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“Black Theology and the Birmingham School: Revisiting a Conversation on Culture”
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**BLACK THEOLOGY AND BIRMINGHAM:
REVISITING A CONVERSATION ON CULTURE**

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ABSTRACT

A picture is worth a thousand words. If this is true of a still photograph, how much more of a moving image? A television broadcast? A streaming webcast? Interpreting the theological meaning of mass-produced visual imagery, then, can pose an analytical problem for theologians. This essay offers the theoretical insight of the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies as a helpful hermeneutic tool and methodological corrective for Black liberation theologians concerned with interpreting the intersections of theology and culture in general, and pop culture forms of religious expression such as televangelism in particular.

Keywords: Dwight Hopkins, popular culture, Raymond Williams, School of Cultural Studies, televangelism

The purpose of this essay is to trace the development of the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies in order to suggest that it offers a viable option for Black liberation theologians concerned with interpreting the intersections of theology and culture in general, and pop culture forms of religious expression such as televangelism in particular. This essay will reveal that the varying methods of cultural studies and Black theology have, in many ways, mirrored one another since their respective inceptions. And over the course of the past decade leading Black liberation theologians have appealed to the theories and methods of cultural studies in their work. Yet a review of Dwight Hopkins’ theological analysis of the intersections of Black religion and popular culture will demonstrate that revisiting the Birmingham tradition can still prove beneficial, theoretically and methodologically, to the Black liberation project. This is particular true in regards to finding the appropriate balance between creative cultural agency and

interpretive freedom of the folk, on the one hand, and the ideological dimensions of mass mediated cultural expression such as Black televangelism, on the other.

What is Cultural Studies? A Definition¹

Cultural studies is an intellectual and political tradition in relation to the established academic disciplines. It is multidisciplinary promoting intellectual discourse across disciplines, and “political” insofar as, unlike many of the traditional academic disciplines, it refuses to divorce intellectual activity from the social and power relations of a given context.² Due to the mutability and malleability of the field, Lawrence Grossberg states, “the more we talk about it [cultural studies], the less clear it is what we are talking about.”³ Nevertheless, Grossberg does identify the terrain in which he believes cultural studies operates.

Cultural studies is concerned with describing and intervening in the ways ‘texts’ and ‘discourses’ (i.e. cultural practices) are produced within, inserted into, and operate in the everyday life of human beings and social formations, so as to reproduce, struggle against, and perhaps transform the existing structures of power. That is, if people make history but in conditions not of their own making (Marx), cultural studies explores the ways this process is enacted within and through cultural practices, and the place of these practices within specific historical formations.⁴

From this terrain four major points of emphases are of note toward illuminating the ethical tasks of cultural studies. Cultural studies is concerned with (1) popular culture; (2) semiotics; (3) ideology; and (4) cultural criticism. These categories and/or tasks are not necessarily unique to the field of cultural studies, and for the most part antedate the field. However, when placed in a symbiotic relationship, situated within the larger methodological and theoretical frameworks, they continue to inform and transform the particular disciplines from which they are largely derived.

1. It is actually inappropriate, theoretically and grammatically, to raise the question, “what is cultural studies?” Rather, it is more appropriate to ask, “what are cultural studies?” However, to indulge my own academic sensibilities and fulfill the necessary simplification involved in this type of work, this paper will refer to cultural studies in a singular tense and as a unified academic field of study.

2. Richard Johnson, “What Is Cultural Studies Anyway?” in *What Is Cultural Studies? A Reader*, ed. John Storey (New York: Arnold, 1996), 78.

3. Lawrence Grossberg, “The Circulation of Cultural Studies,” in *What Is Cultural Studies?*, ed. Storey, 178.

4. Grossberg, “The Circulation of Cultural Studies,” 180.

Why Cultural Studies? Methodological Approaches to the Study of Culture

To say that “*cultural studies is concerned with describing and intervening in the way ‘texts’ and ‘discourses’ (i.e. cultural practices) are produced within, inserted into, and operate in the everyday life of human beings,*” is to presuppose a particular understanding of what culture is, how culture is produced, and the manner in which culture operates in society. Two things here are evident for Grossberg; culture is fluid and belongs to the masses. This conception of culture contradicts classical views of culture identified in the elitist underpinnings of the *culture and civilization* tradition. Literary figures like Matthew Arnold⁵ and F. R. and Q. D. Leavis⁶ defined culture as perfection and regarded forms of mass-produced culture that catered to the urban and working classes as a destructive force in English society. The work culturalist school of thought, however, disrupts and democratizes “high culture” in possession of bourgeois elites. John Storey concisely defines culturalism as “a methodology which stresses culture (human agency, human values, human experiences) as being of crucial importance for a full sociological and historical understanding of a given social formation.”⁷

Richard Hoggart’s *The Uses of Literacy* was the first text to problematize the *culture and civilization* tradition of cultural theory and its elitist conception of culture. Unlike Arnold and Leavis, Hoggart affirms working-class culture. In an appreciative and detailed fashion—though at times reflective of an embellished nostalgia—Hoggart offers vivid descriptions of the particularities and complexities of English working-class culture that were often either ignored as irrelevant or grossly mischaracterized. But, ironically, in the second half of the text, consistent with the *culture and civilization* tradition, Hoggart attributes the decline of the vibrant working-class culture of his youth to the mass-produced popular culture of the day.⁸

Though Hoggart’s text pushed the boundaries concerning popular conceptions of what culture is, and where culture may be identified, it was Raymond Williams who most expanded the definition of culture toward its subsequent

5. Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy: An Essay in Political and Social Criticism* (London: Smith, Elder, 1869), 8.

6. F. R. Leavis, “Mass Civilization and Minority Culture,” in *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*, ed. John Storey (Hemel Hempstead: Prentice Hall, 1998); F. R. Leavis and Denys Thompson, *Culture and Environment* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1977); Q. D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1978).

7. John Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction*, 3rd ed. (London: Pearson, Prentice Hall, 2001), 50–51.

8. Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy*, Classics in Communication and Mass Culture Series (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1992).

appropriation in the field of cultural studies. *Culture and Society*, published as a book of literary history, focuses not on literary texts for their own sake but for their relationship to other historical and social processes. By engaging writers from the late eighteenth to mid twentieth century such as William Cobbett, John Stuart Mill and Matthew Arnold, Williams seeks to reestablish the cultural grounding of their ideas and representations. A notion of culture in the active sense emerges wherein culture, like language, is tied to social processes.

Culture and Society, then, opens the door for a broader conception of culture and contests the *culture and civilization* tradition. Yet a thoroughgoing departure did not take place until *The Long Revolution*.⁹ It is here, as Stuart Hall later states, that, “The conception of culture is itself democratized and socialized.”¹⁰ An important point of note in *The Long Revolution* is Williams’ emphasis on culture as an anthropological rather than an aesthetic concept. Culture is neither an “absolute” ideal that resides above society, nor solely the folkways and cultural products that emerge from within a society. Culture is the relationship between all social patterns and practices and the ways in which they are lived and experienced in their totality. From this extends Williams’ oft-cited definition of culture as a “whole way of life.” Williams’ formulation of culture is thus grounded in the social practices of everyday people. Culture is not an aesthetic ideal abstracted from the social dimensions of culture, nor is it a mere reflection of the social relations (read forces of production) of a particular community. Culture is a constitutive social process that can be identified in the structure of feeling of a community. What (or who) Williams does not identify explicitly in *The Long Revolution* are his intellectual interlocutors that have encouraged and informed his formulation of culture. In his later work *Marxism and Literature* Williams states that after *Culture and Society* he became acquainted with forms of critical Marxism through the writings of persons such as George Lukacs, Louis Althusser and Antonio Gramsci.¹¹

9. Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961). In *Culture and Society*, Williams still maintains that culture can be regarded as an absolute, “a court of human appeal, to be set over the processes of practical social judgement and yet to offer itself as a mitigating and rallying alternative.” In such, like Hoggart prior, Williams offers a valuable and viable critique to “culture and civilization” while maintaining certain notions of culture as a normative ideal. Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society, 1780–1950* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), xvi.

10. Stuart Hall, “Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms,” in *What Is Cultural Studies?*, ed. Storey, 33.

11. To be clear, Williams admits that his formulation of culture was not developed within a Marxist tradition. However, though veiled, his argument against such classical Marxist conceptions can be identified in the second chapter of *The Long Revolution*. But what was veiled in this text was made explicit in his article “Base and Superstructure in Marxist Theory of Culture,” *New Left Review* 82 (1973). Also see Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, Marxist Introductions (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).

The final shaping voice of the culturalist strand of cultural studies is E. P. Thompson.¹² Thompson shared very similar critiques with the classical Marxist theory of culture but, unlike Williams, Thompson developed his theory of culture as he engaged in debates within Marxism. In *The Making of the English Working Class*, Thompson analyzed the development of working-class culture as a historical phenomenon. Consistent with Marx's claim that men and women make their own history, class for Thompson is not a "thing" or a "category," but resultant of historical relationships of unity and difference wherein persons consciously identify shared interests in opposition to another group of interests, "class is a relationship, and not a thing."¹³ Yet, unlike Marx, who also stresses the fact that persons make their own history under determining conditions not of their own choosing, Thompson chooses to place greater emphasis upon human agency and activity than structural determinants. Thompson thus defines class as "a social and cultural formation, arising from processes, which can only be studied as they work themselves out over a considerable historical period."¹⁴

We see that Thompson, like Williams, resisted simple notions of economic determinism and the traditional base and superstructure model. But Thompson's Marxist sensibilities are evident in his conflict-based view of culture. Culture was not, as it was for Williams, "a whole way of life," but contestation between ways of life.¹⁵ Thompson regards culture as predominantly located within social class. In affirming the cultural histories of the working classes, we are able to see the ways in which culture becomes a major force of conflict and competing interests.¹⁶

12. It is important to note that, despite E. P. Thompson's idea of "socialist humanism" and the emphasis he places upon human agency and expression, he does not accept the suggestion that his work falls within the culturalist methodological framework. R. S. Neale, "E. P. Thompson: A History of Culture and Culturalist History," in *Creating Culture*, ed. Diane J. Austin Broos (London: Allen & Unwin, 1987), 179.

13. E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 1st Vintage ed. (New York: Vintage Books a division of Random House, 1966), 11.

14. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 11.

15. Hall, "Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms," 36.

16. Aside from Thompson who recognizes the role of religion, particularly Methodism, as an ideological impulse influencing class formation and conflict, Hoggart, Williams and Hall do not pay explicit attention to the role of religion in the production of values, meaning, or ritual within a particular cultural context. This omission can largely be attributed to their view of religion, alongside of art, as constitutive of the "high culture" which they seek to contrast and offset. See Stewart M. Hoover and Knut Lundby, *Rethinking Media, Religion, and Culture* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1997), 24–25.

A Theology of Civil Rights and Black Power

Like the original culturalist tradition of Hoggart, Williams and Thompson, to trace the development of Black theology of liberation is to witness a similar critique of top-down, static notions of theology as the domain of the elites and ideological force of white supremacy. Beginning in 1969, the writings of James Cone spurred a Copernican Revolution within the theological academy. Black theology as an academic discipline was largely developed within the cultural matrices of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements of the 1960s. Amidst volatile social conditions—the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., urban riots, the occupation of Black communities by armed national guard units, and the counterintelligence operations of the FBI and CIA against Black protest organizations—Cone argued that White theologians engaged in intellectual conversations that had little to do with God, or God's response to the destruction of Black life.¹⁷ Thus, if the Christian faith were to have anything to offer a powerless Black America, it must focus upon their liberation. With his first work, *Black Theology and Black Power*, Cone made the case that Black Power was not antithetical to the Christian message but consistent with the life and teachings of Christ.¹⁸

With the publication of his second book *Black Theology of Liberation* (1970),¹⁹ Cone identifies the principal task of Black theology as liberating Black people from political bondage. For Cone, essential to Black liberation is divine freedom. God chose to create humanity in freedom and partner with humanity toward the realization of this freedom in history. In addition, essential to liberation is the theme of justice. Divine justice makes Black liberation more than a human effort but the march toward freedom should be regarded as a divine movement of liberation. Liberation will take place in human history, not solely based upon human protest—though protest plays a critical role—but according to God's righteousness and sense of justice. Cone believed that salvation should not be regarded as a passive event, or a panacea to come in the afterworld but the moment Christ saves humanity by piercing into the problematic of pain and oppression to liberate humanity from human evils such as racism in America. And, according to Cone, since the New Testament reveals Jesus as the oppressed one who identifies with those suffering under extreme conditions, only a Black Christ is able to identify with and work toward the liberation of Black people.

