

RECLAIMING
STOLEN EARTH

An Africana Ecotheology

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Introduction

Black liberation theology has radically innovated the discipline of theology and transformed its methodology. Coming on the heels of the civil rights and Black Power movements, Black theology offered a critique of mainstream Protestant theology's inability to address the problem of racism, the core foundation of American society. James Cone, Albert Cleage Jr., Gayraud Wilmore, and others argued that theology is not constructed from an objective and neutral location. Theologians are situated in a particular context, and Protestant white theology is incapable of addressing the problem of whiteness that lies at the core of the racial problem in America. American theologians like Reinhold Niebuhr are infected with whiteness; thus, their way of doing theology is not capable of establishing a basis for freeing oppressed Black people from racial oppression. Their theology is not objective or universal, as it claims to be. It is a white theology. For Black people to be free, theologians like Cone, Cleage, and Wilmore argue that Black Christians must be guided by a Black liberation theology deriving from the Black experience and rooted in a biblical hermeneutics that understands liberation as the main theme of the Bible.

Other forms of liberation theology have emerged since Black theology's inception. African, Native American, feminist, eco-feminist, Womanist, and queer theologies, among others, were all enabled by the original claim of Black theology that theology as a discipline cannot be developed from an objective, neutral

space or universal perspective. Ecotheology, yet another late twentieth-century theology, attempts to place the ecological crisis at the center of human concerns and revamp the symbols, models, and metaphors of Christian theology so that they reflect the urgent need to save the Earth from ecological destruction. Ecotheology has sought to reimagine God, sin, Jesus Christ, and salvation in a way that is not anthropocentric (centered around human needs and concerns) and to reframe human existence as part of a larger ecosystem or cosmos in crisis. Ecotheologians often argue for a cosmocentric view, a view that relativizes humanity's importance and concerns within a larger interconnected cosmos. They propose a radical planetary agenda and provide a dire and much-needed perspective. It is my contention, however, that ecotheology is hampered in its ability to effectively address the planetary crisis, precisely because it views itself as positing a goal and agenda different from those of Black theology. The result of this is a failure to see that the problem of whiteness, the main issue Black theology exposes and seeks to eradicate, is also the problem at the heart of the ecological crisis. Thus, the agendas of both Black theology and ecotheology are not separate but related. An African-centered, or *Africana*, methodological approach to theology reveals the ways in which analysis and even the telos of Black theology actually have radical ecological implications. In this book, therefore, I posit the land/Earth as a theological symbol needed to bridge the agendas of those theologies concerned with race, class, gender, and ecological oppression.

I name this an *Africana* methodological approach to theology, and I frame it within a larger emerging field known as *Africana* religious studies, which seeks to increase our understanding of, and to affirm and appreciate the knowledge produced by, the religious cultures of African-descended peoples

worldwide. This need was exposed by some early critics of Black theology, who questioned whether the discipline of theology itself, as practiced in the West, was capable of adequately uncovering or discerning the full Black religious experience, given the centrality and importance of African spirituality and Africa as a religious symbol. Charles Long questioned whether Eurocentric methodological tools could interpret Black religion. For him, incorporation of those tools made Black religion “opaque.”¹ He accused most Black liberation theologians of approaching their task essentially as Christian apologists who too often view theology as equal to the task of explaining Western Christianity from a Black point of view. But Long argued that Black religion is not reducible to Christianity. Black religion has to account for the way it has been influenced by the traditional religions of West Africa.

