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2018 REA Annual Meeting, Nov 2-4

**We Will Never Be White as Snow**  
The Implicit Curriculum of White Normativity and Null Curriculum of Black Liberation  
Theology in the Hymnody of the Baptist Tradition

**Abstract:** While hymnody is the primary source of sacred song in the Baptist Tradition, strands of White normativity and Black domestication are woven through its fabric. The hymns contain linguistic imagery that inaccurately hone into the purity of white and evil of dark. These ideals pose a potential identity crisis because hymnal “darkness” is repeatedly viewed as unpleasant or stops the light the shining. This paper will explore the hymnal language that neglects to affirm black bodies, address social ills and embrace the “other.”

The innocent sound of children singing “this little light of mine, I’m gonna let it shine” captured my heart at the age of five years old. Curious, eager and excited I wanted “a little light” as well and I wanted to “let it shine” everywhere I went. This was my introduction to God. This initial encounter came by way of hymnody within the Black Baptist tradition. The melody captivated me and drifted me to a place of refuge where life’s struggles dissipated. This was the sanctity of the hymnal experience. My appreciation remained this way for years, until I intently heard the stanza in Howard Lowry’s hymn “What Can Wash Away My Sin” that reads “O precious is the flow that makes me white as snow” (Lowry 1876). Gazing upon the faces in the room, full of hues that ranged from almond brown to deep chocolate, I was certain that it was impossible for anyone in the room to be washed white as snow. Unable to articulate the incongruity of the hymnal metaphor to the dark-skinned people, hymnody became a place of inquiry in addition to worship. Like one stream flowing in two different directions, my critical reflection initiated a liturgical eddy. Hymns that I deeply appreciated as part of my liturgical experience in the Baptist tradition were now held with a hermeneutic of suspicion because I questioned if the hymns spoke to and affirmed the Black skin represented my body.

While hymnody is a primary component of the liturgical experience in the traditional Baptist tradition, there lies an implicit curriculum<sup>1</sup> of white normativity that has gone unnoticed. The historical context that undergirds the majority of Baptist hymns reflect the ideals of older White men. These hymns emerged during a time when Black people were disregarded, maligned as abnormal and *forced* to sing a new song in a foreign land through indentured servitude. A plethora of hymnal stanzas give a negative connotation to darkness, partiality to men or serve as pardon for former slave owners who participated in the American Slave Trade. Yet, Baptist congregants *still* manage to worship using these hymns today. With minimal inclusion of ideals that reflect Black liberation in America, there is a null curriculum of Black Liberation. However, hymnody remains a common part of the Baptist liturgical experience and this needs to be revised.

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<sup>1</sup> Elliot Eisner’s form of implicit curriculum has a significant impact on the learner than the explicit curriculum. The implicit curriculum is based on the culture, standards, patterns and setting that informs the learned material or behavior. The dominant components are rarely announced, but they are recognized by the recipients because they emphasize an unspoken behavior. See (Eisner 1979, 76)

Henriot and Holland's "circle of praxis" uses a systematic approach for reflecting to bring about action (Holland and Henriot, S.J. 1980, 8). This paper will employ this methodology to conduct a full analysis.

Historically, African Americans were stripped of their identity, removed from their country, enslaved, oppressed, marginalized, and exploited by the very people who introduced them to Christianity. The colonizers considered the Africans to be "barbaric heathens" and therefore imposed a skewed Christianity that encouraged them to be "saved" and become "good" slaves (Costen 1993, 16). Major contributors to Euro-American hymnody, pardoned themselves for participating in the oppressive hand of slavery because they felt slaves were "inherited" and not purchased. The slave owning hymnal composers were not held accountable for their actions because they "allowed the slaves to express their spiritual insights" (Norton 2004, 50). African Americans had to find a means of affirming themselves, while simultaneously being dehumanized and forced into human servitude (Cone, *God of the Oppressed* 1975, 11). From the onset of the African American Christian experience, there were a unique set of questions that needed to be raised, primarily because they speculated how a God who ostensibly loved them, allowed them to suffer beyond measure.

