

## Article

# Terraforming Religious Consciousness: Race as a Signifier in New World Religious Cosmogony

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**Abstract:** What is the connection between race and religious diversity? This question has emerged as particularly important in recent times, following heightened discussions on racial justice, equity, and the organization of society with regard to racial oppression. The terms race and religious diversity imply distinct points of contact that have within them diverse perspectives and worldviews, that carry with them assumed foundational understandings of the world and unexamined understandings of how the universe functions. This article explores the connection between race and religious diversity by discussing the physical and intellectual landscape and by raising concerns about the historical and religious-symbolic background of the Atlantic World. This background assumes the fact that the Atlantic World is more than just a historical phenomenon. Instead, the formation and operation of the Atlantic World reveals the construction of a cosmogony that informs racial (social/relational) and religious discourse (imagination/intellectual). The Atlantic World cosmogony arose from the conquest of the Americas by European interests, resulting in a terraforming process that adapted the New World to European sensibilities. The story of the Atlantic World cosmogony and the terraforming of the Americas serve as two points of reflection that call for assessing the connection of race and religious diversity. Concomitantly, considering the foreground of the Atlantic World cosmogony and terraforming opens the possibility of resituating the way we critically approach the discourse on race and religious diversity, allowing for communities to candidly express efforts to move beyond the history of the effects generated by the conquest of the Americas.

**Keywords:** signification; theology; race; religious diversity; Atlantic World; iconoclasm; terraforming

## 1. Introduction

The introduction to Charles Long's *Significations* begins with an African American colloquialism: "Signifying is worse than lying (Long 1995)." Signifying, Long explains, is a "verbal misdirection [that] parallels the real argument but gains its power of meaning from the structure of the discourse itself without the signification being subjected to the rules of discourse<sup>1</sup>." Signifying is very common and not necessarily negative. However, the use of signification as addressed here involves not simply verbal

<sup>1</sup> Long, *Significations*, 1. For a further treatment on signifiers and signs as tangible and intangible, see Ricoeur (2007), Paul. "Structure and Hermeneutics." *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007. Specifically, Ricoeur addresses signification theory and the diachronic and synchronic elements at play in reckoning with a linguistic system. Of specific interest is Ricoeur's acknowledgment of a paradoxical element in language systems: "But there is a third principle, which no less involves our problem of interpretation and the time of interpretation. It has been pointed out in particular by phonologists, but it is already present in the Saussurean opposition between language and speech. The third principle is that linguistic laws designate an unconscious level and, in this sense, a nonreflective, nonhistorical level of the mind. This unconscious is not the Freudian unconscious of instinctual ... it is more a Kantian than a Freudian unconscious, a categorial, combinative unconscious. It is a finite order or the finitude of order, but such that it is unaware of itself. I call it a Kantian unconscious, but only as regards its organization, since we are here concerned with a categorial system without reference to a thinking subject. This is why structuralism was a philosophy will develop a kind of intellectualism which is fundamentally antireflective, anti-idealist, and antiphenomenological ... This

misdirection or a turn of phrase. Instead, signification involves the world-building capacity of symbols and language and their transmission through conquest and subjugation. The legacy of conquest in the Atlantic World, the subject of signification, is more than simply a history of colonialism. It is the introduction of the contradictory relationship to land and language, subject and object, faith and body. Long directly identifies the contradiction thusly:

While the reformist structure of the enlightenment had mounted a polemic against the divisive meaning of religion in Western culture and set forth alternative meanings for the understanding of the human, the same ideological structures through various intellectual strategies paved the ground for historical evolutionary thinking, racial theories, and forms of color symbolism that made the economic and military conquest of cultures and peoples justifiable and defensible. In this movement both religion and cultures and peoples throughout the world were created anew through academic disciplinary orientations—*they were signified*<sup>2</sup>.

Long's understanding of signification identifies the intellectual artifice developed to conduct the world-changing subjugation of lands and people on the American continents. The lasting effects solidified social imaginaries that situated people and places according to a discursively oriented understanding of legitimacy and authority. The discourse on authority functions within the boundaries of imported colonial symbols, rendering null the subjugated peoples' meaning-making activity and behavior. Concurrently, the legitimate only mirrors dominant discursive practices, marginalizing alternative senses of one's surroundings.

The discourse of legitimacy and authority in symbolic and proximal relationships recasts sacred claims to land and indigeneity within the categorical frames of modernity. Long's use of signification addresses modernity as a universe (a cosmogony) that generated authoritative claims to property seized from natives and worked by kidnapped Africans and their descendants and ontology (the hierarchy of greater and lesser beings associated with property ownership). The effect was an appropriation of religious symbols and cultural formation that served the purposes of self-justification and self-perpetuation of an economy and the sanctioned boundaries of culture that served the purpose of economic and human exploitation. Space, from the perspective of signification, brings into view the contradiction because it is simultaneously tangible and intangible. It is distinct from land or geography because of its discursive properties, productive capacity, and its foundations in set boundaries of legitimacy and authority. In other words, the Atlantic World and the dawning of modernity constitute a space formed by the cultural contact between natives, a praxis of discursively oriented notions of power, and a political economy based on production via human capital. At stake is not the fact that religious imagination functions in such a way, but rather the way it functions in the Atlantic World, particularly in the United States.

The above assessment of signification functions as the intellectual foreground for the rest of this discussion because it situates the connection between race and religious diversity and its expressions through to the present. The elevation of signification to the level of world-creating power serves two functions in this paper. The first function is to interrogate the connection between race and religious diversity as a starting point for further conversation in order to bring to light foundational characteristics of our historical context that problematize both notions. The second function is to address the deeper implications of connecting the two concepts as they play out in the black "community" in order to show the pivotal role marginalized communities play in imagining (or signifying) reality beyond the confines of the Atlantic World's historical paradigm.

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third principle concerns us ... for it establishes between observer and the system a relationship which is itself nonhistorical." This particular notion of the nonhistoricity of the observer and the relationship with a system will be taken up later on in the article, with José Acosta's theological reduction of space.

