

Losing Salvation

Notes toward a Wayward Black Theology

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ABSTRACT This essay argues that critiques of redemption in contemporary black theory necessitate a rethinking of black theology in terms of loss so as to upend the political theological order of redemption and damnation that justifies antiblack governance of thought and existence. Through an immanent reading of political theology's appearance in ostensibly secular black feminist thought, the article shows how these wayward metabolizations of black theology's internal and external contradictions—specifically, those that illuminate a fundamental crisis of meaning at its heart—reveal black theology's abjection and alienation from its own stated desires for redemption. The article argues that this debasement of black theology opens onto its significance for black thought. As a form of black thought, black theology and its ongoing crisis of meaning crystallize the political theological crisis of illegitimacy and alienation generated by the failed announcement of redemption in racial slavery's wake. Through a reading of Saidiya Hartman and Christina Sharpe's work, the article shows how a wayward form of black theology is immanent in the ostensibly secular work of these and other radical black theorists. Taking their critiques of the redemptive theology that undergirds antiblackness as instructive, the article argues that a wayward, rather than confessional, form of black theology is already operative in realms of black studies that might be called nontheological. Recasting black political and theological desire for the coherence of redemption as a failure, the article proposes a loss of salvation and heretical appropriation of Christian theological materials as a demand for black thought. By critically reoccupying the sense of damnation that marks blackness, radical black reproductions of theological knowledge can insist on a disinherited procedure of thought—a rebellious *gnosis in blackness*—that disfigures the romance of redemption.

KEYWORDS black feminism, black theology, waywardness, redemption, loss

Introduction: The Lost Cause of Black Theology

Is black theology something of a lost cause for black studies? This essay performs an analysis of black theology through an immanent reading of its wayward appearances in ostensibly secular black feminist thought. Through this analysis, I show how a wayward metabolization of black theology's internal and external

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criticisms—specifically, those that illuminate a fundamental crisis of meaning at its heart—reveal black theology’s abjection and alienation from its own stated desires as openings onto the significance of black theology as a form of black thought.¹ Black theology and its ongoing crisis of meaning crystallize the theological alienation generated from the impossible demand announced in racial slavery’s wake. This essay takes up criticisms of black theology as a lost cause to show its significance for grappling with black loss. By showing how a wayward form of black theology is immanent in the ostensibly secular work of many black feminists—with a particular focus on Saidiya Hartman and Christina Sharpe—I argue that a critical or wayward, rather than confessional, form of black theology is already operative in realms of black studies that are nontheological.² How might we understand this wayward form of black theology as a way of rethinking the nature and task of black theology? While critiques of black theology (which I will examine more deeply in the next section) often rest on a critique of Christian revelation’s understanding of exceptional or special knowledge, I show how a wayward sense of revelation does not coincide with a Christian redemptionist one, even as it takes up the Christian theological material of redemption as indicative of the loss that conditions black existence, black thought, and black political imagination. Instead of legitimating a salvific principle of Western civilization, the black event of revelation is a confrontation with black loss that unveils the antagonism between a redemptionist political theological imagination and black freedom.

To clarify how I am reading redemption here, I note that the black feminist work that I engage offers an understanding of redemption as a “salvationist principle” or “totalizing narrative” in national romances of black belonging that place an unspeakable interdiction on black mourning.³ Black participation in and reckoning with the aftereffects of slavery and colonialism in the black diaspora reveal the drama of political redemption—a narrative of return and recovery—as dependent on violent reproductions of black captivity, suffering, and loss precisely to evade that captivity, suffering, and loss.⁴ This is seen not only in scholarly attempts to redeem the past through a recuperative history but also in dominant political imaginations of black political pasts and futures. Joy James, for instance, notes how the “mothers of the movement” appear at the 2020 Democratic National Convention in an incapacity that locates the promise of redemption for black futures in the success of the Democratic Party.⁵ Rather than redeeming the black past or present, these narratives of black life and death show how the “captive maternal” functions to reproduce black social damnation as if it were black redemption.⁶ This capture by a redemptive narrative and redemptive functions of black kinship forestalls an actual confrontation with the antinomies of black emancipations in Africa, Europe, the Caribbean, and the Americas. Converting black loss into black redemption thus serves to obscure the failures of emancipation by figuring the black present as a

triumph of “true identity,” a transcendence of nonbelonging effected by the kinship of national belonging. But perhaps this promise is, at the same time, a threat of incorporation.⁷

I see two key intellectual innovations in black feminists’ interrogations of redemption. First, they take the crises of black kinship installed by racial slavery as revelatory of the tie between a redemptionist paradigm and a national family romance that interdicts black mourning as the condition for black liberation. This romance highlights how crises of meaning in black reproductions of knowledge are expressed as crises of kinship that a sense of redemptive national belonging is meant to remedy. Second, these critics identify the time of slavery as shot through with distensions of time and space that reveal historicism as a secular recapitulation of the Christian order’s salvationist principle.⁸ In doing this, they recast speculative histories as generative tools for critical engagement with blackness—a move that I extend to argue that the wayward black theology immanently generated in this thought also repurposes theological speculation. This repurposing of theological speculation, I argue, offers a critical occupation and analysis of the theological abstractions that govern black life and death. The wayward theological sensibilities expressed in these critics’ works enable a rereading of black theology’s emergence as a black cultural expression of the impossible yet necessary task of coming to terms with black postslavery subjectivity and its situation in the break of knowledge and kinship, the political and the theological, past and future.