Building on this critique, Dianne Stewart and Tracey Hucks argue for a “transdisciplinary agenda” for Africana religious studies to address the methodological inadequacies existing in multiple disciplines, not just theology.² A transdisciplinary approach would incorporate methodological tools and data gained from secular historians, ethnographers, and phenomenologists, among others, in an effort to enhance our ability to understand the spirituality and religions of African-descended peoples worldwide. To that end, I incorporate some of the work of secular historians, sociologists, and philosophers, and I have in previous works engaged in ethnography to help unearth African-centered modalities and idioms foreign to Western modes of theologizing. The discipline of phenomenology is particularly

1. Charles H. Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Aurora, CO: The Davies Group, 1999), 204.

2. Dianne M. Stewart Diakit  and Tracey E. Hucks, “Africana Religious Studies: Toward a Transdisciplinary Agenda in an Emerging Field,” *Journal of Africana Religions* 1.1 (2013): 28–77.

relevant for the development of a spatially oriented theology, because such a theology prioritizes each present moment, as opposed to past events recorded in written texts, and our ability to be in right relationship with all the natural—visible and invisible—entities that occupy our current spaces.

Only by transcending disciplinary restrictions and boundaries can we hope to begin to make Black religion authentically transparent. An Africana methodological approach to theology incorporates new sources and reprioritizes others, like the Bible, once deemed primary in order to study God. This approach leads to a deeper interrogation of the God-symbol and challenges conventional ways of conceptualizing divinity. Finally, this approach endeavors to demonstrate the commonalities in the agenda and goals of Black liberation theology and ecotheology when the act of Africanizing/indigenizing space is the linchpin connecting them.

THE PROBLEM

In her ecotheology, Sallie McFague redefines the Christian view of sin as “the refusal to accept our place.”³ She explains it this way: “We are not sinners because we rebel against God or are unable to be sufficiently spiritual: our particular failing (closely related to our peculiar form of grandeur) is our unwillingness to stay in our place, to accept our proper limits so that other individuals of our species as well as other species can also have needed space.”⁴ This definition of sin is insightful in that it offers an unconventional, spatial conception of sin, yet it is a definition also simultaneously infected with whiteness.

3. Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 112.

4. McFague, *Body of God*, 113.

While it is obvious that the “we” to which she refers is the human species, one might question whether referring to the human species broadly evinces part of the very problem she seeks to solve. It should be noted that within her explication of sin she does argue that humans have caused harm to other humans. In her description of the subsets of sin, McFague refers to the way humans live a lie in relationship to other humans. But even here she speaks generally, and thus abstractly. She writes, “The ecological sin is the refusal of the haves to share land and space with the have nots.”⁵ But who specifically are the haves and the have-nots, and what ideology undergirds and animates their perspective and behavior? Whiteness goes unnamed in her ecological understanding of sin and is thus allowed to invisibly infect and limit the ecotheological project.

The failure to maintain our proper place is not an affliction affecting the entirety of the human species. In fact, indigenous African and Native American worldviews are premised on the need to maintain a proper balance and harmony with the ecosystem. These are cultures that for centuries embraced the idea of harmonizing and balancing space, or being in right relationship with the other living species and the natural world. So the failure to maintain one’s proper place is not a universal human ailment, as suggested by ecotheologians, but it is one way to describe the vicious legacy of white supremacy in America and even throughout the world. Whiteness is greed and selfishness in spatial terms, the hallmark of which has been the conquest of land and continued brutal dispossession of indigenous peoples from their portions of Earth. Spatial infringement, conquest, and control provide one way of framing the oppression of Black and other non-white human beings, revealing the great damage conflicts over space have done to the Earth.

5. McFague, *Body of God*, 117.

Racism in America, in particular, has always been about the desire to control, exclude, and surveil space(s). Kelly Brown Douglas defines whiteness as “the right to exclude.”⁶ By this she means that white privilege has functioned as the license to control, dominate, and occupy any and all spaces without being viewed with fear, suspicion, skepticism, or envy by others. Accompanying this right to exclude is the collective power to inflict rigid spatial confinement, containment, and surveillance of oppressed black, brown, and red peoples in America and other places throughout the world. The problem is that liberation theologies, typically informed by a temporal orientation, have failed to connect the agendas of Black liberation theology and ecotheology around confronting the problem of whiteness. This book makes an effort to do this by developing a theology that prioritizes spatial realities and centers on the task of indigenizing and/or Africanizing our present spaces.

