that happened during Turner’s life, such as the Civil War and emancipation, shifted not only Turner’s message but his approach and tone as well.\(^{136}\) Here, Johnson reveals that the


prophetic persona is not simply a response to an audience but a moment. The prophetic persona drives a person to evaluate and pronounce upon the present moment. This is vital for understanding prophetic persona. As we see through Treinen, the prophet is concerned, at least partly, with the past. It also does not require too much of an imaginative stretch to deduce that a person admonishing, exhorting, and rebuking is attempting to have some sort of meaningful impact on the future. After all, morality’s greatest potential lies in its future normalization. We struggle and fight hoping that future iterations of people might not struggle for but live in morality. So then, the prophet draws upon the past and speaks to the future to address the present moment. The moment, then, allows the prophet to imbue the prophecy with urgency. The moment also serves as the soil where the prophet plants the rhetorical seed: an insistence on change.

The prophetic persona, however, goes beyond simply responding to a moment. Lawrence says, “when presidents choose prophetic personae, they in a sense, do not respond, but rather create appropriate moments, as these moments are selected by God during times of divine crisis.”137 It must be highlighted that president’s serve the empire. This is the same empire that has raped, pillaged, and murdered across the world and across the centuries. The fact that a president, much less someone like LBJ, can adopt a prophetic persona is cause for pause. However, Lawrence’s assessment reveals something important about the prophetic persona. When becoming prophetic, a persona does not simply respond to the moment. She creates moments. More importantly, he does not need the oppressive power that presidents and empires employ to create moments. Instead, they are empowered to create moments through some other source. I believe that occasionally, that power is otherworldly and utterly eschatological.

137. Lawrence, “A Crisis in Civil Rights Leadership,” 36.
However, this dissertation maintains that power is often drawn from the margins. Occasionally, the prophetic moment is the space between the past and the future in which a person emerges from the margins and adopts a persona to tell LBJ to get out of Vietnam. Occasionally, that power is drawn from power, diasporic as it may be, that always existed in the margins and has now come to the center for a moral reckoning.

To that end, Johnson provides four important indicators that a person is adopting a pessimistic prophetic persona: skepticism of civility, description of abuses, shocking and provocative language, and a dismissive nature/tone. While I will further explore the connection between pessimistic prophetic rhetoric and resistive prophetic rhetoric later (see chapter 5), it is important to preliminary note that the resistive prophet adopts a pessimistic view of and persona in the world. Additionally, much like pessimistic prophetic rhetoric, resistive prophetic rhetoric rejects nihilism as a tenable outcome. Given the similarities between these two prophetic rhetorics, I employ Johnson’s four indicators in this chapter to examine how James H. Cone establishes pessimistic resistive prophetic persona in *Black Theology and Black Power*. Here, these four categories bleed into each other. Therefore, in my analysis I argue that Cone uses shocking and provocative language to express his skepticism of American civility. Also, his description of abuses is delivered in a dismissive tone. Moreover, I introduce a fifth category in my analysis: affirmation of the margins. I argue that given his positionality, Cone’s skepticism of civility, description of abuses, shocking and provocative language, dismissive nature/tone, and affirmation of the margins indicates that he adopts a resistive prophetic persona because he accepts the resistive prophetic prophet’s plight: likely exile.

Preliminarily two important things must be established. First, *Black Theology and Black Power* is a groundbreaking text with many revelations. Establishing a prophetic persona is not the only important thing he does in the text. What I argue here, however, is that within the framework of the rhetorical history that his first four books collaborate to create, *Black Theology and Black Power* is the book in which this crucial phase of resistive prophetic rhetoric occurs. Second, as will be the case with each chapter and each part of resistive prophetic rhetoric, this book is not the only one that does the labor of establishing Cone’s prophetic persona. As I will argue throughout this dissertation, he continues to build this persona which shifts and changes with the moment and audience.

**Shocking and Provocative Skepticism of Civility**

Of all that Johnson identifies as making up the prophetic persona, shocking and provocative language best captures the nature of *Black Theology and Black Power*. In 1969 an attempt to reconcile theology with Black Power was not only shocking, but it was also scandalous. To this day, agreeing with Henry McNeal Turner that God is Black is provocative. The shocking and provocative nature of Cone’s language helps to establish his message as resistive prophetic rhetoric. What is more provocative than telling “God’s people” that their religion is derelict, and they should cease its practice? Cone and Amos share a significant prophetic similarity attacking of pre-established and widely accepted cultural and religious values. To challenge those is, in and of itself, shocking and provocative. Doing so is also at the heart of resistive prophetic rhetoric.

Shocking and provocative language does the vital work of unsettling the settled. This unsettling serves as an invitation for anyone who has ears to hear about reimagining the terms of normalcy. What is it that we have normalized and how do we need to modify it? Both Cone and
Amos vehemently critique an empire's normalization of abuses. Not only do these empires normalize abuse, they both cloak them in a rhetorical coat of protection. Israel’s coat was religious superiority. America’s is civility. It seems to me that any assertion of American civility depends on the assumption that the status quo is good or at least salvageable. For Black people, this brand of civility demands something that Johnson identifies as an issue in modern political civility discourse: “moving on before you address the issues and problems that would help you to move on.”\(^{139}\) The idea is that at best, the American way needs minor tweaks, or, at the very least, that change does not need to come through drastic action. After all, America is a civilized nation. Black folks are still waiting for the civility to manifest. Rather than being based in America’s historical record, much of this assumption of civility hedges on a belief in the ultimate goodness of whiteness and the society it has built.

This is James Cone’s shocking entry point into prophetic skepticism of civility. As Cone seeks to announce himself to the academic and theological worlds, he marks his prophetic persona with a staunch skepticism of the white status quo. In *Black Theology and Black Power* Cone provocatively roots his prophetic persona in skepticism of three areas crucial to the facade of American civility: whiteness as good, civility of Christian and theological discourse, and neutrality. Beyond simply inviting his reader to share his skepticism, he also lays the groundwork to establish Black theology as a replacement of the civility fallacy.

**Dismissing White Goodness**

For Cone, the question of civility revolves primarily around the topic of violence. More specifically, what to do about violence. Part of the reason that the Detroit uprisings were such a powerful catalyst for Cone’s unmasking, is because they provided not only a historical backdrop,
but an entry way for him to breach discourses about violence. More specifically, these conversations centered around why there was violence, who was responsible for violence, and what to do about violence. If you were to buy into the idea that America is a civil nation, you might also buy the idea that the uprisers in Detroit’s streets in 1967/2020 caused the violence, were responsible for the violence and perhaps that eliminating them, or their tactics would solve the violence. To that end, Cone explains, “it is this fact that most whites seem to overlook—the fact that violence already exists.” In fact, “the history of the black–white relations in this country from the Civil War to the present unmistakably shows that as a people, America has never intended for blacks to be free. To this day, in the eyes of most white Americans, the black man remains subhuman.” By putting these two assertions into conversation, we begin to see the basic premise of Cone’s skepticism of American civility. America positions itself as a country that is, for the most part, without violence. Richard T. Hughes argues that stories of passed down, rehearsed, and revamped through each period of American history normalized not only violence against Black people but the ignoring of that violence in the construction of America’s self-image. He writes

The stories ranged from tales of inherent black depravity to claims of black stupidity to affirmations that blacks had more in common with apes than with human beings. These stories rested on other equally malicious narratives—that black skin signaled a curse from God, or that black skin would return to its white and normal hues if exposed to colder climes. Each story reinforced the dominant themes—that blacks were fundamentally aberrant and whites were superior to blacks in every conceivable way. Each new turn of history’s massive wheel cemented those stories ever more firmly into the hearts and minds of whites in Europe and America alike.

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141. Ibid., 33
Let these stories tell it, America was not only justified in its violence against Black people and people of color across the world, that violence is not even violence. It is the natural response of the human to the nonhuman. To suggest otherwise, even after two decades of war in Iraq and during the era of mass shootings, might shock many Americans. However, a major glaring contradiction between that account and the historic record is the treatment of Black people, especially after our alleged emancipation from enslavement.

In fact, the historical record reminds us that white violence is America’s original and most consistent form of violence. It is white people, then, and not the uprisers who are responsible for the violence. This violence began and remains as a mechanism to maintain control. Colonization is, of course, an effort to control other peoples. White people then perpetuate, cosign, and/or ignore constant and consistent violence against Black people to make “sure that blacks will not threaten his wealth, his superiority, his power in the world.”\textsuperscript{143} That is why Cone, a Christian theologian, shockingly asserts

Theologically, Malcolm X was not far wrong when he called the white man “the devil.” The white structure of this American society, personified in every racist, must be at least part of what the New Testament meant by the demonic forces. According to the New Testament, these powers can get hold of a man's total being and can control his life to such a degree that he is incapable of distinguishing himself from the alien power. This seems to be what has happened to white racism in America. It is a part of the spirit of the age, the ethos of the culture, so embedded in the social, economic, and political structure that white society is incapable of knowing its destructive nature. There is only one response: Fight it!\textsuperscript{144}

The dehumanization of and violence against Black people is a white inheritance passed down as a weapon to protect white supremacy. For this weapon to be wielded effectively, whiteness must be rhetorically constructed as an ultimate good. The idea is that white people have built this ultimate good society by spreading the gospel of whiteness around the world. “Whitey” knows

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\textsuperscript{143} Ibid., 68.
\textsuperscript{144} Ibid., 57.
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the way, and through showing it has constructed a civilized society in which violence is supposedly unusual and mostly unnecessary.

For Cone, this perspective on whiteness plagues integration efforts, “if integration means accepting the white man's style, his values, or his religion, then the black man must refuse.”145 This provocative take on integration is also a rejection of white style, values, and religion as good. Rather, “what is needed, then, is not “integration” but a sense of worth in being black, and only black people can teach that. Black consciousness is the key to the black man's emancipation from his distorted self-image.”146 What would have been shocking about Cone’s language then and now is the way that this God talk completely and utterly rejects whiteness as valuable. As Cone puts it “the problem with white society is that it wants to assume that everything is basically all right. It wants black people to assume that slavery never existed, and the present brutalities inflicted on them are the working of isolated individuals and not basically a part of the system itself.”147 However, America’s treatment of Black people indicts any claims of civility because the nature of that interaction has always been extreme, unrelenting, and unrepentant violence.

Civility, then, is more than a fallacy. It is a mirage. It is a false image projected by this idea of white goodness that scoffs in the face of the Black historical record. It then has the audacity to whine about violence when the answer to white violence is uprisings, when Black people choose Black Power. That is when “Blacks . . . demand that whites get off their backs. If whites do not get off the backs of blacks, they must expect that blacks will literally throw them off by whatever means are at their disposal.” Cone writes, “this is the meaning of Black

145. Ibid., 38.
146. Ibid., 40.
147. Ibid., 146.
Power.” At that point the supposed civil society wants to engage in conversations about reconciliation as a solution to violence. However, their understanding of reconciliation “would mean admitting that white values are the values of God. It means black people accepting the white way of life. It assumes that black people have no values except those that are given by the white masters.” Of course, this understanding of reconciliation is simply a reforging of the weapon handed from one white generation to another. Therefore, “any advice from whites to blacks on how to deal with white oppression is automatically under suspicion as a clever device to further enslavement.” This is because “white oppressors are incompetent to dictate the terms of reconciliation because they are enslaved by their own racism and will inevitably seek to base the terms on their right to play God in human relationships. The history of slavery and Jim Crow and “integration” efforts renders white people virtually incapable of knowing even how to talk to black people as persons.” From this perspective, white discourse about reconciliation acts as a disingenuous attempt to appear civil while continuing to perpetuate violence against Black people.

Articulating his skepticism of civility required Cone to root his world view in a skepticism of the goodness of whiteness. The assumption that white is good positions whiteness as this holy and sacred station, which justifies its centering. However, an honest examination of the historical record reveals that whiteness is garbage; violent, lying garbage. The uprisings, then, are an attempt to take out the garbage and clean up the streets. Unfortunately, discourse that supports the goodness and sacredness of whiteness is often fortified by religious and theological arguments.

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148. Ibid., 42.
149. Ibid.,146.
150. Ibid., 41.
151. Ibid., 141.
Dismissing Theological/Christian Civility

White people’s self-granted ability to dictate terms seems to be the tie between the civility that emerges from assumptions of white goodness and the brand of civility that Cone engaged in Christian theological discourse. Perhaps addressing responses to the Detroit uprisings, he writes, “it seems that the mistake of most whites, religionists included, is their insistence on telling blacks how to respond, “as Christians” to racism, insisting that nonviolence is the only appropriate response.” Much like the conversation surrounding reconciliation, Christian ruminations about violence were doing very little to address the origin of violence: whiteness. Instead, Christian responses like the insistences upon nonviolence or love only worked to fortify the abusive status quo. According to Cone,

Whites forget about the necessary interrelatedness of love, justice, and power when they encounter black people. Love becomes emotional and sentimental. This sentimental, condescending love accounts for their desire to “help” by relieving the physical pains of the suffering blacks so they can satisfy their own religious piety and keep the poor powerless. But the new blacks, redeemed in Christ, must refuse their “help” and demand that blacks be confronted as persons.

For him, the white Christian/theological discourse that he was engaging had very little to do with God’s will and everything to do with employing God as a weapon against Black people. “White Christianity in America,” he argues, “was born in heresy. It is very coming to be was an attempt to reconcile the impossible—slavery and Christianity and the existence of the black churches is a visible reminder of its apostasy.” As a result “the white church has not merely failed to render services to the poor, but has failed miserably in being a visible manifestation to the world of God's intention for humanity and in proclaiming the gospel to the world.”

152. Ibid., 68.
153. Ibid., 67.
154. Ibid., 107.
155. Ibid., 82.
Church,” then, “does not appear to be a community willing to pay up personally. It is not a community that views every command of Jesus as a call to the cross. It appears, instead, as an institution whose existence depends on the evils that produce the riots in the cities.” For Cone the “job of the Church is to become black with him and accept the shame that white society places on blacks. But the [real] Church knows that what is shame to the world is holiness to God.” What is more, “no Christian can evade this responsibility. He cannot say that the poor are in poverty because they will not work, or they suffer because they are lazy.” But rather than taking on the shame, the church has become a top producer of shame because shaming the Black and the poor rhetorically justifies violence against them. “For the white churches this means a radical reorientation of their style in the world toward blacks. It means,” Cone says, “that they must change sides, giving up all claims to lofty neutrality. It means that they will identify utterly with the oppressed, thus inevitably tasting the sting of oppression themselves.” Cone insists that the church must become Black and accept Asante’s challenge to respond to the outside forces that perpetuate violence against Black people.

The white church and white theological discourse refuses to do that, however. Even when not insisting on reconciliation or love as pacifiers to Black cries, they still manage to avoid the topic of Black suffering by insisting that other matters are more theologically significant. In response, Cone argues “that much of [the] abstract theological disputation and speculation—the favorite pastime for many theological societies—serves as a substitute for relevant involvement in a world where men die for lack of political justice.” It cannot be overstated that here Cone,

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156. Ibid., 88.
157. Ibid., 80.
158. Ibid., 61.
159. Ibid., 89.
160. Ibid., 59.
an American theologian, provocatively pronounces American theology irrelevant. He argues “theology here is largely an intellectual game unrelated to the issues of life and death” and “the seminaries in America are probably the most obvious sign of the irrelevance of theology to life.” He further asserts that theology is “an intellectual exercise but a worldly risk. American theology has failed to take that worldly risk.” Therefore, “just as the black revolution means the death of America as it has been, so it requires the death of the Church in its familiar patterns.”

Completely, disregarding theology’s elevation as God talk, Cone repositions the essence of what makes theology important. Theology is important, not simply because it talks about God, but because it risks everything for the people God identifies with—the weak. That is something American theology simply cannot do. America builds its wealth by robbing the weak. Its kink is abusing and assaulting the weak. To that end, Cone says, “as long as theology is identified with the system, it is impossible to criticize it by bringing the judgment of God's righteousness upon it.” Such a staunch identification with the system demands that American theology ignore the most relevant theological question of the day, Black suffering, and distract itself with other things.

A distracted theology is particularly paramount in American manifestations of Christianity and theology. The avoidance of God’s call to respond extends beyond white churches. Cone explains that “unfortunately, Christianity came to the black man through white oppressors who demanded that he reject his concern for this world as well as his blackness and

161. Ibid., 92.
162. Ibid., 92.
163. Ibid., 118.
164. Ibid., 94.
affirm the next world and whiteness.” Not only did this result in an eschatological grounding in faith, which I will elaborate on further below, but also in a faith that seems less interested in working toward liberation. In many Black church spaces, “the holding of conferences, the election of bishops, the fund-raising drive for a new building or air conditioner seem to be more important than the blacks who are shot because they want to be men.” As a result, “the black church, though spatially located in the community of the oppressed, has not responded to the needs of its people.” Therefore, God “is not in our peaceful, quiet, comfortable suburban “churches,” but in the ghetto fighting the racism of churchly white people.” According to Cone, God has abandoned the “sacred space” and ventured into the ghetto because the church has refused its commission to side with the oppressed of the land. It has done this three ways. It does so first by hiding its theology behind thinly veiled refortifications of white supremacy. As an alternative, it might distract itself with other things it deems to safer than its calling. Or, finally it may choose silent compliance with white supremacy: neutrality.

Skepticism of Neutrality

For Cone, this notion of neutrality plagues much of theology and wider race discourses. According to Cone, neutrality is a white supremacist position taken by liberals that differs from more overtly racist positions in approach but not result. He explains that

The liberal, then, is one who sees “both sides” of the issue and shies away from “extremism” in any form. He wants to change the heart of the racist without ceasing to be his friend; he wants progress without conflict. Therefore, when he sees blacks engaging in civil disobedience and demanding “Freedom Now,” he is disturbed. Black people know who the enemy is, and they are forcing the liberal to take sides. But the liberal wants to be a friend, that is, enjoy the rights and privileges pertaining to whiteness and also work for the “Negro.” He wants change without risk, victory without blood.168

165. Ibid., 51.
166. Ibid., 114.
167. Ibid., 78.
168. Ibid., 46.
This desire to maintain allegiances to mutually exclusive sides positions those who take a neutral side as white supremacists. Cone later explains that “there is no neutral position in a war. Even in silence, one is automatically identified as being on the side of the oppressor.”\(^{169}\) Returning to the theme of violence, Cone reasserts the need to respond. In a violent situation, this response has to be definitive. If one of your friends were planning to murder another of your friends and told you of the scheme you would have an obligation to use the fullest extent of your power to stop your friend's demise. To take a neutral position makes you an accessory. But liberals do not wish to be identified as such. To avoid accountability, they promote neutrality as some sort of noble stance. But “there is no place in this war of liberation for nice white people who want to avoid taking sides and remain friends with both the racists and the Negro.”\(^{170}\) To side with racist is to side with violence; with false civility and to ignore the important call into something that Cone asserts is decidedly more real than the mirage of American civility: Black Theology.

**Black Theology as Replacement for Civility**

Skepticism of American civility proves to be a crucial element of Cone’s prophetic persona because it acts as the bedrock upon which he builds his central thesis: “if Christ is present among the oppressed, as he promised, he must be working through the activity of Black Power.”\(^{171}\) If white violence makes civility a lie, then what should serve as the launching point to engage race? Cone answers: “Black Theology believes that the problem of racism will not be solved through talk but through action. Therefore, its task is to carve out a revolutionary theology based on relevant involvement in the world of racism.”\(^{172}\) Here, “revolution is not

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169. Ibid., 76.
170. Ibid., 79.
171. Ibid., 63.
172. Ibid., 134.
merely a ‘change of heart’ but a radical black encounter with the structure of white racism, with the full intention of destroying its menacing power.”\(^{173}\) Whereas civility avoids addressing the core of white supremacy through promoting the sacredness of whiteness, through revolution Black theology seeks white supremacy’s destruction. It asserts that God is with “the new black man” who “refuses to assume the It-role which whites expect but addresses them as an equal. This is when the conflict arises. Therefore, the new black man refuses to speak of love without justice and power.”\(^{174}\) In Black theology “Black is holy, that is, it is a symbol of God's presence in history on behalf of the oppressed man. Where there is black, there is oppression; but blacks can be assured that where there is blackness, there is Christ who has taken on blackness so that what is evil in men's eyes might become good.”\(^{175}\) What is more, in Black Theology

Jesus is not safely confined in the first century. He is our contemporary, proclaiming release to the captives and rebelling against all who silently accept the structures of injustice. If he is not in the ghetto, if he is not where men are living at the brink of existence, but is, rather, in the easy life of the suburbs, then the gospel is a lie. The opposite, however, is the case. Christianity is not alien to Black Power; it is Black Power.\(^{176}\)

By asserting Christ’s Blackness, Cone divorces Christianity from its dictated relationship with whiteness and hamstrings whiteness’s ability to further insist upon its holiness. If whiteness is so great, then why is Jesus Black and fighting alongside me in the ghettos that you white racist constructed? Or as Cone puts it: “Black Theology must reject outright this style of behavior [that acts as if Black people offer nothing] and insist that black people can bring something to the relationship. They must bring a system of black values that deny that “white is right” and stress the beauty of being black.”\(^{177}\) On the back of this assertion Cone makes another shocking

\(^{173}\) Ibid., 134-5.  
\(^{174}\) Ibid., 66.  
\(^{175}\) Ibid., 80.  
\(^{176}\) Ibid., 55.  
\(^{177}\) Ibid., 143.
argument: “Black Power, though not consciously seeking to be Christian, seems to be where men are in trouble. And to the extent that it is genuinely concerned and seeks to meet the needs of the oppressed, it is the work of God's Spirit.” Once again smashing the denormalizing button, Cone shockingly asserts that Black Power, not overtly Christian places, practices, and norms is where the Spirit of God rests. Here in lies the seed of Cone’s persona that made him not only prophetic, but resistively so. His whole prophetic persona was tied up in the ushering out of a white supremacist value system and, importantly, the ushering in of a new value system rooted in the experience of Black people. That meant a rejection of any cultural norm that did not support “complete emancipation of black people from white oppression by whatever means black people deem necessary.”

Cone’s rhetoric throughout *Black Theology and Black Power* was shocking because it was, at its core, a challenge to the white civility discourse upheld by “christian” rhetoric. By agreeing with Malcolm X’s description of white people as devils and calling for the death of the church, Cone stripped away justifications for supremacy. Because supremacy is such a fundamental element of both the white and Christian value set, what Cone began to propose through the reconciliation of Black Power and theology was a new system of values. This new value system would not emerge from the blue skies and rainbows of false civility upon which white theology and whiteness are built. Rather, this new value system would emerge from the experience of navigating white violence that have long coincided with Black existence and resistance. And Cone would provide an account of abuses against Black people with a dismissive tone.

178. Ibid., 71.
179. Ibid., 30.
Description of Abuses with a Dismissive Tone

Description of abuses is perhaps one of the most recognizable elements of the Black prophetic tradition. Without such description common elements of the tradition such as lament, pessimism, and resistance are virtually impossible. The description of abuse provides for the listener a record of “the what” of Black lament, pessimism, and resistance and sets the stage for our “why” and “what now.” In *Black Theology and Black Power*, Cone’s description of abuses against Black people help to establish not only his prophetic persona, but also themes that remained relevant to his articulation of Black Theology throughout his whole career. He also adopts a tone that is unilaterally dismissive of the institutions and institutional values that undergird Black oppression. That too, becomes a trademark of Cone’s prophetic persona and message. Here, I break his description of abuses into three categories: Black and white place, abuses of the church, and the plight of Black resistance. Each of these categories is accompanied by sections highlighting how Cone’s dismissive tone makes way for a reunderstanding of place, the church, and Black resistance. Therefore, Cone does not simply describe abuses, but rather resistively answers the abuse with the scandalous assertion that the Black Church is the space that place becomes redemptive.