I close by pointing to the ubiquity of wayward forms of black theology and offer a critical interpretation of black theology as a name for the fundamental theological estrangement of black thought from itself. A wayward black theology thus opens itself to a self-criticism that is also a process of black thought’s becoming adequate to the demands of black freedom left unsatisfied in the wake of slavery. By misrecognizing itself as an estranged expression of the fundamental nonidentity of blackness with itself, wayward black theology exhibits its ambivalent attachment to Christian theology.⁹ This repurposing of theological speculation—an appropriation that occurs in and as a confrontation with black loss—is what characterizes black theology as black cultural work: it initiates a heretical use of the terms of the Christian order by serving as a living image of black crises of illegitimacy and so reproduces that crisis at the heart of this antiblack racial order’s redemptive engine.¹⁰

The Lost Cause of Black Redemption

From the earliest iterations of black theology as a curricular enterprise in the university, and its emergence as a part of the burgeoning black studies movement of the late 1960s and 1970s, it could be understood as responding to a crisis or being in a state of crisis itself. James Cone’s *Black Theology and Black Power* announced that “the seminaries in America are probably the most obvious sign of the irrelevance

of theology to life. Their initiative in responding to the crisis of black people in America is virtually unnoticeable.”¹¹ Cecil Wayne Cone extended this sense of crisis in his book *The Identity Crisis in Black Theology*, where he names the identity crisis as one of the black theologian’s identity and the irreconcilability of white scholarly norms of theology and Black Power’s political ideology.¹² Diverse early forms of black theology from Albert Cleage to Joseph R. Washington and J. Deotis Roberts take a similar crisis of black identity as their starting place for either a radical—though sometimes romanticizing—refashioning of Christianity in the image of blackness, or creative—though sometimes pathologizing—attempts to reconcile the two.¹³ This sense of crisis can also be felt in prominent womanist texts like Jacquelyn Grant’s *White Women’s Christ and Black Women’s Jesus*, where the crisis of the black woman’s subjectification as objectification demands a theological revision that challenges white feminist assumptions that Christ’s maleness serves as legitimation of patriarchy, and where Grant names white women’s Christ as non-identical to black women’s liberative Jesus.¹⁴ Perhaps the biggest theological influence on my sense of what black theology might be, Delores Williams also takes up this crisis as a challenge in her *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*.¹⁵ This rehearsal of the crisis of meaning in the curricular origins of black theology is meant to highlight that, from its emergence, black theology—in both its liberationist and its womanist forms—has understood a fundamental crisis or challenge to be the condition of possibility for its speech.

While a crisis of theological origins has been foundational to black theological inquiry since its inception, the aim of most black theologians is to find a way to resolve this crisis.¹⁶ This differs significantly from the ongoing critiques of black theology that have emerged from black religious history, black philosophical and theological pragmatism, and the transdisciplinary aims of Africana religious studies.¹⁷ Drawing on phenomenology, ethnography, philosophy, Africana cosmologies, and a host of other humanistic and social scientific approaches to the study of black religion, these fields echo some of the problematics that early black liberationists and womanists identified—but with an important difference. The nontheological methods for the legitimation of knowledge in the study of Africana religions have allowed scholars to question black theology’s allegiance to exceptionalizing Christian notions of revelation and redemption, recasting these investments as betrayals of the implications of black theology’s own thought.¹⁸

Africana religious studies reveals black theology’s allegiance to a US-centric vision of Christian exceptionalism grounded in theological notions of redemption and revelation. These nontheological critiques thus situate black theology as an extension and expression of black Christianity’s contradictions—its desire for a liberative announcement of the good news of redemption that regularly gets expressed as African American collusion with white Western projects of

settler-colonialism, Christian conversion, and global capitalist extraction. From this vantage point, black theology's position and function within Christian discourse often situates it as a well-intentioned but nonetheless complicit participant in extending the itineraries of destruction—those fashioned through the New World project—to Africa and the rest of the world.¹⁹ When coming to grips with the perpetual crisis within and the trenchant critiques from without, it can seem that black theology as a form of thought is going nowhere fast. Hung up on the repetition of a fundamental impossibility and violent contradiction at the heart of its speech, it perpetually reproduces its own crisis of meaning.

Yet perhaps this crisis of meaning is an occasion for a stranger thought. For it is precisely when it is confronted by the theological excess of the nontheological forms of black thought expressed in a significant body of black feminist scholarship that the crisis of black theological knowledge production appears to mirror a fundamental problem of black political desire in general—namely, the dominance of a political theological structure of redemption that attempts to route black acts, even those that aim at revolutionary projects of liberation, into a racial economy of redemption. The impasses of black feminist thought and its announcement of an interminable crisis might, then, provide a nonconfessional itinerary for black theology.²⁰ If it is going nowhere, attention to the wayward black theology that arises in and from black nontheological thought recasts the antinomies of revelation and theological knowledge production as precisely what must be *worked* in order for us to *work through* the ambivalent attachments to Christianity that pervade even radical and secular black political imaginations of liberation.

