

How I Came to Be Christened “Bird”: Christian Baptism, White Racism, and Theological Passion in the 21st Century

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There is a deep current of anger in the land today at what appears to be the beginning of the end of the American Dream. It shows its face in multiple forms—the level of vitriol in contemporary political debates, Tea Party rants against big government and deficit spending, the battle raging in Wisconsin over union rights and benefits, among other obvious places. And indeed, these may well be grasped as a national version of the upwelling of protesters observed swelling the streets across the Middle East and North Africa, themselves reacting to the global reach of the dream of democracy in ways too complex to analyze in a mere article. Certainly this uptick in the evident energies of upset demands accounting from theological as well as political and social vantage points. The writing here will seek to contribute to such, but from an angle of theological concern for the way the currents of rage are typically channeled along predictable paths determined by our collective history in this country. Despite the election of Obama in 2008, race continues to function as a major channel guide for the currents of national angst, often serving to deflect legitimate dissent away from its appropriate target toward scapegoats and shibboleths. The need for a theological exposé of such angst shows its contours starkly in my state’s own version of the Wisconsin struggle.

At a protest I attended in Michigan’s state capital of Lansing in the late winter of 2011, the focus of concern was the impending

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passage of a law allowing the imposition of an “emergency financial manager” for any municipality or township in the state deemed by the governor to be approaching meltdown. The law arguably evacuates democracy altogether from the local political landscape, making something like “dictatorial takeover” an option at any untoward turn in the road, capable by managerial fiat of suspending local government, canceling contracts, and terminating school boards. The demonstration that day at the capital was a telling palimpsest of our history. Ringing the outer perimeter of the grounds were police and firefighters from towns and villages scattered across the state, maintaining a kind of gauntlet through which legislators had to pass on their way into the building, while gathered at the steps of the rotunda was a Detroit contingent of public employees and concerned citizens (including me), holding up signs and chanting. Between the two groups sharing concern for the same set of legislative initiatives—an obvious gap! The outer perimeter kept itself clear of the gathered mass. In the embodied performance of that public protest, the racial subtext of our political imagination could not be more starkly symbolized. With nary a word said, white “out-state” anger insisted on maintaining itself apart from its largely black “Detroit” counterpart. In a strange sort of social calligraphy, it ringed and contained black unrest inside its own. It is this continuing subtext of our national conversation that exercises my effort in what follows. I am concerned here with the way white identity continues to be embodied in a manner that perpetuates a default presumption of superiority, even outside of conscious intentionality. I will argue that white forms of embodiment remain a theological “sign of the times” that demands continual efforts at unmasking and deconstruction for any Western Christian practice worthy of the name. But I want to steal up on my topic by way of personal experience and do so through a rumination on baptism that will push toward similar riffs on “exorcism” and “apostasy” as the Christian tropes by which I organize my argument.

Baptism

If white supremacy is a sin embedded for at least half a millennium now in our Western theological practice and social habituation, as I believe it is, then as one claimed immediately if not exhaustively by the sense of public bearing and private scripting that can be loosely described as “whiteness,” I should begin with confession. My

authorship here, as indeed my birth certificate, goes under the moniker of James Perkinson. My baptismal name, however, is “Bird”—after Larry Bird of the Boston Celtics fame. I used to think baptism was what happened inside an institution called “church.” And indeed I was baptized under my birth name in the Presbyterian Church as an infant.

But after leaving that church as a teenager, I began a trajectory of experience and involvement that has upended my understanding of the basic Christian initiation rite. That forty-five-year journey has entailed undergoing a born-again experience at the age of nineteen on a suburban street in Cincinnati, Ohio; finding myself re-schooled in my personal practice of Christianity under tutelage to the charismatic renewal—largely within a Roman Catholic context—at the University of Cincinnati during the student years that followed; then immersion for more than fifteen years in an east side Detroit “ghetto” as part of an intentional Christian community elaborating ministry together in that neighborhood; theological training for four of those years at a nearby Roman Catholic Provincial seminary, followed by seven more years at the University of Chicago Divinity School; and then reimersion back in that same Detroit neighborhood for twelve more years as an educator/activist/spoken word poet (not counting a brief three-year stint in Denver as an educator). Under the press of those diverse experiences, I now understand “baptism” both practically and spiritually as having priority reference to the social circumstances and survival struggles of those who would constitute one’s primary community of commitment. What do I mean by such a statement?