History shows that there has been a challenge for Black people to find themselves in the Biblical story of hope. For Black people, the question was not 'did God exist' but rather was God present in their struggle. They grappled with the question of whether or not God actually supported them in their quest for liberation. Based on their reality which was steeped in pain and despair, they wanted to know if God was with them in their struggle for freedom. This unique experience of being an African in America, necessitates a unique critique that speaks to those who were stripped of their identity and muted at the hand of their oppressor who introduced them to Jesus.

African American Christians began to create secret songs as a means of survival in a foreign land. As a means of endurance, slaves created songs known as Spirituals (or Negro Spirituals) and language that helped them navigate a horrific experience (Cone, *God of the Oppressed* 1975, 56). Spirituals emerged and were birthed from the slave period in America. They contained the central theme of yearning for freedom and liberation from their circumstance. They served as a surreptitious form of resistance that was rooted in the eschatological hope that God would deliver the slaves from the hand of the oppressor (Costen 1993, 84). Woven between scripture, slave code and imagery, spirituals were a means of survival that emerged from a labor of faith. They served as the foundation of the slaves' faith formation which rested upon a future that they could not see but found an inner hope to believe that it was on the horizon (Omo-Osagie II 2007, 36).

The first published liturgical documents compiled by and for African American worshippers was a hymnal. This was developed by Richard Allen, founder of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in 1801 titled, *A Collection of Hymns and Spiritual Songs from Various Authors by Richard Allen, Minister of the African American Episcopal Church*. The hymnal contained fifty-four hymns (Blumhofer, Edith L. 2004, 43). A selection of these hymns was included in some of the early southern hymnals that existed during slave antebellum. The first Baptist Hymnal was created in 1903 (Costen 1993, 81-82). In 1977, "The New National Baptist Hymnal" was created and includes Post-Civil Rights Movement social awakening ideals. This is the current and primary hymnal used by the Baptist Church today. Twenty-seven Spirituals and several Civil Rights favorites were added to the 500 plus hymns (Spencer 1992, 93). With roughly 5% of the hymnal including African American experiences, it's understood that some people were not satisfied with the content of "The New National Baptist Hymnal." Those who recognized that

the hymnal content lacked the experiences of a people committed to overcoming the ills of inequality, sought to create a hymnal that included experiences that were previously ignored. In 2001, the “African American Heritage Hymnal” was created to include the African American experience in the Protestant religious tradition. The hymnal features 586 traditional, gospel, and modern worship compositions. However, even with an existing hymnal that speaks to the African American experience, the New National Baptist Hymnal remains the dominant hymnal in the Baptist tradition. It is necessary to assert that the Baptist tradition is autonomous to the local church and authority is housed with the local congregation. A Baptist governing body is not in place to determine which Bible translations to source or which hymnals to use, this is the discretion of the local church. Furthermore, the Black Baptist Church adjusted the meter of Euro-American hymns in the New National Baptist Hymnal so that the melody was unique to the Black Experience. Conversely, it’s quite interesting that the worshippers sought to alter the tune but failed to revise the text. The Black Baptist tradition held to the primarily Euro-American hymnal content with streams of White normativity and Black domestication flowing through its deep waters.

These Euro-American hymns contain linguistic imagery that inaccurately hones into the purity of white and evil of dark. These ideals pose a potential identity crisis because hymnal “darkness” is repeatedly aligned with evil, sin or stops the light from shining. The first hymn listed in “The New National Baptist Hymnal” is “Holy, Holy, Holy” which includes a meter that reads “Though darkness hides thee” (National Baptist Publishing Board 1977, 1). In the same way, the hymn “One Day” includes a meter that reads “One day when sin was black as can be” (Ibid, 68). The hymn “Do You Really Care?” mentions “people grope in darkness searching for a way” (Ibid, 420). “O Zion, Haste” asserts that many are “bound in the darksome prison house of sin” (Ibid, 408). “Lead Me, Guide Me” includes a meter that proclaims “Let me through the darkness, thy face to see” (Ibid, 355). African Americans will see darkness every time they face a mirror because this is the hue of our sacred bodies. Understanding the historical trauma associated with African American identity one would suggest that we avoid language that maligns blackness as “bad,” especially living in a nation where many have fought and died to be accepted as equal.