Taking the loss of redemption as a significant touchstone for the black feminist theories I engage creates a sense of melancholy and mourning that is both an existential and an epistemological problem for black thought expressed as black theology. Confronting loss and its implications for black existence and epistemology, these theorists demand a reckoning with the “monstrous intimacies” that serve as the condition of possibility and the mediator of black desires for belonging, coherence, and the possibility of satisfaction—the actualization of which would redeem the plight of the captive through his fulfillment in the figure of the black (especially the African American) tourist.²¹ In what follows, I take up two intellectual moves that generate this displacement or misplacement of redemption by forcing an encounter between the impossibility of black loss and the failed promises of national redemption. The first move, subjecting history to the demands of racial slavery, reveals the political economies of recuperated histories as recapitulations of a theological salvation history. Analyzing the entanglements of black thought with the redemptive recuperation of damned histories becomes a means of reintroducing the vertiginous effects of slavery into the redemptive ordering of time and space. The second move, in the wake of this disorientation, is a shift of critical view that employs the

speculative, psychic, and affective aspects of black liberation as means of perceiving redemption's generation of a failed family romance in the wounds of continental and diasporic black kinship. This link between a disoriented time and a failed family romance might refashion black theology's persistent, ambivalent attachment to Christian theological materials into a critical tool for exposing what generates the effectiveness of redemptive desire. If the crisis installed at the heart of blackness is passed on by the mother, dwelling in the black loss of kinship at the heart of redemption may offer a way of disinheriting its promises.

Wayward Histories of Redemption; or, Timelines of the Damned

Saidiya Hartman lays out an index of "the time of slavery" as a constellation of effects, failures, and losses predicated on "the antinomies of redemption (a salvational principle that will help us overcome the injury of slavery and the long history of defeat) and irreparability." The explicit aim of her critical but also speculative and psychological engagement with the time of slavery is "to trouble the redemptive narratives crafted by the state in its orchestration of mourning, the promises of filiation proffered by petty traders, and the fantasies of origin enacted at these slave sites."²² If there is a persistent salvational principle haunting black history, a narrative of overcoming whose mythic script bolsters black political desire in a range of conservatizing to revolutionary political projects, what does it mean that troubling such narratives, promises, and fantasies requires the troubling of redemption?

Perhaps, this troubling of redemption reveals the theological economy that is operative in "the development of 'roots tourism,' that is, tourist products and excursions geared for North Americans in search of their roots."²³ Here, a racial economy of redemption governs the time and space where diasporic identifications and disidentifications are played out. The African American political imaginary of recovery and the Ghanaian political strategy of economic development are both "stagings" of tourist excursions generated by an economic drama of redemption. "The most disturbing aspect of these reenactments [of return of the captive through the tourist] is the suggestion that the rupture of the Middle Passage is neither irreparable nor irrevocable but bridged by the tourist who acts as the vessel for the ancestor. In short, the captive finds his redemption in the tourist."²⁴ The fantasy of belonging through a sacrificial exchange of the captive for their fulfillment in the tourist is inextricably caught up in a Christian redemptionist paradigm.

Hartman's formulation of waywardness thus serves as a striking image of blackness's temporal and spatial dislocations—the wandering relations of a permanently dislocated diasporic figure and permanently lost African continent. These temporal and spatial disruptions, emergent in the failure of black redemption, weave the loss that runs through the fabrics of black history into a garment to cover a lack in the black kinship relation. It is the loss of the mother, as psychically traversed in

Hartman's own critical narration and unnarration of her own "return" to Ghana, that becomes a method of nonredemptive intellectual and affective exploration. This is not only the loss of a genealogical tie but the loss of loss itself via the destruction of anything like legitimate traces of kinship or homeland that one could rely on to provide a sense of belonging, continuity, or purpose. In this way, *Lose Your Mother* and its antecedent essay, "The Time of Slavery," are not only critical but also speculative meditations on how one lives with the interminable loss that marks black diasporic existence in the world. Against the backdrop of the lost mother, Hartman inhabits the figure of the African American tourist whose purportedly salvific return, in the drama of black redemption, is disoriented and so fails. Without the touchstones of a redemptive temporal order, Hartman's experience effects something like a constant historical jostling around the conceptual and affective hold birthed by racial slavery. Without a secure timeline, the security promised in black fulfillment through a romance of redeemed African origins and redeemed national belonging—in both continental Africa and the diaspora—is upended.

The Family Romance as Theological Economy of Black Redemption

Both Sharpe and Hartman understand redemption as a "salvationist principle" that structures family romances of national belonging that are, at the same time, interdictions against black mourning.²⁵ The ambivalent attachments of this family romance depend on a fundamentally theological narrative economy. "In Elmina," Hartman writes, "the traffic was in redemption. The past was at stake and the odds were not any better. I could not recuperate my losses, nor could *beloved sister* right the balance between things lost and things gained. What I could salvage amounted to flattering words, make-believe brothers, and vows of love."²⁶ The redemptive economy that Hartman identifies also drives the Ghanaian tourism industry to promote the possibility of family restoration and a repair of genealogical rupture. "Wasn't this the family romance, a fantasy of exalted strangers, a fantasy of reunited kin?"²⁷ At root, the exigencies of redemption that bring together the figure of the tourist and the figure of recovered African kin bespeak not only a capitalist political economy whose distributions of blackness and value demand the repetition of spectacles of black suffering for survival but also a theological economy of spiritual kinship and descent that sutures the political project of the national romance with the legitimating and authorizing power of Christian redemption and its natural and supernatural sanctions.²⁸ Identifying the impasse between redemptive fantasies of black kinship and the actual woundings and vexations of black kinship is thus critical to Hartman's refusal to settle for a historical claim of redemption that is not adequate to the scale of loss.

