Introduction

Black theology is a mode of worldly theology, worldly in that it recognizes the manner in which the historical progress of humanity has taken place at the expense of particular groups not within the circle of dominance. Its existence is premised on a rejection of religious naïveté whereby human misery is covered by unrealizable hopefulness and theological slight of hand. While rejecting the extreme optimism generated by that position, black theological discourse also critiques unduly pessimistic depiction of human potential for initiating and sustaining socially transformative processes. Human progress has indeed produced a bloody trail from Europe through Africa (and Asia), and into the Americas; furthermore, black theological discourse in the form of black theology seeks to acknowledge, confront, and address this situation—all under the belief that substantial social change is possible.

Theologizing consistent with this agenda exposes not only the messy nature of life but also the complex and layered ways in which religion serves as a response to the absurdity of our world. This posture and approach informed black theology’s early rhetoric and stance toward the dominant American theological tradition, and it allowed for the rejection of that tradition’s disregard for those in most need of freedom.

Few in black theology, or those familiar with it, would argue against these assertions as endemic to black theological discourse. And I have little interest in simply rehearsing this well-known and well-worn argument. Rather, I am more interested in the manner in which this fundamental framework shapes the reflexive process within black theological discourse and how that reflexive process might reinforce the importance of certain theological categories and highlight the implied importance of others.

Reflection and Assessment

Black theology is premised on the assumption that its effectiveness must be assessed in light of the manner in which its structure and content addresses
the advancement of a liberative agenda. As a contextual note related to this section, some readers may raise questions concerning my frequent attention to some of the more established theologians and may find problematic the limited attention I give to more recent thinkers. I acknowledge that black and womanist theologies are undergoing transitions, and that new waves of theologians are challenging some of the assumptions regarding the doing of theology. Recent work by Monica Coleman, for instance, asserts the importance of *process thought* for the doing of liberative theological work, and for her this challenge includes attention to the religious pluralism that marks African American communities. J. Cameron Carter’s work on a theological assessment of race provides intriguing insights into the formation and theological impact of race within the modern world. However, I would also argue that even more recent theological work all too often assumes the definition of the body and the framing of the body, which had been established decades ago. Hence, to break this practice and center black theological thought on embodiment/the body, it is necessary to first address the assumed understanding of the black body that informs the first two generations of black and womanist theologians.

Within black theological discourse all conceptual categories are tested in the arena of felt need and effectiveness—the ways in which meaning is made. From its early presentation some forty years ago to more recent efforts to expand and extend black theology’s nature and meaning, there has been recognition of the need to test claims, demonstrate assertions, and adjust in light of one’s findings. Or, as James Cone notes, truth is experienced and experience is truth. What takes precedence, then, at all times is the “realness” of African American experience. Such a stance when held consistently must involve self-evaluation, an evaluation of black theology’s form and content.

Self-critical exploration of black theology during the 1970s initiated by figures such as Gayraud Wilmore, Cecil Cone, and Cornel West produced greater attention to the importance of cultural production for the doing of black theology as well as the need for more explicit attention to social theory as a way to undergird a robust liberation agenda. What is more, continued critical engagement by scholars such as Katie Cannon, Jacquelyn Grant, and Delores Williams produced a turn in black theology during the 1980s that resulted in the surfacing of black theology’s sexism as well as a new theological model referred to as womanist theology. These are just a few of the important and documented moments of introspection that have marked theological discourse in African American communities; they have resulted
in the ongoing revision of its conceptual framework, content, and methodologies as well as expansion of its reach. In this book I suggest another important shift, one that will result in a new modality of black theological thought.

Context and Framework

Embodiment and the New Shape of Black Theological Thought is in part my effort at introspection, an attempt to present in a more sustained form theological concern with embodiment—with the body as the primary source and shape of theological inquiry—present in much of my thinking. My purpose is to point in the direction of a body-centered approach to theological thought whereby the body’s meaning and lived experience are prioritized and used as a starting point for the doing of theology. Within this context, the body is interrogated for what it might offer in terms of the form and content of black theology.