<sup>2</sup> Long, *Significations*, 4.

This article proceeds by addressing the transformation of theological imagination as discussed by Willie James Jennings and Joseph Washington, Jr. Their accounts show that the theological imagination in the Americas, and specifically in North America, underwent a radicalization that melded dehumanization and slave trade with classical notions of Christian theology. Jennings' analysis of the formulation of the Christian imagination in the Americas is a work of decolonial narration that maps the colonization process of the Americas and, by implication, the colonization of Christian thought and faith. Central to Jennings' analysis is the transformation of space, a terraforming process, which he defines as primarily connected to indigenous sacred claims to land and African displacement. Jennings' decolonial narration carries significant weight in drawing together fundamental questions about the viability of Christian thought in the Americas. Washington, on the other hand, addresses the cultural and intellectual consequences of terraforming as he questions the state of Black Christianity, especially its missionary roots and the politicization of Black Christianity during the civil rights era. Black Christian faith, according to Washington, has its origins in an adjusted theology meant to accommodate and pacify slaveowners—a fatal design flaw. His analysis is prescient because it raises concerns about the inherent mechanisms and theological foundations of black Christian expressions that unwittingly support or tolerate white supremacy through the aspiration for political and economic emancipation. The particular design flaw in black religious life is a silent problem that black theologians since the 1970s continue to face.

Jennings and Washington insist that the signification process of Christianity in the Americas was a colonial move toward the exploitation of raw materials and the subjugation of “lesser beings,” and a doctrinal process that would require deliberation on how the contact with Amerindian and African cosmologies required a reconsideration of the fundamental elements of revelation, eschatology, nature, humanity, and creation<sup>3</sup>. Washington and Jennings further explain that the historical praxis of Christianity in the Americas cannot be easily disentangled from the development of slave religion or the political and economic calculus that continues to justify racial supremacy. Jennings brings to bear the question of space beyond the colonial imposition of European forms of polity and governance in a way that leads to Washington's critical understanding of fundamental design flaws of the discursive spaces that introduced Christianity to slaves. Finally, the article shifts to addressing the invariable consequence of Washington and Jennings' analyses by taking up Long's warnings about New World signification as a critical foreground for connecting race and religious diversity in America. This critical foreground, rather than being a welcome space of reflection and dialogue, is the site of an acute crisis that exposes fragmentation as the core of New World religious consciousness and, thus, a religious and hermeneutical crisis. As a point of reflection for weathering the crisis, I analyze Washington's theological hermeneutics and its potential as a critical theological response to the connection between race and religious diversity and the hermeneutical crisis exacerbated by, to use Long's terms, cultural contact and the emergence of religions in the Atlantic World.

Before proceeding, a further note bears mentioning regarding cosmogony. Cosmogony, rather than cosmology, is used here to express the fact that the Atlantic World is the result of a designed physical landscape and intellectual paradigm. As such, the physics and “metaphysics” that contribute to creating what we now understand to be the Atlantic World demonstrate a recasting of the universe and the way it operates within the confines of modernity and Western hegemony. My use of the term cosmogonic thus speaks of a rationale for the universe rather than the reality of the universe as it is. In this way, turning to the cosmogonic amplifies the potency of New World signification as well as its illusory properties.

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<sup>3</sup> In this regard, the peoples of the New World refer to the natives and Africans brought to the shores. Their relationship to the land and subjugation to the economics of resource extraction bind them to the New World. Further, the settler and conqueror classes from the earlier iterations of the Americas likewise bear the same signification due to their espousal of the conquest project. As will be discussed, the notion of “white” people cannot exist without a “black” people, to signify the superiority relationship inherent in the design of the New World project.

## 2. Colonization and the Theological Imagination

This first section examines the historical process of New World signification and the transformation of landscape. New World signification is an epistemological process that disfigures perceptions of facts and what is considered normal. New World signification developed a new normal for the entirety of the Western hemisphere in a way that defined the character and use value of resources, lands, human beings, and the boundaries of human intellect. “Cultural contact and exchanges,” as Long explains, altered the fundamental understanding of reality for natives and settlers<sup>4</sup>. Such alteration brought about debates regarding the humanity of natives and Africans as well as their use value in supporting mercantilist interests. New World signification established the consumption and commodity-based economy we now have, doing so by framing the discourse around how humans are the subject of consumption and commodification.

Signifiers and relationships at every level are implicated in the brutality of conquest that undergirded the formation of the Atlantic experience. The idea of salvation in the Americas, for example, communicates the Christian church’s message of faith in the revealed truth of God’s love, yet transmitted through the brutal conversion and extermination of the heathen Indian and the radical alteration of pristine lands. The transmission of the faith through conquest established the terms of discourse regarding what it means to be human and what constitutes the civilized over the primitive<sup>5</sup>. The cultural contact among Europeans, natives, and enslaved Africans brought about what Long terms “categorical and intellectual structures” that determined New World relationships, hierarchies, and modes of being<sup>6</sup>. The religious and symbolic notions of God, Christ and Salvation, as a result, conditioned the transformations of the landscape and the foundations of power in the Americas.

### 2.1. Colonization and Colonial Landscaping

Jennings directly addresses the transformation of the physical landscape and the rational process that justifies the brutality of colonialism in the Atlantic World. Jennings concludes that the Christian imagining of race in the Atlantic world distances faith expression from the physicality of life, foreclosing opposing or resistant means of drawing meaning from the physical universe<sup>7</sup>. The colonial rejection of natives’ sacred claims to the land and the omission of the doctrine of freedom imposed upon slaves recast Christian symbols and faith within mercantilist power relations reliant on the exploitation of labor. Additionally, the colonial project abolished the cosmos and the identification of landscape to a broader relationship to the universe by introducing a displaced “immigrant ecclesiology.” This “immigrant ecclesiology,” a theology of displacement, is not the origin of colonial power or the agent of change<sup>8</sup>. Instead, theological language and discursive discipline filled the need for a hermeneutical and moral lens in the New World. As the only subsisting disciplinary and philosophical tool available, even the character of theological disciplinary tools conformed to the same expediency used to sanction constructing a commodity-oriented social and political ecosystem, internally displacing natives and miseducating the slave.

