Abstract: This article compares an interspecies moment in Howard Thurman’s classic text, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, and Gwendolyn Brook’s novella, *Maud Martha*, to consider how Black liberation theology might reimagine the animal-human binarism it has assumed from the Western Philosophical tradition. I contend that an animal-human binarism attenuates the liberationist ethos of black theology, particularly when the animal is centered. To explore this, I first parse out the theological anthropology of Black liberation theology to demonstrate how it has historically occupied a complicated relationship to Western depictions of the human. Then, I argue on the grounds of its own theological convictions, that black theology is obligated to move beyond this ambivalence. As an example, I assess Howard Thurman’s classic essay to discover what insights might be revealed if we reconsider his reading of the mouse’s squeal, considering a comparison to a similar encounter between a human and a pest in Gwendolyn Brook’s novella, *Maud Martha*. This comparison reveals that Thurman may very well be limited in his capacity to recognize something in the mouse’s defiance. On the other hand, Brooks’ ecowomanist lens may better affirm the defiant mouse. Maud Martha identifies with the mouse so much that she, in contrast to Thurman, spares its life. This moment resulted in her undergoing an unexpected spiritual experience. This experience, according to my reading, is an example of what I am describing as “catching a glimpse” of a liberating deity’s interiority or, what I am considering as a new relation with divine immanence. In other words, in sparing the animal, in seeing the animal as of equal significance, she consequently felt a connection with God. This moment of liberation and divine connection is the ultimate aim of Black liberation theology. An aim we can try to reach by including the animal into our liberationist objective.

Keywords: black theology; ecocriticism; ecowomanism

Is the black a human being? The answer is hegemonically yes. However, this, in actuality, may be the wrong question as an affirmative offers no assurances. A better question may be: If being recognized as human offers no reprieve from ontologizing dominance and violence, then what might we gain from the rupture of “the human”? (Jackson 2020)

-Zakiyyah Iman Jackson

1. Introduction

What if the Christian anthropology that is assumed in Black liberation theology derail s the ultimate desire of black liberation? What if Black liberation theology is funneled through what Charles Long calls “the centered consciousness”, (Long 1999), through what Emilie Townes’ designates as the “White hegemonic imagination”, (Townes 2006) and therefore is, instead, a continuation of the necropolitical (Mbembe 2019) as opposed to the freedom for the oppressed as initially announced? What if black theology’s historical argument of black people occupying the category “human” under white political sovereignty’s rubrics has engineered a continuation of domination as opposed to an abolition of enslavement? And if so, if the epistemologies and anthropologies that undergird Black liberation
theology thwarts our desires, then how do we offer a redress? How do we, as black theologians, participate in what Ashon Crawley has theorized as the otherwise, as not only the desire, but the willingness to invest our practices into other ways of being human? (Crawley 2016). How do we reimagine and diminish the concept of the human that is attached to Western philosophy and follow black critical theory and ecowomanism and begin anew? How do we start including other forms of life on the planet, and maybe beyond, into our radical concern?

Prior to James Cone’s call for a black theology—a form of Christian theologizing through the American experience of the Black Atlantic—people of African descent, amidst diversity, contained a diverse and expansive religious framework that included beliefs in various instances of supernatural presence. Through various African traditional beliefs, through numerous contacts and exchanges, the African worldview was not only open but convinced that spirits saw no distinction in nature. That is why black theology must follow ecowomanism and include in its diverse thought an attention to and care for the natural, the environment, and the animal. An attention and care that was there before the arrival of European ships.

To make my case, in this article I will first turn to black critical theory to describe the problem of the human. Then I will turn to Marjorie Spiegel’s, The Dreaded Comparison: Human and Animal Slavery (Spiegel 1988), because it attempts to explore the connection between race, slavery, and animal torture. Spiegel’s text captures the overarching spirit of the popular dialogue between racial justice activists and animal rights advocates. Spiegel’s text provides me with an opportunity to detail why I not only think the ontological comparison between animals and African Americans are unfruitful but that it is anti-black, which is critical for the foundation of my claims regarding black theology and animals. Then, I will parse out the theological anthropology of Black liberation theology and show that it has historically occupied a complicated relationship to the imago dei, to the classical depictions of the human in the Western philosophical tradition. Lastly, I will then show how this theo-anthropological tension influences an interspecies moment in Howard Thurman’s classic text, Jesus and the Disinherited (Thurman 1949). Thurman finds mice in his home and, in a Derridean sense, feels “seen” but in a way that maintains the animal-human binarism. Unfortunately, Thurman does not quite identify with the plight of the mice and misunderstands the mice’s defiant squeal as a sort of spiritual hatred toward him as the more powerful species.

