

Article

Diversity, Difference, and Otherness: African American Experience in Contemporary Black Liberation Theology

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Abstract

Black liberation theology as an academic discipline in the late 1960s was initially conceived, interpreted, and articulated as Christian theology that characterized material and spiritual liberation from oppression as the primary aim, task, and meaning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This Black theology determined to interpret the gospel message in light of black experience in a system of white racism in the United States. This article raises the question: What is a more holistic, comprehensive, inclusive and nuanced depiction of African American experience as a theological source for doing contemporary Black theology in the North American context? To avoid representing the black experience in the US as one-dimensional, overly racialized, and monolithic, this work resists androcentrism, outdated racial reasoning and logic, reductionism, and stereotypical social constructions that falsely circumscribe, essentialize, and totalize the theological representation of black experience. Rooted in the diversity, difference, and otherness found within the African American community, this contemporary Black theology of liberation reframes black experience in terms of the inclusive justice and subjective freedom of the gospel message. It seeks to graciously affirm, honor, and uplift the inherent dignity, integrity, and worth of Blackness, all Black lives, and each Black life.

Keywords: black theology; womanist theology; black experience; blackness; African American experience

1. Introduction

In constructing early Black liberation theology in the late 1960s, James Cone argues that any true Black theology must necessarily take black experience as the starting point of its theological reflection.¹ “For theology to be black,” Cone asserts, “it must reflect upon what it means to be black” by uncovering the structures and forms of black experience (Cone 1997, p. 17). As opposed to traditional white Euro-American Christian theology, Cone contends that Black theology of liberation must take seriously and aim to speak of God “in light of black experience” that for Cone consists of the “totality of black existence.” (Cone 2010, pp. 24–25). According to Cone, the theology of Black liberation must emerge naturally and organically from the socioreligious experience of African Americans found embedded in their stories, tales, and sayings of God while being expressed most evidently in their unique historical, social, and cultural liberation struggles against oppression (Cone 1997, pp. 15–16). Exclusivist in tone, Cone argues that Black liberation theology embodies theology of and for Black people that conveys the essential spiritual truths disclosed in African American history and culture (ibid.). In contrast to Cone’s more insular perspective, contemporary theology of Black liberation must continue to expand beyond a sole focus on



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the welfare of only the entire Black community to become a more universal expression of human experience meant to illuminate the message of Jesus Christ for all peoples. At the same time as it seeks to articulate, express, and give voice to black experience, current Black liberation theology must maintain its biblically based emphasis on expounding the lasting truths of the gospel of salvation. Through the lens of black experience, the liberationist theological framework makes the gospel message come alive in new and fresh ways. Within Cone's liberationist model, black experience is the window into the souls of Black folk while embodying the concrete revelation of their individual and communal sacred wisdom found in daily life and human existence. As Cone asserts, for contemporary liberation theology to be black it must also begin with black experience.

As a first-generation black male liberation theologian like Cone, J. Deotis Roberts similarly asserts that the unique problems of black experience warrant the need for a black political theology grounded out of the experience of black Americans (Roberts 2005a, p. 15). Unlike Cone, however, Roberts's more universalist perspective speaks from the particularity of black experience to open up spiritual horizons for understanding human experience in general (ibid., p. 47). Not only concerned with the inward-looking, singular, and isolated Black struggle for liberation, Roberts argues that reconciliation between whites and blacks as equals in Christ must become the primary goal and task of doing Black theology in keeping with the overarching message of Jesus (Roberts 2005b, pp. 8–9). Both Cone and Roberts seek for Black liberation theology to signify, represent, and to embody the sacred wisdom, spiritual truths, and religious understandings rooted in the personal and collective experience of African Americans while also relating those life realities, circumstances, and conditions to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Contemporary Black theology of liberation must continue to find creative and transformative ways to articulate the gospel messages of liberation and reconciliation in light of black experience or the totality of black existence.

As Black liberation theology has progressed from its first generation as an academic discipline, black experience in the North American context or the African American experience has remained the starting point, dominant source, and traditional norm for doing contemporary Black theology of liberation. This primary emphasis on black experience gives rise to the fundamental uniqueness, distinctiveness, and particularity of this Black theological enterprise and liberationist framework. In an introduction to Black theology published in 2001, Bruce L. Fields maintains, "The black experience, a term encompassing many elements of the historical black experience, is foundational and determinative for black theology." (Fields 2001, p. 23). Although multifaceted, dynamic, fluid, and multidimensional, black experience continues to be fundamental and formative for constructing Black liberation theology. While articulating the framework for an African American systematic theology in 2012, James H. Evans, Jr. asserts, "In sum, black theologians must tell a story that relates the hope of the biblical message with the realism of black experience." (Evans 2012, p. 8). For the Black theology of liberation, this constructive African American storytelling speaks from the standpoint of the concrete lived experience, daily life, and everyday human existence of Black Americans since 1619.² Writing in 2025, after more than 400 years for Africans in the Americas, Lewis Brogdon recognizes and acknowledges the contextual nature of all theological reflection that effectively grounds the theological task while giving shape to the questions raised and issues explored (Brogdon 2025). Because it emerges out of black experience and the African American story, certain topics that were heretofore taboo, or marginalized, or hidden or silenced in traditional Christian theology have come to the forefront in Black liberation theology. As an acknowledgment of its own particularistic context, Brogdon asserts, "Black theology grounds itself in the historical, social, and cultural story of Black people in America." (ibid., p. 7). By revealing the wisdom, truth, knowledge, and understanding embedded in the North American black experience or