Both Hartman's and Sharpe's analyses traverse black incorporations into both conservatizing and radical narrations of the nation's promise in the name of black

freedom. Hartman and Sharpe manage an intellectual and affective pivot that considers the actual complications of how something like a black desire for a Christian sense of redemption emerges while also disabling the contrasting Christian theological impulse to locate a “true” redemptive kernel at the heart of Christianity that would exceed its antiblack failures.²⁹ It is the intransigence of Christian structures of feeling and being in time and space that present the most exacting knots for Hartman and Sharpe. The redemptive witnessing of Ghanaian women at Elmina is a fleeting glimpse of some possibility of witness beyond redemption, rather than redemption’s fulfillment: “The abrasive and incommensurate temporalities of the ‘no longer’ and the ‘not yet’ can be glimpsed in these tears.”³⁰ The Christian theological sense of the already and not yet that governs a Christian sense of mission and covenant is disfigured in Hartman’s “no longer” and “not yet.” Rather than a redemptive and reconciliatory sense of the last things, then, this critical grappling with the “time of slavery” also throws redemptive futurity into crisis together with its dependence on reproductive futurity.³¹

For Sharpe, the Christian missionary intimacies and education of feeling represented in Bessie Head’s *Maru*, work to convert black maternal figures—such as the figure of Saartje Baartman—into vehicles for reproducing the spectacle of black redemptive suffering in the name of freedom. The crisis of redemption that black loss introduces into black thought and life expresses itself as a fundamental crisis of theological reproduction, where “reproduction” takes several intertwining forms. Here the excesses of the political revealed by black loss illuminate the theological reproduction of knowledge and meaning, sociality and society, and kin and a sense of enduring community. Redemption is thus an antiblack organization of this fuller sense of reproduction. For instance, Sharpe writes of whiteness as an order of knowledge—“a political project [that is] also a logic, by which I mean it is a calculus, a way of sorting oneself and others into categories of those who must be protected and those who are, or soon will be, expendable.”³² At the same time, her refusal of this organizing logic coincides with an understated refusal of the implicitly redemptive terms of kinship: “One must refuse to repair a familial rift on the bodies cast out as not kin. Slavery is the ghost in the machine of kinship. Kinship relations structure the nation. Capitulation to their current configurations is the continued enfleshment of that ghost.”³³ Kinship, here, is read as the incarnation of the ghost of slavery. Kinship’s animation of this ghost is thus also enabled by the political theological machinations of *incarnation and redemption* that render this racial order reconcilable or redeemable through the shedding of black blood. Again, the repetition of a refusal to reconcile, the insistence on estrangement and the loss of the promise of kinship, undermines theological senses of descent that preserve white belonging at the expense of black freedom.³⁴

Thus, a different set of ethical demands is made visible for those who have a choice in losing their kin and those who don't, elevating the terms of redemption and damnation in the family romance to an antagonism. Might this escalation of the terms of redemption and damnation provide an itinerary for a wayward black theology? Applying this insistence on black estrangement to the terms of this anti-black racial order's political theology would go against the terms of secular and Christian orthodoxies of knowledge- and kin-making. Thus, a black appropriation of political-theological materials might be—instead of a recuperation through confession—a means of occupying the heretical force attributed to blackness, black religion, and black theology, in order to haunt the operating procedures of the redemptive family timeline so as to force its coming apart and the revelation of the break those procedures attempt to suture.³⁵ Against the repairing and reconciling force of redemption, I propose an alternate approach: thinking blackness in terms of gnosis to provide a means of articulating the rebellious force that animates its theological speech and action. The disappeared figure of the gnostic, lost forever to the annals of history, becomes a prefiguration of black loss within the redemption history of racial modernity.³⁶

Gnosis in Black: Toward a Wayward Black Theology

A wayward black appropriation of political theological materials might also be understood as a nontheological appropriation. Suspending the authority of Christian orthodoxies, such an approach takes up political theology's "traditional problems and the resources they use in dealing with them [as] material" for black thought.³⁷ This approach thus enables a means of occupying the heretical force attributed to blackness, black religion, and black theology in order to weaponize the haunting of the heathen and the heretic. Figuring the incoherence and regression against which the cohering principles of redemption find their significance, this heretical appropriation of theological materials forces the revelation of the rupture that the terms of redemption (and) history attempt to suture.³⁸ The immanence of this wayward form of black theology expresses something of its strangeness for thought, hearkening to a theological rebellion in a gnosis that animates its speech and action.³⁹

Gnosis is not a common referent in black studies or black religious and theological studies, though it is subtly recurrent in recent volumes like *Esotericism in African American Religious Experience: "There Is a Mystery" . . .*⁴⁰ Where the historical identification of Gnosticism served as a strategy of differentiation, a convergence of early Christian heresiological polemics with modern Christian apologetics that enabled the production of what became normative Christianity, *gnosis* also operates as an "*insistence* that Christianity needed to make into a heresy," that which was "unaffirmable by Christianity."⁴¹ It is this insistence that "Christianity had to

disappear in order to divisively constitute the world.”⁴² *Gnosis*, as I am employing it here, thus names a tradition of knowledge making focused on what Daniel Collucicello Barber calls the unpossessed knowledge of the Stranger in the world.⁴³

