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Revelation: Overcoming Blindness to See a Common Humanity

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REVELATION: OVERCOMING BLINDNESS TO SEE A COMMON HUMANITY

**A thesis submitted to
Regis College
The Honors Program
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for Graduation with Honors**

by

Kelsey A. Schmidt

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Revelation: Overcoming Blindness to See a Common Humanity

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INTRODUCTION

Just over a year ago, I traveled to El Salvador and as a result of this experience, I write the following pages as a transformed person. My thinking, my longings, and my overall worldview shifted. El Salvador, the tiny Central American country, offered me a place to “learn to love, [and] to be heartbroken” in the words of Dean Brackley.¹ Notoriously, El Salvador and more specifically La Casa de la Solidaridad study-abroad program prove revelatory in unexpected ways. One alum of the program even stated, “The Casa is a hot house for change!”² I often ask the question to myself, “Why El Salvador?” or “Why did I have to travel to find myself?” O’Connor similarly left her life in rural Georgia to find herself. She hoped to gain a broader perspective as a writer in her studies at the University of Iowa by moving beyond the familiarity of the Southern landscape where she grew up.³

Ultimately in El Salvador, I first experienced difference, yet in that difference, also my first true sense of communion. Growing up in Kansas and attending Regis University, I had never been a minority. I interacted with diverse communities and enjoyed the various roles promoting diversity such as the student-lead for ecumenical

¹ Mark Ravizza, S.J., reflection with group, January 17, 2010.

² Mark Ravizza, S.J., class lecture, February 2, 2010.

³ Jill P. Paumgaerner, *Flannery O’Connor: A Proper Scaring*. (Wheaton, Illinois: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1988), 5.

and interfaith services, but what I experienced in El Salvador was completely unique. I felt what it was like to try to fit in or assimilate to a culture to no avail. My blonde hair, blue eyes, extra height, and shaky language skills kept me from physically fitting in with any of the Salvadorans. Just the same, my privilege of growing up in the United States unfazed by the true strife for survival present in El Salvador separated me from the people with whom I desperately wanted to become one. I came to resent my skin color, and my upbringing in the richest country in the world. Paradoxically, the people in the communities admired my foreign blue eyes and desired to know more about “America.”

I felt as though my insides were in constant conflict, a battle waging in my head resulting in a confusing mix of shame, anger, and humility. I recognized my home as the same country which funded a war against the campesinos and campesinas I had come to know and love. How could these people love me and welcome me into their homes after this? How could they still wish to live in a country such as mine? My heart which learned to love by responding to their overwhelming hospitality was now broken. I felt helpless in the fight to release them from the structures of poverty and violence. Yet, this notion did not cross the Salvadorans’ minds. They did not need a fixer or a helper in their community, but rather a friend to endure the good and the bad. They revealed to me the fountain of God’s grace. They lifted my past suffering and my current existential crisis by pouring out an overflowing wealth of love. They taught me to reinvest and live vulnerably when all I wished for was to extract myself from the situation.

While in El Salvador, I carried around my volume of Flannery O'Connor's *The Complete Stories*. Her writing style revealed to me through concrete examples some of my own struggles. It guided my thinking and revelation that we all share a common humanity and with that a common suffering. Each story haunted me, especially "The Artificial Nigger." O'Connor, herself, identified it as one of her favorite stories saying it is "probably the best thing I'll ever write."⁴ Seemingly with ease, O'Connor looked at the fabric of her life and was able to distinguish the thread which could unravel all of the complexity in her surroundings in one fell swoop. O'Connor states,

"I see from the standpoint of Christian orthodoxy. This means that for me the meaning of life is centered in our Redemption by Christ and that what I see in the world I see in its relation to that. I don't think that this is a position that can be taken halfway or one that is particularly easy in these times to make transparent in fiction."⁵

She heralds a world that centers on Christ's saving work for undeserving people. In this reoccurring theme, she draws together sinners and self-professed saints, blacks and whites, as well as the young and old into one community. Her works are not always easy to read containing violence and grotesque themes, but they seek to draw one into Christ's grace. Reading her works, I believe I am a recipient of Christ's grace drawing me closer to the mystery of redemption. The

⁴ Flannery O'Connor, *Collected Works* (New York: The Library of America, 1988), 1027.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 804-5.

complexity of her stories attests to the struggle we have as humans to accept this grace and the saving work of Christ, but I believe they set me on the path towards such.

Additionally, on this journey in El Salvador, I explored the theology of liberation both in theory and through the observation of living practice. I interpreted this theology at its deepest roots as a return to the true message of Jesus found in the gospels, particularly the Sermon on the Mount. In this theology developed by Gustavo Gutierrez, Christ's sufferings were merged with the sufferings of the people oppressed in El Salvador and throughout the world. Liberation theology demands that care for the poor be brought to realization on Earth. After studying this theology, I became deeply interested in the plight of the poor and oppressed, and their struggle for not only freedom but also for a God which spoke to their situation. This led me to the struggle of blacks in America and in turn black liberation theology with its many voices including those most influential in my thought James Cone, Diana Hayes, and M. Shawn Copeland. They argue for freedom from oppression both past and present and do so in the realization of a black Christ, one which suffers their same cross.

Lastly, I came to the work of Christopher Pramuk. He brilliantly speaks to the saving grace and mercy of Christ seen in O'Connor's works. He offers that this grace is available even for oppressors. It is through "Black Suffering" that

there is “White Revelation.” This article works to tie together my thoughts on the aforementioned topics of redemption and liberation in the reality of race relations. While also, guiding my understanding of “How I fit into this reality?” and “What is my responsibility for guiding change?” In this thesis, I seek to understand the theories and presentations of the various authors and in doing so to experience revelation for my own further action.

THE INSPIRATION: Flannery O'Connor's "The Artificial Nigger"

The measure of a human being is not always apparent from the outside. The deeper motivations driving the being lend greater insight into the true character of being. Yet, cultures and societies often miss these more inherently represented clues by valuing instead a person's utility or appearance. Flannery O'Connor explores the characters of two men in her story, "The Artificial Nigger," and in doing so, she attempts to redefine and challenge the contemporary notions of humanness. She uses as the central crux of her story the issue of race relations, but even deeper, the problem of sin in the world. She evaluates relationships between person and self, person and child, person and 'other,' and ultimately, person and God. Her work above all shows the human desire to surmount weakness through a great strength to persevere.

O'Connor's "The Artificial Nigger" on the surface outlines a grandfather and grandson's trip to the big city from the comforts of a rural home. The two characters in a competitive, tense interplay enter the foreignness of the city. Mr. Head, the grandfather, seeks to teach his grandson, Nelson, how good he really has it at home.

Moreover, the story unfolds in its imagery both “literally and symbolically.”⁶ O’Connor seeks to penetrate the world of matter through this journey of novel sights, especially the “niggers” Mr. Head points out.⁷ The main characters become lost in both the physical and metaphysical reality, with each step into unfamiliar territory bringing greater despair. Nelson expresses both resentment and fascination with the blacks he encounters. Ultimately, though, it is his grandfather’s abandonment in a time of need that causes them both to enter into existential crisis. In its culmination, the story asks the reader to reassess the events of the story as a mutual journey toward redemption and the saving power of God.

Flannery O’Connor represents Mr. Head, the first character introduced in the story, as both strong and weak. He upholds himself as a man of great wisdom, stubbornly believing his advanced age as the sign of true knowledge and understanding. He also aligns himself with great figures such as Vergil and Raphael, pointing to his own “composure” and “ancient wisdom.”⁸ However, O’Connor does not let Mr. Head’s endless self-aggrandizement become the final word as she weaves not only his perception but a narrator’s perspective together to make a more complete picture.⁹ For example, the narrator describes a man forced to grasp the iron posts on his bed in order

⁶ Jill P. Paumgaerner, *Flannery O’Connor: A Proper Scaring*. (Wheaton, Illinois: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1988), 56.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 173.

⁸ Flannery O’Connor, *Collected Works* (New York: The Library of America, 1988), 210.

⁹ Henry T. Edmondson, *Return to Good and Evil: Flannery O’Connor’s Response to Nihilism* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2002), 147.

Edmondson acknowledges Mr. Head as a “parody of Vergil and Raphael, not an imitation.”

to raise himself up. Even so, "Sixty years had not dulled his responses; his physical reactions, like his moral ones, were guided by his will and strong character, and these could be seen plainly in his features," although one would assume by the need to grab onto the posts of a bed to rise up that his responses had slowed and that he was a frail, old man.¹⁰

As a result, the reader treks uncharted territory as the opening pages unfold, unsure of Mr. Head setting out on the "moral mission" of showing his grandson, Nelson, the city.¹¹ Nelson is similarly introduced in a contradictory manner. As Mr. Head scans the room in the night, he sees Nelson as the dark spot lying on his pallet. In the light of the moon, Nelson is the only shadow. The reader may naturally assume Nelson is simply a child unschooled in wisdom like Mr. Head, and therefore un-enlightened. Perhaps through no fault of his own, Nelson simply needs to learn the rules of the road so to speak, or the representation could suggest Nelson's need to learn his grandfather's lesson. Mr. Head further complicates the relationship and possible assumptions by presenting a deep-seated relationship based on competition as they enter into a struggle of wills. Mr. Head seeks to prove Nelson wrong or to teach him a lesson from the country while Nelson defends his possession of a superior outlook on the world because he is from the city. This complex interplay asks one to contemplate what it

¹⁰ Flannery O'Connor, *Collected Works*, 210.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 211.

means to be enlightened, and prepares the reader, in the role of judge, for an unknown journey through morality.

O'Connor continually challenges the reader in this story. She resists painting a strong, clear line between good and evil. For example, age is not necessarily considered a sign of wisdom, nor are city people necessarily seen as more enlightened than the country folk. Similarly, Nelson crosses the boundaries expected of children by continually answering with impudence, failing to show respect to an elder, and by trying to hold his own against his grandfather's persistent accusations that Nelson could not even recognize a "nigger." In another exchange, Mr. Head asks Nelson if he had ever seen him lost. Nelson replies, "It's nowhere around here to get lost at."¹² By which, O'Connor may be implying that everyone is lost and just too stubborn to look for the way, especially as Nelson and Mr. Head compete to be the guides of the way or the transmitters of knowledge. Each is overly willing to point out the other's flaws while remaining completely unable to recognize his own. The interplay is pointed, quick, tense but also laughable. Mr. Head gloats that he will teach Nelson the lesson of his life on this trip to the city, ridiculing his pride in his own birthplace and leaving him thinking that home was not that bad a place. Mr. Head is described as a prophet foreseeing an inevitable future, but little does he know that it will be his own. O'Connor writes, "'The day is going to come,' Mr. Head prophesied, 'when you'll find you ain't as smart as you

¹² Flannery O'Connor, *Collected Works*, 211.

think you are.”¹³ Quite frankly it may be his first true thought, spurious in nature but accurately foretelling his own future. Both Mr. Head and Nelson possess a great pride in their knowledge and after this passage the reader waits for the moment of realization.

