

Theorizing the "Black Body" as a Site of Trauma: Implications for Theologies of Embodiment*

Darnell L. Moore

ABSTRACT

In what ways have religious scholars theorized, or undertheorized, the "Black body" and the Black Church's response to embodiment and sexuality? How is the "Black body" configured as a site of trauma and what is the utility of theorizing the "Black body" as a figure of embodied trauma? Lastly, what implications do the latter have on the ways we theologize embodiment in the Black Church? This article seeks to address these questions through a reading that broadens the view of the Black body, seemingly maintained by some religious scholars, that insists upon the Black body as figuring a site of pleasure only.

Keywords: Black body, Black Church, embodiment, sexuality, trauma.

Introduction

Bodies speak. And if we attentively listen, we may perceive enchanting utterances or terrible articulations: deep bewailing; faded susurrations; or divine musings.

Bodies emote. Every moment when tears spill from the eyes, cold chills race across the skin, and the heart thumps within the chest cavity, we bear witness to an emotive performance.

Bodies remember. They are recorders of histories: recalling life's journeys, capturing ethereal groanings, calling forth blissful memories, summoning the joys and the pains, the hurts and the healings, that which we choose to remember and even that which we will to forget.

But what about the particularities that shape the ways that we come to *know*, *experience*, and *exist as* particular bodies? How should we theo-

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rize the body of the victimized, the *sexed* and *gendered* body, the *classed* body, or the body colored by "race"? Moreover, if the body exists as a manifested template, as a map, and as a "walking text,"¹ should we not also attend to the many marks that are inscribed upon certain bodies, the varied socio-cultural/political scenes that particular bodies are caricatured within, and the assorted individual and collective narratives that gesture towards the body's historicity? These are some of the primary questions that guide my theorizing.

In the following, however, I attempt to respond to these central inquiries by attending to and surveying the "Black body." I am interested in the countless ways that one can theorize, or undertheorize, the "Black body" and the ways that the "Black body" can be symbolized as a semiotic figuration of both pain and pleasure and as a site of trauma and grace. Even more, I am interested in theorizing the "Black body" as a figure located at different historicized scenes and how these "sightings"² ostensibly quicken traumatic memories and memorializes the body as a site of trauma. It is this perpetual experience of traumatization, I will essentially argue in this paper, which frustrates the healing potentiality of theologies of embodiment.

Thus, in the following, I will respond to three questions: *First*, in what ways have religious scholars theorized, or undertheorized, the "Black body" and the Black Church's response to embodiment and sexuality? *Second*, how is the "Black body" configured as a site of trauma and what is the utility of theorizing the "Black body" as a figure of embodied trauma? Lastly, what implications do the latter have on the ways we theologize embodiment in the Black Church?

Prognosis: Somatic Dis-Ease

Prior to moving forward, I would like to make a slight turn to the obvious problems that complicate any talk about the body, reflections on blackness, and imaginations of the body; to borrow a term coined by philosopher George Yancey, "raciated" as black.³ To be sure, we must ask: Is it not dangerous to speak existentially about the body—or bod-

1. See Carol E. Henderson, *Scarring the Black Body: Race and Representation in African American Literature* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002), p. 3.

2. I am using the term "sightings" throughout to express the ways in which the body, as figure, is gazed upon. It speaks to the process of *visual* hermeneutics, so to speak, or the readings/viewings that situate the historicized body/figure at different scenes while attending to the diverse ways that the body/bodies speak from those locations.

3. G. Yancey, "Whiteness and the Return of the Black Body," *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 19.4 (2005), pp. 215–41 (216).

ies—as if it there exists an accepted model of embodiment that can be easily characterized? Furthermore, is it not counterproductive to talk about blackness as if it is a common phraseology used by all to connote an essentialized category of racialized cultural difference? Lastly, how can one speak ahistorically of a “Black body” as a particularized object while not taking into account the limitless ways that Black bodies exist, speak, emote, distort, arouse and enchant? You may be wondering, for example, whether talk of a “Black body” will limit the ways we come to know and experience the many Black bodies located at various scenes like those present in our now and the bodies that journeyed in our past, black bodies located in so-called first-world regimes and those existing in empire-ridden third-world spaces, those that died in the Middle Passage and those that crossed just to get double-crossed, the colonized and those living amidst post-colonization?