I would argue that baptism, in its most primal reference, “asks about” and underlines *who* it is that we are actually sharing life *with* (“life” here as inclusive of resources and housing, assets and ardor, pizza and party-time, tears, laughter, touch, smells, gifts, vulnerabilities, cars, lawn mowers, hope) and raises in advance and continually the question *for whom* we might be willing to die. While such a claim might seem overly dramatic given our two millennium-long domestication of the rite in Sunday morning services in often quite pristine and “safe” conditions, our central texts of witness make the point clearly. For Jesus, water-baptism at the Jordan into John’s already “moving” social movement of Palestinian peasantry, most of whom were poor and struggling, found its completion in a blood-baptism embrace, on Calvary, of their recurrent political destiny. It was not a one-time event, nor merely symbolic. His choice to go under the Jordan waters at the

hands of John “located” him socially among those seeking out John as their voice. And it issued an implicit demand to continue deepening that choice that finally asked a hard question. Would he—face-to-face with the way the Jerusalem temple-state preyed on the impoverished majority of Palestine, backed by Roman imperial commitments to a ruthless suppression of dissent—continue to champion the dignity of that majority (naming the poor, for instance, as “blessed”) and share their own life circumstance and frequent criminalization and early demise (he did not die alone, after all, nor was his death as a movement leader at all unique in first-century Palestine)?¹ Or would he try to avoid such a fate in deference to some “messianic necessity” to stay alive at all costs to continue to do ministry?

And lest such a train of thought be too readily dismissed in the name of the uniqueness of Jesus’ vocation, recent events in Egypt (in the winter of 2011) offer a contemporary horizon for consideration. Here was a circumstance where ordinary members of a repressed population suddenly found courage, for eighteen days of remarkable witness, to cross a line from private and carefully hidden dissent to public demonstration of indignation and confrontation, and at the same time, publicly to create a communal sharing of jeopardy and joy, neighbor-care, and “enemy-love” (Muslims, Christians, and atheists all making common cause for days at a time in Tahrir Square) that would put most churches in this country to shame. Remarkable, in my own watching of this crisis, was the recurrence of the testimony of otherwise unknown Egyptian citizens to having reached a point where they would risk mortality. Not that they wanted to die, but that they finally could not let others take that risk alone. Again and again, the report was of a heady kind of freedom, from which—once having tasted its flavor—they would not back away. That, and the communal effervescence of acting together in an organized movement embodying an “other” reality, a glimpse of another possible world!

Certainly, oppression, exploitation, and violence have not been ended in Egypt since the events of January 25–February 11, 2011. But it is patent that those people, having acted with their bodies in a public demonstration of political assertion and having elaborated a kind of “bottom-up” democracy of sharing ideas and care on Tahrir Square, cannot easily be put back in the box of fear. They had

¹ Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and the Powers: Conflict, Covenant, and the Hope of the Poor* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2011), 155–177.

"immersed" themselves in a shared jeopardy with each other, and been "baptized" into an alternative social experience, leveraged by the refusal any longer to be contained by a discourse of intimidation. Such I would suggest is the root meaning of the Christian rite of passage. It signifies passage into a social movement already in progress, immersion among those most vulnerable to oppression and domination, in which both risk and joy are extant—in the name of One who modeled such a commitment by living it to its bitter but powerful end, while inviting those who would listen to go and do likewise. Or at least, such is the understanding I would claim after my own years of trying to replicate such a commitment—albeit in slow motion and with much more fear and trepidation than was exhibited by the Egyptians just mentioned, much less Jesus himself. The question, however—with whom do we share our life and for whom would we be willing to die?—remains sharp and "insurgent" in my own fumbling struggles to follow. And it has expanded my awareness of baptism beyond the ecclesial font to an existential front of battle.

I initially inserted myself in inner city Detroit as part of an Episcopal Church-based Christian community, whose members were pooling income and assets on a poverty-level budget, married and single, black and white together, seeking to translate "pentecostal" energies into an incarnational expression of the body of Christ in a neighborhood that at the time was part of the poorest Congressional district in the USA. I was there—as I thought—on mission, to "help." Only gradually over the course of my first eight years in that "baptismal font" of quite troubled waters was I disabused of my hubris and enabled to discover that my real reason for being there was more a matter of ongoing "revelation"—of myself to myself, and indeed of "America" itself, from a very different angle than I had grown up with.

Baptism for me, as a Christian sacrament, has meaning inside church walls only to the degree it points toward a practical and practiced lifelong immersion outside those walls, in a concrete "Jordan" of social struggle for greater wholeness in spite of oppression and a consciously embraced "Calvary" of political conflict accepted as destiny if need be.² In such a comprehension, the litmus test of the "death and rebirth" significance of baptism as an ecclesial sacrament is the concretely *existential* renaming and "christening" it projects. At issue is

² Aloysius Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1987), 62–63.

an ongoing real-life decentering of one's sense of bodily "being and bearing" from the social order that has heretofore claimed and mapped it and a practical re-formation of that sense of embodiment, under a different sensibility of empowerment, for witness and service. Baptism is nothing if it is not focused on the body.

