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Enfleshing Freedom

BODY, RACE, AND BEING

M. Shawn Copeland

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Body, Race, and Being

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To the memory of
black women
whose bodies were destroyed in the middle passage
whose bodies were abused and chewed up in the maw of slavery
whose bodies were tortured and lynched
whose bodies were defiled and discarded
whose bodies lie in unmarked and unattended graves
and
to the memory of
my grandmother
Mattie Hunt Billingslea
whose bodily labor
made my freedom possible

INTRODUCTION

The wounds of my people wound me too.
Is there no balm in Gilead? Who will turn my head into a fountain and
my eyes into a spring of tears so that
I may weep all day, all night for the wounded out of my people?[1]

It is not knowledge we lack. What is missing is
the courage to understand what we know and to draw conclusions.[2]

Enfleshing Freedom focuses the Christian question of what being human means on the body, most particularly on the bodies of black women.[3] For centuries, black female bodies have been defiled, used, and discarded, quite literally, as refuse—simply because they are female and black, black and female. To privilege suffering bodies in theological anthropology uncovers the suffering body at the heart of Christian belief. Reflection on these bodies, the body of Jesus of Nazareth and the bodies of black women, lays bare both the human capacity for inhumanity and the divine capacity for love.

Five basic convictions ground my discussion of theological anthropology: that the body is a site and mediation of divine revelation; that the body shapes human existence as relational and social; that the creativity of the Triune God is manifested in differences of gender, race, and sexuality; that solidarity is a set of body practices; and that the Eucharist orders and transforms our bodies as the body of Christ.[3] Privileging the black woman's body makes these claims specific and particular. Rather than exclude or overturn or punish other bodies or persons, specificity and particularity insist that we *all* are subjects.[4] Since the radical and expedient subjugation of a people to demonized difference[5] in the fifteenth century, *all* human bodies have been caught up in a near totalizing web of body commerce, body exchange, body value. Taking the black woman's body as a starting point for theological anthropology allows us to interrogate the impact of that demonization in history, religion, culture, and society.

The argument here covers difficult, often precarious ground. First, this book makes slavery visible. This is not a book about slavery, but slavery holds a compelling role in its central claims. Slavery was practiced in the South and, more or less, was contained there; but historian Nell Painter observes, its influence "did not stop at the borders of the South."[6] Rather, she proposes, slavery "calibrated values in core [American] institutions," including the family, religion, government, commerce, labor, education, and entertainment.[7] Nor did "the implications of slavery stop at the color-line; slavery's theory and praxis" seeped into the whole of American society.[7]

We Christian theologians in the United States work in a house haunted by the ghosts of slavery.[8] In a country at once enthralled and impoverished by the dazzling innovations of technical rationality, the political memory of the nation suppresses our deep entanglement in slavery. Without the painstaking, thorough, and passionately dispassionate intellectual courage of women and men of all races—especially historians, and literary, visual, and musical

artists—the nation might have gone on overlooking the bodies "piled up"[9] outside the door, gone on concealing slavery behind narratives of innocence or masks of pretense.[10] But, total erasure has never been possible: the most vivid reminder and remainder of slavery is the black body, which cannot be explained away so easily and which constitutes, in a memorable phrase by historian of religions Charles Long, "a structural embarrassment."

The suffering and death of Jesus of Nazareth rebuke our national amnesia, our forgetfulness of enslaved bodies, our indifference to living black bodies. The *memoria passionis* interrupts our banal resignation to a vague past, our smug democratic dispensation, our not so benign neglect. From the perspective of a contextual theology of social transformation,[11] the full meaning of human freedom (religious, existential, social, eschatological) can be clarified only in grappling strenuously with the "dangerous memory" of slavery.[12]

This book also makes visible black bodies in pain.[13] I have chosen to reproduce accounts of torture, sexual assault, and lynching, but I do not do so casually. I am aware that such reiterations may serve to "reinforce the spectacular character of black suffering"[14] and to foster voyeuristic sentimentality.[15] Rather, as a theologian who is black and a woman, I understand my task here as Toni Morrison understands her task as a writer who is black and a woman: to move aside "that veil drawn over 'proceedings too terrible to relate.'"[16] These may be narratives not to pass on,[17] but to pass over these sorrows imperils humanity as well as theology. For my part, drawing back that veil is an obligation to memory: the subjects and the subject of my theologizing are the dead, the "Many Thousand Gone."[18]