In response, I choose to take up the body, blackness, and the “Black body,” in particular, as contested figures, signs, metaphors, and tropes as opposed to fixed typologies, unalterable essences of identities, or determinative physiological distinctions. I theorize the body guided by the understanding that all readings and sightings of the body will always already be malleable and unfixed even as the body slips through fissures in time and space carrying with it traces of “truths” and memories that illuminate its historicity. It is here where the speculations of George Yancey aid my theorizing. Yancey posits that it is the very “historical plasticity” of the body and “the fact that it is a site of contested meanings,” which “speaks to the historicity of its ‘being’ as *lived* and *meant* within the interstices of social semiotics.”⁴ Hence, one only needs to turn to the sentient and purposed body, to commence a search for roaming traumas, haunting narratives, and gestating memories that are never stilled.

Furthermore, I am taking up “blackness” as a symbol for the socio-cultural/political/spiritual meaning-making process of that raced collectivity that has been named “Black.” Blackness, as symbol, represents the collectivity’s response to ideological, dialogical, and theological violence that would render them abject, devoid of being, lacking rationality, animalistic, and in want of the weighty-presence of the Divine. I take up blackness, then, to be the process of communal and individual restoration. It is a process that seeks to fill in the gaping historical holes (or the spots characterized by what Saidiya Hartman calls “non-history”⁵)

4. Yancey, “Whiteness and the Return of the Black Body,” p. 216, emphasis original.

5. Saidiya Hartman takes up “non-history” as a term which speaks to the blank historical spaces, the holes, left in individual and collective narratives as evidenced

that remain in the collectivity's consciousness as a result of corporeal terrorism, and what Jennifer Cole terms "ontological assault,"⁶ in the form of White racism, imperialist projects of colonization, and capitalist modes of exploitation of Black people. Blackness is a response to the pain caused by this terror which, to borrow Elaine Scarry's powerful phrasing, "unmakes the world."⁷ Simply, blackness—as I am using it here—signs the process of remaking: the remaking of the self, a re-imagining of the body, and a reconstruction of the world in light of these powerful forces. The "Black body," then, is a figure that is particularly located at these various scenes of racialized subjugation. In what follows, though, I am using this figure to refer to African-Americans, a group dislocated by the Middle Passage and relocated to America and for whom slavery caused, as sociologist Ron Eyerman posits, a "dramatic loss of identity and meaning."⁸ In this regard, the "Black body" as a semiotic figure signifies the African-American human body/figure that was/is violently acted upon; thus, the human body, as D. Stringer rightly articulates, is already "figurative" and therefore already a "trope of trauma."⁹ But in what other ways have religious scholars theorized, or undertheorized, the "Black body"? Moreover, in what ways have religious scholars named the Black Church's response to embodiment and sexuality?

I now turn to a work entitled, *Loving the Body: Black Religious Studies and the Erotic*, in response to these questions. *Loving the Body*, edited by Anthony Pinn and Dwight Hopkins, includes a collection of essays written by a diverse set of African-American religious scholars. It features essays representing the erudite and creative scholarship of African-American ethicists, theologians, sociologists, musical studies theorists, scholars of biblical studies and pastoral studies, which respond to the seeming obstinate posture of the Black Church as it relates to the "sensuality and eroticism of the Black body." *Loving the Body* is a loaded resource with rich ground to excavate because of the diverse disciplinary and sexual-political perspectives found within that are penned by male, female, het-

by the atrocious act of slavery in the Americas. See Hartman's book *Lose your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2007), wherein Hartman names and explores this tragic phenomenon.

6. J. Cole, "Painful Memories: Ritual and the Transformation of Community Trauma," *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry* 28 (2004), pp. 87–101 (101).

7. In Cole, "Painful Memories," p. 101.

8. See Ron Eyerman, "Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity," in Jeffrey C. Alexander and Ron Eyerman (eds.), *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004), pp. 60–111 (61).