Black Place as Abuse

According to Cone, the matter of Black place, as he had experienced in his life, boiled down to one question: “How should I respond to a world which defines me as a nonperson?”¹⁸⁰ According to Cone, that is the question that Black people and communities navigate daily as they negotiate every interaction with the world. Do I resist? Do I comply? Will compliance save me from being killed? There have been several examples on the news that suggest otherwise. Here,

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¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 34.
the Black person or community is tasked with navigating a station or place imbued with the trappings of inhumanity. What is more, “this country expects black people to respect law and order while others beat them over the head.”181 Of course, such an expectation has historical roots. “The slave” says Cone, “was rewarded and punished according to his adherence to the view of himself defined exclusively by the master.”182 Here, Cone makes a similar argument about Black place as Wilson (see chapter 1). That is that society assigns Black people and white people set places in life and does its damndest to convince all involved that the world will implode if they do not play their assigned roles. The assigner here, because it is America, happens to be racist human traffickers.

Unfortunately, even after the chains of chattel slavery creatively morphed into the chains of the prison industrial complex, the psychological ramification of America assigning and enforcing such places remain. Cone says that “any careful assessment of the place of the black man in America must conclude that black self-hatred is the worst aspect of the legacy of slavery.”183 Beyond the simple crime against humanity that is kidnapping, owning, torturing, and trafficking another human being, the spiritual crime of orchestrating a society in which self-hatred is not pathological is a fundamental aspect of the place assigned to Black people. That is because “the black man was shackled in a hostile white world without any power to make the white man recognize him as a person.”184 To be clear, the recognition that Cone speaks of has very little to do with being liked or accepted. Rather, it is a matter of power. That is the power to make someone acknowledge the obvious- Black humanity- and (importantly) respond to Black people accordingly. I can know and believe I am human all day, but if every interaction with

181. Ibid., 138.
182. Ibid., 98.
183. Ibid., 34.
184. Ibid., 98.
society tells me I am a dog, the question then becomes what must I do to cease to be dog and begin to be human again? “At this point,” Cone says, “the oppressed is duped into believing that if only he were like the oppressor, he would no longer be ridiculed. A crash program of self-help is then devised to bridge the gap between the educated and the ignorant. This is largely the role of the black churches, the Booker T. Washingtons in the area of religion.”185

**Dismissing Black Place**

It is important to note here that Cone does not simply identify Black place as a part of the racist mechanism, but also adopts a dismissive tone and disposition to Black place. He argues that “absurdity arises as the black man seeks to understand his place in the white world.”186 Despite this, Cone affirms that “whatever blacks feel toward whites or whatever their response to white racism, it cannot be submitted to the judgments of white society.”187 Taking a decidedly different stance than the place assigned to him, Cone affirms the Black person’s place as the chooser and not the chosen for. Fittingly, this was the very choice that Cone was making at the time. Despite essentially being a nobody in the field of theology, Cone was rejecting his place as a transmitter of European theology and dismissing what the academy tasked him to believe, teach, and write. Rather, he took to the task of articulating “a theology for the oppressed black people of America aimed at the destruction of racism in the society [because] Black theologians can no longer be tied to the irrelevancies of white American “Christianity.”188 Therefore,

> It is not the purpose of Black Theology to address white people, at least not directly. Though whites may read it, understand it, and even find some meaning in it, Black Theology is not dependent on white perception. It assumes that the possibilities of creative response among white people to black humiliation are virtually nonexistent.189

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185. Ibid., 108.
186. Ibid., 34.
187. Ibid., 42.
188. Ibid., 118.
189. Ibid., 119.
Therefore, Cone has identified two sources that perpetuate Black nonpersonhood as Black place, both are institutions: whiteness and the Black church. Both must either be destroyed or drastically transformed. Both have divergent reasonings and tactics for reinforcing this Black place. However, the outcome of both is the same.

**white Place as Black Abuse**

With regard to whiteness, Cone asserts that “whites are thus enslaved to their own egos.” As a result, “it is the white man who has sought to dehumanize others because of his feelings of superiority or for his economic advantage.” Then, “to ensure that the master's dominance over the slave would not be preempted by a higher will, the master prevented all instruction in religion except by authorized white persons.” This had two affects. The first welded white supremacy to a state adopted version of the Christian gospel. Christianity may never recover from the sinful two-step it did with whiteness. Secondly, it began the work of socially absolving whiteness and white people of the guilt of Black place. Or as Cone puts it, “white America's attempt to free itself of responsibility for the black man's inhuman condition is nothing but a protective device to ease her guilt. Whites have to convince themselves that they are not responsible.” Having declared themselves innocent, they return to the work of perverting justice. This is, of course, intergenerational work. Just as slave owners and would-be slave owners (poor whites) had to do the rhetorical work to glue slavery to Christianity as a means of justice, the contemporary racist gets squeamish or outright angry when we talk reparations. Because they are “innocent” they owe nothing and justice, according to them, justice

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190. Ibid., 58.
191. Ibid., 38.
192. Ibid., 101.
193. Ibid., 44.
would not allow such an injustice form of obvious justice. That is because “the masters are always silent on injustice, saying ‘Justice will come only in a stable orderly society’ - which means at the good pleasure of the white overlords.”\textsuperscript{194} It also means that the negroes know and mind their place.

**Dismissing white Place**

Again, Cone does not simply identify the way that white self-assigned place is abusive to Black humanity. He actively rejects it. Cone theorizes that “Maybe the oppressor's being is so warped by his own view of himself that every analysis made by him merely reveals his own inflated self-evaluation.”\textsuperscript{195} As a result, “the main difficulty that most whites have with Black Power and its relationship to the Christian gospel stems from their own inability to translate traditional theological language into the life situation of black people.”\textsuperscript{196} Therefore, when the white people ask

> Is There an Appropriate Response to White Racism? [We understand that] The asking of this question is inevitable. Whites want to know whether Black Power is an appropriate response to their bigotry. It is indeed interesting that they, the oppressors, should ask this question, since whatever response blacks make is nothing but a survival reaction to white oppression.\textsuperscript{197}

With that in mind, “the black man's response to God's act in Christ must be different from the white's because his life experiences are different.”\textsuperscript{198} Thinking back to Rodney’s assertion (see chapter 1) that whiteness (europe) has crafted a world in which it is and remains centered, we see that Cone posits a rhetorical and psychological dismissal of white place. Again, the Black person becomes the chooser and not the chosen for.

\textsuperscript{194} Ibid., 136.  
\textsuperscript{195} Ibid., 68.  
\textsuperscript{196} Ibid., 67.  
\textsuperscript{197} Ibid., 40.  
\textsuperscript{198} Ibid., 68.
Abuses of the Church

Cone asserts that whiteness has employed Christianity as one of its primary tools for codifying Black place as a necessary for social order. He argues that “racism has been a part of the life of the Church so long that it is virtually impossible for even the ‘good’ members to recognize the bigotry perpetuated by the Church. Its morals are so immoral that even its most sensitive minds are unable to detect the inhumanity of the Church on the black people of America.”199 After all, “it was the Church that placed God’s approval on slavery and today places his blessings on the racist structure of American society.”200 With regard to Black place the white church “taught the slave that to hope means to look to heaven for a reward for being obedient to the master on earth. It meant accepting his present deplorable lot as a slave.”201 In fact, “some churchmen argued that Christianity made blacks better slaves.”202 For Cone, the church’s rhetoric about slavery epitomizes the fundamental dysfunction with whiteness, the white church, and white theology. If we are to take seriously the assertion that Christ adopts a self-sacrificial persona, the white church is heresy. That is because “the Church has shown many times that it loves life and is not prepared to die for others.”203 Taking the bastardization of Christ’s message far beyond a misinterpretation, the white church in America took Jesus’ name and left the rest of him in the tomb. They then put that name on a white supremacist ideology and told the rest of the world it was our place to follow that bastard theology, thus further fortifying whiteness as sacred.

Unfortunately, whiteness is not the only institution that did the work of fortifying Black and white places. Cone also critiques the Black church and its role in this effort. Perhaps his

199. Ibid., 82.
200. Ibid., 84.
201. Ibid., 84.
202. Ibid., 85.
203. Ibid., 89.
The most potent critique comes in two passages about Black ministers in the aftermath of the Civil War and downfall of reconstruction. Both are worth citing at length. First, he says:

The black minister remained the spokesman for the black people, but “faced by insurmountable obstacles, he succumbed to the cajolery and bribery of the white power structure and became its foil.” The passion for freedom was replaced with innocuous homilies against drinking, dancing, and smoking; and injustices in the present were minimized in favor of a Kingdom beyond this world. Black churches adopted, for the most part, the theology of the white missionaries and taught blacks to forget the present and look to the future. Some black ministers even urged blacks to adopt the morality of white society entirely, suggesting that entrance into the Kingdom of heaven is dependent on obedience to the laws of white society.  

He then explains:

The black minister thus became a most devoted “Uncle Tom,” the transmitter of white wishes, the admonisher of obedience to the caste system. He was the liaison man between the white power structure and the oppressed blacks, serving the dual function of assuring whites that all is well in the black community, dampening the spirit of freedom among his people. More than any other one person in the black community, the black minister perpetuated the white system of black dehumanization.

While there are certainly exceptions to this rule, Cone’s claim is supported by historian Hasan Kwame Jeffries whose book Bloody Lowndes: Civil Rights and Black Power in Alabama’s Black Belt documents the rise of the Black Panther Party in Lowndes County, Alabama. According to John Hulett, one of Jeffries participants, preachers tended to be a part of the class of Black “elites” that most fervently opposed to drastic or revolutionary change. Given the importance of the Black preacher in the Black church and community, it is not difficult to see how this group of individuals being the “most devoted Uncle Toms” could have a catastrophic impact on the Black community’s resistance and liberation potentiality. Cone says, “forgetting their reason for existing, the black churches became, as Washington appropriately

204. Ibid., 109.
205. Ibid., 109.
describes, ‘amusement centers,’ ‘arenas for power politics,’ and an ‘organ for recognition, leadership, and worship.’ To be fair, in many cases “if [Black ministers and churches] had not supported the caste system of segregation and discrimination, they would have placed their lives and the lives of their people in danger.” Nevertheless, by supporting the caste system the Black church helped to justify Black and white places.

**The Eschatological Turn.**

For Cone one of the greatest impacts of the Black church supporting Black place is what I call the eschatological turn. That is the process of making heaven the sole salvation for Black people. As Cone explains “the most corrupting influence among the black churches was their adoption of the “white lie” that Christianity is primarily concerned with an otherworldly reality.” The major problem with the eschatological turn is that “mainly it shows that white power is so overwhelming in its domination of black people that many blacks have given up hope for change in this world. By reaching for heaven they are saying that the odds are against them now; God must have something better in store for black people later.” If the fight is unwinnable, and the placeless place is the bye and bye, why fight here and now? Especially when the odds of having your personhood recognized seem so low?

**Dismissing the Eschatological Turn.**

This is another critical question that Cone’s prophetic persona and message continuously seeks to address throughout his career. The seed from which Cone’s ever-growing answer to that question would emerge lies in *Black Theology and Black Power.* He says “Black religion and black people can never become what they ought to be (a religion and a people unreservedly

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208. Ibid., 110.
209. Ibid., 122.
210. Ibid., 122.
devoted to the emancipation of all blacks) as long as the content of religion is a distorted reflection of the religion of the enslaver.”

Therefore, “Black Theology insists that genuine biblical faith relates eschatology to history, that is, to what God has done, is doing, and will do for his people. It is only because of what God has done and is now doing that we can speak meaningfully of the future.”

With regard to the eschatological shift, that means that heaven cannot be the only placeless place. In Black Theology, eschatology “does not mean merely salvation of the soul, individual rescue from the evil world, comfort for the troubled conscience, but also the realization of the eschatological hope of justice, the humanizing of man, the socializing of humanity, peace for all creation!”

Cone says “Black Theology has hope for this life. The appeal to the next life is a lack of hope.”

When a white man tells you to give up hope and this world and turn your attention to heaven, you tell him to go to hell. When a Black man speaks that same nonsense from a pulpit you tell him, yeen gotta go to hell but you gotta get the hell up outta here with that bullshit.

**Dismissing the Church’s Place**

Cone, then, also rejects the place of the church -both Black and white- as reifyers of Black and white places. Rather, he calls for a radical shift in Christian values. Dismissing the values of the normalized theological dialogues of his day, he asserts

Any theologian involved in professional societies can observe that few have attempted to deal seriously with the problem of racism in America. It is much easier to deal with the textual problems associated with some biblical book or to deal “objectively” with a religious phenomenon than it is to ask about the task of theology in the current disintegration of society. It would seem that it is time for theology to make a radical break with its identity with the world by seeking to bring to the problem of color the revolutionary implications of the gospel of Christ. It is time for theology to leave its ivory tower and join the real issues, which deal with

211. Ibid., 128.
212. Ibid., 125.
213. Ibid., 125.
214. Ibid., 123.
dehumanization of blacks in America. It is time for theologians to relate their work to life-and-death issues, and in so doing to execute its function of bringing the Church to a recognition of its task in the world.215

Therefore, “unless the condition of the poor becomes the condition of the Christian, not because he feels sorry for the poor, but because through the Spirit of Christ he is in fact poor, all acts done on behalf of them are nothing in the eyes of God.”216 For Cone, true Christian activity manifests as it did in the gospel of Luke: in the present world. Salvation does not lie after death, but you may have to face down death to get it. That is because rejecting Black, white, and church places has always put the rejector at risk. That is the plight of resistance.

The Plight of Resistance

Given the importance that American society places on Black place, resisting that place has always been a perilous undertaking. As Cone explains, “the asserting of black freedom in America has always meant war. When blacks retreat and accept their dehumanized place in white society, the conflict ceases. But when blacks rise up in freedom, whites show their racism.”217 That racism often means Black death. Nat Turner was lynched, dismembered, eaten, and turned into a lampshade. When Black’s began to defy place during reconstruction the Klan boarded that white horse and turned their eye toward conquest and murder. Marchers were hosed and attacked by dogs in the 1960s. The Silver Rights Movement coincided with the rise of the modern prison industrial complex and a new generation of police brutality. The correlation between the rises of Black people in college and the normalization of student loans is appalling. Resistance to Black place has always meant the threat of Black death in one way or another. The oppressor levies that threat as a means of control. However, control is not always the outcome.

215. Ibid., 91.
216. Ibid., 71.
217. Ibid., 26.
Cone says “for three hundred years [Black people] have cried, waited, voted, marched, picketed, and boycotted, but whites still refuse to recognize their humanity. In light of this, attributing black anger to the call for Black Power is ridiculous, if not obscene.”

For Cone, Black Power is in perfect alignment with the Christian gospel. In 1969 that was a position that had to be defended. As white people absolved themselves of their guilt the reason for Black anger had to be explained. Certainly, it could not be the caste system that relegated Black people to the Black place. Certainly, white people were not to blame. They are never to blame. That is one of the greatest benefits of their place. Calls for Black Power had to be to blame. In response, Cone asserts “there is a need for a theology of revolution, a theology that radically encounters the problems of the disinherited black people in America in particular and the oppressed people of color throughout the world in general.” For him, that theology was Black Power. Because “the problem of values is not that white people need to instill values in the ghetto; but white society itself needs values so that it will no longer need a ghetto.” Somewhat ironically, Cone asserts that the greatest potentiality for a revolution of theological values was found in the Black Church.

**The Redemptive Black Church**

Despite its complicity in fortifying Black place, Cone asserts that the Black church was perhaps the only place that the necessary revolution in theological values could start. That is because “the black church was born in slavery. Its existence symbolizes a people who were completely stripped of their African heritage as they were enslaved by the “Christian” white man.” In response to that enslavement and stripping, “the black church became the home base

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218. Ibid., 13.
219. Ibid., 94.
220. Ibid., 146.
221. Ibid., 98.
The Black church, then, is built on a different foundation than the racist white church’s white supremacist theology. Rather, out of the oppression of slavery Black theology was born. Cone asserts that

The revolutionary attitude of Black Theology stems not only from the need of black people to defend themselves in the presence of white oppression, but also from its identity with biblical theology. Like biblical theology, it affirms the absolute sovereignty of God over his creation. This means that ultimate allegiance belongs only to God. Therefore, black people must be taught not to be disturbed about revolution or civil disobedience if the law violates God's purpose for man. The Christian man is obligated by a freedom grounded in the Creator to break all laws that contradict human dignity.

Black theology, then, rejects Black place that is assigned to Black people by their captors and oppressors. It seeks to destroy it and, in its destruction, articulate a new Black place that, much like the Black church in slavery, was established on its own terms and with its own values.

Therefore, Black theology rejects the abusive eschatological turn. Here, the black churchman [does] not accept white interpretations of Christianity, which suggested the gospel was concerned with freedom of the soul and not the body. While it is true that most of the Spirituals are otherworldly and compensatory in character and that many black preachers pointed to a “land flowing with milk and honey,” this fact must be viewed in the light of the ever-present dehumanizing reality of white power.

Having effectively witnessed to white abuses and dismissed the justifications for those abuses, Cone establishes a resistive prophetic persona that remained critical of the places assigned to Black people, white society, and the church. If taken seriously, Black theology acts as a bulldozer leveling normalized racial and religious values. In the wake of a new place, now leveled, Black theology calls for all who have eyes to see, to turn their gaze to the margins.

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222. Ibid., 99.
223. Ibid., 135.
224. Ibid., 99.
Affirmation of the Margins

As I have already begun to illustrate in the “Black Theology as Replacement for Civility” and “The Redemptive Black Church” sections above, affirming Blackness is a crucial part of Cone’s prophetic persona. Like Amos, Cone employs his identity away from the empire as a lens through which he evaluates morality. Amos approached his prophecy from the perspective of the marginalized shepherds. Likewise, Cone emerges from the margins with a word of affirmation for America’s marginalized: Black people. This crucial element of Cone’s prophetic persona allows me to offer “affirmation of the margins” as an additional component of Johnson’s prophetic persona categories. In Black Theology and Black and Power Cone’s affirmation comes in three intertwined categories: Black Power as Black affirmation, Black Jesus as Black affirmation, and Black Theology as Black Affirmation.

Black Power as Black Affirmation

Throughout the book Cone continues to make the argument that Black power represents God’s present work in the world. According to Cone, Black Power “is a humanizing force because it is the black man’s attempt to affirm his being, his attempt to be recognized as “Thou,” in spite of the “other.”

Through Black Power,” Cone observes, “blacks are becoming men of worth, and whites are forced to confront them as human beings.” That is because “Black Power . . . is an attitude, an inward affirmation of the essential worth of blackness. It means that the black man will not be poisoned by the stereotypes that others have of him but will affirm from the depth of his soul: “Get used to me, I am not getting used to anyone.” According to Cone, calls for Black Power were helping to engineer a pivotal and foundational step in the

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225. Ibid., 30-1.
226. Ibid., 75.
227. Ibid., 31.
trudge toward Black Liberation. As he explains, “in order for the oppressed blacks to regain their identity, they must affirm the very characteristic which the oppressor ridicules—blackness.”

According to Cone Black Power’s beauty and greatest potentiality lie in its ability to begin undoing the centuries long assigning of inhumanity as Black place. Black power is a call to affirm for ourselves our own humanity, regardless of what the oppressor says. That is why Cone insists that “if blacks are liberated, it will be blacks themselves who will do the liberating, not whites.”

The implications of such an assertion extend far beyond the religious into the political and the implications of such an assertion extend far beyond the political into the religious.

For Cone, there is no greater theological evidence that God affirms the margins than the Lord’s activity throughout the Bible. “It is significant,” he explains, “to note the condition of the people to whom God chose to reveal his righteousness. God elected to be the Helper and Savior to people oppressed and powerless in contrast to the proud and mighty nations.” Here, Cone observes that throughout the Bible God sides with the shepherd as opposed to the king’s priest. She chooses the enslaved over Pharoah. Given that evidence, they choose the marginalized Black over the centered white. This vision of God differs significantly from the God Cone was taught about in graduate school. This God affirmed and loved Black culture and Black people.

Incidentally,

For God to love the black man means that God has made him somebody. The black man does not need to hate himself because he is not white, and he should feel no need to become like others. His blackness, which society despises, is a special creation of God himself. He has worth because God imparts value through loving. It means that God has bestowed on him a new image of himself, so that he can now become what he in fact is. Through God's love, the black man is given the power to become, the power to make others recognize him. Because God is “a God of

228. Ibid., 39.
229. Ibid., 38.
230. Ibid., 60.
power; of majesty and of might,” to love man means that he wills that the black man “reflect in the immediacies of life his power, his majesty and his might.”

Perhaps most importantly for Cone, God’s affirmation of Blackness came through Jesus’ Blackness.

**Black Jesus as Black Affirmation**

Cone’s understanding of Jesus’ Blackness had little to do with his actual skin color. Though the historical Jesus was almost certainly a melanated man, his Blackness arises from his identification with the poor. Cone’s most fundamental understanding of Jesus emerges from Luke 4: 18-19 where he says “The Spirit of the LORD is upon Me, Because He has anointed Me To preach the gospel to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, To proclaim liberty to the captives And recovery of sight to the blind, To set at liberty those who are oppressed; To proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD.” Cone describes this as “the nature of [Jesus’] ministry” and “work [which] is essentially one of liberation.” In that regard, Jesus’ mission aligns perfectly with Black Power because it “is a message about the ghetto, and all other injustice done in the name of democracy and religion to further the social, political, and economic interests of the oppressor. In Christ, God enters human affairs and takes sides with the oppressed.” According to Cone, “God's Word in Christ not only fulfills his purposes for man through his elected people, but also inaugurates a new age in which all oppressed people become his people.” Christ like “Black Power seeks to change the structure of the black community—its thought forms, values, culture. It tells black people to love themselves, and by so doing, confront white racism with a mode of behavior inimical to everything white.”

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231. Ibid., 66.
232. New King James Version
234. Ibid., 53.
235. Ibid., 80.
236. Ibid., 135.
note here, that the “change” that both Christ and Black power is a shift in any values, thought forms, or culture that do not affirm the essential worth of Blackness. That is the bedrock of Black theology.

**Black Theology as Black Affirmation**

Given Jesus’ status as Black, “Black Theology must take seriously the reality of black people—their life of suffering and humiliation. This must be the point of departure of all God-talk that seeks to be black-talk.”\(^{237}\) What is more, “Black Theology is Christian theology precisely because it has the black predicament as its point of departure (emphasis my own).”\(^{238}\)

Therefore, “when Black Theology calls for a new value-system, it is oriented in a single direction: the bringing to bear of the spirit of black self-determination upon the consciousness of black people.”\(^{239}\) Furthermore Black theology “believes that any religious idea that exalts black dignity and creates a restless drive for freedom must be affirmed. All ideas that are opposed to the struggle for black self-determination or are irrelevant to it must be rejected as the work of the Antichrist.”\(^{240}\) For Cone, “Black Theology is biblical theology seeking to create new value-perspectives for the oppressed, it is revolutionary theology. It is a theology that confronts white society as the racist Antichrist, communicating to the oppressor that nothing will be spared in the fight for freedom.” Perhaps most importantly, Black Theology invites Black people to share in revolution; to put aside fear and deference for whiteness and affirm the capability and validity of Blackness. You ain’t gotta go to church to do that. In fact, if Black theology only happens at church, that is a real problem. Black theology is a political theology that asserts that God is a Black mama headed to the Egyptian school house to let them know what’s what. Jesus is a

\(^{237}\) Ibid., 119.
\(^{238}\) Ibid., 119.
\(^{239}\) Ibid., 128.
\(^{240}\) Ibid., 121.
revolutionary that is going to let the poor know that God’s Kingdom is their inheritance, despite such talk being a capital crime. In Black Theology God and Jesus are political power because that is what the folks on the margins need.

**Conclusion**

James Cone was a theologian. While that seems obvious in retrospect, upon the release of his first book, *Black Theology and Black Power*, that fact did not seem so obvious. Throughout the course of the book, he completely challenges and defies what it had previously meant to be a theologian. He does so without the protections of tenure or notoriety. Rather, he does so with the potential for great personal cost. Ultimately this wager works out for Cone, but at the time such an outcome was not self-evident. This is, in part, what controversia is. Cone displays controversia in his willingness to embrace two things: the prophet's plight of exile and the servant charge to evolve. By placing theology in the margins- the Black experience- he presented a theory that was wholly foreign to what had been established as the holy. That is white theology which not only centers white supremacist theological perspectives, but purposefully ignores the Black experience. Turning away from these perspectives and toward Blackness established Cone's message as a seat of controversy.

