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EGE UNIVERSITY

GRADUATE SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN'S PSALMS OF DELIVERANCE: RACE, LIBERTY, AND GENDER IN BLACK CHRISTIAN POETRY

Master Thesis

Emre AÇIKGÖZ

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ETİK KURALLARA UYGUNLUK BEYANNAMESİ

Bu tezin bana ait, özgün bir çalışma olduğunu; çalışmamın hazırlık, veri toplama, analiz ve bilgilerin sunumu olmak üzere tüm aşamalarında bilimsel etik ve kurallara uygun davrandığımı; bu çalışma kapsamında elde edilen tüm veri ve bilgiler için kaynak gösterdiğimi ve bu kaynaklara kaynakçada yer verdiğimi; bu çalışmanın Ege Üniversitesi tarafından kullanılan 'bilimsel intihal tespit programı' ile tarandığını ve hiçbir şekilde 'intihal içermediğini' beyan ederim.

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Emre Açıkgöz

Önsöz

Amerika Birleşik Devletleri tarihi ülkenin dini demografisi, gelenekleri, ve dini politikleri anlaşılmadan yorumlanamaz. Bu Amerikan dini geleneğinin etkilediği alanlardan birisi de ülkenin edebi mirasıdır. Tez araştırması sürecinde sivil hak mücadelesi geleneği, teoloji, tarih ve edebiyatın kesişim noktasına odaklanarak bu dini-edebi mirasın incelenmesi hedeflenmiştir. Bu konu başlığının çalışılmasının sebebi ise Amerikan Kültürü ve Edebiyatı alanında yapılan çalışmalarda teolojik okumaların önemine dikkat çekmek ve ileride teoloji okumalarıyla birlikte disiplinlerarası yürütülebilecek başka çalışmalara bir örnek sunmaktır.

İzmir, 2026 Emre Açıkgöz

Özet

İngiliz Reformasyonu sonucunda İngiltere Kilisesi'nin kendisi için yarattığı *via media* (orta yol) kimliğinden memnun olmayan İngiliz Protestanlarının Kuzey Amerika'daki İngiliz kolonileşmesine katılmalarıyla birlikte, gelecekteki Amerika Birleşik Devletleri'nin karakterinin dini fikirler tarafından şekillendirileceği belli olmuştur. Özellikle Kalvinizme özgü dualizmin yarattığı hiyerarşik dünya bakışı, köleliğin kolonilerde kurumsallaşmasıyla birlikte bu kuruma dini bir kimlik kazandırmıştır. Bu düalizmden doğan beyaz ve siyah Hristiyanlıklar, oluştukları ortam gereği politik dinî hareketler olarak var olmuşlardır. Bu politize olmuş dini hareketler, içlerinden çıktıkları toplumların kültürel miraslarını da etkilemiş; müziklerinde, resimlerinde ve edebi anlatılarında kendilerini göstermişlerdir. Bu çalışmada da Amerika'nın ikilemler üzerinde yapılanmış toplumunun dinî, tarihî ve edebî miraslarının bir arada incelenmesi hedeflenmiştir. Teolojik olarak temelini James H. Cone, Delores S. Williams ve Kelly Brown Douglas'ın çalışmalarından alan bu tez, Phillis Wheatley, Frances E. W. Harper ve Pauli Murray'nin şiirlerini inceleyerek bu şairlerin kendi edebi dünyalarında özgürleştirici bir din anlayışına nasıl yer verdiklerini ele alır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Siyah Teolojisi, Feminist Teoloji, Siyahi Şiiri, Özgürlük

Abstract

As a result of the English Reformation, English Protestants, dissatisfied with the "via media" (middle way) identity the Church of England had fashioned for itself, participated in the British colonization of North America. With this migration, it became clear that the character of the future United States would be fundamentally shaped by religious ideas. In particular, the hierarchical worldview generated by the characteristic dualism of Calvinism lent a religious identity to slavery as the institution became entrenched in the colonies. Emerging from this dualism, White and Black Christianities (Brown Douglas 73, 95) functioned as inherently political-religious movements due to the environment in which they developed. These politicized religious movements also influenced the cultural heritage of their respective societies, manifesting themselves in their music, visual arts, and literary narratives. Accordingly, this study aims to examine the religious, historical, and literary legacies of America's inherently dichotomous society through an integrated approach. Grounded theologically in the works of James H. Cone, Delores S. Williams, and Kelly Brown Douglas, this thesis analyzes the poetry of Phillis Wheatley, Frances E. W. Harper, and Pauli Murray to investigate how these writers carved out space for a liberating understanding of religion within their respective literary worlds.

Key Words: Black Theology, Feminist Theology, Black Poetry, Liberation

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1. Introduction

Religion is not only a metaphysical assent to certain dogmas concerning the divine. Nor is it a set of rituals and practices to invoke the divine for a material or spiritual benefit. It is also a force that affects changes in social environments and is itself dynamic. Religion, while shaping society, is also shaped by it and responds accordingly to the needs and conditions of its native environment. James H. Cone argues in *A Black Theology of Liberation* that theology is inherently a contextual language defined by the social conditions that give rise to it. The United States of America, still considered the most religious among the nations of the global north (Pasquier 6), has historically been, and remains, heavily influenced by the religious trends of its population. Politics, in particular, is an aspect of the American social landscape that actively engages with religion. Though the separation between church and state is a fundamental aspect of the political consciousness of the American people, the Constitution does not prevent religious communities from engaging in indirect political activity, and it would be impossible to expect a religious individual to hold political opinions uninformed by the worldview of their faith. Textbooks on American political institutions have historically tried to downplay the engagement between religion and the American political landscape, claiming that religion is not, and never has been, a significant factor in the development of American political institutions or in their operations (Carey 7). This claim, of course, fails considerably to account for both the contemporary and historic politicization of the American church. Indeed, we can see that in contemporary American society, religion is one of the strongest tools of political mobilization (Jelen 1). This peculiar connection between politics and religion permeates all aspects of American culture, ranging from the arts to language and literature. Within this religio-political landscape, the aim of this thesis is to read the manifestations of black Christianity, an inherently political version of Christianity, in the works of Phillis Wheatley, Frances E. W. Harper, and Pauli Murray. The reasoning behind the selection of these three poets is not arbitrary, nor is it purely chronological. Within the span of two centuries, we see their work representing important milestones that signal the development of a distinct black Christian poetic tradition. Wheatley establishes the prophetic voice that permeate the genre, while we see Harper building upon this tradition a comprehensive theology of liberation that has at its center such biblical figures like

Moses, Hagar, and Ethiopian identity. Finally, Murray, who saw herself as a part of a long line of people struggling for freedom, reimagines this inherited tradition in terms of reconciliation, healing, and wholeness. When read together, it is not only the chronological but also theological continuity that justifies their being examined together in this study. Existing scholarship has made significant contributions to the study of Wheatley's, Harper's, and Murray's works individually, examining their literary corpus through the lenses of gender, race, civil rights, literary history etc. However, these poets have been mostly studied in isolation from one another. In Turkish academy, Phillis Wheatley has not been the focus of any particular study. Likewise, Frances E. W. Harper has not been studied as a poet, rather as a prose author by Nisa Harika Güzel Köşker in her 2016 doctoral thesis titled *Domesticity, slavery, and abolitionism in nineteenth-century women's writing in the United States: Harriet A. Jacobs's Incidents in the life of a Slave Girl, Lydia Maria Child's A Romance of the Republic, and Frances E. W. Harper's Iola Leroy, or Shadows Uplifted.* Pauli Murray's poetics has been part of a master's study conducted by Gözde Zülal Solak in her 2024 thesis titled *Sapphic Identity in the 20th Century American Poetry: Poetry as Performativity.* In all these instances, these poets' liberationist theological expressions in their poetics were not the subject matter of the study. Though womanist criticism has been part of such studies as Dilek Arslan's *Representation of violence in Alice Walker's The Color Purple and Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye in line with the new historicism* (2024), Magdalene Mbotiji Titamoh's *Sex, race, and class: Representation of black women in Alice Walker's the colour purple and the temple of my familiar* (2023), Ela Ocak Yeltekin's *Redefining black women's identity: In Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God, Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Purple Hibiscus novels, beauty and the body* (2025), these studies do not employ womanism as a part of larger black liberationist theological framework. Liberationist theology has been part of numerous studies in local academia as well. Brandon Stewart's *Faith and Fracture: The black church's role changing role in the Social Justice Movement* (2024), Alparslan Emin Öztürk's *Liberation Theology in Gustavo Gutiérrez* (2024), Hüseyin Çoban's *Politic of the Liberation Theology in Latin America: The case of Nicaragua* (2022), and Akın Üstünyer's *Liberation Theology in Christianity* (2020) are all studies conducted in the field. This study sits at the intersection of these fields, aiming to read these poets' contributions to the American tradition of poetry as one

continuous development that contains the germination of the academic development of black liberationist and womanist theologies in the 20th-century United States.

To read these manifestations, the first part of this study will deal with the historical development of black Christianity as an independent religious tradition under the institutionalized white supremacy of the American establishment. It aims to traverse the history of black religion as it developed because of the inherently dualistic nature of Reformed Christianity and the way it gave birth to black identity as subjugated by an elite group of whites. The historical development of this distinctive black religion is further analyzed from the Invisible Institution to the formation of institutionalized black churches as separate ecclesiastical entities, and to the development of the Civil Rights Movement as an inherently religious movement shaped by divergent black theologies. The second part deals with the systematic formulation of black liberationist and womanist theological frameworks through the works of James H. Cone, Delores S. Williams, and Kelly Brown Douglas. Firstly, the study focuses on the theological aspects of the systematized black liberationist thought as developed by James H. Cone, who declared the ontological blackness of God in the cultural landscape of the United States. This theological assertion is then developed through the womanist critique of black theology, as articulated in Delores S. Williams' *Sisters in the Wilderness,* which centralizes the suffering of black women within the liberationist discourse of black theology. Kelly Brown Douglas then further develops this theological framework by placing the concept of holistic liberation at its center. For Brown Douglas, true womanist theology must concern itself with liberation, whose paradigm must include all peoples, all around the world. For Brown Douglas, only through this holistic approach to liberation can the entire system of oppression be overthrown. Through this established framework, the final part of this study examines the poetics of Phillis Wheatley, Frances E. W. Harper, and Pauli Murray not simply as three separate literary expressions of faith but as successive manifestations in different time periods of a distinctly black Christian poetic tradition that contains a theological trajectory that follows prophetic witness, liberation and survival, reconciliation and holistic healing.

Historical Development of Black Christianity

This chapter focuses on the historical development of the black and white Christianities as separate phenomena in the United States. To follow this development, we will first analyze the significance of Reformed theology and its inherent dualistic outlook on the world that allowed the oppressive racial hierarchy to flourish under religious sanction. Then, we will see how the oppressed black slaves appropriated their oppressor's religion to carve themselves an identity and survive as a community in a hostile environment. Later, we will follow along their history as the independent black ecclesiastical bodies form and nourish the development of the black community through education and racial pride. Then we will focus on the instances of lynchings and political oppressions as they led to the Civil Rights Movement, which was inherently a religious movement shaped by the people of faith. Then we will analyze how different faith traditions within the black community clashed with one another only to converge and eventually result in a systematization of Black theology.

1.1. Religion in Colonial America

The first colonizers from England were religious dissenters who held fundamentally different ideas about the operation of the state and church, which led them into conflict with the authorities in their home countries. Realizing that their agenda of reform was not to come to fruition in the old world, they separated themselves from "an unregenerate government which persisted in maintaining a corrupt church" (Wald and Calhoun-Brown 76). Puritan political consciousness in

the 16th century was shaped by Reformed religion and its inherent anti-Catholic sentiment, combined with the Calvinist political system, which motivated the faithful to resist unlawful rulers. Puritan colonizers and their perspective of Christianity, though, were not to be the only kind of politicized faith movement to shape American political history. As Puritan and Pilgrim communities began their "exodus" to the North American continent, they brought to the New World a specific mentality that led them to consider themselves recipients of a divine mandate, a new Israel of God with a new covenant (Hopkins 16). This mandate was to establish a pure religious society, purged of the heathenish "popish" darkness that loomed over their previous home. This new society was to be the evangelical "city upon a hill", as stated in John Winthrop's famous yet disputed sermon *A Model of Christian Charity*. This mentality was the seed that would grow into the concept of American Exceptionalism. As groups of Puritans and Pilgrims arrived at the shores of the American Northeast:

> … the ultimate blessing was the bestowal upon God's special people of a New England—one whose lands were as virgin as the Pilgrim's religion was pure. Indeed this sense of a people, a Puritanism—pureness of superior theology, intellect, wealth, micro powers, racial culture, language—accompanied intentionally these 1620 arrivals as they proclaimed their ownership of all within their sight. And this self-perceived, religious white superiority derived primarily from a vocational sense of divine mission: to discover, possess, and rule over all lands and peoples created to be subdued by white images of and emissaries from God in heaven. (Hopkins 14)

This concept of purity became an integral aspect of the American consciousness, the idea that the "ideal" society established by God's chosen nation was to separate itself from all potentially defiling phenomena. These colonizers did not only bring with themselves their idea of divine election, but they also brought with themselves the mental grid that associated the black and blackness with the demonic, evil, inferior, and sinful, an idea already propagated by the mother churches with which these dissenters desired to distance themselves (Hopkins 15). Of course, in a context in which some consider themselves the elect, others must be considered reprobate. This Calvinistic and insular self-identification of the white settlers of the New World could not possibly result in anything except, or subsist without, a society that

discriminates based on one's membership in the in-group. The ascendance of the trans-Atlantic slave trade at that time provided white "elect" with the perfect outgroup to dehumanize and lord over.

The slavery of Africans by the colonists was already a reality of European life, beginning all the way back in the 15th century. Though the slave trade was not as profitable as it would become in later years, this early engagement between the Europeans and the African peoples had already created in the minds of the white people an image of the African as inferior, heathenish, and savage. Richard Sibbhes, a Master of St. Catherine's College in Cambridge, preached a sermon that reflected the already emergent mentality that dominated interracial relationships at the time:

> Now, God in preparation for the most part civiliseth people, and then Christianiseth them.... For the Spirit of God will not be effectual in a rude, wild and barbarous soul. . .. Therefore, they must be brought to civility . . . to cast them down; and then they are brought to Christianity thereupon. Therefore, they take a good course that labour to break them from their natural rudeness and fierceness (Pobee 54).

White people, bringing with them to the new world their hierarchical and dichotomous understanding of the world, were quick to establish the subordinate role of those who did not share their religion or complexion. Within a century of the Mayflower voyage, the famed Puritan minister Cotton Matter, was already theologizing on the "evident" superiority of the white race compared with the blacks. This indeed witnesses to the birth of a distinctive white theology centered around the concept of racial superiority:

> He believed that the blacks were the "miserable children of Adam and Noah." Out of one Bible and one historical human family arose two diametrically opposed races, black and white. Therefore, to African Americans, he exhorted: "[Be] Patient and Content with such a Condition as God has ordered for [you]." By ordering the bondspeople into slavery, in Mather's theology, God helped to bring fear and trembling to the blacks as they (symbolically speaking) stood before the divine throne. (Hopkins 31)

This kind of theologizing was the source of the creation of black as a separate identity from white, based on the already existent and ontological opposition

between the elect and the reprobate in Reformed Christian thought. Blackness was defined by everything that was opposite to the whites' understanding of themselves. So white people took upon themselves the role of God to create and impose upon a people group a forged identity. Indeed, this was the root of white Christianity, the idea that whites occupied an exalted, Jesus-like mediating role, in between God and the rest of creation, particularly blacks.

