

“No Respector of Persons”:
A Constructive Black Theology of Otherness

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Project Context, Problem, and Thesis

The goal of my dissertation project is to construct a Black theology of otherness (alterity) that moves past totalizing conceptualizations of human alterity.¹ Black theology has its beginnings in the intellectual tensions between the non-violent civil rights movements (such as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference led by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.) and the radical Black power movements (such as the Black Panther Party founded by Huey P. Newton and Robert Seale) in the middle part of the twentieth century. As established in two of its founding publications—the National Committee of Negro Churchmen’s statement on Black Power in the New York Times (1966) and James H. Cone’s *Black Theology and Black Power* (1969)—Black theology attempts to make the Christian gospel relevant for people of African descent who are attempting to flourish in a society that is often set against them.² There is no single line of thought within Black theology and there are a variety of contextual perspectives that expand the field by focusing on different concerns. However, Black theology’s various trajectories share common ground because they constructively address human alterity.³

There are two approaches to alterity in Black theology that form the backdrop for my project: race and diversity. Race is a major way that Black theologians engage difference in their writings. In addition to Cone’s seminal works, thinkers who are representative of this trajectory

¹ Throughout this proposal, I will use *theology* to refer to the study of religious beliefs and the practices of particular religious or non-religious communities. Theological questions and responses engage major questions in the life of religious communities: meaning, reality, beauty/goodness/holiness, and ritual practice.

² National Committee of Negro Churchmen, “Black Power: Statement by the National Committee of Negro Churchmen, 1966,” in *Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1966-1979*, eds. Gayraud S. Wilmore and James H. Cone (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 19-26; James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (New York, NY: The Seabury Press, 1969).

³ Rather than describing something essential/substantial, I understand *difference as a construct* that takes shape through the language we use to name and define groupings of people. In other words, difference as a concept is constructed and always under construction. The way we conceive difference is fluid and constantly under production. While difference as a concept often reflects binary thinking (i.e., Black and White), it tends to exceed simple oppositions. While difference is a construction, it is necessary to be keenly aware that difference often names social, political, and economic power relations which privilege certain cultural groups above others.

include people such as J. Deotis Roberts, Albert B. Cleage, Jr., and Dwight N. Hopkins.⁴ In various ways, they argue that racial Blackness is an expression of God's image in humanity that has worth and dignity. Black is beautiful because it reflects divine creativity in the world. These thinkers also argue that racial Blackness has a culture around it that is rich and full of resources that Black people can use to construct theologies that move them towards their flourishing in the world. By envisioning alterity through the lens of race, Black theologians are able to engage in a sort of *redemption* of Blackness from its malformation by the logics of White supremacy. This redemptive move attempts to redefine Black life in contradistinction to the oppressive, life-denying realities that flow from racial oppression.

While continuing to use race as a theoretical lens, the second approach to difference in Black theologies emphasizes human diversity and the interconnections between dissimilar human communities. Key thought leaders who go this direction in their work include Henry James Young, Monica A. Coleman, and Brian Bantum.⁵ These theologies tend to recognize that race is a *social construct* that cannot contain the composite mix of identifies that converge in individual human bodies. In order to problematize race—without completely moving beyond it—theologies in this vein argue that God's universe is full of multiplicity and as a result, difference is the norm. Rather than trying to resolve difference, these thinkers envision a world where all bodies are given the chance to flourish by making space for one another.

⁴ James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997); J. Deotis Roberts, *Liberation and Reconciliation: A Black Theology*, 2nd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005); Albert B. Cleage, Jr. "What Black Christian Nationalism Teaches and Its Program: Statement from the Black Christian Nationalist Church, Inc., 1976" in *Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1966-1979*, ed. Gayraud S. Wilmore and James H. Cone (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 263-265; Dwight N. Hopkins, *Down, Up, and Over: Slave Religion and Black Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000).

⁵ Henry James Young, *Hope in Process: A Theology of Social Pluralism* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1990); Karen Baker-Fletcher, *Dancing with God: The Trinity from a Womanist Perspective* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2006); Monica A. Coleman, *Making a Way Out of No Way: A Womanist Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2008); Brian Bantum, *Redeeming Mulatto: A Theology of Race and Christian Hybridity* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010).