the African American story in relationship to the gospel message of Christ, Black liberation theology can move from its unique, distinctive, and particularistic context to give voice to more universal expressions of human experience. Because black experience continues to be foundational and determinative for the theology of Black liberation, the crucial question of what actually constitutes black experience has garnered much attention, debate, and dialogue from diverse Black theologians both male and female. Can black experience be characterized, described, and depicted in such a way as to honor shared and common aspects or features of the historical, cultural, and social experience of African Americans while at the same time affirming and respecting human diversity, difference, and otherness that resides both within and without the Black community?

To construct a contemporary Black liberation theology that mirrors the gospel message of inclusive justice for all and subjective freedom for each, this article aims to articulate a conception of African American experience that is adequately and authentically holistic, inclusive, comprehensive, and nuanced enough for capturing the concrete daily life experience and human existence of black Americans in the twenty-first century. Ultimately, for liberation theology in the US to be black, its theological reflection must listen, engage, express, and empower the multiplicity of African American stories, voices, identities, and experiences while simultaneously, unequivocally, and unapologetically affirming the sacred worth, inherent dignity, intrinsic beauty, somebodiness, and full humanity of all Black lives as created in the image and likeness of God. For both liberation and reconciliation to become possible, contemporary Black liberation theology in the American Empire must work to establish, recognize, honor, affirm, acknowledge, and celebrate individual and communal diversity, difference, and otherness as representative of the black experience in the U.S. since 1619.³ This uniqueness, distinctiveness, and particularity of African American experience as multiple and plural, both personal and communal, intersectional and multidimensional, is also representative of universal human experience and our common shared humanity. By seeking to uncover the structures and forms of black experience, the contemporary Black theology of liberation can speak to universal human truths and existence.

2. Critiques of Black Experience

In their description, characterization, and conceptualization of black experience in the US during the civil rights era, both Cone and Roberts define it exclusively in negative terms and in direct opposition to white racism, white power, and the norms of whiteness. Cone classifies black experience for example as “a life of humiliation and suffering” within a “system of white racism.” (Cone 2010, pp. 24–25). To advance the Black theological enterprise, Roberts likewise envisions the call to “speak out of the sufferings and oppression of black Americans” specifically denied the promises of freedom and justice in the US (Roberts 2005a, p. 16). From Roberts’s perspective, the theology of Black liberation must “interpret the faith in order that [Black] people may be set free from the bondage created and sustained by white racism.” (ibid.). Therefore, the methodologies of Roberts and Cone at the time together characterize African American experience solely in terms of suffering, victimization, and oppression combined with the many stories of resistance and struggle waged against white racism in US history. This negative Black identity and explicit opposition to whiteness narrowly frames, limits, obscures, and circumscribes the totality of black existence by describing it solely as an existential fight against racial oppression, nonbeing, and death within an organized system of white racism. Certainly, Cone and Roberts capture profoundly significant and meaningful aspects of the African American experience of enslavement, violence, degradation, and dehumanization since 1619. That historical experience of suffering and humiliation has contributed to present-day black life along with fueling real-life stories of historical and contemporary resistance, struggle,

survival, and meaning-making in the midst of white supremacy. Nonetheless, this collective vision for doing Black liberation theology is not holistic, uplifting, or complex enough for contemporary understandings of experience. As the starting point for doing Black liberation theology, the definition of black experience in the North American context must be further investigated and characterized more positively in such a way as to represent the individual and collective totality of Black existence. Only then can the Black theology of liberation effectively, authentically, and accurately relate the gospel message of inclusive justice and subjective freedom to concrete Black life and daily human existence. By asserting the sacred worth, inherent dignity, and personal sanctity of black people as subjects, contemporary Black liberation theology can meet the gospel mandate of inclusivity for all Black lives and personal freedom for each Black life.