This, however, is not the usual way we think about this sacrament in this country—at least, not if we have grown up middle class, white, and straight. But social orders inevitably conscript bodies into their norms and presuppositions, leaving "on deposit," so to speak, an entire set of habits and orientations that undergird thought and action, as we shall discuss later in this writing. Baptism calls such conditioning in question. Paul will speak of it in graphic terms—a baptism into "Christ's death" that at face value, for the average Jewish mind of the first century, could scarcely have been more evocatively abhorrent. Imagine being "immersed" in the dead flesh of a broken and bleeding body, rolling around in its fluids and odors like a dog with a dead fish. But of course the meaning, someone will instantly react, is metaphorical, referring to a spiritual reality. I would suggest that more faithful to the early biblical representations would be its construal as referring simultaneously to a socio-political reality—the communities of marginalized and oppressed persons whose bodily experiences, day-in and day-out, incarnate "in the flesh" and recapitulate in their physical suffering the "passion" that is said to be the heart of Jesus' vocation.

Here, I would argue, we have a theological identification of the most palpable social location of the Spirit in history, the preferential place of an urgent Divine Vitality under the surface of things, groaning in longing, as Paul says, for the revealing of the freedom of the children of God and indeed, the entirety of creation itself (Rom. 8:18–27). It would also then be that toward which baptism tends, and into which its wrenching dislocation plunges one. Said another way, if in baptism the body is not being made "misfit" in solidarity with one or another "reject" community when the surrounding social order is imperial and violent, then the sacrament is probably more honestly functioning in a demonic manner of deception and reinforcement of the status quo.

In any case, after more than eight years of living, working, and worshiping in the east side Detroit neighborhood I had moved into, I finally woke up one day to the fact that what had actually been happening to me was a kind of existential baptism—a death to what I had

been previously and a rebirth in another identity altogether, that was rooted in a different way of "being" a body. The street had renamed me "Bird," because I had a good outside jump shot, could move with either hand around the basket and hold my own against teenagers with quicker bodies, and even still had a few blond hairs on top of my head. I had disliked, without really understanding, Larry Bird up to that point, but after this "re-christening" and partial embrace by that particular "posse" of African American young men (every one of whom had been similarly hung with a street "handle"), I began to appreciate the character I had been named after. Not only a consummate player but also an irrepressible trash-talker with the ball in his hand, despite being soft-spoken and shy off court, Bird had not only learned physical skills but had developed an alternative psyche in an arena of performance protocols not controlled by whites. Over time, the Beantown Bomber became one (among many) of the archetypes for my own self-understanding in Motown, and the name "Bird" was a cherished sign of the initiation I was slowly undergoing under the tongues and schooling of my particular 'hood. To this day, there are still some folks on those streets who only know me by that name. And it was not a process I had much control over; the neighborhood had *named me*, according to its own lights, verifying that I had indeed "gone under" their waters and come up a member of "their" reality on their own terms.

The initiation begun there, however, has not stopped there. In a very real way, my east side "baptism" was the subject of my entire Ph.D. investigation, ranging across disciplines as disparate as anthropology and English, postcolonial studies and sociology, the history of religions and social ethics, in addition to my actual degree in theology. It also entailed exploration of a mode of expression then surfacing in the society at large: the insurgent beats of boom box *aficionados* and rhyme-spitting street-*savants* whose defiance outed one of the recurrent lies of the culture (that gangsta ethics are peculiar only to the chocolate city rather than characteristic of the country at large) and whose most accomplished white "wanna-be" devotee—for better and worse—would later become Eminem. These beats I would begin to sample and work with in poetic form, becoming a regular figure on the Detroit spoken word scene once back in the Motor City after 1996. (And indeed, Eminem would become another public figure in relationship to whom I would once again undergo a kind of

unanticipated “renaming”! When I spent the summer in Denver in 2003, visiting the woman who would become my wife, an African American MC there quickly “christened” me, as a white boy from Detroit with an animated poetic style, “Eminem’s father,” and I had to learn once again to respect a character I had heretofore, in my ignorance, tended to scorn.)

In *nuce*, my own late-thirties academic quest for ways to deepen my understanding of what I had experienced on east side Detroit issued rapidly in the years that followed in a much broader “sounding out” of that immersion experience—seeking languages verbal and visceral, precisely articulated and profoundly gestured, to explore and counter my own habituation as a white male. That journey by way of the academy and the art community entailed unearthing both unconscious patterns of cultural formation and quite explicit patterns of socialization resulting from having grown up in a middle class neighborhood in transition in Cincinnati. The University of Chicago provided the discourses by which to probe the identity I had been shaped in; the inner city arena of things rhythmic and bombastic offered retraining in psychomotor expressions that allowed me to experiment with alternative ways of “being a body.” Both were crucial to coming to grips with my own primary immersion in whiteness and with gaining a sense of the depths to which any “re-baptism” in an alternative identity (such as “Christianity” or inner city culture) would have to go to effect actual change. As a result, I now carry “Detroit” within me as both amulet and scar, and my sense of white maleness as both “outed history” and unfinished agenda. And theology for me, over the course of such an itinerary, has been both augur and augury. But it has also revealed itself more and more irrecusably, as I have elsewhere written about, as dangerous, a historic mode of white “sorcery.”³