17. James H. Cone, *Risks of Faith: The Emergence of a Black Theology of Liberation, 1968–1998* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1999), see introduction.

18. James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (New York: Seabury Press, 1969).

19. James Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1970).

With these founding texts James Cone redirected the theological task from static notions of metaphysical ideas concerning God and “official” church orthodoxy to a narrative of the spiritual strivings of oppressed people in America whose Black faces reflect the face of Christ. However, similar to Richard Hoggart’s concomitant objection and embrace of the *culture and civilization tradition*, Cone’s early work vehemently attacked the explicit and implicit racism of the traditional theological method while simultaneously employing the theological categories of the dominant theological enterprise. In this regard, if the insights of James Cone were analogous to those of Richard Hoggart, Gayraud Wilmore and Charles Long proved to be his Raymond Williams and E. P. Thompson respectively. These thinkers encouraged both Cone and subsequent scholars of Black religion to reject traditional theological categories that privilege White supremacist sensibilities and focus on the way Black people reflect on and experience the divine. For Wilmore the question was whether Black religious experience requires “white systematic theology as a means of validation.”²⁰ For Long, Black theological reflection should involve the deconstruction of theology as a power discourse and not simply a move to “possess the theological battlefield wrested from their foes.”²¹

In *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, Wilmore offers three sources for African American theological reflection that both counter the dominant theological paradigm and affirm theological reflection from below. The first source is black folk religion. For Wilmore, black folk religion is the faith of the black lower class community as these persons serve as the strength of African American religious organizations and “the real springs of action.”²² Second are the writings, sermons, and addresses of black public intellectuals of the past. Though all figures are not members of the clergy, Wilmore believes that we cannot understand their interpretations of the Black experience aside from “the bedrock of black faith.”²³ Third, since “blacks in the United States did not originate *ex nihilo*,” traditional religions of Africa must serve as a means to interpret Black spiritual thought and practice. While Wilmore admits such African excavation and retention projects may prove more difficult, it is still possible and desirable to

20. Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of Afro-American People*, 2nd ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983), 217.

21. Charles H. Long, “Freedom, Otherness, and Religion: Theologies Opaque,” in *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretations of Religion*, ed. Charles H. Long (Aurora, CO: The Davies Group, 1999), 209–10.

22. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, 235. James Cone’s brother, Cecil Cone, also questioned James Cone’s attention to the cultural production of African Americans. Cecil Wayne Cone, *The Identity Crisis in Black Theology* (Nashville, TN: African Methodist Episcopal Church [AMEC], 1975).

23. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, 236.

make the connection between traditional African religions and the revitalization of African American religion.²⁴

Charles Long regarded the traditional Christian theological categories originally employed by Cone as both a discourse of power and as too intellectually narrow. Black theological categories represent a larger religious framework that Long contends is much more expansive than the Christian faith. Like Paul Tillich, Long defines religion according to one's orientation to the ultimate.²⁵ Religion is not just structures of thought but entails the "experience, expressions, motivations, intuitions, behaviors, styles, and rhythms."²⁶ It is not from above where one can make sense of the ultimate concerns of the Black masses but among what Long refers to as the cultures of the oppressed. Therefore, through the oral traditions, songs, and poetry of the black oppressed—like James Weldon Johnson's *Lift Every Voice and Sing*—Long believes we can find the common thread of freedom as ultimate concern for Black people.

Culture Rooted within Structures of Dominance: The Influence of French Structuralism

In 1964, Hoggart established the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham. It is here that culturalism, diffused through the academic disciplines of English, sociology and history, produced the tradition of British cultural studies.²⁷ Within a few years Stuart Hall replaced Hoggart as director of the Centre and under his direction we see a second major shift/development in cultural studies; both a displacement and regrouping of the theoretical and methodological base of the field. Influenced by critical engagements with Marxist theories of culture by prominent French theorists, cultural studies became closely associated with Marxist cultural studies.²⁸ This emphasis on social structures and ideological systems that dictate the meaning of cultural production is a critique against what was considered the naïve humanism of culturalist thinkers. The perceived romanticized concepts of human agency began dueling with the "rigid and mechanical" closed structures of ideology.²⁹ However, citing Grossberg's identification of the terrain of cultural studies, the methodology of structuralism, with its intellectual tasks of ideology critique

24. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, 238.

25. Charles H. Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion*, Series in Philosophical and Cultural Studies in Religion (Aurora, CO: Davies Group, 1999), 7.

26. Long, *Significations*.

27. Graeme Turner, *British Cultural Studies: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 70.

28. Structuralism is a methodology which stresses that beings can only live and experience culture in and through the frameworks of social formations.