This creation of a black identity, and its imposition upon the black people, made it necessary for black people to try and come up with their own systems of meaning and means to constitute an identity. One medium through which black slaves tried to define their own existence was their appropriation of white Christianity to their condition in creating a Christianity that was essentially black, a religion that reflected their own enslaved condition. One way they did this was to relate their subjugated condition to the stories of the Old Testament, particularly the Exodus narrative. Colonel Thomas Higginson, a Union officer in the Civil War states in his memoir that "[The slaves'] memories are a vast bewildered chaos of Jewish history and biography; and most of the great events of the past, down to the period of the American Revolution, they instinctively attribute to Moses" (49). This "bewildered chaos" was a survival strategy for the black people who shared with one another an experience of immense suffering. Uprooted from their ancestral homeland and having been denied their religions and traditions, they saw in Moses an exalted figure who, by a divine mandate, metes out justice on behalf of the oppressed and delivers them into freedom. This was a conscious strategy on behalf of the slaves to claim authority in shaping for themselves an identity that was not based on the truth claims of the white population. This identity, as with the Israelites in the wilderness, would be given to them by God through divine providence. Another important aspect of this slave religion was the role their ancestral beliefs played in creating a deity that was approachable to the enslaved and the marginalized. In his *Cut Loose Your Stammering Tongue: Black Theology in Slave Narratives,* Dwight N. Hopkins claims that the indigenous West African religions often portrayed God as an "involved God", "The Compassionate God, as a "God of Pity" (3). This image of God, though very much absent in the theology of their white masters, was present in the many stories of the Bible, and the enslaved people, already informed by their own

traditions, adapted these stories in creating a distinctly black religion of a God who was deeply involved in their future deliverance.

This black religion was undoubtedly political, as its main aspects revolved around the idea of freedom, both in this world and the next. This politicized religion also helped with community building and social support in an attempt to create and preserve a common black identity. While the dominant institutions tried to limit the role of religion and its ministers to that of "saving souls", black faith, having to deal constantly with a reality of suffering, persecution, and dehumanization, enlarged the meaning of being saved accordingly. While common criticism directed against black people's adoption of Christianity was that it caused them to become servile and docile, a thorough look at the history of black chattel reveals a different story. One then sees that black spirituals are imbued with double speech concerning the concept of freedom that allowed slaves to constantly await the day that earthly freedom can be possible. This tireless waiting oftentimes radicalized the slaves, who, inspired by their religious convictions and their faith in a God who liberates, took direct action against the slaveholding institution. Kelly Brown Douglas writes in her book *The Black Christ:*

> Sometimes it did point to a freedom beyond this world. However, the freedom that was hoped for in the "next world" was seldom totally divorced from the expectations of "this world." It was not completely spiritualized. The freedom of the other world impacted the slaves' world. It motivated them to continue the struggle to survive and be free, because they knew that their struggle was not in vain: "de udder worl' is not like dis." (107)

What else can make sense of the struggles of the faithful men and women such as Gabriel Prosser, Nat Turner, Sojourner Truth, and Harriet Tubman, who, in defiance of the white Christ and his people and institutions, fought for the liberation of their community? The black religion has always been an inherently communitarian type of religion, as in a society that seeks to destroy one's identity both individually and communally, one does not stand a chance alone. Slaves, aware of this existential reality, attempted to collectively reconstitute the black self through community building. In his summarization of the black spiritual worldview and recreation of the black self, Dwight N. Hopkins writes thus:

> In summation, faith in God, interrelatedness, communality, and balance suggested an epistemology of the self (that is, awareness of one's consciousness) anchored in awareness of others' existence and needs (of ethical obligations). To know oneself was to know the other and share in her or his spiritual and material necessities of life. (Hopkins 113)

This definition allows one to understand the last 250 years of black Christianity deeply as it developed in the United States. It allows one to see the central role the black religion played in the struggle of both the free and the enslaved in their struggle to preserve themselves as human beings against the attacks of a society that forced them to think otherwise.

Many Christian slaveholders were hesitant at first to introduce their slaves to Christianity for fear of their possibly conceiving themselves as equals with their masters. However, gradually, slave masters decided that it'd be better to introduce their chattel to Christianity on their own terms, to preach to them a religion that would develop notions of obedience and subservience. By law, in most states, it was not permitted for black people to gather for worship without the presence of a white overseer. One ex-slave, Mr. Beverly Jones, confirms that "Cause they wouldn't let us slaves have no services unless a white man was present. Most times the white preacher preached… That was the law at that time" (Hopkins 11). Likewise an ex-slave Jenny Proctor quotes a sermon she heard many times as a slave "Now I takes my text, which is, Nigger obey your master and your mistress, 'cause what you git from them here in this world am all you ever going to git, 'cause you just like the hogs and the other animals—when you dies you ain't no more, after you been throwed in that hole" (Botkin 91). The black religion, then, for most of the history of the colonial period and antebellum America, had to remain as an "Invisible Institution" among the enslaved. Slaves, who could not identify with the religion that was preached from the white pulpits, often sought refuge in the wilderness to practice their religion away from the prying eyes of their masters and slave drivers. They sang, danced, and prayed for deliverance. They preached to one another and sang spirituals that talked of a freedom that could not be crushed or taken away by their white masters. Hopkins explains the nature of these secret meetings as such:

> At an appointed hour, African Americans sneaked off in the blackness of night to the woods. Some simply had “a good time talking about their mistress and master”; others assembled around a big fire on the edge of the woods “whar deir racket wouldn’t ’sturb de white folks”; while others knelt and prayed with faces turned toward the ground to deaden the sound of their supplication and heartfelt longings for themselves and future generations: “T know that day we’ll be free and if we die before that time our children will live to see it. (137)

These meetings were the birthplace of the resistant, political, and communal theology that shaped the black faith since colonial times. Oftentimes, one of the younger slaves would go around the forests to ensure that the community would be safe against the patrollers by whispering a tune that would alert the slaves to hide and seek shelter. Another sentinel employed by the slaves was an overturned kettle, believed to catch the sound of prayers and songs before they could be heard by the slave masters. Wilderness was, as can be seen, the birthplace of the black spiritual thought. Away from the slaveholding institutions of the “civilized” world, the black body had the chance to develop and constitute itself as an individual, in communion with his fellow slaves, under the watchful eye of the kettle pot.

1.2.Birth of the Ecclesiastical Black Church

While we can trace the genealogy of black theology to the wilderness of the North American continent, there were also several institutions that were founded by the free people of color to distance themselves from the institutional oppression they experienced in the white churches. The African Methodist Episcopal Church, often abbreviated as AME, was the first Protestant church body founded by black faithful. The Arminian Methodism, founded by the brothers John and Charles Wesley, both priests of the Church of England, gained widespread popularity among the colonists. Methodist preachers were also insistent on the necessity of converting the black slaves, and John Wesley was a staunch abolitionist who considered slave holders to be unsuitable for membership in his Methodist societies. In his famous *Thoughts upon Slavery,* Wesley writes:

> If therefore you have any regard to justice, (to say nothing of mercy, nor the revealed law of God) render unto all their due. Give liberty to whom liberty is

> due, that is to every child of man, to every partaker of human nature. Let none serve you but by his own act and deed, by his own voluntary choice. Away with all whips, all chains, all compulsion! Be gentle toward all men, and see that you invariably do unto everyone, as you would he should do unto you. (26)

While the English Methodists preserved their founders' abolitionist theology, in the United States, abolitionism was largely abandoned after John Wesley's death. The Bishops Asbury and Coke, while themselves abolitionists, finally dropped the regulations on slaveholders at the Virginia Conference in 1785. The racial tensions grew within many Methodist Churches, which by then necessitated black converts to sit separately from the whites. In 1787, Richard Allen, Absalom Jones, and other free blacks separated themselves from St. George's Methodist Episcopal Church on account of the "unkind treatment of their white brethren, who considered them a nuisance in the house of worship" (Payne). The same Bishop Daniel Payne writes in his *History of the African Methodist Episcopal Church*:

> …has been beneficial to the man of color by giving him an independence of character which he could neither hope for nor attain unto, if he had remained as the ecclesiastical vassal of his white brethren. This is evident from the training which the force of circumstances has given us. These circumstances have been such as to produce independent thought; this has resulted in independent action … this ecclesiastical organization has given us an independent hierarchy, and this independent hierarchy has made us feel and recognize our individuality and our heaven-created manhood. (12)

The theology that began to develop among uneducated slaves in the wilderness took a more formalized shape within the ranks of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. This independent Christian movement, the first of its kind, allowed black people to formally recognize themselves as objects of religion without the influence or oversight of their white coreligionists. It allowed them to "recognize" their individuality and personhood before God, a concept which, as stated so far, is at the center of black spirituality.

1.3.Civil Rights Religion

The systematic expression of "Black Theology" came to be only at the height of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, necessitating a brief overview of the period leading up to it. With the enactment of the 13th Amendment in 1865, the United States government legally ended slavery. This was followed by the 14th and 15th amendments, which extended citizenship to black people and legally gave black men the right to vote. This period, known as "the Reconstruction Era", was a turbulent time for the American South, marked by major social unrest and instability. Southern Whites were reluctant to give political and economic rights to people they had been enslaving for generations. With the retreat of the Northern forces from the former Confederate states in 1877, political and economic disenfranchisement experienced by the black population only got worse, and according to black historian Rayford Logan, black people went through the "nadir" of their history. Black people were prevented from exercising their political rights both through legal and illegal means. Poll taxes, literacy requirements, and grandfather clauses were among the strategies employed by the white policy makers to ensure that black men would not be able to exercise political autonomy. In his book, *Carpet Bag Rule in Florida. The Inside Workings of the Reconstruction of Civil Government in Florida After the Close of the Civil War,* John Wallace quotes then Governor of Florida, David S. Walker:

> Each one of us knows that we could not give either an honest or conscientious assent to Negro suffrage. … Much as I worship the Union, and much as I would rejoice to see my State once more recognized as a member thereof, yet it is better, a thousand times better, that she should remain out of the Union … than go back, "eviscerated of her manhood," despoiled of her honor, recreant of her duty, without her self-respect, and of course without the respect of the balance of mankind—a miserable thing, with seeds of moral and political death in herself…(24)

As can be seen, for the Southern whites, the suffrage of black men was an insult to "the balance of mankind," a despoiling of the honor of the South. This pathological enmity against black people and their political autonomy prevented the black population from exercising their voting rights well into the middle of the 20th century, and the securing of the voting rights of the black people became one of the driving motivators of the civil rights activists of the era.

The political and economic hardships experienced by the black community were only exacerbated by the ever-present reality of physical violence. Lynching of black men, mostly on the charge of sexual assault of white women or attempted murder, became a common feature of whites' attempt at maintaining white supremacy. Extrajudicial killings saw a sudden increase for this very reason in the antebellum United States. With the formation of the Ku Klux Klan and several similar terrorist groups, lynching and violence also became a common tactic to ensure that the black community would not exercise political autonomy. In his *Memoirs*, William W. Holden, the governor of North Carolina, writes:

> … But gradually under the leadership of ambitious and discontented politicians and under the pretext that society needed to be regulated by some authority outside or above the law, their character was changed, and those secret Klans began to commit murder, to rob, whip, scourge, and mutilate unoffending citizens. … and under leaders they decreed judgment against their peaceable fellow-citizens from mere intimidations to scourgings, mutilations, the burning of churches, schoolhouses, mills, and in many cases to murder. (138)

These scare tactics that aimed to keep the black population under control were largely successful, and between 1883 and 1941, there were 4,467 recorded victims of lynching, of whom 4,027 were men, and within the total number of victims, 3,265 were black (Seguin and Rigby). Commonality of lynching is further evidenced in the remarks of Bishop Atticus G. Haygood, himself a supporter of lynching in the cases of sexual assault, who complains in his *The Black Shadow in the South* that "Now-a-days, it seems the killing of Negroes is not so extraordinary an occurrence as to need explanation a; it has become so common that it no longer surprises. We read such things as we read of fires that burn a cabin or a town" (167). Indeed, the Bishop is not alone in his lack of emotion in dealing with the subject of lynching, as another US senator from South Caroline proudly declares lynching to be the "right of the Caucasian race" which allows him "to dispose of the blackamoor without the benefit of a jury" (Gussow 49). As it is evident from the given quotations, the consensus of the Southern whites was the necessity of using violence to ensure the subservience of the black population to the interests of white superiority. Amid ceaseless bodily suffering, black bodies found it possible to have fellowship with the figure of the

suffering Christ, who himself was killed by a lynching mob, and would understand the plight of the oppressed.

Facing this endless animosity from the white population since their arrival on the shores of North America in the 17th century, Black people developed two main approaches in their dealings with the wider American public. One of them was integrationism, which envisaged a future for black people within the wider American society as fellow citizens and laborers for a common future. The other stream was nationalism, which claimed that white people would not and will not in any circumstances grant black people equal opportunities to flourish and prosper, and thus, blacks needed to separate from the wider American public, and were to establish themselves as a separate nation, either somewhere in the United States or some other parts of the world. Though we must state here that these two streams often interacted with one another and, depending on the conditions faced by the black community, influenced black thinkers accordingly. So, it would be incorrect to conceive any black thinker as purely nationalist or purely integrationist (Cone, *Martin and Malcolm* 21). The root of the integrationist thought lay in a sincere trust that American values and American religion, which is Christianity, were ultimately pointing to the liberation of the black people. Thinkers like Frederick Douglass believed that the Constitution of the United States was ultimately a pro-abolitionist document, and the fact that slavery existed in the nation was a clear contradiction which would be realized by the wider public sooner or later (Cone, *Martin, and Malcolm* 22). Even though he experienced countless disappointments in his struggle for liberation, it seems that he never completely gave up on the idea of a future United States about which he said in 1865, "… [I] expect to see the colored people of this country enjoying the same freedom [as whites], …voting at the same ballot-box…, going to the same schools, attending the same churches, travelling in the same streetcars, in the same railroad cars,…proud of the same country, fighting the same foe, enjoying the same peace and all its advantages" (Foner 44). Though integrationism became more popular among the black population during hopeful developments, during times of great sorrow and distrust of the United States government, nationalism became more popular. The slave revolts of the 19th century, led by figures such as Nat Turner and Denmark Vesey, clearly had a nationalist spirit animated by the Christian religion. Later in black history, figures such as David

Walker, Marcus Garvey, and Elijah Muhammad emerged. The central claim of these black nationalists was that black people were essentially African and not American and therefore did not need to appeal to the Constitution, white men's conscience, or white men's religion, which is Christianity, to define themselves as a separate nation that deserved fundamentally equal rights. The driving factor behind the nationalist movement was not only the oppression of one group by the other, but also the fact that this was due to their skin color. This conditioned their entire mindset on the fact of their being black and being oppressed because of it, which made the whites, "the natural oppressor," also ontologically "evil." James H. Cone writes:

> Their identity as black touched the very core of their being and affected their thoughts and feelings regarding everything, especially their relations with white people. Nationalists, unlike integrationists, could not separate their resentment of servitude from the racial identity of the people responsible for it. "White Americans [are] our *natural enemies*," wrote David Walker in his *Appeal* in 1829. "By treating us so cruel," we "see them acting more like devils than accountable men." (*Martin and Malcolm* 31)

These two streams, one depicted above in the words of Walker, which depicts the white men as an ontologically predestined agent of evil, and the other, depicted in the words of Frederick Douglass, which believed in a future that promised equality, continued to coexist until the Civil Rights Movement, gaining popularity one over the other as the tides of American public life dictated. However, by the 1950s, both traditions began to engage with one another visibly and to develop their often-clashing narratives and theological visions.