9. D. Stringer, "Trauma Studies and Faulkner's *Sanctuary*: Sex, Sexuality, Race, and American Literature," *Genders* 42 (2005), http://www.genders.org/g42/g42_stringer.html (accessed 15 April 2008).

erosexual, and same-gender-loving identified scholars. Yet, in my reading of *Loving the Body*—amidst the assortment of social, gender, and sexuate locations from which these African-American religious teachers/preachers/leaders testify—many of the scholars center their theorizing on the notion of the *forbiddenness* of the body, sensuality, and eroticism in the Black Church and African-American life. To be sure, Pinn in the introduction to this collection prognosticates, "black religion often promotes an illogical disembodied (or body despising) formulation of the fullness of life"¹⁰ or what I term, "somatic dis-ease." The incessant return to this notion of body-dysphoria and sexual restraint in African-American life as a result of the brutalizing apparatus of White racist ideology and the transposing (or infusion) of African traditional religionist beliefs/ideas with Christian church tradition is the *leitmotif* of this particular collection. Thus, the book rightly presents a responsible and constructive rejoinder as a corrective to the somatic dis-ease that is seemingly characteristic of the Black Church specifically and African-Americans in general.

Many of the writers theorize the "Black body" as a site of pleasure. The "Black body" is caricatured as a scene of bliss, titillation, self- and other-indulgence, and wonderment: it is to be safely touched and explored; it is an abode wherein the Spirit—unlimitedly present—emits and entrances; it is acceptable, valuable, desirable, and ebullient; and it is good. For instance, Womanist ethicist Katie Geneva Cannon in her insightful essay "Sexing Black Women: Liberation from the Prisonhouse of Anatomical Authority," writes about the particular ways that Black churchwomen live in tension maneuvering between an affirming understanding of sex as positive and sex as repugnant. Cannon labors to name and witness against violent forces like hetero-patriarchy, racism and sexism, heteronormativity, and puritanical sensibilities that render the bodies of African-American women "invisibly visible," sullied, and debased.¹¹ Cannon argues for a counter-hegemonic act of resistance calling upon African-American women to embrace their bodies, to touch and to be touched, to essentially embody their bodies. For Cannon, this somatic embrace, or what she calls "genital-sexual eroticism," is nothing less than a "gift from God."¹² Thus, she insists

10. Anthony Pinn, "Introduction," in Anthony B. Pinn and Dwight N. Hopkins (eds.), *Loving the Body: Black Religious Studies and the Erotic* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 1–10 (3).

11. Katie G. Cannon writes on the rendering of the African-American female body as "invisibly visible" in her insightful essay, "Sexing Black Women: Liberation from the Prisonhouse of Anatomical Authority," in Pinn and Hopkins, *Loving the Body*, pp. 11–30 (3).

12. For more on "genital-sexual eroticism" see Cannon, "Sexing Black Women," p. 25.

upon a view of the Black body as a pleasurable location for human intimacy over and against ideologies, theologies, and discourses that are grounded in "antisexual ambivalence" and that troubles African-American women's desires to image their bodied-selves as pleasurable. The central concern, for Cannon, is the peeling away of the veiled representations of the Black body as despicable and unspiritual.

Central to the theorizing of many of the writers is the need to aggravate, contort, and raze cursed inventions of the Black body. The authors, like many of us, have tired of the historical travels of vaporous cognitions of blackness, Black people, and the Black body as terrifying spectacles. As a result, the scholars write to expose and problematize, challenge and reconstruct sadist imaginings that see the Black body as scandalous scenery upon which counterfeit meanings of blackness are to be fastened and vile mores ejaculated. Hence, one sees clearly the need of the authors to re-imagine, redeem, and redress the Black body so as to contravene notions of the Black body, as Pinn asserts, as "undeserving of pleasure."¹³

The authors insist that Black body is, indeed, fully pleasurable because it exists in communion with the mind and the spirit and because it is a site of both sexuality and spirituality. The authors resist traditional dualistic views that wreak havoc on African-Americans' views of self and their bodies, like the division of the mind and body or understandings that seek to split sexuality from its union with spirituality. Essential to the holistic healing of African-Americans, many posit, is the need to live into this integration. For instance, Lee Butler, whom I quote at length, poses the following:

Is the spirit willing and the flesh weak? I do not think that is the lesson we learn from the passion of the Christ child. The message that comes to us from the empty tomb is the spirit is willing and the flesh is too! Without embodiment, why should we have hope in the rapture or dream of walking around Heaven? If the spirit is willing the flesh must be equally willing. What does it mean to be a "living soul" if not the integration of spirit and body? Maintaining a hierarchal split between spirit and body diminishes our humanity and denies the gospel of the abundant life.¹⁴

To fully embody the body is to live into its totality as a spiritual/sexual-erotic temple. In fact, pastoral theologian Horace Griffin contends that it is the very abandonment of this understanding of the Black body, an

13. Anthony B. Pinn, "Embracing Nimrod's Legacy: The Erotic, the Irreverence of Fantasy, and the Redemption of Black Theology," in Pinn and Hopkins, *Loving the Body*, pp. 157–78 (158).

