Coconino Canticle:
Reading Race, Origen, and "Ontological Blackness" in the *Song of Songs*[1]

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'I ENTREAT YOU, BEWARE OF BIGOTRY.'[2]

The following essay takes, as its point of departure, an assertion made by James Cone back in 1969: "…it should be said that racism is so embedded in the heart of American society that few, if any, whites can free themselves from it. So it is a time for whites to recognize that fact for what it is and proceed from there."[3] A great deal has shifted in our society since those words first saw the blush of print—and a great deal has not. In this presentation I will endeavor to frame my remarks in light of Cone's admonition—to me, as a "white" theologian—to recognize certain realities and to proceed in a certain way. I hope, for the next few minutes, you will be willing to indulge in this recognition with me.

First of all, some location of the speaker is in order. I am coming before you this morning as a young man raised in the Southern United States, trained at college in the canons of Western philosophy and later, in graduate school, in systematic and Biblical theologies. I am now an adjunct instructor at a small, predominantly African-American Bible college. So much of what I say this morning is informed by these varied experiences, and the disconnection that I find between them.

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[1] Presented at the 2005 meeting of the Wesleyan Theological Society at Seattle Pacific University, march 3-5, 2005.
[2] John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* (New York: The Epworth Press, 1952) 91.
[3] James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (New York: Seabury Press, 1969) 23-24.

By disconnection I mean this: the training I have received as a thinker and a theologian has not accounted for the reality I have experienced in dialogue with my students. Their experience, and the application of theology to their churches and their lives, is often tempered by their acute awareness of the racial divides that still operate covertly and overtly in America. My experience as a student, however—even at schools as rich in civil-rights history as Vanderbilt—my experience as a student in theology has not prepared me to say the words that I will attempt to say this morning, to you, in my attempt to recognize the reality my students face, and to act accordingly.

My thesis today is simple, and arguably to some quite banal: my thesis is that here, in the American context, we encode race and racialism in every discourse into which we enter. And let me clarify who I mean by 'we': I mean it quite generically (recognizing all the dangers of speaking generically on this issue), we *Americans*. But I also mean it quite specifically: we *theologians*—meaning *us,* you and me. I take my cue here, again, from Cone, when he wrote in 1998 of "the appalling silence of white theologians on racism in the United States and the modern world…progressive white theologians, with few exceptions, [he goes on to say] write and teach as if they do not need to address the radical contradiction that racism creates for Christian theology."[4]

My contention here today is that this is not just a crisis in American theology for our writing and teaching, but indeed for our very *reading* of the theological traditions. It should be noted, as well, that I wish to frame this not just as a problem facing academia, but as an *ecclesial* problem. These issues of theology affect the reading we do and the way we worship, in robust and complex interactions.

[4] Cone, *Risks of Faith* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999) 130.

So this essay will chart some courses between some disparate poles: it will navigate both some aspects of American popular culture and patristic theology, in an attempt to articulate the particular moment of twenty-first century American protestant ecclesia. Because of time, I will make these moves too hastily, I admit. However, I feel I am drawing from some rather archetypical examples of the cultural and theological moments I wish to highlight, so I believe that, even with the brevity, the substance of what I wish to argue will remain clearly in focus.

With only a handful of central characters and a *prima facie* simplicity of narrative, *Krazy Kat* enacted a repetition of gestures played out across a surreal landscape of the mythical American southwest. The premise of the strip is quite simple: Krazy, the hero(ine),[5] is desperately in love with an indifferent an hostile mouse named Ignatz. Ignatz, in turn, delights in taking bricks and throwing them at Krazy's head. The irony and humor of the strip stem from Krazy's constant misinterpretation of this violence as a sign of affection. The violence of the bricks only strengthens Krazy's adoration by the end of any given strip. The banality of this structure is deceptive, however, and conceals tremendous variety and depth of theme in its constant re-visitation.