The persistence of the dominant white establishment in trying to keep from the black people the necessary resources needed for the community to thrive ultimately culminated in mass movements by both integrationist and nationalist groups, with the aim of inserting black people into the political discourse. Throughout the first half of the 20th century, several institutions representing people of color brought cases against discrimination to American courts, some of which eventually succeeded. One of the most important causes that invigorated this wave of mass protest was the segregated education, which was seen as a purposeful attempt to perpetuate ghettoization and economic disparity between different races. This

made segregated education a constant target of attack for the activists. *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* officially ended segregated education, the success of which further invigorated the protesters to push all around the nation to challenge the unequal conditions they faced. Many leaders, from both the integrationist and nationalist camps, came to the forefront of national news. The pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, Martin Luther King Jr., an influential leader of the local black community in Montgomery, received a request to join the well-known Montgomery Bus Boycott, which began with the courageous "No!" of Rosa Parks when she was asked to give up her seat. The pastor was hesitant at first, excusing himself due to his numerous duties (Frady 21). However, he later agreed to give his support through his friend and companion, Ralph Abernathy (21). The following day, King Jr. was accepted as the movement's leader at the age of 26. The success of the boycott thrust King Jr. to the forefront of American politics and transformed him into a leader of the Civil Rights Movement (52). Martin Luther King Jr.'s political philosophy was deeply influenced by his Christian beliefs. He conceived of his struggle against systemic violence and injustice as a purely Christian cause, saying:

> Now, let us say that we are not here advocating violence, we have overcome that. I want it to be known throughout Montgomery and throughout this nation that we are—a Christian people. . .. But the great glory of American democracy is the right to protest for right. … If we are wrong, God Almighty is wrong! … If we are wrong, Jesus of Nazareth was merely a utopian dreamer and never came down to earth! ... And we are determined here in Montgomery to work and fight, until justice runs down like water and righteousness as a mighty stream. (Frady 23)

As can be seen from the quote above, his entire discourse on black people's struggle for freedom was deeply tinged by his own Christian worldview, shaped by the social gospel movement that emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Quoting from the Old Testament Book of Amos 5:24, he hoped to touch the hearts of the whites who, he believed, shared his Christian faith. Taking upon himself a prophetic mantle, King deeply believed that "the Negro is God's instrument to save the soul of America" (Cone, *Martin and Malcolm* 120) and constructed a theological vision centered on this belief.

Understanding the fundamental aspects of this "Civil Rights Religion" of Martin Luther King Jr. is necessary if we aspire to understand the later development of black theology and later womanist/liberationist theologies in the United States. In order to establish King's theological framework, which was shaped by the influence of the black church (Cone, *Martin, and Malcolm* 37), we are going to refer to his compilation of sermons titled *Strength to Love.* Central to King Jr.'s theological speculations was the idea of *the beloved community* (Cone, *Martin, and Malcolm* 113). This beloved community of King's was a collection of all men, from all around the world, united by love, forgiveness, and justice. According to King, the main role of the church in society is to be the heart and moral guardian of the people. To accomplish this goal, the Church, which is the body of believers, must imitate Jesus in constantly turning to *Agape*, selfless love, and forgiveness. In his struggle to eliminate segregation, selfless, long-suffering love always occupies a central place in King's vision. Talking about the creation of the beloved community, he says:

> With every ounce of our energy, we must continue to rid this nation of the incubus of segregation. But we shall not in the process relinquish our privilege and our obligation to love. While abhorring segregation, we shall love the segregationist. This is the only way to create the beloved community…Love is the most durable power in the world. This creative force, so beautifully exemplified in the life of our Christ, is the most potent instrument available in mankind's quest for peace and security. (King 51)

This selfless love, which fueled King's fervent devotion to the practice of nonviolence, was, for King, a non-negotiable aspect of black liberation. He believed that the complete elimination of the race problem depended on the development of the oppressed people's capacity to love their oppressors. Because he believed that justice was the love of God applied to our daily lives, true justice for all members of society could not possibly exist without the manifestation of this agape love between individuals. Agape love, he believed, could not possibly arise from any soil except that which had been tilled with forgiveness. Many of his sermons highlighted the importance of forgiveness in establishing lasting peace between white and black people. He sees the greatest example of forgiveness in the person of Jesus, who at the height of his Passion, cried out to God, praying "…Father, forgive them; for they know not that what they do…" (*Authorized King James Version,* Lk. 23:34). King

accepts the challenge that is presented to the Christians by these words and accepts the fact that many theologians tried to explain away this commandment due to its seeming practical impossibility, speculating on it more as a utopic ideal. However, King, pointing to Jesus, implies that this is a standard all Christians should constantly struggle to achieve:

> But in the life of Jesus, we find that the gulf is bridged. Never in history was there a more sublime example of consistency of word and deed. During his ministry in the sunny villages of Galilee, Jesus talked passionately about forgiveness. This strange doctrine awakened the questioning mind of Peter. "How oft," he asked, "shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Till seven times?" …Jesus responded by affirming that there is no limit to forgiveness. (King 32)

His biggest worry was that if black people forgot about their Christian duty to love and forgive, the race problem could develop into something altogether more violent, which he believed would destroy the nation and would only cause more pain for future generations. It was his firm belief that violence could only beget violence, and in an era beset by the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, the only way forward would be the way of peace. He insisted that black people utilize both a shrewd mind and a loving heart, echoing the words of Jesus in Matthew 10:16. Not having either of these qualities would spell the doom of the struggle for black people's freedom. He directed sharp criticism at people who lacked the loving heart needed to fight for freedom. These people were using physical violence, which could only guarantee a temporary victory (King 7). This criticism was, of course, directed against the black nationalist movement, which believed non-violent action was pointless and that the white institutions would never willingly give up their hegemony over black people. They constituted an alternative model of black resistance, one that had different means in mind for achieving total liberation.

While King was fighting in the South, the land of segregation, a different social unrest was brewing in the North. After World War II, numerous black households in the South, disappointed with the lack of opportunities provided to them in view of their sacrifices for their nation, decided to migrate north to urban centers. *The Great Migration* up north, at the nadir of American race relations, had

been underway since the early 20th century; however, by the 1950s, even larger groups were moving to said urban centers, causing living conditions in the northern ghettos to deteriorate substantially. Though the active segregation was unleashing untold horrors in the lives of the southern blacks, northern blacks did not have it any easier:

> Some people claimed that for blacks the quality of life in the North was even worse than that in the South, because of the devastating effects of the ghetto upon personalities of its inhabitants. Ghetto existence was defined primarily by unemployment and underemployment, dirty streets and overcrowded, rat-infested tenements, pimps and prostitutes, drug pushers and dope addicts, black-on-black crime, and police brutality. (Cone, *Martin and Malcolm* 151)

The colored people who moved with the hope of better opportunities up North found themselves extremely distraught by the conditions they faced in the northern slums. This disillusionment with the promised land of Canaan ultimately led to the development of nationalistic tendencies among the black population, who were ultimately growing more critical of the "good intentions" of the northern liberals. Likewise, many blacks found themselves unable to relate to the Christian religion of their southern ancestors, which for them, no longer related to their present realities in the northern urban centers and their ghetto reality. Amidst this spiritual crisis, leaders like Father Divine, Daddy Grace, and Elijah Muhammad emerged to satisfy the spiritual crisis of the ghettoized black people (Cone, *Martin, and Malcolm* 152). These people created new theological approaches to answer the question of race. Among these, Elijah Muhammad would prove to be very influential during the Civil Rights Movement.

Malcolm X, the disciple and mouthpiece of Elijah Muıhammad as he liked to consider himself, was to be the most outspoken leader of the black nationalist movement during the struggle for civil rights. Coming from a family that was active in the Black Liberation Movement and admirers of black nationalist Marcus Garvey, he was inculcated with a sense of black pride and self-sufficiency from an early age (Marable 20). By 1943, he was in Harlem, one of the biggest black ghettos in the North. He began a life of criminality, selling drugs and procuring women. Recounting this time of his life, before his conversion to the doctrines of Elijah

Muhammad, he says that "The honorable Elijah Muhammad gave me the ability to respect myself as a black person…Before hearing of him…, I had nothing, knew nothing, and was nothing. I was addicted to and enslaved by the evils and vices of this white civilization – dope, alcohol, adultery, and even murder" (Cones, *Martin and Malcolm* 155). He believed that the evil *white civilization* was employing all kinds of means to ensure that blacks would never succeed in life or have a chance at being a nation by themselves. This issue was not only a clash between right and wrong, a moral crisis, but rather something altogether more ontological that affected the white men to their core. Their nature was evil, and this evil nature not only affected the southern segregationists but also northern liberals. For Malcolm, northern liberals were like shrewd foxes who desired to use and abuse black people just as much as their southern counterparts. They were the landlords, the merchants, the drug dealers, who acted like a friend to black people, only aimed at the further demise of the nation (Cone, *Martin and Malcolm* 159). Cone explains Malcolm X's black nationalist rhetoric in these words:

> Malcolm's claim that "white people are a race of devils" was not mere name-calling … On the contrary, his intention was to speak nothing but the truth, the "truth that is not dressed up." His was not just a religious truth ... It was a historical, objective truth, available to any thoughtful and morally sensitive human being. "When I say the white man is a devil," … "I speak with the authority of history." … "The record of history shows that the white men, as a people, have never done good." (*Martin and Malcolm* 161*).*

This was, in a way, the reversal of the formation of a black identity in colonial America. White colonists equated in their minds all that was negative and evil with the dark complexion of their slaves. Now, after centuries of oppression, black people equated all that is evil and cruel with the white complexion of their oppressors. For Malcolm and his fellow Black Muslims, their lived realities in the United States could no longer permit them to believe in a religion that fundamentally claimed that all men are created equal. They saw that the Christian religion, while claiming the brotherhood of all people, actively made black people subservient to people who were exploiting them with untold horrors. To get rid of the servile attitude prevalent among the black population, black people had to accept the painful truth, which would set them free. He criticized black people furiously due to their reluctance to

accept the inherent evil of the white men, and this criticism oftentimes found an ideal target in Civil Rights leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr. whom he considered to be "brainwashed, handkerchief-head, twentieth century intellectual negroes" who were "puppets and parrots" and were "endorsed, sanctioned, subsidized, and supported by white liberals" (Cone, *Martin and Malcolm* 163) For Malcolm and Black Muslims, turn the other cheek mentality had to be destroyed if they wanted to prosper as a nation, and any individual who preached of the love and brotherhood between the oppressed and the oppressor was nothing but an "Uncle Tom" and a betrayer to the cause of liberation.

These two leaders, each embodying two poles of white liberationist thought in their theological speculations, eventually moved closer in their positions on the essential nature of the liberationist struggle. Around 1962, Malcolm became extremely disillusioned with the practices and leadership of the Nation of Islam. Allegations of sexual misconduct by Elijah Muhammad and his charisma, which overshadowed Elijah Muhammad's leadership, finally created an unhealed rift between him and other Black Muslims, and he left the organization to start his own movement. He also declared his hope of working with other Civil Rights leaders, claiming that Elijah Muhammad had been preventing him from doing so (Handler 1). Within weeks of his leaving the Nation of Islam, he converted to Sunni Islam and left the United States for Saudi Arabia to perform Hajj. His Hajj experience became a milestone in the development of his theo-political vision. His experience in Mecca, which allowed him to see people from all corners of the world coming together regardless of skin color to worship together, altered his previously held beliefs concerning the inherent evil in white people (Malcolm X 296). The communal feeling that surrounded the ritual of Hajj meant that he could no longer see the white man as he had once seen them. He writes in his autobiography:

> That morning was when I first began to reappraise the "white man." It was when I first began to perceive that "white man," as commonly used, means complexion only secondarily; primarily it described attitudes and actions. In America, "white man" meant specific attitudes and actions toward the black man, and toward all other non-white men. But in the Muslim world, I had seen that men with white complexions were more genuinely brotherly than

> anyone else had ever been. That morning was the start of a radical alteration in my whole outlook about "white" men. (305)

Around the same time that Malcolm X's vision of race relations was being challenged, Martin Luther King Jr. was experiencing a similar shift in his thinking. After his successful leadership in getting both the Civil Rights Bill and the Voting Rights Bill passed, some, including King himself, speculated that the liberation movement had achieved its goal. Like Malcolm X's Hajj experience, the Watts Riots of 1965 were a milestone that significantly altered King Jr.'s theo-politics. Until the passing of the said bills, King Jr.'s movement was ultimately a southern movement, shaped by the experiences of the southern blacks who were struggling against the evils of segregation. However, the riots drew King Jr.'s attention to the realities of slum life in the northern urban centers. He saw how unresponsive the northern blacks were to his message of brotherhood and non-violence. He also understood that the passing of their constitutional rights meant little to these black people who were crushed due to the economic conditions prevalent in these cities. Now, King was able to see the situation through Malcolm X's eyes. As a member of the black middle class, which afforded him a good education and a comparatively sheltered upbringing, he encountered the hardships faced by urban blacks and had to significantly alter his perception of what the United States was. From his earlier remarks that spoke of hope and fellowship as the natural destiny of the American future, he increasingly referred to the United States as a morally "sick" society (Cone, *Martin and Malcolm* 370). He said in his speech:

> Now I don't believe in black separatism. I am against it…But I do say this. It seems that our white brothers and sisters don't want to live next door to us… So… they're pinning us in central cities…We're hemmed in. We can't get out. They won't pass the fair housing bill here. And that's true in every city in this country. Now, since they're just going to keep us here in here. We got to be the mayors of these big cities… we got to begin taxing everybody who works in the city who lives in the suburbs. (Cone, *Martin and Malcolm 373)*

From his initial conception of liberation as an action that had to be taken by both blacks and whites, he understood that the economic liberation of the blacks was not going to be supported by the white liberals. His criticism of "white liberals" very

much mirrored that of Malcolm X, and he admitted that the majority of whites, knowingly or unknowingly, suffered from racism. No longer was he a believer of the notion that most whites in the nation were decent and moral people. He spoke on one occasion, saying that "it is time for America to have an intensified study on what's wrong with white folks…Anybody that will go around bombing houses and churches, it's something wrong with him" (Cone, *Martin and Malcolm* 385). This shows that the late 1960's likewise showed a significant shift in King's understanding of the human person and interracial relations. Though his fundamental values concerning love and non-violence were never really disavowed, his positive conception of the human person, shaped by his education in the tradition of social gospel and liberal Christianity, was altered. This convergence between the integrationist and nationalist streams within the tradition of black self-conception and theological speculation was the fountainhead that gave rise to the modern black theology as we understand it now.

In conclusion, this chapter aimed to highlight the fundamental aspects that gave rise to the existence of a separate Christian theological framework shaped by the experiences of the African chattel slaves who were stolen from their homeland for forced labor. The white colonial population, which denied their slaves the right to constitute an identity of their own choice, trapped them within an imagined hierarchical dialectic that invested all that was negative in the complexion of the black slaves. Having been robbed of their ancestral religions and traditions, these black slaves gathered in the wilderness to appropriate their master's religion to tell a story of their own which would allow them a voice to self-constitute as a people. This wilderness Christianity also found its manifestation in the simultaneous establishment of black ecclesiastical bodies, which were founded on perceived hypocrisy on the part of the slaveholders. The colored population and their understanding of Christianity led them to think that segregation in worship was not permissible. Amid both physical and psychological suffering, black people held fast to the image of the suffering savior who promised liberation in the face of adversity. Eventually, all these streams that fed the black self-conception and theological speculation found themselves manifested in the political arena within nationalist and integrationist camps. This historical narrative shows us that before Black theology

was ever codified in academic texts, it was already lived, breathed, and contextualized within the dangerous geography of American racism.

