Two of the great church people of the 20th century were Howard Thurman (1899-1981) and Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929-1968). As preachers, theologians, and spiritual leaders, Thurman and King’s prolific and prophetic activism embodied the centrality of community in the African American religious tradition and the intrinsic nexus of justice and love within that towering tradition. Each worked out of different philosophical and theological movements (for Thurman, philosophical pragmatism and Christian mysticism, and for King, personalism and Gandhism), offering distinct but corresponding interpretations and applications of the concepts of the image of God, justice, and love. Still, both shared a vision of an inclusive community that sees everyone as made in the image and likeness of God with love and justice ordered toward community. As theologian Jamie T. Phelps, O.P., observes, “The writings of both Thurman and King are precursors of the liberation theology that would emerge in the late 1960s. Their speech, writings, and actions demonstrate the integral relatedness of liberation and communion.”¹

Indeed, the “stage-setting” for constructing a contemporary black theology of liberation² includes the sermonic and spiritual texts of Thurman and King, which articulated the relation of religion and theology as a vital source of public virtue and the creation of community. The descendants of the long African American struggle for human dignity and freedom had a vision and hope for the “beloved community,” which encompassed not only black people, but also extended to all oppressed people.

Thurman and King were steeped in the grand democratic and prophetic Christian traditions that asked fundamental questions about the anawim: where are the vulnerable, the marginalized, and the downtrodden in the theological discourse? Where are the intellectual resources to wrestle with unjustified human suffering, unnecessary social misery, and unmerited affliction? Have preachers and theologians adequately asked, “Why am I doing what I am doing?” Recognizing that liberation must be positioned as the theological heart of the Gospel, James Cone laments:

Theology [in America] is largely an intellectual game unrelated to the issues of life and death. It is impossible to respond creatively and prophetically to the life-situational problems of society without

identifying with the problems of the disinherited and unwanted in society. Few American theologians have made that identification with poor blacks in America but have themselves contributed to the system which enslaves black people. 3

This level of truth telling—Cone made this assertion 43 years ago but it remains a relevant critique—forces what the great novelist Henry James describes as a “hotel civilization” to recognize that the current moment in history is not beneficial for the anawim. Cornel West explains James’ hermeneutic of a “hotel civilization”:

He [James] said there’s something about American civilization just like a hotel that believes that the lights are on all the time. Leave your room and it’s dirty; come back, it’s clean. You don’t see who cleans it. There’s an obsession, just like a hotel, with comfort, convenience, contentment—so quintessentially American. How can a city on the hill that claims to transcend history engage in a discourse about race, about suffering, about pain and misery? Either push a button and it disappears, or you just keep movin’. 4

When we look closely, a hotel civilization is indicative of the American worship of wealth and the insatiable desire for convenience and felicity, which leaves the tradition of struggle for decency, dignity, freedom, and democracy aimless.

In his 1998 State of the Union Address, President Bill Clinton made a bold pronouncement that because those times [late 1990s] were good, we have a stronger nation: “We are moving steadily toward an even stronger America in the 21st Century; an economy that offers opportunity; a society rooted in responsibility; and a nation that lives as a community.” 5 Clinton’s perspective is paradigmatic of what still masks the struggle of ordinary Americans to live decent and dignified lives. What Clinton espouses provides ground for the Jamesian notion of a “hotel civilization” to serve as a heuristic to contextualize Cone’s method of linking theological scholarship and identification with those for whom this moment in American civilization is not beneficial; the city on the hill is fiction.

Cone suggests that black liberation theology ask, “Beneficial for whom?” What is the evidence that makes us think America has created a society in which the disinherited, who are disproportionately black and brown folk, are provided an equal opportunity to access economic and social betterment? What is the evidence that makes us think that the nation has achieved community? These are among the questions a black theology of liberation must confront. West takes particular affront at the “sugar-coated language that accents the superfluities and superficialities of our day [that] must be pierced to deal with the harsh realities.” He extends his critical analysis here:

[T]oday we face a new moment of triumphalism with new idols like markets and privatizing forces, accompanied by new forms of mendacity, such as using stock market records and balanced budgets as benchmarks of good times rather than the quality of lives lived for the least in society. Perhaps good times should be gauged by the depth of spirituality needed to keep keeping on in the midst of material poverty, and also in the spiritual poverty of brothers and sisters disproportionately white in disproportionately vanilla suburbs. These sisters and brothers are dealing with existential emptiness

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and spiritual malnutrition because they have not received enough care and nurture and love along with all their money and prosperity.\textsuperscript{5}

In the intervening years since Martin Luther King, Jr.’s death in 1968, and Howard Thurman’s death in 1981, the nation has come a long way. Yet, we are still living in a difficult moment in the history of the grand American democratic experiment. The American political discourse and the nation’s priorities are tilted away from pressing social problems. Thus, it is crucial that we continue to look for theological sources of light to sanctify our public life.