2.1. *Black Women's Experience*

Jacquelyn Grant articulates the foundational critique of Black liberation theology and its restricted, narrowly focused, and androcentric conception of the African American story of victimization and suffering from the perspective and standpoint of Black women's experience (See Grant 1979, pp. 418–33). Grant argues that the theology of Black liberation relies solely on Black male experience as its primary source and norm for doing theology thereby making it inauthentic and inadequate as a vehicle of divine liberation for the total Black community including Black women (ibid., pp. 419–21). According to Grant, Black women's voices, stories, identities, and experiences are invisible, excluded, erased, and silenced within the early development of Black liberation theology as dominated by Black men (ibid., pp. 420–21). While presuming to speak on behalf of Black women, Black male theologians, Grant asserts, have concurrently accepted the patriarchal models and sexist structures of White society with its false sexual dualisms as manifested through male control and supremacy in the Black church, community, and theological enterprise (ibid., p. 421). In particular, Grant indicts the depiction of the Black experience of liberation solely through the lens of the fight against white racism rather than gender oppression as well (ibid., p. 422). From Grant's perspective, "There are oppressive realities in the Black community which are related to, but independent of, the fact of racism. Sexism is one such reality. . . Racism and sexism are interrelated just as all forms of oppression are interrelated." (ibid.). As a result of its primary focus on resisting white racism, Grant contends that the early witness of the theology of Black liberation ineffectively captures the totality of black experience from the vantage point of Black women's oppression. By making Black women's experience invisible while also reinforcing patriarchal, sexist, and androcentric norms in its theological worldview, Grant argues that Black liberation theology in its initial form is not truly liberative for both Black men and women. For Grant, the liberation of Black women as well as Black men is ultimately inseparable from one another although not recognized as such by Black male theologians at the time (ibid., pp. 420–22, 430). Grant's argument illustrates that the conception of African American experience must be expanded to include multiple forms of oppression that impact both Black women and Black men like racism, sexism, classism, sexuality, and ecology. Grant calls for the full participation, shared leadership, and inclusion of the prophetic voices, stories, identities, and experiences of Black women within Black theology in order for it to be truly liberating for the total African American community (ibid., pp. 430–31). Partly in response to the sexism, androcentrism, and patriarchal norms identified by Grant in Black male liberation theology, Womanist theology emerged expressly to speak to the experiences of Black women and from the perspective of their own theological worldview as individual subjects and as a traditionally inclusive and uplifting community of African American women.

In its initial conception, Womanist theology aimed to identify, reject, and critique Black male oppression against Black women in addition to the complicity of White feminist theology in the perpetuation of White supremacist oppression against African American women. Womanism reveals to us that Black women's experience is dynamic, complex, and multidimensional with intersecting, interlocking, and overlapping forms of oppression related to gender, race, class, sexuality, and ecology, among other social classifications (Mitchem 2002, p. 5). Unlike traditional Black liberation theology, Womanist theology does not compartmentalize race or any other aspect of identity as the primary or sole locus of oppression. Confining oppression to one isolated aspect of an otherwise multidimensional existence does not offer a complex, multifaceted, or complicated enough rendering of one's human experience for doing Black theology. Womanist queer theologian Pamela R. Lightsey, for example, illustrates how the multidimensional oppression of Black queer women harms the larger society. From Lightsey's perspective, Black theology must in its articulation of African American experience give attention to the lives of LGBTQ Black women who suffer under multiple layers of oppression such as transphobia, religious fundamentalism, and racism (See Lightsey 2015, pp. xx–xxi, 1, 51, 74). In order for Black liberation theology to characterize black experience more holistically, comprehensively, and with greater nuance, it must acknowledge, incorporate, and reflect on Black women's experience and the multidimensionality of Black women's identities as equally representative of the complexities, ambiguities, and intricacies of African American life. By centering the voices, stories, identities, and concrete lived experience of Black women, Womanist theology expands the narrowly defined understanding of black experience found within early Black liberation theology while intentionally opposing "all oppression based on race, sex, class, sexual preference, physical disability and caste." (Williams 2013, p. xvii). Contemporary Black liberation theology must take up this mantle of inclusive justice against all forms of multidimensional oppression to better reflect the more holistic perspectives of Black women and Womanist theology in general on defining African American experience.

2.2. Survival/Quality of Life

In addition to expanding the definition of black experience, Womanist theology challenges the notion of liberation from sociopolitical oppression as the dominant foundational belief associated with African American experience. In her ground-breaking text, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, Womanist theologian Delores Williams identifies two contrasting traditions of African American biblical appropriation useful for constructing North American Black theology (ibid., p. 1). Williams associates the Black male-centered, androcentric perspective on the Bible with the Liberation tradition of black scriptural interpretation that focuses on the Exodus narrative, Jesus's Lukan proclamation, Matthew 25, and the liberation struggles of prominent male figures in the sacred text like Daniel, Joshua, Meshach, Shadrach, and Abednego in addition to the resurrection of Jesus the Liberator to new life (ibid., p. 2). Alternatively, Williams presents a woman-centered tradition and Black female perspective on the Bible rooted in the life story of Egyptian slave Hagar that represents the Black community's analogue for the historical experiences of African American women (ibid., pp. 2–3, 5). Rather than framing Liberation as the central principle of the gospel message and reflective of God's ultimate salvation, the Hagar-centered female perspective, according to Williams, advances Womanist principles of survival and quality of life for Black women in particular as well as the entire Black community of men, women, and families. Williams illustrates through careful scriptural hermeneutics that "In black consciousness, God's response of survival and quality of life to Hagar is God's response of survival and quality of life to African American women and mothers of slave descent struggling to sustain their families with God's help." (ibid., p. 5) According to Williams, rather than liberating