2. Theology of Black Religion

In the previous chapter, we analyzed the historical framework that gave rise to black Christianity as a distinct phenomenon, as a transgressive method of resistance to the white oppressors' attempted erasure of the personhood of the black bodies. In this chapter, we will be analyzing how the wilderness religion of the black enslaved communities, which was shaped by centuries of systematic bodily and psychological torture, eventually entered the domain of academic discourse and became a system through which people of color were able to reinterpret the dialectical relationship between the white oppressors and the black oppressed. The amalgamation of the nationalist and integrationist systems of black self-conception resulted in the forceful declaration of God's blackness by James H. Cone, who likewise placed the liberating God of justice and love next to the bodies of lynching victims hanging from the strange trees of the American South. His revolutionary and critical approach to theology paved the way for later critics who saw inadequacies in his theological framework, particularly the absence of black women from the discourse of suffering. Theologians such as Delores S. Williams and Kelly Brown Douglas pushed the limits of liberation to include the struggle of black women whose survival has historically been threatened not only due to their race, but also due to their gender and overall socioeconomic standing. To establish the womanist theological framework, we are going to analyze the concept of wilderness as presented by Delores S. Williams, and then we will move on to concepts of prophetic wholeness and inclusivity found in Kelly Brown Douglas' *The Black Christ.*

2.1.James H. Cone

The father of Black Theology, James H. Cone, understood that any theology, any speculation concerning the nature and the person of God, is ultimately shaped by the surrounding conditions that shaped the community that created it. He writes that "theology is *contextual* language—that is defined by the human situation that gives birth to it" (*Black Theology* 17). Within this contextual reality, then, to create a black theology, what must be done first is to locate the sources for this said theology. Historical sources of Christian theology are scripture and ecclesiastical tradition. However, Cone understands that these sources, too, are contextualized by time and

place and are not free from being used to serve the needs and aims of a particular community of faith. Therefore, Cone writes in his *God of the Oppressed*:

> Of course, the sources include Scripture and tradition as they bear witness to the higher source of revelation as particularized and universalized in Jesus Christ. But also, with equal and sometimes greater weight, the source must include the history and culture of oppressed people. In the United States and its cultural dependencies that must mean people of color – black, yellow, red and brown." (9)

Cone claims that the established institutions of theology, whose histories have not been shaped by a struggle for liberation, cannot respond to the inherently liberatory message of the Gospel. So, rather than looking at the Eurocentric theological institutions, black people must look at their own experiences as an oppressed people to engage with their faith. This, of course, opens the doors of criticism for those who accuse Cone's theological framework of relativism and racism. Critics claimed that the idea of a "black" theology is just as antithetical to the catholic, that is universal, spirit of the Christian faith as any possible "white" theology. However, for Cone, the appearance of a distinct theology, shaped by the experiences of people of color, was mainly due to "the failure of white religionists to relate the gospel of Jesus to the pain of being black in a white racist society" (*Black Theology* 37). Therefore, it was not a fault on the part of the black people to create a distinct theological voice to relate to the Christian gospel; it was a natural survival mechanism to adapt to a reality shaped by intrinsically racist values. In the 1960s, Cone was aware of the condition the black liberation movement was in and therefore believed that, to achieve success in the ordeal of survival, an ideological and theo-political consolidation of differing views was necessary. In pursuit of this consolidation, Cone accepted the claims of both the nationalist and integrationist camps and harmonized them in a way that would allow black people to continue in the liberation struggle without being affected by the apparent pitfalls of both ideological streams. This amalgamation was shaped by Malcolm X's fierce criticism of the black church and his emphasis on black power and self-determination. This framework was further strengthened by a reinterpretation of the historic black church's focus on love and justice as inherent aspects of the godhead.

To put at the center of his theological framework the idea of "black power", Cone appeals to two fundamental stories of the Bible, the Exodus narrative and the life of Jesus. Looking at the Exodus narrative, Cone, in a manner intrinsic to the historical theological speculation of the black chattel slaves, essentially defines the identity of God as the God who liberates the oppressed. In this light, in his *God of the Oppressed*, he makes the claim that "it is impossible to interpret the Scripture correctly and thus understand Jesus aright unless the interpretation is done in the light of the consciousness of the oppressed in their struggle for liberation" (32). Because, in the biblical account, God does not identify himself with the Pharaoh, but rather with the Hebrew slaves. Neither does he identify himself with the Assyrian armies, but rather with the Israelite Daniel in the burning furnace. Thus, it is inevitable that black people draw parallels between their lived experiences and the liberating narratives of the Bible, seeing themselves in the story of those whose plight was heard by God. The liberation narratives find their pinnacle in the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. As Cone claims that all meaningful Christian theology must ask of the relation between the event of Incarnation and people, he gives the following answer:

> The convergence of Jesus Christ and the black experience is the meaning of the Incarnation. Because God became human in Jesus Christ, God disclosed the divine will to be with humanity in our wretchedness. And because we blacks accept God's presence in Jesus as the true definition of our humanity, blackness and divinity are dialectically bound together as one reality. This is the theological meaning of the paradoxical assertion about the primacy of black experience and Jesus Christ as witnessed in Scripture. (*God of the Oppressed* 33)

The fact that the incarnation of the second person of the Trinity did not take place in the palaces of kings and emperors, but rather in a barn, amid filth and animals, points to where the divine identity of the Godhead lies. If, as we have stated, theological speculation is shaped by the conditions of time and culture, then, keeping in mind God's divine identification with the oppressed, in the United States, true evangelical theology must be black theology. Thus, we can claim that God is black. Cone writes:

> This is the dialectic of Christian thought: God enters into the social context of human existence and appropriates the ideas and actions of the oppressed as God's own. When this event of liberation occurs in thought and praxis, the words and actions of the oppressed become the Word and Action of God, they no longer belong to the oppressed…The oppressed have been elected not because of the intrinsic value of their word or action but because of God's grace and freedom to be with the weak in troubled times. (*God of the Oppressed*, 90)

This convergence between the identity of God and the oppressed then allows the black body to define God's love and justice through its own terms. Through this framework, Cone is both able to affirm God's blackness and affirm the inherently moralistic nature of the issue of race. Unlike the nationalist approach and its related faith traditions, Cone's approach does not create an essentialist link between the oppressed people's skin color and the person of God; rather, it is the inherent preferential treatment granted by God to the oppressed that unites the black condition with that of God.

More than anything else that unites the black experience with that of God in a Christian framework is the experience of bodily pain, employed against the powerless by those in positions of power. Jesus himself, as a preacher in the 1st century Judea, was deemed a dangerous insurrectionist who threatened both the established religious elite, the Sadducees and the Pharisees, and the Imperial government, which was extorting huge sums of money from the impoverished Jews. It was his radical preaching that made him a target of public outrage, and this led to his eventual passion and execution. The detailed depictions of the tortures Jesus endured on his way to Golgotha depicted a God and savior who could intimately relate to the suffering of black people. The clearest depiction of this connection black people felt with the suffering Jesus is to be found in black spirituals. These songs show how deep the sympathy was between the suffering slave and the crucified savior. The words of the famous spiritual bears witness to the intensity of this connection through the words "Poor little Jesus boy / World treated him so mean / Treats me mean too … Dey whipped Him up an' dey whipped Him down, / Dey whipped dat man all ovah town, /Look-a how they done muh Lawd, / I was there when they nailed him to the cross, / Oh! How it makes me sadder, sadder, /When I

think how they nailed him to the cross" (Cone, *Cross and the Lynching Tree* 59). This intimate connection with the symbol of the cross allowed the suffering blacks to transcend their time and place and find themselves spiritually united to their savior in his suffering beneath the cross. The white theologizing of the privileged did not mean anything, as these people could never find themselves beneath the cross. They are ultimately more like the people who crucified Jesus. Cone raises the criticism most poignantly by establishing the clearest connection between the cross and the lynching tree. He writes:

> "The lynching tree—so strikingly similar to the cross on Golgotha—should have a prominent place in American images of Jesus' death. But it does not. In fact, the lynching tree has no place in American theological reflections about Jesus' cross or in the proclamation of Christian churches about his Passion. The conspicuous absence of the lynching tree in American theological discourse and preaching is profoundly revealing, especially since the crucifixion was clearly a first-century lynching. In the "lynching era," between 1880 to 1940, white Christians lynched nearly five thousand black men and women in a manner with obvious echoes of the Roman crucifixion of Jesus. Yet these "Christians" did not see the irony or contradiction in their actions." (Cone, *Cross and the Lynching Tree* 84)

Indeed, white Christians of the United States, adorning their necks and their churches with elaborate crosses, never looked outside their windows to see the ongoing crucifixion of the poor to preserve their peace of mind. This takes an even more disturbing shape when one remembers the existence of "lynching souvenirs", particularly the infamous postcards, that were exchanged as gifts between the whites, given particularly to those who could not watch the violent spectacle (Young 645). What almost feels like an infernal inversion of the Christian practice of keeping relics of the saints, the exchanges that took place through these postcards show us that people participating in these events were all together desensitized to the violence of it while treating it as a social occasion worthy of sharing with others. Apparently, for the white believer, the cross itself lost all its cruelty and violence, and only served as an abstract concept that serves as a template for shaping certain dogmas about soteriology and the afterlife, or as a symbol to be burnt to unleash horror among the innocent.

Sanitization of the cross allows us to see into the nature of white Christianity as it is positioned against black Christianity. When white men first took it upon themselves to deny personhood to the black body and reduce its humanity to naught, they created a fundamentally new religion, a white American religion, the aim of which was preserving their social and economic privilege. On the grounds of their white complexion, they took it upon themselves to act as gods on earth, substituting the role of the suffering Jesus as the savior of the world. They purposefully elevated the Old Testament laws and the Pauline epistles over the Gospels for "[Gospels] are unimportant, since they concentrate on Jesus's liberating activity in human history. The epistles are important because they stress knowledge of and belief in Jesus Christ as essential for human salvation" (Brown Douglas 83). It was imperative for the white slave masters and their bigoted progeny to limit the scope of the Christian religion to the inward world of the person. If you believed in certain doctrines, you were saved, and thus your salvation didn't necessarily have much to do with your actions towards your fellow humans. Kelly Brown Douglas further writes:

> The practical outcome of this New Testament selectivity in understanding Jesus is that it provided proslavery evangelists a way to quell the fears of slaveholders. Evangelists were able to spiritualize the themes of Christian freedom and equality. They essentially reasoned that what Jesus did in human history was disconnected from the salvation that he offered. Subsequently, the salvation that he offered was unrelated to what took place in human history. (84)

This divorcing of religion from social action and moral formation is the fundamental aspect of WASP religion that enabled the enslavement, segregation, and oppression of people of color in the United States. While the black Christ walked with the slaves as they were being led to their death on a lynching tree, the white Christ allowed the mob to preserve their peace of mind, knowing that if they confessed faith in their white savior, all was going to be well. It was so repugnant for them to make the connection between the sufferings of the black people and that of Jesus; when the similarity was pointed out, they would say, with the politician who angrily claimed that "it's bad enough to call Christ a bastard but to call Him a nigger—that's too much" (Cone, *Cross and the Lynching Tree* 278). This incapability of perceiving Jesus as anything other than white is the result of the mental grid that places them at

the top of the hierarchy. Though Jesus repeatedly identifies in the Gospels with the "least of these," accepting this reality would mean whites have to accept the greatest sin that plagues the United States, the sin of white supremacy. The face of the black Christ forces white people to accept their complacency in the perpetuation of racial violence and forces them to reevaluate the whole of their faith tradition.

2.2.Delores S. Williams

While the fundamental departing point of Cone's Black Theology was God's identification with the suffering and their struggle for liberation, the most potent criticism directed at it was the fact that it was silent when it came to the struggles specifically experienced by the women of color in a racist and patriarchal society. In the 1986 preface to his book *A Black Theology of Liberation*, Cone readily admits this by saying that "the most glaring limitation of *A Black Theology of Liberation* was my failure to be receptive to the problem of sexism in the black community and society as a whole" (24). Though the existence of a feminist consciousness in Christian theology can be traced back to the emergence of the suffragette movement, this theology was explicitly focused on the realities of white women's lives. Nyasha Junior, author of *An Introduction to Womanist Biblical Interpretation*, likewise points to the critique of womanist and black feminist approaches on white feminism by highlighting the lack of intersectionality prevalent in said tradition due to its discussion of gender issues to the exclusion of "other factors such as race and class" (26). Pauli Murray, one of the poets whose works will be analyzed later in this study, remarks on the early clash between the black and feminist liberationist streams of thought by writing in the Anglican Theological Review:

> Although certain historical similarities in the subjugation of blacks and women and common motifs suggest a basis for solidarity and fruitful dialogue, considerable tension exists between the two groups. Black theology is rooted in the strongly male-oriented Black Power movement which began in the late 1960's.… On the other hand, the revived women's movement led predominantly by white middle- or upper-class women has not successfully incorporated the aspirations of poor and minority women in its struggle. (3)

It was this reality of being unheard and unseen that led the black women, who have been the cornerstone of the institution of black church since the time of slavery, to

establish a paradigm that would include a theological critique of sexism prevalent not only in dominant white culture, but also within black culture. Surviving at the intersection of oppression that stems from the racial, sexual, and economic realities of the United States, black women elevated the discourse of black and feminist theologies to encompass the entirety of liberationist discourse. Womanist, that is, black feminist, theology looks therefore not only at the Exodus narrative of the Israelites wandering in the wilderness to see the liberating work of God, but also at the Hagarite survival narrative in the wilderness of Beersheba, to see how God's liberating presence takes action in a slave woman's struggle for survival.

Wilderness experience is at the very center of black consciousness, and this very reality can be traced all the way back to the days of slavery in Colonial America. While for the white person, wilderness represented all that was dangerous for the well-being of society, for the enslaved black person, it carried significantly multifaceted connotations. Interweaving the narratives of the Old and New Testaments, the wilderness became not only the ultimate place of suffering, temptation, and struggle for survival, but also the site of overcoming that struggle through divine agency. For the black consciousness, the Israelites wandering in the wilderness and Jesus's temptation in the wilderness become intertwined almost as a singular narrative to show the place of divine encounters for anyone who wishes to pursue it. Wilderness was not solely the place of heathenish darkness away from the light of the evangelical truth as per white conceptions; it is the very place wherein the black slave would experience the life-changing encounter with God. It is where the black slave would get his religion. It was where the invisible institution of the black church was born. It was the very place where the black slave could free himself from the prying eye of the white slave master, from labor, from imposed roles and expectations (Hopkins and Cummings 33). Through the providence of the divine, wilderness was the place where the oppressed could create a new person free from the shackles of white supremacy. In their study of conversion narratives of slaves, Dwight N. Hopkins and George C. L. Cummings depict wilderness in this way:

> In a word, slaves sought to bring to fruition the full potential of their humanity by making themselves available in the wilderness to Jesus' power to break burdensome yokes for deliverance. No wonder they shouted: "I found free grace in the wilderness." Wilderness grace freely offered by Jesus

> conveyed a calling and commission to realize African American freedom, free grace for human freedom. (34)

Indeed, escaped slaves found a sense of freedom in the wilderness. They would live in caves and hidden cabins and forage for their existence, trusting solely in the providence of God. While there was freedom in the wilderness, there was also danger. It was the womanist theologian Delores S. Williams who focused on this dangerous reality in the wilderness by bringing to the forefront the biblical figure of Hagar.