As we saw in the examination of loss proffered by Hartman and Sharpe, black loss and the desire for black redemption generate a blackness that is estranged from itself. This strange form of thought generates a monstrous mode of working with materials so as to introduce what might be called a mutation, but what I call here waywardness.⁴⁴ In contrast to this wayward and unpossessed, because permanently dispossessed, knowledge, the reproduction of the antiblack world proceeds by way of a purported self-sufficiency that attempts to dominate knowledge of time and space, body and flesh, soul and psyche so as to justify the world and its sources of authority. *Gnosis*, in this black sense, foregrounds the theological rebellion that is immanently generated from black feminist encounters with redemption’s failure. The significance of the knowledge produced from this revelation of redemption’s failure expresses an “insistence that knowledge is irreducible to and incommensurable with the achievement(s) of the world.”⁴⁵

What might such a waywardness mean for black study, particularly black religious and theological study? We might look to the work that already travels the strange circuit between a presumed secular black theory, a presumed Christian black theology, and studies of presumed originary Africana religion. In attending to these works, a series of counterharmonies and dissonances creates an alien song made by the three. While many have worked and are working at generating creative revisions of black theology in light of internal and external critiques,⁴⁶ a sense of the ubiquity of the *wayward* black theology I have been articulating is clearly exemplified in the work of J. Kameron Carter, Joseph Winters, Biko Mandela Gray, and Jamall Calloway, for instance. They sound a resonance between black theory, black religion, and black theology that seems to take the problem of history and the legitimation of the idea itself as a question that troubles any straightforward project of a recuperative black religious history.⁴⁷ Their work extends and distends questions of continuity and origins that can retain a heteropatriarchal sense of orderings of kinship and ancestry within black theology, black religious history, and Africana religious studies.

At the same time, they take up the gift of difficult doctrines like theodicy or critiques from the transdisciplinary approach of Africana religious studies, regularly combining its aims with black theory’s displacement of the terms of Christian and secular redemption history as overdetermining the perception and interpretation of black existence and epistemologies.⁴⁸ These scholars locate a fundamental difference between the modes of attention that would do justice to blackness and those that reproduce a Christian order of antiblack anti-African knowledge, while critically using Christian theological materials—that is, appropriating its concepts,

problems, and cultural productions in a nontheological way. Finally, these scholars enable a revision of the estranged familiarity that can, at times, characterize encounters between black religious and theological studies, by showing how they both undo the assumption of the secular/religious distinction that so often operates without attention in black theory. They let us perceive how this distinction serves to preserve antiblack orders of knowledge while policing and inhibiting engagements with the religious, theological, cosmological, mystical, and spiritual dimensions of blackness.⁴⁹ Attending to these curious estrangements and resonances suggests that some alternative mode of traversing these differences without collapsing their differences into each other is necessary. Developing a wayward sense of black theology as a gnosis in blackness is my offering, here, of a mutation of black theology that attempts to become adequate to the ethical demand issued in slavery's wake.

By framing blackness in terms of gnosis, my aim is to outline a black procedure for the reproduction of theological knowledge that would insist on, stumble over, and be exposed by its familiar estrangement from its origins. A rebellious insistence on the intramural dynamics of this redemptive family romance is also a way of refusing to reconcile blackness with a family romance of secular or theological redemption via the establishment of belonging in the redeemed nation or family of God.⁵⁰ For “the issue here does not concern origins. . . . Gnosis instead is the name for a form that can be seen running parallel to these established religions. A kind of force that remains undetermined by their constituted power. A practice and thought, a weapon, fashioned out of the materials present in that religion, but changed in the form of gnosis.”⁵¹ This identification of gnosis as a potentially weaponized thinking that might effect the estrangement of black thought from itself is also expressed in V. Y. Mudimbe's examination of African gnosis, which explores the antinomies of colonialism, including through an incisive examination of the Christian mission's role in the formation of a discursive “Africa” that generated discourses and knowledges that objectified Africa in an attempt to dominate internal and external perceptions of African thought and existence.⁵² Like the work of Hartman, Sharpe, Wynter, and other nontheological black scholars engaged here, Mudimbe's exploration of the contradictions of African thought models a way of questioning how Christian thought continues to shape the form of political thought across continental and diasporic Africanity.⁵³ His examination of “revelation as a political performance,” theology and politics, and questions of signification and origin myths in *Parables and Fables*, for instance, would become significant for tracking the modern haunting of black political life by the global workings of the Christian order. Given the intimacy of Christian productions of knowledge and existence with modern formations of black thought and existence, developing an approach to thought that renders theological materials usable in nonredemptive terms is critical for addressing the ongoing crisis of black political and existential illegitimacy.⁵⁴

Conclusion: Faith in a Freedom Not Given

Any freedom given is not freedom. We have to internalize in our lives that *we* are the ones that will free us and in order to do that we need unity, we need to study, we need to prepare, and we need to believe that we can win our liberation.

—Assata Shakur, “Affirming the Right to Be Revolutionary.’ Assata: An Interview.”

My interpretation of a black feminist revisioning of black theology—renaming the theological excess of black loss as a wayward form of black theology—is meant to illuminate how the displacement of a desire for black redemption is conjured through the critical reoccupation of the Christian theological materials that mark the antinomies of black existence. Rather than seeking the lost redemptive kernel of Christianity, a wayward black theology turns on itself, examining the black desire for redemption as a curious and monstrous effect of racial slavery’s afterlife. This encounter with black loss thus insists on a fundamental antagonism between black redemption and the black work of mourning—what might be called, at turns, “wake work” or “love’s work.”⁵⁵ This change of posture from a liberationist or womanist one would open black theology’s overdetermination by Christianity as a site for the cultivation of the forms of intellectual, psychic, and affective resilience needed to engage in the daily practice of black freedom under assault by the afterlife of Christian order. I thus offer a wayward black theology as a crystallization of the theological form of black alienation, a glimmering expression of the unique drive for black freedom that is immanent to exigencies of Christian order. Hartman’s remembrance of the alien song in her grandfather’s black church expresses something of this uncanny sense of black familiarity.