While on the surface this is mere *cartoon*—implying its frivolity, transitoriness and whimsy rather than its *seriousness*—there is a long standing regard in literary and cultural studies circles for *Krazy Kat* as a synecdoche of American culture, especially for the nascent racial tensions here in "the land of the free". In brief: the strip 'plays' with the concept of social roles and hierarchy. Krazy and Ignatz trouble the waters of

[5] Krazy's gender in the comic strip is constantly shifting between male and female, and on more than one occasion s/he is referred to as *both* within the span of a single sentence.

gender/sexual preference, class, bourgeois moral values—in addition to race—all while maintaining the illusion of innocuous and light entertainment. To dismiss the subversive impact of *Krazy Kat* as a marginal matter is to disregard the fact that for well over three decades it was *the* prominent feature of the many newspapers published as part of William Randolph Hearst's media empire.

To disregard *Krazy Kat* is, moreover, to (dis)miss the racial enigma of its creator, George Herriman, whose very own life could be seen as an *embodiment* of American racial encoding. Cone's statement that in America it is "inevitable that black children should hate their blackness" could well describe this enigmatic cartoonist who is listed on his birth certificate as 'colored' and on his death certificate as 'Caucasian,' and who was referred to by his fellow cartoonists (due to his swarthy appearance and slightly unplaceable accent) as "the Greek."[6] As commentator Eyal Amiran puts it, "Herriman thought he had African American ancestry, and took some steps to pass for white."[7] This desire to be of an 'acceptable color' is interwoven both with creator and creation, as we shall soon discover.

So let's focus for a moment on *Krazy Kat* as a microcosm of the questions of American race identity, played out and 'encoded' across thirty years of newspaper pages. For purposes of space, we will examine closely one strip from 1921. The strip, which ran originally on October 16 of that year, opens with a scene of Krazy passing under a painters berth and being doused with whitewash. The paint transforms Krazy and masks normally *black* fur as white. Informed that the paint will easily wash off with a dip in the

[6] For a fascinating discussion of Herriman's lineage—and its thematic relation to *Krazy Kat*—the reader is encouraged to read Eyal Amiran's "George Herriman's Black Sentence: the Legibility of Race in *Krazy Kat*" in *Mosaic* Journal, September 2000. See in particular pages 62-3 for the tidbits referenced here.
[7] Amiran 62.

river, Krazy heads off to clean up. Upon approaching the bank, however, s/he is observed by Ignatz, who has been pining for a vision of a 'beautiful nymph'. Seeing the be-whitened Krazy, Ignatz totally fails to recognize the object of his usual disgust and violence, professing instead a fawning and undying love and appreciation of the 'beauty' which he has beheld. When Krazy re-emerges from the water, restored to normal hue, we find in the last panel an enraged Ignatz once again hurling his brick at the head of Krazy. The vision is over. Things have returned to 'normal'.

The parallels, I contend, are clear: Krazy, in 'becoming white' (losing blackness, abandoning what is at other points in the comic strip described as an 'Egyptian' or 'Ethiopian' feline heritage), *passes* into acceptability and adoration. In an ironic reversal of how we normally describe such matters of 'cleanliness' or 'purity,' the Krazy *before* bathing is 'beautiful,' the Krazy *after* bathing is detestable, *and the only difference is whiteness.* Reading a beauty that is literally only skin deep, we find encoded here an entire moral and aesthetic ontology—with attendant reactions of adoration or violence.

To read this *innocently*—to read it as *mere* cartoon—demands the bracketing of both the racial realities of the man Herriman and the racial realities which obtained in 1921 and still obtain today. That is (following a version of James Cone's argument) to read this cartoon in this American context as if racism is not a factor *can itself be a covert act of racism*. To attempt to read it innocently is to be guilty. To read it naively is already to be duplicitous.

Let us turn now from this cartoon to a more "serious" theological text: namely Origen's *Homily on the Canticle of Canticles*. In particular I want to draw your attention

to the exegesis he performs on the 5th and 6th verses, which speak in the voice of the "Black Bride,"

> She [the Black Bride] has repented of her sins, beauty is the gift conversion has bestowed; that is the reason she is hymned as beautiful. *She is called black, however, because she has not yet been purged of every stain of sin*, she has not yet been washed unto salvation; nevertheless she does not stay dark-hued, she is becoming white. When, therefore, she arises towards greater things and begins to mount from lowly things to lofty, they say concerning her: Who is this that cometh up, having been washed white?[8]

You will likely already have noticed some parallels here between this text and the *KRAZY KAT* strip from a moment ago: these notions of switching colors, of washing and white-washing, and of the connections between whiteness, beauty, and acceptability.