In the Book of Genesis, the story of Patriarch Abraham and his wife Sarah occupies a significant portion of the narrative. It was with Abraham that God made his covenant, which promised him a progeny through which all the nations of the earth are to be blessed. Accordingly, all three "Abrahamic" religions accord the figure of Abraham and his wife Sarah the utmost respect. However, Williams approaches one of the important stories associated with these figures from another character's perspective. Sarah, barren in her old age, offers her handmaid, Hagar, to her husband, Abraham. Through this, a child is born to Abraham and Hagar, named Ishmael. The story in Exodus takes an unpleasant turn afterward:

> And Sarai said unto Abram, My wrong be upon thee: I have given my maid into thy bosom; and when she saw that she had conceived, I was despised in her eyes: the Lord judge between me and thee. But Abram said unto Sarai, Behold, thy maid is in thine hand; do to her as it pleaseth thee. And when Sarai dealt hardly with her, she fled from her face. (Gn. 16.5-6)

Williams points out the extent of the abuses she endured by highlighting the fact that the verb used to depict Sarah's harshness is the same verb used to depict Egyptian's harshness in their abuse of the Israelites (31). By doing this, the text establishes a connection between the conditions experienced by enslaved people. This connection is further deepened by the motif of divine experience in the wilderness found in both narratives. Hagar, after fleeing from her harsh treatment, decides to flee into the wilderness, and therein she encounters God, who commands her to return to her master and mistress. The Old Testament narrative again uses the wilderness motif in Genesis 21, as, at Sarah's behest and God's permission, Abraham takes Hagar and his son into the wilderness and leaves them there. Williams first questions the reason

why God commands Hagar to return to her slave masters in the aftermath of her escape. If wilderness is freedom, then why does the God of liberation command Hagar to remain in captivity? The answer seems to be survival. It was unlikely for Hagar to survive as a pregnant woman in the desert, and to survive, she was to remain with her slave masters for a while (33). It was only after the birth of Ishmael that God allowed Hagar her freedom, and even then, this freedom came in the wilderness. Wilderness, this time, becomes the place where Hagar is given a chance to survive on her own. Williams' main aim is to establish this connection between the idea of survival and wilderness in the social landscape of the United States. Like all black women, Hagar is trying to find a way to survive in the wilderness against all odds, relying only on the providence of God. For Williams, depicting wilderness solely as the triumphant land of freedom wherein one is made free through providence overlooks the experiences of black women in a society that threatens their existence on multiple levels. She writes that "…for both Hagar and the African American women, the wilderness experience meant standing utterly alone, in the midst of serious trouble, with only God's support to rely upon" (91). William's critique of the wilderness motif is not limited to the struggle of black women. In the person of a black woman, Williams refers to the whole of black people. She writes:

> …African-American symbolic sense of wilderness, with Hagar at its center, makes the female figure symbolic of the entire black community's history of brutalization during slavery; of fierce survival struggle and economic servitude after liberation; of children being cheated out of their inheritance by oppressors; of threat to the life and well-being of the family; of the continuing search for a positive, productive quality of life for women and men under God's care. (99)

Indeed, if we are to see the face of the Black Christ in the oppressed and the downtrodden, we must seek this face in the struggle of Hagar. We must seek it in the struggle of black women who, from age to age, had to surrogate roles that were meant to be filled by other people, just like Hagar (44). We must seek it in the face of black women whose children were killed due to slavery, poverty, drugs, and gang violence, just as Hagar faced the reality of losing her own son in the desert (109). Womanist critique invites us to face this reality. Womanist wilderness, while not denying the Exodus narrative and its connection to black spirituality, reminds us of

the nuances of black existence in the United States. Oftentimes, as we see, wilderness is the place wherein the providence is revealed through survival struggle and not emancipation.

2.3.Kelly Brown Douglas

Williams' conception of black women as the embodiment of the entirety of oppression experienced by the black community finds further theorizing in *The Black Christ* of Very Revd. Kelly Brown Douglas. At the center of her womanist critique of black theology and black religion is the concept of wholeness. Appealing to the originator of the term "womanist", Alice Walker, who defines womanist as someone "who is committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people", Brown Douglas emphasizes the necessity of inclusivity in any theology of liberation. Her first criticism is directed against black women who would like to hold onto their heterosexist privilege in order not to become the ultimate other (126). She claims that if the womanist theology truly seeks to put at the center of its speculations the oppressed and the downtrodden, it cannot fall short of embracing the victims of heteronormativity. For Brown Douglas, the natural conclusion of the liberation theologies of Cone and Williams is:

> Social-political analysis of wholeness compels womanist theologians to break the silence. It requires us to "audaciously" denounce heterosexism as it is present in the black church and black community, as well as in womanist religious scholarship. … If womanist theologians continue to maintain silence concerning the oppression of our lesbian sisters, not only do we perpetuate their oppression, but we fall far short of our own vision for wholeness. (126)

According to Brown Douglas, this holistic approach to liberation can truly be interpreted as the liberationist Gospel of Christ. This inclusivity will allow black women to dismantle the Afrocentric and Eurocentric structures present within their society that prevent communities from prospering as a whole. To pursue the liberating work of Christ, it is also expedient for womanist theologians to engage with the women of the 3rd world. She conceives the role of the womanist theologian, and, in essence, the Womanist Christ, to be that of a prophet who calls the entire world to wholeness (131). This wholeness refers to the complete liberation of all peoples from all systems of oppression and their subsequent flourishing in a liberated

world. The womanist prophet speaks the truth to power, not only to communities she does not belong to, but also to the communities of which she is a part, so that, as stated in 1st Corinthians 15:28, God's liberating work can be all in all.

To summarize, in this chapter, we have analyzed the concept of Black and Womanist Theology and the notion of liberation in these respective fields. Having previously established the nationalistic and integrationist approaches to black identity formation, firstly, we have looked at James H. Cone's work to see how his black theology united these two camps to create an understanding that affirmed God's blackness by affirming God's inherent identification with the poor and the oppressed, looking at the Exodus and evangelical narratives. We further followed Cone's theological framework, as he established his Christology firmly on liberationist grounds. He focuses on the life and ministry of Jesus by aligning it chiefly with his liberating work, and his analysis reaches its zenith when he looks at the cross and the lynching tree as a united symbol of oppression and defiance. Through his Black Christ, Cone attacks the fundamental aspects of white Christianity as being antithetical to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. While Cone's black theology puts at the center of its framework the concepts of oppression and liberation, his theology has been criticized as being silent on the issues experienced by black women. Delores S. Williams, in her *Sisters in the Wilderness*, takes the historic motif of wilderness and focuses on the biblical heroine Hagar. By focusing on Hagar and her wilderness experience, she reinterprets the concept of a liberating God not as a warrior God who leads the Israelites through the wilderness to liberation, but as a God who sustains the black women in their struggle to survive in the desert. Williams sees in the person of the black woman the totality of black experience in the United States in all its suffering and exploitation. Kelly Brown Douglas finally takes the totality of Williams and Cone's theoretical framework by centralizing the concept of wholeness to emphasize the necessity of a holistic and prophetic understanding of liberation that challenges systems of oppression found around the world in any given context. For Douglas, if womanism took the androcentric black theology and criticized its silence on the struggles of black women, it can't stop at those struggles but must, in its liberationist framework, include the whole of humankind.

3. Poetics of Black Religion

In the previous chapters, we have analyzed the historical roots of black theology and how they eventually became an independent theological framework within academia. We first looked at the development of a distinct black theology through Cone's successful bridging of divergent streams of black self-consciousness. As Cone theorized that the God of Israel and Jesus Christ fundamentally identify themselves with the poor and the oppressed, black people must be God's people in the cultural landscape of the United States. Delores S. Williams' Hagar further developed this liberationist ethic by placing the experiences of black women at the center. Kelly Brown Douglas took this framework and brought it to its logical conclusion by stating that any theology of liberation must encompass all humans, and therefore a true womanist theology must prophetically struggle for the wholeness and liberation of the entire human race. Although a rigorous, systematic formulation of such holistic liberationism emerged late in the 20th-century academy, one can see this sentiment throughout the history of black Christian thought. Accordingly, the aim of this chapter is to study the marks of this continuous development of Christian holistic liberationism in the poetics of black women. To achieve this, three Christian poets from three successive generations of black literature will be analyzed through the lens of the womanist liberationist theology we formulated in the previous chapter. Phillis Wheatley, Frances Harper, and Pauli Murray all sang songs of liberation by taking up the prophetic mantle to write poems of deliverance that challenged the status quo of their times, mirroring the development of a distinctive black theology in their poetic constructions. Taken together, the poetic works of Phillis Wheatley, Frances E. W. Harper, and Pauli Murray portray a progressive development within black Christian poetics, moving from the prophetic revelation of injustice to the proclamation of divine liberation, toward a theological vision that places at its center the holistic healing of all peoples.

4.1. Phillis Wheatley

Phillis Wheatley, the first published black poet of the United States and colonial America, is the first poet whose works will be referred to in this study. Born in West Africa around the year 1753, Wheatley was kidnapped and sold into slavery before the age of 10. She was carried over the Atlantic on a ship named "Phillis", the

name of which she was to carry all her life and was brought to the colony of New England. Soon after her arrival, she was purchased by Boston merchant John Wheatley as a present to her wife, Susanna Wheatley, who had recently lost a daughter. The Wheatley family was influenced by the 1st Great Awakening, a religious movement that dominated the religious and cultural landscape of New England at the time. Led by figures like George Whitefield, the Weasley Brothers, and Jonathan Edwards, this new revivalist religion demanded a rigorous and heartfelt practice of religion that went beyond the ritual practices of the established churches. Both Susanna and John Wheatley were part of the Calvinist Methodist circles associated with George Whitefield's preaching. Whitefield himself was interested in preaching to blacks as well as whites and thought that it was imperative that slaves be instructed in the ways of the gospels (Carretta 91). No doubt inspired by their religious surroundings and seeking to show their evangelical piety, the Wheatley family gave an exceptional education to young Phillis (Carretta 78). She received a thorough education that included religion and the classics, and before the age of 15, she already seems to have acquired a reading knowledge of Greek as well as Latin (Salmon 5). It was this well of religion and classical poetry that was to become the source of her poetic constructions. At age 14, she wrote her first poem, "*To the University of Cambridge [Harvard], in New England".*

Within the history of black literary criticism, Phillis Wheatley is, without a doubt, among the people who received the harshest criticisms. She was most certainly misunderstood, and her work was thought to lack a distinct black voice and was even considered to be "a moral and social embarrassment to subsequent generations of African- American writers and readers" (Levernier 172). However, more recent scholarship seems to support a more nuanced reading of Wheatley's works that not only shows her to be attuned to her black identity but also reveals that her works were deeply influenced by her fundamentally Christian belief in liberation. A careful analysis of her poems lets us see that Wheatley did not understand Christianity as a religion of total submission. Her approach to religion seems to disclose that Wheatley understood Christianity as an ultimately liberatory system of religion. It becomes clear in her poems that Wheatley conceived of liberation from death and sin as being akin to earthly liberation that is the inherent right of all people. In this perspective, the Christian religion becomes a framework through which she

was able to communicate her own criticism against oppression without putting herself in danger. Shortly after her manumission, writing to Samson Occom, she states:

> [I]n every human Breast, God has implanted a principle, which we call Love of Freedom; it is impatient of Oppression, and pants for Deliverance; and by the Leave of our Modern Egyptians, I will assert, that the same Principle lives in us. … How well the Cry for Liberty, and the reverse Disposition for the Exercise of oppressive power over others agree, - I humbly think it does not require the Penetration of a Philosopher to determine. (Levernier 173)

In this letter, one of the first things that catches our attention is that Wheatley conceived of liberty as God-given. For her, the concept of liberty was not and could not be shaped by any secular ideologies developed in her time. Liberty was something fundamentally God-given, and infringing on this God-given right was a direct affront to the Christian religion. Throughout her poetic works, this affront is always attacked through the language of scripture, mainly to ensure that Wheatley would not be persecuted for what she was saying. Enslaved condition was a wilderness experience after all, and what was important in the wilderness was the survival of the oppressed. In her wilderness experience, like Moses on Mount Horeb and Jesus in the wilderness of temptation, Wheatley is equipped with the divine Word to speak against oppression by God's blessing, protected at the same time from the charge of disloyalty by her oppressors through the authority of the Scriptures. One way through which Phillis was able to convey her understanding of Christian liberation was through using double speech, like many of her fellow slaves. This was a very common method among slaves who wanted to ensure the white paranoid slaveholders of their loyalty as they would groan and pray for deliverance (Hopkins and Cummings, *Cut Down* 22). Wheatley's use of double speech was not simply a literary technique. It was a method of survival. To pacify white elites, Scriptures were utilized in a way that could assure the slaveholding class of the timidity of Wheatley's message. But on a deeper level, Wheatley allowed the biblical figures and allusions to communicate another message that testified to the liberatory nature of the Christian message. Her engagement with the scripture also transforms this slave girl into a prophetess who reveals the divine truth through God's Word. Her poetic constructions show us that Wheatley indeed considered herself someone who

could gaze into the deeper mysteries of God without the need for an extensive education. This prophetic slave woman who took personal agency to utilize scriptures to declare a message of freedom predates black theological tradition by two centuries while simultaneously portraying how themes directly ingrained in the said tradition were already evident in black religious thought from the earliest days. One of her most infamous poems, *On Being Brought from Africa to America,* is a prime example of how the style and motifs of the biblical prophetic tradition served as a cover for young Phillis to protect herself from attacks while preaching to white people who were her "natural" superiors. The short poem reads thus:

> Twas mercy brought me from my Pagan land,
>
> Taught my benighted soul to understand
>
> That there's a God, that there's a Saviour too:
>
> Once I redemption neither sought nor knew,
>
> Some view our sable race with scornful eye,
>
> "Their colour is a diabolic die."
>
> Remember, Christians, Negroes, black as Cain,
>
> May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train. (1-8)

At first glance, the poem appears to stand in direct opposition to everything the previous chapters have stated concerning black consciousness and the development of a black Christian theology. It seems here that Wheatley completely adapts to the framework of her slave masters and considers her own racial and cultural background as evil altogether. However, it is a particular syntactical maneuver that defeats this interpretation. The comma, cleverly placed after the word "remember," allows us to see that the "benighted soul" is shared by both the colored and white peoples, as both share a common descent from Cain (Scheick 136). The verb "Remember" in imperative shows us that Wheatley already conceives herself as not someone's thankful subordinate but rather the authority of instruction in this poem's narrative. Her authority also claims forgetfulness on the part of her superiors who appear to have forgotten clear scriptural realities due to their own prejudices. Wheatley makes it clear that separation between the races is non-existent when it

comes to the issue of salvation, and both are equally in need of God's mercy. The last line that refers to a process of refinement to join the angelic train is a direct reference to the writings of the Prophet Isaiah:

> I have chosen thee in the furnace of affliction" (Isaiah 48:10). As placed in Wheatley's poem, this allusion can be read to say that being white (silver) is no sign of privilege (spiritually or culturally) because God's chosen are refined (purified, made spiritually white) through the afflictions that Christians and Negroes have in common, as mutually benighted descendants of Cain. (Sheick 136)

This reference to Isaiah reveals another important aspect of Wheatley's thought concerning refinement. It is the afflictions that refine God's people. Afflictions test the faith and become a medium to elevate God's people. This can be further read through similar words of Apostle Paul in his Epistle to the Romans, which reads "…and not only so, but we glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation worketh patience; and patience, experience; and experience, hope: and hope maketh not ashamed" (5:3-5). Clearly, for Wheatley, what white theologians considered to be a curse upon the enslaved could also be seen as a sign of God's presence among the oppressed. It was clear to her that the ones God visited with tribulations were not slaveholders, and therefore, their faith was not tested, and they were not purified. An enslaved woman, Wheatley's poetic genius allows her to take up both the prophetic and ministerial mantle, weaponizing scripture to critique the segmentation of the Christian faith. She clearly does not see Christianity as part of the structure that caused her people to be enslaved; rather, she sees that the enslavers are acting directly against the spirit of Christian faith. She turns the authority of the scripture against her oppressors and holds them accountable for the discrepancies in their faith practices. She rejects the aforementioned hierarchy of the white slave masters who wanted to impose upon black people an identity that was a representative of all that was against Christianity. By rejecting the hypocrisy of white Christianity in creating such a stratification among God's people, she puts at the center of her message the necessity of evangelical salvation for all of humankind. She denies the imputed evil of blackness by showing that whites are just as "black" as anybody else, and her assumption of authority shows that the colored people can be so cleansed from sin as to be able to preach to whites about their own "darkened" nature. Her poetics clearly

relocates blackness to one's spiritual condition, which liberates one's complexion from having an inherent moral identification. Her choosing of such words as "die" and "Cain" appears to have been clever nudges at the inherently greed-driven nature of the transatlantic trade (Levernier 182). She seems to secretly imply that Africans were brought not out of missionary zeal, but because of the sugar and dye trade, which were extremely lucrative. This highly successful utilization of double speech reveals to us a criticism of the Christian rhetoric that was used to justify the inherently greed-driven nature of Western colonial empires. Overall, *On Being Brought from Africa to America*, far from being a poem that praises the institution of slavery, seems to be the single poem that does the greatest justice to the poetic genius of Phillis Wheatley as a Prophetess of Liberation. Throughout the work, she consistently employs an inversion of authority through her mastery of the Scriptures. This transforms her into an authority whose theological understanding bears witness to the black Christian theology that was to arrive at the time of the Civil Rights Movement.