First-generation Black theologian Albert B. Cleage Jr., influenced by Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam, called out the racist implications of Black Christians’ continued worship of a white Christ and a white God. James Cone went further, describing white theology as the Antichrist and synonymous with the ideology of white supremacy.⁷ However, it has not always been clear for Black theologians what the epistemological underpinnings of whiteness are, and how those underpinnings might inform not just a racial analysis but also analyses of class, gender, and even impending ecological destruction.

I posit *white epistemological hubris* as the term to describe the pernicious way whiteness operates both to oppress the racial

6. Kelly Brown Douglas, *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015), 41.

7. James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1970), 6.

other, with Blackness as its chief opponent, and to simultaneously damage and eventually destroy the land/Earth. The foundational tenets of white epistemological hubris are the myth of objectivity, a false universalism, and a vicious individualism, all framed within a temporal orientation. The time-oriented framework is key, as it allows falsely universal and abstract ideas, particularly in theology, to carry weight, value, and influence over spatially relevant, concrete, and tangible conceptions geared toward impacting the present moment and space. The discipline of theology, and Black liberation theology specifically, is hampered by its own reliance on white epistemological hubris, particularly in its tendency to universalize its central theological claims. Thus, as Long contends, it engages in Christian apologetics and suffers a methodological problem. Ultimately, it cannot do what it proposes or achieve its objective of liberation for a specific group of people. As a result, I call for an innovative approach to theological method, one that embraces aspects of Native American and traditional African worldviews that emphasize a spatial orientation over a temporal one. This means reframing space, and land specifically, as a theological symbol; reconstructing our notion of God; addressing the failure resulting from an overreliance on traditional Christian symbols like the cross and the Bible; and finally reexamining the goal, or telos, of Black liberation theology, such that it includes the reclaiming of stolen land, or stolen spaces, and Africanizing/indigenizing them.

White epistemological hubris essentially is an arrogance of perception and a misunderstanding of the natural world and how human beings exist in relationship to each other and the rest of creation. It relies on a temporal orientation, which means that time is the governing category by which we measure human success. Liberalism's understanding of "progress" is maintained

based on a preoccupation with linear time. Human existence is presumed to get better with time, or to progress, as improved scientific knowledge leads to technological innovation and advancement. Thus, what comes later is perceived to be better than what preceded it. Western society measures productivity according to time. Theories of knowledge, specifically Darwin's theory of evolution, are temporally oriented and dependent.

Technological advancement in a machine culture is the ultimate goal of a society that merges its temporal fixation with the myth of objectivity. The separation of a subject from its object and the idea that the subject can know the object in a neutral, pure way have had the same harmful impact on the racial other (the non-white, especially the Black) as they have on the land/Earth. Like certain human beings, the land/Earth was turned into an object, a commodity, for capital accumulation, material gain, and other hegemonic features. The commodification of Earth results in the failure to view it as a living reality, as a part of one large ecosphere. A vicious individualism, which gained preeminence as a result of the European Enlightenment, fuels hyper-competition between human beings stratified by race, gender, class, and sexuality, creating a zero-sum reality in which success for the other is perceived as a loss for the normative white male. Individual freedom is construed as a defense of white, male, Christian privilege and entitlement.

In this text, I chronicle instances of white lynch-mob violence and their resulting land dispossession and posit that such violent events were not just acts of racial terrorism and blatant disregard for Black existence. More than simply representations of Black social death, they are also unaccounted-for acts of violence to the Earth. White epistemological hubris evinces not only selfishness and greed but also a failure to admit the truth that subjugated communities have theological and ecological

wisdom to share with Westerners. I link the legacy of racist Native American and Black land dispossession to the current problem of ecocide.