To offer a counter reading to Thurman, I will engage in an extended reading of the theopoetic ecowomanism in Gwendolyn Brook’s novella, Maud Martha (Brooks 1953), where—in contrast to Thurman—her protagonist identifies with the quiet defiance of the mouse and spares its life. This moment resulted in her undergoing an unexpected spiritual experience, a conversion that connected her with the divine. In other words, in sparing the animal’s life, in seeing the animal as of equal significance, Maud Martha felt God.

Such an endeavor into Brooks’ theopoetic ecowomanism presents Black liberation theology with an opportunity to further excavate from our protocols enlightenment thought that keeps us bound to a logic that is ultimately ruining. By taking seriously the historical intimacy between black people across the diaspora and the animal, Black liberation theology will continue to convert people to a way of life long destroyed by the anthropological machine. It will have a hand in countering the effects of the Anthropocene. It will continue to, in other words, free the captives. Embracing the animal and weakening the animal-human binarism, I argue, creates an internal and spiritual liberating experience. This experience resembles a conversion. One that causes the human to feel one with divine immanence, one with a spirit that connects them with all of life. And that connection, that spiritual transformation, furthers and contributes to the liberatory cause. To say it differently, it helps us become liberated from the concept of the human that has dehumanized us all.

Let us begin with that that cause because such a cause is in accordance with Black liberation theology’s proclamation to declare liberation for all that exists under colonial powers and demonic forces. Black liberation theology contemplates ultimacy through
what is made possible by thinking with and through black flesh. Thinking with black flesh causes an openness to what the West calls “religious”, and compels one to pursue abolition democracy as a form of worship, to see fugitivity as liturgical, as ritual. Ultimately, Black theology is black study of God. For Crawley, “Black Study is a methodological mode of intense, spiritual, communal intellectual practice and meditative performance” (Crawley 2016). And according to James H. Cone, Black liberation theology is inherently the study of God’s special revelation as black revolution. And what’s more, Cone’s black revolution is an *ecological revolution*.²

This special revelation as revolution is not limited to the advantages or concerns of what Sylvia Wynter reveals to us about “Man” with a capital M and his over-representation (Wynter 2003). The definition of Man that stems from the European Renaissance’s secularization of Christian anthropology has overdetermined the characteristics and appearance of “liberty” to the detriment of the world largely and to the chagrin of Black liberation theology specifically. Thus, in the hidden corners of Black liberation theology—lodged underneath its objectives—is the heretofore slowly developing idea that revolution means *for all of life living within the cosmos*. Black liberation, black revolution, is meant for all of existence, past and present, here and on its way, standing erect, moving on all fours, and/or existing as particles of objects (plants, animals, dust, etc.). While the anthropology of European Christianity that first served as the grounds for thinking of black people as humans in black thought and theology, per contra, seeks instead to capture life. Hold it. Keep it lodged under its dominion. And one of the ways it accomplished its evangelical expansion is by pillaging the world, plundering vast amounts of flesh and soil—through Christ—and categorizing everything that cannot fold into its over-representation of “Man”, *as enslavable*, as subject to their ceaseless salvific torment. In other words, white political sovereignty and the creation of the New World was a coetaneous enslavement of land, water, (non)human animals *and even God*.

The theological justification of this violence is that black and indigenous people are considered *beasts who worship beasts*—and by that I do not mean they are refused the designation of human as much as I mean they are, following the work of Zakiyyah Imam Jackson, “bestialized humans” (Jackson 2020)—infidels who either exist outside the purview of God’s concern or heathens for whom God cares about so much that “He” orchestrated their bondage for necessary religious development. To counter this theology and its subsequent recreation of the world—and its plunder—people of African descent across the diaspora utilized various ideologies and theologies to achieve recognition as human beings. Such recognition spurred abolitionist efforts, sparked revolutions, and incited insurrections. Such recognition caused mutinies across slave ships, uprisings across the pages of literature, and mass escapes across indigenous soil in the “underground”. Yet what was unexpected, and yet successful, according to Saidiya Hartman, was that the afterlife of slavery included such recognitions as part and parcel of the reconfiguring of slavery’s protocols. Slavery was not abolished. It persisted. Its afterlife continued uninterrupted underneath the rhetoric of democracy and freedom. Which means, the order of things remains—even thrives—because the humanism that undergirds the past and contemporary abolitionist efforts derails the natural connection between all the living by keeping Man as the zenith of its goal. This deceit is made possible through the ethical thought of white political sovereignty, or what Zakiyyah Imam Jackson calls “universal humanism”, a false idea of inclusion and assimilation that functions as the solution for the despair of white supremacy’s clenches (Jackson 2020).