In raising the aching memory of slavery, this work interrogates memory and history for the sake of freedom. Black women began the healing of their flesh and their subjectivity in the *there-and-then*, in the midst of enslavement. But without romanticizing or uncritically celebrating their resistance, we may say that

black women sometimes opposed their condition through word (sass) and deed (fighting back, literal escape); at other times it was "poache[d] on the power of the dominating class."[19] At still other times, unable to escape or to resist, black women submitted or found ways to subvert "the rituals, representations, and laws imposed on them . . . by the dominant social order [and] deflected its power."[20] Theologically considered, black women's absolute enfleshment of freedom, sown in the *there-and-then*, is caught up and realized in the abiding presence of the resurrected body of Jesus. As a theologian, I fulfill my responsibility to these dead by challenging the reader to "respect the dignity of suffering that has accumulated in history"[21] and to translate that respect into compassionate practices of solidarity—to critical, healing practices that address the crusted residue of slavery in contemporary and global reenactments of violence against black bodies.

Chattel slavery not only critiqued freedom but also raised fateful questions about being human. Contemporary philosophers and theologians agree that traditional metaphysics is under siege from postmodernity's deployment of *difference*. There are advantages to that strategy for projects like this one. Yet, even if problematic, the "implicitly metaphysical"[22] character of Christianity cannot be dismissed. With these debates in mind, I begin by engaging some of the difficulties in speech about body and race and being. From this analysis, the book adverts to the narrative of human creation in Genesis and Christianity's murky role in chattel slavery, then directly confronts the attempt to degrade the *imago Dei* or image of God through commodifying, objectifying, and sexually violating black women's bodies. The freedom of the (human) subject is at stake here and so is the (human) subject of freedom. In history, the psychic, spiritual, physical wounds of chattel slavery were rarely healed; but Toni Morrison's great novel *Beloved* mediates a healing performative midrash on the incarnation of *imago Dei*.

In the middle of the book, the principal historical and social context for thinking about bodies shifts to exercises of imperial

power—*pax Romana, pax Americana*. The body of Jesus of Nazareth presents a formidable entry point for the scandal of particularity in theological anthropology: formidable because of the marks of that body (gender, race, sex, culture); because of that body's openness to, turn toward, and solidarity with even radically different others (Matt. 15: 26-27); and because of that body's pledge to be given and poured out for *all* others across time and space. Moreover, by virtue of its subjects, theological anthropology evokes the church and the bodies that it recognizes, and those bodies that it suspects. If the body, the flesh of Jesus, is the "hinge of salvation,"[23] then the embrace of the church must swing open and wide.

Against the backdrop of the Enlightenment's surrender to racial empiricism, I outline the emergence of theologies of liberation and connect the "new" subject of theological anthropology to the practice of solidarity. An Italian newspaper report of a black woman giving birth by the side of a road unmasks the personal and social sin that racism is in the breakdown of human solidarity. This breakdown uncovers the very loss of *humanum*, the loss of our humanness. Against this loss I argue for solidarity as an expression of the mystical body of Christ.

The book concludes with a return to accounts of the abuse of black female bodies, then takes up reports of lynching. Few theologians and ethicists write about the sexual abuse of black women during slavery;[24] fewer—even black theologians—write about lynching. However, more recently, Anthony Pinn,[25] Kelly Brown Douglas,[26] and James Cone[27] have reflected theologically about this rampant display of the protracted power of slavocracy. Such abuse and torture constitute a surd, the irrationality of evil. Soteriologically considered: In his suffering and crucifixion, Jesus embraces and proleptically unites the real suffering of black bodies to his own. His embrace neither diminishes nor empties, neither justifies nor obscures the horror and misery of black suffering.[28] Rather, the proleptic embrace of the suffering Jesus, who

is the Risen Lord, interrupts the abjection of black bodies and creates an horizon of hope that is "hope against hope": *He have been wid us, Jesus, / He still wid us, Jesus, / He will be wid us, Jesus, / Be wid us to the end.*[29] A meal makes this eschatological hope tangible and nourishing, makes Christ present among us. Thus, the cross and the lynching tree reorient the discussion through reflection on Eucharist—the body of Christ, the black body, the body raised up in humanity by Jesus Christ for himself.