The problem of whiteness connects the fight for racial justice with the urgent need to save the Earth. Theology as a discipline, however, is incapable of speaking directly to concrete matters regarding racial oppression, because it veils whiteness, a specific cultural creation, under the guise of universalism. Christian theological symbols, particularly the Christian cross and the Bible as “Word of God,” are believed not only to speak to the human condition but to offer salvific efficacy to all humanity. Universal application of these symbols hides the reality that, for oppressed people, identifying with the “heroes” of scripture and redemptive suffering has not changed the reality of racial oppression. Rather, these symbols have helped manifest double-consciousness consciousness and have often worked to exacerbate the empathy gulf and the construction of the Black person as the racial other, as well as widen the gap between racially oppressed Christians and those oppressed on the basis of class, gender, or sexuality. A false universalism is sheltered by a temporal orientation preventing theology from focusing on the urgency of the planet heating and burning around us now in our current spaces, and the problem that is the failure to keep our place is not recognized as a culturally specific issue. Whiteness continues functioning invisibly as a failure or flaw within the human species. It is never named; thus, solutions to the problem of impending ecological destruction continue to be framed within the temporal sphere as we race to create technological solutions. Theology as a discipline is particularly inhibited by its universal imperative. Culturally specific symbols masked as universal lure Black Christians into adopting other people’s symbols and stories (i.e., the Jewish narrative of struggle

in the Bible) as their own and failing to incorporate their own culturally relevant and specific symbols, idioms, or modalities in a potentially effective and useful way in their lived experiences.

Finally, reliance on a Western temporal orientation works to camouflage the deception at the heart of the myth of racial progress in America. The idea that Black people have made so much progress in the last four hundred years fails to wrestle or come to terms with what Orlando Patterson and now Afropessimists name as the constancy of Black social death, the legacy of slavery. For Afropessimists, blackness continues to be constitutive of slaveness and property. And whiteness demands Black suffering as intrinsic to its self-understanding. This fundamental American racial framework has not been altered or transformed since slavery. Thus, the election of the first Black president is not progress if it is followed by a vicious racist backlash, the need for a movement for Black lives to respond to racist police violence against Black persons, and the election of a white man whose ascendance to the presidency is fueled primarily by racism, white grievance, victimization, and overreaction to the first Black president. Yet Western liberalism's promotion of a temporal orientation enables the promotion of the rhetoric of progress, which assuages white guilt, avoids accountability for whiteness, and convinces Black people that some degree of racial reconciliation has occurred. Afropessimists help provide a metatheory for evaluating the ineffectiveness of traditional Protestant Christian symbols, like the cross and the Bible, exposing the reality of continued Black subjugation and enabling us to work to ensure Black survival.

Incorporation of African (and Native American) spirituality calls for honoring and reclaiming spaces around us—in effect Africanizing/indigenizing these spaces—which means affirming a pantheistic conception of the divine and viewing the land,

the space, and the Earth as a living reality with which we are connected and interdependent. The land/Earth is the home of our ancestors, who remind us of the vitality of land/Earth and the need for accountability and ritual cleansing regarding its reclamation and healing. Native American theologian Vine Deloria Jr. called for a radical transformation of theological concepts and posited a change in the tools of analysis for explicating religious ideas. According to him,

Spatial thinking requires that ethical systems be related directly to the physical world and real human situations, not abstract principles, are believed to be valid at all times and under all circumstances. One would project, therefore, that space must in a certain sense precede time as a consideration for thought. If time becomes our primary consideration, we never seem to arrive at the reality of our existence in places but instead are always directed to experiential and abstract interpretations rather than to the experiences themselves.⁸

Shifting from temporal to spatial thinking asks us to confront and face what has happened to indigenous and Black spaces in America and around the world. I present an examination of the history of land theft and dispossession, its accompanying rigid spatial confinement, and the inability to indigenize/Africanize those spaces of land/Earth, not just in America but also in Africa and elsewhere, that likely would have been subjected to ecologically efficacious and spiritually healthy and affirming engagement if they had not been stolen from the cultures previously inhabiting them.