Now, I have discussed this homily at some length with my colleagues studying theology with me at Vanderbilt, and they have argued strenuously against the notion that Origen is *literally* indicating racial whiteness and blackness here. The exegesis is intended by Origen to be *allegorical* and to indicate spiritual conditions—this is their claim. I do not contest their arguments here: I agree that Origen's intentions—so far as we can surmise them—were not overtly racial or racist. But where I want to focus is not on the matter of Origen's intentions.

Rather, it is important to focus on this text as a *reading* moment. Particularly, to focus upon it within this American context and to consider how that context encodes reading—not to spiritual allegory, but to race. Let me say that when I first encountered this homily what struck me about it were not its allegorical aspects. Rather, I read

[8] Again, the emphasis here is my own.

Origen's remarks about the Black Bride's desire to become white, her desire to lose her blackness, in light of my own experiences in the South; that is to say, I read it through my own experiences of the manifestations of white privilege and white centrality I have observed and—to a great degree—benefited from in my life and education. My *initial* response to the mention of light and dark, whiteness and blackness in this text was to regard it as a racial text—a text about race and racism. Perhaps I am an anomaly in this—but I do not think so.

I think instead that these images—light and dark, black and white—function for us as Americans in a manner wholly different than the manner in which they might have functioned for Origen. *And this function is not a matter of our choice*. We cannot bridge the hermeneutic impasse and will ourselves, as American theologians and pastors, into a neutral state regarding this text, or any text. Whether I am willing to admit it or not, a text like Origen's—and there are many like it—a text that ties *blackness* to *sin* and *whiteness* to *beauty* is going to function for me, as an American—and perhaps more explicitly as a white-privileged-American—in a peculiar and in a *particular* way.

The peculiar functioning of these signs offer a double danger to me as a reader—or perhaps I should call it a double *temptation*. The first temptation—frowned upon these days but not so recently practiced—would be to collapse culture and text to the degree that Origen's allegorical readings become literal, allowing Origen to unwittingly fund an agenda that *wants* to see blackness as a mark of sin and whiteness as the desirable norm. While such overt racism is currently out of favor, one does not have to look back very far for examples—whether it be in the claims of books like *The Bell Curve* or statements of theologians as prestigious as Reinhold Neibuhr attesting to the "cultural backwardness"

of people of color.[9] The temptation to read race *oppressively* into a text such as this lingers.

The second temptation—and the one I fear I and those whose theological training resembles mine are more prone to—would be the temptation to read a text like Origen's *as if the American context and history of race did not matter*—as if, in other words, the racial moment could be purified out and reading might be innocent of it. The temptation urges us to concentrate solely on Origen's allegorical intentions and to think nothing of our own intentions, retentions, and just plain *tensions* as readers.

And it is this temptation to explain away or ignore this racial moment in American theology that is the danger for those who have been trained as I have been trained. It is a temptation and a danger that confronts theologians like me not only when we read Origen, but when we read across the spectrum of the theological tradition. Wesley, for example, in his *Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, defines sanctification, 'being sanctified' as "To be renewed in the image of God, 'in righteousness and true holiness.'"[10] As with Origen, I understand that Wesley's conception here is spiritual and innocuous—however, in a culture where for several hundred years this "Image of God" into which renewal occurs has included the notion that God is *white* (not *spiritually* white but *racially* white)—in a context in which our readings can be affected and infected in such ways it is incumbent upon us to name this temptation for what it is, to acknowledge it and *resist* it. Not to treat it as a non-issue, or act as if we can choose for it to be there or not, but to name it and own a portion of responsibility for it, *explicitly*, in this time and in this place.

[9] Cone, *Risks* 132.
[10] Wesley 1886, 48.