14. Lee Butler, "The Spirit is Willing and the Flesh is Too," in Pinn and Hopkins, *Loving the Body*, pp. 111–20 (120).

understanding of it as more profane than sacred, that results in what he calls "spiritual estrangement."¹⁵

Spiritual estrangement, as Griffin understands it, subsequently prevents African-Americans from loving, embracing, and fully embodying their bodies. As a result, the authors encourage African-American Christians to do away with Platonist constructions of dualistic orientations even while acknowledging the Platonic paradigm (e.g., a negative view of the flesh/carnality/corporeality and positive view of the spirit) that is very much a part of Christian theology. In response, biblical scholar Michael Joseph Brown in his essay states:

Rather than continuing to denigrate our bodies as a source of animal-like behavior, our unfortunate inheritance of an Euro-American Christian paradigm, African-Americans should develop a theological anthropology that posits corporeal existence as the foundation for our experiences of joy and pain, intimacy and alienation, finitude and existence.¹⁶

Brown's statement takes the form of a rebuke, in a sense, as he urges African-Americans to cease the somatic dis-ease that causes hate of the body rather than love for the body.

The stern tone that characterizes Brown's statement, I found, was similar to the chastising tone that was characteristic of many of the essays that addressed the Black Church and its seeming inability or unwillingness to talk about the body. For example, theologian Dwight Hopkins provides the following admonishment:

The irony is African-American Christians have opposed white Christian racists on grounds that they continue to pit a gospel of spiritual liberation against a gospel of material freedom for Black folk... Yet, Black Christians then unite with the same theological structures of thought regarding the body-soul bifurcation. Conceptually the split between body and soul or body and mind fervently preached in too many churches implies double trouble for Black believers.¹⁷

Hopkins is clear that African-American Christians are responsible for the somatic dis-ease that frustrates the bodily embrace of African-American Christians, despite the effects of White racist and white Christian racist ideology on African-American Christian's "theological structures of thought." He goes on to name what he understands to be problems that the Black Church must address:

15. Horace Griffin, "Toward a True Black Liberation Theology: Affirming Homoeroticism, Black Gay Christians, and their Love Relationships," in Pinn and Hopkins, *Loving the Body*, pp. 133–56 (135).

16. Michael Joseph Brown, "Constructing a Doctrine for the Ecclesia Militans," in Pinn and Hopkins, *Loving the Body*, pp. 53–72 (67).

17. Dwight Hopkins, "The Construction of the Black Male Body: Eroticism and Religion," in Pinn and Hopkins, *Loving the Body*, pp. 179–98 (182).

First, the church fails to craft a positive theology of eroticism for the Black body (especially the male identity), which helps to drive many Black men away from Christian institutions. Second, the notion of the split perpetuates further the dangerous myth that a theology separating mind and body reinforces religious claims that Black people are "body" people. They embody carnal tastes, nasty sex, and lustful libido. So, Blacks who advocate this split are actually affirming theories about their own bestiality and lasciviousness.¹⁸

It is clear from this reading that Hopkins finds fault with the Black Church in regards to its failure to design sex-body-erotic positive theologies and for its perpetuation of notions of the Cartesian split in the theology that frames its preaching/teaching/living. Lee Butler, however, offers a more pronounced reprimand when he states, "We African-Americans, therefore, have sought to sacrificially escape our bodies through an over-spiritualization of our lives. We engage in an escapist process to transform that which is thought to be unholy into the holy by separating our sexuality from our spirituality." Butler's slamming criticism of African-Americans and the over-spiritualist, escapist, and sacred/profane separatist attributes that seemingly characterize Black Christians are representative, in my estimation, of a false diagnosis or—even more—a move that too quickly ignores, fails to nuance, and problematize fixed notions of the Black body as a site of pleasure only, and of the ways that we subsequently image the Black body.