I was stateless too. I had never been at home in the world. It was a sensibility I had inherited sitting on my great-grandfather’s knee in Morning Pilgrim Baptist Church as he implored in his scratchy baritone voice along with the other congregants, “Lord, I’m going home, / No more toils, no more care, / No more grief to bear.” Even as a child I perceived the gravity of these words and I knew they contained an appeal as well as a complaint. Abandoned by all but God, song after song declared. It was a feeling that seemed too ancient for my thirty-six years, but I came by it honestly. I was trying to get to the bottom of it, and for me it began in a holding cell.⁵⁶

Like the declaration of abandonment that Hartman learns through these songs, a wayward black theology inhabits its honest disinheritance—its alienation from theological and national belonging and the promise of a worldly home. Rather than a refusal of redemption resulting in a secular overcoming of otherworldliness, this black insistence on what seems to be an inefficacious “appeal and complaint” to an alien God also reveals the abiding estrangement felt in God’s companionship in the

world.⁵⁷ Perhaps this untiring tarrying song's appeal and complaint is a way of making God pay for the crimes of redemption. Perhaps it is this insistence on estrangement from redemption that refuses to let secular or Christian fantasies of wholeness remain settled in the face of the uncountable loss that racial slavery installs.

Accepting black theology as a stranger, perhaps exiled, form of an already estranged and exiled black thought would prevent a too-easy incorporation of a properly disciplined black theology into the redemptive narratives that secularist thought posits. The secular's attempt to establish redemptive temporalities through the supersession of theological forms of thought imagines black theology as inherently parochial, confessional, and speculatively ungrounded from the concreteness of historical reality. Yet a wayward black theology suggests that this fraught interior sense of racialized subjectivity formed by Christian theological materials must also be a fundamental site of critical engagement. A critical occupation of theological terms is the only way to end the overdetermination of black thought and black political imagination by a Christian redemptionist paradigm. To take up black theology in this wayward sense would thus refuse a reconciliation of its strangeness with itself. Taking up its own estrangement as an object of thought, black theology might name a procedure for working through the loss of redemption. Inhabiting this loss in the theological fault line of thought wherever it emerges, whatever strange or familiar sites that line runs through, is one way of becoming adequate to the demand issued by racial slavery's afterlife.

Rather than a recapitulation of the family romance, then — but this time under the sacred aura of “the Black Family” that is often employed to discipline black feminist thought within and without black studies — this failure of black political theological desire would become a site from which to rethink the redemptive image and sense of kinship according to the kinlessness of black terms.⁵⁸ This does not position a black sense of kinship as concerned with settling its origins or ends but offers a means of fashioning a black form of being and thinking, living and dying free from the *inter-* and *intramural* social damnation necessary to reproduce the redemption of black thought. This takes the form of a strange and strained kinship-in-kinlessness that has, in some inescapable sense, lost the ability to say what being together might mean in the terms given by redemption. To lose the ability to speak in terms of redemption is to remember forms of gathering together that mutate and make monstrous intimacies out of the touch of damnation from which a kinship-in-kinlessness is fashioned and refashioned.⁵⁹

The perpetual crisis of black theological meaning signifies on and as the ongoing crisis of black political meaning. Neither redemptionist nor nihilist attempts to settle the question of black freedom can secure a form of black thought that would give the final word on the black situation — pinning it down as an always already fugitive sociality or as always already socially dead. The intellectual approach I've

engaged in the work of the black feminists and black scholars of religion developing what I've called a gnosis in blackness illuminates the inseparability of black reproductions of knowledge from black reproductions of kinship. The insistence of this strange kinship-in-kinlessness renders black thought a familiar stranger to itself: monstrous, compelling, grotesque.⁶⁰ These are theological antinomies that emerge in attempting to make black life and black thought a living image of black freedom struggle. If black theology is a lost cause, a dead end, it is not, then, any less of an experiment in black thought for all that.⁶¹ A wayward black theology thus offers a vulnerable traversal of black thought that takes up the risk of black thought as an effect of the insecurity of black creaturely existence.

The knowledge expressed in this black form of kinship-in-kinlessness illuminates a rebellious gathering within the terms of order as an ongoing project. For it is only by this insistent staying in, not of, these terms of redemption that an antiblack racial order can be made subject to the demands of black existence. And perhaps it is only there, in bringing redemption history to account, that we can perceive a wayward inhabitation of black theology as a critical engagement with the lost cause of black redemption. Perhaps it is only in losing salvation that something as enduring as the family romance, which damns black freedom to a future never fulfilled, could ever be rendered inoperative at the level of black existence and epistemology. The point in this essay, then, has not been to offer a “new” reading of black theology that would somehow overcome its faults, but rather to offer a black feminist analysis that takes seriously how the novelty introduced by its generation of a wayward black theology is an exploitation of precisely these fault lines—creatively fashioning a genuinely strange and familiar form of thought, repeatedly running into old and new dead ends, hoping for a different outcome, and making something of that hope's disappointment, its inevitable misplacement. Whether tending to the liveliness of black knowledge's reproduction or the dearth of its dead ends and lost causes, all black thought leaves us, at some point—a true loss for words.