Their antipathy toward one another does not mean they do not suffer from the same sinful pride. O'Connor further relates the two characters by describing a striking resemblance between them, almost as if brothers close in age, “for Mr. Head had a youthful expression by daylight, while the boy’s look was ancient, as if he knew everything already and would be pleased to forget it.”¹⁴ She also questions their maturity. Mr. Head’s belief that he is wise and intelligent, youthful and lively is completely ungrounded in reality. Rather, the reader sees an older man with a poor physical well-being who assumes a youthful immaturity. Conversely, O'Connor describes Nelson losing his youthful innocence because the loss of his mother forced him to mature quickly.¹⁵ She states, “the boy’s look was ancient, as if he knew everything already and would be pleased to forget it.”¹⁶ He appears weighted down by the responsibility of coming of age. He wears a man’s size hat but appears as a small boy in grown-up clothing alluding to his forced growth and maturity.¹⁷ He lives weighted by the events of his past and wishes he could return to a life of youthful innocence and shed the defensive wall separating him from the greater world.

¹³ Flannery O'Connor, *Collected Works*, 211.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 212.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

The two most persistent arguments fueling the fierce competition between Mr. Head and Nelson are the arguments about the reality of the city and the ability to recognize “niggers”. O’Connor dichotomizes each of these arguments with stark opposing contrasts, the divides of home and city and black/white segregation. To illustrate, O’Connor reveals the importance of location. Conversations about the city suggest that Mr. Head and Nelson are in a voyage together to an unfamiliar setting, and the foreignness of such a place demands that they pay attention. The city represents exiting comfort zones, becoming lost, and then recognizing “niggers” as inherently different, in order to ensure protection of boundaries and distance. The city as a symbol thus becomes more complex as O’Connor paints a journey through a metropolis that comes to represent the underworld, a place of sin and inhumanity toward one’s own kind. As they embark on this journey of discovery, they walk the tightrope between such vastly different notions of security and the mystery of the ‘other.’ Repeatedly, the characters seek to return home to the safety and comforts associated with a sheltered environment. Mr. Head seeks to show all there is of the city so as to end all enchantment with this horrid place as seen through his eyes.¹⁸ Through the obnoxious degradation of the city, he expresses an appreciation for his relationship with the boy and a desperate plea to return home. The dichotomization of the two competing locations, home and city, and distancing of self that proves problematic. For example, Mr. Head fails to recognize his own role in the tragic creation of a city divided by the

¹⁸ Flannery O’Connor, *Collected Works*, 215.

social construction of race. By classifying blacks as different, he acts as part of a greater collective which seeks to cause a rift in the community. Yet, Mr. Head and Nelson at varying times begin to recognize themselves as lost moving beyond the notion of location. Whereas before they saw black people as symbols of the unknown and wished to return to the familiar, their journey confuses their preconceived notions of reality and plunges them literally into the depths of the unknown figures' beings. The more they step out into uncharted waters, the more they exit the comforts of safety while bridging the gap of a world separated through racial construction.

While on the train ride to the city, Nelson failed Mr. Head's test to see if he could "recognize a nigger," which classifies for Mr. Head a man of culture and wisdom. When Mr. Head pointed to a man and asked, "What was that?" Nelson replied with the simple answer "a man," recognizing the humanity of the man before the color of his skin.¹⁹ The response lands like a breath of fresh air as his child-like innocence appears for a quick glimpse. His outlook on people remained untainted by the perceptions of his grandpa. In a perfect world, a person would always point to similarities rather than differences as the first response. With the focus on a common unity, people would bond together rather than allowing minor physical distinctions to tear humanity apart.²⁰

¹⁹ Flannery O'Connor, *Collected Works*, 216.

²⁰ Ralph Wood, *The Comedy of Redemption: Christian Faith and Comic Vision in Four American Novelists* (Notre Dame, Indiana: Notre Dame UP, 1988), 114.

Wood believes that O'Connor's argument moves deeper than an obvious realization that it is our "our universal and indivisible humanity that characterizes us" rather than "petty distinctions of race and class." Instead, Wood defends that O'Connor seeks the truth that "original sin divides not only the races but also the nearest of kin."

However, the world painted by O'Connor remained anything but perfect, as Mr. Head declared with a matter-of-fact tone, "That was a nigger," in order to make Nelson feel like a fool but ultimately instilling an inner hate for the black man. O'Connor writes, "He [Nelson] felt that the Negro had deliberately walked down the aisle in order to make a fool of him and he hated him with a fierce raw fresh hate."²¹ She vividly demonstrates in this phrase Nelson's feelings and the development of a pointed, direct hate. Nelson misdirects the source of his newfound foolishness on the "Negro" rather than his grandpa, who paints grand illusions of difference between those with a common humanity. The pigment of skin now dictates the powerful force of Nelson's emotions and therefore treatment of another human, a sign of his embarrassment and lost innocence.

Nelson represents a traveler on a road or a seeker. He remains open to shaping and potential growth. Even amidst the display of hatred toward the "Negro," Nelson grasps the notion of incompleteness. O'Connor describes, "He looked toward the window and the face there seemed to suggest that he might be inadequate to the day's exactions."²² In the following of Mr. Head, he becomes jaded due to the narrowness of his grandfather's thoughts. He wants a guide through life presenting leadership and direction.²³ His choice of his grandpa is not surprising as a child often clings to the

²¹ Flannery O'Connor, *Collected Works*, 216.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ralph Wood, *The Comedy of Redemption*, 114.

Nelson feels "hopeless and homeless and parentless" both in the ultimate and literal senses. Therefore, he will shamelessly follow whoever "might show him mercy" as described by Wood.

familiar when faced with new situations, and initially he thought his “grandfather was indispensable to him,” saving him from getting lost.²⁴ Yet, O’Connor forces the reader to question Mr. Head’s ability to fulfill this role, as it is actually fear which guides him. Because he is only able to determine the correct stop from his last journey into the city, he demands a certain respect from Nelson, although he, too, needs a guide. His insecurities associated with being lost illuminate his deeper, metaphysical journey directed toward finding a power outside of himself. O’Connor shows this uncertainty when Mr. Head weighs himself on a scale in a store.²⁵ The reader sees Mr. Head identifying with the scale’s suggested character trait that he is “upright and brave,” but is puzzled about the inaccuracy of the actual weight.²⁶ Unlike him, the reader recognizes both the inaccuracy of his weight and the character trait.²⁷ For Nelson, the weighing machine gave an incorrect weight but his character trait read, “You have a great destiny ahead of you but beware of dark women.”²⁸ This foreshadows his future experience with a black woman but also alerts the reader that he is destined to end up in a better place than before.

Quickly the novelty of the city and weighing machines wears away, representing a turning point in the story as they become lost and desperately seek to find the way.

They begin to open themselves up in a real way to their shortcomings and consequently

²⁴ Flannery O’Connor, *Collected Works*, 217-8.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 219.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Henry T. Edmondson, *Return to Good and Evil*, 148.

Edmondson identifies the “flattering message” as anticipating “Mr. Head’s approaching moral collapse.”

²⁸ Flannery O’Connor, *Collected Works*, 220.

the idea of 'other.' Mr. Head snidely evades the fact that he got them lost and asks Nelson, who was technically born in the city, to ask for directions. Nelson begrudgingly asks a large black woman for directions but in the action he "suddenly wanted her to reach down and pick him up and draw him against her..."²⁹ Her presence enraptures him. He seeks to drink it in and to feel more deeply her presence. He would have most assuredly stayed by her side losing all concepts of time and of his surroundings if it were not for his grandfather's interference. She unlocked another glimpse of Nelson as the seer of the deep beauty of all humanity. She opened him up to the world of vulnerability absent from his childhood years.³⁰

In this powerful encounter, the structured society painted by Mr. Head's view of "niggers" as harmful creatures comes crashing down. O'Connor stated in a letter to her friend Ben Griffith, "You may be right that Nelson's reaction to the colored woman is too pronounced, but I meant for her in an almost physical way to suggest the mystery of existence to him."³¹ The black woman is a revelation in the body, in the flesh. A completely unexpected character now represents a love that transcends human segregation and reveals a common humanity, which reflects God in image and likeness. Nelson seeks to plunge deeper and deeper into her tangible, inexplicable beauty, which emanates grace. Nonetheless, the revelation vanishes the instant his old man knocks

²⁹ Flannery O'Connor, *Collected Works*, 223.

³⁰ Ralph Wood, *The Comedy of Redemption*, 115.

Wood reveals how in Nelson's deep human need and self-crisis he finds the Holy revealed through O'Connor's "sacramental imagination."

³¹ Flannery O'Connor, *Collected Works*, 931.

“sense” into him. This leaves Nelson with resentment and once again the sneering ghost of inadequacy.³² He seeks to leave the city and return to his familiar home, refusing to dwell in the beauty of his recent encounter.

After the beguiling moment of Nelson meeting the black woman, Mr. Head seeks to reestablish his authority over the boy. He remains lost in the city and tired of Nelson’s cocky attitude. Therefore, he plans to scare Nelson into needing him once again. He makes a loud noise on a trash can, causing Nelson to jolt from resting and dart into the street.³³ Unable to catch Nelson, he rushes after him only to find him sprawled on the sidewalk amidst scattered groceries next to a woman screaming about a broken ankle.³⁴ The scene and the cries of the crowd of women demanding justice rattle Mr. Head, and in a state of panic, he denies knowing or ever seeing Nelson previously.³⁵ He states, “This is not my boy... I never seen him before.”³⁶ The women are horrified and repulsed by such a denial of one’s own flesh and blood.³⁷ Mr. Head’s act metaphorically represents Peter’s denial of Christ. In the Gospels, Jesus foretells Peter’s denial at the last supper. In Mark 14:27, Jesus says, “You will all become deserters; for it is written, ‘I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.’” After Jesus predicts the apostles’ denial, they adamantly protest such a thought with Peter leading the way stating, “Even though I should have to die with you, I will not deny

³² Flannery O’Connor, *Collected Works*, 223.