However, Edward Phillip Antonio's essay entitled "Desiring Booty and Killing the Body: Toward 'Negative' Erotics," seems to get close to an understanding of the Black body that takes into account the various ways that the Black body can be imaged. He chooses to write about what he calls a "negative erotics" or a "style of writing that refuses to invoke the erotic in black experience without at the same time recalling that historically the black body has been a veritable site of horrendous pain repeatedly inflicted on it in the name of biological (racial) identity."¹⁹ In this way, Antonio includes in his theorizing different sightings of the body: the Black body as site of pleasure/sensation/eros as well as a site of pain/terror/trauma. This is not to insist that one only envision and speak about the Black body in a determinative manner that does not free it and African-Americans from historical aches. For sure, as Saidiya Hartman rightly argues, "the (counter)investment in the body as a site of need, desire, and pleasure and the constancy of unmet needs, repressed desires, and the shortcomings of pleasure

18. Hopkins, "Construction of the Black Male Body," p. 182.

19. Edward Phillip Antonio, "Desiring Booty and Killing the Body: Toward 'Negative' Erotics," in Pinn and Hopkins, *Loving the Body*, pp. 271–96 (272).

are articulated in the very endeavor to heal the flesh and redress the pained body."²⁰ So, yes, healing is found in the need to counterinvest in the body, as Hartman eloquently notes, "as the site of possibility."²¹ In this regard, the work of the authors in *Loving the Body* are correct in their imaging of the Black body as a site pregnant with the potentiality for human connection, self-love, and divine relationality. However, I concur with Antonio's admonition that we must fully survey the Black body as a magnificent and, yet, pained site. Like Hartman I agree that pain for African-Americans can be defined as the "history that hurts—the still unfolding narrative of captivity, dispossession, and domination that engenders black subjects in the Americas" and that there is a need, then, for a "collective enunciation of this pain, transforming need unto politics and cultivating pleasure as a limited response to need and a desperately insufficient form of redress."²² It is at this point in the conversation where I think it fitting to respond to the second question, namely, *how is the "Black body" configured as a site of trauma and what is the utility of theorizing the "Black body" as a figure of trauma embodied?*

Reframing the Prognosis

Bodies speak. Bodies emote. Bodies remember.

The luminescent and pained Black body narrates an account of its purposed design and sentient being juxtaposed against its location in a history colored, pun intended, by brutalization and terror. The Black body dramatizes its pain/pleasure/joy/disdain through rivers of emotional tears so plentiful that they resemble the water of the Middle Passage that now serves as the interment of many African bodies. The Black body re-remembers its dispossession and the eerie, haunting presence of lynching trees, masters' whips, and black only water fountains. The Black body existing in a post-slavery America is haunted by, to use Mikko Tuhkanen's term, "phantom presences."²³ These phantasms are never stilled, silenced, or squelched. Thus, the re-memorization of these haunting memories signal a perpetual process. It is here that cultural trauma theory may assist in our imaging of the Black body as a site of trauma.

To begin, cultural trauma is not an event but a process, as sociologist Ron Eyerman posits, that is "kept in motion through the continual deg-

20. Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-making in Nineteenth Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 75.

21. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, p. 51.

22. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, p. 51.

23. Mikko Tuhkanen, "'Out of Joint': Passing, Haunting, and the Time of Slavery in Hagar's Daughter," *American Literature* 79.2 (2007), pp. 335–61 (335).

radation and marginalization of American blacks."²⁴ Eyerman goes on to state, referring to Cathy Caruth's psychoanalytic theory of trauma, that "it is not the experience itself that produces traumatic effect, but rather the remembrance of it."²⁵ Cultural trauma, then, as defined by Neil Smelser, can be defined as a:

memory accepted and publicly given credence by a relevant membership group and evoking an event or situation which is (a) laden with negative affect, (b) represented as indelible, (c) regarded as threatening a society's existence or violating one or more of its fundamental cultural presuppositions.²⁶