With these ideas in mind, and if Black liberation theology is to remain a form of liberation theology—a black study of God—and “a theology of the opaque that promises another alternative of a structural sort”, (Long 1999) then we must not only go further in our critiques of liberal humanism, but must follow the insights of black critical thought and ecowomanism and recover the animal *and the animism* lost in our desire to achieve Western humanity. We must embrace the animal as a part of ethical concern. Black theology must refuse the attempts made for inclusion in the over-representation of Man and weaken the
binary between the human and the animal that plagues our ethics. This is precisely why Crawley asks “how do western dualistic perspectives affect how we think the capacity to produce thought as theological? How is western dualistic thinking grounded in the desire for pure difference such that the dualism can be obtained?” (Crawley 2016).

Considering Jackson and Crawley’s concerns, Black liberation theology must become, at its core, indistinguishable from the agenda of eco-womanism. And in this article, I will use Gwendolyn Brooks’ literature to make my point. I believe Brooks’ work can be read as an example of ecowomanist literature. Ecowomanism is a unique framework because, according to Melanie Harris (Harris 2016), it “interrogates the structural evils that African-American women have historically faced and argues that earth justice is and has always been a justice priority for black women” (emphasis mine). By “earth justice”, Harris is stating that the planet—which exists as a living thing—along with everything that exists on it and with it, is central to their concerns. Harris continues:

> Because of the deep value of the earth as sacred, and the interconnection of black women’s bodies to the body of the earth, a religious worldview that translates across the African diaspora is one that African and African-American women all embody a commitment and connection with the earth.

(Harris 2016)

This connection centers around the idea that white supremacy and colonial domination affects every aspect of time and space, everything across land and sea, and it removes any form of logic that lessens the values of nonhuman life compared to human life. Therefore, using black religious texts and black literature, I aim to exhibit how Gwendolyn Brooks’ novella *Maud Martha* (Brooks 1953)—a text I am classifying as an ecowomanist project—offers insight into how a recovery of the animal expands black theologies by offering a poetic glimpse into the imagined interiority of a liberating deity, or black immanence, and thus causes a conversion that expands our concerns. Such an imagining creates the space to see oneself as one with all that is both perceived and undetected.

I use the word “recovery” as opposed to the common word “return” to suggest that a redemption is at hand, to suggest a reclamation of a former embrace. The violence of Christianity and its New World emergence occasioned the white hegemonic imagination which stems from a colonizing episteme, a way of rationalizing that requires the animal-human binarism for its crude understanding of the imago dei. And because African and indigenous frameworks included animals and nature in their conceptions of the sacred, White supremacist Christianity corrupted that framework to justify its violence.

2. The Dreaded Beginning

In Marjorie Spiegel’s passionate text, *The Dreaded Comparison: Human and Animal Slavery* (Spiegel 1988), we encounter a claim that helped establish the popular terms of discourse from over the last 30 years that ties together American enslavement and animal cruelty (Spiegel 1988). According to Spiegel, human societies across the globe have finally reached a moral consensus by concluding that American chattel slavery, and the Transatlantic Slave Trade more broadly, was an inhumane enterprise (Spiegel 1988). We as a species, therefore, considering our new ethical knowledge, should feel equally compelled to emancipate the animal because they, like the darker human, are enslaved and trafficked across the planet. If we can learn from our errors and free black people across the New and Old World, then we should also deduce that the animal, especially the animal within our reach, also needs and is inherently worthy of freedom and liberation. Unfortunately, speciesism—a term coined by Richard D. Ryder—not only prevents us as humans from seeing the animal as worthy of our compassion, but also causes discomfort, especially for people of African descent, at the site of comparison because the animal has been used as a metaphor for proper victim in our multiple parlances (Ryder 1970).

Discomfort notwithstanding, in page after page, Spiegel exposes the similarities between the slave condition at the level of materials and compares it to the predicament
of animals. Despite the intention of the text—an intention I read as trying to abolish the conditions of animal pain—the comparative argument invisibilizes blackness by way of abstracting it. Black ontology, in Spiegel’s analysis, or what Victor Anderson calls “ontological blackness”, reduces blackness to narrow, confining categories that are only useful for her implicit claim. Through Anderson, I read Spiegel’s ontological blackness as solely operating as the raw materials necessary to leverage the real argument, the real claim. Yet what Spiegel says is her real claim is not necessarily argued. It may seem that Spiegel tries to argue that we, as a species, should have realized animal rights in concert with the realization of African people’s humanity. And the end of animalizing black people, should have resulted in the termination of blackening animals. In turn, for Spiegel, the abolition of slavery should have also included citizenship for the animal.