Perhaps one of the most interesting elements to Cone’s turning away from the theology he learned in graduate school and toward Black theology, was the way that he remained rooted in both early in his writings. Despite articulating a Black Theology, Cone drew heavily upon white theologians and thinkers. This would be a point of critique from other Black scholars, including Cone’s own brother, Cecil. What is interesting, however, is what happens when we read this fact through the lens of controversia. Cone makes it clear that he has no interest in “seeing both sides” with regards to race. His dismissive tone toward whiteness, white place, and white
theology demonstrates that. However, what he had was the desired outcome that controversia was designed to produce. Cone possessed a world-class grasp on white theology and his unmasking process was providing him with a deeper grounding in Black culture and theology than he had at any point in his life. He was a man of two worlds, “two un-reconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.”241 To that end, he says “in graduate school, I didn't really know what I was doing, trying to write essays about European theologians who didn't know or care about black people, any more than I cared about them. But now I came alive, with ideas about blackness and liberation, writing about something that mattered.”242 He

Didn't discard European theology and philosophy—I continue to read it today—but black theology began with deconstruction—that is, dismantling the oppressive, white theologies I was taught in graduate school, theologies that not only ignored black people but blinded me to the rich treasure in the black religious tradition.243 He realized that “Black people needed a theological revolution that could stand alongside Black Power and the black arts movement.”244 Therefore he “began to read the Bible through the lens of Black Power, black arts, and the black consciousness movement.”245 He did so with a deep belief that “the truth of the gospel is always offensive and unpopular because it expresses solidarity with the powerless and those on the margins.”246

This is a position that would be lauded and challenged vigorously throughout the remainder of Cone’s career. But in 1969 that career was just beginning without the protections of tenure or job security. In that restlessness, he challenged what it meant to be a theologian. In

242. Cone, Said I Wasn’t Gone Tell Nobody, 27.
243. Ibid., 40.
244. Ibid., 19.
245. Ibid., 18.
246. Ibid., 19.
1969, it would have been easy to pick *Black Theology and Black Power* and simply declare that it was not theology. It did not resemble anything that had been called theology up until that point. However, this was a part of the brilliance of the way that Cone employed the resistive prophetic persona. Because he challenged that status quo, what it meant to be a theologian and do theology was forever altered. He refused to do what was accepted as theology because he genuinely believed it to be racist. But importantly, he never ceded the title of theologian or theology to white racist ownership. Rather, as he explains “I was a theologian through and through. I had no desire to be a Black Power advocate like Stokely Carmichael. For me, Black Power merely pointed to the much larger theme of liberation, which my next book would explicate.”\textsuperscript{247} At the insistence of C. Eric Lincoln, that book, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, would be written over the nine months following *Black Theology and Black Power*’s release. There Cone would systemize Black Theology in an epic critique of the sacred.\textsuperscript{248}

\textsuperscript{247} Cone, *Said I Wasn’t Gone Tell Nobody*, 31.

\textsuperscript{248} Ibid., 55.
I tell you, let them all pass all their dirty remarks (one love)
There is one question I'd really like to ask (one soul)
Is there a place for the hopeless sinner
Who has hurt all mankind just to save his own?
   -Bob Marley

This goes to my alma mater
Want to thank you for the commas
Came here for an education
But was paying for my trauma
   -Theo Blue

I had to write a Black liberation theology that kicked white ass.
   -James H. Cone

Chapter 3

Of The Coming of James: Critiquing the Sacred

Shortly after the release of Black Theology and Black Power Cone received a call from C. Eric Lincoln asking him to do a follow up book. A lot was changing in Cone’s life. Black Theology Black Power placed him in many white theologian’s crosshairs. He was debating and defending Black theology everywhere he went. He also began his appointment at Union Theological Seminary and many of his assertions in the book worried his supervisors. With all of that happening at once writing a second book was a big ask. Cone’s feelings on the matter deserve to be cited at length.

I knew I had another book in me. Black Theology and Black Power was only a beginning. But did I have the resources and talent to write another one? Nevertheless, the fire was still burning in my bones, and I had no choice but to stoke it. I had to keep writing. After all, I was the only black systematic theologian in the United States writing about black people, and it weighed on my shoulders. The black revolution that was exploding all over America needed a systematic theology. If I didn't do it, who would? ‘Am I going to let my people down when they are dying in the streets?’ I asked myself. I couldn't do that! Another installment on my debt was due. I had to do my part for the black freedom struggle. No excuses!

“Now is the time,” as Martin King had often said. I decided to accept Lincoln's
challenge, knowing that it would expose me to a cavalcade of criticism—some of which I had already experienced.249

Just nine months after the release of *Black Theology Black Power*, Cone completed *A Black Theology of Liberation*. It serves as his official address to the oppressor. This is Cone in Israel’s capital telling Amaziah about himself. His goal was twofold. Here, he “wanted to write a systematic theology for black people, I also wanted to deepen my dialogue with white theologians about the truth of race in America and show that their failure to address white supremacy was supporting racism.”250 More specifically, he “wanted black people to know what I was saying about whiteness and Christianity. And I wanted white theologians to know it was time for them to face their own racism. I accepted the task of speaking to whites in black language and in the discipline of systematic theology, which few African Americans knew anything about.”251 He admits that in this task he “found it exceedingly difficult to discard the assumptions about theology that [he] was taught in graduate school.” Nevertheless “I soaked myself in blackness, embraced it as my birthright, and let blackness recreate me into someone my professors would not recognize. Blackness gave me the insight and power to write *A Black Theology of Liberation* with reckless abandon.”252 What emerged was a systematic theology unlike any other that existed before it. It was a prophetic word spoken using the oppressor’s framework for the explicit purpose of violating and exposing everything the oppressor holds sacred. By accepting this task of speaking Black theology for Black people and to white people through a lens that white theologians recognized, Cone necessarily created a dialectic between white theology and what he understood to be legitimate Christian theology. Through this

250 ibid., 58.
251 ibid., 58.
252 ibid., 62.
dialectic he speaks truthfully about the flaws of whiteness, white theology, and its dissonance from any legitimate Christian theology. Perhaps more importantly, he posits Black theology as the third occurrence which does not necessarily emerge from the dissonance, but potentially resolves it. This resolution, however, is not for white people, white theologians, or oppressors of any variety. It is not for Amaziah. Rather it is for the shepherds; for Black people; for the oppressed. Therein lies Cone’s strange but brilliant rhetorical move. Somehow by addressing whiteness, he finds a meaningful way of constructively addressin the Black situation.

This is because resistive prophetic rhetoric negotiates the space between two audiences: the shepherds and Amaziah. The messy connection between these two audiences arises via Amaziah’s oppression of the shepherds. Though these two audiences can be addressed at the same time, they are not the same. Their stakes in the prophetic word are not the same. They are not on the same side of the prophetic outcome. The resistive prophet speaks on behalf of one audience and to the other. She draws upon the experiences of one group to speak to the other. In Cone’s case, “Black liberation theology came out of black culture and religion, and it celebrated a new freedom to talk about God and Jesus in a jazz mode, a blues style, and with the sound of the spirituals. That was where its mojo came from—its magic.” While he was building a systematic theology he was “more concerned about remaining true to black magic than creating new theological ideas that would impress white theologians but would put ordinary blacks to sleep. I wanted to wake up black people and let them know that the day of the white Christ was over.”253 Adopting such a task opens the prophet up to criticism from both ends. Ultimately Cone chose to write *A Black Theology of Liberation* for a simple reason: “I had to write a black

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253. ibid., 64.
liberation theology that kicked white ass.” Very similarly Amos’ prophecy goes to significant lengths to kick wealthy Israelites sacred ass.

Resistive Prophetic Rhetoric: Confronting the Sacred

For this reason, Amos’s rhetoric is extremely critical of the sacred as an idea. What has yet to be explained but needs to be fleshed out is the relationship between sacred and the holy. Israel exists as a cultural manifestation of religious norms which they assert are handed down from God. Therefore, attempting to separate the cultural norm from the religious norm becomes all the more difficult. That is why Amaziah’s status as the religious hegemony’s official representative stands out so much. The Amaziah’s of the world maintain their position by silencing and eliminating the Amos’s of the world; by snuffing out any remnant of descent. However, because of their official and recognized association with the religious institution, those positioned as Amaziah’s in the world become sacred. Their songs become sacred. Their practices become sacred. They become sacred. In response, Amos puts God’s relationship with the sacred in perspective. He asserts that God “despise[s] your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.” This begins the process of differentiating gods. There is a God of the people and a god of the institution. But what happens when the institutional god parades as the people’s God? A resistive prophetic response is one of the potentialities. Therefore, Amos continues:

Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the peace offerings of your fattened animals, I will not look upon them. Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

254. ibid., 68.
255. Amos 5:21 (NIV)
256. Amos 5:22-24 (NIV)
Here, Amos bluntly commands the institution to keep God’s name out of its mouth. Stop singing. Stop worshipping. You blaspheme through your sacred practices of disregarding and discarding the poor. Resistive prophetic prophecy comes when the prophet tells the sacred to shut yo ass up; to cease the reification of their onto-epistemologies as norms. If anyone is to be silenced it is Amaziah, not Amos. But the oppressor knows they are wrong. Unlike soft responses to oppression, such as diversity and inclusion, resistive prophetic rhetoric adopts the oppressed ontological assumption that the oppressor behaves out of malice, not ignorance. And even if oppression comes out of ignorance, the oppressed cannot afford to tarry in the current moment. It is they who go without shelter and die in the night. It is they who spend decades imprisoned for doing what white millennials now become millionaires from. Their daily lives are the material consequences of the “gradual progress” that the oppressor is so fond of. For that reason, resistive prophetic rhetoric says “woe to those who lie on beds of ivory and stretch themselves out on their couches and eat lambs from the flock and calves from the midst of the stall. Who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp.” 257 When the prophecy is fulfilled

if ten men remain in one house, they shall die. And when one's relative, the one who anoints him for burial, shall take him up to bring the bones out of the house, and shall say to him who is in the innermost parts of the house, “Is there still anyone with you?” he shall say, “No”; and he shall say, “Silence! We must not mention the name of the Lord.” 258

With a keen understanding about his audiences, Cone confronts white theology in its own space in its own terms. He calls white theology out for perpetuating a lie that it is sacred. He exposes the songs and rituals of whiteness as idol. He exposes the god of whiteness as idol. In doing so, he attempts to address Blackness and Black people. In doing so, he places white theology and legitimate Biblical theology in a contentious dialectic which Black theology resolves. Therefore,

257. Amos 6:4-5a (NIV)
258. Amos 6:9-10 (NIV)
Cone’s confrontation in *A Black Theology of Liberation* comes in three parts: (1) A Critique of White Theology as Sacred, (2) An Explanation of Legitimate Biblical Theology, and (3) Black Theology as Legitimate Theology.

**A Critique of White Theology as Sacred**

If Cone was to accomplish his goal of “kicking white ass,” his first and most foundational task would be to expose the issues with whiteness as it existed in the world. In *A Black Theology of Liberation*, he does so by critiquing whiteness’s self-assigned place as sacred. Here, he attacks white theology as a concept and the connection between white theology as patriotism. He then makes the argument that white theology is sin.

In many regards Cone’s evaluation of whiteness coincided with Rodney’s and Wynters’. Here, he simply explains that “by white definitions, whiteness is ‘being’ and blackness is ‘nonbeing,’ therefore, “Blacks live under sentence of death.”259 As a result, “Black suffering is not [Black people’s] choice but is a result of the evil of white racists, who believe that they have the first, last, and only word on how the world ought to be run.”260 For Cone, the origin of this view of whiteness in America emerges from Black enslavement. In that institution “masters always pretend that they are not masters, insisting that they are only doing what is best for society as a whole, including the slaves … They know that whites have only one purpose: the destruction of everything which is not white.”261 By the time he pens this book, whiteness has spent approximately 250 years not only centering itself, but rhetorically justifying its mores, perspectives, and actions. This is despite the historic record testifying to those mores, perspectives, and actions being driven by the death of everything Black and anything not white.

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260. ibid., 99.
261. ibid., 25.
At this point Cone begins to explicate the way that whiteness rhetorically advanced itself beyond being centered and justified to being sacred.

Much of the project of Black theology seeks to wrestle what is understood as theological norms away from white definitions. He does so with an understanding of the deep political implications that such norming and defining have. Therefore, whiteness writes a gospel that aligns with white goals. Cone explains, “as long as oppressors can be sure that the gospel does not threaten their social, economic, and political security, they can enslave others in the name of Jesus Christ.”²⁶² This gospel serves as a genesis of what Cone describes as white theology, american theology, and white american theology. Though at times these three all serve different functions, they all have the same goal: Black destruction. Therefore, “when white theology attempts to speak to blacks about Jesus Christ, the gospel is presented in the light of the social, political, and economic interests of the white majority.”²⁶³ However, white people and theologians “fail to realize that their analysis of Christianity is inseparable from their oppressor-mentality, which shapes everything they say about God.”²⁶⁴ In turn, white american theology is a circular and self-justifying logic: whiteness is good because it is good and theology supports white goals because whiteness is good. Therefore, whiteness identifies itself as an elevated position whose view of the world holds exclusive access to understanding of what is good and righteous. Therefore, Cone urges that “we should be especially suspicious of religionists who claim that their view of things is better than that of others.”²⁶⁵

For Cone, the implications of such circular logic are wide reaching, but bear two crucial pieces of fruit. The first is the impact that white theology has in Black-white interactions. To that

²⁶² ibid., 110.
²⁶³ ibid., 35.
²⁶⁴ ibid., 50.
²⁶⁵ ibid., 49
end, Cone asserts, “that the God-language of white religion has been used to create a docile spirit among blacks so that whites could aggressively attack them is beyond question.” However, and importantly, “that does not mean that we cannot kill the white God, so that the presence of the black God can become known in the black-white encounter.”\(^{266}\) Killing the white God serves as an important facet of Black theology that I will return to later in this chapter. For now, it is paramount to note that white theology produces a white god that actively attempts to regulate the way that people interact with whiteness. White god pronounces whiteness and all that it does as sacred.

That is why the second fruit of white theology is an identity crisis within the church, the body that is supposed to worship and represent God. Cone explains,

> The difficulty of defining the meaning of the church and its involvement in the world stems from the unchurchly behavior of institutional white churches. They have given the word “church” a bad reputation for those interested in fighting against human suffering. Because of the unchristian behavior of persons who say they are Christians, “church” in America may very well refer to respectable murderers, who destroy human dignity while “worshiping” God and feeling no guilt about it. They equate things as they are with God’s will.\(^{267}\)

Therefore, white theology is not only a circular and self-justifying logic that seeks to facilitate every people group’s worship of whiteness, it also infiltrates the church for the purpose of creating agents for spreading the gospel of whiteness. That is the destruction of any and everything that is not white. Said another way, the gospel of whiteness uses the church to advance the message that because whiteness is sacred all other onto-epistemological positionalities should cease to exist. What is more, white theology does not simply remain self-contained within its circular logic. It also tethers itself to another important cultural staple: patriotism.

\(^{266}\) ibid., 64.
\(^{267}\) ibid., 123.
American Theology and Patriotism

Thinking broadly about the interaction between theology and patriotism, Cone observes that “in most societies where political oppression is acute and religion is related to the state, salvation is interpreted always in ways that do not threaten the security of the existing government.” That is to say that the broader relationship between theology and the state tends to be deferential to the perspective and will of the state. Faith then becomes a decree of the state and to be faithful to the state becomes synonymous with being faithful to God. This is the circumstance that Amos engages. The state has rhetorically married God’s interest to its own and is primarily interested in serving the society’s “haves.” In America, this means that “by defining the problems of Christianity in isolation from the black condition, white theology becomes a theology of white oppressors, serving as a divine sanction for criminal acts committed against blacks.” Therefore,

From the very beginning to the present day, American white theological thought has been “patriotic,” either by defining the theological task independently of black suffering (the liberal northern approach) or by defining Christianity as compatible with white racism (the conservative southern approach). In both cases theology becomes a servant of the state, and that can only mean death to blacks.

The connection, then, between white theology and American theology is Black death.

Returning to the matter of land identification (see chapter two), America establishes itself, from the outset, as a white nation. It is white not because it possesses white people exclusively. Rather, it is white because it seeks to serve an understanding of the greater white interest. It works tirelessly to advance the gospel of whiteness and white sacredness. “That is why”, Cone says, “so much emphasis has been placed on “law and order.” Blacks live in a

268. ibid., 118.
269. ibid., 24.
270. ibid., 20.
society in which blackness means criminality, and thus “law and order” means “get blacky.”\textsuperscript{271} Therefore, “for the most part, theological discourse in this country has been nothing but a participation in the structures of political oppression under the disguise of freedom and democracy.”\textsuperscript{272}

As a result, for those who have bought into the white american gospel, solutions to both political and theological problems often center on reforming social interactions based on American ideals and principles. However, Cone retorts: “But it never dawns on these do-gooders that what is wrong with America is not its failure to make the Constitution a reality for all, but rather its belief that persons can affirm whiteness and humanity at the same time.”\textsuperscript{273} Cone argues that these two affirmations are mutually exclusive because every urge or whiteness is inhumane destruction of everything that is not whiteness. To that end, Cone boldly submits that “the idea of reformation suggests that there is still something “good” in the system itself, which needs only to be cleaned up a bit. This is a false perception of reality. The system is based on whiteness, and what is necessary is a replacement of whiteness with blackness.”\textsuperscript{274}

As I will discuss in greater detail later in this chapter, this replacement of whiteness with Blackness is not a simple changing of positions. Cone is not insisting that Black people replace white people as the dominant colonizing and victimizing force in the world. Rather to begin to understand his insistence that blackness replace whiteness we must return to whiteness’s two earlier identified fruits. With regards to Black people’s role in Black-white interactions, Cone simply asserts that “if we accept white definitions of blackness, we destroy ourselves.”\textsuperscript{275} The

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{271} ibid., 29.
\item \textsuperscript{272} ibid., 52.
\item \textsuperscript{273} ibid., 102-3.
\item \textsuperscript{274} ibid., 77.
\item \textsuperscript{275} ibid., 30.
\end{itemize}
shift from whiteness to Blackness, then, is a mere affirmation for the validity of Black existence in this and every space. This shift opposes the perspective of a patriotic white american theology which upholds “law and order” and justifies Black death. Here theology identifies Black life as mattering.

Furthermore, as we recall, “the official church, which has been most responsible for the transmission of the gospel tradition, has also played a role as the political enforcer of “law and order” against the oppressed by lending divine sanction to the laws of the state and thus serving as the “redemptive” center of an established order.” Blackness replacing whiteness would mean the church and theology’s divorce from not only whiteness, but patriotism as well. By disconnecting theology from patriotism Cone is proposing the adoption of a different understanding of what has been positioned as sacred and God’s activity in the world. The church would then be tasked with spreading some other gospel with wholly different theological groundings than whiteness and patriotism. But why is divorcing whiteness and patriotism from theology so important? Cone presents a simple answer to this question: white american theology is sin.

**white Theology as Sin**

Throughout his *A Black Theology of Liberation* Cone makes it clear that white american theology is far more than simply not sacred. Rather, he posits that “American white theology is a theology of the Antichrist insofar as it arises from an identification with the white community, thereby placing God’s approval on white oppression of black existence.” The approval of white oppression serves as the white god’s modus operandi. This “white God is an idol created

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276. ibid., 43.
277. ibid., 21.
by racists.”278 Because white theology renders whiteness self-justifying, whites “fail to perceive this as the nature of sin.”279 However, “Christianity and whiteness are opposites.”280 Cone argues that this fact is often lost upon American Christians because white theology parades around as if it is a legitimate theological perspective born from the spirit of the God whose interaction with humans is documented in the Bible.

Cone insists that this is simply not the case. Rather, “the sin of American theology is that it has spoken without passion. American theology is racist; it identifies theology as dispassionate analysis of “the tradition,” unrelated to the sufferings of the oppressed.”281 This white American theology “has informed us that Jesus Christ is the content of the gospel, but it has failed miserably in relating that gospel to Nat Turner, Denmark Vesey, and Gabriel Prosser.”282 Here, Cone identifies several figures whose theological witness prove to be foundational for Black theology: Turner, Vesey, Prosser, and legions of other Black theological voices and actions. Additionally, he identifies the sinful nature of a sacred whiteness. “There is something demonic,” Cone says, “about whites who have the protection of the state but advise blacks to go the second mile for them. They have not moved even an inch for blacks.”283 Turner, Vesey, and Prosser had no such state sanctioned protection. Rather, the state set its eye on their destruction. Cone believes that these people's willingness to face down that destruction for the purposes of the white god’s destruction aligns them with the gospel of Jesus. How, then, can white theology “claim to be speaking from a common perspective called Christianity?”284 It simply cannot.

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278. ibid., 64.
279. ibid., 103.
280. ibid., 50.
281. ibid., 31.
282. ibid., 105.
283. ibid., 74.
284. ibid., 74.
In fact, for Cone, white theology needs to be destroyed along with the white god. Because it has positioned itself as sacred, it pronounced sin as sacred. Therefore, to become legitimate “Christian theology, white theology must cease being white theology and become black theology by denying whiteness as an acceptable form of human existence and affirming blackness as God’s intention for humanity.”

Of course, “the most blatant expressions of human oppression (such as the enslavement of black Americans) have been overlooked in American theology. And that gross sin cannot be forgiven.” Therefore, “if whites expect to be able to say anything relevant to the” real task of theology: self-determination of the black community, it will be necessary for them to destroy their whiteness by becoming members of an oppressed community.”

Black people have a similar responsibility. Cone says “we blacks must perform the iconoclastic task of smashing false images.” That is because “if the society is racist and also uses God-language as an instrument to further the cause of human humiliation, then the task of authentic theological speech is even more dangerous and difficult…It is dangerous because the true prophet of the gospel of God must become both “anti-Christian” and “unpatriotic.”

**Explaining Legitimate Biblical Theology**

This shocking and provocative assertion positions Cone to attend to an important responsibility of the resistive prophet. It is not simply enough to identify the lies that the sacred tell about itself. To simply do that would render the dialectic incomplete. Resistive prophetic rhetoric further presents an image of the thing that has been lied about, but without the lies. In

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285. ibid., 24.
286. ibid., 52.
287. ibid., 95.
288. ibid 64.
289. ibid., 61.
Cone’s case, white american theology is a lie about theology. It is a lie about the task of theology, God: theology’s subject, Jesus: theology’s justification, and Black people: theology’s benefactors. Cone, then, presents the other side of the dialectic or what he understands to be legitimate biblical theology.

(Re)Defining Theology and the Church

According to Cone, the task of legitimate theology is wholly incompatible with the task of white American theology. Whereas white American theology sets its sights on Black destruction, legitimate theology or “God-talk is not Christian-talk unless it is directly related to the liberation of the oppressed. Any other talk is at best an intellectual hobby, and at worst blasphemy.”

Therefore,

The task of theology, then, is to explicate the meaning of God’s liberating activity so that those who labor under enslaving powers will see that the forces of liberation are the very activity of God. Christian theology is never just a rational study of the being of God. Rather it is a study of God’s liberating activity in the world, God’s activity in behalf of the oppressed. Theology’s “sole reason for existence,” then, “is to put into ordered speech the meaning of God’s activity in the world, so that the community of the oppressed will recognize that its inner thrust for liberation is not only consistent with the gospel but is the gospel of Jesus Christ (my emphasis).” To that end, Cone asserts that another “task of Christian theology, then, is to analyze the meaning of hope in God in such a way that the oppressed community of a given society will risk all for earthly freedom, a freedom made possible in the resurrection of Jesus.”

Having established white theology as a patriotic tool used to justify state sanctioned violence

290. ibid., 65.
291. ibid., 19.
292. ibid. 18.
293. ibid., 20.
against Black people. Cone presents a theological task with the exact opposite orientation. That is inspiring the revolutionary spirit amongst Black people.