8. Vine Deloria Jr., *God Is Red: A Native View of Religion* (New York: The Putnam Group, 1973), 72.

While land dispossession on the North American continent is first and foremost the history of the violent conquest of Native American lands, my context, as a constructive Black theologian, is the African American and African experience, and I will focus on African and African American land dispossession as a result of white supremacist actors. Yet the theological assessment, sources, and conclusions drawn are apropos of Native American spirituality because my proposal draws from a shared worldview of the sanctity of land/Earth. The shift to spatial thinking, first called for by Native American spiritualists/theologians, reveals a new framework for accessing what has been lost because of white, Western colonization and hegemony. The point is to show how the history of white supremacist violence and land theft in America and beyond demonstrates the need to merge the agendas of racial justice and ecological movements. Perhaps healing the Earth requires that we return to something former, a perspective subjugated and dismissed, and not simply move fast ahead along the same linear path of Western technological progress.

Building on Deloria's call for radical transformation of theological concepts, I argue for a pantheistic conception of God that reimagines, or re-presents, God as an amoral, non-agential energy, power, and force incarnating us and the spaces we occupy. Understanding how Godpower, divine energy, works allows us humans to have increased access to that power to work to bring about the good. Here I consider the thought of two pastor/theologians who, in an effort to Africanize their respective spaces in America and West Africa, reclaim an African mystical conception of God, one that connects the transatlantic experiences of African Americans with continental Africans. What results is a type of Pan-African theology of spatial reclamation in which God is the connective power, force, and energy bind-

ing humans to each other and the rest of the created order in one interdependent ecosphere.

I then focus specifically on two traditional Christian symbols, the cross and the Bible, and attempt to unravel the way these symbols have too often been interpreted based on white epistemological hubris, making them ineffective symbols of liberation. The redemptive suffering of the cross and the Bible as “Word of God” evince the myth of objectivity and a false universalism.

Finally, I end by examining what liberation means for Black theology given this shift to spatial thinking. Is liberation merely an assessment of which political and economic system will best empower oppressed people? Is it a fight between capitalism, neoliberalism, and/or Marxism and democratic socialism? Or should we consider the land/Earth and its healing in our conceptualization of liberation? In this sense, liberation must be reimagined in a way requiring that we indigenize/Africanize the spaces people occupy throughout the world. *Reclaiming Stolen Earth* is a theological and philosophical reflection on the pressing need to consider how the problem of whiteness, specifically as manifested through white epistemological hubris, demands a merging of the agendas of Black theology and ecotheology by incorporating African and Native American spirituality to save us both from brutal antiblackness and impending ecological devastation.

The year 2019 marked the four-hundred-year anniversary of the start of the transatlantic slave trade in 1619 and the violent dislocation, spatial trauma, and cultural alienation of African people transported as commodities throughout the Western world. Additionally, 2019 was the year of return to Africa, spearheaded by the nation of Ghana, for African-descended people throughout the African diaspora, especially for African Ameri-

cans. Ghana is the spiritual home of many diasporic Africans, in part because it houses many slave dungeons on its coast. Most African Americans have West and West Central African ancestry. Thus, Ghana's spiritual and political leaders called for African Americans specifically (but also other African-descended peoples) to come back to Africa and undergo rituals of spiritual healing and cultural reclamation and reconnection. It was a gesture of unity and solidarity, a reunion, performed to bridge the four-hundred-year spatial and geographical divide and deep spiritual alienation engineered by the European transatlantic slave trade, colonialism, and Western imperialism. In effect, dislocated Africans were asked to return to those slave dungeons and pass back through the "Door of No Return," in order to reconnect with something lost. As a result, many diasporic Africans returned not just to heal damaged spiritual wounds but as a symbolic act of geographical and spatial recovery. This book is intended as a continuation of that project; thus, I draw upon both African American and West African sources. The shift to spatial thinking is a theological reassessment of how focusing on the land/Earth can heal spatial, geographical, and theological alienation and simultaneously draw from the deep cultural wisdom and knowledge of African Americans and West African and Native American spirituality. Let the healing begin!