Important work is being done by theorizing human difference through the lens of race and diversity. Beyond giving African Americans a language that locates God in the struggle towards full flourishing, Black theology makes a major contribution to Christian theology because it does not treat markers of alterity as secondary matters. Rather, it deals with human variety as a primary matter of theological anthropology. The Black theology project demands that scholars undertake explorations of alterity as a central part of their work. With this in mind, I want to raise two concerns about these approaches that shape my project problem.

First, a significant number of Black theologies tend to think about racial Blackness as *ontological blackness*. Victor Anderson notes that ontological Blackness “connotes categorical, essentialist, and representational languages depicting black life and experience.”⁶ In this sense, race is a part of one’s very being and generates a particular form of life. On the one hand, ontological Blackness is problematic because it fails to capture the complex internal diversities within African American communities. It can make it seem as if there is a singular experience of racial Blackness that adheres to a monolithic narrative (typically centering on the suffering of Black bodies). On the other hand, ontological Blackness—at least the way it is often at play in Black theology—cannot exist without ontological Whiteness. Anderson forcefully argues this point, noting that “ontological blackness signifies *the blackness that whiteness created* [emphasis added].”⁷ While attempting to leave race (as a concept) behind may not be an adequate solution, we need a way of thinking about alterity is both inclusive to many forms of Black life and not dependent on Whiteness for its existence. Black theology needs a theory of difference that moves beyond essentialist, ontological racial categories.

⁶ Victor Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness: An Essay on African American Religious and Cultural Criticism* (New York, NY: Continuum, 1995), 11.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 13.

Second, Black theologies that *normalize diversity* can constrain alterity to identity markers that do not affirm the ever-excessive ways human difference occurs in the world. To be clear, diversity logic is an important intellectual move beyond ontological race because it recognizes that human individuals and communities are a mix of multiple differences (ethnicity, gender, sexuality, ability, class, and religion among others) rather than being reducible to a single marker of difference. I see the work of second-generation womanist theologians (for example, Karen Baker-Fletcher) and third-generation/fourth-generation Black theologians (for example, Brian Bantum) affirming a plurality of identities in their theologies of humanity. My concern is that these frameworks are still dealing with difference through identity markers that ultimately enclose alterity within totalized identity categories. While the affirmation of multiple identities can seem to create the foundation for a truly diverse community—a move that is frequently made in womanist and certain Black theologies—these identities can easily end up as essentialized categories that leave little room for bodies that do not fit the definition of these identities. Black theology needs a theory of difference that realizes the impossibility of containing alterity within the bounds of identity (even multiple identities).

I will address these concerns by using Emmanuel Levinas's theory of *otherness* and Black Pentecostal pneumatology to construct an original theology of human alterity in conversation with Black theology. By the conclusion of my dissertation project, I will advance the following thesis: by moving beyond the totalizing logics of race and diversity, it is possible to envision a world where the Spirit empowers human beings to welcome one another's *irreducible otherness* as a holy expression of communion with the infinity of the other.⁸ I am

⁸ I am using the term *otherness* in the Levinasian sense where it refers to the infinite difference that one encounters in other human beings (and that other human beings encounter in the self) that cannot be diminished or eradicated. In his *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas argues that the other's otherness calls into question human freedom and places an ethical demand on us that cannot be evaded.

calling for Black theology (and Christian theology in general) to take seriously the Apostle Peter's declaration that "God is no respecter of [the ways humans classify] persons," recognizing that God's Spirit forms interconnections between humans that exceed social constructions, boundaries, and arrangements of alterity.⁹ The miracle of Pentecost in the Luke-Acts narrative is the creation of a Spirit-formed community that brought radical others together—Jews and Gentiles—in confounding, yet gracious ways. Where the Spirit is present, the individual self is at home with the face of the Other whose otherness cannot be evaded.