The goal for black liberation theology is to achieve a way of living unchained that is available to all who hunger and thirst for justice, especially those whom Thurman calls the “disinherited,” or, put another way, those who “stand with their backs against the wall.”\textsuperscript{7} The same question that Thurman raised many decades ago—and black theology must still raise—remains as relevant as ever: “Why [is it] that Christianity seems impotent to deal radically, and therefore, effectively, with the issues of discrimination and injustice...? Is this impotency due to a betrayal of the genius of the religion, or is it due to a basic weakness in the religion itself?”\textsuperscript{8}

**Purpose of Paper**

Framed by these questions, this paper proposes that black liberation theology urge a progressive movement toward achieving justice and genuine democratic community for all Americans. The present historical moment requires a theology that can underscore a revitalized movement that is an adequate expression of Christian faith and discipleship lived in the face of human suffering and injustices. The challenge is to keep black liberation theology vital and vibrant as an intellectual discourse without forfeiting its prophetic stance.

This paper advances Cornel West and Eddie Glaude, Jr.’s call to take up “a more critical analysis of the discursive and ritualistic formations that question traditional scholarly categories and open up new sites for investigation.”\textsuperscript{9} Further, it echoes their appeal for a “more careful ‘meta’ reflection on the central category of [the] field, including its complex relations to sophisticated conceptions of class, gender, sexual orientation, race and empire.”\textsuperscript{10} Examining these complex relations to changed realities that confront our democratic ideals, they argue, requires “a thick historicist sensibility” to understand black theology’s relations to American ideology, and its relations with discourses on the ethical conceptions noted above.

British research scholar Anthony Reddie’s scholarship will help conclude this paper. He joins West and Glaude in bringing fresh critical thinking to bear on the future direction of black theology. Promoting an interactive and participatory approach to theological reflection, he posits: “To understand Black theology one must work in a more inductive or “inside out” way of thinking and feeling as opposed to more deductive or “outside in” approaches.”\textsuperscript{11} As we will discuss later, Reddie challenges James Cone’s traditional systematic approach.

**Historical Perspective**

Black theology of liberation is grounded in “discovering the core message of personal and structural liberation in the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures and connecting this message with God’s presence in African Americans’


\textsuperscript{7} Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1976), page not numbered.


\textsuperscript{10} West and Glaude, African American, xiii.

movement for justice.” This theological commitment understands the wedding of blackness and Christianity as a particular calling to struggle for freedom and human flourishing while celebrating the intellectual and spiritual gifts of people of African descent. Indeed, people of African descent globally share this gift of blackness and Christianity anchored in the Gospel’s liberationist orientation. Dwight Hopkins of the University of Chicago Divinity School makes clear that black liberation theology in the United States joins an ongoing global movement—Latin American liberation theology and African liberation theology, for example—of liberating the oppressed, which affects all of humanity. “If the majority of the people in the world who are materially and spiritually oppressed are also free,” Hopkins writes, “then this offers hope to remove the unjust power of the minority groups which control most of the world’s resources.”

Black theology in the United States emerged from five significant historical moments, or stages: (1) “African American Religion as the Problem of Slavery” (mid-eighteenth century to 1863), (2) “African American Religion and the Problem(s) of Emancipation” (1864 to 1903), (3) “African American Religion, the City, and the Challenge of Racism” (1903 to 1954), (4) “African American Religion and the Black Freedom Struggle” (1954 – 1969), and (5) “The Golden Age of African American Religious Studies” (1969 to the present). Thus, the first four stages delineate the historical, homegrown, unsystematic black theology. It is the fifth stage of this arc of black strivings in the U.S. that marks the emergence of the modern, critical, and systematic black theology with the promulgation of three seminal documents.