Yet what Spiegel really argues, according to my reading, is that black people are illogical accomplices in the domination of animals by historically taking offense at the dreaded comparisons about them. In Spiegel’s text, Sterling Brown—the renowned black poet and folklorist of Howard University—is reduced to what I read as an imagined archetype of her audience, a typical black person who argues for defining black people as human beings in contradistinction to the various animals used to demean them. The proclamation that black people are humans and not monkeys, bucks, mules, or chattels, is offensive to the listed animals. This offensiveness, to Spiegel, is because black people across history seem to believe that animals should be enslaved. Which confuses her. For Spiegel, that black people were enslaved and then “freed”, should spur an ethical survivor’s guilt that compels them into passionate involvement in Animal Rights activism. The lack thereof, to Spiegel, is a moral failure of black people and occasions not only her text, but the pornotropic (Spillers 1987) photographs of black slaves and animals in their most tortuous conditions. Photographs make her claim legible. Black people should “see” how they are not any different historically from the animals that are currently harmed. 3

Yet, the commonality of experiences and/or enslavement can prove fruitful outside the boundaries of an ontological comparison. Not only that, following Saidiya Hartman, the abolition of slavery did not abolish slavery, but instead set the terms for its continuity. Following Hartman, the state utilizes citizenship to sustain the protocols of white political sovereignty. Black theology rejects the implicit logic of Spiegel’s text and the dreaded comparison claim because the issue of white supremacy we seek to confront regarding the animal-human binarism causes a rift between all members of life. There is no need for an ontological comparison between black people, specifically, and animals. Moreover, the notion of commonality—the spirit of the comparison— is a liberal way of centering oneself at the sight of one’s pain. Black liberation theology asks, what happens if we refuse the need to see unity for necessary identification and solidarity? What if they are, or it is, nothing like us? On the other side, what if a refusal or acceptance of commonality has no bearing on the desire for abolition?

What if there was a concentration, instead, on black and animal alliance and solidarity, interspecies intimacy, one that has existed since the slave ship and auction block, to address the real threat to all existence, white political sovereignty, which is the promise of our apocalypse. Ridding black theology of Western philosophy’s understanding of the human and sidestepping Spiegel’s anti-Black claim of black anxiety will help us avoid what Zakiyyah Imam Jackson calls “the presumption that all humans are privileged over all animals by virtue of being included in humanity, or that racism is a matter of suggesting that black people are like animals based on prior and therefore precedental form of violence rooted in speciesism” (Jackson 2020, p. 17). Unfortunately, Spiegel’s text is more concerned about black anxiety at the sight of the comparison than about white supremacy’s success at creating the agonizing condition for the comparison. Black peoples’ historical acceptance or refusal of the comparison does not cause or destroy the persistence of either racism or animal suffering.
3. Black Theology and the Human

According to Christian theology, human beings were created in the image of God. However, the “concept” of the human has been one of the more complicated categories in black theological discourse. Most black theologians note the difficulty in offering a theological anthropology because of the history of the idea in Western Christianity. Moreover, there is little agreement regarding the sources used to argue for black humanity. Although, I believe, black theology historically possesses an animal-human binarism, what is fruitful for our agenda is also recognizing the tension it seems black theologians have had in offering a theological anthropology without addressing the corrupted binarism. This tension, I argue, is generative. I will review some key arguments of black theological anthropology before turning to the literary analysis.

In James H. Evans’ We Have Been Believers: An African American Systematic Theology (Evans 2012), Evans offers a history of the tension in black theological anthropology (Evans 2012). For Evans, “African-American theology does not escape the requirement to explicate its understanding of humanity. However, the social, political, historical, and cultural context in which that theological discourse takes place gives this question a distinctive cast (Evans 2012)”. Evans explains this distinctive cast by writing: “People of African descent in Europe and North America have not been able to address the question of what it means to be human without, first, wrestling with what it means to be black. One could argue that the question of being black was separated from the question of being human by elevation of the factor of race to a normative status in relation to the human being” (Evans 2012). In other words, according to Evans, black religious scholars from George Kelsey to contemporary theologians and scholars, have combated the ways the Western episteme’s invention of race complicates the agenda of black theological anthropology.

Dwight N. Hopkins, aware of this habit, casts aside the concern for the history of white supremacist theological anthropology in Being Human: Race, Culture, and Religion (Hopkins 2005), and presents an understanding of “the human” on black theology/religion’s own terms through black folktales (Hopkins 2005). In Anthony Pinn’s Terror and Triumph: The Nature of Religion (Pinn 2003), we encounter how colonizers and enslavers tried to transform the slaves into things, objects, creatively engineering ways to reduce the “personhood” of the slave (Pinn 2003). Pinn reminds us of how enslavers presented people of African descent as dangerous animals themselves, bucks, and other cattle. Yet, for Pinn, it is the burden of black religion (using insight from art criticism) to find new methodical tools to understand and present the humanity of the enslaved.

For James H. Cone, black people are humans who fight for—and are refused—dignity. Because dignity is an inherently human characteristic, the nonnegotiable source that makes human beings human, it is the singular category upon which black people focus. For Cone, dignity is what separates a being from a nonbeing. Yet, there is a persistent critique of this perspective through a refusal to see assimilation and liberalism into how white supremacy defines dignity as solutions for black plight. This refusal is so significant for early black theology in its emergence that Cone calls for a new system of values from which to study God and maneuver the world. Cone writes, “When black theology calls forth a new value-system, it is oriented in a single direction: the bringing to bear the spirit of black self-determination upon the consciousness of black people. It is the creation of a new cultural ethos among the oppressed blacks of America, so that they are no longer dependent on the white oppressor for their understanding of truth, reality, or—and this is key what ought to be done about the place of black sufferers in America” (Cone 1969).