29. Turner, *British Cultural Studies*, 65.

and semiotic method within, serves to illumine the ways cultural practices are “inserted into, and operate in the everyday life of human beings and social formations, so as to reproduce...the existing structures of power.”³⁰

Structuralism did not begin as a theory of culture but as a theory of language.³¹ Linguistics, from a Saussurian perspective, is primarily concerned with language as a system rather than the speech that flows from it. Ferdinand de Saussure extends the principles of the linguistic system beyond the domain of linguistics to organize communication “signifying” systems—i.e., images, gestures, physical appearance and other varying types of behavior. Claude Lévi-Strauss’ structural analysis is constructed upon this tangential relationship between linguistic and cultural systems as the task of structuralism is to identify the rules that govern the production of meaning. Though Lévi-Strauss examines a number of systems that produce meaning, this work is most concerned with his analysis of myth. Myths work like language.³² They operate according to preconceived cultural notions of similarity and difference. Therefore, a myth can perpetuate that which is considered good in a society based upon a shared understanding of what is bad. From a cultural awareness of these oppositions, myths are able to serve their primary function—to make sense of the world and banish contradictions, thus allowing persons to live at peace with themselves and their existence.³³

French theorist Roland Barthes explicitly connects this understanding of myth to the function of ideology in society.³⁴ Barthes believes that cultural meaning is expressed via the relation between the signifier/signified but beyond a primary meaning he argues that there is a secondary level of meaning where myth is produced and ideology is naturalized for consumption. Myth works to render the signifier and secondary significations into a fixed relationship. When cultural, secondary connotations are fixed, they are then diffused through society as normal, natural and universal. Examples of these sorts of fixed relationships can be seen in contemporary American political culture. For instance, in the 2004 presidential general election, the independent terms such as “Christian,”

30. Again, like cultural studies and culturalism, structuralism is theoretically varied. However, there is a certain commonality among the varying structuralist approaches, most notably the salient concept of ideology and early influences of the linguist studies that gave way to semiotics, which makes the designation of the plural noun under a single heading feasible.

31. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* (London: Fontana, 1974).

32. See Claude Lévi-Strauss, “The Story of Asdiwal,” in *Structuralism in Myth: Lévi-Strauss, Barthes, Dumézil, and Propp*, ed. Robert A. Segal (New York: Garland Publishing, 1996).

33. Lévi-Strauss, “The Structural Study of Myth,” in *Structuralism in Myth*, ed. Segal, 133.

34. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), 11.

“Believer,” “Evangelical,” and “Republican” were often deployed by the media as synonyms. And in the historic 2008 Democratic presidential primary contest between Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton, the media regularly described the former as the “African American” and the latter as the “woman.” Many race and gender theorists were quick to note how “white” is rarely spoken alongside the term woman in describing either Hillary Clinton or her supporters.³⁵ Though Clinton is just as racialized as Obama (and Obama as gendered as Clinton) in a male and white supremacist society, the terms “white” and “male” are assumed as normative unless stated otherwise. The assumption becomes that the majority of African Americans (read: male) supported Senator Obama, and the majority of women (read: white) supported Clinton. Hence such naturalized and accepted cultural significations renders African American women politically invisible as a potential voting bloc.

As a counter-corrective, the political task of cultural studies is to read popular culture in such a way to demystify the construction and codification of such fixed cultural meaning. In *Mythologies*' concluding essay “Myth Today,” Barthes posits semiotic analysis as the appropriate method.³⁶ If cultural studies, as Grossberg contends, “*is concerned with describing and intervening in the ways ‘texts’ and ‘discourses’ are produced...*,” then semiotic method provides the formula to read the cultural texts and discourses. Unmasking or demystifying ideological constructions that lend themselves to the privileging of some and exclusion of others, for Barthes, is the purpose of the semiotic task.

Here one might decipher why semiotic method is of great import for theologians interpreting mass-mediated Christian practice. It provides a method to analyze all signifying practices from within the phenomenon, which include, but are not limited to, speech, gestures, clothing, music, architecture, written words upon the screen, and edited crowd response. This, then, helps us to identify operating myth systems that render center arbitrary religious and social practices legitimate, orthodox, and/or even “anointed.” As Milmon Harrison’s important work on the Word of Faith Movement—also known as the prosperity gospel—in the African American community reveals, if we ignore the physical attributes and visual presentation of this pop culture phenomenon, we are overlooking a central aspect of its identity and attraction.³⁷ A conspicuously placed

35. Orville Lloyd Douglas, “Sisters in the Struggle: Why Are Black Feminists Ignored?” in *Angry Gay Black Canadian Blogspot* (2008), <http://orvillelloyddouglas.wordpress.com/2008/05/03/sisters-in-the-struggle-why-are-black-feminists-ignored/>. Or see, for instance, Melissa Harris Laceywell debating Gloria Steinem on “Democracy Now.” http://www.democracynow.org/2008/1/14/race_and_gender_in_presidential_politics

36. Saussure defines semiology as a science that studies the life of signs within society. Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, 16.

37. Milmon F. Harrison, *Righteous Riches: The Word of Faith Movement in Contemporary African American Religion* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 161–62.

diamond ring, a custom-tailored suit, sequined high heels, an expensive car in the parking lot, and the rhythmic sermonic cadence of a televangelist are not natural occurrences. Televangelists understand that aesthetic accoutrements such as these carry as much meaning for believers as the Eucharist. When the language of “blessings from God,” for instance, coincides with the visual images of luxury goods, the two can easily be reduced to a naturalized signifier/signified relationship. Thus it is incumbent upon theologians to interpret and unpack (demystify) the polyvalent religious meanings that are encoded in such visual messages.

A Mature Ideology Critique

The problem with ideology critique, however, is that it can work too well. As Jeffrey Stout suggests, ideology critique is a hermeneutical ambulance. If called upon too quickly, it can superciliously treat persons as unconscious patients rather than critical and self-conscious subjects.³⁸ The type of textual determinism of Barthes’ ideology as myths systems or Louis Althusser’s concept of interpellation represents the limitations and inadequacies of the structuralist school of thought. Individuals are denied both autonomy and agency once they are rendered subjects by ideology via the ideological apparatuses—a process Althusser depicts as both inevitable and uncontested. The great strength of the structuralist methodology precludes cultural theorists from succumbing to a humanist orientation that denies the systems of relations of which all human agents are positioned. Moreover, the structuralist emphasis upon ideals as a cultural expression of meaning based upon one’s position within a system of relations can help us to possibly identify the ideological aspirations and motivations of cultural texts no matter how implicitly written. Despite this, the limitation of such a closed, ahistorical framework precludes creative possibilities and human agency. In the words of Michel Foucault, “where there is power, there is resistance.”³⁹ This is where the incorporation of neo-Gramscian thought, in particular the notion of hegemony, accommodate the fissures between economic and cultural determination as well as individual agency versus structures of power and dominance.⁴⁰

Hegemony, unlike determinist ideology, does not reduce the consciousness of the subordinate class to the ideology of the ruling class. Hegemony is not a system or structure but a lived process. It is highly complex and does not exist

38. Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, New Forum Books (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 178.

39. Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), 97.

40. Hall, “Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms.”

passively as a form of dominance. Therefore, it restores agency to subordinated groups leaving room for both willful consent as well as revolutionary challenge. The concept of hegemony takes into account the complexity of class structures and the interests of both the dominant and subordinated classes. In this way, like the initial critique against culturalists, emphasis upon agency does not become a naïve humanism. However, it also frees us from following other gross Marxist thinkers down the slope of reductionism that has tended to regard ideology as a false consciousness and hegemony as irreversible. This reconceptualization views popular culture as a compromised equilibrium between the previous two dominant yet polarized traditions—popular culture as a form of “agency” from below (extreme forms of the culturalist school) and popular culture as an ideological force imposed by capitalist culture industries which proved the theoretical Achilles heel to both the Frankfurt School and structuralist Marxism. With the appropriation of hegemony, popular culture was no longer something merely imposed by capitalist elites or produced by the “authentic” resistant actions of the common masses but a fluid combination. Popular culture, then, can be viewed as incorporation and resistance, structure and agency.

This emphasis on not merely identifying but struggling against ideological apparatuses toward transformation proved to complexify further the field of cultural studies. In the late 1970s and throughout the next decade emergent voices problematized the dominance of class as the major axis of division. Issues of gender and race broadened the political tasks of the field. The feminist movement of the 1970s is an example. Women working within the Birmingham Centre like Angela McRobbie illuminated how the theoretical and methodological traditions employed within the field were gender-blind.⁴¹ And just as Black theologians began to incorporate a systemic class analysis into their reflections upon race due to Cornel West’s cogent critique of the Black liberation project, cultural theorists at the Birmingham Centre engaged race as a sociological category inextricably linked to class formations.⁴² With the publication of Stuart Hall’s “Race, Articulation, and Societies Structured in Dominance,” Hall, a Jamaican immigrant, offered a challenge to the, then, dominant theoretical frameworks of cultural studies that ensconced concerns of race and ethnicity by solely analyzing the economic structures and relations of a society.⁴³

41. Women’s Studies Group, Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, University of Birmingham, *Women Take Issue: Aspects of Women’s Subordination* (London: Hutchinson, 1978).

42. Cornel West, “Black Theology and Marxist Thought,” in *Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1966–1979*, ed. James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979).

43. Stuart Hall, “Race, Articulation and Societies Structured in Dominance,” in *Black British Cultural Studies: A Reader*, ed. Houston A. Baker, Manthia Diawara, and Ruth H. Lindeborg (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

Similar internal critiques were taking place among Black liberation theologians. Black feminist thinkers were arguably the first to demonstrate an acute understanding of the critical interlace between race, gender, and class as culturally constructed and ideologically loaded identities. Specifically, Jacquelyn Grant's eminent article, "Black Theology and the Black Woman," demonstrates how the original Black theology project contradicts its own claims.⁴⁴ If Black theology is concerned, like Jesus, with the least of these in society, then why is Black theology silent concerning the oppression and exploitation of Black women in America in general, and within Black communities of faith in particular? Victor Anderson's *Beyond Ontological Blackness* offers a similar critique of Black theology's reified notion of "blackness" as ideologically loaded concept. For Anderson, Black theology diffuses static notions of blackness that becomes a tyrannical force of sameness that precludes individual cultural fulfillment. A deontological standard of what blackness is, which, in turn, will determine who is Black has deleterious implications for African Americans of varying backgrounds, social classes, and sexual orientations.

Moreover, Anderson furthers his claim by stating that the "blackness" of the Black theology project is parasitic upon White thought. Responding to the structures and categories of White thought, Black theologians unwittingly employ a homogeneous conception of blackness as a counter-critical response to White supremacy. As a result, rather than demonstrating Black self-determination and consciousness, Black theological thought merely mirrors the traditional racial categories it seeks to reject and removes itself from the cultural sources that are supposed to inform its reflections on Black life.⁴⁵ It may be argued that this, in itself, most contributes to the alienation of Black liberation theologians from the African American communities that they purportedly represent. If Black theology regards itself as radically different than European Christianity in general, and the tradition of American Evangelicalism in particular, then it is virtually impossible for Black liberation theologians to profess that Black theology reflects the theology of Black congregations. But if Black liberation theologians relinquish the theological claim of Black exceptionalism and divine privilege, then Black liberation theologians give up the radical and revolutionary identity which it has claimed for itself.⁴⁶

44. Jacquelyn Grant, "Black Theology and the Black Woman," in *Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1966–1979*, ed. Cone and Wilmore.

45. Victor Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness: An Essay on African American Religious and Cultural Criticism* (New York: Continuum, 1995), 87–117.

46. Victor Anderson, "We See through a Glass Darkly": Black Narrative Theology and the Opacity of African American Religious Thought," in *The Ties That Bind: African American and Hispanic American/Latino/a Theologies in Dialogue*, ed. Anthony B. Pinn and Benjamin Valentin (New York and London: Continuum, 2001), 80.

Examining Dwight Hopkin's View of Culture

Despite such criticisms from subsequent generations of African American theologians like Victor Anderson, it remains difficult to dispute Black theology of liberation's continued influence. The copious and magisterial writings of Dwight Hopkins, and the authoritative attention his work commands attest to this fact. Building upon the work of Cone, Hopkins continues to hold the academy accountable, forcing it to take seriously the strivings and sufferings of Black humanity as well as all persons who find themselves on the underside of society. Furthermore, Hopkins was among the first theologians of any tradition to employ the methodologies and analytical resources of cultural studies in order to demystify the continued dogmas operative from both the right and left sides of the academy. In Hopkins' own words his approach

contrasts the conservative view of religion as God, faith, or spirituality being top-down, unchanging essence removed from society and the world, as well as the liberal paradigm, which asserts and seeks a universal and all-encompassing understanding of religion with the hope that Reason (or the Logos) employed will yield a recognizable Truth surpassing the power and particularities and positivity of diverse cultures... Hence, both the conservative and liberal approaches leave the status quo, broken humanity, in place—the conservative by placing religious reflection “above” systemic realities and the liberal by seeking theological implications (oftentimes unintentionally) from the perspective of society's structural status quo.⁴⁷

Like cultural studies, Black theology of liberation is concerned with human/social transformation. And the sources that inform Black theology of liberation constitute “a total way of life,” that, according to Hopkins, constitute “a dynamic, non-hierarchical interplay of macro, micro, linguistic and identity concerns.”⁴⁸ Thus, whether informed by the narrative of former slaves, participants in Black Power movements or as embodied by the civil rights protest activity of Martin Luther King, Jr., Black theology of liberation offers a viable counter-hegemonic theological interpretation that disrupts traditional theological categories.