Even at the age of 14, Ethiopian prophetesses were admonishing people far above their station in society. We see in her poem *To the University of Cambridge in New England* how Wheatley assumes the ministerial voice to teach young white men of the most prestigious seminary in Colonial America the values of Christian faith. While initially acknowledging the educated state of their addresses, writing:

> Students, to you 'tis giv'n to scan the heights
>
> Above, to traverse the ethereal space,
>
> And mark the systems of revolving worlds.
>
> Still more, ye sons of science ye receive
>
> The blissful news by messengers from heav'n, (7-11)

The level of education she ascribes to the seminary's students with such lofty words does not prevent her from going on to school these "students" in Christian doctrine. She immediately refocuses the discussion on Jesus' redeeming work and on sin. She admonishes students to keep themselves pure from the stain of sin, which he calls "the baneful evil to the soul" (24). She reminds them that sin is the greatest foe that must be kept away from the students, calling it but a transient sweetness which

would eventually lead to their doom (28-30). The very fact of a privately educated slave girl preaching to a group of seminarians is revolutionary indeed, given the circumstances in which Wheatley was writing. Here, Wheatley does not simply adopt a posture of a thankful convert; rather, she, a recently converted slave, declares herself the preacher of the divine Word. Throughout the poem, there is a clear distinction of authority that places Wheatley as the master of mysteries who imparts wisdom upon students of divinity. Wheatley's artistic inversion of authority once again destabilizes expected social norms of New England society. Wheatley, not educated in an Academy, nor of a lineage that could have given her the wisdom she claimed for herself, equates herself with the biblical prophets of Israel who received the words they spoke directly from God, like Ezekiel, who ate God's scroll and prophesied. In her prophetic office, Wheatley admonishes those whose religious office came to them through their station in life and whose calling could be corrupted by the daily temptations of life. But this New England prophetess truly becomes a prophetess of liberation when one learns that the final version of this poem included in her collected works is heavily edited. James A. Levernier writes that "an early version of *To the University of Cambridge*, Wrote in 1767 -, "Wheatley also identifies herself as "An Ethiop" but recently arrived from a "sable Land" where she witnessed "error's darkest night" (196-97), and she urges Harvard students to "[s]uppress the sable monster in its growth," for, as she warns, "Its transient sweetness turns to endless pain, /And brings eternal ruin on the Soul" (177). Levernier claims that the sable monster that is growing, which was not included in the final version of the poem, was a direct reference to the institution of slavery. The reason this slave girl was preaching the Christian values to a group she identifies as "Ye blooming plants of human race divine" in line 27 could have been understood as her desire to see them destroy this baneful monster before it creates further destruction. Keeping in mind that this was Phillis' first written poem and it was written not long after she was abducted from her homeland makes this reading of the poem a lot more credible. Levernier's discovery allows us to see the narrow confines through which Wheatley was permitted to express herself. This earlier version shows us that a possible anti-slavery witness was present in her worldview even at the very beginning of her career, though it had to be consistently clouded behind a distinctively Christian rhetoric to ensure her safety. Another important aspect of this line is Wheatley's self-identification as "an Ethiop". By doing that, Wheatley aims to

strengthen her prophetic authority by relating her own identity as an African to the biblical texts. Psalm 68:31 which states that “Princes shall come out of Egypt; Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God” transforms an inferior identity of the colonial American cultural landscape into an identity redemption of which was promised by the Scriptures. This word also creates a connection between Wheatley and the Ethiopian Eunuch of the Gospel account, thereby creating a connection between Wheatley and one of the first Gentile converts to Christianity. Through scriptural sanctioning, this self-identification allows Wheatley to claim for herself a voice by constructing an identity independent of the one given to her by society, which considered her voice inferior. Contrary to what her critics claimed, Wheatley appears to have embraced her identity as a black person alongside her identity as a Christian, uniting them into a coherent whole.

Maybe the poem that most foreshadows future development of black theology is her poem titled *To The Right Honourable William, Earl of Dartmouth.* Written upon the arrival of William Legge in the Colonies as the Secretary of State for the Colonies for King George III, the poem encapsulates many aspects of black experience on the American continent through the personal voice of Phillis. In her role as a Prophetess, she was never limited in the scope of her addresses by people in New England, as oftentimes the poems she composed were directed at those at the top of the British Empire's hierarchy. The universality of people Wheatley addresses in her poems further strengthens our reading of her career as a poet in prophetic terms. Biblical prophets, themselves often hailing from insignificant backgrounds, had to address leaders of the Israelite community through divine sanction. Likewise, the fact that Wheatley found in her the right to address aristocrats, ministers, governors, and the educated elite as an enslaved African woman places her within the tradition of biblical prophets. This poem presents one of the clearest criticisms Wheatley made against the institution of slavery. Though written toupon the Earl’s arrival, it is clear that Wheatley aimed at create something more than a simple poem of praise. Wheatley, aware of the political tensions between the colonies and the British Empire, used this opportunity to present her own views concerning the concepts of liberty and freedom:

No more, America, in mournful strain

Of wrongs, and grievance unredress'd complain,

No longer shalt thou dread the iron chain,

Which wanton Tyranny with lawless hand

Had made, and with it meant t' enslave the land (15-19)

While Phillis seems to talk about the crises between the Colonies and the London government, the fact that the main imagery used in this depiction was the image of chains and slavery is a most purposeful choice. It is evident that, on a theological and personal level, these chains were meant to evoke in the reader the idea of slavery. Wheatley unites these two forms of oppression into one, challenging the readers of her poem to make the necessary inferences from the context. Indeed, the biographer of Wheatley, Vincent Caretta, writes that the revolutionary rhetoric used by the American colonists led many to question the hypocrisy of owning other human beings as property. He further points out the decrease in the number of people enslaved at the time in Boston (380). Within this social reality, Wheatley, "The Ethiop", once more points out the nation's inherent sin and hypocrisy in her own way. Through her prophetic office, Wheatley does not aim to preach to the outsiders and enemies as an outsider, but rather to the covenantal community as a part of it. Rather than prophesying future events, she calls upon her people to see the sins they are committing in defiance of the revealed will of God because of their hypocrisy. She also relates her enslaved condition to the condition of the American colonies, in a way embodying the plight of the whole of the oppressed in her own experience, becoming the mouthpiece of divine righteousness:

I, young in life, by seeming cruel fate

Was snatch'd from Afric's fancy'd happy seat:

What pangs excruciating must molest,

What sorrows labour in my parent's breast?

Steel'd was that soul and by no misery mov'd

That from a father seiz'd his babe belov'd:

Such, such my case. And can I then but pray

Others may never feel tyrannic sway? (24-31)

Wheatley transitions from the political realities of the 18th century to her personal experiences, using them as an interpretive lens through which to discuss the concepts of liberty and oppression. Within this poem, Phillis' abduction is not only a part of her life story but also a singular instance in a larger system of powerful people exploiting the weak. This poem is another instance in which the poetic voice of Wheatley assumes a moral superiority. Once again, her moral superiority does not come from her social standing, but rather from a suffering she faithfully endured. Throughout the Gospels, Wheatley knows that it is with people like her that Jesus identifies. This identification predates the central claim of black Christian theology by almost two centuries. Just as James H. Cone, looking at the condition of the black people in the mid-20th century United States, was able to identify the black experience directly with the Gospel message, Wheatley makes a similar claim through her poetics. She locates the authentic Christian life not among the established elite of New England, but among the oppressed of the society, as can be seen in her taking upon herself the prophetic mantle. Through this reversal, Wheatley shows us that membership in the institutional church does not guarantee one's spiritual faithfulness. It is in the imitation of Christ that one acquires spiritual authority. In her position, Phillis takes one more step and establishes a stronger connection between her condition and Jesus'. She prays that the very people who snatched her away from her happy home may never feel what she herself had to endure. She embodies Jesus' commandment in Matthew 5:44, which instructs his disciples to pray for people who despitefully use them. It is this Christlikeness that transforms this slave girl into the Ethiopic Prophetess of Liberation who brings into "light" the evident hypocrisy of white Christianity, or as she would have said, the "Egyptian Religion". White Christians may hold in their hands the ecclesiastical and social power, still, the scripture and spirit sanction the least among them to preach truth to power.

Phillis predated womanist theologies by almost two centuries. However, the intrinsic ideas we find in both fields have their earliest poetic manifestation in the works of Phillis Wheatley. As a woman in the wilderness of slavery, snatched away

from her native shores, she took upon herself a prophetic and ministerial mantle through stylistic ingenuity and syntactical maneuvering. Inconceivable at her time for a slave woman, her unique poetics allowed her to preach to white people about the nature of Christian faith, which she believed was inherently egalitarian and liberationist. Her poetic preaching clearly showed that it was Phillis and her people who were moral superiors to white people, whose greed had led to great suffering. Their "diabolic die" was present not on the colored people's complexion, but in the soul of Christian folks who claimed the name of Christ all the while turning a blind eye to the plight of the oppressed all around them. While her enslaved condition made her criticism subtle and veiled behind the language of the Scriptures, decades following her passing would see the rise of prophetesses whose language was forceful in their denunciation of the wickedness of the white institutions of power.

4.2. Frances E. W. Harper

Within the same century as Phillis Wheatley, the need to write about the evils of white supremacy and slavery behind a veil was becoming increasingly redundant. Free educated women of color were criticizing the system in which they found themselves in unimaginable ways in the preceding generation that listened to the Ethiopic Prophetess' songs of freedom. Now, the tide of fate was raising up Moseses, Aarons, and Miriams during Egyptian captivity. Most certainly, the woman whose poetic compositions were most filled with the Christian spirit of liberation was the authoress of the famous novel *Iola Leroy*, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper. Born in 1825 as a free person of color, she was orphaned at a very early age, after which she was raised by her maternal uncle and aunt. Her uncle, William J. Watkins Sr., was a preacher and gave Frances a good education. Her uncle was a preacher of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, and Frances was raised during this ecclesiastical communion. For Frances' uncle, "religion was a political point of view as well as a cosmic belief," and the A.M.E. Church adhered to a liberationist doctrine and strong black consciousness (Joyce 37). Amid this intellectual and religious environment, Frances took to heart her family's liberationist religion and infused her poems with its spirit. At the age of 14, she began writing pieces for anti-slavery journals (Showalter 176), and at the age of 20 she wrote her first book of poems *Forest*

Leaves. Wheatley's prophetic critique of her society was shut behind the door of stylistic choices. Without the key to her personal correspondence, it would have been significantly harder for us to interpret her poems successfully. However, Harper's voice is thunderous in her denunciation of the "New Egypt" (Joyce 70). Her entire poetic corpus is filled with Biblical stories, which she retells to criticize the death, corruption, and oppression present in the United States. She unites the figures of Jesus and Moses in a singular liberatory character. She turns around the head, the color associations of the white supremacists in a way that is most reminiscent of the Black Christ of Cone. She rewrites the biblical narratives to give voice to the women whose perspectives were untold in the Holy Scriptures (Joyce 96), embodying Williams' Hagar. Overall, as a poet, the liberatory tendencies of the black Christian religion emanate from each verse composed by Harper.

The figure of Moses was fundamental to Harper's politics and poetics. Her poetic Magnum Opus, *Moses: A Story of the Nile,* is an enormous poem, a liberatory epic of 9 chapters that retells the exodus story in a way that connects it with the religio-political realities of the United States. The poem starts with Moses' giving up the material luxuries and comfort of his adopted family to live with his own people who are under subjugation. Moses speaks to her adoptive mother:

> I've come to thank thee for thy goodness,
>
> And to breathe into thy generous ears
>
> My last and sad farewell. I go to join
>
> The fortunes of my race, and to put aside
>
> All other bright advantages, save
>
> The approval of my conscience and the need
>
> Of rightly doing. (2-8)

Moses' decision to give up his own wealth and privileged position should not only be read through a political lens. Here, Harper portrays Moses' giving up his station as a moral conversion necessitated by his conscience. Moses' abandoning of the Egyptian court is a prerequisite for his identification with the oppressed Israelites. One cannot identify with the oppressed from a distance; rather, one needs to labor with them.

Harper's poetic depiction of the event creates an additional level of conversion narrative to a story that is, on the surface, about national liberation. This concept of moral conversion recalls a concept James H. Cone would delineate a century later in his *Black Theology of Liberation*. For Cone, for white people to participate in the liberatory work of God, they must renounce their whiteness with all that it entails and convert to "blackness" (132). Of course, Cone does not understand this conversion on the level of biological race or culture but rather sees it as an individual's conscious identification with the marginalized of society. Blackness becomes a theological category that means the society's other, and Harper uses the Israelites in her poem to make this identification. Moses' conversion starts long before God speaks to him through the burning bush. He becomes one of the oppressed, "a convert", the moment he rejects his portion in life for the sake of laboring with the oppressed of the land. Moses continues:

> Let me tell thee, gracious princess ; 'tis no
>
> Sudden freak nor impulse wild that moves my mind .
>
> I feel an earnest purpose binding all
>
> My soul unto a strong resolve, which bids
>
> Me put aside all other ends and aims ,
>
> Until the hour shall come when God-the God
>
> Our fathers loved and worshipped-shall break our chains,
>
> And lead our willing feet to freedom . (17-24)

Moses identifies the God of his forefathers as the God who breaks the chains of slavery, the God who leads his people into freedom. The God whom Moses describes is not mainly identified with any particular quality that may be appropriate to the theological senses of the Egyptians. Nor does he seek to bring to the audience's attention his transcendence or omnipotence as a point of differentiation from their gods. Rather, it is the act of emancipation that is at the center of God's self-revelation. Harper invites us to look through this emancipatory lens at the history of humankind, to see the person of God not in the oppression of the powerless but rather in their liberation. For Harper, Moses cannot be only a historical individual

whose actions are limited to his time. Moses is a universal character whose person must be imitated in all instances of oppression. Exodus story is not limited to one instance in biblical history. It is an event that recurs whenever one group is exploited for the benefit of another. Christian religion then calls the faithful to become a Moses in this struggle for freedom. She believes that each faithful is called to become a Hebrew in soul, just like Cone's conception of becoming black, no matter their station in life. Every believer is confronted with the same decision that confronted Moses, whether to remain within the security of Egypt or to embrace the call of solidarity with God's suffering people. It is clear from her poems that she does not believe one can remain a Christian while siding with the Egyptians of one's time. As can be seen, the story of Exodus is central to Harper's theological poetics as she builds her framework for the Christian religion, whose central point is liberation. Another one of her images is an image we have already seen being used by Wheatley, the image of "Ethiopia". By using Ethiopia, Harper seems to be uniting the experiences of the Israelites of Exodus and black people of the 19th-century United States, as by the time of Wheatley onwards, the word "Ethiopia" was increasingly associated with the self-conception of the black Christians in the US. Ethiopia here is no longer a geographical location but akin to Cone's conceptualization of the term blackness; it is the symbol of the oppressed waiting for divine liberation:

> Yes, Ethiopia, yet shall stretch
>
> Her bleeding hands abroad,
>
> Her cry of agony shall reach
>
> The burning throne of God. (1-4)

While the previous poem was heavily based on an Old Testament narrative, here, Harper aims to include in her liberatory discourse a distinct Christological perspective. Bodily suffering of Ethiopia with her bleeding hands and in agony calls to mind the suffering of Jesus on the cross with his pierced hands. This connection allows Harper to create a typological relation between the suffering of Christ and the suffering of the black people of the United States. Ethiopia not only imitates Jesus' suffering but rather participates in it through the universalistic reality of oppression of the powerless. Through this reading, we see Harper's anticipation of later black

theologies' claim that Jesus is uniquely present in the plight of the oppressed and the downtrodden. This Christological typology takes place in other poems of Harper's too. Her short poem *I Thirst* is a direct reference to the word of distress uttered by Jesus during his crucifixion in the Gospel of John, chapter 19, verse 28. Harper's appropriation of Jesus' last words allows black suffering to turn into a cry for communal endurance in the face of oppression. Jesus' physical thirst has now become a thirst that black people experience for justice and equality in a world that does not treat them with love as God commands in his word. In this struggle, Harper affirms to her people that they will be sustained by divine agency and that they are not left alone:

> Within, in thee is one living fount,
>
> Fed from the springs above;
>
> There quench thy thirst till thou shalt bathe
>
> In God's own sea of love (21-24)