This image of “darkness” has tainted the perception of what it means to have Black skin in America while it implicitly highlights the goodness of white. It is not that the hymnal compilers lack information, but rather they fall victim to accepting misinformation. They have embraced inventions of distorted reality and personified collective amnesia (Masingale 2018). “We soak up propaganda and ideology whose intention is to *prevent* thought” (quoted in Wink 1988, 288). It is not that hymnal compilers are ignorant to the prejudice that permeates hymnal language, but rather they choose to see what they were trained to see. The National Baptist tradition has consistently associated darkness with evil through Euro-American hymnal repetition and imagery and the Baptist tradition has been trained to accept it without significant critique. Religious institutions have blinded themselves to the horrors that align with this language and have not sought to rectify the misappropriation of “darkness.”

African American denominational churches have done a poor job of critically interpreting the Biblical text (Williams 1993, 150). For centuries, these churches have ascribed to the scriptures without critical engagement. They neglected to raise questions that would liberate and affirm their congregants. They have ignored the violent acts of God in the struggle for liberation (Ibid). In order for change to become a lasting reality, congregations must begin to raise questions that have been previously ignored. The church has a responsibility to speak from the angle of the African American experience which is full of a struggle for an identity in a world that has taken extreme measures to omit their experience. When we fail to raise the difficult questions, we domesticate

the liturgical experience by merely accepting what has been provided. This critique is applicable to hymnody as well. An exploration of hymns needs to take place that works to revise the language and does the work of liberating the hearers of hymnal liturgy. Liberating liturgies empower people to embrace the struggle and emerge with a praxis that initiates faith-based action (Hessel 1992, 81).

The null curriculum<sup>2</sup> of Black liberation addresses the paradoxical nature of God. While God loves humanity, one must wrestle with the concepts of slavery, oppression, and injustice that continues to plague Black lives across the nation. Traditional Baptist hymnody does not explain why God allows those whom God loves to experience great calamity. Additionally, it neglects to question why oppressed groups endure a life of humiliation and suffering (Cone, *A Theology of Black Liberation*, Twentieth Anniversary Edition 1990, 17).

Though America has made significant changes to improve the experience of being Black in America, Black lives and bodies still need to be affirmed. In fact, the Millennial lead Black Lives Matter Movement emerged at the height of repeated incidents of police brutality on Black people in America. Black Lives matter exists to answer the question of how can white America learn to see Black people as human beings? It is deplorable that this question remains pertinent to a people who were forced to migrate to a place where their lives were considered disposable. In a world where political leaders of influence label police misconduct "a significant exception" and wonder why society was not talking about "black on black crime" there is a systemic issue in place on a national level (Coates 2014). Ironically, there was an uproar in the use of the notable hashtag #BlackLivesMatter, because people believed that there was an omission of other groups of people. As a result, other hashtags emerged as a means of resistance against the Black solidarity which included #AllLivesMatter, #BlueLivesMatter and even #WhiteLivesMatter. Isn't it interesting that we easily seek to find issue with the use of language when it is most convenient? The hashtag, Black Lives Matter caused pandemonium among groups of people who did not identify with Black lives. Consistent with American history, they found it offensive to assert that Black Lives had value. These people consistently believe that there is something fundamentally wrong with being Black. For this reason, there is something profoundly wrong with associating Black with darkness or evil in hymnody semantics. These metaphors are heightening a disconnect with the black beauty that rests among God's creation.