For Cone, Black Power as an ideology is not only theoretically commensurate with Christianity but is its true representation in the 20th century. This connection between two seemingly contrasting views, necessitates extracting from Christianity the values of Western philosophy and liberal humanism that causes the seeming differences. Cone’s first four texts from 1969 to 1975 operate as a genealogy of this philosophical extraction.

In Black Theology of Liberation (Cone 1970), Cone distances his thought from Karl Barth’s emphatic rejection of natural revelation—and his own perspective on revelation in 1969—by
claiming that theology is anthropology. God thinking, or black study of God, must begin with the concrete experience of the disinherited. Cone's theological anthropology does not expand to the point of including the animal, but what is apropos for our aim is to show how early black theology was against liberal humanism, or what Zakiyyah Imam Jackson calls “universal humanism.” Cone writes:

Secondly, black theology is suspicious of those who appeal to a universal, ideal humanity. Oppressors are ardent lovers of humanity. They can love all persons in general, even black persons, because intellectually they can put blacks in the category called Humanity. With this perspective they can participate in civil rights and help blacks purely on the premise that they are part of a universal category. But when it comes to dealing with particular blacks, statistics transformed into black encounter, they are at a loss.

(Cone 1970)

Cone's point echoes the words of Jackson. Jackson writes, “Assimilation into ‘universal humanity’ is precisely this tradition’s modus operandi”. So, Jackson queries: “If being recognized as human offers no reprieve from ontologizing dominance and violence, then what might we gain from the rupture of ‘the human’?” (Jackson 2020) Through Cone and Jackson, we see that black theology has historically recognized that humanity is a complicated and abstract concept that does not translate into including particular black people into its covenant.

So far, this article has attempted to explain the complications in thinking about the “human” as well as the historical tension in Black theology's theological anthropology. This tension is most explicit in Howard Thurman’s Jesus and the Disinherited (Thurman 1949) and results in his misunderstanding the liberating squeal of the mice he finds in his home. I will read this moment in Thurman’s essay through the work of Gwendolyn Brooks’ novella, Maud Martha (Brooks 1953), where her protagonist identifies with the quiet defiance of the mouse and spares his life. This moment resulted in her undergoing an unexpected spiritual experience. I embark upon this reading not to overly criticize Thurman because he was ultimately concerned with different questions, but I just want to interrogate what insights we might glean from placing the animal into Thurman’s world in order to see what we might discover for our objectives today.

4. Howard Thurman and the Mice

In 1936, Howard Thurman—a black mystic, and minister—was confronted by an unnamed Hindu man who was not only angry about the manipulative presence of Christian missionaries in India, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka, but was also rather nonplussed by Thurman’s earnest evangelicalism. Perplexed by Thurman’s presence, he, almost reluctantly, insulted Thurman by vocally calling him a traitor to the “darker peoples of the earth”. He found it disconcerting that Thurman, a black man from the United States, whose people was suffering under Jim Crow and tormented through lynching, would find himself in South Asia advocating on behalf of Christianity—the colonizer’s religion—to impoverished people of the global south who needed aid and resources. Thurman says this insult caused a five-hour conversation that allowed him to express to the unnamed Hindu his interpretation of what he calls the “religion of Jesus” (Thurman 1949). This interpretation of Jesus, to Thurman, is vastly different from the Christianity of the colonizers. The religion of Jesus is distinguished from the religion of the colonial Christ because it is a religion where the primary figure, Jesus of Nazareth, is understood and related to the impoverished people of the global south who needed aid and resources.

Thurman sees that the oppressed, or the disinherited, are held captive by what he calls the three hounds of hell: fear, hypocrisy, and hatred. These hounds force the disinherited to live incomplete lives, lives that are poisoned by psychological techniques employed to help
them feel a sense of their own interiority while also ruining the possibility of cross-racial human connection. Thurman’s interpretation of Jesus is not confrontational in a violent sense, but spiritual in a way that mirrors Gandhi, a direct influence on Thurman’s religious thinking. Overall, the objective of Thurman’s religion of Jesus is to liberate the disinherited from the hell they think they need to live to feel free. To show how this relates to Thurman and the animal, I will heretofore solely focus on the third hound of hell: hate.