Thus, it is not uncommon for slavery and racial oppression to be regarded as cultural traumas in that they are spectacles that have been fixated in the collective memory of African-Americans and have been constituted by African-Americans, and others, as being laden with adverse affect, represented as ineffaceable, and regarded as having violated the existence of African-Americans. Cultural trauma theory allows us to conceptualize trauma not as a single event or a psychogenic disturbance, that is, a disturbance originating in the mind having a psychological origin that affects an individual, but, as Jeffrey Alexander suggests, that which is the result of the "acute discomfort that enters into the core of the collectivity's sense of its own identity."²⁷

The Black body has been memorialized in the African-American collectivity's consciousness as the vehicle through which the terrorizing, dehumanizing capitalist human enslavement project in America was sustained. The Black body was imaged, treated, and used as a marketable good. The Black body, in all of its luminosity, was ravaged by slave owners and disregarded by the state. The Black body thrashed, the Black body lynched, the Black body sexually assaulted, held captive, murdered, tortured, spat upon, legally denied, named less-than, cursed, missionized and publicly satirized, that Black body is the site of trauma(s). It is that landscape that still smells of war and terror even as it exists in its beauty. It is a figure that does not escape the collective memory: It is Harriet Tubman pressing through the thick of the woods to make it to the Promised Land; it is Aunt Hester's scream piercing the ears of her nephew, Frederick Douglass, as her flesh is whipped; it is narrative figurines, like Dessa in Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose*,

24. Ron Eyerman, *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 97.

25. Eyerman, "Cultural Trauma," p. 97.

26. Neil Smelser, "Psychological Trauma and Cultural Trauma," in Alexander and Eyerman, *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, pp. 31–59 (44).

27. Jeffrey C. Alexander, "Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma," in Alexander and Eyerman, *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, pp. 1–30 (10).

who wore the scars of brutalization on her inner parts; it is the body of that unnamed sister or brother who dared to transition from hell on earth to heaven in that dreadful moment in the Middle Passage; it is Venus, the slave purchased by the iconic American revivalist and theologian Jonathan Edwards himself; it is the fiery-red, bloody, pricked finger of that mother picking cotton; it is the body of that soldier who fought and died for democracy in spite of being named three-fifths of a man; it is Emmett Till; Rosa Parks; Martin Luther King; Malcolm X; my ancestors; me.

The Black body exists in the collectivity's memory; memory, as Jennifer Cole insists, links individual bodies with wider social narratives.²⁸ Slavery as trauma, as Ron Eyerman reminds us, is captured in the collective memory, informs the collective memory, and helps to shape the collective memory.²⁹ Slavery, and the bodies that the project capitalized on, formed the primal scene, or the precipitating moment that commenced the process of meaning-making and identity formation in response to the unmaking of African-American being that it sought to bring about.³⁰ The Black body, then, is the site of trauma located in the space between wanting to remember and a longing to forget. As M. Jacqui Alexander poignantly exclaims, "at times forgetting is so deep that forgetting is itself a part of what we have forgotten."³¹ She goes on to ask, "What is so unbearable that we even forget that we have forgotten?" She responds by stating in response to the terror of the Middle Passage, colonization, and patriarchy, "Such a memory of violence and violation begets a will to forget, to the innards of that violation."³² This brings us to a discussion of why dis-remembering, or what some writers in *Loving the Body*—as described previously—term escapism or over-spirituality, functions.

Like psychoanalytical theories of trauma, cultural trauma theory speaks to the coping mechanisms used by collectivities in response to the trauma affecting them. Consider how collective forgetting, for instance, could be a functional means to cope with collective trauma or, even more, shape the way a collectivity images, confronts, or embodies the very site that signals trauma, namely, the Black body. If, in fact, "embodiment functions as a pathway to knowledge, a talking book, whose intelligibility relies on the social-spiritual expertise of a community to decode Sacred knowledge," as M. Jacqui Alexander maintains,