The document, “Black Power: A Statement by the National Committee of Negro Churchmen” (later the National Committee of Black Churchmen, or NCBC), inaugurated the first stage within modern black theology (“The Golden Age,” asserting that freedom and power are related because no one can be free without political power. The statement claims that because the black community does not have any power “to implement the demands of conscience, the concern for justice is transmuted into a distorted form of love...Powerlessness breeds a race of beggars.” Declared by an ecumenical ad-hoc coalition of black Protestant clergymen, this theological pronouncement was published on 31 July 1966, in the New York Times; it was a response to the onset of the Black Power movement as a new current in the civil rights movement. In April 1969, at the National Black Economic Development Conference in Detroit, James Forman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, a civil rights organization that rejected the gradualist approach of some civil rights leaders, issued the “Black Manifesto” which the NCBC accepted. The document sparked passionate debate within and outside the black community about reparations that were never delivered. Then, in June 1969, the NCBC put forward the “Statement of Black Theology,” signaling a black theological resourcement. A seminal text, it articulates principal elements of black liberation theology:

Black Theology is a theology of black liberation. It seeks to plumb the black condition in the light of God’s revelation in Jesus Christ, so that the black community can see that the gospel is commensurate with the achievement of black humanity. Black theology is a theology of “blackness.” It is the affirmation of black humanity that emancipates black people from white racism, thus providing authentic freedom for both white and black people. It affirms the humanity of white people in that

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it says “No” to the encroachment of white oppression. The message of liberation is the revelation of God as revealed in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. Freedom is the gospel. Jesus is the Liberator!\textsuperscript{16}

With these three foundational texts, there was a need for a “fresh start” in doing theology in a new way that would not hinge on white theologians. Malcolm X, whose advice scholars suggest Cone followed more than King, puts it this way: “Don’t let anybody who is oppressing us ever lay the ground rules. Don’t go by their games. Don’t play the game by their rules. Let them know that this is a new game, and we’ve got some new rules…”\textsuperscript{17}

Taking up the task to concretize a more systematic expression of black liberation theology, \textit{Black Theology and Black Power} was James Cone’s first attempt to identify liberation as the organizing theme of the Gospel and blackness as the primary conduit of God’s presence. Written with a sense of anger, he wrote the book in four weeks toward the end of four years at his first teaching post, Adrian College, a small Catholic liberal arts college. Cone was deeply affected by the surging black power movement. Lamenting that his theological education was fixated on European theologians and feeling alienated with the white/Euro-centric theology he was teaching, he prized the stimulating writings of luminary black figures including James Baldwin and LeRoi Jones (later known as Amiri Baraka). Because black theology and black power were more concerned with societal problems than with developing a new-fangled way to do theology, Cone soon turned his attention to developing a liberation perspective for the field of theology.

The three statements in conjunction with Cone’s classic text \textit{Black Theology and Black Power} constitute stage one of black theology’s modern, systematic liberationist orientation. Moving to establish black theology as a field of academic study, the founding of the Society for the Study of Black Religion in 1969 in Atlanta during a gathering of African American seminary professors, and the publication of Cone’s second book constitutes the second stage of modern black theology. Stage three is marked by the 1975 Black Theology Project that was comprised of scholars, church ministers, and community activists from the United States and across the Global South. This phase focused attention on African socialism, feminism, and Marxism, among other issues. The rise of a second generation of African American religious scholars and ministers—Dwight Hopkins is one of them—marks the fourth and present stage beginning in the mid-1980s. It is a stage characterized by theology’s wider exploration of black life; a theology that integrates an analysis of class, gender, sexual orientation, and race; a bankrupt sociological, political construct.\textsuperscript{18} (Womanist theology can be characterized as a sixth stage in black theology.)

\textit{A Black Theology of Liberation} is widely recognized as the most significant text in grounding and advancing black liberation. The end purpose of Cone’s theological discourse is to root the African American experience as the contemporary revelation of God and to affirm Christianity as a medium for the liberation of oppressed people. Cone’s methodological approach keeps sight of the dialectical relationship between the biblical revelation of God and God’s relationship with humanity. Crucial to the theological task for Cone is an understanding that

\textit{...revelation is not just a past event or a contemporary event in which it is difficult to recognize the activity of God. Revelation is a black event; it is what blacks are doing about their liberation. [B]lack experience, black history, and black culture [are] theological sources because they are God at work liberating the oppressed.}\textsuperscript{19}

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\underline{17} Cone, \textit{Black Theology}, xiii.
\underline{18} Hopkins, \textit{Introducting Black Theology}, 7-11.
\underline{19} Cone, \textit{Black Theology}, 30.
\end{flushleft}
Cone’s hermeneutical principle takes seriously “the questions which arise out of the [black] community” itself and how the community encounters Jesus Christ. Cone observes: “[Martin Luther King, Jr.’s] life and message demonstrate that the ‘soul’ of the black community is inseparable from liberation but always liberation grounded in Jesus Christ.”