³³ *Ibid.*, 225.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 226.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

you.”³⁸ Still Peter denies his discipleship with Jesus three times and with each denial, the intimate bond once shared between Jesus and Peter seems to crumble.³⁹ The language in all four gospels shows Peter’s response as direct and distancing. Peter states “I do not know this man about whom you are talking.”⁴⁰ Mr. Head and Peter act out of fear. They deny not only a relationship with a loved one but in turn a relationship with God incarnate in the humanity of Jesus

Nelson additionally failed to uphold the gospel message or act in a wholesome manner. He showed his human imperfection by turning away from his grandfather with great dignity.⁴¹ Although Mr. Head acted poorly, Nelson acts very rudely as he traverses behind his grandfather, causing Mr. Head to lose all hope.⁴² He envisions himself “wandering into a black strange place where nothing was like it had ever been before, a long old age without respect and an end that would be welcome because it would be the end.”⁴³ Mr. Head, humbled even to the point of humiliation, enters now into a true journey through Hell in order to reach heaven. John’s gospel emphasizes the journey of Resurrection rather than pointing to the welcome end with Christ’s death. In a threefold question and answer, the Resurrected Jesus tells Simon Peter to tend and feed

³⁸ Mark 14:31

³⁹ Mark 14:66-72

⁴⁰ Mark 14:71

⁴¹ Flannery O’Connor, *Collected Works*, 227.

⁴² Ralph Wood, *The Comedy of Redemption*, 116.

In Wood’s assessment, he shows how O’Connor suggests it is this breach of community resulting from personal and social distrust (on the most intimate level of family) which allows for the sin of “racial hatred.”

⁴³ Flannery O’Connor, *Collected Works*, 228.

the sheep so as to continue the journey.⁴⁴ Jesus offers Peter redemption for each of his three denials, while Nelson denies his grandfather such graced forgiveness. Relational redemption for Nelson and Mr. Head is possible only through the recognition of shared human faults and the saving power of God. However, the power of redemption, as revealed in these moments of refusal, reaches far beyond this unforgiving blackness into a true miracle of light and hope.

Mr. Head was jarred to attention by loud barking dogs causing him to shout, “Oh Gawd I’m lost! Oh hep me Gawd I’m lost!”⁴⁵ He for the first time acknowledges that he is lost on the journey. He recognizes a faint vision of hope and believes he is saved as a man tells him the train station is only blocks away. He exclaims, “We’re going to get home!”⁴⁶ This statement is confusing as home lends itself to more than one meaning. For example, it could represent the kingdom of heaven as Mr. Head is now on the cusp of a spiritual awakening. In addition, home could simply mean the return to the place from which they came, and the familiarity and comfort of white country living. O’Connor begins to show how even those with atrocious character flaws, including Southern ways of racism, can come to see the light of their own sin.

The defining moment of the story came down to the unlikely image of “An artificial nigger!”⁴⁷ It was a “plaster figure of a Negro... pitched forward at an unsteady

⁴⁴ John 21:13-17

⁴⁵ Flannery O’Connor, *Collected Works*, 228.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 229.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

angle because the putty that held him to the wall had cracked. One of his eyes was entirely white and he held a piece of brown watermelon.”⁴⁸ The statue once of a black man in happy servitude now shows the suffering endured in such an environment. O’Connor states, “there is nothing that screams the tragedy of the South like what my uncle calls ‘nigger statuary.’”⁴⁹ This alludes to the common representation of Sambo dolls as ordinary ornamentation for white homes in the South. These dolls allowed whites a skewed interpretation of the world which allowed thought that the world was in proper order even with segregation and slavery. By the happy portrayal of black servitude, whites demean the integrity of blacks while boosting their own egos. The “artificial nigger” propels Mr. Head into the depths of his own failures and shortcomings. O’Connor’s fictional language shifts with the revelation of Mr. Head. She begins to speak with strong theological language so as to alert the reader that her characters are on an “absolute,” “metaphysical” journey of epic importance.⁵⁰ Thus, Mr. Head reflected that he knew “what heat would be like without light and what man would be like without salvation.”⁵¹ Mr. Head for the first time recognizes his own sin and foolish pride. His reflection identifies not only the inextricable relationship between heat and light but also between God and humankind. He, in this revelation, saw that he was not the true guide but rather the unsuspecting recipient of the saving power of

⁴⁸ Flannery O’Connor, *Collected Works*, 229.

⁴⁹ Flannery O’Connor, *The Habit of Being: Letters*, ed. Sally Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1979), 101.

⁵⁰ Ralph Wood, *The Comedy of Redemption*, 117.

⁵¹ Flannery O’Connor, *Collected Works*, 229.

God.⁵² The narrator describes the notion of redemption stating, “They stood gazing at the artificial Negro as if they were faced with some great mystery, some monument to another’s victory that brought them together in their common defeat. They could both feel it dissolving their differences like an action of mercy.”⁵³ This notion of redemption requires an admittance of imperfection, the reliance on a liberating God, and the release allowing one to be transformed through and with another. Redemption is the transformation of sin into the deep recognition of one’s inadequacies and the common bond of humanity as made whole in God. The pinnacle moment of Mr. Head’s revelation comes as he claims ownership of his failings and in turn reassures Nelson. He makes a “lofty statement” proclaiming “They ain’t got enough real ones here. They got to have an artificial one.”⁵⁴ Edmondson, an O’Connor scholar, believes that Mr. Head’s statement could be re-written to say, “Not only has the Negro been oppressed in his daily experience, but as if the white race were still unsatisfied, they must also re-create that black oppression and humiliation in this cheap art form.”⁵⁵ By this re-creation, Edmondson presents Mr. Head’s newfound identification with the oppressive white race. However, even with Mr. Head’s previous denial of his role in sin, God forgave. Mr. Head’s closing revelation unveiled that “no sin was too monstrous for him to claim as his own, God loved in proportion as He forgave...” and at that moment, “he felt ready at

⁵² Ralph Wood, *The Comedy of Redemption*, 117.

O’Connor believed that grace was an “action upon a character even more than it is a movement *within* a character.” Thus, the metaphysical journey of Mr. Head and Nelson is not deserved but rather granted by the “grace of God.”

⁵³ Flannery O’Connor, *Collected Works*, 229.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 230.

⁵⁵ Henry T. Edmondson, *Return to Good and Evil*, 148.

that instant to enter Paradise.”⁵⁶ He feels free not in his refusal to accept his sinfulness but in his humanity through the saving works of God. He feels ready to enter paradise as God will forgive out of his abundant capacity for love.

Nelson’s final words of the story seem to unravel the entire groundwork of the journey through which O’Connor has guided the reader. He and his grandfather have returned to the country, and he no longer holds the same resentment of home. Nelson states, “I’m glad I’ve went, but I’ll never go back again!”⁵⁷ Is he turning away from the journey leading to the redeeming act of love and revelation of a common humanity? Simply, yes he is, but Nelson’s statement alludes to more than a simple return to the comforts of home. In a letter to Cecil Dawkins, O’Connor writes, “All human nature vigorously resists grace because grace changes us and the change is painful.”⁵⁸ Staying in such graced moments, such as that experienced by Nelson and Mr. Head through the “artificial nigger,” is a struggle for everyone. Yet, the change evoked by grace necessitates living in the world, continuing the journey. Mr. Head seemed to glimpse the doors to Paradise, heaven, but he responds to the call of Nelson which recognizes their change. They can never go back down the same path or go on the same journey. Rather, they are forever changed by the painful experience of grace, which forces them

⁵⁶ Flannery O’Connor, *Collected Works*, 231.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 1084.

to trudge endlessly through the struggles of life's journey with the hope of God's saving power to guide them.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Ralph Wood, *The Comedy of Redemption: Christian Faith and Comic Vision in Four American Novelists* (Notre Dame, Indiana: Notre Dame UP, 1988), 108.

Wood also believes O'Connor leaves the reader with the notion of positive grace in comparison to her other stories. He believes "The Artificial Nigger" shows "that white prejudice and black suffering have not only a causal but also a curative relation." Mr. Head and Nelson juxtaposed with a figure of horrible "negro anguish" do not turn away but rather enter into the collective pain of racial hatred to be "redemptively borne."

On account of skin color, a nation stands divided. Although the United States elected a black president and claims to have moved past a racial divide, the reality of racism remains as divisive and unjustly discriminatory as ever. Whether white, black, brown, red, yellow, or whatever background, humans daily fail to uphold a human community. Flannery O'Connor's short story, "The Artificial Nigger," depicts the dynamics of racism, as a young boy learns hatred of blacks at an early age from his grandfather. Yet, through this boy, Nelson, she shows the flaws of such a reality. She strikes to the heart of sin in this world by exposing the denial of one's own sister or brother through various images including the grandfather's denial of his own grandson (as shown in previous chapters). Ultimately, O'Connor represents the grandfather and grandson's "common defeat" -- "dissolving their differences like an action of mercy."⁶⁰ O'Connor's work exemplifies a revelatory vision. She uses the interplay between grandfather and grandson to show the overwhelming experience of forgiveness and redemption offered to them in the form of an "artificial nigger."⁶¹ The story debunks the falsehoods of superiority and being free of sin rather plunging her characters, and in

⁶⁰ Flannery O'Connor, *Collected Works* (New York: The Library of America, 1988), 230.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 229.

turn, readers into the heart of grotesque situations. She expresses through her characters the need to overcome the sin of pride, which allows for division or self-aggrandizement. O'Connor paints a reality which calls readers to question their own role in racism. If the story characters are capable of such action, the reader must question his/her own capacity for sin and the denial of humanity through racism. "The Artificial Nigger" demonstrates the journey of revelation amidst the tragedy and inhumanity of racism.