The Christian gospel is an invitation to *metanoia*, to change; the standard against which that change is measured is the life of Jesus Christ. In other words, the gospel seeks not only to change our lives but to transform them. Lived transformation is discipleship; it is the practice of solidarity with and beside and among "the least." Theology that rises from the message of the gospel should disturb as well as provoke, encourage as well as console in the furthering of life in Christ. In spelling out the meaning and implications of life in Christ, that theology can neither ignore nor mitigate the experiences that complexify being human and the real questions these experiences instigate—whether those questions arise from history or from culture or social (that is, political, economic, or technological) arrangements. Thus, a theological anthropology worthy of reclaiming black women's bodies is worthy of reclaiming *human* bodies. This is the task I have set for myself in *Enfleshing Freedom.*

CHAPTER ONE

Body, Race, and Being

God saw everything that he [sic] had made,
and indeed, it was very good.[1]

O my body, make of me always [one] who questions.[2]

The body provokes theology. The body contests its hypotheses, resists its conclusions, escapes its textual margins. The body incarnates and points beyond to what is "the most immediate and proximate object of our experience"[3] and mediates our engagement with others, with the world, with the Other. The immediate imperatives of hunger or thirst, pleasure or pain, desire or revulsion are not merely the body's imperatives; rather, they are *your* imperatives, *my* imperatives.[4] For the body is no mere object—*already-out-there-now*—with which we are confronted: always the body is with us, inseparable from us, *is* us. But, always, there is a "more" to you, a "more" to me: the body mediates that "more" and makes visible what cannot be seen. "The body," Yves Cattin writes, "is that ontological impotence which prevents the human

spirit from presenting itself as pure absolute spirit. And in being human, the body is an essential quality of the soul."[5] Spirit or soul and body, he continues, "are not two realities of which we are composed, [but] the originary totality that we are."[6] The body constitutes a site of divine revelation and, thus, a "basic human sacrament." In and through embodiment, we human persons grasp and realize our essential freedom through engagement and communion with other embodied selves.[7]

Cultural anthropologist Mary Douglas calls attention to the body's symbolic function in human culture, focusing on the body as a code or image for social reality. She distinguishes and relates the physical and social bodies: "The social body constrains the way the physical body is perceived."[8] In other words, while interaction and engagement with others is crucial to realizing essential freedom, that realization in large measure hinges upon cultural perceptions and social (political, economic, technological) responses (affirmation or rejection or indifference) to the physical body. So the social body's assignment of meaning and significance to race and/or gender, sex and/or sexuality of physical bodies influences, perhaps even determines, the trajectories of concrete human lives. Thus a social body determined by the arbitrary privileged position and, therefore, power of one group may enact subtle and grotesque brutality upon different "others."

Taking black women's bodies as a prism, this work considers the theological anthropological relation between the social body and the physical body. By doing so, it avoids the trap of detaching the embodied subject from historical or social or religious contexts, which would render the subject eternal, universal, absolute. Rather, it opts for the concrete and aims to do so without absolutizing or essentializing particularity or jeopardizing a notion of personhood as immanent self-transcendence in act. Attention to the concrete bodies and experiences of black women provides an interrogation of the dynamic unfolding of created spirit in the struggle to exercise freedom in history and society.

theology as a process

This first chapter comprises five sections, which set out themes and questions that modulate the body. Race along with gender, sex, and sexuality are inseparable from the body, even if at times these markers may be ambiguous, paradoxical, problematic. What is race? What *makes* a body black? What does *black* mean? What might *being* black mean? These questions unsettle and problematize the conventional agenda of theological anthropology, but they are necessary questions if we are to take being human seriously.

When we talk with one another about "race," we assume we have some idea of what it is, and we do. But our understanding tends toward opinion or what philosopher-theologian Bernard Lonergan names common sense.[9] Most of us have an opinion about race; many of us even have had experiences that involve explicitly adverting to race—either our own or someone else's. The first section follows the idea of race as it was put forward by European Enlightenment thinkers, then focuses on the story of nineteenth-century Khosian woman Saartjie Baartman and the way in which her body was rendered captive by greed and pseudoscientific inspection. The second section theorizes race—skin—through the notions of horizon and bias. Horizon connotes a worldview; bias may participate in the construction and control of it, but both govern meaning-making. From the perspective of phenomenology, the third and fourth sections extend the framework advanced through relating the notions of horizon and bias, uncover the damage that racism does to body and soul, and gesture toward a "critical ontology of the body."[10] The final section summarizes some categories that surface in theological anthropology's attention to the black female body.