Across the long history of the African American struggle for freedom and civil rights, black theology has been expressed in various ways as a means to engage in truth telling, soul searching, and witness bearing. This prophetic tradition has been expressed by both intellectuals and artists, among them Langston Hughes, James Weldon Johnson, Howard Thurman, and Zora Neale Hurston. These words of Hughes vividly embody the deep reservoir of black cultural heritage—experience, history, and culture are among the sources that shape black theology—that theologians cannot ignore:

But then there are the low-down folks, the so-called common element, and they are the majority—may the Lord be praised! The people who have their nip of gin on Saturday nights and are not too important to themselves or the community, or too well fed, or too learned to watch the lazy world go round. They live on 7th Street in Washington, or State Street in Chicago and they do not particularly care whether they are like white folks or anybody else.... These common people are not afraid of spirituals, as for a long time their more intellectual brethren were, and jazz is their child. They furnish a wealth of colorful, distinctive material for any artist because they still hold their own individuality in the face of American standardization.

Langston Hughes’ narrative captures how poor black folks lived religion. Black theology of liberation aims to wrestle with the questions that ultimately arise from such experiences as the ghetto—from their joys, their sufferings, their hopes, their disappointments. For historian and theologian Gayraud Wilmore, liberation is found “in the streets, in taverns and pool halls, as well as in churches.” In light of Hughes’ reference to 7th Street in the nation’s capital and to State Street (South Side) in America’s third largest city, we must ask whether much has changed along those streets in what remain black ghettos. While this paper does not present a space to explore in-depth the urban (and rural) ghettos today, the lived reality of impoverished and marginalized African Americans is a subject for serious theological reflection and response.

Hermeneutical Method

As discussed earlier, the emancipatory interpretation of Scripture developed by enslaved African and African Americans Christians, and the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, constitute three building blocks in the formation of black liberation theology. Method is a fourth building block in constructing this theological expression. According to Dwight Hopkins, the method(s) of black theology enables the African American faith community to respond these questions: How do we arrive at our answers in our talk about and practice with God among the poor today? How do we come to our conclusions about relations among God, humanity, and the world? What are our sources, norms? What are our beliefs? What are the consequences of our theology?

Black liberation theology’s method is informed by six sources—the “raw materials” for constructing contemporary black theology of liberation: Scripture’s revelation of God’s liberating action in history; African Ameri-
can churches (historically black denominations and black congregations in largely white denominations) experiences of worship; a faith tradition of struggle for liberation inside and outside formal church structures; African American women’s intellectual, emotional, and physical experiences; black culture, which experienced religious conditioning and contains religious and theological themes across its broad spectrum of mediums; and engagement of a contested terrain with a radical politics in the face of systemic power institutions and individuals.25 These sources do not function independently, but converge at many different points like “raw materials” mixed together to create a particular product.

Black theology of liberation views God’s liberating power as resident in all aspects of black life, especially in the life of those disherited, dispossessed, and disenfranchised in society. A persistent focus on liberation for those who are impoverished threads black theology to the biblical God’s concern for those who occupy the lower rungs of society’s socio-economic ladder. “[A] constructive Black Theology of liberation is a mediation between what poor African Americans of faith believe and do by force of habit, on the one hand,” asserts Hopkins, “and a systematic tradition where oppressed Black folk self-consciously struggle for full humanity in God’s divine realm, on the other hand.”26 As Cone sees it, there are “two hermeneutical principles” operative in black theology’s interrogation of the doctrine of God:

(1) The Christian understanding of God arises from the biblical view of revelation, a revelation of God that takes place in the liberation of oppressed Israel and is completed in the incarnation in Jesus Christ. (2) The doctrine of God in black theology must be of the God who is participating in the liberation of the oppressed of the land...Because God has been revealed in the history of oppressed Israel and decisively in the Oppressed One, Jesus Christ, it is impossible to say anything about God without seeing [God] as being involved in the contemporary liberation of all oppressed peoples. The God in black theology is the God of and for the oppressed, the God who comes into view in their liberation. Any other approach is a denial of biblical revelation.27

The second hermeneutical principle results from the first, which is to say, that God calls all humanity to freedom. That is the enduring testimony of the prophetic Hebrew tradition.

With an orientation to transform the world, to help build God’s reign on earth, the method of “a constructive” theology of black liberation is anchored in the prophetic Christian tradition. It is a tradition that has defined the faith of African Americans across the arc of history in this country. In a commencement address at Wesleyan University in Connecticut, Cornel West eloquently puts forward the moral claims of this tradition in which doing black liberation theology must be anchored:

...[Prophetic Christianity] views each and every individual as having equal status, warranting dignity and love, especially those who are denied such dignity, respect and love by individuals, families, groups, social structures, economic systems or political regimes—hence the prophetic Christian identification and solidarity with the downtrodden and disinherit, the degraded and dispossessed; and lastly, the good news of Jesus Christ, which lures and links human struggles to the coming of the kingdom—hence the warding off of disempowering responses to despair, dread, disappointment and death.28

27 Cone, Black Theology, 60-61.
West points to the prophetic Christian tradition’s conception of what it means to be human and how we, as individuals and as community, should act. In his address, we see Scripture and a faith tradition of struggle—two sources of black liberation theology that veritably underscores all the others—embedded in West’s exegesis of this Christian tradition of prophetic witness.