Exorcism

I begin my comments with such a personal sketch, under the aegis of baptism, because I think the controlling mediation of white supremacy historically in this country has been its conditioning in a particular practice of hegemonic embodiment that has operated precisely by claiming universality under the guise of its own hidden

³ James W. Perkinson, *Shamanism, Racism, and Hip-Hop Culture: Essays on White Supremacy and Black Subversion* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan Press, 2005), 17–42.

particularity. "Baptism" becomes a rich metaphor for consciously engaged transformation because of its insistence on the primacy of work with the body in any attempt to alter one's engagement with reality. Early Christianity quickly enshrined the practice as a project of intentional re-formation in a ritual code of "going under" in order to "undergo." In urban outlaw communities (Christianity was illegal for most of the first three centuries) living under the surveillance and repression of Roman imperial anxiety, it served to screen out informants and spies: a catechumen might expect to go through a multiple-year-long "labyrinth" of deprogramming discipline and rescripting "initiation." In the process, what was unlearned and relearned was not merely cognitive but gestural and material, an entire repertoire of behavior, giving physical expression to a spiritual conviction. And its incorporation of exorcism—as both one time "repudiation" and as ongoing struggle in a socio-spiritual conflict whose character was at least that of low-intensity warfare—signaled the existential issue at stake as life-long apostasy from the reigning Principalities and Powers, by refusing to "pinch incense" either to Caesar or his iconic cult-surrogates.

One of the primary modalities of the latter in our day, I would assert, is the largely inchoate "cult" of what might be called "white normativity," encoded in an assumed orientation toward the world that is middle class, patriarchal, and heterosexist in its typical embodiments. It is a cult no less ritualized in our politics than was the Roman imperial version in its time. Indeed, I would suggest that something like the ritual of "pinching incense to Caesar" polices our own presidential elections, though with much less obvious fanfare than the Roman rite, and in service of a racial/sexual subtext rather than a strictly religious one. Certainly such was in evidence when George W. Bush defeated John Kerry in 2004, as poll after poll after the fact indicated the number of voters who disagreed with Bush's policy positions but voted for him because he seemed like a nice guy or a decisive "commander." He was, arguably, "cowboy-in-chief"—more nearly matching the normative understanding of what a white male public figure should appear like than Kerry's east coast "brahmin" demeanor. In cocktail conversation, I would often argue that Kerry lost in part because of his way of clenching a fist with his thumb perched on top of his fingers rather than tucked below the second joint—for many males a stereotypically "soft" gesture.

And far from displacing the way whiteness demands a certain kind of political obeisance, Obama's election actually only further

confirmed the way white power continues to reign in public life. Tim Wise has thoroughly tracked the degree to which Obama dared not speak about the realities of race for people of color in the election run-up, not only tossing his pastor Jeremiah Wright under the bus without any debate over Wright's comments, but also refraining from mentioning the evidence of escalating discrimination on many fronts (housing, employment, incarceration, education, and health care, to name a few).⁴ The way to the "White" House required careful PR packaging as colorblind and race-neutral in policy approaches and tacit agreement to leave the word "racism" out of his vocabulary so that white folks could feel good about embracing his candidacy. Even so innocuous a gesture as fist-bumping his wife caused concern and may have cost Obama standing. Such attention to certain protocols might be good politics, but it is also revelatory of the reality of whose protocols control. And theological naming of the operation of power is never innocent of spiritual discernment of the "Powers."

And obviously, I am resurrecting older cosmological categories in speaking of exorcism and principalities, discernment and sorcery, incense-pinchng and christening. But I am not so concerned accurately to name whiteness as a "Principality"—as part of its tactic of power is precisely its capacity to shape-shift its strategies of domination—as to suggest the need for discernment. Part of the struggle is not pretending that the category can solve the crime. The task is really rather one of reentering community on a global and local scale, in a world that is primarily one of color, in which whiteness historically, whatever its other names and notoriety, has facilitated a planetary-wide project of plunder and pillage that continues apace in our day. In that task of reentry, the first moment is one of listening to those who have become much clearer on the socio-political effects of historic white control of institutional life than those of us who benefit (albeit disparately in terms of class, gender, and orientation) from it, because at stake for them more often than not has been the very survival of their bodies and communities.