With the same critical insight and imagination that Hopkins has ingeniously employed the methodologies and analytical tools of cultural studies to counter European based, immutable, meta-narratives of traditional theology, I believe it is time for Black liberation theologians interested in the intersections of Black religion and popular culture to revisit the theoretical and methodological

47. Dwight N. Hopkins, “Introduction,” in *Changing Conversations: Religious Reflection and Cultural Analysis*, ed. Dwight N. Hopkins and Sheila Greeve Davaney (New York and London: Routledge, 1996), 2.

48. Dwight N. Hopkins, “Theological Method and Cultural Studies: Slave Religious Culture as Heuristic,” in *Changing Conversations*, ed. Hopkins and Davaney, 165.

insights of Birmingham. Having stated Black theology of liberation's counter-hegemonic value in relationship to a European-centered theological curriculum, following Victor Anderson's alienation critique, I contend that in this contemporary moment Black theology of liberation has institutionalized itself as a normative standard of Black theological thought promulgated by few other than African American academics. Whether one personally ascribes to Black theology of liberation as an academic project or not, it is the burning sands of which all who engage in the academic study of Black Christian practices must cross.

Sheila Greeve Davaney asserts that a turn to cultural analysis can help theologians identify and critically examine the beliefs and values that are central to religious traditions and phenomena.⁴⁹ But I argue that the value-laden presuppositions of the Black liberation project frustrates the descriptive-analytical function of the theological task. Victor Anderson attributes this dynamic to the ideological path of Black theological method. According to Anderson, the ideological path enters into dialogue with African American cultural sources—sources that range from slave narratives to rap music—with an already defined agenda structured by the primary tenets of Black liberation theology. Cultural sources are retrieved and referenced via a hermeneutic of return in order to corroborate and legitimate historical continuity between African American experience and Black theology as an academic project. The ideological path, then, serves two functions: it helps Black theologians address the aforementioned cultural alienation critique and reinforces a progressive worldview as the standard of African American theological reflection.

Elsewhere I have argued that the ideological path of Black theological method can take the form of Black theologians describing contemporary forms of Black Christian expression according to the same pre-established binary categories that have constrained the academic study of Black religion for the vast majority of the previous century. The theoretical divides of “otherworldly versus this-worldly,” “compensationalist versus instrumentalist” and “accommodation versus protest” date back to the earliest academic treatments of the Black church offered by W. E. B. Du Bois, Carter G. Woodson and Benjamin Elijah Mays. And though many contemporary scholars have increasingly problematized such rigid lines of theoretical divide, with the rise in popularity of African American megachurches and televangelism, which, for the most part, reflects the culturally conservative strand of American Evangelicalism and contradicts many of the progressive theological principles of Black liberation theology, we have witnessed the phenomenon evaluated along this either/or binary.⁵⁰

49. See her essay, “Theology and the Turn to Cultural Analysis,” in *Changing Conversations*, ed. Hopkins and Davaney, 9.

50. Jonathan L. Walton, *Watch This! The Ethics and Aesthetics of Black Televangelism*, Race, Religion and Ethnicity (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 31–32.

Dwight Hopkins' description of what he refers to as the "life and death struggle" facing African American churches in his book *Heart and Head: Black Theology—Past, Present and Future* offers an example. Hopkins argues that an increasing amount of black churches are "catering to conservative forces in the country by emphasizing the accumulation of wealth and a prosperity gospel." He goes on to profess that such congregations, "foster a spirituality that removes the individual from this world in order to feel good in the midst of a material suffering and psychological wounds, while avoiding Jesus' mandate to revolutionize systems on earth on behalf of those lacking the resources to impact the direction of the nation or their lives on a daily basis." He then distinguishes these conservative congregations from those he deems as "prophetic" and living out the "spirit of liberation." These prophetic congregations that offer day care, housing for seniors, drug counseling and other social programs, Hopkins says, are "urging people to remember the tradition of their slave ancestors, their West African forebears, the heroic role played by black churches in the civil rights movements."⁵¹

Though in a more nuanced manner, underlying Hopkins' analysis are the either/or binaries of this-worldly/other-worldly, liberation/prosperity, socially oriented/individualistic, and even African/Western. While I am sympathetic to Hopkin's political and prophetic stance concerning the activist role of progressive Afro-Protestants, such pre-established categories obscure our understanding of the phenomenon. There are conservative congregations proclaiming variants of the prosperity gospel, which offer the same sorts of social programs Hopkins attributes to "prophetic" congregations. Likewise, there are preachers proclaiming tenets of Black liberation theology that maintain lavish lifestyles that would give their prosperity preaching counterparts a run for their money (or tithes, if you will). But similar to the connections between linguistic and myth systems in early structuralist thought, Hopkins's normatively-charged descriptive modifiers promote faux oppositions which promote that Black liberation theologians consider good (this worldly, liberation, socially oriented and African) based upon a shared understanding of what is bad (otherworldly, prosperity, individualistic and Western). The descriptive-analytical function of the theological task thus succumbs to the analytical trap set up by an ideological understanding of what the "Black church" is, or at least, should be. And, as a result, Hopkins is able to quickly dismiss more popular forms of Black Christian practice that are not consistent with a particular theological agenda as always and already outside of the thematized tenets of Black liberation theology.