In addition to the six sources, Hopkins denotes that there is a norm, or organizing principle, that informs the doing of a systematic black theology of liberation. He describes the norm as the spirit of liberation that “permeates, vivifies, and judges” each source. “Not all sources, histories, and contemporary experiences of African American people are locations of God’s spirit of liberation for the poor,” Hopkins observes. African American culture and experience is not divorced from the larger American cultural currents that favor success in market-oriented culture. Such a cultural milieu leads some African Americans who have “succeeded” to bypass the concerns of the dispossessed, to at least implicitly support the status quo, and to see the black middle-class as normative. Furthermore, Hopkins and West, and other black liberationist thinkers, remind us to avoid canonizing the African American experience, including that of the materially poor, as automatically a prophetic stance for freedom and human dignity. Still, Hopkins contends “the black poor are the most fertile ground for the appearance of divine presence because it is God’s will that they be free spiritually and materially.”

Black liberation theology, like other liberation theologies, is situated squarely in the realm of social context. Neither tradition nor scripture are claimed as the dominant sources for discerning God’s liberating activity in the world. Rather, the experience of oppression by black persons and communities is the primary mediator that determines the vocational direction of black theology. Explaining this claim, Cone posits: “It is the common experience among black people in America that Black Theology elevates as the supreme test of truth. To put it simply, Black Theology knows no authority more binding than the experience of oppression itself. This alone must be the ultimate authority in religious matters.”

Awareness of the historical context and social location is paramount to theology’s critical and prophetic engagement with socio-economic systems that are maladjusted. It is a method that radically departs from the detached “objectivity” of the Scholastic and Neo-Scholastic approaches to theology. Dennis Wiley, a theologian and United Church of Christ pastor, writes: “Instead of focusing on questions such as ‘Does God exist?’ black theologians have been more interested in asking ‘Does God care?’ or, more pointedly, ‘What is God doing to alleviate the suffering of black humanity?’”

While this paper is not a space for a detailed exploration of womanist theology and method, we end this section with a brief consideration of how womanist thought responds to black liberation theology. Womanist analysis offers a wholly different reading of the biblical witness that black liberation theology use as a source to validate the normative claim of God’s liberating power on behalf of all the oppressed. Delores Williams, Paul Tillich Professor Emerita at Union Theological Seminary, argues: “If one reads the Bible identifying with the non-Hebrews who are female and male slaves (the oppressed of the oppressed), one quickly discerns a non-liberative thread running through the Bible.” Thus, womanist theologians question black liberation theologians’ “assumption that the African American theologian can today make paradigmatic use of the Hebrew’s exodus and election experience as recorded in the Bible.”
The Future of Black Theology of Liberation

Central to the vocation of black theology of liberation is keeping alive the radical dimension of African American Christian identity that prioritizes the distresses of the “disinherited” in our society. Princeton Professor of Religion Albert Raboteau, reciting Howard Thurman, writes: “[T]he test of any religion ‘turns on what word’ it has ‘to share about God with men who are the disinherited, the outsiders, the fringe dwellers removed from the citadels of power and control in the society.’” While not overlooking the less than prophetic tendencies in the black Christian tradition and the consequences of such brokenness, this rich religious heritage has commonly been linked to negotiating and transforming the public sphere, facilitating the transition in American democracy from slavery to freedom, from racial segregation to civil rights. Deepening this tradition of struggle to create a genuine culture of justice and freedom, black theology must take up the task of recasting the contours of a prophetic vision and redefining the contents of liberation, praxis, and coalition-building for social transformation across the margins for today.

Probing the literature on black theology, we find scholars and practitioners in the last two decades identifying a series of challenges for black theology. In a 1993 essay, Riggins Earl, a Professor of Ethics and Theology at the Interdenominational Theological Center, outlines the challenges this way: the challenge of communicating black theology’s prophetic ideals and contributions to the “anatomy of theological knowledge”; institutionalizing black theology as an academic field of study so as not to appear as “convenient political rhetoric used to gain employment in White schools”; and refashioning and reimagining black theology’s hermeneutical method(s) that embraces a more holistic theological integration of black experiences including sexual orientation, gender, class (caste), and color. Conceivably, this question Earl poses aptly summarizes the aforesaid challenges he points out: “Can Black theologians maintain creative tension between Black [T]heology’s prophetic duties and its pedagogical ones?” Three years later, in her reflective work, And Still I Rise, Georgetown University Professor of Theology Emerita Diana Hayes puts forward this unequivocal perspective:

The Black community, and therefore Black Theology for which that community is both foundation and ever-renewing source, is facing an uncertain future, assaulted as it is on every side, disintegrating from a variety of forces, both internal and external, losing its self-understanding as a place of growth, vitality and renewal for Black peoples who, instead, are losing faith in each other, in their institutions, and in themselves.