My project will benefit from engaging with Levinas because he has a powerful critique of *totalizing ontological conceptualizations* of alterity that attempt to cut down on the space between the self and the Other.¹⁰ Black theology will also enrich Levinasian thinking by showing that markers of difference that attempt to name the face of the Other (especially race) must be taken into account when theorizing alterity.¹¹ Furthermore, my work will benefit from reconstructing alterity through the lens of African American Pentecostal pneumatology because there is a *spiritual disruptiveness* that Black Pentecostal experience throws against political, economic, institutional, and societal powers that attempt to enclose the varieties of life that resist the status quo.¹² Black pneumatology envisions a world marked by the equitable leveling of human relationships in the midst of complex otherness. By bringing these two frameworks into conversation with Black theology, my project will offer a novel framing of human alterity that embraces the excessiveness of otherness in God's universe.

⁹ Acts 10:34-35. In his *Who is the Holy Spirit?: A Walk with the Apostles*, Amos Yong argues that this narrative points to the unbound-ness of the Spirit and the fact that the Spirit-formed community is not subject to the constrictions that are productions of social constructions of difference.

¹⁰ Seán Hand, *Emmanuel Levinas* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2009), 36.

¹¹ John E. Drabinski, *Levinas and the Postcolonial: Race, Nation, Other* (Edinburgh, UK: University of Edinburgh, 2011), 39.

¹² Ashon T. Crawley, *Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2017), 3.

Project Scope

There are a couple aspects of my project scope that need mention to specify the boundaries of my research. First, I will primarily interact with contemporary Black theologies that are products of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. My chosen focus should not be understood to mean that Black Americans were not thinking theologically prior to the academic beginnings of Black theology in the 1960s. Scholars such as Albert J. Raboteau (from a religious history perspective in his publication of *Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South*) and Dwight N. Hopkins (from a theological perspective in his publication of *Down, Up, and Over: Slave Religion and Black Theology*) clearly establish that Black Americans have been engaging in God-talk (theology) since the arrival of the first African slaves in the “New World” in the 1600s. I am specifically focusing on contemporary Black theologies because of their deliberate examination of human alterity through the logics of race and diversity.

Secondly, I will only engage with select contemporary Black theologians who are working within some sort of Christian theological framework. There are other approaches to Black theology embedded in non-Christian religious traditions and even ones that work in non-theistic humanistic frameworks. I will not deal with these at length since my project will not have enough space to deeply treat each of these approaches in a meaningful way. By limiting my project’s scope, I believe that I will be able to give a deeper analysis to Christian Black theologies which have been a key part of my graduate research. Also, my project will not give readers an extensive literature review of every Black theologian who deals with difference in their work. Instead, my research centers on the work of a few select thinkers who have a sustained focus on human alterity that is representative of the common approaches to alterity in Black theology.

Project Method

I am approaching my dissertation as a constructive theology. First, I will analyze the two major approaches to alterity in Black theology through the writings of James H. Cone, Albert B. Cleage, Jr., J. Deotis Roberts, Henry James Young, Monica A. Coleman, and Brian Bantum. Each of these thinkers has important things to say about race and/or diversity that I believe are critically important for readers to hear if they are to understand something about how Black theology has thought about alterity. Second, I will construct a theology of otherness through drawing on Levinasian ideas about alterity, demonstrating how otherness as a concept shows up within Black Pentecostal pneumatology, and creating a pneumatological framework that opens up a liberative view of human alterity.

Project Significance and Contribution

While my work will continue some of the same ideas found in existing Black theologies, it also contains two significant distinguishing features. First, my dissertation attempts to move beyond ontological race (not just ontological Blackness and identity) and Western notions of diversity in ways that existing Black theologies have not done. As I note earlier in this proposal, race and diversity logics have been a key part of the contemporary Black theology project. There is not much divergence from these logics of difference. While I am not denying the important work these concepts are doing, they ultimately function to contain plurality rather than allowing it to flourish in all of its complexities. One way to address this is by thinking about human alterity in terms of otherness (à la Levinas). To my knowledge, there are no scholars working in Black theology who deal with Levinas in a major way and my work stands to introduce him to field as a generative interlocutor.¹³

¹³ This is not to say that there are not Black theologians who are working with ideas that come close to what Levinas is saying about otherness. In his recent work, *The Death of Race: Building a new Christianity in a*