Theological discourse provided a key to the rationalization and categorization of space in the era of early colonization in the Americas. One of Jennings’ studies in the transformation of space in *The*

<sup>4</sup> Long, *Signification*, 156.

<sup>5</sup> Long, *Significations*, 86.

<sup>6</sup> Long, *Significations*, 5.

<sup>7</sup> Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 251: It must be further noted that Jennings’ solution is recasting space in terms of the Biblical and geographic space of Israel. While I do not agree with this reduction of the imagination of space, his argument still make the case that the colonial project was a venture of materialist reductionism. His solution, as I read it, undermines the immense project he pursues throughout the entirety of *The Christian Imagination* because it depends on signifying on the basis of a tangible geography, thereby stripping the established indigenous and situated symbolic and religious experiences of those subjugated in the Atlantic World.

<sup>8</sup> Phillip J. Linden (1993) “Downside of an Immigrant Ecclesiology: A Review Stephen Ochs’ *Desegregating the Altar: The Josephites and the Struggle for Black Priests, 1871–1960*.” *U.S. Catholic Historian* 11 No. 1 (1993), 139.

*Christian Imagination* notes that the Spaniard José de Acosta's 16th century theological mission in Peru, as well as other early colonial theologians in the Americas, faced the daunting task of theologizing in a new world without the protective hedge of the church or regular contact with university debates<sup>9</sup>. In fact, "From the moment Acosta (and those like him) placed his feet on the ground in Lima, the Christian traditions and its theologians conjured a form of practical rationality that locked theology in discourses of displacement from which it has never escaped (Jennings 2010)." Jennings rightly points out that the world of the Americas was akin to stepping into an alien planet. The task for a displaced theology and the world to which it must become intelligible required the reliance on the traditions of the Old World as well as practical shifts to address the new one. The transmission of the Christian faith to a new and alien world forced a practical dilemma for theological thought: how to articulate the Truth without altering it<sup>10</sup>.

The radical and rapid transformation during the colonial period shows that religious language and consciousness developed alongside changes in the physical landscape and increased the cultural contact with natives. Jennings explains that the New World was a world ending and beginning at the same time.

In Peru, Acosta entered a Spanish world in the making and a native world in collapse, two worlds so intertwined that both were transformed in the colonialist moment. The transformation is visible in the reformation of Indian life that took place through the reconfiguration of habitat. The "encomienda" and the "reducción" began the Spanish disruption of Andean space and the interruption of Andean identities. In this regard, the reconfiguration of living space is the first reflex of modernity in the New World, that is, the denial of the authority of a sacred land. The Spanish rejected a spatially constituted authority—in this case, a divinely established native authority over space itself<sup>11</sup>.

As Jennings indicates, the cultivation of living space requires an understanding of the cosmos—that is, a cosmology—that legitimates and solidifies the imagination and orientation to one's world. The rejection of an established native cosmology and the immediate imposition of an incompatible European cosmology upended both imaginations. As a result, space, cosmos, and "home" as operative and viable concepts that directly identified with our place in the cosmos or provided a marker of identity became ambiguous. In a stronger sense, the collision brought about by the cultural contact between natives and colonialists elicited a discursive contradiction for the signification of space and identity.

With the transformation of the landscape came the transformation of imagination and discourse. The collision of native and colonialist modes of thinking and communication generated a "creolizing" effect which neither the old nor the new world anticipated or could fully capture with language. The term creolization "expresses the complex and various meaning of the nature of contact, subordination, and settlement of peoples and cultures within the Atlantic World. This term . . . connotes also the result of biological as well as cultural contacts and exchanges (Noel 2009)." The creole, a unique phenomenon of the exchange and contact, contained in its people and culture the collision of the colonial period and the paradoxical relationship to power and the language of power. Jennings explains that the paradox reshaped the physical world according to the needs of the distant "old world" through extracting resources and establishing new referents of value for identifying the physical landscape:

The conquerors as pastoralists established a new system of relating to the land and a new point of evaluation for indigenous agriculturalist practice: themselves. This meant that the skills and abilities of native peoples to work the land were rendered null and void even

<sup>9</sup> It is also important to note that the major colonial centers in the 16th century were Mexico City and Lima. For further discussion of the historical colonial process and the establishment of the Christian Church in Latin America, see Dussel (1976), Enrique. *History and the Theology of Liberation*. Maryknoll: Orbis. 1976).

<sup>10</sup> Jennings, *Christian Imagination*, 71: "The metaphor for "feet touching the ground" is an important one here. Acosta stepped into a world, the Indias Occidentales, that was being radically altered and that in turn would alter the way he perceived the world. More specifically, it would not alter the creedal substance of his doctrine of creation but the way in which its logic would be performed (emphasis added)."

<sup>11</sup> Jennings, *Christian Imagination*, 75.

as the Andean peoples tried to continue their own pastoral practices. It also meant that they were forced to place their ‘products’ into new economic networks alongside new alien crops and produce. The reputation created by this transformation meant that native peoples’ agricultural practices were perceived as backward at best or of poor stewardship of the natural resources at worst<sup>12</sup>.

In what could be seen as “terraforming” the New World, Jennings points to the remaking of one world into another. The redesign of the physical landscape marginalized, if not wholly eradicated, previous relationships and worldviews connected to the land.