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Notes

1. While my essay does not directly take up the queer theoretical influences of this analysis, they are certainly felt in the oblique reading of black theology's abjection that I offer here. See Rohy, *Lost Causes*; Scott, *Extravagant Abjection*; Edelman, *No Future*; Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*; Muñoz, *Disidentifications*; Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black*.
2. While I'm unable to provide an exhaustive account of the theological in ostensibly secular black feminisms, a sampling of the readings and theorizations I engage is listed here. James, *Seeking the Beloved Community*; James, "Womb of Western Theory"; James and Vargas, "Refusing Blackness as Victimization"; Tillet, *Sites of Slavery*; King, "Black 'Feminisms' and Pessimism"; McDowell, "Reading Family Matters"; Spillers, *Black, White, and in Color*; Spillers, "Fabrics of History"; Spillers, "Idea of Black Culture"; Spillers, "Kinship and Resemblances"; Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being"; Wynter, "Ceremony Must Be Found"; Wynter, "Beyond the Word of Man."
3. Hartman, "Time of Slavery"; Sharpe, *Monstrous Intimacies*.
4. Examples of this critique of redemption as it presents in contemporary black studies can be found most notably in the work of Frank Wilderson III, "Afro-pessimism and the End of Redemption." This critique has also emerged as something of a theme. See Best, *None Like Us*; Bliss, "Defense, Redemption, Care"; Nash, *Black Feminism Reimagined*.
5. See James, "Captive Maternal." Biko Mandela Gray also performs a critique of redemption as it comes to operate as a justification of antiblackness. See Gray, "Now It Is Always Now."
6. James, "Womb of Western Theory."
7. "Is not the spectacular abjection of slavery reproduced in facile representations of the horrors of the slave trade? What ends are served by such representations, beyond remedying the failures of memory through the dramatic reenactment of captivity and the incorporation of the dead?" (Hartman, "Time of Slavery," 767–68).
8. This sense of a salvationist principle has deep resonances with Cedric Robinson's identification of a redemptionist paradigm at the heart of the Western political order. See Robinson, *Terms of Order*, 125.
9. I further develop this sense of alienation, exile, and estrangement in a reading of W. E. B. Du Bois's short stories. See Armstrong, "Apocalyptic Theology."
10. J. Kameron Carter makes a resonant analysis of Aimé Césaire's debased reading of eucharist and excrement. See Carter, "Excremental Sacred."
11. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*.
12. Cone, *Identity Crisis in Black Theology*.
13. Cleage, *Black Messiah*; Roberts, *Liberation and Reconciliation*; Washington, *Black Religion*; Washington, "Are American Negro Churches Christian?"
14. Grant, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus*.
15. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*.
16. William R. Jones notes common moves in this attempt at resolving black theology's fundamental contradictions. See Jones, *Is God a White Racist?*
17. A range, though not an exhaustive one, of these critiques can be found in Diakité and Hucks, "Africana Religious Studies"; Hucks, *Obeah*; Stewart, *Orisa*; Jones, *Is God a White Racist?*; Stewart, "Womanist God-Talk"; Drexler-Dreis, "Theological Thinking"; Long, *Significations*; Hart, *Afro-eccentricity*; Noel, *Black Religion and the Imagination of Matter*.
18. Dianne Stewart and Charles Long offer foundational critiques, while Joseph Drexler-Dreis compiles these in a helpful survey of Africana religious studies' importance for reimagining liberationist theologies. See Stewart, "Womanist God-Talk"; Drexler-Dreis, "Theological Thinking"; Long, *Significations*.

19. See Diakité and Hucks, “Africana Religious Studies”; Johnson, *African American Religions*.
20. Hortense Spillers’s formulation of black culture as a *critical* culture is especially important for my sense of a nonconfessional black theology. See Spillers, “Idea of Black Culture”; Spillers, “Crisis of the Negro Intellectual.”
21. Sharpe, *Monstrous Intimacies*.
22. Hartman, “Time of Slavery,” 759.
23. Hartman, “Time of Slavery,” 759.
24. Hartman, “Time of Slavery,” 769.
25. Hartman, “Time of Slavery,” 759; Sharpe, *Monstrous Intimacies*, 73.
26. Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, 89.
27. Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, 89.
28. Salamishah Tillet also offers an in-depth and incisive analysis of transnationalism and racial economies of African American tourism. See Tillet, *Sites of Slavery*, 95–132.
29. For an astute analysis of this move to recover a “true” redemptive core, see Drexler-Dreis, “Theological Thinking.”
30. Hartman, “Time of Slavery,” 777.
31. Lee Edelman’s reading of redemptive futurity as reproductive futurity is crucial here. See Edelman, *No Future*.
32. Sharpe, “Lose Your Kin.”
33. Sharpe, “Lose Your Kin.” See also Sharpe, *Monstrous Intimacies*.
34. “Refuse reconciliation to ongoing brutality. Refuse to feast on the corpse of others. Rend the fabric of the kinship narrative. Imagine otherwise. Remake the world. Some of us have never had any other choice” (Sharpe, “Lose Your Kin”).
35. I also develop this sense of heretical appropriation in relationship to the work of Cedric Robinson. See Armstrong, “Heretical Histories of Liberation”; and again a resonance is found in Carter, “Excremental Sacred.”
36. While I do not have the room to more fully develop this connection, I am also thinking here with the work of François Laruelle and his understanding of gnosis. “Gnosis shatters the aporetic relations of ontology, anthropology and humanism and not only those of God and man. Facing the unitary desire, more-than-gregarious, of the churches, gnosis has put to work its multiplicity, and against their unitary division its spirit of separation” (*Future Christ*, 38).
37. Smith, *Non-philosophical Theory of Nature*, 55. This approach is derived from François Laruelle’s nonphilosophy and its suspension of philosophical authority in order to think the “workings of the real that have necessitated [a concept]” (Koložova, *Cut of the Real*, 4). Suspended from its organization within a system of thought, nonphilosophy enables a thinking of philosophy that enacts “a transformation of [philosophical or theological] theories into simple materials” (Laruelle, *Introduction to Non-Marxism*, 68).
38. “The divine creation—the World—is a failure, this knowledge is one thing that gnosis acquired” (Laruelle, *Future Christ*, 39).
39. Indeed, in future work, I aim to track how the development of Christian heresiology in late antiquity and the emergence of Gnosticism as a term in the early modern and modern periods coincides with early Christian and Euro-Christian anxieties about racial order and the need to secure normative Christianity via symbolic antiblackness and the use of the figure of the slave. See Jonas, *Gnostic Religion*; King, *What Is Gnosticism?*
40. An increasing amount of authors are tracking the convergences of blackness and esotericism or forwarding ideas of agnosticism that are resonant with elements of the sense of gnosis I am developing here. At the same time, an understandable suspicion of the