Thurman believes that hate as a term evades proper description. Yet, it is palpable in our world because it is sown among all people through nationalism, war, and racism. Thurman believes that the disinherited—to their detriment—utilize hatred to feel a sense of themselves. It generates self-realization. This is a hound of hell because it prevents the disinherited from having the ability to create genuine relationships with others. Thurman’s understanding of the function of hatred and what it prevents is ultimately how he will read the house mice, whose squeal represents the desire for self-realization in the face of impending destruction. I argue that Thurman overall misunderstands confrontational expressions of proclaiming dignity and conflates the affect of the disinherited with the behaviors of those who embrace the normative structure of domination. For Thurman, black protest and defiance, especially through black nationalist ethos, is an example of mirroring white supremacy.

My reading of Thurman and the mice centers around two points. First, Thurman has a moral connection with the mice but eventually severs it as he remembers the social contract of human domination he has with his fellow species. Secondly, Thurman hears the mice squeal and connects it to a form of hatred. Thurman writes, “I remember that once, when moving from one home to another came upon a quiet family of mice in a box in the basement. Their presence created a moral problem for me, for I did not feel that I had the right to take their lives. Then I remembered my responsibility to the family that was moving in, and, with heaviness of heart, I took my daughter’s little broom and descended upon them with a mighty stroke.” (Thurman 1949).

For sure, Thurman’s mysticism privileges a radical openness and compassion to everything living. Yet here is a family of vermin who wish to live freely and safely, like his own. Thurman recognizes their lives, their breathing, their souls. Thurman connects with it. I argue—despite Western philosophy measuring it to determine value—seeing sentience stops Thurman and causes him to glance. However, that glance is disrupted as he remembers the social contract with his fellow species. Thurman claims it would have been immoral towards the future tenants to, in the words of Agamben, “let them be” (Agamben 2004). Therefore, the first glance and immediate interspecies connection is interrupted by Western “thought” that springs from the order of things.

This encounter between Thurman and the mouse resonates with what Joshua Bennett theorizes as “the contagious alterity of the pest” (Bennett 2020). For Bennett, pests occupy a complicated space within our thoughts on industrialization, economics, and property. But the moment, the second glance that erased the solidarity of the first, begs the question: what would the new family have thought of their predecessors if Thurman had allowed the mouse to continue living? What did the presence of the pest signal to Thurman? Thurman continues,

Sensing the impending tragedy, one of them raised himself on his haunches to meet the stroke of the broom with a squeal of defiance, affirming the core of his mouse integrity in the face of descending destruction. Hatred makes this sort of profound contribution to the life of the disinherited, because it establishes a dimension of self-realization hammered out of the raw materials of injustice.

(Thurman 1949)

My criticism of Thurman is not reduced to the lack of connection or comparison in the way Spiegel might desire, as much as it is in Thurman’s reading of the squeal. By concentrating on himself as a representative of “Man”, and therefore the “subject of hate” from the animal, as opposed to interpreting the squeal as a passionate jeremiad to urbanization and
development, the very condition of possibility for their presence and encounter inside his home, Thurman sees hatred (one of the hounds of hell) as a personal indictment or attack on his personhood.

Through a black theo-ecological reading, I assert that Thurman transforms himself into an object of the animal’s bitterness identical to how he believes the dispossessed immorally hate the personhood of their oppressors to their own detriment. And I argue that defiance, the squeal of the weak, is not a hateful response directed towards Thurman (the one who functions as the colonizer in this event), as much as it is a pronouncement of dignity—a category Cone misunderstands as exclusively human—in the face of an unavoidable and impending tragedy. Thurman misses the moment of external defiance because he sees it as proof of an internal entrapment. This misrecognition fails the mouse. I understand that Thurman’s overall project in his essay was addressing other concerns; but, if Thurman would have heard the squeal as a call for alliance against the Anthropocene, the animal human binarism might have been attenuated.

I recognize that my analysis of Thurman presents him differently than in common portrayals and readings. Thurman is often read as a mystic who was ahead of his time concerning ecological thought, comparative theology, and black apophatic theology. However, it is because of his capaciousness that his perspective on the mouse stands out within his most popularly cited text. To put it clearly, if Thurman himself, with all his spiritual insight, is still vulnerable to the animal-human binarism then it reveals the pervasiveness and success of Western anthropology.

5. Gwendolyn Brooks and the Mouse

I will now contrast Thurman’s reading of his encounter with a family of mice with a similar affair in Gwendolyn Brooks’ ecowomanist novella—published four years after Jesus and the Disinherited—Maud Martha (Brooks 1953). First, I recognize that I am using a novella, black fiction, to counter an autobiographical moment in Thurman’s classic essay. I recognize the methodological difficulties and perhaps inconsistencies I am leaving myself vulnerable to. My thesis, however, is affirmed by crossing these boundaries. I assert firmly that black eco-criticism, produced through art, is a helpful tool and provides an imaginative anthropology that can replace the anthropology assumed through Western philosophy or modern thought.