Rather than attempting to make use of all of the Levinasian corpus—this might turn my theological project into more of a philosophical project—I will primarily utilize his conceptualizations of totality and otherness in his *Totality and Infinity*. These ideas can help build a strong critique of the way alterity is being thought about in Black theology, while simultaneously giving Black theology a new language of alterity that can serve as the foundations for new frameworks for thinking about difference. I believe that totality will be helpful in problematizing race and diversity, especially since they can be said to be co-agents in the “conquest of otherness” that concerns a significant part of Levinas’s project.¹⁴ Otherness offers a critical way of thinking about alterity that makes it clear that the individual self is partly a product of encountering the one who is not the self. In terms of his significance for my constructive theology, Levinas will give me the language to argue that the Spirit brings people together in the midst of dissimilarity (rather than in its absence).

Second, my project is significant because it realizes that Black Pentecostal pneumatology needs a robust hearing within Black theology. While there are many works in Black theology that primarily do their constructive work through Christology, there are fewer thinkers who are using pneumatology as a primary anchor or building point in their work. Not only is my project unique with its concentration on pneumatology rather than Christology, it is also distinctive because the pneumatological framework that I am working with comes from Black Pentecostalism. Even though Black Pentecostalism is one of the significant contemporary African American religious traditions—it has direct ties to Black religion in the American South and has a large following within the African American community—it has yet to be extensively

Racial World, Brian Bantum does border on Levinasian language because of his focus on the meaning of bodies in the world that exceed the narrow limits of race (a social construct that has deadly power).

¹⁴ John E. Drabinski, *Levinas and the Postcolonial: Race, Nation, Other* (Edinburgh, UK: University of Edinburgh, 2011), 54.

engaged in Black theology. Since Black Pentecostal pneumatology touches on community in the midst of difference, it can open new ways of thinking about alterity within Black theology.

While Levinas provides the constructive part of my dissertation with a useful philosophical theory about human alterity, Black Pentecostal pneumatology provides me with a theological vision for a community of dissimilar persons. There are two concepts within Black Pentecostal pneumatology (along with its broader theological framework) that I will utilize in my project: radical love and transformation. William J. Seymour—an early twentieth century Black preacher who is one of the key leaders in the early North American Pentecostal movement—argues that the evidence of the Spirit’s presence in a community is radical love for one’s neighbor (the Other) that confounds the status quo.¹⁵ I will engage Seymour’s ideas around radical love as they are found in his published sermons and in *The Apostolic Faith* because he attempts to rethink difference in a deeply racialized context. While Seymour does deal with alterity in terms of race, I argue that he is also pushing towards an understanding of human alterity that borders on what Levinas means by otherness.

Leonard Lovett will also be a key interlocutor for the constructive part of my dissertation because he constructs a theological ethic of transformation within Black Pentecostal thought with the liberative aims of Black theology.¹⁶ Lovett argues that despite the reading of Pentecostalism as a socially withdrawn movement (Pentecostals have often been accused of “being so heavenly-minded, they are no earthly good”), the movement’s theology contains robust visions for social transformation theologians should examine; these will be key for my project because Black Pentecostal theologies touch on social transformation in a pluralistic society.

¹⁵ Estrela Y. Alexander, *Black Fire: One Hundred Years of African American Pentecostalism* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011), 130-131.

¹⁶ Leonard Lovett, “Black Holiness-Pentecostalism: Implications for Ethics and Social Transformation” (PhD diss., Emory University, 1979), 138-172.

Levinas and Black Pentecostal pneumatology exist in very different worlds: one exists within the European academy and the other emerges within the religious traditions of the African diaspora in the aftermath of slavery. However, they both make an important move in their frameworks that is truly liberating for conceptualizing human alterity: they dismantle the oppressiveness of totality and welcome the excessiveness of otherness in the formation of community. In other words, both of these frameworks resist reducing the one who is not the self to a totalized concept and find value in allowing the other to be the other. Appreciating the irreducible otherness of the Other is fundamental to the individual self finding its own unique existence in the world. My project makes a significant move in bringing these two paradigms together and I believe that it has the potential to create a novel way of thinking about alterity that can breathe new life into the important work Black theology is already doing around theological anthropology.