Hayes’ claims remain cogent; thus, let us expand on it briefly to understand the social reality that underscores her claims.

For the last four decades, renowned Harvard sociologist William Julius Wilson has chronicled “the truly disadvantaged.” To date, Wilson has provided some of the most insightful explanations for the sociological currents that underscore Hayes’ claims. Recognizing that a wider analysis of these social problems is beyond the scope of this paper, nevertheless, it is important to point out the social and material context is inextricably intertwined with the religious and ethical context of individuals and communities. Though debated, Wilson makes a strong

claim, for example, that the exodus of middle class and educated African Americans from neighborhoods that represent the historic core of urban black communities has contributed to an increase in the truly disadvantaged. Wilson observes:

In earlier decades, not only were most of the adults in ghetto neighborhoods employed, but black working and middle classes brought stability. They invested economic and social resources in the neighborhoods, patronized the churches, stores, banks, and community organizations, sent their children to the local schools, reinforced societal norms and values, and made it meaningful for lower-class blacks in these segregated enclaves to envision the possibility of some upward mobility.40

Regarding black churches, many congregations have moved outside the black ghetto neighborhoods, building larger modern edifices as they follow the movement of middle class and educated African Americans elsewhere in cities or into suburbia. The black church landscape is now permeated with mega-churches and the onset (some say a re-emergence) of the so-called “prosperity gospel.” Many African American and Hispanic Pentecostals claim it as real liberation for the oppressed, though it is not a phenomenon limited by ethnic background or class status. Roger Olson of Baylor University rightly emphasizes that this “pernicious teaching is anything but liberating. It enslaves people to false hope and apathy (of others) if not blame. And, it doesn’t work.”41 For the African American community, the negative implications are considerable if this bankrupt theology is not thwarted. There is ample material to draw upon for reflection and critique regarding new visions and new approaches for doing black liberation theology. Of the three broad challenges Earl identifies above, we will plumb ideas about hermeneutical method(s) so as to renew the signifier “liberation.” A black liberation ethic must recapture “a radical response from the underside of American religious history to the mainstream of white Christianity” (and black Christianity, too).42 To that end, we will primarily draw from Elonda Clay, and Cornel West.

In a paper delivered at the American Academy of Religion’s annual meeting, Elonda Clay, a doctoral candidate at Lutheran School of Theology of Chicago, sets the stage to unmask whether black liberation theology takes the signifier “liberation” for granted. She ponders: “...if the discourse now participates in a politics of nostalgia reflecting on a historical moment that has passed (black power); thus rendering the signifier “liberation” stagnant and worn?”43 Scanning the canon of black theology, she carefully argues, “second- and third-generational iterations of ‘liberation’ have come to be a discursive (historical) signifier failing to adequately include new voices of the oppressed, thereby decentering Cone’s initial theological formulations of Black Power.”44 “Liberation” functioned paradigmatically as “concept, heuristic, signifier” in the early iterations of black theological discourse, but it has become re-signified, or reconfigured, “into a discourse of cultural legitimation.”45 Here, Clay echoes the thinking Eddie Glaude and Cornel West, as well as other scholars and practitioners. Second and third generation black theologians and pastors—there are exceptions—have failed to recast the “heuristic of ‘liberation’ for changing conditions and contexts”—the multiple social burdens society struggles to address: homophobia, heterosexism, classism, sexism, and racism. Evident through its discursive content, Clay suggests, black theology’s disengagement with these social concerns can be described as retreating rather than identifying with marginalized people of color. “Such a lack of sustained engagement resignifies liberation from praxis for social transformation to celebrating and reliving past achievements,” writes Clay.46