This is a task asserted by the likes of African American novelist Richard Wright as categorically as "White Man, Listen!" and by Native American theologian Vine Deloria as pontifically as "We Speak, You Listen." The question of what constitutes listening here is

⁴ Tim Wise, *Between Barack and a Hard Place: Racism and White Denial in the Age of Obama* (San Francisco, Calif.: City Lights, 2009), 22, 27, 37–83.

perhaps the entire dilemma in a nutshell. I want to give a theological gloss on this "white listening" as first of all a matter of "exorcism." And here I demur from the usual multicultural approach of seeking to facilitate a dialogue. I do not think the primacy of emphasis between white people and communities of color in general is as yet as transparent as a "mutual speaking." It is rather that of uncovering the conditions for the possibility of speech—on both sides. Counterintuitively, on my side of the line of color, the deepest dilemma finds formulation in the question "Can Whiteness Speak?"

Tied up in that question is the anterior issue of both the place of speaking and the protocols governing the act. My provisional theological answer is: "Whiteness" (white people insofar as they identify with being white) must indeed learn to speak accurately and forthrightly about its already routinized modes of covert operation, which are anything but dialogic and explicit, but it must do so in forums where it can be soundly contested by peers of color with equal power—which is to say, with equal capacities to bomb and bully, colonize and incarcerate, promote or fire, stigmatize and denigrate. Saying such is not to wish for the spread of more military operations or prison systems or transnational corporations or media conglomerations, but to call up on the surface of awareness the fact that those of us who are white have these large-scale institutional power formations looming over our shoulders in virtually every encounter we have with people of color. None of those "powers" have ever operated innocent of race, and all of them, one way or another, generally privilege white skin or interests in their manner of operating at the expense of people of color.

At the level of institutional life, we are nowhere near inhabiting a structure of reciprocal potency and shared accountability, either globally or locally. Having a "level playing field" would mean that it is level with respect to bringing real-life consequences to bear on our interlocutors, among other things. Without that kind of "leveling," the dialogue is warped by the subtle or not-so-subtle presence of these looming powers, whose clear effect on the planet has been to concentrate economic resources, military might, sanctioning force, and media control in largely white hands. How else to understand, for instance, the fact that while less than 5 percent of world population, this country consumes somewhere between 25–40 percent of global resources, has more than one thousand military bases or base-like installations in more than one hundred fifty countries, and wields the

international clout to gerrymander United Nations deliberations or World Trade Organization agreements in favor of that continued hegemonic positioning? Or how do we who are white suppose that we would have responded if the Wall Street CEOs and banking moguls who most benefited from the 2008 economic meltdown were virtually all black rather than all white?

Short of such “mutuality,” the task of white people in the near term is to listen at length and in depth—with the “ear” that is our entire body and the financial statement that is our corporate legacy. There is much to be undergone here. And yet at the same time, it is imperative to clarify that “whiteness,” like all other racialized categories, remains a social fiction—a constructed fantasy that nowhere exists as such in a definitive person and nowhere exhausts the complex experiences of those persons it does partially designate. But it is a fiction that continues to broker profoundly real and disparate life positions and opportunities for the various peoples it differentiates in our history.

The listening in question is thus complex. It involves interpersonal relations and economic accountings, political positionings and cultural habituations, aesthetic presumptions and erotic terrors, spiritual outings and theological conundrums. To manage mentally this “white elephant” rampaging through the global household, I often simplify the task as threefold: it involves responses on the *interpersonal, social-structural, and psycho-cultural* levels. That is to say, I imagine white response-ability in the contemporary theater of globalized and asymmetrical interdependence as entailing:

- (1) a disciplined white anticipation and embrace of *face-to-face* encounter with people of color that only slowly edges toward some kind of authenticity to the degree we
- (2) explicitly advocate and actually cooperate in movements led primarily by peoples of color aimed at a *political economy* that engenders a recirculation of first world (middle and upper class) stockpiles of global resources back toward the communities and countries from which they have been extracted, while simultaneously engaging a common struggle to return production and consumption to more local, sustainable modes of organization, and to the degree we
- (3) entertain the kind of “significant emotional events” of angry or silent or humorous rebuttal that our ignorance and

presumption inevitably attracts from people of color (whether experienced in person or ventriloquized by a text) as the motivating force for a Dantesque descent (with the help of various kinds of Virgils) into the *psychosomatic* interior of our own Western individualist social formation, there to be “de-schooled,” *culturally and spiritually*, in “infernal underground” work, uncovering the way the assumptions and entitlements upon which our broader institutional (political and economic) structures are based end up embedded in and organizing our emotional life (owning, that is, our desires and facing our fears and laboring our confusion into a purgatorial passion for a lifetime of activism and alliance as articulated in the second requirement above).

As I said—this is only the “simplified” version!