The concept of thirst quenched by love also reminds us of the words Jesus spoke in his Beatitudes, when he claims that those people who are hungering and thirsting after righteousness are blessed and will be satisfied by God. Here, it also seems that the thirst experienced by Harper's people will eventually be satisfied by God. Though a reading associated with the life to come may be appropriate, we can also read here an eventual expectation of earthly liberation which will be achieved by God's own agency, like resurrection and Exodus narratives. Harper's poetics are significant in our analyses because she has a distinct awareness of two separate Christianities that is most like Cone's later systematization of white and black religions. While Harper's own religion is identified by the stories of Exodus, the Passion narrative, and liberation, the white religion is the religion of people who weaponize faith to oppress the weak. In relation to this religious dichotomy, she also utilizes a method that white slavers employed to dehumanize the black body to make her point. She reverses the accepted color association of the 19th-century racial ideology, making whiteness an inherently ethical and theological category. In her poems, particularly in her work *Moses: A Story of the Nile*, she associates the color grey with physical death, while the color white is associated with sin and, therefore, spiritual death. It was a "white hand" that beckoned Moses to sin (Joyce 37). By

imputing the concepts of sin and temptation on whiteness, she reverses white Christian claims on blackness on its head. In this poetic totality, Harper clearly distinguishes between the white and black Christianities as two separate religions. White religion, then, is the false religion that beckons the person to sin. So little patience Harper had with this white religion, she attacked it ferociously in her poem, *Bible Defence of Slavery:*

> An infidel could do no more
>
> To hide his country's guilty blot,
>
> Than spread God's holy record o'er
>
> The loathesome leprous spot.
>
> Oh, when ye pray for heathen lands,
>
> And plead for dark benighted shores,
>
> Remember slavery's cruel hands
>
> Make heathens at your doors (24-31)

For Harper, the fact that the Bible has been utilized to defend the practice of slavery is indeed something that could not even be done by an infidel. The severest crime the white religion undertakes is not slavery but rather utilizing the Scriptures to sanctify an institution of oppression and exploitation. He shows the hypocrisy of such an undertaking by also attacking the common excuse of Christianizing the "heathen" through such a barbaric practice. Like Wheatley, these lines relocate spiritual darkness to her contemporary United States. She says to the white Christian, "You yourself are a heathen due to slavery's cruel hands"; "You yourself are the most benighted infidel for perverting the truth." It becomes clear then, Harper considered it a matter of great audaciousness for white Christians, overlooking their own "benighted state", to play the part of the savior of the infidels.

As much as we see Harper prefigure the development of James Cone's Black Theology in her Mosaic poems of deliverance, we also see her prophetically speak of Mother Hagar, as in Delores S. Williams. Moses was the main figure around which Harper was able to speculate on the concept of collective deliverance as a people. The mother figures of Scriptures allow her to talk about forms of oppression that

were not at the center of androcentric liberation struggles. Harper does not only talk about the victorious walk of the Israelites towards nationhood, but she also talks about the daily struggles faced by the least of the least, that is black women. Particularly in the aftermath of the Civil War, and having lost her husband in the meantime, Harper's activism began to take on a distinctly feminist trajectory. The concept of motherhood was a very central motif in the whole of Harper's poetic works. She gives voice to the maternal archetypes in the Bible who were only side characters in men's grand narratives. In doing so, she wants her readers to see the essential role assumed by the simple people in grand narratives of liberation. For Harper, motherhood is not only a biological role assumed by women, but rather it represents a theological calling associated with black women's endurance and moral strength in the face of intersectional oppression as they participate actively in God's liberating work. In her poem *The Syrophoenician Woman,* she gives voice to a character that appears but a moment in the Gospel:

> Rack'd with agony and pain,
>
> Writhing long, my child has lain;
>
> Now the prophet draweth near,
>
> All our griefs shall disappear. (5-8)

Similar to many black mothers of the 19th-century United States, this woman does not possess any power, social or political, to effect any change in her condition. The only thing that she possesses to bring about any change is her faith that the approaching prophet can make her grief disappear. She appears to us to be in the biblical wilderness of Mother Hagar, wherein survival is completely dependent on faith in God's providence. Harper repeatedly associates Black motherhood with precisely this condition of radical powerlessness, and thus she links contemporary Black experience with one of Scripture's central motifs. Jesus' reaction to the woman's imploring is significant, as we see that the miracle does not occur due to her ethnic background. On the contrary, in lines 20-24, Jesus rejects her request because his mission is limited to the people of Israel. However, the faithful insistence of the woman impresses Jesus:

> "Woman," said the' astonish'd Lord,

"Be it even as thy word I

By thy faith that knows no fail,

Thou hast ask'd, and shalt prevail." (25-28)

Harper's theological claim is that the person of Jesus transcends racial categorizations. She thereby offers comfort to black mothers whose humanity is questioned daily by showing that their faith is where God meets them in their daily struggles, regardless of what the larger society may have to say about their personhood. Another one of her motherhood poems, *The Slave Mother*, reminds us of the role of surrogate mother experienced by Hagar in the Genesis story. Just like Hagar, who was forced to give birth to a child that was not hers, in Harper's poem we also see a mother whose child does not belong to her (17-18). Her motherhood is a particular kind of motherhood that does not entail any authority of the mother over her children. The institution of slavery has systematically broken apart the natural connection between a mother and a child, as the love of a mother towards her child was under constant threat. Just like Williams' Hagar, Harper also situates her slave mother in "life's desert wild" (28). However, in this desert wild, Harper does not relate a story of deliverance, but rather of perseverance. She does not have any power to change what is to happen to her child, but in her life, she can still cling to her faith to bear her pain and continue her struggle. All this was most certainly inspired by Harper's personal experiences as a black woman. It also becomes clear to us that Harper's theological speculations were deeply connected to her own lived reality. Rather than looking at the Scriptures as a collection of texts that build an abstract system of thought, she looks at them through real-life concepts such as motherhood, poverty, racial discrimination and oppression, and widowhood. Her theology does not exist separately from her, but as Cone claimed to be the nature of theology, exists as her contextual language. Speaking at the 1866 National Woman's Rights Convention of New York, she spoke of her experiences as a black woman who was a widow without anyone to provide for her:

> My husband had died suddenly, leaving me a widow, with four children, one my own, and the other stepchildren. I tried to keep my children together. But my husband died in debt; and before he had been in his grave three months, the administrator had swept the very milk-crocks and wash tubs from my

> hands… Had I died instead of my husband, how different would have been the result! By this time, he would have had another wife, it is likely; and no administrator would have gone into his house…

Harper's poetical and religious commentary refuses to see racial and gender oppression independently. She was a wilderness woman, a Hagar who had to survive with her children in a society that intended to destroy her not only because she was black, but also because she was a woman. When we describe Harper as a wilderness woman, we acknowledge that, in her sufferings, she was able to encounter God and accept her vocation to speak her theological truth to power. As she looked at the world, she was able to say that a society could not possibly trample on any member of its society, black or white, men or women, without putting their own soul in danger (Joyce 114). This statement, very progressive for her time, shows that Harper's worldview rejected all systems of oppression, whatever shape they may take. For her, human dignity is indivisible. Looking at her poetic theology, we see Harper prophesying the future arrival of not only Cone's black liberationism but also womanist theology of holistic liberation. While Wheatley played the role of an Old Testament prophet warning the covenant community of its sins, Harper centralized and combined Exodus and Hagarite imagery to create a proto-womanist poetical theology that openly addressed and attacked oppression existent in her times. Truly, through her life and poetics, among the voices of the Civil War, none embodied the role of the Ethiopic Prophetess in the Wilderness more successfully and more faithfully than Frances Harper.

4.3. Pauli Murray

A generation after Phillis Wheatley, Frances Harper was the woman who sang the songs of the liberatory Christianity in the most elegant way. Centralizing the person of Moses and the story of Exodus, she prefigured the Black Christ of Cone by a century. She showed that to identify with the God of Christianity, one must give up one's associations with the oppressive systems of power and identify with the oppressed. In her poetics, the God of Christianity was not the God of the Egyptians; it was the God of the Ethiopians. Suffering of Ethiopia identified her with the biblical God who breaks the chains and sets the captive free. Another important aspect of

Harper's poetics was the centrality of womanhood and motherhood to the suffering nation. She gave voices to biblical characters in her poems who were only side characters, voiceless, in the story of "more important" men. In doing so, she artfully depicted the wilderness experience of the black mother who had very little but her faith in her struggle to survive.

A year before Harper's passing in 1911, Pauli Murray was born in Baltimore, Maryland, on November 20, 1910. She came from a family with diverse backgrounds, which led to their being called a "United Nations in Miniature" (Mack 208). Like Harper, Murray also lost her family early in life, and she was taken care of mostly by her relatives. Raised in a religious family from the South, she attended St. Titus Episcopal Church as a child. After turning 16, she moved to New York to receive further education. Throughout her life, Murray studied at numerous institutions. She started her professional life as a lawyer, and in this career, she most definitely excelled. She was an outspoken activist of the Civil Rights Movement. She was well connected with the leaders of her time, including Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, and First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt. Between 1960 and 1961, she lived in Ghana. One reason she moved to Africa was the fact that she wanted to get rid of the internalized conditioning she had of black people as inherently inferior (Murray 262). Later, she returned to the United States and became the first black person in the US to earn a Doctor of Juridical Science degree (Azaransky 59). Christianity has always been an important part of Murray's life. However, even as a young child, she became increasingly distraught by what she considered to be the sexist practices of the church in not permitting Christian women to play ministerial roles. She writes this in her own autobiography:

> As a child growing up in the church, I knew that I could never be privileged to carry the cross or serve at the altar as an acolyte. Only boys were permitted to do so. I grudgingly accepted these limitations, suppressing my resentments and serving in the capacities open to me.…I responded to this lack of representation when I became an adult by a studied indifference to church organization. …. My feelings toward the church were ambivalent: I could neither stay away entirely nor enter wholeheartedly into Christian community. (302)

However, this indifference did not last long. After a spiritual crisis she experienced due to the loss of her partner, Renee Barlow, she decided to pursue active ministry and ordination in the Episcopal Church. As she was pursuing ordination, she joined the seminary and received her Master of Divinity in 1976 with a thesis titled *Black Theology and Feminist Theology: A Comparative Review*. On January 8, 1977, she became the first black woman ordained as a priest in the Episcopal Church. In many respects, Murray was the embodiment of Christianity's liberatory spirit. A woman of color and someone who struggled with her gender identity throughout her life (Mack 211), she deeply believed in a God who fundamentally represented the equality of all. In her Autobiography, she would write:

> Whatever future ministry I might have as a priest, it was given to me that day to be a symbol of healing. All the strands of my life had come together. Descendant of slave and of slave owner, I had already been called poet, lawyer, teacher, and friend. Now I was empowered to minister the sacrament of One in whom there is no north or south, no black or white, no male or female—only the spirit of love and reconciliation drawing us all toward the goal of human wholeness. (355)

With her ordination, Murray indeed was able to become not only the prophet but the minister of the God who promised wholeness and healing to all peoples, regardless of race, gender, or, as in her case, identity. Looking at her life's work, she is indeed the embodiment of Kelly Brown Douglas's Womanist Prophet. Looking back at the history of black women who came before her, she bears witness to the faith upheld by these women, a faith that prophetically defies the established social order and calls for societal reform for the betterment of the whole.

Murray's whole life was a testament to the fight against injustice and oppression. All aspects of her professional life, be it as a lawyer or as a priest, were an outgrowth of this testament. But closest to the heart of Murray lay her love for poetry. Her poetry too was a response to injustices she faced in the United States; it was a mode of ethical expression for her (Peppard 22). As an individual, all her life she was deeply aware of the distinctive type of oppression she faced as a black woman, and she called it being "triple handicapped" (Murray 340). This is significant, as it reveals Murray's awareness that forms of oppression cannot exist

independent of one another. Although academic talk on intersectionality would only emerge in decades following her death, Murray, like Harper, was always aware of the way different forms of oppression interacted with each other. Against this reality of oppression, she considered her poetics a form of "confrontation by typewriter" (Murray 87). This expression is important, as it portrays how Murray conceived of her work as a poet. For Murray, Poetry is not only about artistic production but rather a form of prophetic witness to challenge the power structures of one's time. Her most famous poem, *Dark Testament,* is one such confrontation, in which she forces the American white to face the reality of the country's past by narrating the story of her own people. Unlike Wheatley and Harper, whose theological voice as expressed in their poetry was wholly based in the narratives of the Scriptures, Murray looks at the history of the United States as a source of Christian theology all by itself. She reinterprets the American experience through such scriptural concepts as deliverance, reconciliation, exile, etc., and writes a history of black religious thought. She begins writing:

> I was an Israelite walking a sea bottom,
>
> I was a Negro slave following the North Star,
>
> I was an immigrant huddled in ship's belly,
>
> I was a Mormon searching for a temple,
>
> I was a refugee clogging roads to nowhere—
>
> Always the dream was the same—
>
> Always the dream was freedom. (8-14)

The repeated use of the first-person pronoun aims to challenge the distinction between the individual and larger society. Here, Murray does not speak as Murray but rather speaks as the narrator of the accumulated memory of suffering experienced by diverse groups of people throughout the history of the United States who were made social others. This 'I' is simultaneously a black slave and an Israelite, an immigrant and a Mormon. The experiences of displacement and oppression are a united manifestation of the singular phenomenon. Having united these groups of people in their common persecution, Murray also unites them in their common desire for freedom. She signifies the universality of the desire for freedom.

America was the dream of freedom.

But the dream was lost when campfires grew,

The Bible twisted as white men threw

The Redskins back to mountain pass, (17-20)

The duality is established. The dream of freedom, the American dream, is doomed from the very start. However, there is also in these lines the fact that Murray distinguishes between the ideal of America and its historical reality. Murray's criticism once again evokes the prophetic mission of her poetics. Like an Old Testament prophet, she does not attack the divine covenant, that is, the ideal of America, but rather criticizes the covenant community for their falling short of it. With the coming of the white men, with the burning of the settlers' campfires, the Bible is twisted, she says. It is important to note here that Murray uses a passive construction. She does not see the distortion of the dream as a natural outgrowth of the Bible, but rather as the human intervention perverting its inherent message. Because of human sinfulness, the faith that is freedom is lost. The future of America promises anything but freedom for anyone who would seek it. Except the white men who, in contradicting the Scriptures, won their freedom through having an axe in one hand and a gun in the other (30-31). Then the speaker of the poem goes to Africa and continues the narrative, depicting Africa's idyllic scenes. However, with the arrival of the slavers, we are brought back to the slave market wherein black humanity was crushed, and redefined as a commodity:

Sell a man's brain for a handful of greenbacks,

Mark him up in Congress—he's three-fifths human,

Mark him down in the record with mules and mortgage,

Sell him long! Sell him short! Cotton's a-boomin'.