Jennings’ discussion of José Acosta’s theological work in Peru provides a view of the radical adjustments necessary to address an alien world and the discursive obstacles that arise when faced with an alien population. The “terraforming” project produced new epistemological categories that maintained an abstract seat of power through violence and state control, as well as new identities that related to foreign symbols that represented colonial power<sup>13</sup>. The dramatic transformation of land prompted a discourse on conquest and the relationship between the present conditions and the intention to change them. Yet, instead of reconstituting the Christian religious consciousness in terms of an alien world, Acosta bifurcates the understanding of the physical landscape and the theological logic used to interpret the world. The result of this bifurcation, as Jennings notes, transforms faith from “the content of faith, the *fides quae creditur*, but to the faith of the intellectual at work, the *fides qua creditur*”<sup>14</sup>. Theologians like Acosta across the New World utilized their training and role as the expositors of faith as the central magisterial authority<sup>15</sup>. The account of faith and the theological discourse on Christian symbols and destiny narrowed to accommodate the limitations of the dominant consciousness of European and colonial rationality (Canon 2008). Ultimately, religious imagination and colonial economic rationale became symbiotic expressions of a reductionist cosmology of hegemonic dominance. Such a cosmology and theology privileged an internal logical coherency of power relationships at the expense of the physical landscape and its inhabitants<sup>16</sup>.

The “terraforming” process of the New World prompted a bifurcation of theological logic, separating the physical relationship to land from a relationship to the cosmos. A self-contained theological reasoning functioned alongside economic and military conquest to form the Atlantic world structures that would administrate the exploitation of resources and labor. Such reasoning could not directly access the experience of the colonized or the enslaved. Instead, natives and enslaved peoples were subjugated to the New World through evangelization, racial hierarchy, and miscegenation.

<sup>12</sup> Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 77.

<sup>13</sup> Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 78.

<sup>14</sup> Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 83.

<sup>15</sup> Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 85: “As an Aristotelian-Thomist, Acosta understood himself to be ... evaluating truth-claims about the world, separating through his experience in the New World the actual case of material specifics from Old World Speculations. Acosta did not reach, in his own estimations, what [Alisdair] MacIntyre refers to as an epistemological crisis—that conceptual space in which Acosta might acknowledge new inadequacies, incoherencies, and new problems for which ‘there seems to be insufficient or no resources within the established fabric of belief.’ In fact, however, Acosta reached if not an epistemological crisis, the certainly an epistemic rupture, one he had to slice from the body of tradition, its textual authority and geographic discernments, as one slices away dead material from a plant so that it might continue to live. Once his operation was underway, Acosta had to replace ancient philosophical and theological geographic authority with another geographic authority, himself.”

<sup>16</sup> Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 88: “[Acosta’s] commitment to an Aristotelian anthropology was unwavering even in light of his withering rebuttal of Aristotle’s meteorological speculations. The moment of innovation here is Acosta’s bracketing of theology by means of an intellectual sleight of hand. Theological critique masks theological limitation. This adjustment will be rehearsed countless times as Acosta’s modernity gives way to the Enlightenment’s modernity ... Acosta exhibits a stretching of theological speech in an attempt to make intelligible its vision of the world to the faithful of the Old World. This is a matter of coverage, of coherence, and of holding the entire world within theocentric sight. Acosta’s efforts imitated the economic circuit that was quickly enfolding the expanding known world in cycles of production and consumption. The economic circuit’s coherence was beautiful and constantly self-correcting. The economic circuit shoed how merchants were able to adapt to newness, overcoming geographic barriers, transforming the inhospitable into livable habitation, and exacting goods and services from all it touched. The economic circuit was taking the New World and channeling it thought the Old World and taking the Old World and performing it through the New World.”



## 2.2. Theological Compromise: Slavery in North America

Joseph Washington Jr. addresses a further transformation of the American landscape and its inhabitants by explaining the economic necessity of compliance with the dominant administrative power. The incorporation of the vanquished, though, forced a further shift in theological reasoning, that catalyzed an alternate theological rationalization that functioned (and continues to function) alongside dominant theological hegemony. As noted above, the theological rationalization to fabricate a separate sub-Christian belief system required the omission of particular Christian claims to freedom and emancipation in Christ. Washington points out a significant design flaw in Christian belief that subjects American Christian denominations and practitioners to the political and economic processes of a global economy. Washington's identification of the design flaw has damning implications for later black theologies in their efforts to politicize skin color and the peculiarities of slave religion as viable and legitimate discourses that transcend global economic and political norms (Washington 1967). What happens is the opposite, as Washington warns: black theologies and churches risk further entrenchment in miseducation if they continue to overlook the design flaw brought about by New World signification (Washington 1964).

In his "Are American Negro Churches Christian?", Washington interrogates the missionary efforts that resulted in the formation of the contemporary Black Church in the United States. His central argument focuses on the fact that Black Christianity is characteristically different from mainline—white—Christian churches. It is important to note that the publication of this article comes at a time when civil rights legislation has not yet been established. Religious, cultural, and economic tensions in the United States prompted new questions about how black Americans would participate as enfranchised citizens and how black religious life would carry on beyond its politicization and introduction to the mainstream social and political landscape<sup>17</sup>. Washington notes a striking comparison between the evangelization of slaves and economic expansion. Ecclesial and economic realities do not simply mirror each other. Instead, they operate as agents of one culture. Washington observes that the broad understanding of mainstream American religious culture has no separation from the economic or political aspects of American life (Washington 1963).

The main point of contention that Washington ponders is the real meaning of the term "mainstream." For Washington, the term "mainstream" represents a relationship to the dominant economic institutions as well as an acceptance of a normative culture of consumption and economic mobility<sup>18</sup>. Connected to the notion of the "mainstream" is his observation that "there is a noticeable absence of tension between Protestantism and the culture in which it religious life is nurtured because the persons involved in both are one and the same<sup>19</sup>." Further, "Few split loyalties or personalities are engendered by either Negro or white Protestantism at the point of the exclusive nature of these various denominations<sup>20</sup>." Simply put, the mainstream of American culture is the conduit for Protestantism as it has coalesced in the United States. The lack of cultural tension is evidence of the cultural and religious kinship shared between blacks and whites. However, the source of tension lay in the mainstream of economic mobility and stability which black religious activism had at the time brought to public attention. Washington further observes:

The current insistence which demands the entrance of Negro Americans into the political, economic and social mainstream has not left unaffected religious communions. It is evident,

<sup>17</sup> Vine Deloria makes this point from the American Indian perspective: "The civil rights movement was the last full scale effort to realize the avowed goals of the Christian religion. For more than a century, the American political system had proclaimed the brotherhood of man as seen politically in the concept of opportunity and justice equally administered under the law. Equality under the law, however was a secularized and generalized interpretation of the Christian brotherhood of man—the universal appeal standing equally before the law and secular institutions." (Deloria 2003).