Hagar from her oppressive slave-masters, God returns her to bondage while at the same time working toward her survival and quality of life in an effort to make a way out of no way. With respect to Black life and existence in its totality, Williams expands our vision of African American experience to include the breadth and depth of Hagar's wilderness experiences of surrogacy, rape, motherhood, enslavement, and other forms of dehumanization representative of Black women's experience of both slavery and emancipation in the North American context. The implications of Williams's work are not intended to bifurcate the two traditions of biblical appropriation or to differentiate exclusively between Black male and female experience. Rather, Williams argues that in addition to the Liberation tradition, the Hagar-centered focus on the wilderness encounter with the divine offers a more comprehensive and holistic vision of African American experience that is inclusive of male/female/family, religious and secular, as well as survival/quality of life and liberation motifs (*ibid.*, pp. 141–42). Williams advocates for this new and more expansive vision of black experience for doing Black theology to foster a collective culture of resistance, uplift Black female leadership roles, and cultivate dialogue between Black Liberationist, Womanist, and Feminist thought (*ibid.*). It is this collaborative, dialogic, and mutual Black theological enterprise that will empower contemporary Black liberation theology to speak more authentically and honestly to the multiplicity of diverse, different, and other African American voices, stories, identities, and experiences. In her Womanist critique, Williams questions the assumption of the paradigmatic use of the Exodus and Election narratives in the Bible as symbolic of the totality of African American experience within Black liberation theology (*ibid.*, p. 130). By relying solely on the Liberation motif, Williams argues that the Black theology of liberation is blinded to the experience of the oppressed, the non-Hebrew female slave, and the descendants of the bondwoman rather than the patriarch Abraham and Sarah or the chosen and elected Hebrews of the Exodus. Looking through the lens of Hagar's wilderness experience, Williams's work transcends gendered, religious, and familial designations of black experience that end up constricting our view of the totality of black existence. Contemporary Black liberation theology must likewise reach out to all within the Black community from across the spectrum of experience who might be considered "the least of these." It must give voice to the multiplicity of African American voices, stories, identities, and experiences that have historically been erased, silenced, and hidden from traditional Christian theology and the Black witness to the gospel.

Grant (1979) and Williams (2013) together expand our formulation of black experience to encompass the realities of multiple forms of interlocking, intersecting, and overlapping oppressions both within and without the Black community that ultimately make all black experience multidimensional, complex, and dynamic for individual subjectivity and the collectivity of African Americans. Additionally, they each demonstrate that Black liberation theology began as a black male-centered enterprise that marginalized, excluded, repressed, and silenced black women's voices, stories, identities, and experiences. This androcentric, patriarchal, and sexist foundation for doing Black liberation theology while reading and interpreting the scriptures obscures, undermines, and marginalizes the understanding, representation, and articulation of black experience as seen through the eyes, hearts, and minds of African American women. For the totality of black existence to find expression in Black liberation theology, Black theologians must engage in mutual dialogue, collaboration, and exchange between Liberationist, Womanist, and Feminist perspectives. To find a more holistic model of the black wilderness experience that promotes principles of liberation as well as survival and quality of life motifs, the theology of Black liberation must extend beyond itself to embrace the gospel message of inclusive justice for all peoples alongside subjective freedom for each individual soul. Black liberation theology can only be authentic, honest, and true to black experience both male and female if it affirms the collective sanctity

of Black life while at the same time honoring the sacredness of individual personality in relationship to the divine.