Black theologians, ranging from activists such as Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcom X, to more contemporary examples of Diana Hayes and M. Shawn Copeland, recognize the inhumane treatment they have endured throughout history, and like O'Connor, seek to reveal this to others. Yet, their recognition accompanies the urgency for freedom. James Cone, identified as the first to articulate a Black Theology in 1969, saw the hypocrisy of White Christianity in America and strove to relocate Black theology in the heart of Black Experience.⁶² Cone's movement grew separately but coincided with a greater global movement of liberation theology stemming from Latin American political unrest. Liberation theology generally seeks to acknowledge a faith that responds to the current reality rather than standing apart. Thus, it seeks to relocate the faith in Christ's subversive interactions with the poor and lame so as to overwhelm oppressive structures. Black theology, specifically, calls for freedom and recognition. As blacks, they seek to reclaim their identity. The fight is daunting as they stand against

⁶² Diana L. Hayes, *And Still We Rise* (New York: Paulist Press, 1996), 71.

years of oppression due to the reality of white supremacy that advocated that blacks should not have a voice. Black theologians intend to reclaim their history and dignity as human beings. The movement of Black Liberation theology developed primarily within the Civil Rights movement, the Black Power movement, and current Black Catholic understandings and it ties its roots to traditional African-American spirituals as well as the strife of slavery. The movement relates their own story of suffering to the pain of the cross that Christ Jesus suffered and strives to rise above these structures of unjust power. Their witness and action testifies to the need to question social contexts and lenses in order to make change.

The black experience in America highlights a dramatic history, indicative of injustice and also demanding attention. Yet, now as a society, this fight for blacks' equity sits on a backburner as many would say the emancipation of slavery and Civil Rights movement worked to heal such mistreatment. In response, the United States Catholic bishops in a 1979 pastoral letter on racism titled, "Brothers and Sisters to Us," questioned this common misperception stating,

"Today the sense of urgency has yielded to an apparent acceptance of the status quo. The climate of crisis engendered by demonstrations, protests, and confrontation has given way to a mood of indifference; and other issues occupy our attention."⁶³

⁶³ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Brothers and Sisters to Us: US Catholic Bishops Pastoral Letter on Racism 1979," Cultural Diversity and the Church: African American Affairs, <<http://www.usccb.org/saac/bishopspastoral.shtml>>.

The status quo in today's world is driven heavily by the white race and norms. The oppression continues in more subtle ways of racism, discrimination, and marginalization. A study by Ken and Mamie Clark identified the development of racial constructs in children, the most innocent in a society. They showed that the majority of black children chose to play with the white doll and even more startling identified the white doll as looking most like them.⁶⁴ In a reexamination of Dr. Clark's sociological study performed by ABC news 60 years later, black children when asked to choose between a white and black doll still showed the deep ramifications of decades of racial and economic subordination. Although the children did not overwhelmingly choose to play with the white doll, African American girls showed signs of favoring the lighter-skinned doll.⁶⁵ Black children are paying the price for the prevalence of white attitudes weaving the threads of reality. Their perception of beauty favors the white reality. The Clark doll study represents this, and in addition, a documentary titled "Good Hair" by Chris Rock shows the extreme measures of black women and men to conform to the white reality.⁶⁶ Blacks pay thousands of dollars on weaves and chemical relaxants in attempts to conform to the white interpretations of beauty. Beyond the overall poor framework in society for racial identity creation, oppressive realities for blacks in the education and justice systems perpetuate cycles of poverty and crime. The achievement gap shows that white students continually score higher than their black

⁶⁴ American Broadcasting Company. "What a Doll Tells Us About Race," <http://abcnews.go.com/GMA/story?id=7213714&page=1>.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Chris Rock, *Good Hair*, 2009.

counterparts on state testing particularly due to vast disadvantages in high-minority schools. Yet, the status quo of a predominately white nation perpetuates the notion that this is indicative of a developed, affluent nation.

The structure of oppression in the United States has not gone unnoticed. Blacks and particularly black theologians around the world seek to take back what is rightfully theirs. M. Shawn Copeland shows how many “have gone on to uncover the intensity and scope of the efforts of the culturally and socially (i.e., politically, economically, technologically) privileged few around the globe to frustrate the aspirations, hope, even the survival of marginalized others.”⁶⁷ This process requires a critical analysis of the world and also a refusal to accept things as they are. Black theologians recognize their own exploitation as a means to advance the well-being of a particular group. Therefore, they contextualize the experience of blacks within their own understanding. Hayes points out, “It is from the particular context of a particular people that all theologies develop, whether that is recognized or not.”⁶⁸ White theology is particular to Western Europe, concerned with the ideas and thinking of economically privileged people. Whites did not accept nor recognize the development of a unique black faith shaped from their own black context, a context ravaged by mistreatment. While white theology developed questions of orthodoxy, historical interpretations, saints and art focused obliviously to the worship practices of a whole group of people, black people

⁶⁷ M. Shawn Copeland, “Racism and the Vocation of the Christian Theologian,” *Spiritus* 2, no.1 (2002): 15.

⁶⁸ Diana L. Hayes, *And Still We Rise*, 186.

and theologians continually questioned from the midst of their oppression, “Who is God for African Americans? What is the meaning of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ for us? What is the meaning and purpose of Black existence in the United States?”⁶⁹ Blacks set out with a purpose not only to discover God but to identify God in their own reality. White churches continually suppressed the black faith in its tradition, images, and style of worship, considering it inferior to the dominant image of the white Western European God. For example, two images of Christ existed during the times of slavery. Hopkins describes these dichotomous views stating, “slave owners preached a spiritualized white Christ in order to justify the privileges of white skin over black skin. Blacks in contrast, believed in the prophetic and liberating activities of Christ’s daily ministry with the poor and marginalized.”⁷⁰ Yet, the White image proved dominant. In the suppression of such an image whites denied themselves, and more importantly blacks, the relationship with a God who speaks to them. God for blacks was literally whitewashed. The image of a suffering, black God was continually overcome by the pervasive white God. The black experience called for a faith that related to their background. The white representation of God was not only foreign, but also representative of the oppressor. Despite the attempts of whites to suppress the black faith, the black faith lived strong in the hearts of black slaves. The strength of a faith which spoke to them “enabled their people to ‘keep on keeping on,’ despite chains,

⁶⁹ Diana L. Hayes, *And Still We Rise*, 3.

⁷⁰ Dwight N. Hopkins, *Introducing Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1999), 150.

whips, lynchings, hunger, miseducation, fear, and poverty and the teaching of a distorted Christianity to an illiterate and captive people.”⁷¹ Throughout this oppression, it was neither the slaveholder’s image nor the segregationist who gave them strength. Blacks knew the tragic reality of oppression and found strength in a God who suffered alongside them.

Thus, the revelation of sin and oppression acts as a challenge to theology. For blacks, a deep ownership and discernment of their greater suffering frames their belief and creation of theology. Karl Rahner validates such an understanding of reality framing discussion of God: “the personal history of the experience of the self is the personal history of the experience of God... the personal history of the experience of God signifies, over and above itself, the personal history of the experience of the self.”⁷² He believes God experiences through us and thus knows the pain of the people.

Similarly, as blacks in the United States began to discern their surroundings and their own identity, their presented image of God no longer spoke to them. In turn, a black theology was born out of the Civil Rights and the Black Power movements. The Civil Rights movement first paved the way. Black Christian ministers, most notably Martin Luther King, Jr., became discontent with the way things were. They were taught in seminary to teach “a Christianity seemingly at odds with the best interests of their

⁷¹ Diana L. Hayes, *And Still We Rise*, 66.

⁷² Diana L. Hayes, *And Still We Rise*, 101.

own people.”⁷³ They stood in a place of paradox seeking to worship God, but in doing so, recognized that they failed to pay heed to the reality of segregation and the maltreatment of their own. Thus, the Civil Rights movement raised the consciousness for blacks and whites alike. With this new-found awareness, ordinary citizens, such as Rosa Parks, took stands against injustice by reclaiming their roots. By the 1960s, the black church had lost sight of its roots, its faith no longer flowing organically from the black experience.⁷⁴ Thus, the reclaiming of such faith required the overturning of powerful structures which had ceased to recognize the black voice. Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote “A Letter from Birmingham Jail” in 1963 reflecting on the experience of blacks in the United States in which he spoke out against fellow theologians, white theologians, for their inaction. Then he states, “We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed.”⁷⁵ Blacks began to take ownership in their faith, recognizing their need to stand up against the forces of power.

From this refusal to accept the white-influenced status quo, the Black Power movement was born in the late 1960s. Stokely Carmichael, a famous civil rights activist, raised the call for Black Power in 1966 arguing, “integration is a subterfuge for the maintenance of white supremacy” which “assumes that (whites have) something which

⁷³ Diana L. Hayes, *And Still We Rise*, 55.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ Martin Luther King, Jr., “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” in *Nonviolence in Theory and Practice*, ed. Robert L. Holmes and Barry L. Gan (Long Grove, Illinois: Waveland Press, 2005), 104.

Blacks want or should want, as if being close to white people enhances the humanity of Blacks.”⁷⁶ Integration illusively acted to continue the white agenda although promising a better tomorrow of unity for whites and black. The white agenda reigned dominant as integrated cities especially in the North showed only the powerful white traditions expecting the blacks to follow suit.⁷⁷ However, proponents of the Black Power movement strongly resisted such movements to the point of upheaval. The Black Power movement was action-oriented. Malcolm X, a leader of the Nation of Islam, and a growing number of youth demanded insurrection against power. Their actions combated the dominance of white power and placed it aside to find power within the black community. Stokely Carmichael said, “Black Power means T.C.B., Take Care of Business—black folk taking care of black folks’ business, not on the terms of the oppressor, but on those of the oppressed.”⁷⁸ Blacks sought to take action where they had been denied action earlier. This movement coincided with the formation of an identity within one’s own context escaping the projected images of others. They began to believe that they could create their own destiny apart from the structures of whites.⁷⁹ In this view, blacks were appalled at the idea that a people who had for so long oppressed and stripped them of every ounce of human dignity should be considered Christian. “To them, in their understanding of God, it was incomprehensible that the people who enslaved them could believe in the same God and continue to behave as

⁷⁶ Diana L. Hayes, *And Still We Rise*, 61.

⁷⁷ Diana L. Hayes, *And Still We Rise*, 61.