Making a Body Black: Inventing Race

When confronted with the writings on race by major thinkers of the European Enlightenment, contemporary philosophy too often

blinks, dismissing these texts as minor or unrepresentative. Yet, Emmanuel Eze argues, "Enlightenment philosophy was instrumental in codifying and institutionalizing both the scientific and popular European perceptions of the human race."[11] In an age that has become synonymous with criticality, major Enlightenment thinkers—including Georges Léopold Cuvier, Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, David Hume, Immanuel Kant, and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel—played a key role in shaping white European sensibilities of national, cultural, and racial superiority vis-à-vis non-white non-Europeans.[12] Indeed, from the eighteenth century until well into the twentieth, their ideas about race served to reinforce proslavery attitudes, to sustain racial segregation and discrimination, and to exert subtle, perhaps devastating, influence on metaphysics and ethics. Recall the vile efforts of the Nazi regime to dehumanize and eliminate Jews or the brutal reign of apartheid in South Africa or the persistent racial discrimination, even in the twenty-first century, in the United States.

Readers may be familiar with Hume's suspicion that black people "are naturally inferior to the Whites,"[13] or with Kant's insistence that the differences between blacks and whites were fundamental and that differences in their skin pigmentation mirrored differences in their mental capacities,[14] or with Hegel's pronouncement that Africa was bereft of history and its inhabitants lived "in barbarism and savagery [without] any integral ingredient of culture."[15] The enervating dimensions and underside of Enlightenment evaluations that correlated white skin with reason, intelligence, civilization, goodness, and creativity also correlated non-white skin, black skin with unreason, ignorance, savagery, depravity, and mimicry. Further, these evaluations insinuated the idea that white skin functionally accorded absolute supremacy to white men over non-whites and women and legitimated imperial brutality, extermination, slavery, racism, and biology as human destiny.

We may trace a direct and disastrous route between the visual and psychological perception and physical treatment of black

bodies and the work of both Blumenbach and Cuvier. By expanding the racial taxonomy developed by his teacher Carolus Linnaeus,[16] Blumenbach shifted the four-race "canonical geometry of human order from cartography to linear-ranking, to a system based on putative worth."[17] Blumenbach's taxonomy set out a scheme in which first place was accorded to the "Caucasian . . . as the most beautiful race," with the American, Mongolian, Malay, and Ethiopian varieties of the human species "degenerating" from the ideal.[18] Biologist Stephen Jay Gould contends that Blumenbach did not use the term *degeneration* in the "modern sense of deterioration."[19] Blumenbach held that all humans shared a unitary origin and allotted differences in skin pigmentation and character to differences in geography and custom. Still his five-race taxonomy has proved tragic for non-white people, black people in particular.[20]

Sixteenth-century Belgian physician Andreas Vesalius, the founder of modern anatomy, maintained, "The violation of the body would be the revelation of its truth."[21] Cuvier's interest in the body of Saartjie Baartman directly connects violation of the black body to Enlightenment-spawned pornographic pseudoscience.[22] Baartman's story is rife with pain and misunderstanding and her motives may have been ambiguous, but they were never as mendacious as those of the men, white and black, who manipulated her body. At about twenty-two years of age, Saartjie Baartman, a Khosian woman, was smuggled into England in 1810 and marketed as a "lucrative scientific curiosity" by disgraced British physician Alexander Dunlop and his black servant Hendrik Cesars, who also was Baartman's legal guardian.[23] Baartman came willingly, certainly not fully cognizant of just what her supposed musical performances might entail. In the end, financial mismanagement, alcohol, ill health, deceit, and neglect would overtake her; she would die in Paris at about the age of twenty-five.

Dunlop and Cesars planned on exploiting fantasies fueled by the prurient curiosity of European male travelers, whose fabricated

reports made black sexuality an "icon for deviant sexuality in general."[24] Baartman was exhibited as "the Hottentot Venus" in British, Irish, and Parisian drawing rooms, private clubs, and museums to eager audiences, but no one was more eager to gaze upon, to measure, to examine her body than Cuvier. While only partially successful in satisfying his perverted curiosity during her life, after Baartman's death Cuvier organized the casting of her body, conducted the postmortem examination and dissection, and prepared her brain and genitals for preservation.[25] At some point, between 1822 and the 1850s, Saartjie Baartman's skeleton, body cast, brain, and genitals were placed on public display at the Natural Museum of History and remained there until the 1970s, when such specimens were removed from public exhibition.[26]

The violation and display of Saartjie Baartman's body would yield no *truths*, only legitimate quasi-theories of black degeneration, degradation, and sexual deviance. The pseudoscientific gaze scales and assesses an object in relation to some set of hierarchical standards. This gaze registers degrees of conformity to and divergence from those standards; it normalizes, hierarchizes, and excludes. Aesthetic value judgments leach into degradation of intelligence and morality that demand disciplining, restraining, and controlling the body. Finally, the pseudoscientific gaze is pornographic: it positions, handles, and fetishizes. The black female body emerges from this spectacle of inspection as the spectacular; her body is remade by power and pleasure for exhibition and display.