2.3. *Essentializing the Black Experience*

Aside from its androcentric foundations, the Black theology of liberation also risks essentializing, totalizing, and absolutizing black experience and what it means to be black, while in pursuit of its own theological worldview of African American life and existence. Victor Anderson's work discloses ways in which race is reified in African American cultural and religious thought and thereby treated as if it exists independent of historically contingent factors and subjective intentions (Anderson 1995, p. 11). Anderson categorizes this tendency toward racial reification as ontological blackness (ibid.). Classified as "a philosophy of racial consciousness," Anderson characterizes ontological blackness as "a covering term that connotes categorical, essentialist, and representational languages depicting black life and experience." (ibid., pp. 11, 14). For Anderson, ontological blackness is reliant on categorical racial reasoning and a black aesthetic that forms black experience into a collective racial consciousness (ibid., p. 14). Anderson critiques James Cone's theological framework in particular for reifying Blackness into a totality or unity of black life and experience. At the same time, Anderson contends that Cone circumscribes the meaning of Blackness in terms of black suffering and oppression alongside rebellion against whiteness (ibid., p. 91). From Anderson's perspective, whiteness appears to be the ground of black experience in Black liberation theology and its understanding of black life. Anderson argues that the self-identity of Cone's black being is ultimately bound by white racism and the culture of survival (ibid., p. 87). In fact, Anderson argues that Cone's framework actually depends on whiteness, white racism, and white theology for the disclosure and legitimacy of its view of black identity. Therefore, Anderson asserts, "the new being of black theology remains an alienated being whose mode of existence is determined by crisis, struggle, resistance, and survival—not thriving, flourishing, or fulfillment." (ibid.). The crucial limitations of early depictions of black experience in the theology of Black liberation framed exclusively in terms of humiliation and suffering within an organized system of white racism becomes clearer and more evident in Anderson's critique. For Anderson, such a narrow understanding of black experience blots out the cultural thriving, human flourishing, and personal fulfillment found in the totality of black existence. A negative and reactionary Black identity cannot speak with integrity to the hope found in the gospel of new life. Additionally, Anderson illustrates that ontological blackness risks essentializing and absolutizing black life into a monolithic totality of unified experience and racial group consciousness. Furthermore, Anderson contends that ontological blackness subjugates black subjectivity and individual fulfillment under the banner of collective racial consciousness (ibid., p. 104). With greater emphasis on personal and cultural thriving as well as human flourishing rather than suffering and victimization alone, contemporary Black liberation theology must expand the authenticity, honesty, and truthfulness of its account of the full humanity of African Americans both in their radical subjectivity and traditional communal experiences.

Anderson contrasts the racial reification in ontological blackness with postmodern forms of black identity that recognize the significance and permanency of race as a category of identity formation while also acknowledging the flexibility, malleability, and fluidity of experience and human existence (ibid., p. 11). Anderson argues for new contemporary understandings of racial identity due to the changing conditions in postmodern North American life (ibid., pp. 15–16). For Anderson, African American identity is continually reconstituted and renegotiated based on widely differentiated social spaces and communities of moral discourse, multiple languages of race, class, gender, and sexuality, as well

as changing social conditions (ibid., pp. 11–12). This level of diversity, difference, and otherness in the black experience requires a new lens to envision the totality of black life and existence. Demanding a new cultural politics of black identity, Anderson argues that the categorical, essentialist, and representational language of ontological blackness greatly distorts the condition of black experience in the US that is “dispersed [with] not always commensurable interests of class, gender, sexual differentials, and race.” (ibid., p. 15). Yet, Anderson also affirms that racial identity is always present although never total from his perspective or else it becomes idolatrous (ibid.). Anderson’s work takes us beyond ontological blackness in resistance to essentialist, categorical, and absolute representations, characterizations, and classifications of black experience or any unified collective racial consciousness. Nonetheless, there still remains a need for radical affirmation of black life in its totality even with recognition of its abundant diversity, difference, and otherness.

2.4. *Race as Social Construction*

While ontological blackness reinforces, solidifies, and hardens racial reification, categorical racial reasoning, and collective racial consciousness in addition to advancing essentialist and totalizing conceptions of black experience, race is still a crucial aspect or feature of what it means to be human in the US context and within postmodern African American life. While Anderson’s work emphasizes the historically contingent and subjective nature of racial constructions, it should not be taken to minimize the intransigence, inflexibility, and intolerance of race as a signifier of difference, diversity, and otherness in the North American context. From a second-generation Black liberationist perspective, Hopkins (2005) constructs a contemporary theological anthropology that demonstrates the emergence of race as a distinct marker in Western consciousness and US self-identity that ultimately justified the genocide of the Amerindians and the enslavement of Africans in America. For Hopkins, “In the United States an obsession with race is deeply embedded in the concept of a human being. . . . Race presents, perhaps, the superlative overarching mark of what a human being is in the United States.” (Hopkins 2005, pp. 118–19). In spite of this history of racial consciousness in the US with its white supremacist roots, Hopkins argues that race is not an objective biological or genetic marker of human difference (ibid., pp. 123–25). Rather, Hopkins asserts, humanity is one biological human race or one unified human species (ibid.). As such, according to Hopkins, this revelatory fact of our common humanity should indicate and signal to us the cultural constructed-ness of racial groups in the United States (ibid.). As a social construction, the meaning and significance of race is subjectively and collectively determined through historical roles, cultural expectations, and social mores that are oftentimes stereotypical, prejudiced, discriminatory, and biased. These historically contingent, socially and culturally determined roles, expectations, and mores are contextual and dependent on a particular set of circumstances or conditions. Although race is based on phenotypical traits and characteristics alone, race becomes reified in theological discourse as ontology rather than acknowledged as socially constructed, culturally contextual, and historically contingent. Combined with the limitations of ontological blackness, the recognition of race as a social construction illustrates the illogic, opaqueness, and muddiness of using race as an absolute, objective, and incontrovertible marker of identity formation. Not only is categorical racial reasoning unsound, it fundamentally obscures the multidimensional, intersecting, and interlocking nature of one’s social location and personal experience. Nonetheless, although it is a phenotypical rather than biological or genetic human distinction, race in the US context cannot be meaningfully reduced to insignificance in a preferably colorblind or post-racial society. The aim for US society to be blind to race or even beyond it in some way is ultimately misguided as a true philosophy of mutuality because of the enduring significance of race for both