⁷⁸ James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1969), 6.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

they did," Hayes writes.⁸⁰ Blacks now recognized a God who spoke to their experience, one that was on their side and not one that sought to ignore their existence. They believed that God powerfully and lovingly created them, and it was through this deep recognition of God in their own experience that they were able to establish such a theology. This theology of Black Liberation sparked from the underbelly of history. From a silenced group, came a remarkable display calling for change and the renewal of self and society.

The last component shows how the modern moves in the Black theology of liberation seek to recognize the universality of the movement. As these voices rose from the Catholic context, widely absent before the past three decades as the movement was primarily Protestant in its beginning, theologians including Diana Hayes, M. Shawn Copeland, Fr. Cyprian Davis, and Fr. Bryan Massengale, have guided the thoughts of a Black Catholic tradition which calls for the growth of such liberation.⁸¹ Their work encompasses all races, genders, and classes seeking to grow the communion of brothers and sisters. Black theology is limited insofar as it only recognizes the plight of its own people against the structures of oppression. Therefore, these theologians strive to extend their freedom and liberation through the notion of solidarity among many minority groups, which if unified would quickly turn into the majority.⁸²

⁸⁰ Diana L. Hayes, *And Still We Rise*, 12.

⁸¹ Diana L. Hayes, *And Still We Rise*, 161.

⁸² *Ibid.*

I, myself, am a white Christian. In my research, I have read an extensive number of theologians, particularly black theologians. I wanted to explore the notion of black liberation theology including its roots and the power of a faith promoting freedom. Just as in any movement, it is not a history completely unified; rather it incorporates a vast spectrum of ideas with the single mission of freedom. As I read about these valiant efforts of blacks, I had to recognize myself in the form of other. Karl Jaspers expanding on the notion of metaphysical guilt reaches an important point stating, "There exists among [people], because they are [people], a solidarity through which each shares responsibility for every injustice and every wrong committed in the world."⁸³ I as a white must identify with the oppressor because of the reality and forcefulness of my race's treatment of black people. Yet, Jaspers' statement pushes for a deeper solidarity, one that extends beyond one's own race. As a global people, we must stand up to recognize the revelation of a human community.

This theology pervades throughout the black community today not only looking for change but the promotion of a future freedom and unity. The black experience speaks "as a theology of praxis emerging from the breadth and depth of the Black experience which, while recognizing the promise of the eschaton as revealed in Christ, also demands concrete action in this world on behalf of marginalized Blacks in American society today."⁸⁴ This movement is hopeful but also expresses a deep pain from which

⁸³ James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 24.

⁸⁴ Diana L. Hayes, *And Still We Rise*, 87.

the black community must rise. They reinterpreted the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ through a slave's understanding.⁸⁵ Now, God stood on their side and their own suffering was like that of Christ Jesus' cross. They seek to speak truth from their own experience but also deeply from a faith that recognizes their condition and looks for a day of redemption. They have carried and withstood the burden of the cross and they ask others to recognize the very real cross in the world today. Their theology is "seen as 'subversive,' one which is paradoxical, turning all of accepted reality upside down to present a new reality, that of the last being called forth to be revealed as the bearers of a vital, healing vision of Christ crucified from their experience of both racial and religious persecution."⁸⁶ Yet, this theology, along with other theologies of liberation across the world, recognizes the essential need to challenge everyday assumptions.

This movement has Biblical roots allowing Christians to take up a fight seen again and again throughout history. Paul states, "God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are" (1 Cor 1:27-28)."⁸⁷

⁸⁵ Diana L. Hayes, *And Still We Rise*, 66.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 173.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.

Black liberation theology gave a voice to a group of people who for so long were voiceless. Yet, this voice in its rhetoric and the reception by whites did not always promote dialogue. Although black liberation theology prompted a needed movement for a renewed and life-giving faith for blacks, a new direction must be forged to promote needed action for solidarity and reconciliation between blacks and whites. Christopher Pramuk explores an avenue for revelation within the black and white racial relationship. He sees an extreme failing on behalf of his white race in its inability to see, claiming that whites continuously create a "myth of innocence," which assumes a self-given white privilege.⁸⁸ He also highlights a failure of whites to critically examine their own role in oppression beyond a single social location. Pramuk's work complements Flannery O'Connor's efforts to expose flaws in vision. Both authors seek to put an end to self-aggrandizement and sinful action through an illuminating revelation leading to change. The moment of revelation involves an unveiling of the truth, typically recreating an image often seen but not understood fully. Pramuk describes the revelatory capacity of an event as "awaken[ing] dormant seeds of sorrow and hope, or alternately, seeds of

⁸⁸ Christopher Pramuk, "'Strange Fruit': Black Suffering/White Revelation," *Theological Studies* 67, no. 2 (2006): 347.

bitterness and resentment” in a receptive audience.⁸⁹ Pramuk and O’Connor see a greater humanity beyond the limits of race and seek to awaken within their readers and literary characters the need to see beyond the limits of their current understanding.

Pramuk’s article, “‘Strange Fruit’: Black Suffering/White Revelation,” attempts to place white Catholic understanding “at the very limit” of the conventional systems of meaning. He quotes Reinhold Niebuhr, “The truth of the Christian Gospel is apprehended at the very limit of all systems of meaning. It is only from that position that it has the power to challenge the complacency of those who have completed life too simply, and the despair of those who can find no meaning in life.”⁹⁰ Niebuhr’s statement truly offers a challenge. Mainstream understanding found in places of power is an insufficient source of knowledge. Truth must seek to challenge rather than uphold or to redefine rather than mystify. Otherwise, truth becomes a lie upheld through its unquestioned continuance. Pramuk exemplifies his own interpretation of Niebuhr through an exploration of eschatology and its effect on the Catholic imagination as well as black liberation theology and its communion with the dead in his article. He centers on how the “strange fruit” of black suffering will prove revelatory and salvific for whites. The title of his article stems from the song, “Strange Fruit,” by Billie Holiday. Her eerie lyrics read,

⁸⁹ Christopher Pramuk, “‘Strange Fruit’: Contemplating the Black Cross in America,” *ARTS* 20, no. 1 (2009): 14.

⁹⁰ Christopher Pramuk, “‘Strange Fruit’: Black Suffering/White Revelation,” 345.

“Black bodies swinging in the Southern breeze,
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.
Pastoral scene of the gallant South,
The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth.”⁹¹

Abel Meerpol, the Jewish songwriter, compares black bodies lynched in trees to strange fruit.⁹² His lyrics demand attention as he uses a strange, disturbing sight to highlight injustice. The social location of a Jewish man in the wake of the Holocaust provided the necessary vision of a common humanity regardless of race. Abhorred by the images of “man’s inhumanity to man,” he set out to reveal “what should not be.”⁹³ Pramuk identifies this as a “negative contrast experience” which at its root is “participatory and dynamic” calling one into action in the harsh reality of such horrific actions.⁹⁴ The lyrics create an image representing a revelatory dimension which draws one into “simultaneous fascination and repulsion.”⁹⁵ The lyrics demand one to listen, and through listening, one becomes engaged in the scene expressed through the sheer urgency of Holiday’s voice and the unmistakable horror of the inhumane treatment of people to one another. The words contain no sense of apology, but rather through song ask listeners to determine their own proximity to the fruit or the trees.⁹⁶ Those who hear “Strange Fruit” remain haunted by this song. The poignancy of Holiday’s voice does not allow for a safe distance for white listeners through the “myth of innocence,”

⁹¹ Christopher Pramuk, “‘Strange Fruit’: Black Suffering/White Revelation,” 346.

⁹² Christopher Pramuk, “‘Strange Fruit’: Contemplating the Black Cross in America,” 14.

⁹³ Christopher Pramuk, “‘Strange Fruit’: Black Suffering/White Revelation,” 346.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 346-7.

nor can they imagine themselves as the lynched either. A white must listen knowing that his/her people committed these atrocities while simultaneously knowing that a common humanity hangs in the tree. After hearing this song, a person cannot easily soothe their guilt or feelings of shame to “apprehend some fragment of meaning (cleansing, redemptive, esthetic) in such a horrific suffering.”⁹⁷ Rather, an “accusatory shadow” comes to loom over White American Christianity and White Catholicism and necessitates the need for communal reconciliation.

Pramuk, however, uses the piercing, lingering effects of this haunting song to frame his questions, which he believes offer meaning at the limits. The song continues, “Scent of magnolias, sweet and fresh,/ Then the sudden smell of burning flesh.”⁹⁸ The paradoxical nature of the image identifies beauty amidst horror. Equally, humans have the capacity for great good and great evil. Pramuk additionally identifies the black community’s exceptional ability to live in the paradox through their “capacity for celebration in the midst of suffering.”⁹⁹ If this song offers no recompense, then what are the listeners to do with this “strange and bitter crop”?¹⁰⁰ Pramuk describes the movement of black theologians who ask white colleagues to subject themselves to questions such as this and “to place ourselves [as whites] at the Niebuhrian limit of every racist, apathetic, individualist, or complacent framework of white hope and, in

⁹⁷ Christopher Pramuk, “‘Strange Fruit’: Black Suffering/White Revelation,” 347.

⁹⁸ Christopher Pramuk, “‘Strange Fruit’: Contemplating the Black Cross in America,” 13.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 13.

doing so, to transcend all culturally constructed limitations on Christian solidarity and love.”¹⁰¹ Outside of the bounds of these oppressive contexts a new freedom arises. The freedom fosters a collective identification and healing. Thus, Pramuk’s urging to enter this Niebuhrian limit addresses the deep, de facto segregation between whites and blacks. It does not seek to hide or glaze over any hard truths but rather asks one to dig deeper into the surrounding reality. Together all races must work together to cross this divide that inhibits true acts of Christian piety, and even more so, robs the dignity of fellow humans. Systems of racism, apathy, individualism, and complacency amidst a falsely crafted hope currently objectify and separate, but Pramuk believes that the truth reveals itself exactly at these locations. The black community without a doubt suffered painful, “senseless” violence and evil at the hands of fellow humans with the only difference found in the color of skin.¹⁰² This is known as the “*memoria passionis*,” or “dangerous memory,” which Pramuk claims holds “revelatory, even salvific meaning for White believers.”¹⁰³

Pramuk believes this transformative experience opens people up for communion and the transcendence of barriers. Ultimately, he suggests that “senseless suffering,” even that which is very real and present in today’s society, can evoke a racial reconciliation here “on earth” rather than “in heaven.”¹⁰⁴ In the Christian belief

¹⁰¹ Christopher Pramuk, “Strange Fruit’: Black Suffering/White Revelation,” 347.