One might assume black theology, over the course of four decades, has given significant attention to the nature and meaning of black bodies as an important theological issue. The sociopolitical context for its development and the liberative—pro-black and at times nationalistic and exceptionalist—focus of that discourse would suggest such a concern with bodies as a reasonable assumption. This is certainly a good way to understand the manner in which liberation has been presented in terms that speak to the materiality of black bodies. The demand for healthy life options, the challenge to environmental racism, the lament of inadequate employment all speak to an understanding of liberation theologically constructed as engaging the body.

Behind black theology’s large claims regarding liberation is a troubled relationship to human flesh, to black bodies. Black theological thought related to issues of liberation and life meaning, when framed in terms of the body, tend toward the body only as abstraction, as symbol with little attention to the lived body. At best and with few exceptions, black theology and its claims made and agendas drawn do not typically emanate from the body.7 Black theology is often a theology of no-body,8 a system of theological expression without an organized (re)presentation of the body as body.

Black theology often lacks a clear subject of concern in that it gives so little attention to the body as material, meaning the physical dimensions of existence, the “stuff” of human beings. In black theology, the body is a vaguely presented and defined idea, a metaphor, a symbolic measuring stick used to debate the shape and purpose of social structures. (Regarding this understanding of the body Michel Foucault has been helpful to black theol-
ogy, although black theology embraces a sense of liberation and a framing of ethics that would trouble Foucault.) In short, it is representational—a means of classification. Black theology, therefore, is materially empty. The problems with this approach are numerous. For example, from my perspective this perception makes difficult any clear assessment of liberation—its meaning and nature, its function and purpose. In addition, lack of attention to material bodies also warps the manner in which issues such as racism are measured, and progress against oppression marked. In other words, without attention to the physical, racism becomes a phantom reality; and like phantom limbs it is felt and serves as a source of pain or stimulation difficult to address. One is left with the sensation that racism is always present and impacting life in a reified manner, even when there are signs of its shifting importance. Tied to this perception of racism as fixed, a reality not dependent on observation, is the sense that blackness easily becomes “over present”—a concern that overshadows or shapes perception of all other concerns.9

Black theology, by highlighting the body as metaphor, as symbol of the meaning of blackness over against whiteness, is often an etiology of white supremacy, but one that fails to give sufficient attention to the experiencing (by material bodies) of white supremacy and, by extension, the materiality of liberation. The body becomes a symbolic measuring stick used to debate the shape and purpose of social structures. There are ways in which black theology concerns itself with the demand for agency; yet, “agency, of course, requires a body acting in time and space and is meaningless without it.”10

The feel for life, the experience of living, is often addressed in black theology as an epistemological issue. Even M. Shawn Copeland’s insightful analysis of the body in the article “Body, Representation, and Black Religious Discourse,” seems to suggest primarily the body as mechanism of social regulation and control vis-à-vis racial stigma and racism/sexism. Even her discussion of sex/sexuality appears circumscribed to the body as metaphor through which the European sexual-self is worked out. The black body is shaped and defined by power dynamics. In a sense it is the cartography of power dynamics. The body, hence, is a story told to support the social system.”

**What Is the Body?**

What is meant by the term “body”? To what does this terminology refer? Efforts to explain and unpack this body have taken various forms—some privileging the body as epistemologically significant to a positioning of the body in terms of action. Yet others combine epistemological and action-
based understandings of the body. Mindful of this perspective, and avoiding naturalistic arguments, I promote the body as developed and defined by social structures (e.g., discourse) and in this it is not a biological reality. I couple this with an understanding of the body as biochemical reality, as biological “stuff” that is not captured through abstract references to social mechanism and epistemological structures. I work through this “combined” body or “meta” body by drawing from Foucault’s work (and Foucault-influenced authors) for insights into the constructive nature of discourse and power relations, and by giving attention to sociology of the body’s analysis of the materiality of bodies. The underlying conceptual commitment throughout the text is the suggestion that black bodies are material, are real, but what is meant by this and what is known/experienced about this body is not possible outside discourse (knowledge) generated in connection to power relationships. I do not want to dismiss the discursive body that is currently of concern to black theology but instead combine that understanding of the body with solid focus on the physical or material body.