OUTLINE OF CHAPTERS

In chapter 1, I argue for an Africana theological method. This requires incorporating aspects of traditional African and Native American spirituality, primarily as it regards the shift from a temporally oriented conception of reality to a spatially oriented one. Building on the insight of Mary Daly, who asserted that Christian theology has an idolatrous relationship to method in

its glorification of a past, static event, I argue that a spatial conception of reality demands that we do theology—without being distracted by the distant past or preparing for an unknown future—based on our experience of the natural world in the lived spaces we encounter in every present moment. The world we live in today and the spaces we currently occupy provide the canvas for this theology.

In this chapter, I examine the legacy of a Western temporal orientation to the traditional Christian theological method. Much of the debate in early twentieth-century Protestant Christian theology has to do with disagreements about how and to what extent God operates in time or in history. Liberal theology sought to explain God and God's actions through the medium of scientific inquiry and the insights of the European Enlightenment. Liberals tried to demystify the Bible and discern the essence of the gospel based solely on the ethics of Jesus Christ. Neo-orthodoxy reacts against the claims of liberalism, challenging whether God, and specifically the revelation of Jesus, can be explained simply as a historical event. These debates amount to a dispute about time and whether God and Jesus are bound by it the way other human beings are. The question of Jesus's divinity, for example, was ultimately decided based on whether Jesus was a contingent being or an eternal one.

An Africana theological method, however, asks that theology prioritize the present and the importance of being in right relationship with the spaces we occupy, including the natural world. Revelation is reconsidered, and the African conception of *living revelation* is prioritized over a single, historical revelation. Living revelations occur inside living, visible bodies in the spaces they occupy. These moments then confer sanctity, even holiness, onto these spaces, making particular sections of the land/Earth spaces of revelation, a part of the one divine reality con-

necting us all. Western Christianity, a servant of white supremacy, has promoted the subjugation of indigenous cultures and their perspectives and has also used traditional Christian doctrines to perpetuate a view of the land/Earth that has resulted in its objectification and exploitation. An Africana theological method argues for the recovery of a *conjurational spirituality*. Conjure is a different mode of knowing that gleans truth from the energy, materials, and power, seen and unseen, in spaces in the natural world that promote healing, recovery, balance, and harmony with the rest of creation.

Chapter 2 focuses on the history of African American and African land dispossession. It begins with an explication of the divergent views of land/Earth from a Western perspective, with its emphasis on private property, and the traditional African and Native American perspective, which views the land as a spiritual reality home to spiritual entities like ancestors and other divine emanations. When Africans were transported to America, they brought Africa with them to the extent that they tried to “indigenize/Africanize” the spaces they inhabited. Africanizing American spaces was critical to their acculturation and conversion to Western Christianity. During slavery, the ritual of the ring shout inside praise houses and outside on land, often separate from the slave owner and his family, represented actions taken to indigenize the land, to Africanize American spaces. After Nat Turner’s rebellion, however, racist white authority shut down these spaces and began a process of rigid spatial confinement for Christian worship in the balconies of white churches. These antebellum actions are emblematic of the more pernicious practice of land dispossession and spatial confinement in urban slums many Black people experienced postbellum during the Jim Crow era.

I chronicle examples of white lynch-mob violence and the subsequent land theft to highlight the brutality, vicious cruelty,

individualism, and greed that motivated these attacks and also to showcase how failing to indigenize spaces of Earth had clear ecological ramifications. These pieces of Earth are reservoirs for violence and death, and the exploitation and objectification of land/Earth is an extension of the exploitation of Black bodies that previously resided on that Earth. There needs to be an accounting, a ritual cleansing, and a way to offer ecological repair for the violence and death stored on this land/Earth.

But this phenomenon is transatlantic. Land theft obviously occurred in Africa as a consequence of European imperialism. I cite Ghana and South Africa as two examples among many of virulent land theft and spatial confinement of native Africans. My choice to focus on Ghana, in particular, is based on the fact that it was the first nation to declare its independence from British colonizers in 1957, and Kwame Nkrumah emerged as a symbol of a new African leadership. His fight for a Pan-African States for the purposes of trade, with each African country owning and controlling the natural resources and means of production in their own countries, was feared and undermined by Western powers. Nkrumah's admonitions of neocolonialism in Africa provides a framework for demonstrating how corporate globalization and neoliberal practices desecrated and exported the resources from the land and impoverished the people.