¹⁰² Christopher Pramuk, “Strange Fruit’: Contemplating the Black Cross in America,” 15.

¹⁰³ Christopher Pramuk, “Strange Fruit’: Black Suffering/White Revelation,” 347.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 349.

system, followers continually look forward to the next life for their hope and solace. The directed, hopeful desire for another world in many ways encourages endurance or perseverance through suffering. Yet, theologians such as Pramuk question whether in reality such images of Christian hope require the actualized realization within human history of the validity of our faith. For him, images such as “resurrection, salvation, heaven, utopia” remain “meaningless, ideological, or flatly oppressive without foretastes or concrete realizations of them in history.”¹⁰⁵ Further, such central teachings must be understood while additionally recognizing God as very present in humanity, which has capacity for good and a capacity for evil, as exemplified by the “strange fruit” hanging in the tree.

Now to say that such idealized notions as resurrection, salvation or heaven are represented not only in this world but at the edges amidst the horror, the shit, and the suffering pushes systems of understanding. In the Christian mystery, the divine merges with the concrete, by Christ humbling himself and becoming human. Jesus did not associate with the rich and powerful, but rather the ostracized, the downtrodden, the victims, and the persecuted, who bring the opportunity for true redemption, just as He did. The reality of their suffering draws one out of oneself to recognize and work for reconciliation and solidarity at the very point of anguish. Black liberation theology advocates for a black Christ representing the union of their own suffering with Christ’s persecution and resulting death. Christ is thus represented as “a fellow sufferer, a

¹⁰⁵ Christopher Pramuk, “‘Strange Fruit’: Black Suffering/White Revelation,” 349.

confidant, a provider, and a liberator.”¹⁰⁶ Pramuk uses M. Shawn Copeland’s idea of the Mystical Body of Christ identifying the victims of history as the broken bones of Christ.¹⁰⁷ Through such a comparison, she suggests that the saving power of Christ’s death and resurrection also exist at the edges of society and are awaiting redemption with their brothers and sisters in the center.

Pramuk expands his ideas through the inspiration of Merton and *Lumen gentium*, a Vatican II document addressing the role of lay ministers, suggesting the idea of a “cloud of witnesses,” people who have demonstrated exemplary behavior and who affirm the truth of the Gospel as the face of Christ on Earth.¹⁰⁸ In black theology and spirituality, the lines between heaven and earth, living presence and dead remain much more fluid than European practices of tradition.¹⁰⁹ The strong memory of slavery and the perpetual poverty still suffered by blacks today represent such fluidity.

Black Americans today must seek to “speak truth to power.”¹¹⁰ The memory held amid lived experience seeks liberation and new life. Their spiritual songs and narratives of slavery or action in the civil rights movement provide a unifying anthem and a deep inviting cry for help and change.

A popular African American Spiritual sung at Loyola Catholic Church in Denver reads,

¹⁰⁶ Dwight N. Hopkins, *Introducing Black Theology of Liberation*, 150.

¹⁰⁷ Christopher Pramuk, “‘Strange Fruit’: Black Suffering/White Revelation,” 349.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 351.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 353.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 354.

“Somebody’s knockin’ at your door;
Somebody’s knocking at your door;
O sinner, why don’t you answer?
Somebody’s knockin’ at your door.
Knocks like Jesus,
Can’t you hear him?
Jesus calls you,
Can’t you trust him?”¹¹¹

These perpetual reminders draw one into the memory of Christ’s real presence, one’s own failings, and the question of response. Yet, white theology historically (and arguably currently) lacks in self-criticism. White Christians often remain unable to confer judgment and justice at one’s own expense. Pramuk demonstrates this by Anglo and European theologians recognizing the plight of the Latin American peoples but failing to “acknowledge the black face of suffering right in their midst.”¹¹² National borders in this case allow white Christians a physical boundary of innocence. Thus, Anglo and European theologians explore and address these issues frequently. The more challenging effort Pramuk believes rests in the act of pointing the finger of blame on one’s self as a way to recognize one’s own responsibility in oppressive treatment. In the full gravity of inhumanity, one must always accept the “weight of humanity’s collective sin.”¹¹³ As a community, people are responsible for actions committed by predecessors

¹¹¹ “Somebody’s Knocking at Your Door,” Hymnary, accessed May 3, 2011, <http://www.hymnary.org/hymn/GATHER/395>.

¹¹² Christopher Pramuk, “Strange Fruit’: Black Suffering/White Revelation,” 354.

¹¹³ Christopher Pramuk, “Strange Fruit’: Contemplating the Black Cross in America,” 17.

and also neighbors. The recognition of injustice as part of the human community acts to transform the reality of people upheld as less than human.

Through establishing a common humanity, by naming not only one's own personal sin but the plight of the poor as identified with Jesus' own suffering, one not only gives dignity but sees a "saving power in them."¹¹⁴ Jon Sobrino aligns this with the recognition of the dead. The martyrs and dead provide a provocative and transformative lens in which to view others. They permeate our limited vision by telling a story, calling to mind the past and ultimately calling others to conversion. By aligning the plight of suffering on Earth due to the blows of racism or oppressive regimes with the suffering of Christ, liberation theologians seek a response. Pramuk identifies this as a necessary movement to "conversion, light, and salvation."¹¹⁵ Followers of Christ and believers in the power of the dead view the reality of suffering but rather than stumbling under the weight of the pain see the opportunity for change. The change moves beyond the righting of one's action to a transformation in the simultaneous beauty and pain of the oppressed peoples.

Pramuk's article makes strong claims, as it seems troubling to offer up suffering for the conversion of the oppressor. Whites subjected blacks to cruelty in the forms of slavery and racism. Then, in the midst of this tragedy, this article suggests that true liberation and salvation exists for the oppressors through the suffering they cast upon

¹¹⁴ Christopher Pramuk, "Strange Fruit': Black Suffering/White Revelation," 357.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

their neighbors. This seems contradictory or a continuation of white hegemony. However, the social location of this article points to the historical account of Jesus as an example of the opportunity for salvation through suffering. Acts 5:30 reads, "The God of our ancestors raised Jesus, though you had him killed by hanging him on a tree."¹¹⁶ In the familiar sight of the crucifixion, the symbol of Christianity, strange fruit again hangs on a tree. In the traditional Christian understanding, believers must acknowledge that their salvation rests in a man they killed by human sinfulness. Pramuk relates this story to the urgency of a new approach to racial relations. He believes that white Christians risk losing their "very relationship with God, that is, salvation," move from "blindness to sight."¹¹⁷ A deep conversion lies in seeking sight, solidarity and liberation. However, along with Pramuk I would argue that the benefits exist not only for whites but for blacks also. Liberation comes as a gift, calling for conversion, and empowering the oppressed.¹¹⁸ Grace acts upon those in need of conversion and together they can move forward.

Pramuk's article at this point shifts to the theology of revelation and further explores the role of black suffering or white racism in relation to God. The movement from blindness to sight does not always result from the exploration of black suffering. For hundreds of years, the division between blacks and whites has run deep due to complacency and the inability to see a neighbor as an equal. Pramuk states, "Even if the

¹¹⁶ Christopher Pramuk, "Strange Fruit': Black Suffering/White Revelation," 357-8.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 358.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

greater 'family resemblance' of Blacks to the suffering Christ is granted, it remains to be explored how Whites might appropriate such an identification, if inclined to do so at all."¹¹⁹ Whites may choose to turn away; black suffering and its salvific revelation could be ignored further. Niebuhr attributes the inability to see oneself clearly as the reason for refusing such revelation. He remarks that revelation requires "rational analyses rooted in faith" as well as an acknowledgment of "evil not only surrounding the soul but in one's self."¹²⁰ These ideas complement his belief that truth is apprehended in the very limit of systems of meanings. Faith, for Niebuhr, acts within a social location and beyond that as an indicator of truth. Revelation, then, "takes root in those persons and communities who know 'what they are.'"¹²¹ To open oneself to another requires a firm knowledge of one's own sins and beauties. In this openness, one can more fully transcend the distorted vision and blindness that stems from an elevated view of oneself in the social location. Merton identifies this location using the imagery of "under 'the presence of the redeeming value of the Cross.'"¹²² The foot of the Cross represents suffering and one's recognition of it. By standing next to the suffering with full knowledge of self, one receives redemption, or wholeness through the complete acceptance and forgiveness of Christ.

¹¹⁹ Christopher Pramuk, "'Strange Fruit': Black Suffering/White Revelation," 359.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid., 360.

¹²² Ibid.

White revelation can essentially be summarized into three movements. White Christians experience “(1) the revelation of the real, (2) contrition and mourning, and (3) reconciliation.”¹²³ Each movement further represents a great stride in the path towards sight from the depths of blindness. The conversion will never exist perfectly on Earth, yet these movements allow one to see more clearly neighbor and God. First, the revelation of the real calls for honesty. It is a transcendence of one’s own social location into the sphere of “assessing the world in its totality.”¹²⁴ Reality exists not from one location or viewpoint but from the compilation of views that assess the world critically and in all of its complexity. Most pressing is this revelation for the rich and powerful, or those “who benefit from the status quo,” even if inadvertently this group most frequently manipulates reality.¹²⁵ This population holds stake in their status and views the world as solid when it upholds their current position. Vulnerability does not exist in a real way for these people, and therefore they must control their environment. Thus, “revelation, understood as divine disclosure and interruption opens up a more universal field of vision.”¹²⁶ Revelation then topples the idea of control and allows people to identify a radical oneness not only with neighbors but “in God.”¹²⁷ Malcolm X described his “revelation of the real” by describing his journey to Mecca in which he experienced a “revolutionary anthropological reversal,” identifying people of all races as one family

¹²³ Christopher Pramuk, “‘Strange Fruit’: Black Suffering/White Revelation,” 360.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 361.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

under the watchful presence of God.¹²⁸ The recognition of people of different colors or backgrounds as one common people truly opens one's eyes to a sense of kinship and thus a deep sense of responsibility for another. The revelation and secondary "rearrangement of thought-patterns" allows for a deeper understanding of another. This honesty and ability to see truly exemplifies Christian ideals by plunging more fully into reality.