28. Cole, "Painful Memories," p. 88.

29. Eyerman, "Cultural Trauma," p. 60.

30. Eyerman, "Cultural Trauma," p. 60.

31. M. Jacqui Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), p. 277.

32. Alexander, "Pedagogies," p. 277.

then embodiment insists upon bodies to re-conjure memories, to read what is inscribed upon them, and to hear what they and the community have to say about their histories and locations in national narratives. This process, though important as stated previously, must be understood in terms of its emotional, psychological, and spiritual impact upon the collectivity and the individuals that form the collectivity. So a turn to the Black body is a confrontation with it in its grandeur and in its pain. Thus, we can speak of coping mechanisms, like collective forgetting, as survival techniques as opposed to ignorant escapist moves to disjoin the body from the spirit or mind. They are survival techniques in the sense that they attempt to manage and protect against the dissociative effects of trauma like communal disintegration and disruption. This leads me to my response to the final question that has guided my presentation, that is, *what implications do the latter have on the ways we theologize embodiment in the Black Church?*

First, let me say a few words about what I mean by theologies of embodiment or what theologian James Nelson calls "sexual theology." Theologies of embodiment, as James Nelson instructs,

invites us to listen to the body's own speech, to think theologically *with* and *through* our bodies... It involves embracing our embodiment not as curse or affliction, nor as incidental to our search for meaning, but as an opportunity to learn the poetry of mortal dwelling and, understanding more of that poetry, to live differently.³³

Sounds pleasant, beneficial, and curative does it not? Nelson poetically describes theologies of embodiment as a clean process: an invitation to listen to our bodies speak, the chance to engage in theological dialogue with and through our bodies, an opportunity to embrace our bodied-selves not as curse, affliction, or as secondary in our search for meaning, and a moment to hear the verse of mortality so that we may dwell differently in the world. But what if the invitation to attend to our body's narration comes with a statement of warning cautioning the listener to be aware of the possibility of hearing pleasant tales, enchanting remembrances, and mystical lyrics as well as horrid screams, petrifying rhymes, and piercing cries? What if while attending to the body, embodying the body, one finds oneself in the midst of a twisting phantasmagoric flash of haunting scenes and memories of affliction and torment wherein babies pulled away from their parents can be heard howling or the smell of torn flesh roasting under the hot sun on master's plantation assaults the senses? This is, too, what it means to engage in embodiment

33. James Nelson, "On Doing Body Theology," *Theology & Sexuality* 1 (1995), pp. 38–60 (46).

and what it means to attend to the Black body as open text; which is why transcendence, or what some decry as over-spiritualization, functions for it acknowledges that absence from the pained body is to be in the presence of the Divine and away from hellish oppression.

Yet, some may wonder: Should we read and image the Black body only as a site of trauma? Must we fix our gaze upon the primal scene of trauma only without viewing the Black body at the pre-primal scene, that is, the figure of the Black body before slavery, or at the post-primal scene, namely, the Black body post-slavery? Moreover, is there not a message of healing found in the Gospel that redresses the Black body? I answer, no; we should not read or image the Black body as a monolithic figure of embodied trauma only. We should, however, consider what is at stake for African-Americans when we as theologians, pastors, scholars, or lay persons make too quick of a move to urge Black Christians to embody their bodies as sites of pleasure only without acknowledging that a turn to the Black body may result in an encounter with dysphoria. In addition, the Black body always everyday exists marked by its placement at the primal scene. To imagine the Black body at the pre-primal scene, before slavery, is to summon what no longer exists, for the past has merged with the present in the making of a body/figure that lives into the process of traumatization through the daily remembrance of it. Thus, we are right to ask here: Where is the hope? I respond, by acknowledging that though the Black body can be figured as a site of pleasure and as a site of trauma, it is at the same time, what Anthony Pinn names, "ritual space in which the divine is manifest."³⁴ Yes, it is a site of trauma that bears many painful memories, haunting ghosts, and terrifying manifestations; yet, it is Divine, Spirit, Graceful *and* it is good. That is the scandalous *theo-logical* message to be heard, and it is one that, I believe, carries with it immense hope.

Darnell L. Moore is a writer/thinker/activist whose personal mission can be captured in one word: justice. He holds the MA in Community and Clinical Counseling from Eastern University and the MA in Theological Studies from Princeton Theological Seminary. He presently works as an administrator at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey.

Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, 57 US Highway 1, New Brunswick, NJ 08901-8554; darnellm@andromeda.rutgers.edu.

34. Anthony Pinn, "Black Theology, Black Bodies, and Pedagogy," *Cross Currents* 50 (Spring/Summer 2000): 1-2, <http://www.crosscurrents.org/pinn.htm> (accessed 15 April 2008).

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