He says if Christian theology “is going to have relevance in a revolutionary situation, [it] must take the risk of pointing to the contemporary manifestation of God, and this necessarily involves taking sides.” 294 What is more, “church is the community that participates in Jesus Christ’s liberating work in history [and] can never endorse ‘law and order’ that causes suffering…the church must be a revolutionary community, breaking laws that destroy persons.” 295 Therefore, legitimate “theology can never be neutral or fail to take sides on issues related to the plight of the oppressed.” 296 Building on an argument he initiated in *Black Theology* and *Black Power*, Cone insists that “neutrality is nothing but an identification of God’s work with the machinations of oppressors.” 297 Therefore, legitimate theology takes sides with the oppressed community because oppressed communities do not have the same state sanctioned protections as oppressors. Therefore, the oppressor rhetorically bends and shapes theology to their own will, thereby producing a white god. Oppressed communities, however, have no access to this patriotic white god because he has declared their destruction. Therefore, “only oppressors can turn in upon themselves and worship their own projected image and define it as God. Persons who live in the real world have to encounter the concreteness of suffering without suburbs as places of retreat.” 298

As a result, theology “cannot be separated from the community which it represents. It assumes that truth has been given to the community at the moment of its birth.” 299 Though often

294. ibid., 41.
295. ibid. 120.
296. ibid., 20.
297. ibid., 41.
298. ibid. 122.
299. ibid., 23.
entrusted to Black caretakers, whiteness is born of a demon theology. However, because oppressed communities have been placed under attack by white god and white theology, they must turn to another source besides the state. Cone argues that “the Bible can serve as a guide for checking the contemporary interpretation of God’s revelation, making certain that our interpretation is consistent with the biblical witness.” Here, the biblical witness, much like the historical record, provides a source other than white nationalist rhetoric, for theologians to begin making sense of theology’s subject: God.

(Re)Theologizing God

Having established the separate basis for a more legitimate theology, Cone retheologizes God. Theology is after all, “God-talk.” Cone, therefore argues that “God is revealed as the God of the oppressed, involved in their history, liberating them from human bondage.” God’s activity on behalf of the oppressed serves as a biblical motif which Cone continuously employs as he lays the groundwork for a biblical view of God. For example, “the consistent theme in Israelite prophecy is Yahweh’s concern for the lack of social, economic, and political justice for those who are poor and unwanted in society.” In Cone’s reading of the Bible, “God comes to those who have been enslaved and abused and declares total identification with their situation, disclosing to them the rightness of their emancipation on their own terms.” The state sanctions take a backseat as God redefines the nature of the interaction between the oppressed and the oppressor. It simply does not matter what Amaziah’s letter to the king says because God has legitimized the shepherd’s values, norms, onto-epistemological perspective, and prophecy.

300. ibid., 42.
301. ibid., 47.
302. ibid., 18.
303. ibid., 19.
304. ibid., 53.
Quite simply “Yahweh takes sides” because “in a racist society, God is never color-blind. To say God is color-blind is analogous to saying that God is blind to justice and injustice, to right and wrong, to good and evil.”

For Cone, that kind of God-talk is simply untenable because it scoffs in the face of the biblical witness. Therefore, the “oppressed and oppressors cannot possibly mean the same thing when they speak of God [because] the God of the oppressed is a God of revolution who breaks the chains of slavery.”

Further, “divine involvement in historical events of liberation that makes theology God-centered; but because God participates in the historical liberation of humanity, we can speak of God only in relationship to human history.”

In that participation, the God of the Oppressed approaches the white God and white theology wrathfully because “a God without wrath does not plan to do too much liberating.”

God’s “kingdom, then, is the rule of God breaking in like a ray of light, usurping the powers that enslave human lives.”

The God of the Oppressed is fundamentally opposed to human enslavement and the state sanctioned institutions that enslave. For Cone, there is no greater impetus for God-inspired human resistance to those institutions than Jesus. He argues therefore, that “Christian theology begins and ends with Jesus Christ. He is the point of departure for everything to be said about God, humankind, and the world.”

Therefore, just as God has to be retheologized, Jesus has to be reexegeted.

(Re)Exegeting Jesus

Much like God, white theology spent centuries recrafting Jesus in its own image. He too became a state sanction symbol of oppression. They turned him white. Therefore, echoing his
assertion about white god, Cone posits that “if Jesus Christ is white and not black, he is an oppressor, and we must kill him.”311 In the wake of white Jesus’s death, what Cone understands to be a more biblical interpretation of Jesus comes to the fore. Here, “if Jesus Christ is to have any meaning for us, he must leave the security of the suburbs by joining blacks in their condition.”312 In this new theological reality, “the norm of all God-talk which seeks to be black-talk is the manifestation of Jesus as the black Christ who provides the necessary soul for black liberation.”313 In this (re)exegesis of Jesus, “liberation is not only consistent with the gospel but is the gospel of Jesus Christ.”314 And much like God, “Jesus is not a human being for all persons; he is a human being for oppressed persons, whose identity is made known in and through their liberation.”315 Liberation, then becomes the cement from which the bricks of the Black Jesus building are made.

Perhaps directly answering or simply anticipating tired arguments about the Biblical Jesus turning the other cheek, Cone makes a sophisticated rhetorical move in exegeting Jesus. He says, “we cannot use Jesus’ behavior in the first century as a literal guide for our actions in the twentieth century. To do so is to fall into the same trap that fundamentalists fall into. It destroys Christian freedom, the freedom to make decisions patterned on, but not dictated by, the example of Jesus.”316 Here, Cone hamstrings time honored theologies that cast Jesus in the mold of Black docility. White theology would lead Black people to believe that our only connection to Jesus was through passive acceptance of our plight and when called upon “sacrifcing” our lives so that those privileged by the state, like Paul, can parade around and tell everyone how important it was

311. ibid., 105.
312. ibid., 105.
313. ibid., 47.
314. ibid., 18.
315. ibid., 86.
316. ibid., 42.
that we died. This reading benefits the privileged. Jesus’ place, then, resembles Black place (see chapter 2). He is here simply to die and make sure white folks are no longer accountable for their actions. However, “being ‘Christian,’ they should know that Jesus was crucified because he did not “stay in his place.” In fact, that is what authentic Christian existence is all about, the refusal to stay in one’s place.” Therefore, Black Christ don’t lay his life down for whiteness. Rather, “the very character of human existence as defined in his life is enough to show that we cannot be for Jesus and for the societal humiliation of human beings.” When Jesus becomes an example for oppressed people's revolution, the question shifts from “what would Jesus do” to “how do we use our lives to liberate like Jesus?”

From this vantage point, Jesus wages war against the institution. To understand Jesus, we must understand him in light of “the conflict with Satan and the powers of this world, the condemnation of the rich, the insistence that the kingdom of God is for the poor, and the locating of his ministry among the poor—these and other features of the career of Jesus show that his work was directed to the oppressed for the purpose of their liberation.” So then, “how can it be said that Jesus was not primarily a social reformer but ‘concerned with men’s motives and hearts,’ when the kingdom itself strikes across all boundaries—social, economic, and political?” Unlike the jesus of white theology, “the black Christ,” then, “is he who threatens the structure of evil as seen in white society, rebelling against it, thereby becoming the embodiment of what the black community knows that it must become:” unapologetically Black.

317. ibid., 78.
318. ibid., 97.
319. ibid., 19.
320. ibid., 110.
321. ibid., 114.
(Re)Loving Blackness

Simply reimagining theology, God, and Jesus would inadequately respond to the white theology lie. That is because white theology does not simply lie about God and Jesus in casting its demon theology, it also lies about Blackness and Black people. This is, at least in part, why God chooses Blackness as her manifestation in the world. Like God and Jesus Black folk and Blackness in general have been lied on. Therefore, “to say God is creator means that my being finds its source in God. I am black because God is black!” Furthermore, “the blackness of God means that God has made the oppressed condition God’s own condition.” To that end, Cone says “Black culture, then, is God’s way of acting in America, God’s participation in black liberation.” To be clear, “Blacks are not elected to be Yahweh’s suffering people. Rather we are elected because we are oppressed against our will and God’s, and God has decided to make our liberation God’s own undertaking.” Therefore, “to be in sin is to be contented with white solutions for the “black problem” and not rebel against every infringement of white being on black being.” This is because Black God and Black Jesus call Black people into what Cone describes as “revelation” or “a historical liberation of an oppressed people from slavery. When an oppressed people comes to know who it is, it will not tolerate oppression.” He continues: “to receive God’s revelation is to become black with God by joining God in the work of liberation.” That is because “liberation is nothing but putting into practice the reality of human

322. ibid., 77.
323. ibid., 67.
324. ibid., 40.
325. ibid., 61.
326. ibid., 103.
327. ibid., 59.
328. ibid., 69.
freedom.” And “in order to be free, a person must be able to make choices that are not dependent on an oppressive system.”

But how can a people marked for enslavement and death know freedom? For Cone, “this is the paradox of human existence. Freedom is the opposite of oppression, but only the oppressed are truly free.” What is more, legitimate Christian freedom is the recognition that Christ has conquered death. Humankind no longer has to be afraid of dying. To live as if death had the last word is to be enslaved and thus controlled by the forces of destruction...For men and women who live in an oppressive society this means that they do not have to behave as if death were the ultimate.

If death does not have the last word, revelation and revolution can proceed without being impeded in any way. With the illusion of whiteness as sacred dismantled and the fear of state repercussions relegated, Black people are called to proceed with Black affirmation of self and humanity by any means necessary. Therefore, with the essential spiritual worth of Blackness affirmed and “because whiteness by its very nature is against blackness, the black prophet [in Black theology] is a prophet of national doom. He proclaims the end of the ‘American Way,’ for God has stirred the soul of the black community.”

Black Theology as Legitimate Theology

Despite Cone’s task as a resistive prophet to (re), he also acknowledges that the Lawds’s stirring of the soul of the Black community is not new or novel. As he says “like black power, black theology is not new either. It came into being when the black clergy realized that killing slave masters was doing the work of God.” When The Lawd cracked the sky and played the

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329. ibid., 89.
330. ibid, 93.
331. ibid., 87.
332. ibid., 111.
333. ibid., 61.
334. ibid., 38.
melodious sound of *Knuck If You Buck* in Crispus Attucks ear, The Lawd was stirring. When The Lawd told sister Harriet to grab that rusty revolver and get to work, he was stirring. In the still of the night, when God confirmed that Sojourner Truth was, in fact, a woman, she was stirring. When The Lawd declared August 21st go time for Nat Turner, they was stirring. The Lawd was stirring in enslavement. The Lawd was stirring in reconstruction. The Lawd was stirring in Jim/Jane Crow and Civil Rights. The Lawd is stirring in Black Power. The Lawd was stirring in Silver Rights and the new age of Black prosperity. The Lawd is stirring in the throes of police brutality and prison industrial poison. The Lawd is stirring! The Lawd is stirring! The Lawd is stirring!

And because The Lawd stirs; because The Lawd is actively involved in the liberative affairs of real people, a third emergence in the dialectic between white american theology and legitimate theology is necessitated. That is Black Theology. The dissonance between white american theology and what Cone presents as legitimate Biblical theology provided space for Cone to articulate Black theology. In *A Black Theology of Liberation*, he attempts to systematize what he began explicating in *Black Theology Black Power*. More specifically, he explains Black theology in terms of what it is, what it aint, what it does, and who it is for.

**What It Is**

Black theology serves as a unique resolution to the clash between white theology and legitimate Biblical theology. “Realizing that white racism is an insanity comparable to Nazism,” Cone says, “black theology seeks to articulate a theological ethos consistent with the black revolutionary struggle.” He explains further that “the development of black theology is an attempt of the black community itself to define what the knowledge of God means for its

335. ibid., 28.
existence in a white racist society.”

Here, Cone proclaims Black theology as a theology of resistance. As I will explain in greater detail in chapter five, Black theology is primarily concerned with the interaction and relationship between the oppressed (Black people) and the oppressor (whiteness). More specifically Black theology’s task “is to analyze the nature of the gospel of Jesus Christ in the light of oppressed blacks so they will see the gospel as inseparable from their humiliated condition, and as bestowing on them the necessary power to break the chains of oppression.”

It is a direct response to white oppression, not only by Black people, but by a Black God.

To that end, Cone explains that “by becoming a black person, God discloses that blackness is not what the world says it is. Blackness is a manifestation of the being of God in that it reveals that neither divinity nor humanity resides in white definitions but in liberation from captivity.”

Therefore, God rejects the aspects of the Black-white interaction that the Black community rejects. Black Theology believes “the black community’s no as expressed in the black revolution is God’s no, showing God’s rejection of oppressors and acceptance of the oppressed.”

Black theology then makes room for a revolutionary Black Christ. That “black Christ leads the warfare against the white assault on blackness by striking at white values and white religion.”

It is more than simply saying no to white values, however. More importantly, Black theology is saying yes to Black values. To do so, Black theology turns to Black history. Black history preserves the record of white abuse and Black triumph thereof. However, “black history

336. ibid., 50.
337. ibid., 20-1.
338. ibid., 114.
339. ibid., 73.
340. ibid., 113.
is more than what whites did to blacks. More importantly black history is black persons saying no to every act of white brutality.”\textsuperscript{341} For this reason, “Black theology focuses on black history as a source for its theological interpretation of God’s work in the world because divine activity is inseparable from black history.”\textsuperscript{342}

Black history also captures and leads into the Black experience, which is just as crucial for Black theology. According to Cone, “there can be no black theology which does not take seriously the black experience…This means that black theology realizes that it is human beings who speak of God, and when those human beings are black, they speak of God only in the light of the black experience.”\textsuperscript{343} Therefore “Black theology represents that community of blacks who refuse to cooperate in the exaltation of whiteness and the degradation of blackness…The black community is thus a religious community, a community that views its liberation as the work of the divine.”\textsuperscript{344} In fact, “to try to separate black liberation from black religion is a mistake, because black religion is authentic only when it is identified with the struggle for black freedom.”\textsuperscript{345} Black theology, then, is a theological emergence that arises out of the Black-white struggle to declare that God is Black and her liberative activity can be found in the annals of Black history. Christ is Black and his liberative activity manifests not only in the first century but also in the twenty-first century in the form of the Black experience. This renders the Black community a religious community, which means that in Black theology the Black experience “is about more than simply encountering white insanity. It also means blacks making decisions

\textsuperscript{341} ibid., 37.  
\textsuperscript{342} ibid., 38.  
\textsuperscript{343} ibid., 35-6.  
\textsuperscript{344} ibid., 61-3.  
\textsuperscript{345} ibid., 63.
about themselves.” Such a shift is radical in a world where white theology has centered itself. But Black theology aint white theology.

**What It Ain’t**

Given its affirmation of Blackness, Black theology rejects the mores and norms of whiteness and white theology. It “rejects their standards, for we know they speak for oppressors, and thus will inevitably analyze the nature of God in the interests of white society as a whole.”

This means that “Black theology also rejects those who counsel blacks to accept the limits which this society places on them, for it is tantamount to suicide.” Rather, “as the oppressed now recognize their situation in the light of God’s revelation, they know that they should have killed their oppressors instead of trying to ‘love’ them.”

Black theology, then, aint a religion of the passive long-suffering “love” that white human traffickers attempted to indoctrinate our ancestors with. In Black theology, “to love is to make a decision against white racism. Because love means that God meets our needs, God’s love for white oppressors could only mean wrath—that is, a destruction of their whiteness and a creation of blackness.”

Black theology is an unequivocal rejection of whiteness. Therefore, it is a rejection of several other foundational elements of white theology as well. First, Black theology is not a theology of supremacy. It is not about winning this demented game that Europe has been playing for several centuries. Afterall, “what could ‘winning’ possibly mean? If it means what white racists mean by it—enslavement of human beings on the alleged basis of white supremacy—then, ‘God deliver us!’”

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346. ibid., 36.
347. ibid., 66.
348. ibid., 30.
349. ibid., 57.
350. ibid., 75.
351. ibid., 49.
values. For that reason, “Black theology must also be suspicious of so-called white revolutionary theologians. What is most disturbing about their self-proclaimed identification with black power is their inability to let us speak for ourselves.”\(^{352}\) For Cone, this “white help” often comes at the price of Black voice and values. Next, “black theology rejects the tendency of classic Christianity to appeal to divine providence. To suggest that black suffering is consistent with the knowledge and will of God and that in the end everything will happen for the good of those who love God is unacceptable to blacks.”\(^{353}\) Therefore, Black theology rejects “the eschatological promise of a distant, future heaven is insufficient to account for the earthly pain of black suffering. We cannot accept a God who inflicts or tolerates black suffering for some inscrutable purpose.”\(^{354}\) That means that “black theology rejects elaborate speculations about the end. It is just this kind of speculation that led blacks to stake their whole existence on heaven—the scene of the whole company of the faithful with their long white robes. Too much of this talk is not good for the revolution.”\(^{355}\) Black theology actively works for the end of Black pain and suffering here, now, and on this side of death.

**What It Do**

What Black theology does, then, is call Black people into revelation and revolution. It reminds Black people that “the Jesus-event in twentieth-century [and twenty-first century] America is a black-event—that is, an event of liberation taking place in the black community in which blacks recognize that it is incumbent upon them to throw off the chains of white oppression by whatever means they regard as suitable.”\(^{356}\) Black theology holds that “the black

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352. ibid., 66.
353. ibid., 30.
354. ibid., 30.
355. ibid., 130.
356. ibid., 21.
community is aware of this; and the black revolution is nothing but a will to spread the decision among blacks to seize their freedom—any way they can.”

Because “the God of black liberation will not be confused with a bloodthirsty white idol,” the task of Black theology is to “show that the black God has nothing to do with the God worshiped in white churches whose primary purpose is to sanctify the racism of whites and to daub the wounds of blacks.”

In Black theology “God must be sharply distinguished from white distortions of God.” Therefore, “God not only reveals to the oppressed the divine right to break their chains by any means necessary, but also assures them that their work in their own liberation is God’s own work.”

Likewise, “through Christ blacks are able to perceive the nature of black being and destroy the forces of nonbeing (white racism).” In light of this, Cone urges that “Black theology must realize that the white Jesus has no place in the black community, and it is our task to destroy him. We must replace him with the black messiah, as Albert Cleage would say, a messiah who sees his existence as inseparable from black liberation and the destruction of white racism.”

From this vantage point, Black theology’s mission is simple. “In black theology,” Cone says, “blacks are encouraged to revolt against the structures of white social and political power by affirming blackness… because and only because they can do no other; and black theology says simply that such action is in harmony with divine revelation.” Black theology accepts that “no black person will ever be good enough in the eyes of whites to merit equality. Therefore, if blacks are to have freedom, they must take it, by any means necessary.”

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357. ibid., 95
358. ibid., 66.
359. ibid., 65.
360. ibid., 53.
361. ibid., 58.
362. ibid., 47.
363. ibid., 30.
364. ibid., 30.
theology does. It calls Black people out of the cycle of oppression that is the Black-white struggle and into revolution on Black terms and for Black people.

**Who It Is For**

To be clear, “the focus on blackness [in Black theology] does not mean that only blacks suffer as victims in a racist society, but that blackness is an ontological symbol and a visible reality which best describes what oppression means in America.”  

Cone argues that “the event of the kingdom today is the liberation struggle in the black community.” This means that Blackness is a manifestation of God’s liberative work in the world. I am sure that both Black theology and Cone would agree that when Greg Abbot evicted Latinx asylum seekers because of his racism, that God was a Latinx asylum seeker. That is the point. Black theology is a theology of the oppressed. It agrees with the Afropessemistic view that the world has decided that it needs a permanent underclass and has selected Black people to be that underclass. Therefore, Black theology “is a theology of and for the black community, seeking to interpret the religious dimensions of the forces of liberation in that community.”  

It is, then, a specific version of a wider phenomenon of God’s liberative activity in the world. Black theology comes to the oppressed and says “it does not matter that whites have all the guns and that, militarily speaking, we have no chance of winning. There comes a time when a people must protect their own, and for blacks the time is now.”  

Black theology is for the Black people “telling whites where to get off, and a willingness to accept the consequences” just as Jesus did. Black theology is for all those who have accepted the truth of the gospel of Black power which means “the black

365. ibid., 22.
366. ibid., 116.
367. ibid., 21.
368. ibid., 129.
369. ibid., 53.
community will define its own place, its own way of behaving in the world, regardless of the consequences to white society.\textsuperscript{370} Black theology, then, is for any and everyone needing to throw the oppressor’s mental, physical, social, and political yoke off and pick up the yoke of revolution.

**Conclusion: Of the Coming of James**

In the thirteenth chapter of his iconic *The Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B. Du Bois provides the narrative “Of the Coming of John.” Here, he juxtaposes two Johns, one white and the other Black. Throughout the course of his life Black John (hereafter referred to as John) proves to be an exceptional student. This culminates in him being sent off to “Wells Institute” for advanced education. John’s education was a community effort, designed for community benefit. But something peculiar happened to John in Johnstown, the location of Wells Institute. In Johnstown, John learns the norms and values of white culture. This sacred culture molds him into a more conscious and learned man. He became so conscious and learned that he begins to dread his return home to serve the Black folks in his hometown of Altamaha. Upon his return, he speaks in a way that his friends and family do not understand. He thinks in ways that simply do not resonate with them. His education has rendered him unintelligible. The brief time that is the rest of his life is spent reconciling his education with his calling; making sense of these two life-defining experiences: Black Altamaha and white Johnstown.\textsuperscript{371}

What John wrestles with and what Cone begins to wrestle with in *A Black Theology of Liberation* is a distinct political responsibility that the magic man has within Blackness. He is, of course, a magic man because he wields nommo or as the Dogan people believe: “to command

\textsuperscript{370} ibid., 29.
things with words is to practice magic.”372 In the curious case of the African American, liberation is the driving motivation of the magic. The magic comes in the Black ability to speak liberation into existence. In John’s case, the liberative magic was an educated Altamaha. For Cone, the liberative magic was a Black Theology. This is the magic that makes the prophetic word a form of futurism. This magic allows the prophet to not only articulate a vision of Black theology, but to call the community into co-constructing that vision, into living into that vision. Just as John traveled to Johnstown to get the good word, Dr. Cone has as well. But how good could a word be if it is unintelligible to the people who sent you? Or worse, if it fails to fully represent and resonate?

In A Black Theology of Liberation, Cone attempted to address the reality of white racism. Perhaps inspired by enslaved Black people who “were able to appropriate white Christianity to their own condition by turning it into a religion of liberation,” Cone begins to systematize Black theology.373 But could Blackness and theology be reconciled? Charles H. Long, one of Cone’s greatest dissenters did not seem to think so. Cone quotes Long’s criticism saying, “theology is a Western concept, created by Europeans to dominate and denigrate non-Western peoples,” he said, “and thus completely alien to the black religious experience.”374 Cone disagreed. Unwilling to cede theology to whiteness, he set out to articulate Black theology which emerged out of not only the Black religious experience, but the wider Black experience.

However, to accomplish that task, Cone employed the tools he’d been given in graduate school. For me, this is a part of Cone’s brilliance. To be able to stroll into Israel’s capital and condemn Israel’s false prophet using his own framework, beating him at his own game inspires

373 Cone, Said I Wasn’t Gone Tell Nobody, 118.
374 ibid., 85.
me. But therein lies the problem and the trouble with resistance as well. Resistance necessitates the oppressor. We do not have to worship something in order for it to be pivotal to our efforts. If I am going to address the oppressor through his lens then I must, at least partially, speak his language. But what of the harm that language has done to the shepherds? Unfortunately, Black theology as it appears in *A Black Theology of Liberation* does not reject “white theology entirely…because black theologians are trained in white seminaries, and white thinkers make decisions about the structure and scope of theology, it is not possible for black religionists to separate themselves immediately and completely from white thought.”375 This initial inability would serve as the source of many of Cone’s Black critics, including his own brother, Cecil.