However, one cannot traverse the reality of racism or slavery without some sense of mourning. This recognition gives one stake in the situation. A white man or woman must not only begin to see differently but express sorrow for the injustice done to a common humanity. The division of humanity into cultural centers, Niebuhr describes, tore "the whole fabric of human togetherness because they made themselves the false centers of the whole existence."¹²⁹ This identification reveals a sin of pride, a pride thriving by the dehumanization of a race. Pramuk highlights the "long, sad history of White hubris" and the list is not even exhausted after a long paragraph.¹³⁰ He identifies the destruction of culture on behalf of a more "civilized", white culture in various populations including the Native American peoples and blacks, as well as regions such as Africa, the Middle East, and Africa. The white ideas of instilling culture when looked at in light of the deaths and destruction do not suggest civility. What is the white race to do with this exposé? In the true revelation of such realities, "the cross of Christ

¹²⁸ Malcolm X, "Letter from Mecca," http://www.malcolm-x.org/docs/let_mecca.htm.

¹²⁹ Christopher Pramuk, "Strange Fruit': Black Suffering/White Revelation," 365.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

casts an accusing shadow over every center of White power in America.”¹³¹ These stories open one up to judgment in the face the ultimate inhumanity of senseless killing and death.¹³² Yet, the cross of Christ, even though construed as a deep tragedy offered salvation for people.

Therefore, the second movement of mourning and repentance expresses deep sorrow at the actions of the White community towards others. Yet, this mourning is directed at the hope of a common future that invites all races and regions into a collective movement. The deaths of masses of people around the world at the hands of the powerful, wealthy, and white similarly offer the move toward salvation. Salvation calls for repentance, conversion, and reconciliation. Whites everywhere must identify with their communities’ sin and let it transform them. The inhumanity, injustice, and cruelty expressed in the reality of years of destroying people and cultures demands that whites pay attention. The cross of Christ subjects whites to “not only judgment, but invitation.”¹³³ A deep mourning and sense of responsibility for one’s action should not suppress action but rather call us into a common identity that allows grieving but also movement toward change. Catholics possess a strong formation in this collective identity, which allows the imagination to focus on the “ritual remembrance of guilt and responsibility.”¹³⁴ Catholics believe in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ Jesus

¹³¹ Christopher Pramuk, “‘Strange Fruit’: Black Suffering/White Revelation,” 365.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Ibid., 366.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

and their role in it. They identify with their role as a Peter or Judas but survive in the light of salvation from the deep contrition, transformation with the body of Christ, and forgiveness.

Human suffering calls people into a solidarity that crosses borders or wrongful interpretations of 'other.' Together the country and world must redevelop a certain amount of courage to cross the boundaries of race, ethnicity, and economics to develop trust.¹³⁵ Such a movement recognizes the dignity of others and begins standing with them. Solidarity as expressed by Jon Sobrino is "having seen, touched, and realized love," and thus "the conviction of love is possible."¹³⁶ It seems dangerous to enter into such a relationship by opening one's self to vulnerability, but the end result of community proves worthy. Thus, solidarity invites a people to come together not offering or accepting help but in a genuine "shared presence" of love that allows the relationship to step on the "path of grace."¹³⁷ Humans cannot alone make change because they must rely on the redeeming power of Christ, who gives a grace to develop a true shared presence and movement toward "unity in difference."¹³⁸

The complication of this article lies in the black community's "ambivalent feelings (putting it mildly) about reconciliation with Whites."¹³⁹ As a white Catholic Christian, the hope of moving toward reconciliation through this revelation is powerful.

¹³⁵ Christopher Pramuk, "Strange Fruit': Black Suffering/White Revelation," 369.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 370.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 372.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 370.

A fair amount of mourning lies ahead with the reality of cruelty inflicted on others. Yet, this pain originates in the original horrific actions of the white community. Blacks suffered at the hands of whites. Racial superiority complexes empowered whites to hang blacks in trees. Then, Pramuk tells blacks that reconciliation awaits through whites' realization of blacks suffering at their own hands. The statement seems contradictory, almost a continuation of white hegemony: whites seeking once again to use blacks' condition for their own advantage. Yet, Pramuk's argument seeks to overcome the social location which allowed for such inhumanity. He wants to overturn the power structure by creating the viewpoint from the underbelly of history and society. The benefits of such reconciliation and solidarity will prove mutually beneficial - salvific for whites on account of their deep repentance and conversion but also for blacks as they lift themselves from the depths of poverty and racism.

Flannery O'Connor's "The Artificial Nigger" examines this movement of "wonder and gratitude, humility and grace" within racial relationships.¹⁴⁰ Pramuk identifies these gifts within his article's three movements to first reveal the real, then to mourn, and lastly to seek reconciliation. O'Connor, too, highlights such steps in her story. The goal of the story as outlined by Mr. Head intends for Nelson to learn a lesson, one which will force him to not only give Mr. Head greater authority but also humble him enough to return home without wanting to return to the city. The journey does not go as planned; rather the plot is full of unexpected surprises. As Mr. Head's best-guided

¹⁴⁰ Christopher Pramuk, "Strange Fruit': Black Suffering/White Revelation," 370.

intentions crumble, they become more and more lost. They intend to lead as shepherds but return home with the meekness of sheep. Their journey is marked with powerful glimpses of a reality extending far beyond what they know. Their mutual pride and self-confidence does not appear sufficient enough for the journey ahead. Rather, a graced black woman provides them with needed direction. Nelson walks away from asking her for directions reeling from the experience. He loses his identity in that of another. His moment of ultimate desperation as he could not find the way, actually guided him to the right path. He began to see things not as he physically saw them, but in light of how they were opened up and revealed to him. His sight and path became that of another's even if only recognized in the brief moment as he experienced an overwhelming connectedness in the black woman's presence. The large black woman acts like the "cloud of witnesses" in Pramuk's article "summon[ing] to conversion, bring[ing] light and salvation."¹⁴¹ She looms large as a character of strength and transformation. An essential piece of Pramuk's article, which he attributes to Sobrino encourages a "willingness to be swept along by the 'more' of reality."¹⁴² Nelson reaches this moment but is unsure what to do with this baffling experience.

Pramuk suggests that the second movement required for reconciliation with the black community requires a moment of repentance and mourning.¹⁴³ Nelson does not enter into this stage as he holds fiercely to his anger directed at Mr. Head, who jeers at

¹⁴¹ Christopher Pramuk, "Strange Fruit': Black Suffering/White Revelation," 357.

¹⁴² Ibid., 364.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 367.

Nelson and then seemingly abandons Nelson in his upmost vulnerability. Yet, together they experience a moment of revelation opening them to grief. “They stood gazing at the artificial Negro as if they were faced with some great mystery, some monument to another’s victory that brought them together in their common defeat. They could both feel it dissolving their differences like an action of mercy.”¹⁴⁴ They experienced this grace-filled moment of repentance. They do not seek to hide behind their sinful pride, but rather they recognize themselves as sinners in the overwhelming grace of God.

God triumphs in this story as they experience the Gospel’s teachings of “unity, peace and mercy” which Merton claims to be “the reconciliation of man with man, and so with God.”¹⁴⁵ They reunite with the full human community. My interpretation of this reconciliation aligns with the Catholic traditional interpretation of reconciliation as a means to make right one’s self with God. Reconciliation requires a return to the world of sinfulness. An opening up to the path revealed even as it takes one down the paths of human temptation. Faith first reveals itself through the opening up and unity of people, but due to human nature one must choose to continually open up to God’s healing power.

¹⁴⁴ Flannery O’Connor, *Collected Works*, 229.

¹⁴⁵ Christopher Pramuk, “Strange Fruit’: Black Suffering/White Revelation,” 350.

CONCLUSION

In my Salvadoran experience, I learned to love and to reinvest even in the midst of heartbreak. Since returning, the fire of justice burns overwhelmingly strong within me. It no longer feels acceptable to cling to naïve notions or remain inactive. I still struggle every day to align my physical being and wealth of privilege with my desires to be a “woman for and with others.” I seek to see through the eyes of the poor and marginalized; I blaze this path with no true experience only the will to live differently. Is this enough? I do not think it will ever be enough, but the minute I allow myself to think it is I reenter into a complacent attitude in a world full of injustice. Rather by writing this thesis, a piece meant to act as the culmination of my educational career thus far, I seek to say something. I recognize my inadequacy to relate personally to certain experiences of blackness or oppression. Yet, I also recognize the need to speak out and act out against what I do see including persistent racism and the unwillingness to claim responsibility for our past sins. This thesis seeks to put into dialogue two of my favorite works that I have read during my college career, “The Artificial Nigger” and “Black Suffering/White Revelation” in the context of greater Black Liberation Theology.

To me, these works say the same thing albeit in a different matter. They seek to expand the fabric of our lives to extend beyond lines of segregation. O'Connor and Pramuk turn a "critical eye on the enlightened rather than the benighted" or oppressed.¹⁴⁶ O'Connor, as a prophetic writer, "detected what the age was eager to deny—that the sins of the supposedly righteous were altogether as egregious as the evils of the obviously wicked."¹⁴⁷ She sees a line of separation that extends beyond the socially constructed ideas of race. The separation that O'Connor identifies stems from our most inherent being and our human desire to elevate ourselves even at the expense of others. She "reveals an evil —ethical self-righteousness—that is far subtler than injustice and far deeper than prejudice."¹⁴⁸ Especially in the American context, she identifies the autonomy of citizens as inhibiting a greater realization of humanity. Whether I admit it or not, denial pervades throughout my life. It is easy to make quick judgments on the world but what I find often the most difficult is a deep and thoughtful introspection on myself. It is a challenge to accept the sin of my own behavior and even more so to come to full acceptance of my inherent privilege and identity in the historically (and arguably current) oppressive white race. I would rather shy away in fear or act as a chameleon changing throughout society. Yet, O'Connor critiques this mentality as well as she holds disdain for John Griffin's sociological study where he lived

¹⁴⁶ Ralph Wood, *The Comedy of Redemption: Christian Faith and Comic Vision in Four American Novelists* (Notre Dame, Indiana: Notre Dame UP, 1988), 108.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 108.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 112.

as a “black man” for six weeks to write the book *Black Like Me*.¹⁴⁹ She would rather he not put on a false persona requesting rather that he come with a plain face. O’Connor rather asks her readers not to escape their own identity but rather to plunge deeply into all that it has to offer. In the South, she identifies “Southern religion and Southern manners” as “potentially liberating and ennobling” although they are often viewed as “the two things that seemed to be the worst buttresses of the evil order.”¹⁵⁰ These pillars strip the Southern culture to the two most inherent notions of being: how to relate to God and how to relate to others. In using these notions, the South does not have to reinvent the wheel; rather, they can work within an existing framework to seek an end to troubling evils of sin and segregation.