And obviously here I am choosing to emphasize, out of those three modes of responsibility, especially the latter task of quite fraught self-reflection and spiritual upheaval. This is because it is my judgment that the question we are attempting to address—the cultural codification and racial legitimization of the late capitalist takeover of the planet—is finally a modality of power that is habituated in psyche and body alike in profoundly intimate and unconscious ways. It is not enough to call up words in our consciousness to identify and rework the problem. It is much more existential and messy than that. One place theological work might be pursued in this vein is in retrieving the moments of historical political cooperation between white allies and communities of color in previous social movements of resistance. Such work would focus on tracing the way whiteness has been differently lived and performed (both consciously and unconsciously) in such crucibles of struggle, in order to galvanize creative reconstructions of present possibilities and their meaning for theological reflection and ecclesial action. My own citing of Larry Bird and Eminem as examples of embodied whiteness publicly engaged with blackness in arenas where black cultural norms control the idiom of expression points toward a quite different agenda of engaging popular culture operations of “race” that nonetheless partakes of a similar intuition.

Another domain requiring serious attention is the intersection of white *eros* and race. White desire in North America has been profoundly shaped in its libidinal intensities by the social imagination of dark bodies. On the one hand, black males are constructed in media projections as what Michael Eric Dyson calls a “peripatetic penis,”

ready to enact a kind of vengeance-taking on everything white. And on the other, either sex is regularly made to serve a white need for titillation as “jungle fever incarnate” (whether in the movie by that name or in major label packaging of hip-hop lyrics in “booty call” visuals). Institutional arrangements in this country—from board room demographics at the top through residential segregation and service industry organization in the middle to carceral gate-keeping at the bottom—give partial but effective articulation to a long-standing white male concern to manage black maleness “away from” white females. And indeed, hip-hop culture, at one level, may well represent in its clear crossover power a kind of return of the repressed terror/titillation inside white adolescent bodies that symbolically and sonically accomplishes the very “penetration” by blackness that the suburb was designed to ward off in the first place. Here too, the theological ramifications have yet to be fully teased out.

Apostasy

But in any case, my concern in this commentary is to underscore a deep problem in the entire project of modern Christian theological production. And that is the historical “creep” of what patristic theologians would have called docetism⁵ that has invested Christian theology ever since Constantine began to colonize early Christian ritual practice in the service of the empire. The pre-Constantinian idea that entry into the outlaw community of faith (which was gathering strength especially among the slave and servant classes in the first three centuries) required embrace of a *sacramentum* counter to Rome’s own—a commitment to enroll one’s body as “militant” in an enterprise of spiritual warfare that could result in early and quite physical death—was subversive genius. As already mentioned above, early baptism entailed serious deprogramming and reinitiation of that body in a different sensibility. Post-Constantinian sacramental practice, however, became the subject of struggle between continuing folk intercourse with the spirit-world (still rooted in a rural ecological sensuality derogated as “pagan”) and official, increasingly patriarchal and ascetic ecclesial proscriptions (as well as appropriations) of the same.

⁵ Docetism (from the Greek *dokeo*, to appear) is a belief that Jesus only appeared to take on flesh, but really remained incorporeal, pure spirit.

Throughout the Middle Ages, sensual varieties of gendered identity among the peasantry, male and female, found ready harbor under episcopal blessing and Romanesque sculptural embrace. These peasant ways of being were nurtured by a veritable menagerie of floral and faunal spirit-consorts carried into church practice and architecture from their host sites in an agrarian world that was only gradually being evangelized; witness, for instance, the official care taken to bless wells and fields, and the care taken to build gargoyles and sprites into church cornices or tucked up in remote corners. At the same time, the managerial mode of pastoral care initiated by Charlemagne around 800 CE would issue four hundred years later in a Fourth Lateran Council sanction of penitential practice bringing bodily life ever more tightly under clerical control by way of confession. In Renaissance and Reformation elaborations of the faith, sensuality and the body continued as contested terrain. They became the carnal "site" of an ever-growing surveillance and discipline that Roman Catholic inquisitorial torture and Calvinist iconoclastic terror "policed" with ever-increasing technological sophistication (even as resistance thereto gathered force underneath the surface submission).

After 1492, European colonial and missionary categories of "Christian" and "heathen," "civilized" and "savage," found their most potent articulation in the clothing styles, architectural reorganizations, garden sculptings, linguistic suppressions, and ritual reformulations foisted on native bodies. These imposed a socio-cultural conformity far more ruthless in its requirements than the verbal indoctrinations of the faith so clearly subject to indigenous inflection and revision. And subsequent industrial and bourgeois conscriptions of physicality in the disciplines of factory and city, as well as postmodern mass-mediated consumerist modes of shaping desire by way of eros and the commercial, have continued the reconstitution of bodily life in the later phases of capitalism's relentless takeover of our species' social sensibility.