black men and women in American society. Race cannot be ignored in the articulation of Black liberation theology because it is subjectively meaningful for human existence. Since postmodernism acknowledges the permanency of race as a marker of identity formation while the US maintains its obsession with race, racial hierarchy, and racial polarization in a white supremacist culture, the articulation of the black experience must mean finding ways to affirm the sanctity, sacred worth, and human dignity of all those with at least one drop of black blood who are considered African American by US social and cultural standards.⁴

As a womanist queer theologian, Pamela R. Lightsey argues that identity politics in the US has damaged and continues to damage women and African American communities because of the essentialism associated with categories of identity formation (Lightsey 2015, p. 16). For Lightsey, gender like race is a performative social construct such that “there is no unique or essential way of being man or woman, heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, or transgender. There exists no objective, epistemological, and monolithic construct for sexual identities. They are simply too vast, too complex, and too fluid.” (ibid., p. 26). According to Lightsey, complex identity categories like race and gender can be deployed as mechanisms of solidarity, liberation, or even oppression due to their “heterogeneity, historical context, arbitrariness, [and] unverifiable essentialism.” (ibid.). Despite being subjective social constructs, Lightsey asserts that these categories of identity can nevertheless be experienced as lived reality (ibid., p. 24). Therefore, one cannot discount the impact of race and gender or other aspects of one’s identity and social location such as sexuality on one’s personhood and cultural formation especially in the US. The contemporary conceptualization of black experience must take into account the arbitrary nature of the social constructed-ness of race and gender for defining identity. At the same time, black experience must acknowledge that race, gender, and/or sexuality can also maintain paramount significance and meaning for individuals in the North American context. How can we avoid the essentialism found in categories of identity formation such as race and gender while at the same time acknowledging the personal subjective significance and meaning of these categories for some or many African Americans?

2.5. Individual/Community

Each of the critiques of Black liberation theology’s definition of black experience highlights the interplay between individual subjectivity and the communal identity of African Americans. While the notion of black experience assumes a dimension of racial group consciousness, theologians and scholars have warned against androcentrism, exclusivism, reductionism, ontological blackness, essentialism, categorical racial reasoning and logic, identity politics, and absolutizing the totality of black existence to form one unified monolithic conception. With respect to blackness, there is no categorical way to be black, to embody blackness, or to determine what it means to be black for individuals or communities. Not all experience being black or African American in the same way. Not everything considered black is truly healthy or holy as well. Blackness is as much an individual subjective experience as a general classification of the communal experience of Black Americans. There exists genuine pluralism and multiplicity within black identities. Because diversity, difference, and otherness are prominent features of black experience as well as the human community, there will always be a personal, individual, and radical subjectivity associated with African American religious experience. Contemporary Black liberation theology must acknowledge and account for this dynamic tension between the individual and the community within black experience itself. The language of black experience must not be so narrowly focused such that it eliminates the personal dimensions to one’s identity, daily life, and human existence as a unique, distinctive, and set apart Black human being. This language must embrace positive identity and individual personality in

relationship to the divine rather than sink into negativity and the despondent language of suffering, humiliation, and victimization. Subjectivity, personal fulfillment, individual thriving, and human flourishing must be incorporated into a broader and more inclusive understanding of black experience.

As one examines black experience more holistically, a common denominator emerges across the spectrum of Black theologians and religious scholars that unequivocally and unreservedly affirms the sacred worth, inherent dignity, and personal sanctity of each African American life whether male or female in spite of diversity, difference, and otherness that embodies the community. Within the biblically based Black slave religion, for example, it is the somebodiness of the slave in particular that is uplifted and honored without any partiality from God. The slave no less than the slave-master is also created in the image and likeness of God as a child of God (*Imago Dei*) according to the Black believer. During the social movements of the 1960s and within early Black theology, it is racial and cultural pride in the beauty of blackness itself that elevates black consciousness, self-determination, and self-love. With the emergence of Womanist Theology, it is the triumphant and multidimensional voice of the African American woman regardless that illuminates and supports all of Black humanity, men, women, and families. For Lightsey as a womanist queer theologian, the *Imago Dei* signifies that God's love is inclusive of all walks of life implying the inherent worth and sacred value of all people regardless of race, gender, and/or sexuality (*ibid.*, p. 72). For the contemporary BlackLivesMatter movement, this means the sacred worth, inherent dignity, and personal sanctity of *all* Black lives including those marginalized within the Black community itself like LGBTQ African Americans. Like other contemporary liberation theologies, Black theology also pronounces the full humanity of African Americans as representative of the shared human family. Together, these movements across the span of American history symbolize the predominant spiritual need within both Black individuals and the Black community to unashamedly and unabashedly honor, celebrate, and uphold Black voices, stories, identities, and experiences as authentic, honest, and true reflections of what it means to be human.