<sup>18</sup> Washington, "Are American Negro Churches Christian?" 92.

<sup>19</sup> Washington, "Are American Negro Churches Christian?" 92.

<sup>20</sup> Washington, "Are American Negro Churches Christian?" 92.

for the first time in American history, that full participation of the negro is the pervasive mood of the influential forces which determine the future of the nation however deliberate and void of enthusiasm. This new fact of seeing the Negro as a responsible participant in all areas of our structural life may be realistically recognized as a future rather than a present fulfillment. It is clear that a universally geared technological economy operated by a comparable bureaucratic administration of organization men cannot permit racial conflicts which tend to disrupt a well-oiled organized society or rob it of necessary colored cogs. It is also clear that one does not need to be a functionalist to perceive the truth that the church mirrors the culture. The natural drive towards merging denominations inherent in the growing movement called ecumenicity can hardly be passed off as a mere occurrence accidentally emerging in the same climate of a worldwide technological revolution. To the degree that the economy seeks to integrate persons regardless of color, we can expect a similar response within the church. The fiction of the church as a sphere of private life not unlike the local country club will easily submit to reality when the very economy which supports it institutes the inclusion of hitherto unacceptable demands and equal access to the leisure time activities as an insurance of operational efficiency<sup>21</sup>.

Washington points out that the religious drive toward integration works in concert with the economic transformations present in mid-20th century society. The religious zeal to transform society does not preclude a religious logic to the expansion of the political and economic stability of the American economy.

It is clear that Washington's analysis points to a deeper problematic element in American and Atlantic culture ([Washington 1987](#)). The lack of tension between religion and culture indicates a historical praxis initiated in previous centuries that subverted or completely removed critical elements of Christian faith expression and reflection. The removal of critical elements of Christian faith expression buoyed New World efforts to secure white (European settler/slaveowner class) supremacy as the touchstone for religion and culture. Further evidence of lack of tension comes in Washington's visceral description of the economic justification for slaves to espouse Christian symbols. In particular, the features of the economic justification become particularly important when addressing the doctrine of salvation. In point of fact, Washington identifies salvation as the contested territory of faith that brought about the greatest obstacle for harmonizing a slave owning society. Washington's turn to the historic roots of American Protestantism centers on the missionary efforts to convert and indoctrinate slaves. The goal of such evangelization was not for slaves and owners to share in a common destiny with the Divine, but to secure spiritual loyalty to the slave institution<sup>22</sup>.

Washington's historical investigation reveals that the omission of significant doctrinal details, the Christian doctrine of freedom, was a rationalization for maintaining a Christian, slaveholding society. Washington explains:

Of course the institutional approach to the virgin territory of the slaves was prompted by the missionary zeal to spread the gospel. At the same time it was necessary to counteract the general opinion that slaves should not be introduced to the gospel since the obvious result would mean openness to the Christian doctrine of freedom. The earliest opposition to proclaiming the Christian faith among Negroes was profoundly theological in nature:

<sup>21</sup> Washington, "Are American Negro Churches Christian?" 93.

<sup>22</sup> Washington, "Are American Negro Churches Christian?" 94. See also [Canon \(2008\)](#). Canon names the missionary zeal to convert slaves and the imperialist drivers to secure dominance as a "missiologic of immanent parousia": "Strictly speaking, European Expansionists who perpetrated human trafficking synchronized the Christian understanding of Parousia—the quickly approaching, expected hope of Christ as judge to terminate this world order, with the early church's confession of a universal christophany, commonly referred to as the 'great commission' based on Matthew 28: 18–20. Thus, for three centuries the missiologic of immanent parousia served as the standard European false justification with vicious consequences for more than 12 million Africans who embarked on hellish voyages to the Americas in wretched, suffocating, demeaning conditions, shackled and chained as marketable commodities."



the Christian faith is inseparable from the doctrine of freedom ... Theology was quickly by-passed in favor of telling the Negro a simple story. (Here, in this decision, not only were the roots of the Christian faith expendable and spurious of value, but the real meaning of the Christian faith was distorted.)<sup>23</sup>.

The compromise in theology to suit slaveholders' needs and to satisfy the missionary zeal of the Second Great Awakening was not an innovation, but a reinforcement of the already established religious, political, and social paradigms that governed the colonies<sup>24</sup>. In the strongest terms possible, Washington suggests that Black Christianity and, to a much greater extent, mainline Protestantism are not Christian. Instead, mainline American Christianity is an economic religion that utilizes Christian terminology and symbols.

Washington's conclusions are not meant to be a condemnation, but a warning to Black churches. The collapse of religious consciousness into dominant economics and politics minimizes the expression of the historical experience of the vanquished. He further warns:

If this perspective has validity, these congregations are at a point in history where it is imperative that they decide in which direction they are heading. Wither movement into the mainstream of the Christian church or the general stream of religion is the authentic choice before Negro congregations who wish to be responsible.<sup>25</sup>

His warning highlights the validity of Christian faith in the Americas and whether it is possible to contend with a broadly compromised religious imagination. Although Washington focuses on the critical edge of his analysis on black Christian churches, his critique applies equally to mainline Christianity in general. For Washington, contending with a compromised Christian imagination means identifying the distortions brought about in an intentionally miseducating catechesis.