To unpack the discursive black body, I make use of conceptual frameworks offered by Foucault within the three phases of his work devoted to (1) the production of knowledge; (2) the “conditions of knowledge,” and (3) care of the self. These three stages might also be construed as being concerned with discourse, power relations, and the subject. In the first phase of his scholarship, marked by *The Archeology of Knowledge*, Foucault concerned himself with an archaeologically identified manner of study, whereby he gave attention to the history and formation/transformation of knowledge. At play here is not simply attention to “bodies” of knowledge but also to the discursive body as displayed through and by frameworks of thought. The “middle phase” of his work, involving *Discipline and Punish* and the first volume of the *History of Sexuality*, seeks to unpack the manner in which power shapes and controls bodies—rendering them docile—arranging them with political intent and through mechanisms of surveillance. In short, the body is the location for the arrangement and display of power, producing a certain “art of the body.” Through power, subjects are produced and these subjects come to represent various arrangements of power. The discursive body is “inscribed” by power relationships and modalities of discipline. As some scholars argue, though, this remains a matter of the discursive body in that “Foucault’s argument that disciplinary power produced a certain ‘art’ of the human body challenges conceptions of modernity and only indirectly concerns empirical conceptions of the body.” The final phase of his work, framed by volumes 2 and 3 of *The History of Sexuality*, marks a turn toward care of the self, the manner
in which the body is transformed by and through technologies that produce subjects. This is a less passive, less docile, and more active body, but nonetheless a discursive body. Through effort, individuals’ work on themselves in ways meant to gain some relief, to achieve a certain level of contentment, if not happiness and advancement. For Foucault, in all phases of his thought, the body (particularly in the context of desire) is not hidden; rather, power and discourse shape and transform. Hence, the body is “real,” but this reality involves its presence as a discursive construction, and it is monitored with regard to its development, (re)presentation, and control.

Embodiment and the New Shape of Black Theological Thought moves between these three phases because in each case Foucault remains concerned with the body: the construction of the body, the “placement” and “control” of the body, with (and finally) the management of the human being as a subject whereby individuals “act” on their bodies. The construction of black bodies through discursive means, in relationship to mechanism of power results in fixed “things”—black bodies that are rigid, truncated realities not to be viewed, understood, and appreciated in diverse ways. Rather, to draw from the quantum physicist David Bohm, they are the result of a unified and unique truth. This truth is built for the benefit of white supremacy, to limit the scope of black bodies. The dilemma for those possessing bodies so formed is that there is little “space” for a diverse range of opinions and perspectives on these discursive bodies. Their meaning is fixed—incoherent (again to borrow from Bohm), and dialogue concerning them is also fixed and limited to the “truth” of these bodies provided by those with the power to control the means of their production.17 The discursive black body, formed as a matter of power dynamics and white supremacy, is a fragmented “something.” This body is a mutation, a matter of warped reality representing a piece of black meaning that has lost its integrity and relationship to a more robust depiction of humanity. This discursive black body, then, is perceived as having no positive relationship to intelligence, civil liberties, privileged social spaces, and the like. And, the black material body, likewise, is believed, as a matter of social truth, to be understood as having no core relationship to beauty, privileged social spaces, and so on.18 Theology based on these premises becomes a mode of interpretation whereby the forms of the body are exposed for their religious content.