Unfortunately, as seen here, the ideological path of Black theological method can cause Black liberation theologians to overdetermine the role of the

51. Dwight N. Hopkins, *Heart and Head: Black Theology—Past, Present, and Future* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 19-21; emphasis added.

dominant culture and flattens the complexity of everything that lies beneath—including the complex ways participants experience the sacred and theologically interpret their activity. In this regard, the ideological path of Black theological method reflects the determinist and reductionist tendencies of structuralist Marxism. Participants in the world of religious broadcasting are not simply folks who have reneged on their “West African” and “communal” selves in order to embrace “Western” ideals and an “individualist” theology. To view such persons, even those who adhere to the prosperity gospel, as trapped in a closed system of false-consciousness duped by the conservative forces of American capitalism, rugged individualism and crass materialism totally obliterates the human agency, purposeful appropriation and theological negotiations that take place by participants within this particular blending of Black religion and popular culture.

What is more, distinguishing and defining exactly what constitutes popular culture is another area where British cultural studies can continue to sharpen Black theology’s methodological foci. Consistent with a theological turn to culture, and contrary to my above criticisms, Black liberation theology is very much concerned, in theory, with the religious sensibility of non-elites. I have already noted how Black theologians regularly appeal to non-traditional theological sources such as the slave narratives to interpret the spiritual strivings on those on the underside of society. Yet it appears that in investigating, illuminating and lifting up the theological sensibility of the masses, some have failed to distinguish between differing types of Black cultural production. Notwithstanding the work of other theologians and biblical scholars who have employed a hermeneutic of return to connect Black liberation theology to distinctive Black cultural sources, I will again focus on the work of Dwight Hopkins, as his work provides the most consistent treatment of Black theology and Black culture.

Folk Culture or Popular Culture?

In Hopkins’ most recent book, *Being Human: Race, Culture, and Religion*, Hopkins posits African American folktales as instructive and insightful models that demonstrate the God-human connection. He believes folktales are “built on the raw materials of stories about spiritual presence among ordinary people,” and offer theologians insight and access to a cultural space that reveals positive encounters between Black poor and the divine.⁵² Moreover, the Black folktale archetypes of the trickster, conjurer, outlaw and faithful Christian witness, according to Hopkins, reveal “what god has created humans to be and what

52. Dwight N. Hopkins, *Being Human: Race, Culture, and Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 54.

humans are called to become still today.”⁵³ For example, Hopkins interprets the trickster archetype as representing a strategy of reversal to demonstrate how socially downtrodden yet spiritually centered communities can flourish against the odds. For these reasons, among others, Hopkins regards folktales as authentic representations of folk culture.⁵⁴ In his words they are, “cultural indices of the positive encounter between the black poor and the sacred vision.”⁵⁵

In the introduction of *Being Human*, however, Hopkins also refers to Black folktales as a form of Black popular culture. This is no small difference. But it is consistent with the manner in which he has deployed notions of folk and popular culture interchangeably throughout his writings on culture. In the previously mentioned text, after citing Raymond William’s classic definition of culture as “a whole way of life,” Hopkins defines *folk culture* as “nonelites—working people, communities living in structural poverty, the marginalized, the unrecognized voices in our society.” He goes on to add, “the folk believe in and practice a sacred way of life from the bottom of society.”⁵⁶ In his essay, “Black Theology on God: The Divine in Black Popular Religion,” Hopkins defines *popular religion* as “the sacred life experiences of non-elites—the poor, working class people, the marginalized, and the least of these in society.”⁵⁷ And in an essay entitled “Black Theology: The Notion of Culture Revisited,” Hopkins borrows from Amilcar Cabral, the West African nationalist politician and writer, and defines *popular culture* as “that which emanates more or less from social sectors lacking ownership and control over wealth.”⁵⁸ It is apparent, then, that Hopkins sees conceptual consistency in folk culture, popular religion and popular culture. In terms of the sacred, all three substantively articulate the spiritual striving of those on the underside of society.

I believe it is appropriate to define folk culture as Hopkins does here. In a postmodern capitalist economy fueled by the mass production of commodities

53. Hopkins, *Being Human*, 169.

54. See Hopkins, *Being Human*, 2–3, where Hopkins discusses why a deeper conceptual analysis of culture, selves/self, and race are necessary in relationship to cultural anthropology. After offering brief introductions of black folktales, contemporary models of theological anthropology, and his own previous writings, Hopkins states, “After these comparative reviews of black popular culture, theological anthropology paradigms, and my own prior works, I concluded that...” Thus, one can see that Hopkins is conflating the Black folktales with Black popular culture.

55. Hopkins, *Being Human*, 169.

56. Hopkins, *Being Human*, 169–70.

57. Dwight N. Hopkins, “Black Theology on God: The Divine in Black Popular Religion,” in *The Ties That Bind: African American and Hispanic American/Latino/a Theologies in Dialogue*, ed. Anthony B. Pinn and Benjamin Valentin (New York and London: Continuum, 2001), 99.

58. Dwight N. Hopkins, “Black Theology: The Notion of Culture Revisited,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* (2005): 78.

and control of knowledge, it makes sense to define cultural production from below as principally in the possession of those alienated from social power and economic capital. Here, like in the pre-capitalist world, folk culture remains localized. It can thus be characterized as all of the traditional cultural systems that enhance a particular group's personal and social lives. Popular culture, on the other hand, is characterized by mass production, distribution and consumption within the larger economy. Because popular culture requires a mass audience, it also requires access to a conduit of mass distribution whether it be television, radio, movies, books, magazine and/or cyber-technologies. Why is this distinction important? Confusing and conflating folk culture and popular culture can lead one to essentialize the former as the authentic and organic representations while missing the ideological systems of power and authority operative in the latter. This appears to be the case in Hopkins' treatment of the folktales. Indeed the folktales provide an example of Black popular culture. Not because Black folktales emerge from African American folk culture and represent the moral and ethical sensibility of enslaved and poor southern Blacks, though such a claim is true in part. But what makes folktales a form of popular culture rather than mere folk culture is the way they entered into the imagination of the larger society through the writings of *Atlanta Constitution* journalist Joel Chandler Harris, a member of the White dominant overclass. And while Hopkins interprets Black folktales as culturally subversive archetypes, there is evidence that Joel Chandler Harris, along with other White cultural elites, circulated images of the trickster, conjurer, outlaw and faithful Christian in the late nineteenth century in order to satiate the anxieties of America's White supremacist imagination following the Civil War and subsequent Reconstruction efforts. The *Dial* magazine published the following review of Harris' 1892 collection *On the Plantation*:

The old plantation negro and the old negro house-servant seem to live and talk again in his pages; and very interesting and attractive people they are, full of quaint good sense, full of affection, of good humor, and of natural courtesy. Why has the negro of today so completely lost the best traits that marked his race at that time? The good nature and humor are gone and the courtesy is gone; and what good qualities have taken their place? The negro has become a voter, and in the effort to seem the peer of the whites he has copied many of the worst defects of uncultivated white men, and has at the same time lost some characteristics of his own which once made his race attractive and lovable. It is a period of transition: let us hope that as it took a hundred years to transform the African savage into the gentle and lovable negro known on many a plantation before the war, so another hundred years may develop the negro of today into something much better than now seems probable.⁵⁹

59. Alexander C. McClurg, "Old Time Plantation Life: A Review of *The Plantation*," in *The Dial* (June 1892).

Unfortunately, Hopkins fails to provide the appropriate theoretical nuance necessary when distinguishing the mass-mediated cultural expressions of the folk, which constitute popular culture, over and against authentic representations of the folk, which are largely invisible and have evaporated into the gases of history. This awareness of the inability to retrieve and mass circulate true cultural representations of the folk led Zora Neale Hurston, the original Black anthropologist of folk culture, to surmise that there has never been a legitimate presentation of genuine Negro expression to any audience anywhere. The true folktales, she said, “were being made and forgotten everyday.”⁶⁰

It is safe to conclude, then, that such theoretical slippage can have deleterious implications for the interpretive task of Black liberation theology. We have seen examples of how Hopkins’ ideological path into Black cultural sources causes him to *overdetermine* popular cultural practices, such as conservative Black evangelical broadcasting, which are conceived as outside the pale of the primary principles of Black liberation theology. Just as it causes him to *underdetermine* Black cultural practices that are wrongly interpreted as representative of the “folk.” To be sure, in the latter case, I am not suggesting that we allow anyone to take hostage of the cultural production of African Americans. I am saying, however, that if black cultural production is to be a source of African American theological reflection, we have to take into consideration the full gamut of influences that inspired their entrance into popular culture and their subsequent circulation throughout the years. The admonition of Ralph Ellison seems appropriate here:

Somehow it was assumed that the Negroes, of all the diverse American peoples, would remain unaffected by the climate, the weather, the political circumstances—from which not even slaves were exempt—the social structures, the national manners, the modes of production and the tides of the market, the national ideals, the conflicts of values, the rising and falling of national morale, or the complex give and take of acculturation which was undergone by all others who found their existence within the American democracy.⁶¹

Conclusion

I agree with Black liberation theologians that the religious cultures of the non-elite offer great insight into the creative capacity and moral richness of African American theological thought and practice. Popular religious phenomena of

60. Derived from Zora Neale Hurston’s 1934 essay “Spirituals and Neo Spirituals” as quoted in Eric J. Sundquist, *The Hammers of Creation: Folk Culture in Modern African American Fiction* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1992), 51.

61. Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act*, 1st Vintage international ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 250.

everyday Black folks, like the world of Black religious broadcasting, are valuable theological sources. However, this essay has sought to demonstrate that I find the theoretical and methodological terrain of cultural studies beneficial to Black theology of liberation for the following reasons: First, the Birmingham School of thought encourages theologians to have a more nuanced approach to varying forms of Black cultural production. Culture should not be viewed solely as the possession of an elite class (high culture) or as human agency and resistance from below (folk culture). Culture is fluid and represents a whole way of life for a society, or particular ways of life among conjoining and conflicting groups. And when cultural practices are made accessible to the masses via advanced media technologies, both elite and folk culture are transformed into popular culture. Though distributed by the culture industries, thus necessitating certain levels of economic capital, its mass appeal must speak to and reflect the cultural sensibilities of everyday folks on a relative level. Hence, theoretically, popular culture should be conceived as both a site of cultural resistance and cultural incorporation.

Second, cultural studies provides theologians with interpretive tools to unpack (demystify) the polyvalent signs and symbols encoded in mass mediated culture. This includes messages that wittingly and unwittingly promote a particular theological and/or political orientation. As it relates to Black religious broadcasting, for instance, such questions as: what signs and symbols are equated with the divine? How might physical architecture, captions projected upon the screen, or the purposeful placement of luxury images be decoded by varying participants? How might these readings be affected by social location and cultural circumstances? Semiotic method disrupts naturalized interpretation and demands historical specificity due to the fluid nature of cultural meaning. The language and symbols that may signify the sacred, notions of freedom and liberation change over time and are always irreducibly open and contestable. Thus this particular method provides a means for Black liberation theologians to decipher a plethora of complementary, competing yet culturally sustainable meanings from both explicit and implicit signs and symbols.

Third, a theoretically nuanced conception as well as a comprehensive though responsible interpretation of popular culture leads to mature cultural criticism. Human subjects should neither be treated exclusively as duped sheep being led to slaughter nor as revolutionary forces of cultural upheaval. Whether we are discussing viewers of religious broadcasting in the contemporary moment or African American folktales of the late nineteenth century, mass circulated cultural meanings are not viewed as imposed by conservative elites or produced organically by the common masses. Hence, Black liberation theologians become more open to cultural sources that a narrow ideological path may have discounted. The narratives, testimonies and practices of particular African American faith communities that would otherwise be dismissed become potentially

rich sources of religious creativity, counter-hegemonic activity and spiritual sophistication. Just the same, Black liberation theologians become more aware of the ideological implications of Black cultural sources that are otherwise extolled as examples of counter-cultural theological resistance. A mature critical eye is thus turned to all forms of cultural production.

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