Washington's warning is not without warrant. Black theologies that grew from the 1970s and gained prominence in the 80s and 90s bear witness to this warning. Perhaps inadvertently, iconic black theologies play into the fatal flaw described by Washington in their points of departure for theological reflection. Examples abound, but I will only look at a few that pass from the nascent stages of black theology to contemporary thought.

James Cone and his intellectual protégé, Dwight Hopkins, for example, contend that black theology begins in slavery<sup>26</sup>. While Washington would concede this point, Cone's and Hopkins's appropriation of classical Christian theological images and discursive patterns on the basis of the politicization of the Black Church focus on blackness as the core of black Christian faith. Blackness itself is the very object of signification, the "negative and binary 'other' to whiteness (Carter 2003)." Locating the roots of black theology in slavery situates signification rather than countering it. Theological reflection thus reinforces signification, further defining the "empirical other" in Western civilization.<sup>27</sup> Washington's warning is gaining urgency, especially in the liberation axiom in black theology, which is based on the economic liberalization of black folks and the eschatologized hope in racial equality.<sup>28</sup> What can

<sup>23</sup> Washington, "Are American Negro Churches Christian?" 94–95.

<sup>24</sup> Washington, "Are American Negro Churches Christian?" 97 See also Williams (1993).

<sup>25</sup> Washington, "Are American Negro Churches Christian?" 99.

<sup>26</sup> Hopkins (1994); Cone (1985). For a broader view of black theology, see Deotis (1994); Shawn (2009).

<sup>27</sup> Long, "Primitive/Civilized: The Locus of a Problem," *Significations*, 103: "The problematical character of Western modernity created the language of primitives and primitivism through their own explorations, exploitations, and disciplinary orientations. Recourse to the 'primitives' cannot bring about new insight. The world and language that emerged from the imaginary geographies of the Renaissance through conquest of the Americas and the later conquest of the South Pacific can no longer be returned to as a lively hermeneutical option."

<sup>28</sup> Carter, "Contemporary Black Theology," 118: "What is at stake ... is whether what Hopkins takes to be black theology's own project of constructing a 'more true [Protestantism]'—one that beckons toward 'a new humanity' and an eschatological 'Common Wealth' that is grounded in a 'unified theology and social patterns of democracy, justice, and liberation for all Americans'—whether this project is in fact radical where it most needs to be, or whether, when all is said and done, it is simply a counter gesture within the modern (white) theology. Within modernity's accounts of freedom, its political

be seen as a sidestepping of Washington's warning is the way that Hopkins and others deal with the status of being black *and* Christian. The two ideas juxtaposed expose the signification dilemma, enabling the theologizing "otherness" created by modernity to reaffirm the omission of the Christian doctrine of freedom<sup>29</sup>.

The doubled-down efforts to convert slaves resulted in the formation of a parallel religious culture and socialization that we now understand to be racialism and, in particular, the solidification of blackness in the United States. Contemporary efforts to get beyond black theology's "middle passage" epistemology challenges univocal notions of blackness informed by the logic of transatlantic slave trade. Michelle Wright notes, in *Physics of Blackness: Beyond the Middle Passage Epistemology*, that blackness does not operate in a "Newtonian" binary—the axiom of black and white or the static transatlantic logic. Instead, she develops a "quantum" interpretation such that "Black discourses can endlessly expand the dimensions of our analyses and intersect with a wider range of identities by deploying an Epiphenomenal concept of spacetime that takes into account all the multifarious dimensions of Blackness that exist in any one moment, or 'now'—not 'just' class, gender, and sexuality, but all collective commination imagined in that moment (Wright 2015)." However, Wright's attempt at expressing a quantum interpretation does not resolve New World signification. Instead, in revealing the extent of New World signification and the complex layers of identities enmeshed in the colonial intellectual project, the turn to the quantum evades the symbiosis between white supremacy and its foundational role in influencing black religious expression and striving. At worst the turn to the quantum reinforces New World signification through Wright's attempt at establishing new rules within an already established cosmogony.

A final example of not heeding Washington's warning is J. Kameron Carter's theological account of race, that attempts to move away from the middle passage epistemology in order to provide a significant philosophical contribution to the understanding of race. The difference in his account has much more to do with a departure from defining blackness as a source for theology, toward an understanding of race as a secular and secularizing discourse. Carter moves toward a critique of modernity on the basis of race, noting that the same evils rendered through the *Judenfrage* are inextricably linked to the *Rassenfrage*<sup>30</sup>. As with Wright's transference of epistemology to the quantum, Carter reflects on otherness that "point[s] toward a resolution of [modern racial reasoning] by situating them within a different horizon of religious and theological meaning and ultimately within a different framework for the meaning of existence as such<sup>31</sup>."

Carter's move to merging the "race question" with the "Jewish question" makes it such that communities or theologies cannot move beyond New World signification. Such merging risks positing a racialized theological romanticism. The race question as a subject of examination is an exercise in signification in the sense that it operates under the same premises of Kantian categorical knowledge. As a subject of Kantian categories, race proves to be only viable insofar as it is a descriptive formulation of the middle passage epistemology (which Carter seeks to distance himself from) without taking into consideration the cultural and literary assumptions that generate from the question itself. To say that

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economy of liberal 'right', and its 'kingdom of ends', such a gesture may be ill-equipped to account for the *pragmata* or 'the-things-themselves' of the black experience of God in Christ."

<sup>29</sup> Washington's reference to a doctrine of freedom is not literal in the sense that such a doctrine functions in the matrix of Christian theology. Rather, it is the implied characteristic of conversion associated with the salvation of the entire person. In one sense, the doctrine of freedom requires the acknowledgment of personhood (theological anthropology) and the acknowledgment of the eschatological sameness of all resurrected bodies, black or white notwithstanding.