Maud Martha is expressed, perhaps implicitly, as a text with a protagonist that has a unique and extraordinary connection with the natural world that surrounds her. As a child, Maud Martha is fascinated by the beauty of nature, especially the dandelions, described as “yellow jewels for every day” (Brooks 1953). These natural jewels which held a particular commonness to Maud Martha were especially significant because she saw such commonness—and a commonness that still required cherishing—reflected in herself. In another passage, before boarding the local train, Maud Martha watches a gorilla with whom she connects, hoping he escapes and finds safety. In a different section of the novella, Maud Martha finds herself in a home that has roaches but wonders to herself why the roaches are there—as opposed to elsewhere—and yet is unable to kill them (Brooks 1953). And on another page, whilst reflecting on what her deceased uncle possibly gave the world to improve it, make it better, and perhaps more livable—and a bit more beautiful—she guesses that he “perhaps had stopped his car short once, and saved a dog” and knowing that pausing one’s vehicle on the road is proof of an uncommon goodness, she continues that hypothetical event by saying “so that another car could kill it a month later” (Brooks 1953). And whilst preparing dinner, tearing apart a whole chicken she is prepping to cook, she struggles and grieves for its life. In a kind of interspecies mourning, she opines that people eat chicken (and meat in general) because the faint-hearted butcher can conceal the violence involved in the preparation from the larger society. The trade of the butcher—to Maud Martha—allows human beings protection from what might be considered uncivil to their modern ethos. Therefore, the butcher’s concealment engenders a process of societal disremembering, allowing for the invention of a false reality. This
pseudo-reality, under the cloak of civility, allows for the avoidance of encountering the processes of the hunt, the kill, the blood, and the carcass that makes the presentation of meat on the plate possible. This pseudo-reality allows humans to eat meat with comfortable oblivion, an open secret where everyone knows what they do not know, or does not know what they know. That is why Brooks writes in this passage that the “The difference was in the knowing. What was unreal to you, you could deal with violently” (Brooks 1953).

However, through Maud Martha, Brooks writes: “If chickens were ever to be safe, people would have to live with them, and know them, see them loving their children, finishing the evening meal, arranging jealousy”. “Knowing” chickens would mean an alternative episteme, including a rupturing of the animal-human binarism that is fueled by a practicing Cartesianism. And this intimacy is modeled in Maud Martha’s encounter with a mouse.

Maud Martha had finally captured the mouse. After evading her tricks and traps, after living a life of fugitivity, circumventing the deathly hands of humans, she was finally able to apprehend it. Yet in contrast to Thurman’s mouse that squeals in the face of destruction, Maud Martha’s mouse’s “black eyes contained no appeal—the little creature seemed to understand that there was no hope or mercy from the eternal enemy, no hope of reprieve or postponement—but a fine small dignity” (Brooks 1953, p. 70) Maud Martha identifies in the mouse’s eyes something akin to resignation, but a dignity that faces impending destruction with proud acceptance. Maud Martha identifies with the mouse’s pride—sees what Thurman does not see and what Cone claims is intrinsically human—and wonders about the other thoughts the mouse might have. Brooks writes,

She wondered what else it was thinking. Perhaps that there was not enough food in its larder. Perhaps that little Betty, a puny child from the start, would not, now, be getting fed. Perhaps that, now, the family’s seasonal house-cleaning, for lack of expert direction, would be left undone. It might be regretting that young Bobby’s education was now at an end. It might be nursing personal regrets. No more the mysterious shadows of the kitchenette, the uncharted twists, the unguessed halls. No more the sweet delights of the chase, the charms of being unsuccessfully hounded, thrown at.

(Brooks 1953, p. 71)

For Maud Martha, the hypotheticals of the mouse’s life outside of her constant pursuit, compelled her to liberate the animal. The title of this section of her novella includes the term “spare”. Yet this sparing of the mouse’s life had a profound theological effect on her. I wonder what was spared in her by sparing the mouse? She had experienced, at least for a moment, the feeling of omnipotence, a theological characteristic normally reserved for the absolute, for (a) God. However, instead of exerting her power, and in place of enacting torment on behalf of the war between human and pest, she extends it grace and mercy. She replaces Thurman’s broom with liberation, with letting be. She grants the mouse freedom. Through Bennett’s theory of blackness functioning historically as the caesura between person and creature, we see that Gwendolyn Brooks offers through Maud Martha and the mouse: she spares a theopoetics of black socialization (Bennett 2020). One that registers the mere assumption of dignity and worth without requiring its declaration. Language, or its presumed absence, does not foreclose the possibility of interspecies alliance or mutual recognition. Both Martha and the mouse communicate in silence, or perhaps through it, and propel it to another common ground. Such common ground is the canvas upon which Martha wonders about the life of the mouse, and the life he may have and enjoy despite the ever-present threat of capture.