In closing, I realize I am a guest among you. This is my first time attending a conference of the Wesleyan Theological Society. My colleagues who have been here before assure me that, in the matters of which I have been speaking all-too-cursorily today, you folks are aware of the issues and have been often at the forefront of confronting the sort of temptations I have been talking about. If that is the case, I salute you, and will admit the possibility that my words this morning were perhaps more for me than for you, and that I am a late ally in a struggle to which you have already been a part. In other words, I hope that I have been preaching to the choir here. Whether or not this is the case, however, I put the matter to you squarely as one that we must continue to talk about, and I am glad to be here to join in the conversation. As one who feels privileged to be here, I thank you.

ORIGEN – from THE HOMILIES ON THE CANTICLE OF CANTICLES

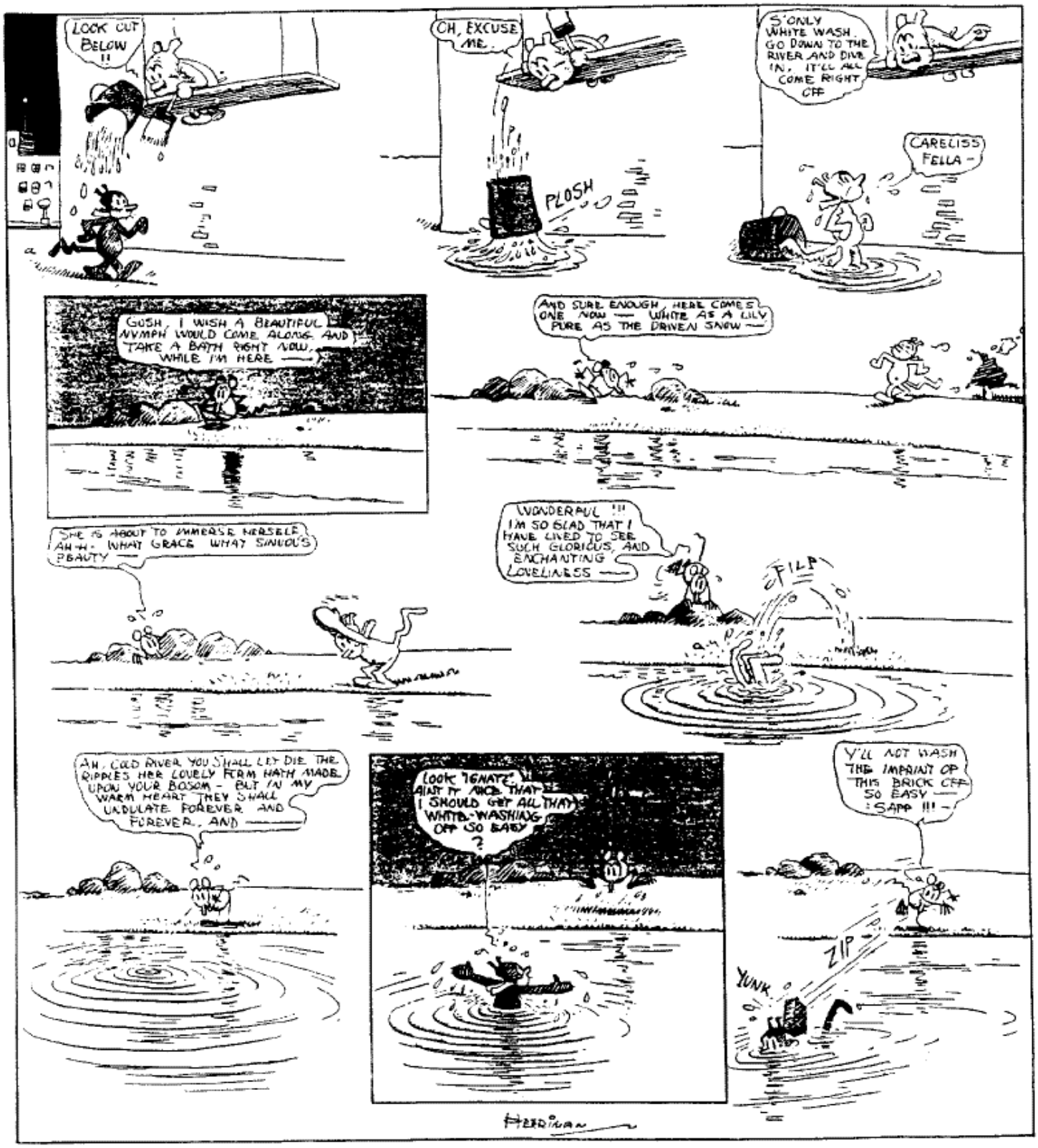
From the Latin translation by St. Jerome - English translation by R.P. Lawson