Skin as Horizon: Theorizing Race and Racism

Contemporary scholarly efforts to define and theorize race coalesce in the consensus that race, as commonly understood, is a social construct with no basis in biology.[27] Thus, there is only

one race—the human race. At the same time, scholars conclude that the cognitive mapping, interpretations, and practices of race emerge from historical and social construction and replication.[28] The putative meanings of "race" are transmitted through a series of "durable, transposable dispositions" that structure, (de)form, direct, and predispose an individual's "perception and appreciation" of social experience. French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu names this complex process of acculturation "*habitus*."[29] Both sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva and historian James Sweet extend this notion to race and to racism. Sweet concludes: "The structures of a racialized *habitus*, based on perceived phenotypical distinctions . . . result in homogenizing processes that reduce social or cultural 'difference' to innate traits, or 'race.'"[30] In this reduction, ideologically construed, skin generates a privileged and privileging worldview; skin morphs into a horizon funded by bias.

By horizon, I mean, "a maximum field of vision from a determinate standpoint."[31] What and who is outside the range of that field is eliminated from my knowledge and interest, care and concern. Uncontested, the limited and limiting standpoint of skin as horizon reassures and is reassured in bias. Thus, insofar as the skin, the race of the "other" differs from my own, a racially bias-induced horizon hides the "other" from me and renders the "other" invisible. Lonergan formulates the notion of bias with precision, distinguishing it from a commonsense notion of simple preference or inclination of temperament. Bias, he explains, is the more or less conscious and deliberate choice, in light of what we perceive as a potential threat to our well-being, to exclude further information or data from consideration in our understanding, judgment, discernment, decision, and action.[32]

Transposed as a racialized horizon, the four principal forms of bias—dramatic, individual, group, and common sense—account for racism as psychic, affective, and intellectual *scotosis* or blindness.[33] The denial of affect (for example, fear or disappointment

or joy) and suppression of unwanted insights of self-knowledge in everyday life result in *dramatic bias*, but members of the privileged racial group are permitted to project personal inadequacies onto members of non-privileged racial groups. The privileged members not only damage themselves by resisting the invitation to self-transcendence; by interrupting human intersubjective spontaneity they inflict incalculable harm on "others."

Individual bias stems from conscious distortions in personal human development in intelligence and in affective and experiential orientation. In a cultural and social matrix bounded by racialized horizon, those belonging to the racially privileged group all too easily and frequently overlook or refuse opportunities to encounter those who are "different" from them. In yielding to individual bias, these women and men not only stunt their personal affective and cognitive development, but their distorted experience becomes the foundation for aberrant understanding of others, impairs social relations, and affects cultural representation.[34] While individual bias potentially is operative in any cultural and social matrix, the distortions that deform the patterns of the social order cannot be attributed to individual bias alone. *Group bias* finds decisive, even violent, expression in ethnocentrism. Within a racially bias-induced horizon, members of the privileged group are conditioned to withdraw from unnecessary experiential contact with "other" non-privileged members of society, thereby depriving themselves of the possibilities of human and humane relationships. With its penchant for "the quick-fix" and the short-term solution, the *general bias of common sense* colludes with group bias to disregard innovative and good ideas that might come from non-privileged groups. General bias regulates social arrangements to the immediate well-being of the dominant racial group and thereby despoils the common good.

When the texture of civilization, the fabric of culture, provides a scaffold for the bias-induced horizon of a group, racism holds potent currency. Race functions as a "metalanguage in its discursive

representation and construction of social relations"; race is "'the ultimate trope of difference'—artificially and arbitrarily contrived to produce and maintain relations of power and subordination."[35] A white, racially bias-induced horizon defines, censors, controls, and segregates different, other, non-white bodies. Ordinarily these bodies are "invisible" in the processes of historical, cultural, and social creativity and representation, but should these non-white bodies step "out of place," they are subordinated literally to surveillance, inspection, discrimination, assessment and containment. Turning a phrase coined by Martinique-born psychiatrist, philosopher, and activist Franz Fanon, Paul Gilory writes:

> Epidermalized thinking violates the human body in its symmetrical, intersubjective, social humanity, in its species being, in its fragile relationship to other fragile bodies and in its connection to the redemptive potential inherent in its own wholesome or perhaps its suffering corporeality, our being towards death.[36]