Over the course of such a genealogy of Western physicality, it is possible to discern a gradual alienation of our bodily experience from organic contact with other bodies, human or natural. Instead, our sensate experience has increasingly found itself engulfed in and schooled by the globalizing armature of cyborg technology and social media imagery. The "other" in terms of which human beings now work out their deepest dialectic of identity is no longer the concert of life forms of a given local ecology, as in the hundreds of thousands of years of

hunter-gatherer experience that set our DNA code on a Pleistocene frequency. Nor is it any longer the ensemble of humans “known” and “strange” in the last ten thousand years of settled agriculture’s village economies. Rather, it is now the radically novel and genetically “untested” (in the sense of long-term evolutionary viability) machine-surround of commercializing and now hyper-industrializing urbanization that serves as the mirror for our self-identification. Today we have children aspiring to become “transformers” or Darth Vader and teenagers imagining themselves as one or another cyborg character in Tron or Matrix.

At the same time, for the better part of this latter five-hundred-year-long “explosion” of European culture around the globe, skin color has operated as a primary recoding of bodily meaning. As a rough-and-ready visual shorthand—subject to ever-changing articulations—race has had quite a career, policing appropriations of resources, brokering access to power, enforcing wage labor, and delineating the landscape of desire and terror in various regimes of the imagination. Certainly in the mix, explicit notions of “whiteness” only came into focus in nineteenth-century North American buy-offs of immigrant European resistance to industrialization, as scholars like David Roediger have traced.⁶ But the “supremacy” that such whiteness encodes, I would submit, has been around for the whole modern history of conquest and colonization.

Its first form was theological, emerging as the bastard offspring of the “Great Chain of Being” thinking in the early modern European suppression of indigenous religious practice around the globe, in which all of reality was organized in a hierarchical scheme of evaluation, from top to bottom, with God at the apex, European Christians presiding over all other human communities in the middle just below angels and saints, and natives, Africans, and animals anchoring the lowest rung.⁷ It is this *Christian supremacy* that is the real birth-mother and ardent tutor of modern white supremacy in all of its subsequent permutations and combinations with class and gender differences. And thus I would argue that in our day, a kind of *lived apostasy* from the typical Christian presumption of religious superiority may well be the “evangelical” sign, *sine qua non*, of actual Christian

⁶ David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York: Verso, 1991), 11–13.

⁷ James W. Perkinson, *White Theology: Outing Supremacy in Modernity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan Press, 2004), 58.

faithfulness—much as the early church was well known for its apostasy from the Roman imperial pantheon. Its flip side, of course, would mean religious embrace of, and willingness to learn from, other religious traditions, both literate and oral.

What social forms such a commitment might take is open to creative communal experiment that has been recurrently explored for the entire duration of modernity. Here I am thinking of colonial examples that birthed novel religious “lifeways” welding together various Christian elements with their own indigenous memories and practices. The *Mexicano-mestizo* embrace of the Guadalupe Virgin as “the little brown one” (*la Morena*) after Cortés’s conquest in 1521 opened a way into the future for a crushed native culture and animated every subsequent movement for independence and rights on the part of that newly emergent *Raza* in Mexico.⁸ Afro-Caribbean creolizations of Yoruban *orisha* practice “underneath” the saints of European folk Catholicism in Brazil, Cuba, and Haiti enabled slave survival in an impossible circumstance and galvanized revolutionary political achievements.⁹ Gandhian embrace of interreligious participation and beatitudinal enemy-love in his *satyagraha* movement for Indian independence from Britain became a world-gift inspiring nonviolent efforts across the globe (including our own Civil Rights Movement).¹⁰ Papua New Guinean attempts to figure out their own economic exploitation—what they called the “secret of cargo”—by accommodating their hero-myths (about figures known as Manup and Kilobab) to early twentieth-century German and Australian preaching of Jesus stand as another provocative, if tragic, example.¹¹ The creative precedent is nearly ubiquitous in the subaltern histories of peoples subjugated under Euro-colonial Christian domination. But it has not yet gained serious theological attention.

In theoretical domains, the twentieth century witnessed a beginning “return of the repressed” out of colonial domination—not only in the sociological form of populations of color gaining admittance to the

⁸ Virgil Elizondo, *Galilean Journey: The Mexican-American Promise* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Press, 2006), 11–13.

⁹ Joseph M. Murphy, *Working the Spirit: Ceremonies of the African Diaspora* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 10, 44, 81.

¹⁰ Pieris, *Asian Theology*, 64; David Chidester, *Christianity: A Global History* (San Francisco, Calif.: HarperSanFrancisco, 2000), 466–470.