42 Clay, “Liberation or Legitimation,” 308.
43 Clay, “Liberation or Legitimation,”308-09.
44 Clay notes that Cone, after presenting her paper, remarked that he often asked himself the same question of liberation or legitimation as the (unintended?) outcome of black theological discourse. See Clay, “Liberation or Legitimation,”309.
45 Clay, “Liberation or Legitimation,”310.
West expresses a theological consciousness that challenges the political economy and its social order. Steeped in a prophetic-liberationist paradigm, West’s philosophical-theological thought brings together the rich legacy of Athens (practicing democratic dialogue) and the prophetic legacy of Jerusalem (keeping sight of human suffering)—these traditions anchor his hermeneutical method. In *Democracy Matters*, he illustrates how these two traditions—we must allow them to resource our theological praxis—cohere to sustain individuality and human dignity within community. We quote at length to capture the gravity of his argument:

[O]ur Socratic questioning must go beyond Socrates. We must out-Socratize Socrates by revealing the limits of the great Socratic tradition. My own philosophy of democracy that emerges from the nightside of American democracy is rooted in the guttural cries and silent tears of oppressed people. And it has always bothered me that Socrates never cries—he never shed a tear. His profound yet insufficient rationalism refuses to connect noble self—mastery to a heartfelt solidarity with the agony and anguish of oppressed peoples. Why this glaring defect in Socratic love of wisdom? Does not the rich Socratic legacy of Athens need the deep prophetic legacy of Jerusalem? Must not the rigorous questioning and quest for wisdom of the Socratic be infused with the passionate fervor and quest for justice of the prophetic?47

Reading West, we discover that Clay’s critique mentioned above corresponds with his understanding of democratic *paideia*—cultivation of critical citizenship—that generates a more efficacious democratic praxis. For West, democratic praxis and liberative praxis are linked—pursuing justice and freedom through pragmatic political activity. He shares Clay’s assertion that many theological discourses in black liberation “represent historical reflections on the experiences of Black Power and the ‘voiceless’ Black underclass rather than contemporary reflexive theologies of liberation” that respond to changing societal conditions and contexts.”48 Like Clay, he is interested in reversing current trends in black theology, what she calls “the evasive strategies of retrospective reflection and nostalgic return, that divert attention away from the challenges of solidarity with the margins for entitled yet oppressed middle-class and elite Blacks.”49 West recognizes the central role of the human voice in the long struggle with the dark side of the American democratic experiment. This vital role of the human voice reflects the commitment to the value of democratic individuality and robust dialogue, and remains keenly alert to the impediments to achieving those values.

The impediments to the fusion of the prophetic Christian tradition with the radical democratic tradition are due in large measure to cultural decay which West aptly describes as “...the relative erosion of systems of nurturing and caring, which affects each of us, but which has an especially devastating impact on young people.”50 The growing “gangsterization” of everyday life, the degeneration of mutual respect and empathy in public discourse, isolation and loneliness, cold-heartedness and mean-spiritedness, distrust and loyalty, increasing suicides and homicides, as well as degradation of people because of skin pigmentation, ethnicity, or sexual orientation are among the signposts of decay in American public life.51 As a religious engagement of prophetic imagination, black theological discourse must spotlight this cultural decay, with an approach that sustains the rich black Christian heritage with an emancipatory politics that interrogates and transforms the public sphere.

West maintains that Marxist concepts that challenge the current construction of society can contribute to liberation theologies’ fundamental goals. Adroitly, he appropriates Antonio Gramsci’s notion of hegemony as a valuable instrument to analyze culture. Gramsci enlarges Marxist understanding, viewing culture as both tradition

49 Clay, “Liberation or Legitimation,” 312.  
West offers a hermeneutical method that builds on this Gramscian perspective, a method that can inform black liberation theology. West describes this hegemonic culture: “A hegemonic culture subtly and effectively encourages people to identify themselves with the habits, sensibilities, and world views supportive of the status quo and the class interests that dominate it. It is a culture successful in persuading people to ‘consent’ to their oppression and exploitation.” Here West proposes “the continuous creation of a counter-hegemonic culture” that contests the worldviews, sensibilities, and habits of hegemonic culture, fostering “an alternative set of habits, sensibilities, and world views” that cannot be actualized within the contemporary social order. The task is to combine theory and action, connecting those aspects of culture and religion that liberates to social change.

West laments that more black scholars and religious leaders do not combine the insights of black theological discourses and Marxist social theory. Patrick Bascio, C.S.Sp., a Roman Catholic systematic theologian, summarizes West: “The failure of black theologians to analyze the manner in which the existing productive and social structures relate to the exploitation of blacks is...the reason why the rhetoric of black power has not been translated into productive and meaningful gains for the black community.” West points to Reverend George Washington Woodbey as “the best historical example of a black religious thinker and leader who combined the insights of black theological reflection and Marxist social theory...” Woodbey was a Baptist minister in San Diego and a highly touted socialist leader of the early 20th century, who was Eugene Debs’ running mate in the 1908 Presidential election. For West, Woodbey is a paradigmatic figure, unbending in his commitment to promote structural social transformation and establish a counter-hegemonic culture in a capitalist political economy. Strong in faith, culture, and religion, Woodbey’s “life and writings best exemplify the point at which black theologians and Marxist thinkers are no longer strangers.” Drawing from his interdisciplinary orientation, West points to why creating a counter-hegemonic culture—combining theory and action—further grounds Thurman’s and King’s articulation of the relation of religion and theology as a vital source for remaking those places that mirror 7th Street in Washington, DC, and South State Street in Chicago.