Intentional and unintentional structures of white, racially bias-induced horizon replicate and reinforce customary patterns and practices of racial stratification even as racial self-identification grows more fluid, more unpredictable.[37] Yet, even the most creative[38] and most public[39] contestation of these structures, patterns, and practices may deny affirmation, verification, and admiration to "blackness" and, thus, reinforce "the privilege of violence."[40]

Seeing Body

Perhaps no thinker exceeds Fanon's ability to signify racial alienation, to explicate its crushing objectification,[41] to diagnose its ruthless hurt, and to evoke its shock and shame. The following passage illustrates his skill at slicing open "instances of skewed racial visibility,"[42] that peculiar way in which within a racialized horizon black bodies are made absent and present:

> My body was given back to me sprawled out, distorted, recolored, clad in mourning in that white winter day. The Negro is an animal, the Negro is bad, the Negro is mean, the Negro is ugly; look, a [Negro], it's cold, the [Negro] is shivering . . . shivering because he is cold, the little boy is trembling because he is afraid of the [Negro]. . . . I sit down at the fire and I become aware of my uniform. I had not seen it. It is indeed ugly. I stop there, for who can tell me what beauty is?[43]

Fanon employs phenomenology to unpack the disturbing aesthetics of scaling racialized bodies, the Manichaean ethics of the social construction of race: contrast, objectification, distortion, the dichotomy of absence-presence, anxiety, evasion, race/skin as costume, self-wounding. His question leads us into a philosophic minefield strewn with conceptual models and practices spawned by modernity's arrogance, and hemmed in by the disturbing aesthetics of race.

In theorizing black invisibility, philosopher Lewis Gordon comments: "The body is our perspective in the world. This perspective has at least three dimensions—the dimension of seeing, the dimension of being seen, and the dimension of being conscious of being seen by others."[44] In the world that Fanon interprets, black embodied consciousness picks over a familiar query: "How does it feel to be a problem?"[45] In a white, racially bias-induced horizon, blackness is aberration and defilement, a source of dread and intimidation; thus, the black body must be hidden, concealed, spatially segregated. "How does it feel to be a problem?" In this bias-induced horizon, black embodied consciousness is labeled dense, thick; only a twilight of "agent intellect" shines in and through this darkness.[46]

In this white, racially bias-induced horizon, the relation of presence to absence leads to skewed regulative logic. Rules of presence, being, and identity apply to bodies not as *human* right, but as racial privilege: hence, "black presence is absence and white presence is presence."[47] Two applications of this flawed logic: First, although absent, the black body takes on a "peculiar" and "perverted" form

of presence that renders the individual black human person anonymous.[48] In a white, racially bias-induced horizon, the black body, overdetermined, is every, all, any black; metonymically, the black *is* crime, wanton sexuality, evil, and sin. Second, in such a bias-induced horizon, the black body, when isolated, may be enticed to deny "other" black bodies. The "only" black body in a room among white bodies may be lulled into social comfort, and liberated from the "burden of blackness" to assume a false whiteness—until another black body enters the room.[49] A calculus of pleasure and fear drives the dialectic of evasion: "maintain[ing] the illusion of seeing-without-seeing,"[50] while maintaining the illusion and self-loathing pleasure of being-seen.[51]

James Baldwin captures the "existential violation of human personality that is the inexorable consequence of the hegemon[y]"[52] of racially bias-induced horizon: "Negroes . . . are taught really to despise themselves from the moment their eyes open on the world."[53] To resist pretense, self-deception, and complicity—to *be* human—is to grasp reality not as given and promoted in bias, but in critical questioning of one's own thoughtless initiatives, in admitting to consciousness the tension between limitation and transcendence, in revising choices and values, and in habitually incorporating what is estimable in daily living.[54]

The passage from Fanon with which the section began concludes with this breathtaking question: *"Who can tell me what beauty is?"* The question, asked within a white, racially bias-induced horizon, challenges any so-called objective or neutral discussion of aesthetics and ethics. This disquieting passage incriminates practices and speech regarding bodies, race, gender, and power. Any response to Fanon's question ought to begin by acknowledging that any appeal to the empirical or visual in the effort to understand human being is never innocent, never ahistorical, and never divorced from power. As the adage would have it, "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder"; but the eye must be tutored to see, coached to attribute meaning to line and curve.