Foucault’s conceptual frameworks shake black theology’s certainty, its somewhat arrogant claim to a special epistemology revolving around historical etiology upon which is harnessed its distinctive ontology. He points out that what they claim is not so unique and perhaps is not so liberative—but,
sadly, may represent simply another working of power within power relations. But there were hints of this noticed early in the musical forms of the blues, and perhaps this is why black religion and later black theology needed to subdue the blues, render those bodies docile by spiritualizing them as secular spirituals.19

Perhaps the limited effect of black theology (and womanist theology) on the life circumstances of the most oppressed stems from misperceptions easily corrected by Foucault: fighting oppression as a form of power relations does not entail fighting particular individuals or groups. Power is a series of relationships found in everything and through everything. Hence, an attack on white supremacy as expressed in relationship to particular groups does not end the problem when one considers the fluidity of power relationships and the knowledge connected to them, as well as the manner in which these same power relationships flow from the oppressed. Struggle, then, takes on connotations and possibilities less robust and meaningful as that posited by liberation theologies. Nonetheless, struggle, as the effort to stem and alter the ways in which bodies are controlled and arranged, remains vital. It is only that the outcomes of such struggle must be less grand (a bit disappointing to old guard liberationists) and must revolve around greater spaces of liberty within the context of the system.20

Black theology and womanist theology seek to detangle black bodies from the power dynamics of oppression, but if Foucault is correct, such thinking is to misunderstand the nature of power and knowledge, and to assume the body has a pre-history reality and to assume that power does not flow through and by means of black bodies as well.21 Furthermore, again turning to Bohm’s provocative work on dialogue, one might also consider how the very form of theological discourse limits the outcome of its work. The type of freedom black theology claims to promote and seeks to make real is influenced by the limitations of our thinking, the limitations of our imaginative conceptualizations. This, however, is not the problem; it is simply the consequence of the limitations of thought. The problem is black theology’s failure to recognize this limitation and to promote a rather troubled depiction of life and the issues confronting humanity.22

Black theology would be more helpful if it “goes into the process of thought behind the assumptions, not just the assumptions themselves.” 23 Put another way, black theology has made its reputation on the ability to point out the bad faith of religion and certain forms of theological inquiry—the manner in which both reinforce oppressive political frameworks and restrictive social patterns. Black theology often fails, however, to recognize the ways
in which it states its critique from within the very structures of knowledge it finds troubling. Black theologians’ thinking is assumed free (for the most part) of the bad “stuff” and marked by liberative potential. Yet, their thinking is based on the same knowledge sources used to define and safeguard restrictive and subjecting arrangements. They believe they have the “right” religion, when in fact all religion participates in power relations and structures of knowledge. By implication, black theology must wrestle with multiple truths and avoid the tendency toward a resolution to oppression. The sexism and homophobia (as well as classism) that have plagued black theology’s “liberative” praxis should be enough evidence to support this more moderate perspective on truth and resolutions.24

From my perspective, this “turn to the process of thought” within the context of black theology must include greater interrogation of embodiment (its meaning and practices) as thought experiment, as discursive construct. A greater range of resources and more intentional interconnectedness must match this. What I am suggesting is a pressing of black theology’s assumptions concerning the body, assumptions that cloud black theology understanding, representation, and handling of the body as a “focus of life.”25

There is more to the black body than this manifestation of discourse and thought. The body is also material, a “substance” without clear boundaries to the extent it is connected to the larger, natural environment.26 The body is not simply discursive construction, as some critiques of Foucaultian analysis argue. For example, as philosophers like Susan Bordo have insisted, it is vital to recognize the materiality of the body. She remarks, “if the body is a metaphor for our locatedness in space and time and thus for the finitude of human perception and knowledge, then the postmodern body is no body at all.”27 While some argue even the materiality of the body is lodged in discourse, for scholars such as Bordo societal developments and the workings of power relationships have consequences that are felt, that impact the material integrity of people: bodies live, change, decay, die.28 “Let’s agree,” writes Bordo, “we cannot ‘get outside’ the (historically sedimented) discourses and representations that shape our reality. Does this mean that all we are legitimately permitted to talk about is our reality as discourse and representation?”29 In defining materiality, Bordo points to such markers as race, gender, biology, and the like, framing these markers in terms of “finitude” by which she references “our inescapable physical locatedness in time and space, in history and culture, both of which not only shape us but also limit us (which some post-moderns seem to deny).”30 Material bodies engage culture and experience life through a range of activities and practices.31 Our bodies are as defined and
shaped by this materiality—the stuff of our practices—as by discourse and thought. Our bodies are both cultural product created through discourse, and material with “existential content” and “terrestrial weight.”32 In addition to this philosophical critique of strict attention to the discursive or thought body, sociology of the body informs implicitly and explicitly the concern for the material body marking this text. This is not to suggest a turn away from the body as cultural product, as discursive creation; but again I make an argument for understanding the body as both cultural production and material reality.