Organizations affiliated with the Black Lives Matter movement compiled "A Movement for Black Lives," a detailed and ambitious agenda separated into six components that includes a list of demands that address pertinent issues relevant to the African American community. The list includes restructuring policing and prison, jobs and healthcare, tax code revisions that will "ensure a radical and sustainable redistribution of wealth," expanded rights to clean air, fair housing and union organizing, and greater community control over police and schools. Additionally, the BLM movement has expanded to include trans, queer and poor people (Joseph 2017, 19). Somewhere along the journey of development BLM leaders realized that racism, sexism and homophobia are conjoined. When the oppressive dialogue is limited to a particular group, minimal change will occur (Lorde 1984, 1).

The Movement shows that young people are interested in seeing a better way of life for marginalized groups of people and they are willing to participate in bringing justice to fruition.

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<sup>2</sup> Elliot Eisner's form of null curriculum is the curriculum that does not exist. "the options students are not afforded, the perspectives they may never know about, much less be able to use, the concepts and skills that are not part of their intellectual repertoire" See (Eisner 1979, 92)

The pressing question is, for the sake of revised liturgy, what does hymnody say to these issues? Does Baptist hymnody contain language that seeks to affirm black bodies or alleviate the ills that are pertinent to its community? With the exception of a few notable Black churches, why has the influential Baptist tradition sought to remain silent instead of affirming Black lives? Now more than ever, there is a need to offer liturgy that speaks to the plight of oppressed groups. Holding acts of justice and liturgical experiences in creative tension, liturgy can produce action to participate in just causes (Hessel 1992, 82).

From a theological perspective, God has always sought the liberation of humanity and recognized that a struggle always exists. Genesis tells the story of a man named Jacob who wrestled with God until daybreak. It was not that Jacob defeated God, but God was overtaken by Jacob's unrelenting persistence in obtaining a blessing. At the conclusion of the fight, Jacob's name was changed to Israel because he struggled with God and humans and prevailed (Genesis 32, NRSV). Israel eventually became the name of God's chosen people. With this in mind, the people of Israel were identified as people who struggle *with God and humans and prevail*. The re-naming of Jacob established a new relationship between God and humanity. The concept of struggle was a mode of identification for God's people. To participate in God's inauguration of divine righteousness involves the willingness to suffer in the struggle of freedom (Cone, *A Theology of Black Liberation*, Twentieth Anniversary Edition 1990, 172). God's people struggle so that they can be reconciled to God through liberation. "This reconciliation comes through the restored humanity that can only be implemented through the reign of justice and love" (quoted in Hessel 1992, 60). In order to achieve this mission, there is a requirement to live in hopes of a future that does not yet exist. Maltbie Babcock wrote in the famous hymn *Be Strong!*, "Shun not the struggle, face it, 'tis God's gift. Be strong, be strong, be strong!" (Babcock 1901). The partial language used in hymns within the Baptist tradition is an injustice that needs to be addressed. Rectifying the prejudice can serve as a means of religiously educating the community to develop inclusive language.

It is critical that this affirmation in hymnody should come from those who are impacted by the Baptist liturgical experience. Paulo Freire notes that the historical task of the oppressed is to liberate themselves and the oppressor (Freire 2016, 44). As a precursor to liberation, the participants, both oppressor and oppressed, must reimagine the participatory roles. Only power that comes from weakness can be strong enough to liberate the oppressor. This is a sensitive place for the oppressed because they are faced with the responsibility to restore humanity, rather than reversing roles and oppressing the oppressor (Ibid). This kind of liberation can only come from the power of God. The oppressed "must bear witness to humanity's liberation by freeing the present from the past and for the future" (Cone, *God of the Oppressed* 1975, 151). This is a call to see creation in the eyes of the creator thus forging a divine connection that unveils a mirror, enabling one to see a reflection of oneself. That reflection should cross the boundaries of male supremacy, white supremacy, economic supremacy, denominational differences, and homophobia (Irvin 1996, 177).