As different as the two audiences might be, the shepherds are still Israelites. However, resistance actively works to remove Amaziah from his elevated place of sacredness. For that reason, “Black theology believes that the spirit of the authentic gospel is often better expressed by ‘heretics’ than by the ‘orthodox’ tradition.”376 This means that “Blacks know that whites do not have the last word on black existence. This realization may be defined as black power, the power of the black community to make decisions regarding its identity.”377 Therefore, “relating this to black theology, we can say that the definition of truth for the black thinker arises from a passionate encounter with black reality. Though that truth may be described religiously as God, it is not the God of white religion but the God of black existence.”378 But why address the white god by employing things learned in white theology?

The sacred builds this place of exclusion for the purposes of elevating themselves. They justify their elevation by claiming some exclusive relationship with God. However, Amos even

376. ibid., 44.
377. ibid., 36.
378. ibid., 32.
responds to this. He reminds them saying “are you not like the Cushites to me, O people of Israel?” declares the Lord. ‘Did I not bring up Israel from the land of Egypt, and the Philistines from Caphtor and the Syrians from Kir?’ In other words, yeer special! Resistive prophetic rhetoric calls those whose position give them voice at the expense of others into silence. Ultimately, a message about the sacred will always necessitates an address to the sacred. This is why resistive prophetic rhetoric does not simply stop at addressing the sacred. It calls the sacred into silence as a means to initiate what is next. In the absence of sacred oppressive songs and festivals, resistive prophecy hands the microphone to the secular.

379. Amos 9:7 (NIV)
Say it loud!
- James Brown

Africans viewed life as a whole and did not make the distinctions between the secular and the “sacred” that are found in Western culture.
- James H. Cone

Chapter 4
The Bridge

*The Spirituals and The Blues,* which Cone released in 1972, marked several turning points in his prophesy. His first two books were forged in the fires of debates with whites about the nature and merits of Black theology. However, by the time 1972 rolled around Cone found himself less interested in such debates. As he explains, “white critics soon ceased to matter to me at all… [they] lived in a privileged world that exploited black people and even the best of them missed what black people were struggling against daily.”

From this point on, Cone’s focus would be more squarely set on engaging, responding to, and being molded by Blackness. Interestingly, *The Spirituals and The Blues* also initiated another pattern that lasted the rest of his career. None of the remainder of his book titles, besides his 1984 *For My People: Black Theology and the Black Church,* would feature the words Black or theology.

Perhaps both these shifts pointed to a new focus born out of an unexpected controversy. Cone begins the fourth chapter of *Said I Wasn’t Gonna Tell Nobody* discussing Charles Long. As I mentioned before, Long was Cone’s greatest critic. It seems to have gone a bit beyond that, however. According to Cone, The Society for the Study of Black Religion conference (SSBR) “turned out to be a platform for Charles Long to launch his persistent and harsh criticism of black liberation theology. Whatever the subject, he would find a way to attack my books—an

attack that continued throughout the 1970s and much of the '80s.”\textsuperscript{381} Cone “respected Long and wanted him to be my teacher. I knew there was an important truth behind what he was saying, though I was damned if I understood exactly what it was. He seemed more interested in embarrassing me than teaching me.”\textsuperscript{382} Despite having written two groundbreaking books, Cone was still young in his academic career. Charles Long was a giant. His persistent rejection of Black theology seemed to have wounded Cone.

But that was not the only wound. Even before \textit{Black Theology and Black Power} was published, Cone had accepted the plight of the prophet. He understood that his message would be rejected by the white voices in theology. He understood that they might never understand, much less accept, Black theology. However, Long was not his only Black critic. Cone also specifically cites other Black religious scholars, J. Deotis Roberts and Gayraud Wilmore as critics. Despite their criticisms not being as universally dismissive as Longs, Roberts, Wilmore, and other Black scholars’ skepticism of Black theology shook Cone. He says, “I'd expected white scholars to dismiss black theology, but hadn't expected that response from black scholars; I thought they'd come to my defense, but they didn't, and I felt alone and scared.”\textsuperscript{383} Despite this fear, Cone was able to absorb the critiques and reimagine Black theology based on Black interactions he was having. Similar to the way that he learned from Long, Cone explains:

I learned from them both, especially from Wilmore, who based his critique on his appreciation of my work and his involvement in the black church, the civil rights and Black Power movements...What J. Deotis Roberts criticized was my endorsement of Black Power, which he regarded as un-Christian, violent, lacking any interest in reconciliation with whites.\textsuperscript{384}

\textsuperscript{381} Ibid., 85-6. 
\textsuperscript{382} Ibid., 85. 
\textsuperscript{383} Ibid., 85. 
\textsuperscript{384} Ibid., 89.
However, like Black Power, “Black liberation theology strives to open a world in which black people's dignity is recognized.” 385

Nevertheless, Cone’s sea of Black scholarly critics meant that there was something about his prophetic message that did not resonate with the shepherds. Perhaps that is the cause of his aforementioned admissions that in writing his first two books he found it difficult to completely put away what he’d learned in graduate school. Long was not completely wrong. Despite his message, many of Cone’s citations thus far had drawn heavily upon sacred white theological texts. To that end, Cone admits: “no doubt much of what [Long] said was valid, and in fact I learned a great deal from him, even if I was often deeply offended.” 386

Here, Cone found himself immersed in yet another eventually deeply impactful realm of controversy. That is, the remaining disconnect between Black theology and the Black experience. He “was trying to create a new language about God that derived from the black experience and the struggle for justice and dignity, which I knew was not simply the flip side of white Western theology.” 387 In fact, what Cone was attempting to accomplish moved beyond the place that white theology even occupied. In his words:

White theology didn't set me on fire. Research in theology, biblical studies, history of religions, sociology, philosophy, or any other academic discipline interested me but didn't set me on fire. What was happening to black people in the urban centers of Chicago, Detroit, Los Angeles, and New York, and on the back roads of Alabama, Mississippi, Arkansas, and Georgia did that. 388

He also needed to examine himself, however. “Without going back to Macedonia and reexperiencing what I felt as a child,” Cone says, “I couldn't have written The Spirituals and the
His first official memoir would not be published for another decade. However, now more than ever, Cone’s Black critics were causing him to turn inward.

Scholars were not the only Black people whose criticism and acknowledgment were having an impact on Cone’s prophetic progressions. Cone deduces the 1969 *Time Magazine* article “Theology: In Search of a Black Christianity” as the catalyst for a meeting with the Black Panthers in 1970. That article asserted that “the black churches of the U.S.—which have frequently been accused of excessive caution on civil rights—are rapidly catching up with the secular advocates of Black Power who have created such turmoil in the universities and urban ghettos.” It also credited Cone’s theology for being a primary proponent of that reconciliation. Despite leaving the meeting with the Black Panthers believing that “God was using them to shake up America, even though they did not speak of their work in that way,” there was also unresolvable tension between him and the freedom fighting group. This was because he was a “preacher and they didn't like preachers. They said that ministers got in the way and impeded the black revolution for which they believed they were the vanguard. They liked what I said about the revolutionary Black Christ. However, we never became soul mates.”

Built upon an ironically similar logic to many of the critiques that Cone launched in his first two books at the Black church and preachers, the Black Panthers seemed to have written Black Christianity off completely. What could Black theology say to Black people who had made a similar decision? Much of the rest of Cone’s career would be dedicated to answering this question. Interestingly this would not come in the form of a traditional apologetic, but rather a further examination of

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389. Ibid., 96.
391. Cone, Said I Wasn’t Gone Tell Nobody, 77.
392. Ibid., 103.
the reconciliation between Christ and Blackness. Perhaps that is why Cone was able to develop a much better relationship with Black nationalists, such as Amiri Baraka.

Baraka and Cone first met in 1970 upon Baraka’s request. Cone explains that Baraka’s “writing influenced me more than any nationalist, except for Malcolm X.” According to Cone, Baraka loved my focus on blackness, though I could tell that my Christian identity didn’t sit well with him. He organized the Congress of African Peoples, and at its first major conference, he asked me to be the co-chair of the religion workshop, along with Albert Cleage. There were nearly three hundred people in the workshop, and I was the only openly declared Christian, since Cleage could not attend. Leading a workshop of religious black nationalists, with many different views, was one of my challenging experiences. Black nationalists urged me to denounce Christianity as the white man’s religion because it was against the black revolution. I stood my ground and responded that Jesus was not white but a dark-skinned Hebrew who died fighting for the freedom for his people.

Here, Black non-religious scholars’ impact on Cone’s theology is fully displayed. The common emphasis on Blackness between Black theology and Black nationalism served as the velcro between the two. Ultimately, Cone hoped that Black Theology’s greatest impact would be on Black people. He “was on a mission to transform self-loathing Negro Christians into black-loving revolutionary disciples of the Black Christ.” Recognizing the need for a new source, “I soaked myself in “the world I came from”—the world of the spirituals and the blues, folklore, and slave narratives and found the language of freedom and liberation black slaves and ex-slaves sang and talked about.” Therefore, Cone “decided to examine black freedom in the spirituals and the blues, the music I first heard in black churches and juke joints in Bearden, Arkansas.”

Black music then became the new source from which Black theology emerged anew. Though the

393. Ibid., 103.
394. Ibid., 104.
395. Ibid., 91.
396. Ibid., 94.
quotation of spirituals had been a staple in Cone’s previous two books, Black music, and not what he learned in graduate school, became the soil from which *The Spirituals and The Blues* grew. He says,

I wrote *The Spirituals and the Blues* to show that black liberation theology was not, as Long had suggested, derived primarily from the European theology I studied in graduate school. Although European thinkers helped me to get started in theology, the idea of liberation and freedom did not come from them. Already free, they did not need to advocate historical liberation from oppression. In their theologies, freedom was an abstract and philosophical principle, lost in the realm of ideas. I had to bring them down to earth, to the ghetto, and compel their work to serve the black struggle for justice. Their theologies were not written for the African people Europe colonized; they wrote for the colonizers.\(^ {397}\)

Cone, however, wrote for Black people; for the shepherds; for the secular.

**Elevating the Secular**

Through the process of creating a space of exclusion the sacred carve out for themselves an identity through dichotomizing. Either something is sacred, or it is not. Either a song is holy, or it is not. Either a particular kind of petitioning is holy, or it is not. Either a people are sacred, or they are not. The secular, therefore, arises out of a notness. Amos’s prophecy is filled with discourse puttin on for the not. Immediately following his hook of “for three transgressions… and the four, I will not revoke the punishment,” Amos makes the foundational justification of Israel’s judgment clear. He says “they sell the righteous for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals. [Israel are] those who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth and turn aside the easy of the afflicted.”\(^ {398}\) Amos’s prophecy stands as a redemptive song for the poor. This redemption, however, does not come because the poor have done wrong, but rather because they are the wrong that society has done. They are the victims of the “cows of Bashan, who are on the mountain of Samaria, who oppress the poor, who crush the needy, who say to your

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397. Ibid., 94-5.
398. Amos 2:6-7 (NIV)
husbands, ‘Bring, that we may drink!’” Here, the picture that Amos paints becomes clearer. Human beings are casted into poverty’s throw so that others might receive elevation. It is these elevated ones who own the sacred. After all, as Cone explains “the Bible was written from the perspective of the dominant class in Israel.” This class has turned “justice to wormwood and cast down righteousness to the earth!” For that reason Amos speaks on behalf of the secular when he says “Woe to those who are at ease in Zion, and those who feel secure on the mountain of Samaria, the notable men of the first nations, to whom the house of Israel comes…Woe to you who lie on beds of ivory and stretch themselves out on their couches and eat lambs from the flock and calves from the midst of the stall.” Amos lives in a society so low that trading the poor’s humanity for material things has been normalized. It has become sacred.

Interestingly, and unlike much of our political discourse today, Amos’s prophecy does not pathologize poverty. Amos is a shepherd. He explains that the exigencies of widespread injustice during his time have had a direct impact on the “the pastures of the shepherds [who] mourn.” He is a part of the not; of the other; of the secular. He knows that they understand something deeper about God; something the sacred will never understand. They are not secular because they have no connection with the holy, but rather because that connection has been pathologized in the process of sacredization. The sacred has left no room for secular onto-epistemological positions to be recognized. Rather, they are pushed to their hush harbors. Unfortunately, this marginalization comes at a price- often their lives. So, the resistive prophet adopts a position in line with Asante when he says, “we must respond to the external forces,

399. Amos 4:1 (NIV)
401. Amos 5:7 (NIV)
402. Amos 6:1; 6:4 (NIV)
403. Amos 1:1 (NIV)
404. Amos 1:2b (NIV)
[because] there is no escaping that responsibility.” The resistive prophet seeks, then, to respond.

**Cone’s Secular Turn**

As I began to argue above, *The Spirituals and The Blues* comes as a response as well. Here, Cone is responding to his Black critics as much as he is responding to the sacred. In fact, his response to the sacred comes in the form of a complete violation of everything that has been made sacred. In *The Spirituals and the Blues* theology does not emerge from Barth or Tillich. Rather, more than ever, Black theology is born out of the Black cultural experience. This is reflected in Cone’s methodology. Rather than piecing together the ideas already known to theology to argue for liberation, Cone begins with liberative culture. That is Black culture. That is Black music.

He examines Black music for several reasons. First, he highlights that “writing *The Spirituals and the Blues*, while listening to Mahalia Jackson, B. B. King, and other artists, was a soulful and a soul-searching experience.” From the beginning, Black music served as Cone’s medicine machine. Following King’s murder, Cone began the practice of putting on an angry face with white people and teaching his classes during the day, and going “home to my ‘Blue Room’ in the basement, furiously scribbling notes, and [thinking] deeply about what I was going to write.” Cone’s “Blue Room” is where he listened to blues. Those blues became his grounding for a prophetic rhetoric rooted in the secular, not the sacred. His examination of Black

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407. ibid., 34.
408. ibid., 44.
music, then was a turning away from the sacred and aligning himself more completely with the secular.

The *Spirituals and The Blues*, then, serve as the bridge of the song that is James Hal Cone’s foundational texts. It is an early turning point after which the very nature of Cone’s theology would permanently shift. Black theology was still Black and would remain Black. What was in the rearview mirror was his graduate school grounding. This was no longer “theology.” It was fully Black Theology.

Considering that fact, like the bridge of a song, this chapter breaks form. *The Spirituals and the Blues* is Cone’s response to his Black critics. To that end, it is worthwhile for the bridge to not simply analyze Cone, but to actively put him in conversation with a Black critic and conversation partner. There are several candidates with valid reasons to be Cone’s conversation partners. Long is an obvious choice because it appears that he and Cone’s rivalry often resembled the east coast-west coast rap beef of the 1990s. Examining Cone with Wilmore would provide an opportunity to read Cone alongside someone who was both a critic and collaborator. I have chosen, however, to place Cone in conversation with Baraka. More specifically, the bridge of this song scaffolds *The Spirituals and the Blues* and Baraka’s *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* side by side. I do this for two reasons. First and quite simply, Baraka being the second most impactful Black nationalist voice for Cone, only after X, puts Baraka likely in the top tier of most influential voices for Cone all together. Therefore, and secondly, it is extremely likely that *The Spirituals and The Blues* adopts a similar method and mission as *Blues People*, which was published a decade prior. Just as Baraka sought to anthologize Black culture through Black music, Cone sought to anthologize Black theology through Black music.
The Blues and The Spirituals: Baraka and Cone

Amiri Baraka is widely revered as a major proponent of the Black Arts Movement (BAM), which occurred roughly in the ten-year period between 1965 and 1975. Like many Black nationalists’ movements of the time BAM heavily drew inspiration from Malcolm X. Following X’s death Baraka left his white wife, Hettie Cohen, and relocated to Harlem where much of BAM’s activity transpired.409 Like Baraka, many other BAM participants found inspiration in X. This is testified to by the Malcolm X section of poems in the collected volume SOS/Calling All Black People: A Black Arts Movement Reader, which is dedicated to the movement.410 X’s ideology helped BAM artists engage in the important work of discovering and rediscovering Blackness. It guided them as they attempted to build Black institutions in X’s spirit of self-determination.

Malcolm X’s ideology also inspired Cone as he articulated Black Theology. Most famously, the pages of his early works are graffitied with X’s famous phrase “by any means necessary.” In the introduction to Black Theology and Black Power he explains that “the burning theological question was, how can I reconcile Christianity and Black Power, Martin Luther King, Jr.'s idea of nonviolence and Malcolm X's 'by any means necessary' philosophy”411 For Cone, the phrase and X’s ideology bore undeniable repercussions for Christian theology and what it meant for Christian impact on the world. In all the ways that Cone’s theology was a theology of political action, it was active because X pushed it to be.

Both BAM and Black Liberation Theology were born out of the turbulent exigencies of the 1960s. The areas in which the two movements and the two men often put at the forefront of them diverge is perhaps more interesting, however. Specifically, Baraka’s tone toward Christianity is often decidedly critical and dismissive. Cone, on the other hand, understands Christianity to have a great liberative potentiality. This seemingly irreconcilable difference begs a question. How could two people with such profoundly similar ideological motivations come to completely different conclusions about Christianity?

In 1963 Amiri Baraka published *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*. This anthology of Black culture employed music as a vehicle to trace the development of Black culture as it departed from Africa’s shores and meandered down The United States of America’s highway of Oppression. Baraka’s book reads like a U.S. Black history with the blues at its center. Despite there only being two proper chapters dedicated to the subject, the shadow of the blues looms from the book’s beginning until its end. In his treatment, the spirituals are a chapter, both literally and historically, of Black history. Cone takes an inverse approach. Five of his six chapters are dedicated to the place that the spirituals play in Black cultural development. His treatment is an extension of Baraka’s work in many ways. However, in his telling the blues are a chapter, albeit a crucial chapter, of the Black cultural story.

Their agreement on the role of music in Black consciousness and cultural development provides bifocals for us to read the two texts together. Despite any divergences, both men and movements prop up Blackness and Black experience as fundamental in any project of Black liberation. This turn to the Black experience binds these sibling texts and is the most appropriate tool to interrogate an important emergence in Cone’s prophetic progression. That is the turn toward the secular in a recalibration of his resistive prophetic mode.
In this chapter I argue that building upon Baraka’s work, Cone reimagines and re-articulates the relationship between the spirituals and the blues as prophecy instead of an anthology. Cone’s prophetic orientation drives him to think of the spiritual and the blues in more harmonious terms. This shift makes way for a project of resistive and liberatory reconciliation, which further shifts his prophetic resistance. To explore how he creates this prophecy, I analyze both texts, teasing out the ways that each man situates the spirituals and the blues respectively within Black cultural development and liberation projects. I conclude by explicating Cone’s prophetic resistance. This resistive prophetic rhetoric engages the conversation between the sacred and secular for resistive or liberative purposes. Resistance and liberation also served as driving motivations for the BAM. With that motivation in mind, Amiri Baraka placed the spirituals into the anthology of Black cultural development.

**The Spirituals and the Baraka**

Baraka’s discussion of the spirituals is couched within a larger commentary on Christianity and Blackness. In chapter four of *Blues People* entitled “Afro-Christian Music and Slave Religion,” Baraka presents the Black embrace of Christianity as a step in the evolution from African to American Negro.412 Much of this process resembles what Kent Ono and John M. Sloop describe as “pastiche” in which marginalized groups “barrow from, without mimicking” their oppressors.413 To that end, Baraka explains that “Christianity was adopted by the Negro before the great attempts by missionaries and evangelists in the early part of the nineteenth century to convert them.”414 Here, he pushes back on claims that enslaved Black people were

forced to adopt their master’s religion. Baraka finds the manner of conversion to be quite the opposite. He asserts that “it was thought by white Christians that if the Africans were given Christianity, there could be no real justification for enslaving them, since they would no longer be heathens or savages.”\textsuperscript{415} So why, then, did enslaved Black people adopt Christianity. Baraka offers two answers “the reason for grasping the white man’s religion by the North American Negro are fairly simple. First, his own religion was prohibited in this country. In some parts of the South, “conjuring” or use of “hoodoo” or “devil talk” was punishable by death or, at the very least, whipping. Also, the African has always had a traditional respect for his conqueror’s gods.”\textsuperscript{416}

It is noteworthy that Baraka describes Christianity as “the white man’s religion.”\textsuperscript{417} This is a claim that Cone, his contemporaries in Black theology, and many of his students would contest. However, for Baraka, the origins of Black people’s relationship with Christianity were simple. “Christianity was attractive” to the enslaved African “simply because it was something the white man did that the Black man could do also, and in the time of the missionaries, was encouraged to do.”\textsuperscript{418} From this vantage point, Christianity was (and perhaps still is) pastiche. The exigence of slavery demanded that the enslaved Africans and their offspring adjust. Forced to put away their own religion and culture, the dispersed Africans found ways to modify what they saw their enslavers doing. This manifested in several African-based connections to Christianity. For example, “total immersion in water, which is the way the Baptists symbolize their conversion to the ‘true church’ and the teachings of Christ, ... was perhaps particularly attractive to the early slaves because in most of the religions of West Africa the river spirits were

\textsuperscript{415} ibid., 36.  
\textsuperscript{416} ibid., 32-3.  
\textsuperscript{417} ibid., 33.  
\textsuperscript{418} ibid., 33.
thought to be among the most powerful deities.”

Likewise, “the American Negro’s religious music developed quite similarly, taking its superficial forms (and instrumentation, in many cases) from the European or American models, but there the imitation ended.”

Baraka argues throughout the chapter that enslaved Africans imbued the spirituals with African logics, rhythms, melodies, and terms. More specifically he says that “the music that was produced by Negro Christianity was the result of diverse influences. First of all, there was that music which issued from pure African ritual sources, and which changed to fit the new religion.”

Despite the distinct African or Afro form that enslaved Christian practice and the spirituals took, Baraka argues that Christianity played a pivotal role in decentering Africanness in the African mind. He asserts that “the Christianity of the slave represented a movement away from Africa. It was the beginning of Africa as ‘a foreign place.’”

For Baraka and many BAM contributors, Africa served as a home base of Blackness. For Africa to be “a foreign place” in the minds of the Black person was an extreme tragedy that begot further tragedy. In the life of an enslaved African one tragic result born of Christianity came in the form of coalescing to the enslaved condition. Baraka declares that:

The Slave masters also learned early on that the Africans who had begun to accept Christian ethics or even some crude part of its dogma were less likely to run away or start rebellions or uprisings. Christianity, as it was first given to the slaves . . . was to be used strictly as a code of conduct which would enable its devotees to participate in an afterlife; it was from its very inception among the black slaves, a slave ethic. It acted as a great pacifier and palliative, although it also produced a great inner strength among the devout and an almost inhuman indifference to pain.

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419. ibid., 38.
420. ibid., 42.
421. ibid., 44.
422. ibid., 39.
423. ibid., 38.
Working from the observations of enslavers, Baraka deduces that Christianity made the enslaved person more enslaveable. It made taking back her freedom and humanity less likely because he was subjected to an ethic and dogma that had no use for or belief in either. Rather, “Christianity was to prepare the black man for his Maker, and the anthropomorphic ‘heben’ where all his ‘sins and suffering would be washed away.’”  

This journey from freedom and humanity on Earth to the elsewheresness of “heben” mirrors the journey that the African experienced in the middle passage. It is, as I describe it, a second middle passage: a mental middle passage. Just as Africa is home, this world is home. To defer humanity to elsewhere was a similar process to deferring citizenship (in the broadest definition) to elsewhere. In the first middle passage, elsewhere was American. In the second, elsewhere was heaven.

For Baraka, the fact that enslaved people chose Christianity did not make being Christian any more of a choice than being enslaved. It was, like the spirituals, a mix of the reality of their condition and the fleeting values brought from home. If respect for the conqueror’s god means that we become Christian then we shall be Christians. But let us be sure to be baptized in the river. Neither becoming an American negro nor a Christian was a choice born of agency or full autonomy. Rather, in the spirit of pastiche both were products of slavery’s circumstance. Therefore, “the Early black Christian churches or the pre-church praise-houses (hush harbors) became the social focal points of Negro life. The relative autonomy of the developing Negro Christian religious gathering made it one of the only areas in the slave’s life where he was relatively free of the white man’s domination.”  