Elaine Scarry distinguishes four key features of beauty: beauty is sacred, unprecedented, salvific, and intelligible.[55] The beautiful evokes awe and reverence, responses commanded by the encounter with the divine, the wholly Other; beauty is singular, even as it prompts mimesis and creativity. Beauty nourishes and restores interiority and incites a longing for what is true. But, within a white, racially bias-induced horizon, such a depiction of beauty erases blackness; the black body *cannot* be beautiful. In this bias-induced horizon, the black body is repulsive, hideous; it encodes the demonic, the disposable, the lost, and the vacant. Like the mythical Caliban, black being "remains too heavily mired in nature for its uplifting powers of reason and civilization"—and beauty.[56]

"Who can tell me what beauty is?" To reply, "Black is beautiful!" disturbs the hegemony of a white, racially bias-induced horizon and shakes the foundations of its unethical deployment of aesthetics and power. To declare, "Black is beautiful!" states a disregarded theological truth, nourishes and restores bruised interiority, prompts memory, encourages discovery and recovery, stimulates creativity and acknowledges and reverences the wholly Other. To assert, *"Beauty is black"* exorcises the "ontological curse"[57] that consigns the black body to the execrable, and claims ontological space: space to *be*, space to realize one's humanity authentically.[58] I am black and beautiful![59]

"Who can tell me what beauty is?" Any reply to Fanon's question requires a response that—while transcending race, gender, sexuality, class, and culture—neither dismisses nor absolutizes the problematic ontologizing potential of these dimensions of concrete human existence. Beauty is consonant with human performance, with habit or virtue, with authentic ethics: Beauty is the living up to and living out the love and summons of creation in all our particularity and specificity as God's human creatures, made in God's own image and likeness.

Being Black

In a negrophobic society, black ontological integrity suffers compromise. On the one hand, massive, negative, transgenerational assault on black bodies has ontological implications. In such a society, *blackness* mutates as negation, nonbeing, nothingness; blackness insinuates an "other" so radically different that her and his very humanity is discredited. Then, black identity no longer offers a proper subject of sublation, of authentic human self-transcendence, but a bitter bondage to be escaped. Blackness becomes a narrative of marginality and a marginal narrative. On the other hand, to center "suffering and resistance and white racism [as] ontologically constitutive of black life, faith, and theology," ethicist Victor Anderson asserts, jeopardizes the intrinsic meaningfulness of that life, faith, and theology.[60] Anderson rightly questions the *limitation* of black experience to black resistance and black suffering, with its truncation of the (black) human subject.[61] He takes aim at blackness as essentialized identity, with its "unresolved binary dialectics of slavery and freedom, Negro and citizen, insider and outsider, black and white, struggle and survival," and denial of transcendence or fruitful mediation.[62]

This critique also uncovers the epistemic function of race (blackness) as a "concept constructed by metaphor and metonymy."[63] At stake is whether concepts result from understanding or understanding from concepts. As a mode of human knowing, conceptualism fails utterly in grasping the relation of the universal to the particular, of *human* to *this (black) human*. With the intrusion of white racial bias, sensible data (i.e., black *human* performance) is dismissed and *insight* (into universal common humanity) is suppressed.[64] What is *seen* are preconceived patterns or stereotypes of black body, life, and being—promiscuous, loud, illiterate, diseased. Insofar as a black woman accepts and chooses to act out of such negation and contents herself with such denigrated living, she "is swallowed up by [her] alienated existence."[65] She has

learned to submit, to stop asking questions.[66] White women and men who applaud or mock this performance *see* only an object—although, an object structured by white racial bias for white racial pleasure.

Postmodernism offers strategies through which black women may disrupt black humiliation as well as white racist pleasure, and exorcise the ontological overdetermination of the black body.[67] In displacing metanarratives and affirming situated knowledge, contesting *a priori* foundations and recognizing plurality of discourse, disrupting fixed identities and asserting the fluidity of social locations or positionalities, postmodernity may support black women's upending of biased notions of blackness. However, postmodernism is not uncomplicated. Essayist and cultural critic bell hooks offers this trenchant critique of postmodernism:

> It is sadly ironic that the contemporary discourse which talks the most about heterogeneity, the decentered subject, declaring breakthroughs that allow recognition of Otherness, still directs its critical voice primarily to a specialized audience that shares a common language rooted in the very master narratives it claims to challenge.[68]