The benefit of turning to sociological concern for the material body is reasonable and productive because, according to Simon William and Gillian Bendelow, the body is “deeply embedded in the core problems of sociology.”33 As Bryan Turner remarks, sociology of the body is fundamentally “a materialist inquiry,” but one premised on the importance of the body as regulated by discourse and as “vehicle of the self.” The body is both “natural and cultural.”34 Like Bordo, certain figures in sociology have engaged but also critiqued Foucault and offered an alternate view of the body in that “Foucault’s epistemological view of the body means that it effectively disappears as a material or biological entity. We can never know the biological or material body in the ‘raw’ so to speak, only through the filter of this or that discourse.”35 The body occupies a social space whose texture and tone cannot be fully assessed only through the workings of spoken language, but we also must be sensitive to the physical placement, condition, and actions of real and specific bodies. Meaning is embodied. Human experience, then, involves an array of factors only some of which are discursive in nature. Bodies serve as a nonmaterial text to be read, but they are also material realities that shape information within the context of the world. Whereas certain philosophical and phenomenological takes on this connection to and impact on the world is individual focused, Turner reminds us that sociology of the body places the individual within the collective. Sociology of the body recognizes the social nature of embodiment.36 The benefits for black theological thought of this individual within the context of community are obvious.

As Bordo made clear and as further explicated in sociology of the body, physicality is necessary in order to understand and work through oppressive circumstances and address the pain and suffering promoted by those circumstances. Power relations are not simply thought but are performed through the placement of real, fleshly bodies in time and space. “The physical body,” write Williams and Bendelow, “does not therefore simply reflect but actively contributes to social inequalities.”37 And Bordo’s point is that these same bod-
ies and their activities also ground efforts to resist those inequalities. As Gail Weiss writes, these bodies are “marked by assumptions made about their gender, their race, their ethnicity, their class, and their ‘natural’ abilities.”

Bodies that bend, scream, or act out when experiencing discomfort or pain cannot be ignored because oppression involves the visibility of all aspect of the body (or in fact the visibility of multiple bodies), thereby defying any effort to deny the materiality of physical bodies or the cultural/discursive creation of nonmaterial bodies.

As opposed to simply being the projection of thought, the “culture, too, becomes a projection of the body into the world.” The intellectual supremacy of the disembodied body has been challenged through recognition of physicality as shaping culture, rather than the body simply being shaped by culture. Therefore, the body, according to Mary Douglas, is a symbol of the social system and is also a material reality. For Douglas and those influenced by her, the body affords an opportunity to challenge the dominance of the spoken and written word as the primary means of exchange: through the body, sociology depicts ways to analyze cultural arrangements and production. Concern with the physical body entails new insight into the lived dimensions of life—those elements of our existence not fully captured in what we think but more fully accounted for by what we do—our practices and existential interactions. “We,” notes Bryan Turner, “labor on, in and with bodies.”

**Theology and the Body**

The reminder to engage the “fleshy” body is important for theology. Any effort to change the situation of embodied people must have litmus tests, benchmarks, and only attention to concrete conditions faced can give a sense of the “felt” consequences of struggle. We cannot step outside of power relations and the workings of discourse; it is only through engaging the markers of materiality that resistance can be assessed and strategies revised as necessary. To the extent black theology avoids the existential and theoretical significance of the body, it fails to have an adequate object of exploration. One might argue that theistic forms of this theological discourse are grounded in a supreme subject—the divine—yet missing is the subject/object through which connection to and a mapping of the divine takes place. Hence, within the context of this book, the body is a tangled relationship of “thoughts” and “feels.”