He further elucidates that “early Negro churches were attempts by the black Christians to have their cake and eat it: to maintain African

\[\text{424. ibid., 38-9.} \]

\[\text{425. ibid., 40.} \]
traditions, however veiled or unconscious the attempt might be, yet embrace the new religion.”

For example, many spirituals incorporated “an African melody that was known traditionally to most of the slaves to be used as a Christian song. All that would have to be done was to change the worlds.” In that way “Christianity was a Western form, but the actual practice of it by the American Negro was totally strange to the West.”

For Baraka, the spirituals were pastiche born from the trauma of two middle passages. They were simultaneously a testament to the deep connection the Black person shares with Africa and the product of the de-Africanizing process. Christianity was the white man’s religion that the enslaved Africans made more African. However, in that process, Christianity continued the enslaving work of divorcing the African from Africa.

**The Spirituals and the Cone**

Cone also grounds his analysis of the spirituals in enslavement. He argues that “the black spirituals were ‘the slave's description and criticism of his environment’ and ‘the key to his revolutionary sentiments and to his desire to fly to free territory.’” Here, he lays the foundation for his underlying thesis that both Black Christianity and its spirituals are birthed out of liberation. They are callings and deep yearnings for freedom. To support this claim, he illuminates that “‘Nat Turner was a preacher and he knew his Bible well’; but he did not let his religion distort his perceptions of the sociality of slave existence, ‘for it led him to bloody massacres, coldly planned.'” Here, Cone invites the reader to interrogate where Nat Turner fits into the conception of enslaved Christianity espoused by folk like Baraka. How does Nat Turner

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426. ibid., 43.
427. ibid., 45.
428. ibid., 42.
430. ibid., 11-2.
fit into a narrative of docile enslaved Christians? For Cone, Christianity’s appeal to the enslaved person differed from what Baraka argued. Rather, “the essence of antebellum black religion was the emphasis on the somebodiness of black slaves,” and to that end, “The content of the black preacher's message stressed the essential worth of their person.”

At the core of Black Christianity, Cone argues, is a striving for freedom. Nevertheless, The Spirituals and the Blues is not a Christian apologetic.

Despite diverging from Baraka on the underlying reasoning for enslaved African’s affinity to Christianity, Cone agrees with Baraka on one major point. He says:

> We should be reminded here of the role played by white Christianity in producing mental servitude among blacks. Through most of the eighteenth-century planters were generally suspicious of white people who wanted to "christianize" the slaves. Gradually, however, many owners came to feel that "the deeper the piety of the slave, the more valuable he is in every respect."

Cone acknowledges the benefit that enslavers eventually recognized in enslaved people adopting Christianity. As Baraka argues, Christianity produced what Cone describes as “mental servitude among Blacks.” He does not go as far as Baraka, however. Rather than letting mental servitude be the final word of enslaved Christianity, he pushes back on what he understands to be white’s interpretation of the matter. To that end he says “if slaves were as harmless as whites contended, why was there almost universal fear about slave insurrections? The fact is that much of the fear was well grounded. Black slaves were not passive, and black history is the record of their resistance against the condition of human bondage.”

Stepping beyond the simple assertion that Christianity did not make enslaved people docile, Cone makes a broader cultural

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431. ibid., 13.
432. ibid., 16.
433. ibid., 17.
assertion about enslaved people. Simply put, enslavers were afraid of them and had good reason to be.

For Cone, that revelation about enslaved people demands a renewed look at Christianity and the spirituals. The spirituals need special reconsideration because they “show us the essence of black religion, that is, the experience of trying to be free in the midst of a ‘powerful lot of tribulation’” 434 “The spirituals,” he says:

Are historical songs which speak about the rupture of black lives; they tell us about a people in the land of bondage, and what they did to hold themselves together and to fight back. We are told that the people of Israel could not sing the Lord's song in a strange land. But, for blacks, their being depended upon a song. Through song they built new structures for existence in an alien land. The spirituals enabled blacks to retain a measure of African identity while living in the midst of American slavery, providing both the substance and the rhythm to cope with human servitude. 435

Interestingly, despite beginning from an opposing ideological standpoint about Christianity, Cone comes to a similar conclusion about the spirituals. The spirituals allowed for the enslaved person to retain a portion of their Africaness. Born out of “the ethics of black resistance,” which allowed enslaved people to “live a different ethical style than their masters because they constructed a different religion,” the spirituals inspired revolutionary thoughts and behavior. 436

Cone argues that these different ethics grew out of different religions: one Black, one white, and both claiming the title of Christian. “Outwardly,” he continues, “the religion of the slaves seemed to be like the 'Christian' religion as taught by the masters, but it was not. Religion is not a set of beliefs that people memorize and neither is it an ethical code of do's and don'ts that they learn from others. Rather, religion is wrought out of the experience of the people who

434. ibid., 19.
435. ibid., 20.
436. ibid., 19.
encounter the divine in the midst of historical realities.” This intervention into Baraka’s narrative about Christianity and the spirituals proves to be fundamental in understanding Cone’s rhetorical move toward prophecy. Both men agree that Black music is a meaningful way to trace Black culture. However, by taking what Baraka frames as a white man’s religion and arguing that, due to experience, Black Christianity is something completely different, Cone calls the spirituals out of their place within an anthology of Black culture and into a completely different place. The spirituals are not the songs of a docile people who are losing touch with Africa and their right to be fully human in this world. Rather, “in the spirituals ‘I Got Shoes,’ ‘When I Get to Heaven,’ ‘Swing Low,’ and ‘My Lord Delivered Daniel,’ the black slave was ‘tearing down a wreck and building a new, solid world, and all along we thought he was romanticizing.’ The spiritual, then “is a joyful experience, a vibrant affirmation of life and its possibilities in an appropriate esthetic form.” What is more, “Black history then is the stuff out of which the black spirituals were created. But the "stuff" of black history includes more than the bare historical facts of slavery. Black history is an experience, a soulful event.” For Cone, that spiritual is set to the tune of Black liberation. Baraka views the blues in a similar light.

**Baraka People**

According to Baraka, the blues emerges following the end of the Civil War. He posits that “during the time of slavery, the black church had almost no competition for the Negro’s time. After he had worked in the fields, there was no place to go for any semblance of social intercourse but the praise house. It was not until well after the Emancipation that the Negro had

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437. ibid., 19.
438. ibid., 12.
439. ibid., 21.
440. ibid., 21.
much secular life at all.” In fact, Baraka attributes the development of the blues to four important shifts in Black post-enslavement life—newfound leisure, mobility, self-reliance, and speech patterns (specifically as people moved from place to place). From this well of newness sprung the specific conditions that birthed what Baraka describes as the primitive Blues. “Primitive blues-singing,” he says, “actually came into being because of the Civil War, in one sense. The emancipation of the slaves proposed for them a normal human existence, a humanity impossible under slavery.” Travel helped to demarcate the Blues experience. According to Baraka “the thousands of black blues shouters and ballad singers who wandered throughout the South around the turn of the century moved from place to place not only because Negroes were allowed to travel after the Civil War, but because for a great many Negroes, emancipation meant a constant desperate search for employment.” He asserts that this exigence is particularly important to note because “each phase of the Negro’s music issued directly from the dictates of his social and psychological environment.” In that way, just as the conditions of slavery and the de-Africanization of Black people helped to produce the spirituals, emancipation and “the negro problem” helped to create the blues.

For Baraka, Blues is the most quintessentially Black music produced in America. He says, “early blues, as it came to differ from the shout and the Afro-Christian religious music, was also perhaps the most impressive expression of the Negro’s individuality within the superstructure of American society.” An example of this can be found in Blues offspring, jazz.

442. ibid., 61-2.
443. ibid., 61.
444. ibid., 64.
445. ibid., 65.
Baraka explains that in early jazz “the purity of tone that the European trumpet player desired was put aside by the Negro trumpeter for the more humanly expressive sound of the voice.”

Through yet another instance of pastiche “the rough, raw sound the black man forced out of these European instruments was a sound he had cultivated in this country for two hundred years.”

The blues, then, followed a similar pattern to the spirituals. Born out of Black people’s lived experience in the post-Civil War world, the blues narrated Black cultural development. As Baraka says, “if the Blues was a music that develop because of the Negro’s adaptation to, and development of, America, it was also a music that developed because of the Negro’s peculiar position in this country.”

Unlike the spirituals, however, the blues represent a pure Black cultural expression. He explains that “the movement of the Negro into a position where he would escape . . . separation from the white mainstream of America is a central theme” of Blues People. Here, Black culture almost exists on a wave of sorts. The advent of slavery moves the African away from their home base of Africa and involuntarily drops them into American culture as an enslaved person. That status of “slave” is accompanied by a rejection by white culture, which is partially undone as enslavers begin to desire the enslaved to convert to Christianity. As a result, “the Christian church” became “the sole place the slaves could spend their leisure time.”

This, along with many other factors, led to a widespread adaptation of the white man’s religion. However, with the advent of emancipation, leisure time could be spent elsewhere. At that time “a great number of clubs and secret societies and fraternities” began to compete with

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448. ibid., 79.  
449. ibid., 79.  
450. ibid., 66.  
451. ibid., 65.  
452. ibid., 74.
the church to occupy Black people’s leisure time.\textsuperscript{453} Blues arose as a Black musical and cultural expression, free of the enslaver’s docilizing emphasis on the afterlife. In this sober expression of Black life “the metaphysical Jordan of life after death was beginning to be replaced by the more pragmatic Jordan of the American master: the Jordan of what the ex-slave could see vaguely as self-determination.”\textsuperscript{454} It is that engagement with self-determination that makes the Blues so powerful for Baraka. For him, the blues is the uniquely Black mix of possibility and oppression. It is the possibility to travel wherever I want to work and the oppression of being denied a job when I arrive. For Baraka, the blues is the greatest sermon ever preached because it tells a truth about the Black experience that transcends time and perceived possibility.

\textbf{Cone Music in America}

Cone’s defensive tone about the spirituals does not produce a view of the blues that one might assume. He begins the sixth chapter “The Blues: A Secular Spiritual” by writing “Theologically, there is more to be said about the music of black people than what was revealed in the black spirituals...The blues depict the "secular" dimension of black experience.”\textsuperscript{455} Through his chapter title and first sentence, he makes it clear that he is not interested in drawing any further distinctions between the spirituals and the blues. Rather, a theological study of Black people requires a step outside of what might easily be described as the sacred: the spirituals. To get a full picture of Black culture, Cone asserts that theology must engage the secular.

This is because he views the blues as occupying an important and theologically complementary space in understanding Black culture. Like the spirituals, “the blues are about black life and the sheer earth and gut capacity to survive in an extreme situation of

\textsuperscript{453} ibid., 73.
\textsuperscript{454} ibid., 63.
\textsuperscript{455} Cone, \textit{The Spirituals and the Blues}, 59.
oppression.”\textsuperscript{456} Leaning into Baraka’s assertion about the blues, Cone affirms it as a quintessential expression of the Black experience. It is ultimately about survival and oppression, or as I explained above, possibility and oppression. However, the secular nature of the blues speaks to a different element of the Black experience (or perhaps speaks differently to the same elements). To illustrate this, Cone returns to enslavement. He explains that “the ‘secular’ songs of slavery were ‘non-religious,’ occasionally anti-religious, and were often called ‘devil songs’ by religious folk. The ‘seculars’ expressed the skepticism of black slaves who found it difficult to take seriously anything suggesting the religious faith of white preachers.”\textsuperscript{457} Returning to his argument of two Christianities, Cone asserts that the secular song played a crucial role in the development of the Black Christian ethic: skepticism. This skepticism, though attributed to enslaved people who were “non-religious” or “anti-religious,” had to have played a crucial role in the development of Black Christianity. Even if Black Christianity is pastiche, skepticism is the critical line that stands betwixt borrowing and mimicking. Cone asserts that the secular has always been the skeptical element within Blackness that maintained Blackness. That is because “The blues are honest music” which addresses the Black experience in its completeness.\textsuperscript{458}

From that vantage point, the blues has much to offer theologically. What Cone’s prophecy pushes back on, then, is not attacks on the spirituals or Christianity, but rather the division between the spirituals and the blues. For him “the blues are ‘secular spirituals.’ They are secular in the sense that they confine their attention solely to the immediate and affirm the bodily expression of black soul, including its sexual manifestations. They are spirituals because they are impelled by the same search for the truth of black experience.”\textsuperscript{459} Later he explains that “Blues

\textsuperscript{456} ibid., 59.
\textsuperscript{457} ibid., 59-60.
\textsuperscript{458} ibid., 70.
\textsuperscript{459} ibid., 60.
music is music of the black soul, the music of the black psyche renewing itself for living and being.”460 The spirituals and the blues are two sides of the same coin for Cone. Echoing Baraka, Cone asserts that “The spirituals are slave songs, and they deal with historical realities that are pre-Civil war. They were created and sung by the group. The blues, while having some pre-Civil War roots, are essentially post-Civil war in consciousness. They reflect experiences that issued from Emancipation, the Reconstruction Period, and segregation laws.”461 Given this, the blues, like the spirituals “are not propositional truths about the black experience. Rather they are the essential ingredients that define the essence of the black experience. And to understand them, it is necessary to view the blues as a state of mind in relation to the Truth of the black experience.”462 Cone’s prophecy, then, seeks to restore Blues to its proper place in the theological exploration of Blackness because

Unfortunately, it is true that many black church people at first condemned the blues as vulgar and indecent. But that was because they did not understand them rightly. If the blues are viewed in the proper perspective, it is clear that their mood is very sar to the ethos of the spirituals. Indeed, I contend that the blues and the spirituals flow from the same bedrock of experience, and neither is an adequate interpretation of black life without the commentary of the other.463

For Cone, the seat of this misunderstanding lies in the artificial line placed between the sacred and the secular. Mirroring BAM’s valuing of Africa, he contends that “Africans viewed life as a whole and did not make the distinctions between the “‘secular’ and the ‘sacred’ that are found in Western culture.”464 Therefore, “after the Civil war” when “the church became only one of several places where blacks could meet and talk about the problems of black existence. Other ‘priests’ of the community began to emerge alongside of the preachers and deacons; and other

460. ibid., 63.
461. ibid., 61.
462. ibid., 62.
463. ibid., 35.
464. ibid., 24.
songs were sung in addition to the spirituals. The ‘new priests’ of the black community were the blues men and women; and their songs were the blues.” 465 By collapsing the line between the secular and sacred Cone makes way for a new possibility. For him, it is a fuller exploration of the Black experience and cultural development. It is not simply that blues people make meaningful contributions to the Black community. Rather, they occupy a similar role as the priest or deacon in the liturgy of everyday Blackness. “Like the preacher in the church,” Cone says, “they proclaimed the Word of black existence, depicting its joy and sorrow, love and hate, and the awesome burden of being "free" in a racist society when one is black.” 466 It is:

The affirmation of self in the blues is the emphasis that connects them theologically with the spirituals. Like the spirituals, the blues affirm the somebodiness of black people, and they preserve the worth of black humanity through ritual and drama. The blues are a transformation of black life through the sheer power of song. They symbolize the solidarity, the attitudes, and the identity of the black community and thus create the emotional forms of reference for endurance and esthetic appreciation. In this sense, the blues are that stoic feeling that recognizes the painfulness of the present but refuses to surrender to its historical contradictions. 467

By engaging the sacred and the secular, James Cone reimagines the relationship between the spirituals and the blues within the context of prophecy. Building on Baraka’s anthology, Cone plucks these two scenes from the movie that is Black cultural development in America and puts them into conversation. He asks, what do the spirituals have to say to the blues and what do the blues have to say to the spirituals? This rhetorical move allows for a powerful subversion of expectation which breeds a more powerful potentiality. The feat that Cone accomplishes in The Spirituals and The Blues is not simply executing a prophecy but employing prophecy for its most sacred intent: resistance.

465. ibid., 61.
466. ibid., 61.
467. ibid., 63.
James H. Cone and Resistive Prophecy

Returning to his assertion that “many black church people at first condemned the blues as vulgar and indecent,” the productive possibility of Cone’s prophecy comes into view. In *A Black Theology of Liberation*, he says that “theology can never be neutral or fail to take sides on issues related to the plight of the oppressed. For this reason, it can never engage in conversation about the nature of God without confronting those elements of human existence which threaten anyone’s existence as a person.”\(^{468}\) Amongst other things, this quotation exhibits Cone’s stance on neutrality in hegemonic situations. It is only when we consider this stance against neutrality that the power of his prophecy can be fully understood.

By placing the spirituals and the blues- that is the secular and the sacred- into conversation, Cone does the important work of Blackening the Christian conversation. That means he makes way for the relationship between the two categories to be interrogated in Black cultural terms. As Baraka reveals, from its origin the Black Church has always been much more than a religious space and Black Christian practice has always been part Jesus and part “secular” African spiritualism. What then is this line between the sacred and secular? For Cone, it is a lie that only the truth of the blues can unlie. It is one thing to construct a theology that allows the sacred Christian to entertain the secular blues. It is another thing altogether to assert that the spirituals and the blues are on an equal theological playing field; that both forms have an equal potentiality to express and reveal about Black culture, which for Cone is God’s culture. To make them both equally theologically meaningful is to pronounce them both sacred. Such a pronouncement automatically calls into question that which was previously exclusively deemed sacred.

To take his stance on neutrality seriously means approaching the dichotomy between the spirituals and the blues that Cone engages with a sober view of the relationship. The blues is not simply music about oppression. In the relationship between the spirituals and the blues- between the sacred and the secular- the blues is oppressed music. By breaking down this wall between the spirituals and the blues Cone weaponizes the secular to critique the sacred. Returning to Johnson’s definition of prophetic rhetoric, the important question to ask is what does the secular have to say to the sacred in the first place? Is not the sacred elevated? Does it not rhetorically position itself as the epitome of holiness. What meaningful contribution can the unholy make to the holy? Cone’s answer is resounding: a more complete understanding of sacredness itself.

For both Cone and Baraka, Black is sacred. Cone agrees with Baraka in his assertion that no real exploration of the Black experience can be done without centering on the blues experience. By returning the blues to its rightful place alongside the spirituals, Cone’s prophecy resists the white dynamic. That is not to say that Blackness has no concept of sacred and secular. Rather, the sacred and secular are and should be in harmony. The sacred, however, tends to believe its own hype and in that belief devalues and silences the secular. Through his resistance prophecy, Cone snatches the microphone back from the sacred and hands it to the secular because the people need to hear what the blues priest is singing.
Chapter 5

Said I Wasn’t Gonna Shout About It: Committing for the People Through Prophetic Futurism

Widely considered to be the final of his foundational text, *God of the Oppressed* represents a comprehensive look at Cone’s theological and rhetorical development over the course of his first six years in the public eye. In 1997 Cone wrote “*God of the Oppressed* represents my most developed theological position.” Elsewhere he adds

> In *God of the Oppressed*, I was singing both the spirituals and the blues, preaching sermons in church, and signifying on the corner at the juke joint. It was an intellectual culmination of what I began in my blue room in Adrian and my brother’s church in Little Rock. I put everything in this book and left it all on the page.

His journey thus far had brought him to the confluence of the spirituals and the blues. His observations about their relationship, which was coming to be the substance of Black theology further entrenched him in controversies that remained a constant his whole career.

> *God of the Oppressed* “was also written in response to black and white critics who challenged my interpretation of biblical faith and black religion.” He further explains that “white theologians were disturbed by the militancy of black theology—the passion and anger that characterized its language about black liberation.” Additionally, “white theologians argued

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that my reading was subjective and ideological and theirs was objective and correct. Because we
were unwilling to concede each other's hermeneutical point, dialogue between us was nearly
impossible.” On the other hand,

Black theologians challenged me from both a different and similar angle. Some
questioned whether I had focused too little on the African origin of black religion
and too much on the white theology I learned in graduate school. They claimed that
my black theology was not black enough, that is, not attentive to the “otherness” of
black religion, particularly as revealed in non-Christian sources.473

Black theologians were a major driving force in Cone’s theological evolution and
rhetorical progression. Perhaps that is why when once again reflecting on this period he insists
that “Black theology shouldn't, indeed couldn't, rely strictly on religious sources in the narrow
church sense, because secular sources were also a part of the black community.”474 In God of the
Oppressed, Cone “sought to deepen my conviction that the God of biblical faith and black
religion is best known as the Liberator of the oppressed from bondage.”475 Traditional religious
sources, such as the spirituals, would not enable him to fully do that however. Therefore, he used
the blues as “a kind of self-interrogation for Christians who sing spirituals. They are ‘secular
spirituals.’”476 It was not just Cone’s engagement with Black scholars and Black music that help
to spur this growth. Secular Black people did as well. He similarly observes that “both Panthers
and nationalists gave me a much-needed self-interrogation.”477

God of the Oppressed, then, provides us with an image of Cone coming more fully into
his theological voice. The spheres of controversy that followed him from 1969 up until this point
also shaped his rhetorical posturing. What was important for Black theology to emphasize? Who

472. ibid., loc 80.
473. ibid., loc 91.
474. Cone, Said I Wasn’t Gonna Tell Nobody, 103.
475. Cone, God of the Oppressed, Loc 72.
476. Cone, Said I Wasn’t Gonna Tell Nobody, 104.
477. ibid., 104.
was Black theology in response to? Perhaps most importantly, who was Black theology for? The latter question was born from “another critique of black theology [which] sought to undermine its central claim: If God is liberating blacks from oppression, why then are they still oppressed?” How could God be on the side of the poor if they still find themselves abused?

This critique embodied what made Black theology so necessary. Theology is God talk. It is human rhetoric about God. That means that God’s character is, at least in part, co-constructed. The human task in theology is to interpret what God’s activity in the world might be and what that activity says about God’s nature, purpose, and intentions. Cone was committed to this project of theology because he believed it was crucial to Black liberation; to articulate the reading of God that was on the side of the oppressed. He believed that there was practical liberative worth in Black people understanding that. Therefore, he was committed to theology, not because theology as a field or institution was worth commitment, but because this deeply spiritual people needed Black theology. For that reason, even at the end of his life, Cone maintained that God of the Oppressed “still represents my basic theological perspective- that the God of biblical faith and black religion is partial toward the weak.”

In this chapter I explore Cone’s commitment to his particular institution: theology. Here, I highlight the nature of that commitment and the purpose/people that inspired that commitment. Grounding this commitment in the resistive prophetic mission, I first examine Amos’s own commitment and purpose for commitment. From there I explore a potential catalyst for Cone’s commitment: the Bearden Experience. Next, I turn my focus more squarely to the nature of Cone’s commitment to theology. I then excavate how this commitment leads Cone to further negotiate the space between the secular and sacred. I finally conclude, with the purpose of

478. Cone, God of the Oppressed, Loc 91.
479. ibid., 102.
Cone’s commitment. Here I introduce prophetic futurism to highlight the potential for pregnant productivity that such a commitment can have within resistive prophetic rhetoric.