The history of apartheid in South Africa provides the most glaring example of stolen Earth and rigid spatial containment of native Africans on homelands and townships. Yet even after the Black Consciousness Movement and the struggle to end apartheid, postemancipated South Africa continues to live under apartheid-like spatial configurations. Azania critical philosophy offers a response to the assumption of white settler entitlement, calling for a radical reframing and renaming of the land and space and who has a right to its control.

I end this chapter with a critique of ecotheologians' claim that Christians need a conversion to the Earth. I contend that this claim evinces white hubris and fails to consider that indigenous African and Native American perspectives were already Earth-centered prior to the conversion of these groups to Western Christianity. Also the language of conversion is replete with cultural hegemonic logic, given the legacy of Western Christian missionary use of this term as a tool to conquer and exert triumphalist claims over the native peoples they sought to convert. The rhetoric is informed by an arrogant, ethnocentric assumption that non-Western, non-Christian cultures have nothing to teach the Christian West. Such hubris is the very thing placing the Earth in peril. We do not all need a conversion to the Earth. Oppressed people need to reclaim stolen earth, to reconnect and rediscover what was lost. The recovery of stolen Earth and the restoration of subjugated knowledge(s) are crucial elements of ecological reparations and environmental recovery and healing.

Chapter 3 makes the argument that a shift to spatial thinking leads to theology promoting a pantheistic conception of God. The God of classical theism and classical Christology derive from a white, Western temporal orientation. Because Black theology continues to rely on aspects of these conceptions of the divine, I argue that it is infected with whiteness and manifests double-consciousness or second-sight.⁹ Second-sight is particularly reflected in the circumscribed way Black theology developed its doctrine of God. Black theology has not sufficiently wrestled with its refusal to incorporate African spirituality and religions as a theological source and the extent to which it accepts the Western pejorative of African religions as fetish religion. Eboussi Boulaga claims that the overreliance on Western

9. Based on W. E. B Du Bois's definition of *double consciousness* in *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago: A. G. McClurg, 1903), 3.

theological assumptions and claims about God actually leads to the fetishism of Jesus as revelation and, by extension, the cross and the Bible. This is revealed particularly in the much-heralded claim that “God is on the side of the oppressed.” Like William Jones, whose provocative questions to Black theology continue three decades later to go unanswered, I want to know: Where is the historical evidence for this claim? How is this claim reflective of Black people’s lived experiences, their present reality and constant condition of Black social death? Are professional theologians precluded from offering alternative conceptions of the Christian God because of academic gatekeeping protocols demanded by the discipline in order to gain acceptance as a professional Christian theology?

Conversely, I present two pastor/theologians, Albert B. Cleage Jr. and Ishmael Tetteh, one African American and the other Ghanaian, who, through their efforts to address double-consciousness in their respective contexts, develop and preach a pantheistic conception of God based on their embrace of traditional African mysticism. They conceive of God as the creative power, energy, and force filling the universe. God is the power that not only enables life but creates the possibility for radical transformation of this life into various new forms. This is the God we must plug into to do what we, human beings, determine is the good. But God is an amoral, neutral power that does not express agency like human beings. Thus, God is not on the side of the oppressed any more than God is, or ever was, a white racist. The God of spatial thinking is the God that is ever present in and constitutive of the space(s) in us and all around us. According to Acts 17:28, “In God we live, move, and have our being” (New International Version). These creative intellectuals incorporate a conception of God bridging the spatial and geographical divide between continental and diasporic Africans. In

so doing, they offer a theology capable of overcoming spiritual alienation and eradicating the double-consciousness existing among African-descended peoples, thus promoting Pan-African spiritual and spatial recovery.

Chapter 4 builds on the argument introduced in chapter 3 by interrogating the way two traditional, Protestant, Christian symbols, the cross and the Bible, have failed to help Black Christians fight against whiteness and defeat racism. My contention is that the theological symbol of “ancestor” is more pragmatic and useful in working toward liberation and is consistent with the dictates of a spatially oriented theology.