**Concluding Remarks**

This paper has shown that it is possible for black theology of liberation to remain vital and vibrant as an intellectual discourse without forfeiting its prophetic stance. The powerful discourse of Eddie Glaude and Cornel West opens a path that surely challenges black liberation theologians and other religious thinkers to resist becoming creatures of market values, succumbing to a commodification of liberation. Political scientist Iris Marion Young echoes Glaude’s and West’s wider concern about some black theologians’ notion and process of doing liberation. Interrogatively, Young puts forward these ideas that should underscore black liberation theology: Are ideas and solutions related to social justice the same for marginalized people in the present epoch, as they are for the academic, the community activist, the city planner, or the pastor [and the theologian]? How can these groups with differing self-interests and competing paradigms of liberation work together for social change?

Sharing common ground with Glaude and West, Elonda Clay exposes the unyielding problems facing black liberation theology’s creative capacity to wrestle with these existential questions. She argues, “...U.S. Black Liberation Theology itself has its ladders on the wrong walls. Methodological, epistemological, praxiological, and theoretical shifts within U.S Black Liberation Theology are required to produce more effective liberation advo-

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53 West, *Prophecy Deliverance*, 120.
56 West, *Prophecy Deliverance*, 127.
This reality—the ladders on the wrong walls—points to a present juncture in which the politics and method(s) of doing black liberation theology must adopt a clear stance against naive assumptions of fairness, yet stand for equity based on justice which assumes structural and systemic change. Anthony Reddie puts it this way:

> It goes without saying, of course, that Black theology would want to question to what extent fairness and treating all people the same can ever be identified in the historic or contemporary practice of Christendom or in Euro-American societies in terms of their actions regarding darker-skinned people. But not withstanding the illusory promises of equality, it is, as a concept, a flawed one. Black theology, like all theologies of liberation, argues for equity and not equality.59

If black theology of liberation fails to address the pragmatic dimension necessary to remain vital and vibrant in the present, then it risks deteriorating into what West calls “Constantinian Christianity.” This notion becomes normative as theological discourse and praxis loses its “…fervor for the suspicion of worldly authorities and for doing justice in the service of the most vulnerable among us, which are central to the faith.”60 That pragmatic dimension of the theological discourse must extend to the complexities of class, gender, sexual orientation, race and empire. This requires bringing “competing paradigms of liberation” into harmony to create lasting social transformation for those who currently live on the 7th Streets and South State Streets in America.

While the work of James Cone and other first and second-generation black liberation theologians remains valuable, Reddie offers a proposal beyond the traditional deductive systematic approach. He posits:

> I have noticed the tendency to want to work in more deductive rather than inductive terms. This means that they often begin with broad analytical thinking and reflections and then move into smaller and more specific forms of work. Inevitably, narratives and personal experiences are relegated to the sidelines in their theological method.61

Thus, Reddie proposes an “inductive or inside out approach” that fosters a participatory model of liberation praxis. In short, the goal is to give marginalized people a voice in doing black liberation theology—“a radicalized and politicized form of theology”—that enables those involved to “make sense of this often absurd notion called life.”62 Reddie’s perspective affirms the search for the integration of liberation and communion that Thurman and King envisioned, as described by Phelps earlier.

We began this paper with reference to Howard Thurman and Martin Luther King, Jr., as precursors of black liberation theology. Concluding, we report on an ecumenical group that pledges to act on King’s Birmingham jail message. On 14-15 April 2013, members of Christian Churches Together convened in Birmingham, Alabama, to commemorate the 50th anniversary of King’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail.” In his seminal letter in response to eight white clergyman, King stressed that “it is an historical fact that privileged groups seldom give up their privileges voluntarily,” noting that “freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed.”63

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58 Clay, Liberation and Legitimation, 324.
59 Reddie, “People Matter Too,” 58.
60 West, Democracy Matters, 149-50.
61 Reddie, “People Matter Too,” 60.
62 West, Democracy Matters, 149-50.
63 Reddie, People Matter Too,” 62.