**Amos’s Commitment**

Returning to Amos’s persona and identification with the secular, sobriety of strategy necessitates engagement with the oppressor. Perhaps in a perfect world, Amos would not have to go to Israel and talk to the wealthy and talk that talk to Amaziah. But the world’s imperfections, created by the sacred, demands the prophet’s message. Because those imperfections bear material consequences for the people, who are the secular. It is these people to whom Amos’s prophecy commits. That commitment means that he must sober up to the reality of necessary response that Asante articulates.⁴⁸⁰ In a perfect world this would be a liberated prophecy instead of resistive and the oppressed could live as Amos prophesies in chapter nine:

> “Behold, the days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when the plowman shall overtake the reaper and the treader of grapes him who sows the seeds the mountains shall drip sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it. I will restore the fortunes of my people Israel, and they shall rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them, they shall plant vineyards and drink their wine, and they shall make gardens and eat their fruit. I will plant them on their land, and they shall never again be uprooted out of the land that I have given them,” says the Lord your God.⁴⁸¹

They would not have to engage those who daily unhumanize them. They could live in a world in which the oppressor was eliminated. Where, as Cone says, “white theology [ceases] being white theology and become[s] black theology by denying whiteness as an acceptable form of human existence and affirming blackness as God’s intention for humanity.”⁴⁸²

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But they do not live in that reality. So, the very best Amos can do is resist. Resistance, unlike liberation, starts from a place of commitment. That is why resisting hegemony makes so much sense. Hegemony only exists if there is compliance from the oppressed masses. But compliance is not always consensual. So, we resist in our own multiplicity of ways. Resistance is fundamentally a commitment to the institution. If you are not committed, why stay and resist? Of course, many-a-ancestor might reply, “because I cannot leave.” Certainly, student loans and other forms of debt tie many modern enslaved persons to their plantations. So then and now we resist. But the important element of resistance is not that it is a commitment to the institution, but why! In resistive prophetic rhetoric, the prophet commits to the institution because the institution’s power to sacredive itself also manifests as power to hurt, kill, rape, imprison, mame, embarrass, kill, enslave, kidnap, lynch, pathologize, and kill people—human people. And we do not deserve to die for and because of your damned elevation. The prophet commits to the institution because she loves the people; because the people deserve to live.

In Cone’s case, the people who deserved to live were Black people. From the outset, he wished to write a theology for Black people. As his Black critics aptly point out, much of what he wrote early was actually a response to white people and whiteness which unfortunately excluded much of the Black experience. But how could Cone begin to unearth Black theology’s connection to the Black experience without examining his own? If Cone was going to get to the root of the shaping of his methodology and the opinions that he advanced, he had to return to the particular sociopolitical setting that informed his personal history. Amos’s prophecy emerged from the shepherds. Cone’s prophecy was born of the Bearden experience. If he wished to make the connection more fully between Black theology and Black people, he would have to return to the Bearden experience.
Returning to the Bearden Experience

In *God of the Oppressed*, Cone continues his turn inward. In the 1975 preface, he self-reflexively observes that

More often than not, it is a theologian’s personal history, in a particular sociopolitical setting, that serves as the most important factor in shaping the methodology and content of his or her theological perspective. Thus theologians ought to be a little more honest, and let the reader know something about those nonintellectual factors that are so important for the opinions they advance. . . [Therefore] in this book, I take the risk of revealing the origin of my commitment to the Christian faith; not for its own sake, but for the sake of the theology I seek to explicate.\(^{483}\)

He further explains that “two important realities shaped my consciousness: the black Church experience and the sociopolitical significance of white people.”\(^{484}\) These two clashing realms of existence worked to not only shape Cone’s mask (see Chapter 2), but also his eventual prophetic persona and message. This was his double consciousness and the origin of his engagement and eventual commitment to the institution.

From a young age, Cone recognized the impact that the socio-political elevation of white onto-epistemologies had on Black people and Black life. He writes “the white people of Bearden, of course, thought of themselves as "nice" white folks. They did not lynch and rape niggers, and many attended church every Sunday. They honestly believed that they were Christian people, faithful servants of God.”\(^{485}\) However, to the contrary, in Bearden “white people did everything within their power to define black reality, to tell us who we were—and their definition, of course, extended no further than their social, political, and economic interests. They tried to make us believe that God created black people to be white people’s

\(^{484}\) ibid., 1.
\(^{485}\) ibid., 3.
servants.”  This, of course, was Cone’s experience with being socialized into Black place (see Chapter 2).

He further highlights how this socialization impacted his early attempt at a theological career. He explains that initially “like most college and seminary students of my generation, I faithfully studied philosophy and theology—from the pre-Socratics to modern existentialism and linguistic analysis, from Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and Origen to Karl Barth, Bultmann, and Tillich.” However, the philosophy and theology he studied in graduate school betrayed the other element of what had long subconsciously been his theological perspective: the Black church experience. Cone writes that

The black Church taught me how to deal with the contradictions of life and provided a way to create meaning in a society not of my own making. In the larger "secular" black community, this perspective on life is often called the "art of survival"; but in the black Church, we call it the "grace of God." It is called survival because it is a way of remaining physically alive in a situation of oppression without losing one's dignity.

Here, Cone identifies an early and pivotal engagement with the primary ingredients of resistive prophetic rhetoric: the secular and sacred. He importantly notes that art of survival which Black people engage Monday thru Saturday is the same as the grace of God which a fraction of us receives on Sunday morning. These two phenomena harmoniously worked to show Cone a Black somebodiness in the midst of racist white encroachment in Bearden. But Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and Origen to Karl Barth, Bultmann, and Tillich as they were taught to him in graduate school had very little, if anything, to say about the harmonious phenomena. Certainly, they might be able to explain certain dogmatic, systematic, or even doctrinal elements of the Black church experience, but their ability to engage the theology deeply

486. ibid., 2.
487. ibid., 5.
488. ibid., 2.
imbedded in Cone’s being lacked significantly. To that end, Cone writes “if Richard Wright is correct in his contention that "expression springs out of an environment,' then I must conclude that my theological reflections are inseparable from the Bearden experience.”489 This led him to reengage the books he had published previously. He explains

Reflecting on those books I realized that something important was missing. They did not show clearly enough the significance of Macedonia A.M.E. Church and the imprint of that community upon my theological consciousness. After all, I was insisting that theology has to arise out of an oppressed community as they seek to understand their place in the history of salvation.490

Without understanding what Cone gained in Bearden and at the Macedonia A.M.E. Church he would never be able to fully understand the theology that God and the ancestors were using him to cry out. Without understanding why it was necessary for Cone to turn inward, we might not be able to fully grasp the nature of his commitment to the institution of theology.

**Cone’s Commitment**

In his dissertation, “A Close Reading of Albert Cleage Jr’s Black Messiah: A Study in Rhetorical Hermeneutics, Black Prophetic Rhetoric and Radical Black Politics” Earle J. Fisher levies several critiques at Cone. One critique, with which I agree, deals with Cone’s lackluster citation of Albert Cleage given the impact that Cleage’s preaching likely had on Cone’s understanding of Black theology. Another, which I feel must be addressed, posits that “Cone’s rendition of Christianity appeals to Martin [Luther King Jr.’s ideals of racial inclusion and equality but stops short of a demand for liberation ‘by any means necessary.”491 What is more,

489. Ibid., 3.
490. Ibid., 6.
he argues that “Cone’s rendition of Malcolm’s theology,” which proves to be a part of the foundation of Cone’s own theology, “is insufficient because Cone’s privileging of white Christianity will not make room for Malcolm (or Cleage’s) militancy within the Christological framework.” Ultimately, what Fisher identifies is an ongoing grapple within Cone. To Fisher’s point, there is a dissonance between making “by any means necessary” a motif throughout your work and telling the Black nationalist you must stop short of violence. However, what needs to be explored is the reason why Cone stops short of violence.

Cone explains “if you reject Christians because they will not engage in violence, then I say to you that I’m not for any revolution that does not include my mother, and she is a nonviolent Christian.” Perhaps what Fisher observes is Cone’s commitment to the institution. Nonviolence made sense for many Christians, like King, because ultimately, they were committed to the institution. King, like many ancestors, believed in the democratic project that America has been lying about for 400 years. But if you believe in the project, you work with the institution that is “attempting to execute” the project.

James H. Cone believed in theology. Despite criticism from peers and idols, he believed in theology, not just as a practice, but as a field. From 1969 until 2018 he committed himself to the institution of theology. He taught, conferenced, wrote books and articles, gave lectures, and debated within the institution. But why would a prophet commit himself to an institution he is prophesying against? Like Amos and all resistive prophets, Cone committed to the institution not because he believed in the institution, but because he was committed to the people that the institution impacts.

492. Ibid., 171.
493. Cone, Said I Wasn’t Gone Tell Nobody, 104.
Cone believed in theology and its prophetic potential. To that end, he writes, “because theologians are exegetes, they are also prophets. As prophets they must make clear that the gospel of God stands in judgment upon the existing order of injustice.”494 Cone held a deep belief in the impact that the theologian could have on the community. They were the prophet tasked with reading and interpreting scripture for the purpose of explaining God’s present activity against injustice. For that reason, Cone never ceded the title of theologian. Though his writings and lectures progressively abandoned what had previously been identified as theology, Cone never ceded the title of theologian back to white theology. When Long told him that Black theology was an oxymoron, Cone never ceded the title of theologian. Rather, he maintained possession of the title, forcing all to contend with what he was doing as theology. To that end, he explains:

I am a black theologian! I therefore must approach the subject of theology in the light of the black Church and what that means in a society dominated by white people, I did not recognize the methodological implication of that assumption until the summer of 1966 when Willie Ricks sounded the cry of "black power" and Stokely Carmichael joined him as the philosophical spokesman.495

At that time, he began to realize that “the education of white theologians did not prepare them to deal with Watts, Detroit, and Newark. What was needed was a new way of looking at theology that must emerge out of the dialectic of black history and culture.”496 Cone’s commitment to the institution, then, was pragmatic. As I highlight in Chapter 3, white theology provided much of the rhetorical justification for Black abuse. Cone chose not to abandon theology because he believed a reclamation of theology within the institution was paramount.

494. Cone, God of the Oppressed, 8.
495. Ibid., 4.
496. Ibid., 6
As Fisher convincingly highlights and as Cone admits, Black theology existed long before James Hal Cone was thought of. But that is the point. At every turn, white theology overrepresents itself and attempts to craft a rhetorical situation in which it is the one true theology. But Black people never fully accepted that conclusion. Taking slavery as one of the origin points for the African American faith, Cone reminds us that when blacks prayed, they did not accept the religious outlook of the white master. To be sure, the historical situation of slavery may have forced the black person to worship with and "like" the white master, but in any subtle ways the slave transcended the limitations of servitude and affirmed a religious value system that differed from the master’s. 497

Though this value system differed from the human trafficker’s, it did not evolve completely unimpacted by that demon theology. By the time Cone inherits Black theology, “not only white seminary professors but some blacks as well have convinced themselves that only the white experience provides the appropriate context for questions and answers concerning things divine.” 498 Perhaps that is why the ailments that Cone critiques in the Black church exist. Unfortunately, the Black church is not the only space impacted by whiteness and white theology. According to Cone, what is needed then is Black theology as a staple in the same place that white theology has colonized. For that reason, “there can be no Black Theology which does not take the black experience as a source for its starting point. Black Theology is a theology of and for black people, an examination of their stories, tales, and sayings.” 499 Cone sought to articulate a theology that took the Black experience seriously. To that end, he explains “Jesus Christ is the subject of Black Theology because he is the content of the hopes and dreams of black people. He was chosen by our grandparents, who saw in his liberating presence that he had chosen them and

497. Ibid., 19.
498. Ibid., 14.
499. Ibid., 16.
thus became the foundation of their struggle for freedom.”

“This means,” he continues “that theology is political language. What people think about God, Jesus Christ, and the Church cannot be separated from their own social and political status in a given society.” For him, “theology is not universal language; it is interested language and thus is always a reflection of the goals and aspirations of a particular people in a definite social setting.”

But what happens if Black theology never engages white theology intellectually? What happens if a new place, the Black theology place, is never articulated in that realm?

Recognizing the material impact of Black theology not being theorized and further built upon, Cone sets out to establish Black theology as an academic discipline. For that reason, he was adamant about having students. He understood that the loneliness within Black theology that characterized his early career might spell the eventual death of Black theology’s growth. This would only result in the further reification of white theology’s lie. His commitment to the institution, therefore, was not a commitment to the lie. Rather, it was a commitment to be a catalyst for prophecy in the place where all the lies were being told. To that end he writes “as theologians, therefore, we must take the risk to be prophetic by doing theology in the light of those who are helpless and voiceless in the society.”

Cone’s commitment to the institution, therefore, was a commitment to the helpless and voiceless in society. It was a commitment to Black people. It was a commitment he called anyone who ventured to do Black theology into. It was a commitment to resistance until resistance gives way to liberation. Perhaps the terms of his commitment are best summarized in this quotation that deserves to be cited at length:

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500 Ibid., 30.
501 Ibid., 41.
502 Ibid., 36.
503 Ibid., 75.
I intend to make the theological point that the "scandal" (skandalon, stumbling block) is no different for us today than for the people who encountered Jesus in the first century. It is that the exorcisms disclose that God in Jesus has brought liberation to the poor and the wretched of the land, and that liberation is none other than the overthrow of everything that is against the fulfillment of their humanity. The scandal is that the gospel means liberation, that this liberation comes to the poor, and that it gives them the strength and the courage to break the conditions of servitude. This is what the Incarnation means. God in Christ comes to the weak and the helpless, and becomes one with them, taking their condition of oppression as his own and thus transforming their slave-existence into a liberated existence.⁵⁰⁴

One of the major scandals of Black theology serves as its primary connection to resistive prophetic rhetoric. That is the way that it engages the sacred and secular.

**Sacred and Secular**

Regarding the negotiation between the sacred and the secular, Cone’s assertion that he left it all on the page bleeds through. In all his works thus far, the sacred and secular categories have referred to several realms of cultural interaction. On the one hand, the distinction between sacred and secular appears as I have primarily dealt with throughout this dissertation: race. Here, whiteness establishes itself as sacred and isolates all other positionalities from that identification. Because whiteness called Blackness its antithesis, Blackness came to signify the secular. Therefore, Cone’s project of Black theology rejected the sacred and called for the secular to be embraced.

However, another slightly nuanced reading of the sacred-secular paradigm existed throughout his writings as well. It was merely a germ when Cone penned his first critique of the Black church in *Black Theology and Black Power*. Nevertheless, his critique and praise for the Black church remained consistent. *The Spirituals and the Blues* introduced the blues as a conversation partner for the Black church. Having gone inward, Cone discovered that Black Theology was as much blues as it was spiritual; perhaps more. Having gone inward, James Cone

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⁵⁰⁴. Ibid. 71.
found that Black theology was as much Malcolm as it was Martin, perhaps more. Unfortunately, those who sing the spirituals often miss The Lawd’s revelation in battle rap and proponents of Martin dismiss Malcolm’s prophecy. Even within the Black community, the silencing mechanism that the sacred always seems to have is fully functional.

But there is hope! Unlike whiteness, which must cease to exist, the sacred within Blackness has a place. However, its place is not above but beside. This is the resistive prophetic move. In resistance prophetic rhetoric, the prophet does not quiver when white people complain about what they might have to lose for justice to roll down. The resistance prophetic answer is “of course you will lose things. You will lose all the things you use to elevate yourself.” And resistive prophetic rhetoric does not get squeamish regarding Black folks either. Resistive prophetic rhetoric does not care how you spend two to four hours on Sunday morning. Your status as Christian and within the Christian church should not elevate you. So, in resistive prophetic rhetoric, the high are brought low and the low are brought high. This does not create a new and opposite dynamic but rather harmony. The grounding for this harmony is the Black experience shared by the sacred and secular within Blackness. Black theology posits the Black experience IS God’s experience.

For that reason, the black experience as a source of theology is more than the so-called "church experience," more than singing, praying, and preaching about Jesus, God, and the Holy Spirit. The other side of the black experience should not be rigidly defined as "secular," if by that term one means the classical Western distinction between secular and sacred, for it is not antireligious or even nonreligious. This side of the black experience is secular only to the extent that it is earthy and seldom uses God or Jesus as the chief symbols of its hopes and dreams. It is sacred because it is created out of the same historical community as the church experience and thus represents the people’s attempt to shape life and to live it according to their dreams and aspirations.  

505. Cone, God of the Oppressed, 22.
Like the Black church experience “the seculars deal with the absurdity of existence without using Jesus Christ as their central focal point.”506 Both expressions reveal some meaningful element of what Cone argues is God’s intention for the Black community: liberation.

That is why “the whole of black expression, Christian and non-Christian, preacher and poet, deals with the theme of liberation and the transcendence that happens in struggle.”507 Therefore, “the black tradition breaks down the false distinctions between the sacred and the secular and invites us to look for Christ's meaning in the spirituals and the blues, folklore and sermon.”508

The sacred stifles liberation when it denies the falseness of the distinction, however. Instead, when the sacred insists on its own elevation it also insists on an oppressive status quo.

To that end, Cone writes “in the history of Western theology, we seldom find an ethic of liberation derived from the God of freedom, but rather, an ethic of the status quo, derived from Greek philosophy and from the political interests of a church receiving special favors from the state.”509 These special favors help to solidify western theology as sacred and elevate the Christian tradition. “However,” he reminds us that “we must not forget that what is usually called ‘tradition’ represents the Church's theological justification of its existence based on its support of the state in the oppression of the poor.”510 According to Cone, this is the grounding for white theology, the white church, and white religion.

Black religion, the Black church, and Black theology are born from a different rhetorical tradition. Cone explains that “since blacks were slaves and had to work from sunup to nightfall, they did not have time for the art of philosophical and theological discourse…the God of black

506. ibid., 24.
507. ibid., 28.
508. ibid., 105.
509. ibid 181.
510. ibid 104.
experience was not a metaphysical idea. God was the God of history, the Liberator of the oppressed from bondage.”511 Rather than theorizing God through the philosophical and theological discourse that western theology elevates as “real theology”, the Black theological tradition derives from the Black experience as described and engaged through stories. To that end, Cone writes

The theme of liberation expressed in story form is the essence of black religion. Both content and form were essentially determined by black people's social existence. Because black people were oppressed but not destroyed by it, they intuitively knew that servitude was a denial of their essential worth. They therefore looked for religious and secular themes in their social existence that promised release from the pain of slavery and oppression.512

Cone argues that God lives and works within the community's stories. Therefore, in order to elevate itself, the sacred must oppress the story as well. Said another way,

It is only when stories are abstracted from a concrete situation and codified into Law or dogma that their lifeblood is taken away and thus a people begin to think that its ways of thinking and living are the only real possibilities. When people can no longer listen to other people's stories, they become enclosed within their own social context, treating their distorted visions of reality as the whole truth. And then they feel that they must destroy other stories, which bear witness that life can be lived in another way. White people's decimation of red people and enslavement of black people in North America are examples of attempts to deprive people of their stories, in order to establish the white story as the only truth in history. That was why slaves were not permitted to communicate in their African languages and why red people were placed on reservations. White people were saying that black and red stories were lies and superstitions that have no place in a "civilized" country.513

The deprivation of stories is the sacredizing move. It is the denial of another culture’s humanity. It is to say that the Black or the blues has nothing meaningful to say. It is the lie upon which oppression is built. Perhaps the most harmful impact that white religion had on Black religion was sacredization. Without sacredization, “liberation as the fight for justice in this world

511. ibid., 50-1.
512. ibid., 55.
513. ibid., 94.
has always been an important ingredient in black religion. Indeed black religion's existence as another reality, completely different from white religion, is partly related to its grounding of black faith in the historical struggle of freedom."

Here, “liberation is the opposite of the policeman, the judge, and that system which may be loosely described as "white folks" and in the New Testament is called the principalities and powers.” Specifically in the origins of African American religions “Black slaves, on the other hand, contended that slavery contradicts the New Testament Jesus. They claimed to know about a Jesus who came to give freedom and dignity to the oppressed and humiliated.”

As a result, “Black religion . . . becomes a revolutionary alternative to white religion. Jesus Christ becomes the One who stands at the center of their view of reality, enabling slaves to look beyond the present to the future, the time when black suffering will be ended. The future reality of Jesus means that what is contradicts what ought to be.”

Cone argues, therefore, that faith “is God's gift to those in trouble. It bestows meaning in a meaningless situation, enabling the oppressed to believe that there is One greater than the power of the oppressors.”

What is more,

Whatever else the gospel of Jesus might be, it can never be identified with the established power of the state. Thus, whatever else Christian ethics might be, it can never be identified with the actions of people who conserve the status quo. This was the essential error of the early Church. By becoming the religion of the Roman state, replacing the public state sacrifices, Christianity became the opposite of what Jesus intended.

The secularizing move or the resistive prophetic move, then, seeks to annul the marriages between the sacred and elevation because that elevation comes through justifying officiated by

514. ibid., 141.
515. ibid., 143.
516. ibid., 108.
517. ibid., 120-1.
518. ibid., 178.
519. ibid., 181.
state orchestrated violence. Rather, resistive prophetic rhetoric calls the sacred and secular back into equitable harmony in which both work toward the goal of liberation. Therefore, “God has chosen what is black in America to shame the whites. In a society where white is equated with good and black is defined as bad, humanity and divinity mean an unqualified identification with blackness.” And if the Black sacred is determined to maintain sacredization, the God of liberation will choose the secular to shame it as well.

Cone commits himself to the institution, at least in part, for the purpose of prophesying to this effect. The prophet engages the institution because the institution has a material impact on the shepherds. Certainly, the white and the Black experiences are distinct, but they are also interconnected. Enslavement, reconstruction, jim/jane crow, the prison industrial complex and predatory policing practices: all these seats of Black oppression force engagement between the white and Black experience. Unfortunately, no one can speak of the African American experience honestly or fully without engaging the oppressor. That is why it is resistance rhetoric. The oppressor has elevated and centered itself to such an extent that liberation seems damn-near impossible without engagement. Engagement with the oppressor for the purpose of liberation is resistance. So, Cone does not engage the oppressor to further the oppressor’s elevation through pandering or accommodation. Rather, as a resistive prophet, he engages so that he might speak to the impact that white elevation has on making manifest the prophetic ideograph of our time: Black Lives Matter. He engages the oppressor to deliver a message of destruction to whiteness. But more importantly, he engages the oppressor to call us into self-love because he knows that Black self-hate is one of the oppressor’s primary missions. So, Cone commits to the institution of theology. He does this because he understands the impact that white theology has had on Black

520. ibid., 206.
faith, religion, life, and liberation efforts. Enough is enough and someone has to say something
damnit!

**Prophetic Futurism**

Cone’s commitment to the people manifests partly in a prophetic futurist's call. The first
movement of this call required him to flesh out liberation. To that end he explains that
“liberation then is not simply what oppressed people can accomplish alone; it is basically what
God has done and will do to accomplish liberation both in and beyond history.”

521 Liberation for
Cone is a collaborative project between God and the people whose culture God identifies with.
For that reason, Jesus’s “resurrection, therefore, is God breaking into history and liberating the
oppressed from their present suffering, thereby opening up humanity to a divine realization
beyond history.”

522 To be clear, what Cone is proposing is not that Black people sit back and
wait for God to bring about freedom. Rather, in Cone’s prophetic future, God’s activity in the
world’s history emboldens Black people to know that the present oppression is not the last word.
Therefore, there is no reason to sit and wait for God, because liberation is the active work of God
and God’s community.

What is more, God provides an element to liberative ambitions that allows Black people
to imagine Black freedom far beyond the bounds of what their contemporary experience might
lead us to think is possible. Black people then “have a liberation not bound by their own
strivings. In Jesus' death and resurrection, God has freed us to fight against social and political
structures while not being determined by them.”

523 Not only are Black liberative possibilities not

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522. Ibid., 162.
523. Ibid., 145.
bound by our own imaginations, but they are also not subject to historical limitations either.

Cone writes that

While the meaning of liberation includes the historical determination of freedom in this world, it is not limited to what is possible in history. There is a transcendent element in the definition of liberation which affirms that the "realm of freedom is always more than the fragments of a free life which we may accomplish in history."\(^{524}\)

This means that what Black people strive for as liberation is not bound by our own limitations, by historical limitations, or even eschatological limitations. Rather, “liberation as a future event is not simply other worldly but is the divine future that breaks into their social existence, bestowing wholeness in the present situation of pain and suffering and enabling black people to know that the existing state of oppression contradicts their real humanity as defined by God's future.”\(^{525}\)

Here, Cone displays an important element of prophetic futurism. He adopts a tone so optimistic about the Black future that it simultaneously acknowledges the historical record of Black abuse while denying that record any determining power in the creation of the Black future. Rather, “a foretaste of that freedom is already breaking into our present history and that is why the oppressed can struggle for freedom in this world.”\(^{526}\) That foretaste of freedom puts the Black future solely in the hands of the Black community. Having established that, Cone engages the other element of prophetic futurism, which helps to distinguish it from Afrofuturism: the call.