In this chapter, I engage the central claims of Afropessimism that blackness is “coterminous with slaveness” and is marked by *social death*.¹⁰ Black social death is a condition of psychological acceptance (by both Black and white people) that Black life is characterized by excessive human suffering and disproportionate amounts of violence. The cross, as the central Christian theological symbol, only enhances Black social death in its fetishism of redemptive suffering. James Cone’s analysis of the correlation between Black Christians’ embrace of the cross of Jesus and their experience of lynchings, especially spectacle lynchings, during the Jim Crow era in America illuminates the problem of Black social death and the ineffectiveness of the cross in ameliorating the condition. Contemporary spectacle lynchings, like the much publicized executions of unarmed Black people by white police, and even vigilantes acting as defenders of whiteness, expose the theological paucity in theodicean claims suggesting that God always converts evil into good. To make this point, I highlight Barack Obama’s eulogy at the funeral at Emanuel AME church in Charleston, South Carolina, for the nine Black victims of white supremacist violence. Acceptance of the cross as a central

10. Frank B. Wilderson III, *Afropessimism* (New York: Liveright, 2020).

Christian symbol actually stereotypes Black people as superhuman sufferers, exacerbating the empathy gulf existing between Black and white people in America.

In the later part of the chapter, I demonstrate how white epistemological hubris, particularly as expressed in the myth of objectivity, is implicit in the claim that the Bible is the *Word of God*. African-descended people have failed to read and interpret the Bible based on their own cultural biases. In a misguided attempt to read it “objectively,” Black Christians have too often identified with the heroes of scripture and too often assigned innocence to the text under the rationalization that it is the “Word of God.” As Itumeleng Mosala asserted, “oppressive texts can’t be tamed and converted into liberating texts.”¹¹ Randall Bailey proposes a *freedom of interpretation* for Black Christians if the Bible is to continue to serve as a source for their theologizing.¹² This Africana theological approach gestures toward a relegation of the Bible to a secondary source, and I posit the ancestor as a theological symbol that should be elevated above the Bible for this Africana ecotheology.

The fifth and final chapter focuses on the telos, or goal, of Black liberation theology. In effect, what does liberation mean and how will we know when we have achieved it? Cornel West’s work took Black theology to task early on regarding its definition of liberation. He was particularly concerned that Black theology lacked an analysis of class and the political economy and did not possess an adequate social theory. West and Cone propose progressive Marxist analysis and democratic socialism as solutions to the greed and individualism endemic to capital-

11. Itumeleng J. Mosala, *Biblical Hermeneutics and Black Theology in South Africa* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989).

12. Randall Bailey, “The Danger of Ignoring One’s Own Cultural Bias in Interpreting the Text,” in *The Bible and Postcolonialism*, 1, ed. R.S. Sugirtharajah (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 73.

ism and neoliberalism. But a question remains if this definition of liberation is limited still by its anthropocentrism and silence about any political economy's impact on the natural world. Something is missing.

The analysis of Womanist theologians helps redefine liberation. They are suspicious that Black theology's description of liberation is inhibited by a Black androcentrism rooted in Black male victimization. They offer survival/improving the quality of life as the more appropriate telos for Womanist theology. Monica Coleman posits "creative transformation," or "making a way out of no way," as a new goal offering an alternative to the andro- and anthropocentric nature of the earlier conception.¹³ Womanist and African ecofeminists open the door to consideration of the land/Earth in Black theology's definition of liberation. Liberation involves indigenizing the spaces around us, not just replacing the political economy, to create Black self-determination projects and, at the same time, heal the land/Earth upon which we all reside. I examine Black church and African-centered farm communities attempting to create such spaces. Ecological liberation ultimately is the destruction of whiteness, which finally puts human beings in right relationship with one another and restores and replenishes our one and only home, the Earth. But we must actively reclaim it!

13. Monica Coleman, *Making a Way out of No Way: A Womanist Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 36.