Take a black's manhood, give a white God (139-143)

Now, once the black human is destroyed, once the black manhood is turned over to the white master, we see that a white God is created. Once again, she rejects an inherent whiteness in God but, rather, through constructing a passive structure, sees it as a creation of sinful humans. The responsibility behind the existence of this

racialized religion does not lie with God but rather lies with us. Murray sees that the existence of the white God and his Christianity depends on the dehumanization of her own people. Murray thereby suggests that racism is not merely a social or political evil but also a theological one, since it fundamentally alters the way God is imagined and proclaimed. This insight places her in remarkable continuity with the broader Black theological tradition. However, as she goes on to state, the black person who is in the wilderness still finds a way to make a way out of no way. She writes:

> A black man down on his knees in the swamp-grass
>
> Sent his prayer straight to the white God's throne,
>
> Built him a faith, built a bridge to this God
>
> And God gave him hope and the power of song. (147-150)

While on first reading, it feels almost as if the black man received the religion of the "white God". However, the fact that it was the black man who actively built this faith gives him agency. This is not the religion of the slavers. This is the religion that was born in the wilderness of Colonial America; this was the Invisible Institution. Faith here is something that the enslaved construct through their suffering. It was not imposed on them but rather exists as a manifestation of the communities' own lived experiences. Murray constructs, through her poetics, a history of Black religion, a faith of hope and song that sustained the slave and her descendants in the wilderness. The verb "to build" suggests spiritual labor and communal participation in the struggle to create a distinct theological worldview. A poetic and theological reading of history is an important aspect of Murray's work. As we stated above, she sees herself as part of a people and faith tradition that fought for wholeness and equality. In her poem accurately titled The *Psalm of Deliverance,* written for the black children of the American South after the integration, she writes:

> Children of courage, we great you!
>
> Gentle warriors, we salute you! …
>
> We, the wounded and dead of former campaigns,
>
> Unknown, unheralded, unribboned, …

From restless graves in swamps and bayous,

From slave ships, slave pens, chain gangs and prisons, (1-10)

She recalls the forgotten warriors of the past to encourage the children to continue the fight for equality. By doing so, Murray uses the concept of historical memory as a liberatory practice all by itself. Befitting the title, this act of remembering establishes a clear connection between this poem and the larger traditions of Psalms, in which faithful people frequently meditate upon the past acts of liberation of God. Line 10, with its several motifs of suffering, creates a genealogy of oppression that connects the present generation with their ancestors who were stolen from the African soil. Just as she sees herself as a part of a larger tradition that fought for liberation, this poem reads like a prayer of remembrance that commemorates the memory of the larger cloud of witnesses that surrounds everyone who fights for equality in the United States. This is not the only poem of hers that takes the form of a prayer; she composes another prayer in one of her poems from the same year. Through this prayer, Murray also delineates her own vision of struggle against oppression. Written after the lynching of Mack Charles Parker, *Collect for Poplarville* goes thus:

Give us courage to stand firm against

our tormentors without rancor—

Teach us that most difficult of tasks—

to pray for them,

to follow, not burn, thy cross! (12-16)

The very title of the poem itself is important. In Christian tradition, a “collect” is the communal prayer of the worshipping community assigned specifically for a given Sunday. By titling the poem as a collection and keeping a similar structural form, Murray claims that the tragedies of racial violence are inherently connected to the life of Christian discipleship. The church cannot separate itself from the everyday violence happening in front of its doors while also claiming faithfulness to the message of Jesus. In addition to this, Murray also reveals much about her own theological vision in this poem. Murray’s theology is a theology of passive resistance, more akin to Martin Luther King Jr.'s theology. Her exclusive focus on Christology, as we can see in her other poems, prevents her from structuring a

theology that permits violence. However, as her poems show, Murray does not share the positive conceptualization of human nature that was central to King Jr.'s vision. She, as we have stated, is deeply aware of human wickedness that can corrupt the faith itself. Her nonviolent attitude results not from a faith in an inherent goodness but rather from a strict understanding of *Imitatio Christi.* The distinction between "follow" and "burn" in line 16, so closely situated with each other, shows us that Murray sees these as fundamentally exclusionary approaches. By evoking the KKK's cross burnings, she wants her audiences to understand violence used as retaliation against violence. But in using the said imagery, she also forces her audiences to want to create a difference between themselves and the Klansmen. This difference is created by imitating the virtues of Christ. One is not simply a passive recipient of hate, but rather a purposeful imitator in choosing to follow the way of the Cross. The strength one must pray for, according to her, is the strength to become different than one's oppressors. While her theology differs from King Jr.'s on the question of human nature, she also departs from Cone's. Firstly, she rejects any ontological definition that would limit the person of God. For her, the insistence on the collective reality of the black people would result in an analysis that does not extend beyond racial groups to merit individual effort and responsibility (Pinn 29). Cone himself later admits to this rather limited vision of his, stating that his early theologizing lacked the necessary critique of the interlocking systems of oppression, economic and gender-related, that caused suffering to all peoples (Cone, *Black Theology* 25). Murray's poetic theology is always centered around a version of liberation that must be for all in all. Her poem *Prophecy* speaks of this new conceptualization of total liberation, which is inherently reminiscent of Brown Douglas' womanist Christ:

> I sing of a new American
>
> Separate from all others,
>
> Yet enlarged and diminished by all others…
>
> Progeny of all colors, all cultures, all systems, all beliefs.
>
> I have been enslaved, yet my spirit is unbound. (1-7)

For Murray, the freedom dreams of America she testified to in *Dark Testament* is restored prophetically again in this poem. This American is not merely a citizen of an

earthly nation. Rather, it is a renewed human who transcends all inherited separations without losing their histories. This new American is unbounded; she is separate from all others that have so far existed, she is unlike any other yet containing all that precedes it. She is a child of the whole, concerned for all, striving for all. She is a womanist. Although Murray wrote her poem before the emergence of womanist theology, her new American deeply resembles an individual who heals relationships distorted by numerous forms of oppression. As she states in line 10, she does not seek conquest, wealth, power, or revenge. This womanist prophet of the new American is a prophet of Murray's Christ whose unique identity is neither black nor white. He is neither male nor female, as the Apostle Paul declares in Galatians 3:28. It is pure, unlimited love. This Christ is Murray's *Nazarene,* who appears as a hippie poet charged with the music of the spheres (3-4). In this poem, Murray's theology declares that it is not concerned even with the reality of a historical Jesus. The only concern of Murray's theology is unbounded love that bears the pain as humankind struggles for the healing of the whole. Hate, as the opposite reality of Murray's theology of love, can result only in death and destruction. In her poem titled *Hate,* she focuses on this reality:

> But when man hates
>
> His clumsy hands drip human blood,
>
> And where, in some quiet land
>
> White goats danced on a hillside
>
> Or children gathered flowers,
>
> A thousand puny skulls
>
> Give feast to flies and maggots. (6-12)

The poem's imagery quickly moves from one extreme to the other. While we are presented with picturesque images of dancing goats and flower-picking children, we are also immediately reminded of the repulsive existence of skulls eaten by flies and maggots. Clearly, Murray wants us to feel disturbed by this abrupt transition, which would make us understand the utter devastation caused by human hatred. As stated above in one of her own quotations, both in her ministry as a priest and as a poet, she thought of herself as someone who sang hymns to divine love that result in the

healing of the whole through the person of Jesus, in whom there is no particularity but a celestial wholeness. If Jesus is the spirit of love, hate is his antithesis, the Antichrist that destroys the whole. It is not simply a moral failing; it is what transforms the beautiful scenery of goats and children into a devastated realm of revulsion, an anti-creative force. For the sake of this healing of the whole, Murray accepts suffering as a reality that can't be theologized away. In her poem *To The Oppressors*, Murray uses what appears to be an almost eucharistic language to address the oppressors of the peoples, once again uniting the oppressed and the person of Jesus into one indivisible whole for the sake of the ministry of reconciliation. She writes:

> Now you are strong
>
> And we are but grapes aching with ripeness.
>
> Crush us!
>
> Squeeze from us all the brave life
>
> Contained in these full skins.
>
> But ours is a subtle strength
>
> Potent with centuries of yearning,
>
> Of being kegged and shut away
>
> In dark forgotten places. (1-9)

The grapes call to mind the Last Supper of Jesus and his disciples in the upper room, during which Jesus institutes the Eucharist as a perpetual memory of his passion. It is important that Murray chooses the figure of grapes. The grapes are not yet made into wine; that is, they are not yet "crushed". The experience of suffering, the crushing, will transform the grapes into wine, akin to transforming wine into sacramental holiness through the Passion of Christ. Their suffering is not meaningless. The suffering endured by the generations of oppressed peoples will also have a sacramental quality in the world. Once again, "through their subtle strength potent with centuries of yearning", the oppressed people's struggle will be a healing balm to steal away the oppressors' senses (11), to bring healing, the forgiveness of sins. The suffering of the oppressed does not seek destruction but conversion. Their witness

aims to restore the humanity of the oppressors as part of the mission of holistic healing. Just as Christ's prayer and sacramental offering of himself expose the world's injustice while simultaneously bringing about its healing, the triumph envisioned by Murray is neither political domination nor moral superiority, but the healing of the whole of creation through the exercise of divine love.

Succeeding in spirit our Wheatley's and Harpers' prophetic ministries, Murray finalizes the poetic development of a womanist theology. Murray looks back on the inheritance and faith tradition she received and poeticizes them. She looks at the birth of the Black religion in the wilderness. She traces how black people created this faith of hope and song against the White God whose existence depended upon the destruction of black people's humanity. This hopeful faith tradition, according to Murray, must continue to inspire generations, no matter where they are in their fight against oppression. She further shows us that this fight can only be waged through Jesus' own methods. Black people must carry their cross. However, her vision does not abandon black theology; she simply understands that an ontologically driven black theology will ultimately not advance the cause of what she understands from liberation. This enlarged vision of liberation means that Murray prefigures the birth of the womanist theologian for two decades through her poetics. For Murray, because of her *Nazarene*, who is the embodiment of radical unbounded love, true liberation requires an expansive theological vision – a vision that must be the vehicle for the healing of the whole.

5. Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to analyze the historical, theological, and poetical development of black liberationist theology. In the first chapter of this work, we have traced the historical development by first visiting the colonial background of the development of slave religion. We first highlighted the importance of Reformed theology and its inherently deterministic ideas concerning the human person, which were also dualistic. This dualistic conception of the world, which posited the good and the bad, the black and the white, against one another, created a theological framework that enabled the colonial settlers of Reformed persuasion to conceptualize their new homeland specifically within this system of dualities. The elect, that is, the colonists, who came to the North American continent, naturally needed a group that was not elect, the reprobate. The transatlantic slave trade supplied the colonials with just that, a group of reprobates. Already bringing with them from their home churches the typological associations of the color black with evil, the American white deemed slaves to be the damned descendants of Cain, forever destined to be the white men's servants. White men destroyed the identity of their slaves to create for themselves the superior identity of whiteness; their Godlike status could not exist without the subjugation of their black slaves. To survive in this oppressive landscape, the black slaves appropriated the religion of their white masters and transformed it into something uniquely their own. They took the biblical narratives of struggle for freedom and adopted them as their own religio-historical memory. This new black religion was inherently political, and throughout history it mobilized black people to advance their cause for freedom, as evidenced by figures such as Harriet Tubman, Nat Turner, and Sojourner Truth. Slaves believed the freedom promised through Christ could extend to this world as well. They believed this was also Jesus' promise for them in this life, and for this freedom they prayed. Gathering in the wilderness of North America, they laid the groundwork for the future black churches through the Invisible Institution. In the wilderness, they sang songs of freedom, and they danced. They prayed for their deliverance from the house of slavery. Eventually, the black church became an institution. This institution enabled black people to receive an independent education and prepare for their struggle against inequality. Through these institutions, black people were able to reclaim their humanity denied to them by white power structures. Within this struggle, black people continued to fight

against both physical and political assaults, as white institutions continuously executed black people without due criminal procedure. Also, to prevent them from changing the status quo, they took away their right to vote and ensured that they would forever remain in their subjugated, disenfranchised state. However, by the first half of the 20th century, the mass mobilization of black people resulted in the Civil Rights Movement. Civil Rights Movement was a deeply religious affair for the black community. Many of its leaders were members of the clergy whose understanding of freedom and liberation was deeply tinged with their own theological frameworks. Two of the most important leaders of the time, Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X, represented two streams of black religious tradition. These integrationist and nationalist streams eventually converged in the theology of James H. Cone, who defined a systematic Black Theology.

In the second chapter, we analyzed the theological development of a black liberationist theology. James H. Cone's vision in constructing his black theology was to bring together the two separate streams of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. With Malcolm X, he affirmed the ontological blackness of God. To do so, he looked at the Holy Scriptures, the Exodus narrative, and the Gospels, and through them identified God as the one who identifies with the oppressed. However, he also rejected an essentialist apotheosis of blackness, as he considered the black struggle inherently moralistic. For him, the reason for God's blackness is His preferential treatment of the oppressed. He further goes on to connect the historic experience of lynching with Jesus' Passion narrative and establishes the link of bodily suffering between the black body and divine person. He criticized the sanitization of the Cross from a radical symbol of resistance against state power to a simple religious symbol divorced from its radically evangelical meaning. This sanitization of the Gospel narratives and preference for the Pauline Canon created a white Christianity that ultimately lost its radical transformatory power over society. While Cone created a theology that put at its center the poor and the oppressed, his theological framework was silent when it came to the experience of the black woman. Black women, the ultimate other, had experiences that placed them essentially at the very bottom of the American social hierarchy. Delores S. Williams, in her *Sisters in the Wilderness*, drew attention to another aspect of the historic wilderness experience of the black people. While not completely disregarding Cone's exodus narrative, she pointed out

that black women's experience in the United States was more closely aligned with the story of Hagar in Genesis. Forced to surrogate roles of others, and having very little except her faith in the inhospitable desert, Hagar is the archetypical black woman in the United States. However, Williams also believed that the experiences of black women and any theology based on her were not to be limited only to black women. In the person of Hagar, black women represent the totality of the oppression experienced by the black body, be it men or women. Kelly Brown Douglas pushes the limits of Black and womanist theologies even further by placing the concept of wholeness at the center of her theological vision. In Douglas' theological framework, the womanist Christ is the God who restores wholeness to all the oppressed, wheresoever they may be found. Her vision encompasses all the interlocking systems of oppression and recognizes the essential responsibility of all liberationist theologies to function within this intersectional structure.

The final chapter of the study focused on the parallel development of a theology of liberation in the poetics of black women. In their respective styles and theological visions, Phillis Wheatley, Frances Harper, and Pauli Murray constructed a religious worldview that centered on the idea of liberation. The first published black woman poet of the African American canon, Phillis Wheatley, has always been a much-misunderstood figure. In the last two centuries, she has been criticized for lacking a distinctive black voice and remaining silent on the issues that affected her people. However, a more appropriate reading of her poems reveals a clever woman who took upon herself a Prophetic role, teaching through stylistic ingenuity that preserved her safety in the wilderness. In her poems, she distinguished between the religion she professed and that of her enslavers. She pointed out the continuous and persisting hypocrisy of a generation that enslaved people as they fought against their own "enslavement". By assuming the role of Ethiopic Prophetess, Wheatley not only reclaimed the Scriptures from the hands of slaveholding Christian authorities but also laid the foundations for a distinctly black Christian worldview in which the biblical narrative consistently speaks on behalf of the oppressed rather than the powerful. Wheatley's prophetic ministry had to be done in a way that didn't put her life in danger as an enslaved woman. However, within a generation, a new group of free, educated women of color emerged who sang their songs of liberation with greater force. Among these, Frances Harper was the woman who created the most elaborate

theology in her poetics. Her *Moses: A Story of the Nile*, written almost a century before Cone, most poignantly depicts the inherent clash between two Christianities of American society. She attacks white Christianity and its typology of color by reversing colors' ascribed meanings and declaring God to be the suffering God of Ethiopia. All this prefigures Cone's declaration of God's Blackness. Harper's poetics also gives voice to the crisis of maternity in the wilderness and brings women's voices to the forefront of her works, pointing forward to the birth of Williams' womanist theology. Through the interconnected figures of Moses, Hagar, and suffering Ethiopia, Harper expanded the poetic-prophetic tradition into a coherent theology of liberation that embraced not only political freedom but also realities of black womanhood that included maternal endurance and communal survival, prefiguring concepts deeply ingrained in womanist theology. Finally, Pauli Murray embodies the ideals of future womanist theology in her person as a civil rights lawyer, priest, and poet. She looks back at the inherited tradition of black faith and poeticizes its history, singing the songs of a religion based on eternal love in the person of the *Nazarene,* which aims to destroy oppressive powers wherever they may be to bring wholeness and healing to the whole of humankind. She builds upon the poetic theology of Wheatley and Harper and reconstitutes liberation as reconciliation of the larger fractured human community. Taken together, Wheatley, Harper, and Murray demonstrate that Black Christian poetry is not merely a literary tradition but a sustained theological witness in which prophecy gives birth to liberation, liberation evolves into reconciliation, and reconciliation ultimately leads to the healing of the whole human family.

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