¹¹ Chidester, *Christianity*, 471–490.

academy, but also in the form of what has come to be called “subjugated knowledges” (more embodied “ways of knowing” practiced by indigenous peoples, subjugated populations, and women) that have broken through white male academic insistence on abstraction as the only valid form of examining reality. My own emphasis on body-knowledge partakes of this latter development. Much of the resulting creative ferment (liberation theologies of all kinds, feminist and womanist theologies, black theology) points toward the “depth-work” still needed in Western academic theology for its body awareness to return out of the thin air of rarefied debate and once again learn to walk with its feet on the ground. One interesting diagnosis of this “docetic” debilitation is offered by Argentinian theologian-ethicist Enrique Dussel.

In an article for a text on globalization, Dussel tracks a kind of eclipse of corporeal experience in modern life in favor of the categories of “efficiency” and “abstraction” characteristic of the new kind of capitalism emerging in the Netherlands in the seventeenth century, but also expressed in more philosophical form by the mathematician-philosopher Descartes, sitting alone in his room in Amsterdam in 1636 and trying to figure out reality as European Christianity dissolved around him in the Thirty Years War.¹² There the latter was famously hounded by the devil, as he recounts, into an interior “safe-house” of his mind that he called the *ego-cogito*, the “thinking I,” which he laboriously and methodically excavated from his own imagination under pressure of the fear of being deceived. In the face of devastating social upheaval, the only thing he found he could finally trust was thinking itself—thus his famous “*Cogito ergo sum*” (“I think, therefore I am”). At work under the surface of his new formulation, however—in which he separated thinking from the entire realm of *res extensa* (bodily things having substance and durability as opposed to effervescent and immaterial mental images)—was also arguably the terror of the recent Copernican revolution, in which the earth had gone from being the big center of a small universe to suddenly being a marginal speck of matter in a near infinity of space and time.

¹² Enrique Dussel, “Beyond Eurocentrism: The World System and the Limits of Modernity,” in *The Cultures of Globalization (Post-Contemporary Interventions)*, ed. Fredric Jameson and Masao Miyoshi (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1998), 15, 19.

The existential vertigo for someone like Descartes must have been immense. Likewise lost was any sense that body-knowledge could be trusted, as what had been mundanely experienced and intellectually verified as utterly trustworthy for centuries—our own planet as the focal point of both God's concern and all other planets' circulation—had suddenly proven false. Not surprising then that Descartes felt an abyss open under his feet and a shade of deception appear where he had perceived substance. But in fact, the evil spirit he then wrestled in his tight little room could also be grasped as the haunting awareness of another kind of disappearance—a ghostly visitation/intuition of all the native bodies “disappeared” in the machinery of European colonial consumption of indigenous substance across an entire globe. Here, I would argue, is unwitting indication of the real condition of the white male northern European body inside the vaunted rationality of modernity: it is indeed a body haunted by a spirit of deception that requires it to turn away from any real “knowledge” of “substance”—it simply cannot acknowledge where its “stuff” (its ink and paper and lumber and cloth and oil and gold and silver and sugar) is actually coming from, and how it is being accumulated, without collapsing into moral non-being.

But underlying this growing (and now digitized) abstraction of modern capitalism's “rational efficiency”—its utterly antiseptic and mathematical representations of reality first given philosophical voice in Descartes's “certain ideas” and later formally systematized by Kant and Hegel—is a more grim calculus. Something like the letters of the Dominican mission priest Bartolomé de las Casas—reporting from the early modern operations of Spanish and Portuguese silver mines and sugar fields—stays closer to the human truth of things. In his writing we glimpse the bodily reality of a “reverse transubstantiation” taking place in the colonies—Amerindian and African bodies and blood being converted into European bread and wine (and silver and gold and indigo and fur) under the whip and gun and chain. European substance and surfeit carries as its invisible but indelible sign the deep truth of indigenous demise. And this is a history of material consumption that has not ceased even as its spilled blood and broken bones have been effectively erased inside the commodification *quanta* of today's transnational corporation.

It is *this* inferno of ongoing immolation that must be faced inside the body (the “substance”) of whiteness if ever that body's tongue is to speak truth in a world organized precisely to mask such. However

much our white sensibility may comfort itself inside the shrines of sacramental practice controlled by our ordained elites (both Catholic and Protestant)—until we are re-baptized back into communion with the experiential anguish and survival artistry of the planet's varied communities of color, our theological pronouncements remain more masquerade than revelation. Would that they did reveal the truth! Then we could learn freedom from those who are actually having to fight for it every day. But in the deepest sense, I am afraid, most of our theology is actually docetic and ethereal rather than incarnational; it does not actually walk through the world touching the earth. Ultimately the baptismal rite of passage referenced in the title of this paper must become existential and global. Until then, there is only the equivalent of insurgent theological groaning, resolute political struggle, and the unexpected joy of being known and named by others if we manage to join them in their own passionate struggle to survive.