theological animates these works and it is precisely this allergy to theology that I aim to broach. See Finley, Guillory, and Page, *Esotericism in African American Religious Experience*; Crawley, *Blackpentecostal Breath*. Additionally, the African philosopher V. Y. Mudimbe makes explicit the connections between gnosis and the ordering of knowledge. See Mudimbe, *Invention of Africa*.

41. Barber, "Unpossessed Knowledge."
42. Barber, "Unpossessed Knowledge," 227.
43. For more on my thinking on this kind of unpossessed knowledge of the stranger in the world, see my piece on W. E. B. Du Bois and the apocalyptic: Armstrong, "Apocalyptic Theology of Du Bois."
44. See Anthony Paul Smith's translator introduction in Laruelle, *Future Christ*, xi.
45. Barber, "Unpossessed Knowledge," 228. I wonder, too, whether this sense of knowledge would work well with Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí's explication of "world-sense" against Western conceptions of "worldview." See Oyèwùmí, *Invention of Women*.
46. For instance, in their overview of key black theological works that are resonant with African religious studies, Dianne Stewart and Tracey Hucks point to notable texts such as Clark, *Indigenous Black Theology*; Coleman, *Tribal Talk*; Young, *Black and African Theologies*; Young, *Pan-African Theology*; and Coleman, *Making a Way* (Stewart and Hucks, "Africana Religious Studies").
47. Notably, themes of failure, critique, betrayal, abjection, and intellectual impasses between blackness and redemption are operative in these works. Additionally, they regularly engage the work of black feminists and womanist theologians in their formations of thought. See Carter, "Excremental Sacred"; Carter, "Paratheological Blackness"; Winters, "Recovering the Irrecoverable"; Calloway, "To Struggle Up a Never-Ending Stair"; Calloway, "Purpose of Evil Was to Survive It"; Gray, "Now It Is Always Now"; Finley and Gray, "God Is a White Racist."
48. Calloway, "To Struggle Up a Never-Ending Stair"; Gray, "Now It Is Always Now"; Drexler-Dreis, "Theological Thinking."
49. Carter, "Excremental Sacred"; Winters, "Politics of Theology."
50. This, perhaps, resonates with Joseph Winters's engagement with Stephen Best's *None Like Us*. See Winters, "Recovering the Irrecoverable."
51. Smith, "Against Tradition to Liberate Tradition," 154.
52. Mudimbe, *Invention of Africa*.
53. "What this [African] gnosis attests to is thus, beyond its will for power and its conceptual apparatus, a dramatic but ordinary question about its own being: what is it and how can it remain a pertinent question mark?" (Mudimbe, *Invention of Africa*, 199).
54. Mudimbe, *Parables and Fables*.
55. Sharpe, *In the Wake*; Rose, *Love's Work*; Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law*.
56. Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, 44.
57. Here, I am reading Jamall Calloway's compelling argument that black Christianity "centers the cross, only to reject it, as it is intended to be" ("Purpose of Evil Was to Survive It," 69).
58. See McDowell, "Reading Family Matters"; King, "Black 'Feminisms' and Pessimism."
59. We might see, in this rereading of kinship, a gloss on the debates in queer theory figured most insistently by Lee Edelman and José Muñoz. See Edelman, *No Future*; Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*; Muñoz, *Disidentifications*.
60. Here, Victor Anderson's critical, creative, generous, and generative work leaves its mark on me. Unfortunately, Anderson's pointed critique of James Cone often overshadows his deeper

- criticism of a *heroic genius* that permeates black and womanist theology (i.e., a redemptionist impulse) and he turns, instead, toward a sense of black life in terms of the *grotesque*. While I disagree with much of his critique of Cone, Anderson's critique of genius and sense of the grotesque are still underexamined as a means of understanding the religious and theological excess of black life. See Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness*; Anderson, *Creative Exchange*.
61. I am grateful to Sean Capener for sharing his forthcoming examinations of intellectual "dead ends" as generative for understanding the vexing relationships that antiblackness births through its management of debt, slavery, and economic theology.

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