Sticking with a motif present in his first three books, Cone’s call centers Black self-love. To engage this topic, he reimagines reconciliation. In previous works Cone critiqued white conceptions of reconciliation for furthering Black place. But we aint talkin bout what white

\(^{524}\) Ibid., 145.
\(^{525}\) Ibid., 146.
\(^{526}\) Ibid., 162.
people be doin in prophetic futurism. Our main concern is what Black folk finna do. To that end, Cone reclaims reconciliation as a Black happening. He writes, “it is therefore black people's reconciliation with each other, in America, Africa, and the islands of the sea, that must be the black theologians' primary concern.”\(^{527}\) “Therefore,” he adds “as black theologians, we must begin to ask, not about black people's reconciliation with white oppressors, but about our reconciliation with each other.”\(^{528}\) More specifically, Cone sees the skepticism that Black people might approach each other with as a barrier to liberation. It is hard not to wonder if Cone addresses this particular aspect of Black reconciliation because of the feelings of isolation he felt from Black scholars in years prior. Was Long’s constant attack on his books at conferences furthering Black liberation? While Cone never spoke to that directly, it is clear that he imagined such dogged opposition to other Black people as a stumbling block to his prophetic future. To that end he asserts, “the crucial point is that we are black, and that fact alone ought to keep us open to each other, not for the purpose of conversion, but for shared participation in finding out the best means of struggle.”\(^{529}\)

This does not mean that any idea presented by a Black person fits the prophetic future. After all, “we black theologians must refuse to accept a view of reconciliation that pretends that slavery never existed, that we were not lynched and shot, and that we are not presently being cut to the core of our physical and mental endurance.”\(^{530}\) Even if presented by a Black person, this was the version of reconciliation that benefits the white supremacist power structure. Cone writes, “while divine reconciliation, for oppressed blacks, is connected with the joy of liberation from the controlling power of white people, for whites’ divine reconciliation is connected with

\(^{527}\) Ibid., 225.  
\(^{528}\) Ibid., 224.  
\(^{529}\) Ibid., 198.  
\(^{530}\) Ibid., 208.
God's wrathful destruction of white values.” In Cone’s prophetic future Black reconciliation and white reconciliation takes two distinct forms: the formal is hopeful and missional. The latter is apocalyptic. Black “reconciliation then is not only what God does in order to deliver oppressed people from captivity; it is also what oppressed people do in order to remain faithful to their new gift of freedom.”

So, what is James Hal Cone’s prophetic futurist vision? In *God of the Oppressed* it is God breaking into human history and Black people exegeting God’s historical activity as an invitation to co-construct a liberated Black future. Here “it is God who makes human suffering redemptive! For Yahweh takes on the pain of the widow and orphans and transforms slavery into freedom.” And “because God has liberated the oppressed from bondage, thereby making freedom possible, the oppressed must now accept their freedom by joining God in the fight against injustice and oppression.” Black people are thereby invited to build a world not run by white supremacy, but rather by “divine justification” which “is the removal of oppressed black people from the control of white power, thereby making it possible for the enslaved to be free.” The result is a Black future built not by the lies that whiteness tells about itself and us. Rather, this Black future is built on truth. For Cone, “truth is a *liberating event*, a divine happening in the lives of the people.” Armed with the truth, Black people are empowered to construct for themselves a world currently unimaginable.

Let me ask you this. Imagine a world where you were never programmed to code switch, and lacking such programming would result in no harm. Imagine a world where white people

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531. Ibid., 217.
532. Ibid., 217.
533. Ibid., 159.
534. Ibid., 213.
535. Ibid., 216-7.
536. Ibid., 223.
could not weaponize the police against you. Imagine a world in which white folks at yo job wasn’t doin micro aggressions every five seconds. Imagine a world where you ain’t need therapy to unpack growing up around white people. Imagine a world where you ain’t have to engage whiteness at all. And the world was lush and abundant and safe. Does that sound like any world you recognize? But you can see it. You can imagine it; maybe even taste it, even if you can’t touch it. This is a world where Black folks are free- free to be concerned primarily with Black things. Where whiteness (whiteness? what is that?) has been stripped of its power to center itself. It has been stripped of its power to hurt, kill, rape, imprison, mame, embarrass, kill, enslave, kidnap, lynch, pathologize, and kill people- human people. It has ceased to exist because it is, in its very nature, violence against the margins. That is James Hal Cone’s prophetic future.

But we do not get there by sitting and waiting. NO! Liberation is a place yet seen. It is our new place that replaces Black place as it is currently conceived. We build that world. We build it where we are stationed. Cone was stationed in the theological institution and through his prophetic vision he built Black Liberation theology as a discipline, as a new Black place. This place was built with the bricks of resistance. It is not liberation. It is not the place of which he prophecies. Rather it is a place before that place, a prerequisite. We must engage the outside forces. Asante said there is no escaping that grave responsibility.\footnote{537. Asante, Afrocentricity, 35.} Black theology engages them, not because of their natural importance, but because of the importance engagement has in the trudge toward liberation. The place Black theology resists as a means of pointing to the liberative place. That is the hope in resistive prophetic rhetoric. For that reason, as Cone left it all on the page, he shouted a crucial call erupting from the lungs of his theology and prophetic futuristic vision of resistance. He says,
Thus if we black theologians are going to interpret correctly the meaning of the black people's struggle, we cannot be concerned with what white theologians are going to say about our theological perspective. Black theologians are not called to interpret the gospel in a form acceptable to white oppressors.\textsuperscript{538}

\textbf{Conclusion}

Early into his tenure at Union Theological Seminary President John Bennett called Cone into his office. Bennet was concerned about Cone’s claim in Black Theology and Black Power that “the white church is the Antichrist.” According to Cone Bennett anxiously asked, “that’s hyperbole, isn’t it?” Cone replied “Absolutely not! . . . I mean it literally-every word of it.”\textsuperscript{539}

Eventually Bennett asked Cone “if you think white seminaries and churches are the Antichrist… why are you teaching at Union?” Cone replied

My father,” I said, “who just died of heart failure, probably from the stress of white supremacy, cut wood, billets and logs to support his family; I work at Union. I see no difference. We both had to deal with the stress of white supremacy every day. And as long as I don’t burn Union down, I might as well work here.\textsuperscript{540}

This witty reply to Bennett’s question reveals a deeply important reality of not just the resistive prophet, but the marginalized more widely. Cone’s father cut wood and billets and undoubtedly endured white supremacy in that space because he had to feed his family. If his boss micro-aggressed against him, he did not quit. He remained in that space because he was committed not to the noble project of cutting wood or his employer’s consumers. Rather, Cone’s father was committed to his family.

Cone likewise was committed to Black people. That commitment drove him to teach at Union and to do theology. It also drove him to prophesy to and about that institution. Because the institution makes commitment a prerequisite for survival, commitment then also becomes an

\textsuperscript{538} Ibid., 225.
\textsuperscript{539} Cone, Said I Wasn’t Gonna Tell Nobody, 51.
\textsuperscript{540} Ibid., 53.
inevitability of resistance. The prophet seeking to resist engages the institution for the purpose of speaking to the people who daily must endure the oppression that comes with being a woodcutter. They tell them that CEOs and billionaires have no greater right to full human treatment than the lowliest employee, no matter what American and western culture tries to make us believe.

At that point— at the point of commitment— the resistive prophet has an opportunity and task to deliver a vision of prophetic futurism. This vision calls the woodcutter beyond any indignities that exist in that station. It imagines a world where a Black professor would not get pulled into the university president’s office for an occupational and emotional shakedown. Most importantly, connected to the people by involuntary commitment, the resistive prophet can call the professors and wood cutters to live into that vision by any means necessary.
Burn the table!
- me

If that the black church has one problem that I think it needs to think about it is the problem of whether it is called to save its own life or whether it's called to lose its like for the sake of others.

-James H. Cone

Chapter 6

James Hal Cone and Resistive Prophetic Rhetoric: A Preface

Throughout this dissertation I have laid out the elements of resistive prophetic rhetoric: persona, critique of the sacred, elevation of the secular, and a commitment to the institution for the purpose of serving the people. To be clear, the primary characteristic of resistive prophetic rhetoric is the negotiation between the sacred and secular. More specifically, the resistive prophet is rooted and grounded in the secular. Returning to Andre E. Johnson’s definition we clearly see that this is a slight, but critical deviation from current conceptions of prophetic rhetoric. But why does rooting the prophetic persona, mission, and message in the secular matter? James Hal Cone’s prophetic progression provides insight.

I also wrote my master’s thesis on Cone. In that project I used his theology as a framework to analyze another text. In my research I came across a video in which he was serving on a panel of other black leaders. The topic of the panel was the state of the Black church. The moderator, Tavis Smiley, asked Cone if the Black church had become too political. In the silence of the room Cone provided a response that deserves to be cited in full:

Thank you very much. I’m pleased to be here just like everybody else and I’m also pleased that you asked me a question about whether the Black church is too political and so of course it all depends on what you mean by politics and what way you mean that. I think one of the things that we- that the black church needs to ask itself is what is its mission. What is its mission? I think one of the things that black church has lost is a good understanding of its mission. Black church is good at preaching, good at singing, good at a lot of things, but Black church has not been as good at thinking about what its nature is and thinking about what its mission is. Is its mission primarily saving souls? Or is it saving bodies? Or is it both together? I think
if you see them both together, I think you would have to see that the Black church have to be political because politics is a part of life. It also has to be concerned about saving souls because full meaning in life is not simply found in politics. So, I would want to emphasize this particular point here, if that the Black church has one problem that I think it needs to think about it is the problem of whether it is called to save its own life or whether it's called to lose its like for the sake of others. I feel that the Black church is concerned with saving its own life because its so interested in the gospel of success. The gospel of Jesus is not a gospel of success the Gospel of Jesus is the gospel of ultimate success through failure. It's a gospel of ultimate success through obvious failure. That’s why the cross is at the center of the gospel. The cross is not a gospel of success. Jesus did not succeed. He failed. But God took that failure and transformed that failure into success. Now it's very important when you talk about ultimate success it's not so obvious because the resurrection was not obvious. The tomb was empty and yet, nothing was there. I feel today was so much focus on building buildings and and and and and all the other humongous things that we do that we fail to see that the cross is at the heart of what the Black church ought to be about. It was not very difficult for the Black church to see that during the time in which it was born because being a slave church, that was not success. It was obvious failure there. The problem is that the church has lost its legacy. It has lost its message. And when success becomes the focus of it, it loses its mission, and it loses its message. I would like to see the church not be so concerned with its success. But much more concerned with a kind of success through failure and where its failure is at the heart of things. So, I would want to put my emphasis there. I’m concerned that the church doesn’t get too concerned about its own survival. Because Jesus said, “‘people who seek their life shall lose it. But if you lose your life for the sake of the least of these, then you’ll find your life.”

I remember watching in amazement as this little man employed his squeaky voice to critique a room full of Black church people into an eruption. I was astonished not because of the response his message got from the crowd. Despite actively critiquing the Black church, an institution that most people there likely had a deep investment in, the response was relatively normal. He had, as he insisted Black orators need to do, told the story in a way that resonated with the people. I been in Black church too long to be surprised when a “hard message” moves the people. What was more surprising was the initial moments when he began talking. When Tavis Smiley asked him the question, the room was silent., almost on pins and needles, waiting

541. “James H. Cone on ‘Success in the Black Church,’” April 25, 2007, YouTube, video. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jPF2RuD4124&t=308s
on a word from the prophet. At the time, I had no knowledge of prophetic rhetoric as it is studied
in either the religion or communication disciplines. Still, I found myself asking what kind of
prophetic persona had this man landed in?

The prophets I knew from the Bible were mistreated and killed. Here, however, Cone sat
as an elder-statesperson prophet of sorts. The people knew he had a word that would cut them to
their core. He had a word that meant that the decades-old building fund might be drained in lieu
of feeding, housing, or defending the poor. He had a word that damned their self-interest. They
knew he had that word, and they gave him complete silence and deference so that he might
deliver it. And upon its/their deliverance they cheered.

To be fair, that day Cone shared the stage with other prophets of the same status such as
Jeremiah Wright and Louis Farrakhan. However, as this dissertation has stated, Cone’s prophetic
persona began with accepting the plight of the prophet. That is exile. In Cone’s case, he
embarked to critique an institution to its face. He did so without the protections that his field had
to offer, job security or tenure. Rather, he was an emerging scholar who refused to modify his
message because he understood that even if it meant his death, his prophetic word needed to be
spoken.

What is fascinating is that, unlike the prophets of the Bible, ultimately Cone is not exiled.
It is quite the opposite. Very early on he achieves national recognition in several national
publications such as Time and Jet Magazine. The buzz and controversy surrounding him led to
several job offers and a position at one of the most prestigious seminaries at the time. And by the
time this 2003 panel rolled around, he was an elder statesperson prophet.

At the time I first watched the video, that baffled me. In fact, I still find myself slightly
perplexed. When I first saw it, I had completed reading *Black Theology and Black Power, A*
Black Theology of Liberation and God of the Oppressed. I was in the process of reading The Cross and the Lynching Tree. How could a person who critique the religious and theological institution so adamantly become such a staple of those institutions’ mere decades later?

That was the catalyst of my study of the progression of Cone’s prophetic persona. Much of that work remains and needs to be done. What I have provided in this dissertation is an examination of Cone’s early and foundational works. Perhaps the most generative aspect of examining this period of Cone’s prophetic progress lies in gaining a better understanding of what it looks like to resist an institution to which you are committed. How do I prophesy within an institution? As I explored in Chapter 5, Cone ultimately commits to theology as an institution. That is not the only institution, however. It does not take very much stretching to deduce his commitment to other institutions such as the Black church. It is his commitment and the reason for his commitment that helps make his prophetic rhetoric resistive.

The plights of the enslaved person are plentiful. However, one of the predominant marks of enslavement (at least as it manifests in the United States) is that enslaved people cannot leave their plantations in any permanent sense. As Baraka observed, mobility is an indication of emancipation. Therefore, involuntary commitment has always been an issue for African Americans. From our genesis, we have been forced to work for and with institutions that ultimately sought to harm and mistreat us. The more an enslaved person works for a human trafficker, the more power and capital that human trafficker has to abuse the enslaved person. However, as Baraka also observes, these plantations often have practical and tangible impacts on the enslaved person’s quality of life. It was their source of food and shelter. It was the place

where they raised families and prayerfully did not have that family split.\textsuperscript{543} Any commitment to that institution was not born out of love or dedication, but a sober realization of its power to impact us.

James H. Cone observed theology’s power to impact. And like the enslaved people who dared to slow down labor, steal food, or break tools, he made a conscious decision to resist an institution he was committed to. He was committed not due to love or dedication to the institution. Rather, he committed because of the institution’s power to impact. Because the institution had the power to dictate place and place needed to be rearticulated. Because the institution had the power to name right and wrong, new ethics born out of the Black experience needed to be articulated. Because the institution lied to position itself as sacred, the secular needed to be elevated.

Resistive prophetic rhetoric, then, is discourse grounded in the secular and rooted in the community experiences of the poor that offers a critique of existing communities and traditions by charging and challenging the society’s espoused ideals, while offering celebration and hope for a brighter future for the oppressed. Going far beyond shifting the prophetic paradigm to be rooted in the secular, resistive prophetic rhetoric prophecies to prophetic rhetoric itself. It questions how we can be so wrapped up in the sacred when we are tasked to speak on behalf of the least of these? How can we be so affixed to the sacred when the historical record reminds us that at every turn the oppressor has rhetorically constructed itself as sacred? Amaziah was sacred. The Pharisees were sacred. The Sadducees were sacred. The holy roman emperor was sacred. George Washington was sacred. George Wallace was sacred. All the while, the Black people crossing the bridge were presented as secular. The now toothless enslaved person was

\textsuperscript{543} ibid., 55.
secular. The little carpenter from nowheresville was secular. Amos, who wanted nothing to do with the so-called sacred and declared “I was neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet” was secular.\footnote{Amos 7:14. NIV.}

If we are honest, we will admit that the prophet has always spoken out against the sacred, because sacred and secular are far more political positionalities than they were ever spiritual. Sacredness, like wealth, is not given or earned. More often than not, it is taken. It is the process of victimization and if prophecy ceases to remember that the prophetic potential for impact on behalf of the weakest of society becomes void.

Throughout this dissertation I also employed elements of rhetorical history to trace the progression of James Hal Cone’s resistive prophetic rhetoric. He began by establishing a resistive prophetic persona in \textit{Black Theology and Black Power}. In that text, he accepted the likelihood of exile which is the plight of the prophet. He defied the place that american white supremacy and white theology assigned him. In \textit{A Black Theology of Liberation}, he took to the task of kicking white ass and affirming the margins. This book was his official critique of the sacred. Following his first book he realized he had to address the oppressor on their own terms. He had to do theology. The way he spoke, and his assertions granted him national notoriety in the form of several high-profile news and media articles as well as invitations for several debates. However, with that attention came criticism from Black scholars and activists who were confused at how a Black theology could be built with white tools. Writing \textit{The Spirituals and the Blues} he turned his attention to the secular. In a real way, this was him turning his attention more fully to Black culture and experience, both of which lie at the root of Black theology. In doing so, he elevated the secular. No longer should it be considered less than sacred. Rather he began
the work of putting the two in harmony. In *God of the Oppressed* he exhibited and perhaps justified his commitment to theology by outlining the reason for that commitment. His commitment to the poor drove him to dedicate himself to growing Black theology as a discipline to serve as a perpetual prophetic source calling Black folks into a prophetic futuristic vision.

During those foundational six years, several controversies drove his prophetic progression. None of them came to a resolution. In fact, Cone’s connection to several realms of controversy provides us with a uniquely different conception of controversia. Because he was trained by the institution, he understood traditional theology. Because of the Bearden experience he grounded himself in Blackness, which the institution excluded. Cone, therefore, brought all sides to his theology. He did not do this in any neutral or disconnected way. Rather, his knowledge of the sacred and secular enabled him to sharpen his critique of the sacred and strengthened his elevation of the secular. Like the Lawd, he chose sides. This mechanism of his prophetic rhetoric was molded by trial, error, contemplation, processing, and growth which manifest in his prophetic progression. That progression continued until and even beyond his death.

Despite repeated insistence that arguing with white theologians proved to be a waste of his time, he would continue to critique white theology up until his death. The controversy that Black theology’s existence created within the field of theology lives on. As Earle J. Fisher’s work displays, Black scholars continued to be troubled by Cone’s negotiation of the balance between his version of Black theology and the theology we are taught in graduate school. The clash between Cone’s Black theology and the Black experience lives on. An interaction between Cone and one of his students also highlights a controversy that arises out of Cone’s particularization of God.
In *Said I Wasn’t Gonna Tell Nobody*,” Cone tells a story of an event during his “Foundations in Theology” class. That day a white male student shouted “‘Dr. Cone, you don’t know a God damn thing about the gay experience.’” In the book, Cone draws comparisons between this student and his own angered outburst during a graduate course. On that day, class was not dismissed, the professor did not storm away angrily, and no one was forced to return their mask to their face. Cone explains, “I wasn’t angry; I knew he was right, and that he was hurting from homophobia in the midst of the AIDS crisis in the 1980s, as I was from racism in the 1960s. Although I was trying to address homophobia in society, churches, and theology, he needed more.” Shortly after Cone continued “…oppressed people have the right to speak about ultimate reality of their own experience. That’s why I began writing about God and the Black experience…I cannot speak for you but hope I can inspire you to find your voice, as I found mine. That’s why I teach.”

Here Cone found himself in an interesting position. He was the world’s greatest academic proponent of Black theology. He was also a part of the system. The chapter that this story is recorded in is entitled “When He Saved My Soul: Learning from My Students.” In this chapter Cone provides what is almost certainly an abridged version of the different lessons he learned from students at Union Theological Seminary that forced his theology to evolve. That learning and evolving was a staple in Cone’s prophetic progression and process. In fact, it was the driving force. Whether it was learning from his students, other Black scholars, or debates with white scholars, the mobility of Cone’s theology proved to be its greatest escape from hypocrisy.

546. ibid., 108.
547. ibid., 108.
Consistently throughout his life and career, Cone critiqued whiteness and white supremacy. At the core of supremacy is a circular self-justification. Whiteness is good because it is. White is right because it is. Evidence is grafted onto those assertions after they have been accepted as fact. But what does a person attempting to elevate something without subjecting it to the hell of supremacy do? You allow it to be mobile. This mobility does not enable it to escape critique. Rather, it embraces critique, reevaluates, and grows based on what experience has taught it. This seems simple and it is. But simple and practiced have different definitions for a reason.

Despite his own elevation in status, Cone’s willingness to allow his personal reading of Black theology to be mobile also enables his theology to remain affixed on the elevation of the secular. Take for example his admission in the 1986 edition of *A Black Theology of Liberation*:

The most glaring limitation of *A Black Theology of Liberation* was my failure to be receptive to the problem of sexism in the black community and society as a whole. I have become so embarrassed by that failure that I could not reissue this volume without making a note of it and without changing the exclusive language of the 1970 edition to inclusive language. I know that this is hardly enough to rectify my failure, because sexism cannot be eliminated (anymore than can racism) simply by changing words. But it is an important symbol of what we must do, because our language is a reflection of the reality we create. Sexism dehumanizes and kills, and it must be fought on every front.548

Or his 1997 deduction about the Bible, the text that he touted so highly in his early career. He says, “I still regard the Bible as an important source of my theological reflections, but not the starting point.” Initially he explains that “the black experience and the Bible together in dialectical tension serve as my point of departure today and yesterday. The order is significant. I am black first—and everything else comes after that.” Nevertheless, shortly after that he admits “There have been, however, significant developments in my thinking as a result of the gender

critique of feminists and womanists, the class analysis of Third World theologians, and the
collapse of second-generation black theologians.” More specifically,

“The Bible, of all books,” wrote feminist critic Mieke Bal, “is the most dangerous
one, the one that has been endowed with the power to kill.” No group in the U.S.
has spoken more tellingly about the deadly dangers of biblical texts than gay
thelologians. J. Michael Clark confesses to “scripture-phobia” and Gary Comstock
offers no theological excuses for the Leviticus text (20:13) which condemns gays to
death. “How many times and in how many ways do we have to be told that we
should be killed before we take it seriously? Is not once enough?” Using the Hagar
story, womanist theologian Delores Williams challenges black theology’s claim that
the biblical God is always on the side of the oppressed, liberating them from
bondage. God did not liberate the runaway slave woman Hagar but instead
compelled her to return and submit to her abusive mistress Sarah. Native American
theologian Robert Warrior makes a similar challenge by reading the Exodus and
Conquest narratives “with Canaanite eyes.” The Exodus is not a paradigmatic event
of liberation for indigenous peoples but rather an event of colonization. Speaking
out of the black struggle for justice in South Africa, Itumeleng Mosala also
questions black theology’s idea of the “Word of God,” an ahistorical exegetical
starting point which cannot be criticized and challenged. The Bible was written
from the perspective of the dominant class in Israel.

Why does it matter that he recognized his sexism or reevaluated the relationship between
the Bible and his theology? It matters because it tells the story of his true commitment. James
Hal Cone committed his life and prophecy to the marginalized. WE remained the compass that
directed his prophetic message and persona. When his message violated that commitment, they
shifted to realign with the secular onto-epistemological grounding as he understood it. That is
resistive prophetic rhetoric. It is understood that sacred and secular are political assignments
cloaked in religious rhetoric assigned to the haves and have nots. As Derefe Kimarley Chevannes
explains “political speech imparts the Black subject with a generative capacity. It opens the
possibility for the (re)articulation of the human being from the standpoint of lived experience. It

550. Ibid. loc 118.
offers horizons of limitless possibilities.\textsuperscript{551} Understanding the potentiality of this political place that is the sacred and secular, resistive prophetic rhetoric rejects every urge to conspire with the society for the harm of the least of these. Rather, it rebukes all that the society holds sacred and exposes that very sacredness as an oppressive lie. Perhaps even more importantly, it calls those previously called enslaved into what one might describe as a horizon of limitless possibilities. But we will just call it liberation.