Without question, race and diversity have carried Black theology's conceptualization of alterity a long way. I want to affirm the work that has already been done in Black theology when it comes to theologizing about difference. However—as I argue elsewhere in this proposal—these concepts about difference can only go so far because they ultimately function to *tame alterity*. My project aims to make an original contribution to the field by constructing a theology of difference that 1) does not seek to circumscribe alterity within the bounds of identity, 2) sees dissimilarity as the necessary ground for communion between human others, and 3) uses pneumatology to discuss the movement of human others into community with one another.

Tentative Chapter Outline

Introduction – Problem, Thesis, and Method – I will introduce my project by outlining the two ways that Black theologies tend to deal with human alterity: race and diversity. After giving this background, I will discuss my project problem: race and diversity are totalizing concepts that attempt to enclose alterity rather than honoring the complex otherness of the one who is not the self. Finally, I will state my project thesis and outline the method I will use: an analysis of key thinkers of alterity within Black theology and constructing a Black theology of otherness.

Part One – Black Theology and Difference

Chapter 1 – Black Theology: An Introduction – I will use this chapter to give a brief introduction to Black theology—starting in the late 1960s—and with special attention to theologians working within this theological paradigm who are thinking about human alterity.

Chapter 2 – Redeeming Race – I will use this chapter to analyze Black theologies of difference through the work of James H. Cone, J. Deotis Roberts, and Albert B. Cleage, Jr. These thinkers engage difference primarily through racial difference and do so with showing that racial Blackness is an expression of the *imago dei* in humanity. While thinking about alterity in terms of race does important work, it tends to approach race as an ontological, essential category.

Chapter 3 – Normalizing Diversity – I will use this chapter to analyze select Black theologies of difference that emphasize multiplicity and plurality. In particular, I will look at the thought of Henry James Young, Monica A. Coleman, and Brain Bantum. While these thinkers recognize that limiting difference to race can be problematic—especially since race is a construct—they still deal in makers of identity/difference that attempt to enclose difference.

Part Two – A Constructive Black Theology of Otherness

Chapter 4 – A Theological Reading of Levinasian Otherness – I will use this chapter to engage two critical concepts that come out of Levinas’s *Totality and Infinity*: totality and otherness (or infinity). I will demonstrate how these terms—which, depending on what one means by “theology” are very non-theological within Levinas—should be appropriated to thinking theologically about alterity.

Chapter 5 – Black Pentecost and Alterity – I will use this chapter to argue that Black Pentecostal pneumatology envisions human difference along the lines of what Levinas calls otherness in his work. William J. Seymour (an early twentieth century Pentecostal pastor) and Leonard Lovett (a Pentecostal theo-ethicist) will be the primary interlocutors for this chapter.

Chapter 6 – Welcoming the Other – I will use this chapter to bring Levinasian and Black Pentecostal pneumatology into a synthesis. I will show that the Spirit forms community in the midst of otherness (not by getting rid of the space between the self and the other) and that this is the foundation of welcoming the one who is not the self.

Conclusion – In this chapter, I will give my concluding thoughts on my project. I will use this space to discuss ways to further develop and build on the work I have done in my dissertation.

Bibliographic Method

I conduct broad general word searches using the Compass search function on the University of Denver's library website. I tend to focus on exploring academic search engines such as Academic Search Complete and Ebsco. Additionally, I like to use the ALTA database to focus on recent theological publications. The following key words continue to yield a number of helpful results within these academic databases: "Levinas," "philosophy-difference," "alterity," "otherness," "Black theology," "pneumatology," and "Pentecostalism." Additionally, I use the ProQuest Dissertations & Thesis Global database to look at other recent dissertations that are written in my area of focus.

I am current in the areas of focus that are represented in my dissertation. For Black theology, I keep up with recent publications in *Black Theology: An International Journal* and anything that is being published by scholars working within the Black theology group of the American Academy of Religion. When it comes to Pentecostal studies, I frequently read recent publications in *Pneuma: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies* and the various Pentecostal studies series (especially the ones published by Brill and Routledge). Additionally, I regularly engage with scholars working in Pentecostal studies through the Society for Pentecostal Studies. For Levinas, the work of John E. Drabinski continues to be very helpful for me because of his postcolonial reading of Levinas. I have also been reading journal articles that deal with diversity and race in general since these are subjects that come up in my work.

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