What I am suggesting is recognition of multiple representations of the body, the manner in which the body is really bodies or “a multiplicity of bod-
ies, inviting a great many disciplinary points of view and modes of interpretation.” The multiple meanings and references (metaphor and material) serve as the theory of the body framing this volume. In addition, this project is framed by an underlying argument: Theological and religious concerns, motivations, and formulations are present within this “give-and-take” between the metaphorical body and the material body. One might think of this tension between the discursive and the material body as the \textit{me(an)ing} of embodiment. This tension highlights the connections between struggle for “place” or identity consistent with the workings and arrangement of the material body, and the manner in which discourse and power dynamics produce the meaning of the body both in thought and space. The black body—the changing sense of its biology and social construction/existence—provides a powerful example of the body as always under construction, never complete. The black body, so defined, “shadows” the evolving nature of religiosity and theology. The development of the New World, and the larger cartography of Africa and the African Diaspora, necessitated this black body.

\textbf{Experimenting with Embodiment}

In these pages, I make an effort to present examples of theological thinking that maintain the importance of theologizing the body as a symbol of the social system—as grand metaphor—but also theologizing the body as material, fleshy reality. In this way, as noted in the preface, I am involved not in systematic theology (nor in the presentation of a formal constructive theology); but rather in experimentation whereby the body is central terrain, the place of contestation for all things sociopolitical, economic, cultural, religious and theological.

The embodied approach does not maintain the assertive ethics of former black theology: it does not recognize as certain particular outcomes fully definable as liberation. Drawing from Foucault, it suggests instead that forms of identity cannot be addressed in isolation. They draw on and from each other in ways that keep them bound. Hence, positive movement regarding racism and other forms of discrimination might be a reinforcing of other oppressive patterns. Theology, done in light of and through embodiment, is content to point out the significance of bodies for the manner in which they provide an aesthetic of struggle that might inform our understanding and mapping of religion/religious experience. Such a perspective has implications for the outcomes of theological thinking through embodiment. The claims are not as grand, and the agenda less certain.
The rest of the book is divided into Body Construction and Bodies in Motion. Part 1 suggests a discussion of the body as metaphor or symbol, and part 2 concerns the body as material or as lived. This distinction marked by the two parts is organizational and not a firm epistemological and existential separation: together they serve to harness the importance of the complex body, as both metaphor and material. The chapters within these two parts are shaped by a question that undergirds in both explicit and implicit ways my main thesis: What is the look of theological thinking that takes as its starting point the religious significance and theological importance of the fleshy and metaphoric body? How does one think about theological categories such as “redemption,” religious experience, evil, world, and so on, if the body is central?

Chapter 1 is followed by discussion of the troubled nature of identity as “blackness.” Here I raise questions concerning how notions of identity, framed and embedded in black theological discourse as “blackness,” have served to privilege the black male body by assuming the re-presentation and re-construction of that male body meet the liberation needs of all black bodies. Of concern is the manner in which this formulation of the (assumed male) black body hampers a full understanding of complex subjectivity as the shape of religious encounter because it fails to consider a sufficient range of the ways in which African Americans are dehumanized.

Chapter 3 focuses on the theological construction and deconstruction of the black male. I use Spike Lee’s *Get on the Bus* to raise questions concerning the way in which even troubled notions of manhood are often interrogated within a limited context, based on a limited critique. Using womanist thinking as a lens, I offer an alternate perspective on the nature and meaning of gender. What results is an in/out orientation whereby the flaws of body construction are noted from within that very construction. I attempt to be mindful of this dilemma by pointing to cultural figures and developments as source material for theological inquiry rather than presenting them as normative models. The use of particular artists and other cultural examples does not suggest or imply a way of understanding embodiment. Rather, I want to suggest that attention to the blues and to rap or hip-hop does indeed break the monopoly held by what has proven a rather narrow range of source materials used in the doing of black theology (e.g., slave narratives, gospel music, a select range of literary sources). Black theology is often done in a way that privileges sources that do not trouble neat depiction of life (e.g., flat critiques of oppression that are no more than two-dimensional)—sources such as the spirituals and “race” narratives that affirm a liberation epistemology framed by a teleological view of history. However, attention to the blues
(when not sanitized as “secular spirituals”) and rap provides an alternate perspective, one offering a look into the “messy” nature of life. But this depiction of source material, and the suggested framing of the black body when referenced using music, is best read in conjunction with the insightful work being done in relationship to the presence of black female bodies. 47