Brooks writes that Maud Martha says to the mouse, “Go home to your children… [to] your wife or husband.” And then she opened the mouse trap and allowed it to flee. What is more, this moment of rejecting sovereign violence resulted in an internal spiritual freedom for Maud Martha. “Suddenly” Brooks writes, “she was conscious of a new cleanliness in her. A wide air walked in her. A life had blundered its way into her power and it had
been hers to preserve or destroy. She had not destroyed . . . Why? I am good! I am good!” (Brooks 1953)

What Maud Martha experiences in the sparing of the mouse, in the shouting of “I am good”, is nothing less than the reimagination of oneself. The sparing changed her as much as it helped the animal. In attenuating the animal-human binarism and experiencing, even for a second, the power of a god or, the strength of the sovereign, she stumbled upon the praxis of an opaque god of liberation. She stumbles upon the ability to wield power and yet refuses. My reading of Maud Martha’s “I am good!” is that the proclamation of “good” was a result of her refusal to participate in human domination. The “good” she felt as a result of her decision was the feeling of rupturing the concept of “Man” in her thought. It was a destruction of the contract that Thurman kept. If being “human” requires creating a distinction of value between us as a species and the rest of life, then Maud Martha refused it and opted for the otherwise. (Crawley 2016)

If Crawley is right and “Blackness—when thought within the bounds of pure reason, which is to say when thought theologically—calls into being the violence of the state, of the divine”, (Crawley 2016, p. 128) then Maud Martha, is a prime example of an ecological text where blackness becomes a way to feel deeply for the world. And this feeling provides room to opt for the otherwise, the imaginative. And this sensing and feeling, this blackness, resulted in a spiritual experience that offers insight into the possible feeling of God. In other words, what we learn from Brooks’ text is that refusing and attenuating the animal-human binarism, sensing and feeling the natural world around us, allows, or engenders, a transcendental and concrete connection with however we understand our spiritual cores. I read this passage as instructive for encountering the possible interiority of the liberating ground of being. In sparing the mouse, in seeing spiritual worth and value in the animal, one can become one with the spirit of life that connects us all.

What does it mean to catch a glimpse of, or encounter, God’s interiority? It is more poetic than precise. It means that if God is the ground of being and is present in the pursuit of liberation, of abolition, then God’s spirit is shared and felt with humans who join God by exhibiting behavior we proclaim is central to God’s essence. If God’s mysterious essence is something we approximate as akin to freedom, to liberation, then freeing any form of life from oppressive conditions is inherently participating along and with the spirit of God.

However, Black liberation theology, in distinction from its earliest iterations, is not committed to making and keeping normative claims concerning God or the universe. Instead, it only makes claims about the objective and ultimate desire of our indefinable gods: liberation. Black liberation theology includes numerous gods, traditions, methods, and possibilities. Its primary claim—perhaps only claim—is that it is black study of God. Yet, from my perspective, I believe God and gods were also kidnapped in the transatlantic slave trade and they are—like us, who are combattng captivity—still in the pursuit of abolition. Yet, as Paul Tillich has claimed, God is the “ground of being”, the force or power of existence that foregrounds the existence and inter-connectivity of all life. God, as the divine mystery that transcends full epistemological recognition, is—as James Cone gestured towards—partially recognizable in the desire and pursuit of freedom. Like Cone has reminded us, time and time again, where there is call for liberation, God is there. Where there are cries for freedom, God is there. Where there are pronouncements of dignity, God is there. Perhaps what Maud Martha teaches us, theologically, through a theology grounded in a black ecology, is that the cries and squeals of the animals, of the planets, of the earth, are their forms of resistance, and those moments also reveal God’s liberating presence. What we must do in black theology, is follow the insight of Gwendolyn Brooks’ ecotheology and remove the remnants of Western philosophy that sustain the animal-human divide. With that said, I argue that Black liberation theology refuses assimilating into “the human” and the hegemonic imagination and recognizes life as the spirit of being, regardless of the flesh or epidermis it borrows, and seeks to enact a God-given world that does away with
all domination and enslavement, along with its logic. What we must do is identify with the animal’s defiance, refuse the temptation of inclusion into the over-representation, and maybe then we will be closer to the world we proclaim that is on its way.

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### Notes

1. For Agamben, the concept of “the human” and its proximity or distance from the animal is constructed through what he calls the anthropological machine. Through the machine, the animal operates almost like a canvas upon which notions of the human are created. For more see: Agamben (2004).

2. For Cone, liberation as a concept within black theology is biblical. That is why the task of the theologian is to proclaim liberation to the oppressed because liberation is not only the heart of the gospel, but also the central claim found across the Hebrew bible and the Christian scriptures. From Moses to Jesus, freedom is the central Judeo-Christian message. For more see: Cone (1970).

3. For Hortense Spillers, pornotroping is a term employed to expose when people are reduced to objects for violent and sexual objectives, and thus all personhood and personality is removed. For more, see Spillers (1987).

### References