6. The Bride then makes the maidens this reply: I AM BLACK AND BEAUTIFUL, O YOU DAUGHTERS OF JERUSALEM--We learn now that "daughters of Jerusalem" is what the maidens are--AS THE TENTS OF CEDAR, AS THE CURTAINS OF SOLOMON. LOOK NOT AT ME, FOR THAT I AM BLACKENED; FOR THE SUN HAS LOOKED DOWN ON ME. (1.5)

Beautiful indeed is the Bride, and I can find out in what manner she is so. But the question is, in what way is she black and how, if she lacks whiteness, is she fair. She has repented of her sins, beauty is the gift conversion has bestowed; that is the reason she is hymned as beautiful. She is called black, however, because she has not yet been purged of every stain of sin, she has not yet been washed unto salvation; nevertheless she does not stay dark-hued, she is becoming white. When, therefore, she arises towards greater things and begins to mount from lowly things to lofty, they say concerning her: Who is this that cometh up, having been washed white? And in order that the mystery may be more clearly expressed, they do not say leaning upon her Nephew's arm, as we read in most versions--that is to say, episterizomene, but epistethizomene, that is, leaning upon his breast. (8.5) And it is significant that the expression used concerning the bride--soul and the Bridegroom Word is lying upon his breast, because there is the seat of our heart. Forsaking carnal things, therefore, we must perceive those of the spirit and understand that it is much better to love after this manner than to refrain from love. She comes up, then, leaning on her Nephew's breast; and of her, who at the Canticle's beginning was set down as black, it is sung at the end of the marriage-song: Who is this that comes up, having been washed white?

We understand, then, why the Bride is black and beautiful at one and the same time. But, if you do not likewise practice penitence, take heed lest your soul be described as black and ugly, and you be hideous with a double foulness --black by reason of your past sins and ugly because you are continuing in the same vices! If you have repented, however, your soul will indeed be black because of your old sins, but your penitence will give it something of what I may call an Ethiopian beauty. And having once made mention of an Ethiopian, I want to summon a Scriptural witness about this word too. Aaron and Mary murmur against Moses, because Moses has an Ethiopian wife. (Num 12.1) Moses weds an Ethiopian wife, because his Law has passed over to the Ethiopian woman of our Song. Let the Aaron of the Jewish priesthood murmur, and let the Mary of their synagogue murmur too. Moses cares nothing for their murmuring; he loves his Ethiopian woman, concerning whom it is said elsewhere through the prophet: From the ends of the rivers of Ethiopia shall they bring offerings, and again: Ethiopia shall get her hands in first with God. (Ps 71.8-10, 67.32) It is well said that she shall get in first; for, as in the Gospel the woman with the issue of blood received attention before the daughter of the ruler of the synagogue, so also has Ethiopia been healed while Israel is still sick. By their offence salvation has been effected for the Gentiles, so as to make them jealous. (Rom 11.11)

"I am black and beautiful, O you daughters of Jerusalem." Address yourself to the daughters of Jerusalem, you member of the Church and say: "The Bridegroom loves me more and holds me dearer than you, who are the many daughters of Jerusalem; you stand without and watch the Bride enter the chamber." [Let no one doubt that the black one is beautiful, for all she is called black. For we exist in order that we may acknowledge God, that we may tell forth songs of a song, that we may be those who have come from the borders of Ethiopia, from the ends of the earth, to hear the wisdom of the true Solomon.] And when the Savior"s voice is heard thundering out the words: The queen of the South shall come to judgment and shall condemn the men of this generation, because she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold, a greater than Solomon is here, (Mt 12.42) you must understand what is said in a mystical sense: the queen of the South, who comes from the ends of the earth, is the Church; and the men of this generation whom she condemns, are the Jews, who are given over to flesh and blood. She comes from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom, not of that Solomon about whom we read in the Old Testament, but of him who is said in the Gospel to be greater than Solomon.



October 16, 1921