Yet, this movement cannot rely on human will alone. It requires, also, the redeeming work of God. The reality of the South, a stark representation of the rest of the nation, presents a tragedy of suffering solely because reactions to another’s skin color. In “The Artificial Nigger,” this showed through the “artificial nigger” statue which typically represents a black man in happy servitude of whites. Displayed in yards, it acts as a symbol of whites’ triumph over blacks. Mr. Head and Nelson encounter a similar statue but stand astonished by its greater power. Though the “artificial nigger” they see appears miserable and cracked attesting to the awful treatment of the black race, O’Connor seeks to show something more in this chilling image. She states, “What I had

¹⁴⁹ Ralph Wood, *The Comedy of Redemption*, 109.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 112.

in mind to suggest with the artificial nigger was the redemptive quality of the Negro's suffering for us all."¹⁵¹ Although black man suffered, life is restored through the saving power of God and the solidarity of suffering. Tragedy for O'Connor does not end the story but rather opens the story to redemption. She calls the main characters of the story to see anew, to move beyond racist denial, and move into a common humanity and shared defeat. The suffering expressed through the statue is gripping. It represents not only inhumanity toward a neighbor but also "suffering that has been willingly, patiently borne."¹⁵² The "artificial nigger" thus presents Mr. Head and Nelson with the contradictory idea that someone's suffering can bring a saving power, saving them no less. Although they may have never encountered a crucifix, "they experience the secular counterpart" occupying the ground at the foot of the cross. The "artificial nigger," in the Christian perspective, exemplifies the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. Jesus was scorned in life, mistreated all the way to death, and through the power of almighty God his death on a cross brought salvation. Black experience in America highlights a similar opportunity for communal redemption. The history of slavery and segregation based on the difference of skin color enveloped the black race in scorn and mistreatment; yet, through this suffering and oppression blacks and whites alike receive the invitation of redemption through the alignment of the modern experience with Christ's suffering on the cross. By plunging deeper into the reality of

¹⁵¹ O'Connor, *The Habit of Being*, 78.

¹⁵² Ralph Wood, *The Comedy of Redemption*, 116.

mistreatment and suffering, people receive redemption through the experience of common humanity and worldly defeat.

O'Connor revealed to Mr. Head and Nelson a lowly statue, suffering and lauded only for its dutiful servitude. Then, the mystery and power contained in the "artificial nigger" released to invite the grandfather and grandson duo into a shared existence with the statue. Therefore, in this moment, the "artificial nigger" opens them not only to reconciliation between one another, but also unto an entire group, the oppressed and mistreated blacks in America. The suffering and humility they experience opens them up to a greater understanding of the world. Mr. Head understands now that God mercifully washes him of any sin, no matter how great.¹⁵³ It is this agony he experienced as a result of his betrayal of Nelson that ultimately draws him closer to Paradise, the gates of mystery.¹⁵⁴ Mr. Head allows himself to be inspected, viewed, and ultimately judged by himself and God. It is in this judgment that he realizes "all a man could carry into death to give his Maker" is agony and that he must work to relate to those who suffer.¹⁵⁵ His self-aggrandizement recognizable throughout the story crushes under the weight of a collective testimony presented through the "artificial nigger."

Black liberation theology expresses similar elements to O'Connor's vision. After years of suffering through brutal slavery and divisive segregation, blacks in America

¹⁵³ Flannery O'Connor, *Collected Works*, 231.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

began to speak out. They realized their own power, black power, as well as, an identification with a black, suffering Christ. Just as Mr. Head realizes the greater power of the “artificial nigger,” blacks realized the power within themselves to speak up for better treatment, rights, and salvation. They ignite in one powerful movement the sentiments of past ancestors suffering along with their own. Their loud tone, forceful in nature, seeks to reclaim the ground in which they walk. They want to overthrow oppressive structures and rise above. Their plight illuminates the suffering of Christ in the modern day. For many years blacks have endured unjust treatment and abuse but just as Christ’s suffering redeemed their world, their suffering, too, will heal the world. Thus, the “artificial nigger” symbolizes more than just black suffering. Ralph Wood states that the statue “discloses the subtle grace inherent in suffering that can be redemptively borne because God in Christ has borne it himself.”¹⁵⁶ The identification and alignment of black suffering with that of Jesus Christ does not hold power due to the new black face of Christ but rather in the promise of the alleviation of suffering. Their suffering is not in vain. Liberation reigns as their suffering will lead others into the light, reconciling humanity with one another and with God.

Pramuk in his article, “Black Suffering/White Revelation,” takes the black liberation argument a step further. He offers that the suffering of blacks for centuries proves to free not only blacks but whites as well. As a white theologian himself, he

¹⁵⁶ Ralph C. Wood, *Flannery O’Connor and the Christ Haunted South* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 153.

seeks to define his social location. He identifies a strong need to stand witness from the edges of a society and through the underbelly of history. He states, "When the souls of Africa and all those who have borne the dehumanizing blows of racism are conjoined with the suffering face of Christ, who can fail to be moved, Black or White? They call us to conversion, light, and salvation."¹⁵⁷ He believes that the black strife and the alignment with the suffering of cross bear a special message for all to hear. Together they demand that the suffering not exist senselessly but for a greater realization of a common humanity. Blacks suffered overwhelmingly brutal treatment in the past which does not allow for distance but rather invites one into their suffering and ultimately to the foot of the cross. Thus, the remedy to this maltreatment occurs, according to Pramuk in a three step process: the revelation of the real, contrition and mourning, and then reconciliation.

First, he identifies the revelation of the real. He reveals "revelation, understood as divine disclosure and interruption, opens up a more universal field of vision."¹⁵⁸ O'Connor's "The Artificial Nigger" exemplifies this move at two different points. Initially, Nelson experiences revelation through his interaction with the large black woman. He is enthralled by her presence which seems misdirected amidst the culture of racism. Yet, he cannot help but realize the pull of something beyond. He cannot help but sense being drawn into a greater connectedness that aims at unity over the divisive nature of

¹⁵⁷ Christopher Pramuk, "Strange Fruit': Black Suffering/White Revelation," 357.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 361.

racism. He becomes aware in this relational experience of his own location. Before he distinguished blacks and whites and responded to social cues but he remained unaware of his own role in the societal norms.

Second, contrition and mourning as described by Pramuk place the subject under the accusatory shadow of the cross. In this movement, the subject can no longer maintain a safe distance. Traditionally, a great disconnect divides notions of history of destruction and current injustice. However, Pramuk eliminates this idea causing one to take responsibility for the injustice of present and past. This element involves contrition and mourning at the great suffering caused and resulting. It involves guilt, acknowledgment, and grief at the reality now seen more clearly. Mr. Head experiences this as he recognizes his neglect to care for Nelson in a responsible manner. He mourns this by calling out to God for help crying, "Oh Gawd I'm lost! Oh hep me Gawd I'm lost!"¹⁵⁹ He recognizes not only his separation from Nelson but additionally from God. O'Connor states, "He felt he knew now what time would be like without seasons and what heat would be like without light and what man would be like without salvation." He mourns his own action of cruelty toward his grandson, and in turn, gains a greater perspective on the world's pride and resulting sin. He recognizes his own involvement in sin and also how that acts to separate far more than the color of one's skin. Therefore, he seeks now to live differently. He repents for his behavior and through Pramuk's third step of reconciliation seeks to make change.

¹⁵⁹ Flannery O'Connor, *Collected Works*, 228.

Thirdly, the step of repentance asks him to make himself right with God. He must rid himself of his ideas of separation and authority which separated him in the past from the true revelation of reality for all of its beauty and tragedy. In this, he must recognize his “common defeat” with Nelson, “the artificial nigger,” the greater world, and God. Life remains a mystery but in the unity of people into a common humanity one has purpose. O’Connor represents this movement to struggle with reality through the return trip home. Mr. Head and Nelson experience an incredible moment of redemption through the “artificial nigger” yet their comments on the sight downplay their understanding of its significance. Mr. Head responds, “They ain’t got enough real ones here. They got to have an artificial one” and Nelson states, “Let’s go home before we get ourselves lost again.”¹⁶⁰ Yet, Mr. Head experiences true mercy and repentance as they arrive at their junction. He mourns his sins as he realizes the true “agony” suffered by so many and also, “He saw that no sin was too monstrous for him to clam as his own, and since God loved in proportion as He forgave, he felt ready at that instant to enter Paradise.” He repents in the healing love of God and sets out to live his life differently. He knows the sins of Peter’s denial and the sins of racists as his own and seeks now to live his life differently.

O’Connor, Black Liberation Theologians, and Pramuk write in response to racism. They each approach the topic in a unique manner and target a different audience. Yet, they invoke a response and action within me. Their accumulation and conversation

¹⁶⁰ Flannery O’Connor, *Collected Works*, 230.

mirrors my own journey of revelation, contrition, and reconciliation. In my journey to El Salvador, I became disillusioned with the world. I struggled to understand how the world could support so much injustice and poverty without a response. Even more so, I could not comprehend how the El Salvador Civil War never appeared in my textbooks or arose as a common memory for people. Then, the crowning moment of my disillusionment and plunging into the true reality was identifying my own tendencies to cling to my own blindness and sense of privilege. I felt continually split as to how to live life “for and with others.” Was it not conflicting that I would leave my newfound family to return to a million choices on menus, a sturdy roof over my head and floor under my feet, and more? I mourned the thought that I would leave and they had to stay. I knew that my Salvadoran families gave me so much more than I could have ever given them. Yet, upon return I knew that I could never forget them and that their revelation to me of a common humanity would forever change my interactions with those around me. My reconciliation with the world takes place through this paper. I resolve to never again be satisfied with the status quo condoning racism or overwhelming poverty. I seek to say something and to reinvest in a world that often breaks my heart. El Salvador helped me to overcome my blindness and disassociation to sense true responsibility and investment in a common humanity.

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