

BLACK CATHOLIC THEOLOGY – CONSULTATION

Topic: Erasure, Displacement, Labor, and Surplus in the New Gilded Age:
Seeking Theologies of Life-Flourishing in the Black World

Administrative

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Convener: SimonMary Aihokhai, University of Portland

Moderator: Joseph S. Flipper, University of Dayton

Presenters: Camillus O. Njoku, Loyola University, Chicago

Rufus Burnett, Jr., Fordham University

Emmanuel Osigwe, Duquesne University

The contemporary global economy is characterized by overproduction and fungibility of persons, the conditions of which only intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many of those valorized as “essential workers” by public authorities and corporations faced dangerous working conditions for a living wage. Yet income soared for the wealthy. The Black Catholic Theology consultation asked: against the contemporary backdrop, how does Black theology develop understandings of freedom and practices of flourishing?

In “Anti-Black Race-Based Socio-Politics of Work and the Making of the Underclass: A Theologico-Decolonial Perspective,” Camillus O. Njoku described an “anti-Black socio-politics of work,” rooted historically in slavery and colonialism, that is perpetuated today in globalization and neocolonialism. The result is a form of erasure. Amidst these global challenges, Njoku sees within African struggles for justice and social movements in the African diaspora manifest a counter socio-politics. Njoku develops the interconnections between decolonial theory and pneumatology. In opposition to the manifestations of empire, the Spirit is at work in reconstituting human community intended by God for flourishing.

Rufus Burnett, Jr., in “Surplus, Decoloniality, and God Talk: A Decolonial Reflection on the Thought of Charles Long and James H. Cone,” considers two modes of thinking about surplus: the surplus generated by the economies of extraction on the plantation and the surplus generated within the self-organization of those enslaved by the plantation economy. First, Burnett draws from the concept of opacity developed by Charles Long, that is the “surplus of meaning” flowing from those whose lives have been reduced to nonbeing. This opacity is a meaning that exceeds the value extracted from their lives on the plantation. Second, while James Cone points to Fannie Lou Hamer as an advocate for the integral relationship between economic and racial justice, Burnett specifies Fannie Lou Hamer’s work with the Freedom Farm Cooperative as an exemplar of opacity exceeding the meaning of the plantation. Hamer’s work is one that developed possibilities for freedom on “plots” that were on the plantation. Burnett argues, like the geography of the plot, theologies informed by Black experience highlight the possibilities for “life within rather than beyond the cartography of the plantation.”

Emmanuel Osigwe presented a paper entitled “The Impact of Ecocracy and the Global Economy on the Black People: Reinventing a Theology of Resistance and Integral Human Development.” Osigwe theologically addressed the problem of the

“gift” of development aid on the African continent. Unlike the Marshall Plan, which aimed at supporting existing European institutions, he argues that much of the aid directed to Africa is disruptive and is aimed at the “recreation of the recipient’s cultural, political, and economic paradigms.” The result is a “vicious circle of aid.” While Osigwe argues for the rejection of foreign aid, he also proposes sources in Catholic social teaching for development of a theology of the non-oppressive gift.

There were approximately seventeen people in attendance who discussed aid paradigms and economics, plantation geographies, pneumatology and decoloniality, and Black concepts of freedom.

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