Rooting the description, characterization, and classification of black experience in the *Imago Dei* thereby signifying the somebodiness, intrinsic beauty, self-transcendence, and full humanity of all Black lives is the way forward for contemporary Black liberation theology. There are few if any things that most Black people can agree on to enunciate the structures and forms of the subjective and communal experience of blackness. One dominant theological affirmation and belief structure found within the black experience is the recognition and acknowledgment of the sacred worth, inherent dignity, and personal sanctity of each African American life that has existed in the American Empire and is created in the image and likeness of God. Black experience, in terms of the concrete voices, stories, and identities of Black Americans, if nothing else, validates the worthwhile existence of each African American life regardless of personal persuasion. Black liberation theology cannot ultimately determine one's ontology or psychological makeup or identity based on categories like race, class, gender, sexuality, or ecology but it can do more definitively to validate one's right to self-love, self-determination, and self-affirmation in one's own being as a function of what it means to be black and human. Black experience depends on loving one's black being as God does. What ultimately binds African Americans together is the black experience of somebodiness that validates us, unites us to one another, and connects us to all human beings as created in the image and likeness of God.

3. Inclusive Justice and Subjective Freedom of God

Grounding black experience in the Imago Dei and the sacred worth of black being enables contemporary Black liberation theology to embrace and expound upon the inclusive justice and subjective freedom of God embedded in the gospel message of Christ Jesus. This positive articulation of black experience removes the solely negative association with suffering, victimization, and humiliation within a system of white racism replacing it with sacredness, dignity, and sanctity of all African American life regardless of social condition, economic circumstances, or lived reality. This affirmation of black life implies that human flourishing, cultural thriving, and personal resilience are enduring characteristics of what it means to be black as well as a human being. Black experience can no longer be imagined solely as suffering and humiliation within an existential systemic fight against white racism in the US. Inclusive of all walks of life including men, women, and families, such a depiction of the worthwhile nature of black existence in its totality removes the original androcentrism, sexism, and patriarchal nature of the Black theology of liberation in favor of new motifs such as survival and quality of life representative of African American women's experience. Affirming the value of black being for both men, women, and children infers a level of group racial consciousness on them while at the same time resisting an essentialized, categorical, and representational language of black identity that obscures individuality, subjectivity, personal fulfillment, and private agency as an African American. Rooting black experience in its inherent dignity, intrinsic beauty, and the self-transcendent quality of blackness aims to capture the dynamic interplay between the individual and the community. All African American voices, stories, and identities are a part of the black experience but each life is unique to one's self in determining the meaning and significance of blackness, what it means to be black, and how to perform one's black identity. Because it is God's grace alone that initiates salvation, the gospel favors inclusive justice for all people because God desires that all shall be saved. Everyone is a child of God in the mind of God's inclusive justice. The gospel message is therefore meant for all of humanity who have altogether fallen short of the glory of God. At the same time the gospel of Christ ensures inclusivity, it honors individual freedom, subjectivity, and personal agency through faith as a choice of life pathway. With an open invitation to receive God's grace, the gospel sanctifies one's personal decision of self-determination and faith in response to the offer. The justice of the gospel favors inclusivity for all lives while the freedom of the gospel celebrates subjectivity for each life.

Grounding black experience in the Imago Dei does not invalidate the secular witness of non-religious African Americans or others who do not share faith in a Creator God. Rather, the theological implications of the Imago Dei affirm the right of every African American to determine themselves in keeping with their own conscience and the internal orientation of their heart. While black experience is not monolithic and cannot be essentialized or absolutized as a unified way of life or common disposition or group racial consciousness, it can be described, characterized, and defined in a more holistic, comprehensive, and nuanced way by referencing the inclusive justice and subjective freedom of the gospel meant for all people who are together created in the image and likeness of the divine. This depiction of black experience sanctifies the sacred worth, inherent dignity, innate beauty, and intrinsic value of all African Americans as individuals and a collectivity regardless of religious affiliation. At the same time, it grounds blackness in our shared humanity as sacred beings formed in the divine image and as universal expressions of God's inclusive justice and subjective freedom.

4. Conclusions

For contemporary Black liberation theology to remain black as James Cone envisioned, it must continue to advance black experience as the starting point, dominant source, and traditional norm of doing Black theology yet without giving in to ontological blackness, androcentrism, essentialism, categorical racial reasoning, or reductionism. This foundational and formative emphasis on black experience makes the theology of Black liberation unique, distinctive, particularistic, and set apart as a framework and methodology for doing theology. Notwithstanding, its particularity as a theological worldview makes it possible to speak through the lens of black experience to enunciate larger universal human truths that arise out of shared and common human experience. Black theology of liberation's contemporary understanding of black experience must be more multifaceted, intersectional, and multidimensional by engaging Liberationist, Womanist, and Feminist thought in dialogue, collaboration, and mutual exchange around questions of blackness, what it means to be black, and black identity. Contemporary Black liberation theology must also become more inclusive of men, women, and families in addition to religious and secular identities as well as survival and quality of life motifs alongside liberationist perspectives. At the same time it seeks to illuminate black experience or the totality of black existence, the theology of Black liberation must speak more directly to universal human experience in relationship to the gospel message of Jesus Christ.