<sup>30</sup> J. Cameron Carter (2008). *Race: A Theological Account*, 40: "I say theological and political (or theopolitical) to signal that my claim calls for analyses of the problem of race (and relatedly, of the Jewish question) that explore the senses in which such a discourse is bound to the nature and practice of modern politics and thereby indelibly tied to what is religious about modernity and the way it parodies theology at the same time it cloaks this fact. The discourse of race is critical to the cloaking process and thus functions as a vital cog within modernity's own religious and quasi-theological machinery, a machinery intent . . . on producing bodies and people, but bodies and people of a particular sort. It produces bodies and people that can populate an enlightened, global, and cosmopolitan social order, the domain of civil society."

<sup>31</sup> J. Cameron Carter (2008). *Race: A Theological Account*, 198.

race is a phenomenon would be reductive of phenomenology and a reduction of race. At the same time, race itself is reductive, for it operates from its inception as a discursive boundary to what Long calls a binary born out of conquest<sup>32</sup>. While Carter admits as much, what he neglects in formulating the theological account is the phenomenon of the *people* to whom race discourse is directed—that is, non-white, primitive, so-called underdeveloped people. Race, in the end, is constitutive even in its reductionism. Not only does Carter remain within discursive, and thus categorical formulations, but he also relegates theology to a constitutive discourse that situates race within secularity while simultaneously arguing for a theological substantiation of race. Thus, race cannot move beyond its own terms due to the fact that Carter’s account denies the spatial and physical contours of the reality that prompts the meaning-making activity, preventing subjects from fully expressing themselves on their own terms.

### 3. Terraforming a Hermeneutical Crisis: Moving Beyond Artificial Universes

The notions of space expressed in the previous sections point to more than just a physical landscape or a notion of dominion. The “terraforming” of landscapes as expressed by Jennings reveals that the originating notion of *terra* inhabits the Americas through the recasting of ideas inherited from Christendom. As such, the colonizing of the Americas is the creation of a world and worldview that thus generate a novel consciousness that accommodates the underlying purpose of making Europeanized thoughts and symbols viable in the new world. The *terra nova* (new world) is alien, and the inhabitants and laborers transported to exploit resources are likewise considered alien. With this logic, it makes sense that slave religion would be configured as alien to the originating sources of Christianity. Furthermore, the terraforming of landscape catalyzed the concealment of the true alien (the conqueror and the settler). To a greater extent, terraforming concealed the realization of the true alien and, through its own efforts, the alienation from its own symbols and religious consciousness—a point Washington exposes in the divisions of “white” and “black” Protestantism. However, the imposition and resignification of the Christian religion and religious symbols upon so-called aliens catalyzed what Washington and Long would both regard as the multifaceted collapse of the New World cosmology. This real and present crisis reverberates in culture, politics, economics, and, invariably, the foundation of societies in the Western Hemisphere, manifesting itself on a continuous basis, from the struggle to survive in the streets of American cities to the ongoing interventionist military conflicts occurring worldwide.

Both Washington’s and Long’s perception of a crisis must be taken into context, in light of the above sections. The fatal flaws employed to coax cohesion in the Atlantic World are evidence of this collapse, but the concealment of its inevitability is the normalization of the dominance of the cosmology—the illusion of no escape or moving beyond the norms, politics, economics, or the idea of Western “civilization.” With regard to Washington, his essay “The Black Religious Crisis,” published in 1974, is a time capsule in its sentiments and sensibilities. Although written forty-five years ago, the essay expresses a warning that can yield new insights for discourses on race and theology. The present essay can only deal with a few of these insights. Long, in this same vein, presents a graver dimension of this crisis that suggests a revaluation of the foundational rationale of religious consciousness in the Atlantic World<sup>33</sup>. His invitation to truly do the “heavy lifting” compliments Washington’s time capsule in the

<sup>32</sup> Long, *Significations*, 95.

<sup>33</sup> Long, *Significations*, 194: “We must remember that the historicity of these two traditions [Hebrew and Euro-Christian] was related to the possession of a land, but this has not been the case for blacks in America. In one sense It is possible to say that their history in America has always presented to them a situation of crisis. The intervention of the deity into their community has not been synonymous with the confirmation of the reality of being within the structures of America.” While Long’s statement ultimately remains positive about the innovations of black religion, his observation of the Judeo-Christian stronghold upon black religion remains entwined within the structure of religious consciousness that forces a constant reassessing within an imposed universe. There is never a moment where one cannot “think twice” or take for granted ontological or metaphysical security.

sense that the twenty-first century occasions the reconfiguration and thinking about the entwinement of our relationships in society and among faith-identified people.

Washington's understanding of a black religious crisis is an acute expression of the cosmogonic limits that prompt the entwinement of race and religious life in the Americas. Washington addresses the alienation of religious life and its vibrancy in black middle-class churches in a post-civil-rights context. His focus on the middle class is intentional, though not exhaustive, in that the black middle class is seen as a "canary in the coalmine" for the state of religious life in the United States (Washington 1974). What Washington poses as a "disquieting inertia" among black middle-class churches shows that the responses of post-1970 black theologies exacerbated the deepening gulf between the thought of the cultural distinctiveness of black religion and the fact that black religious experience was by design a tool of survival<sup>34</sup>. Black middle-class churches reveal this gulf in that they do not exist either in survival mode or as a dynamic and self-reflecting institution for black Americans to transcend the boundaries of the impositions of a colonial cosmological vision.

The black middle-class church, as Washington notes, is afflicted with a lack of critical capacity, not simply because it has denied such capacity, but because it was never equipped with it. The adjacent church, the church of the black poor, hold on to forms of survival that are provisional in nature and thus unsavory to middle-class mobility and consciousness<sup>35</sup>. What Washington points out that is of significance here is the static confines of religious imagination that pervade black religious life. In this regard, the paradox that Washington and Long point out shows its particular impact. The terraforming and alienness of the Christianity imposed upon blacks metamorphosed into an institution that became *sui generis*, though inadequate because it is subject to the rules of a cosmology born in conquest. In other words, black religious reality is a derivative of conquest.