Jesus' social standing; a poor Jewish member of a minority group in the midst of the dominant and powerful Roman Empire, included him in the oppressed group. He stood among the world's disinherited. Despite his social standing, the driving question for Jesus was: "under what terms is survival possible" (Thurman 1976, 20)? The religion of Jesus sought the survival of His people against the hardships they faced, and the key to that survival was maintaining their spiritual connection to God. He created a spiritual model for us to emulate; a connection to God as

Father/Mother and to seek justice and liberation for the oppressed. Similarly, the Catholic Social Teachings of Pope John XXII speak to the equality of men [and women].

45. When society is formed on a basis of rights and duties, men have an immediate grasp of spiritual and intellectual values, and have no difficulty in understanding what is meant by truth, justice, charity and freedom. They become, moreover, conscious of being members of such a society. And that is not all. Inspired by such principles, they attain to a better knowledge of the true God—a personal God transcending human nature. They recognize that their relationship with God forms the very foundation of their life—the interior life of the spirit, and the life which they live in the society of their fellows (Pope John XXIII 1963).

This teaching affirms that we have a social responsibility to participate in bringing about justice and liberation in the world. In fact, when we fail to act justly we are committing a social sin. To be conscious is to face the present realities that contain injustice, poverty, economic despair, discrimination, male dominance, and environmental ruin and be moved to action. When we ignore hymnal stanza's that are steeped in injustice, we fail to embrace the equality of men [and women] alike.

Since hymnal propensity of the Baptist liturgical experience is an essential element of worship, it can serve as the vehicle for liberation. Nullifying the implicit curriculum of white normativity in Baptist hymnody will be best approached through the lens of Religious Education. There is a tremendous opportunity to educate young people to live justly in the world. While many have ascribed to hymnody that domesticates, there is still the possibility of creating hymns that are inclusive so that the next generation can sing a new song full of inclusion and hope. Religious educators have an opportunity to re-imagine traditional hymnal elements in conversation with the unique experience of Black Americans. This creative tension presents a valuable opportunity to allow the hymnal tradition to take shape as practical theology through lived experience. It creates an opportunity to refresh and retain while simultaneously looking back in order to self-reflect.

Hymnal composers have an opportunity to broaden the liturgical experience by revitalizing hymnody, enhancing what already exists and placing it in context with personal experience. This calls for a renewed hymnal pedagogy in efforts to understand what the hymns have to say to us today. In order to bring about this change, hymnody must reflect the socioreligious experiences of **all** people in America and use language that affirms all (Cone, *God of the Oppressed* 1975, 16). In seeking to correct the injustice and offer a renewed view of darkness, the hymnal compilers have to affirm darkness by offering new insight. It would be counterproductive to use language to reduce “whiteness” to evil, but rather hymnody should affirm beauty in all hues (Freire 2016, 44). In fact, hymnody should highlight some of God's great work that was done in darkness. Hymnody must call to remembrance, God creating the earth out of a dark formless void. In order to bring about sustainable liberation with a lasting impact, this praxis must be a model for all people in the struggle (Freire 2016, 54). Most importantly it ought to reduce the partiality to self-serving agendas and renounce the bondage of injustice (Hessel 1992, 44).

In a perfect world, the National Baptist Association would do an open call for Pastors, Theologians, Musicians, Gospel Artist and Religious Educators from African American, European American, Hispanic American, Native American, LGBTQ, Feminist and Womanist communities across America to gather and participate in revising “The New National Baptist Hymnal” which

has not been revised since 1977. In addition, the conveners should invite other denominations to the gathering and honor plurality by exploring differences. Once the community gathers to review the current hymnals and determine which hymns should be revised or replaced, they should develop a curriculum that guides the new hymnal language and addresses the social ills that impact the community. The curriculum should be executed in small groups. To ensure that people are moved to action, the curriculum should include an assignment that encourages the small group to develop a ministry project that addresses a social issue identified in the new hymnody. This would serve as an example of continuing God's work through human hands (Hessel 1992, 83).

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