Chapter 4 wrestles with the theological import of bodily pleasure by rethinking the nature of sex(uality) as theological category. Following Kelly Brown Douglas’s lead, current discussions of sex(uality) within black theology all too often maintain unchallenged moral codes and frameworks that buttress a mind/body dualism.48 In something of a departure from Douglas, however, I do not understand black churches as victims of a generic Western framework of proper relationship, but rather that this problematic stance stems from black theology’s uncritical epistemological link to and enabling of black churches.

Chapter 5 discusses the body as the site of religious struggle. This chapter focuses on the nature of encounter with good and evil—the body’s troubled occupation of time and space through attention to a question: How does one articulate and live the struggle for life meaning, or complex subjectivity? My response is shaped by attention to musical production—the blues and rap music—as source material. Use of musical production as theological resource continues in chapter 6, where the rap artist Tupac Shakur frames perspective on redemption as outcome of religious struggle. Chapters 5 and 6 seek to wrestle with traditional questions of religious struggle and redemption (what some might call conversion and salvation), but in a way that never loses focus on the body. 49

Chapter 7 highlights the body’s relationship to the world by exploring the theological nature and meaning of the effects of Hurricane Katrina. The chapter seeks to think about pain and suffering in ways that center the materiality of the body and its connection/relationship to the materiality of the world. That is to say, evil is discussed here, based on the assumption that the body and world influence and inform each other, without clear boundaries between the two.

Chapters 2 through 7 end with a short statement (“Prospects for Future Study”) offering suggestions concerning what embodiment might entail, the look of embodiment within black theological thought. This material is not meant to imply the formal look of an embodied theology, and because of this I do not offer full explication of these possible turns in the doing of black theology. Again, I do not provide an embodied theology in this book. Rather, in a somewhat heuristic manner these thoughts at the end of chapters are meant to simply offer possible directions and topics for further work.
**The Goal**

My claim is simple: The body (metaphor and material) has profound theological importance. And here I make an effort to give some shape to this claim, to explore the ways in which this claim effects and influences the form, content, and tone of black theological thought.

*Embodiment and the New Shape of Black Theological Thought* is really a work in progress because it does not provide a full articulation of the complex body in/as theology, and in some cases readers will likely point to the manner in which the chapters talk about the body rather than represent theologizing from the body. My goal here is to simply point to the importance of such a move toward embodiment and to provide examples of how this might occur: To the extent the ordinary definition of theology as “God-talk” is still used by black theologians, I would note even this framing of theological discourse as “story-ing the divine” stems first from relationship to the human body. It is the discomfort, dis-ease, and joy of embodiment that promotes reflection on transcendent concerns in connection to the world. Attention to the body, then, points in as well as out.

I must also acknowledge the manner in which this book frames much of this discussion in ways meant to decenter the male body through an alternate attention. This is not to dismiss black female bodies as important. Rather, I make an effort to include sources and to note the importance of gender discussions extending beyond the frameworks of masculinity. The assumptions concerning the nature and look of black bodies must be challenged and broken, and in part this must involve the exposure of the problematic of the male body related to both the historiography of black theological thought and also as a matter of challenge to my theological autobiography. Hence, my discussion of the black male body does not solidify its centrality but rather serves to challenge this centrality.

Understanding and addressing the concerns of black theological thought as they involve altered states of existence—marked by greater freedom and liberty—requires attention to the material body as the source and recipient of social regulations and controls. The lived body must be tracked. After all, it is reasonable to assert the corporeal body was the first and primary instrument of construction (their bodies for the benefit of others within an oppressive system) and resistance—of “being”—available to people of African descent within the ontological and existential disorder of diaspora environments.