Moving beyond the imposed cosmological vision, and thus transcending a derivative state, comes with a shift in the understanding and vision of the purposes and aims of black church life and black theology: learning to love and loving learning. To this end, Washington describes the work of theology as "the discipline of leaning to love"<sup>36</sup>. Nonetheless, a hermeneutical quandary arises in what Washington and Long see as a critical edge in transcending the imposed cosmology of conquest: the lack of inner cohesion and consensus within the so-called "Black community (Washington 1969)."

The idea of the black community and its cohesion functions as an illusion of wholeness that, while imposed in slavery, gradually gained traction as a constitutive aspect of being black in the United States. As a constitutive imaginary, the black community, just as the black church, presupposes an intra-communion among all black people. While there are identifiable sociological indicators for black Americans, these do not factor into the scope of this work. Theologically and religiously speaking, the cohesion of the black community arises, as Washington observes, in the post-reconstruction era through the World War II era. Such cohesion, as Washington laments, seems all but fragmented in a post-civil-rights era. Such cohesion, however, does not speak to the character of religious life or the viability of religious symbols, but instead to a social, political, and economic aspiration signified in religious language. Moreover, this signification speaks of the artificially construed world within race and the genesis of subcultures that occur under the hegemony of conquest.

The work of theology, learning to love, in a 21st century context, is an appeal to employ a new imagination of a new cosmos. This is not the same as the fragmented imaginings of the permutations of identities that simultaneously criticize and embrace conquest—a side effect of conquest and an attempt at discovering cohesion in a fragmented *Weltanschauung*, among alien religious symbols. Such new imaginings and learning to love require an iconoclastic engagement with the signifiers of Atlantic World life that, as Long intimates, recognize the fragmentation and possible disintegration of the

<sup>34</sup> Washington, "The Black Religious Crisis," 475.

<sup>35</sup> Washington, "The Black Religious Crisis," 475.

<sup>36</sup> Washington, "The Black Religious Crisis," 475.

Atlantic World cosmology. While this sounds apocalyptic (I contend it is), it is not eschatological or a prognostication of doom—a deception imbedded in the master-slave paradigm.

Learning to love involves an iconoclastic embrace of finitude and a letting go of tainted symbols (religious, social, and cultural) that signify our current existence<sup>37</sup>. In this regard, intrareligious and interreligious discourse take on significantly different proportions, beyond distinctiveness and similitude. Instead, it is the embrace of finitude—death—that reveals the abiding attributes and characteristics wherein there can arise the “heavy lifting” necessary for weathering the crisis. The embrace of finitude has the dual purpose of acknowledging our status as creations and our limits as creators. Iconoclasm, specifically from the perspective of those racialized and primitivized, forces a reckoning with our limits as creators, specifically the struggle with the creation and cosmos we can generate.

The work of theology (learning to love) is an appeal to understanding the reckoning with life in all its dimensions, especially the impulses that arise in the condition of oppression. Learning to love, on the other hand, engages the struggle of living in occupation and coexisting despite contrived markers of otherness in a way that provides space for loosening the grip on established or so-called traditional symbols and expressions of religious life in the New World, and allowing for the possibility of embracing the contradictions of the New World without being subject to them. At the transcendental level, the alien cosmos of the Atlantic World exists as a historical convergence of the need to reassess the fact that, as a species, we have yet to come to a consensus of what it means to be human and the meaning of addressing humanness beyond the signifying biases of race. Negatively, learning to love may mean that being human is not enough. Positively, a contemporary iconoclastic cosmological vision may reveal that we have already gone beyond the confines of “human” meaning. In either case, such reckoning with finitude and death situates us in the suffering of our condition, that, while inherent, forces us to a greater honesty about our capacity to design worlds and generate cosmos.

#### 4. Conclusions

Washington and Jennings confirm the potentially problematic nature of connecting race and religious diversity in their discussion of the means by which the Atlantic world came into existence. The body and the soul have very little meaning beyond supporting the economic and political reductionism of production. Understanding the manufacturing of the Atlantic world in cosmogonic terms (the imagining of space) offers a view into the praxis of colonialism and the sustained legacy of subjugation. When read as the artifice of the Americas, space shows itself to be the produced reality within which we signify the colonial imagination, to which there is no escape. Nonetheless, the cosmic reimagination of space as a discourse encompasses the values and countervalues that force rethinking and reorienting signs and symbols in a way that necessitates a more careful consideration of what it means to explore the relationship between race and religious diversity. Accordingly, historicity must not be reduced to the praxis of domination, but regarded as a countercurrent that unlocks a different experience of reality, beyond the limits of the given paradigms that govern the intellect and bodies.

In a more potent way, Jennings and Washington focus on what lies beneath dealing with race and religious diversity. Engaging the dyad via historicity provides a countercurrent that demands theologizing from the perspective of the vanquished, the silenced, and concrete reality as it is. The results of their analysis indicate that New World signification *is* our culture. Since signifying is worse than lying, the alternative of telling the truth via Washington’s specific understanding of learning to love runs counter to the perceived norms of Atlantic World societies. The viability of religious symbols

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<sup>37</sup> By iconoclastic I mean reckoning with the entanglements of religious consciousness on the basis of human “matter”—the fact that humanity is only as relevant as the matter that composes the cosmos. The ethics from this point of view means that our consciousness or signifiers cannot elevate humanity (or even sections of humanity) above other forms of matter. Finitude in this context is not simply the characteristic of being a creature generated from the divine, but rather a characteristic of our relationship to all other substances in the universe—that is, our smallness.

and their impact on the vanquished of Atlantic World societies represent the results of New World signification and the answer to the contradictions brought about by signification. From a cosmogonic perspective, universes abide among us and exist beyond this one, even though they have yet to be discovered. Getting beyond the abstraction and countering the New World signification process calls into question our epistemology of space, constructed in the colonization of the Americas, because it demands letting go of perceived norms and reassessing our fundamental faith claims. In a final step, going beyond New world signification requires rethinking our very understanding of origination and destination, history and praxis, configuration and materiality.

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