Similarly, cultural critic Stuart Hall questions postmodernism's insistence on collapsing "the real." In an interview, Hall observed: "Three-quarters of the human race have not yet entered the era of what we are pleased to call 'the real.'" And, further: "Postmodernism attempts to close off the past by saying that history is finished, therefore you needn't go back to it. There is only the present, and all you can do is be with it, immersed in it."[69] Philosophers Cornel West and Emmanuel Eze concur with Hall's critique of postmodernism's easy relativism, vague commitment to history, and sense of the present as serial and fragmented.[70]

Yet certain deployments of postmodern theory may incite black women (and men) to courage and may shore up resistance to subordination. First, postmodernism is patient of the notion of

race as ideology and insists that the concept of race lacks all scientific and intrinsic merit. Because postmodern approaches resist the limitations of binary (black-white) racial formations, they call for a reframing of the racial problematic. Doing so not only exposes the toxic in biased social arrangements, it requires both reimagining and reimaging and constructing those arrangements differently. Third, as bell hooks has pointed out, postmodern critiques of essentialism allow for the decentering of racism and its effects. By attending, for example, to the impact of class mobility in "alter[ing] collective black experience . . . multiple black identities, varied black experience" may be affirmed.[71] According to hooks, such a critique "challenges imperialist paradigms of black identity which represent blackness one-dimensionally in ways that reinforce and sustain white supremacy. . . . Abandoning essentialist notions would be a serious challenge to racism."[72] At the same time, in the effort to embrace the integrity of black multi-dimensional identity, no uncritical, simplistic, inclusionary practices may be indulged.

Fourth, postmodern approaches also invite analyses from perspectives drawn from differentiated standpoints, including those of gender, sexuality, class, culture, and interculturality. Given the legacy of forced and voluntary migrations (in the United States and, for example, in Brazil, South Africa, and possibly Australia), critical attention to cultural diversity and the particularities of lived conditions may constitute rich possibilities for human solidarity in understanding, in insurgent discourse, and in action for justice on behalf of all those who suffer oppression.[73]

The black struggle for authenticity is coincident with the human struggle to *be* human and reveals *black-human-being* as a particular incarnation of universal finite human being.[74] Authentic incarnations of black identity (neither imitative nor emulative) emerge in response to "the law of genuineness" in human development. As suggested above, living by this law requires the repudiation of a racially-bias-induced horizon, the rejection of all pretense and self-deception. Thus, living by this law means that the black human

subject takes herself, her humanity, seriously and respectfully: she engages in critical questioning of her own initiatives, acknowledges the tension between potential and actualization, responds to new spontaneities with new habits and patterns, revises choices and values, and seeks a new way of being in the world. Moreover, her struggle acknowledges and affirms all "others" in their subjectivity and engages with them in a praxis of compassionate solidarity that intends the concrete realization of a world of goodness and beauty, truth and justice in which Being is at home.

Black Body Theology

Theologians and ethicists of African descent have begun explicitly to address the position and condition of the black body in Christian theological anthropology.[75] Not surprisingly, black women thinkers—writers, literary and cultural critics, historians, ethicists, theologians, philosophers, and scientists—have spearheaded this effort; after all, black women's bodies have suffered under racial and gender bias in the extreme.[76] Their critical analyses of the human condition and its incarnation in the black human condition, particularly the experiences of black female embodiment, imply new categories for theological anthropology.

These categories include blackness, being, body, incarnation, beauty; power and oppression; sin and grace; suffering and compassionate solidarity; history, memory, and freedom. Such a list cannot be exhaustive, nor can all of these categories be treated here. The next four chapters interrelate several of these, pausing over some with more concentrated attention, foregoing elaboration of others. Here I undertake to interpret the "opaque symbol of blackness" and the "opacity of black experience,"[77] to uncover the light of divine revelation in that experience, to honor the beauty and courage of black being—to make this visible in black women's enfleshing of freedom.

CHAPTER TWO

Enfleshing Freedom

God created humankind in his [sic] image,
in the image of God he [sic] created them; male and female he [sic] created them.[1]

God would not reduce the human race to slavery, since [God],
when we had been enslaved to sin, spontaneously recalled us to freedom.
But if God does not enslave what is free,
who is he that sets his own power above God's?[2]

No Christian teaching has been more desecrated by slavery than the doctrine of the human person or theological anthropology. Theological anthropology seeks to understand the meaning and purpose of existence within the context of divine revelation. The starting point for theological reflection is the Old Testament account of the creation (and fall) of the first human creatures (Genesis 1-3). This intensely realistic narrative furnishes Christianity with a cosmic account of all creation, a history regarding the first individual human beings, and a paradigm of human nature. Three