Framing black experience in the North American context more comprehensively, holistically, and with greater nuance means centering the multiplicity of diverse, different, and other voices, stories, and concrete identities of Black Americans as well as the sacred wisdom, spiritual truths, and religious understandings embedded in their tales, songs, and sayings. It means not only engaging traditional voices but also the least of these including those marginalized within the Black community itself including the poor, mentally ill, and homeless. At the same time, African American experience must include the historical, cultural, and social Black liberation struggles in the US as well as the elements of cultural thriving, human flourishing, and personal fulfillment that inhabit black life and existence in the American Empire. This black experience must be understood to be dynamic, fluid, and in process with constant renegotiation and reconstitution between competing social spaces, moral discourses, languages of identity, and changing social conditions affecting both individuals and the community. Contemporary Black liberation theology must acknowledge, expose, and resist all forms of interlocking and multidimensional oppressions that emerge from the intersections of race/ethnicity, gender, class, sexuality, and ecology among other social classifications. It must seek to inclusively represent all African American voices, stories, identities, and concrete lived experiences while giving attention to diversity, difference, and otherness found within the fabric of the Black community as a whole.

Ultimately, contemporary Black liberation theology must lift up the gospel messages of liberation, reconciliation, survival, and quality of life in new, fresh, and transformative ways that empower African Americans both men and women as well as others to claim their sacred dignity, inherent worth, innate value, and intrinsic beauty as children of God. Across the span of Black religion and theology in the US, African Americans have been seeking to affirm, honor, and celebrate their personal and communal identities while acknowledging the legacy of their ancestors with authenticity, honesty, and truthfulness. In spite of or even because of white racism, African American experience must be defined, described, and characterized in contemporary Black liberation theology as a positive, fulfilling, resilient, and flourishing lived reality in keeping with the gospel message of inclusive justice and subjective freedom. African American experience rests foundationally on the somebodiness, intrinsic beauty, sacred worth, inherent dignity, self-transcendent quality, and full humanity of all Black lives as well as each Black life although thoroughly

diverse, different, and other. Through the lens of African American experience, the gospel must be revisited to demonstrate the inclusive justice and subjective freedom of God in the Black community and the human family. As the starting point of contemporary Black theology, black experience in the North American context signals, symbolizes, and signifies that God's grace and justice is inclusive of all human beings while the subjective pathway of freedom is offered to each human life both male and female.

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Notes

- ¹ In this article, the “black experience” in Black liberation theology is taken to mean the same as “African American experience” specifically in the North American context of slavery, Jim Crow, lynching, mass incarceration, and police brutality. This signifies the story, existence, and lives of black Americans since the first “20 and odd” Negroes were traded to Jamestown, Virginia for food and supplies in 1619. This circumstance of white racism and systemic Black oppression in US history gives rise to early characterizations of black experience as oriented toward struggle, survival, and resistance against immoral systems of white power. This African American experience of bondage, victimization, and subjugation also includes the social and cultural milieu as well as the natural environment that simultaneously cultivated positive forms of human flourishing, spiritual resilience, communal struggle, and personal fulfillment in the Black enslaved and free community. The common denominator for the dignity, worth, and sanctity of the black experience is the individual and communal affirmation of Black being, beauty, and life in the midst of nonbeing, ugliness, and death. The aim of this piece is to complicate, complexify, and confound our traditional understandings and usages of the very notion of black or African American experience as the starting point for doing Black theology of liberation.
- ² Kendi and Blain (2021), pp. xiv, 3, 8. 20 August 1619 is the symbolic date of the birth of African American identity when enslaved Africans first came to a British colony.
- ³ See Lampley (2024). While telling the African American story since 1619, Lampley constructs a theological statement and declaration for a contemporary Black liberation theology that critiques, resists, and transforms the omnipresence of racism and white supremacy in the American Empire as well as its emergence, development, and advancement into the twenty-first century. The work proposes a new morality, ethics, and virtue of diversity, difference, multiplicity, otherness, and pluralism fostered by a “blackening” of the theology of the American Empire that refocuses its attention on poor and oppressed peoples in the US and around the globe.
- ⁴ Ibid., p. 118. Hopkins labels the one-drop rule as an American cultural fantasy meaning that any person with “one-drop” of African or black blood automatically becomes not white—or Latino(a), Native American, or Asian—but rather a black self. This one-drop rule has helped historically and in the present-day context to police the boundaries of European American identity, aesthetics, and power according to Hopkins.

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