Doing Theology with Radical Particularities:
Insights from African American Theology

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Abstract

This paper examines the challenges of representing marginalized groups in theological discourse, particularly in the context of Korea's constrained theological climate. This study draws on the works of two African American theologians, Emilie Townes and Victor Anderson, whose theological responses resonate with challenges comparable to those in contemporary Korean theology, to seek insights for promoting radical particularities. Townes' concept of the fantastic hegemonic imagination critiques systemic mechanisms of erasure, while her counter-memory offers a method for reclaiming silenced narratives and resisting reductive stereotypes. Anderson's critique of categorical racism and his proposal of the grotesque genius emphasize the importance of embracing the unsettling and contradictory aspects of identity, challenging essentialist and heroic representations. Together, their approaches

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suggest pathways for Korean theology to affirm the full diversity of marginalized identities without reducing them to socially acceptable norms. This paper argues for a transformative approach to theological ethics in Korea—one that resists hegemonic narratives and embraces the radical diversity of minority groups as essential to the flourishing of a just and inclusive community.

I. Introduction: Challenges in Representing Minority Groups

Theologians who try to advocate minority identities by problematizing and dismantling the oppressive ideologies often tend to represent the sociopolitical and theological concerns of the communities from which they originate. This approach is common among the theologians coming from non-dominant cultures such as Asian, Latina/o, Native American, Black, LGBTQ, disabled, and so on, who must provide the historical and cultural contexts of the communities they are discussing to the readers who are not familiar with their cultures. The "politics of representation," as Native feminist theologian Andrea Smith criticizes, can in turn lend itself to "totalizing and essentializing discourses about the communities theologians seek to represent."[1] The representative politics deployed by theologians from the non-dominant culture often renders them to become the self-appointed representatives of their communities, regardless of whether they seek this leadership role. This standpoint, though unintended, could yield undesirable consequences, because it might ignore and trivialize all differences among the communities they are speaking for, thereby silencing the voice they try to give them.

It is a challenging task for theologians from non-dominant groups to discuss theology and theological ethics without unwittingly making broad assumptions about the different contexts of oppression their com-

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[1] Andrea Smith, "Dismantling the Master's House with the Master's Tools: Native Feminist Liberation Theologies," in *Hope Abundant: Third World and Indigenous Women's Theology,* edited by Kwok Pui-lan (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2010), 72-85; 77.

munities are enduring. The social justice pathos can be easily in collusion with the colonizing hegemony unless they undo the hegemonic normativity within their own projects. It is because of this reason that Kwok Pui-lan, a prominent postcolonial theologian, argues that the challenges of White feminist theologians are not radical enough if they only aim to replace the position of "the Subject" without being conscious of their complicity in the colonizing project.[2] In a similar vein, queer liberation theologian Marcella Althaus-Reid criticizes Latin American liberation theology's "preferential option for the poor" in that its representational position erases all gender, sexual and class differences among the Latin American's lives and experiences. She argues that Latin American liberation theology has grouped a variety of conditions of oppression under one "homologated category" while categorizing and romanticizing the poor as a healthy, asexual and "decent" agent of liberation." In this homogenizing process, according to Althaus-Reid, "the local structures of knowledge of survival of different people" are forgotten.[3]

In contemporary Korean theological circles, advocating for minority identities is even more fraught with complexities, especially in a climate that not only resists inclusivity but also actively silences minority voices. The recent "10.27 United Worship and Great Prayer Meeting" exemplifies this dynamic, where prominent religious leaders not only opposed social inclusivity measures but implicitly reinforced the bounda-

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2 Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 52-76.

3 Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics* (London: Routledge, 2000).

ries of acceptable discourse within Korean theology. In such an environment, theologians who attempt to advocate for marginalized perspectives often find themselves isolated, constrained by both social pressures and theological expectations. The rigidity suppresses minority voices twice over: not only by discouraging open discussion but also by framing the experiences of marginalized groups in ways that obscure their full complexity, aligning them instead with "acceptable" narratives.

In the highly constrained environment of Korean theology, discussions about minority identities are limited, and when they do emerge, they often adopt a cautious tone that emphasizes similarity to established norms as a way of fostering acceptance. While this approach allows marginalized voices to enter theological discourse in ways that are resonant with mainstream perspectives, it risks reducing the identity of minority groups to a narrative centered around fitting in, rather than fully embracing their distinctiveness. The emphasis on sameness, while understandable, confines minority theology to a reactive position, always attempting to justify its existence by showing that it is "not so different" from dominant norms. This approach frames minority inclusion in terms of crisis and accommodation rather than fulfillment and thriving, ultimately limiting the potential for a truly expansive and inclusive theological vision. By focusing primarily on how marginalized identities align with established norms, this theological stance inadvertently leaves less room for acknowledging and celebrating the complex and sometimes unsettling aspects of these identities—those facets that do not neatly fit into existing frameworks. Moving beyond proving alignment with dominant structures, Korean theology needs to

embrace a more transformative approach that allows for the fullness of marginalized experiences to be acknowledged and valued, paving the way for a richer and more inclusive discourse.

This paper seeks to explore alternative paths by engaging with the works of two African American theologians who, within similarly fraught contexts shaped by historical and contemporary Black respectability politics, have advocated for radical particularities. The first section examines the emergence of respectability politics during the Jim Crow era, highlighting its role in perpetuating internal hierarchies and exclusions. The second section turns to its contemporary neoliberal iterations, focusing on the mechanisms of secondary marginalization within Black communities. The third section draws on Emilie Townes' concept of counter-memory, which disrupts hegemonic narratives, and Victor Anderson's notion of grotesque genius, which critiques essentialized identities and embraces the complexity of marginalized experiences. Building on these insights, the paper proposes the radical particularities as a theoethical perspective for reimagining Korean theological ethics in ways that resist hegemonic norms, honor diversity, and promote inclusivity.

II. The Historical Roots of Respectability Politics

In understanding African American theologians' commitment to radical particularities, it is essential to first examine how cultural forces have shaped the representation of Black people.

The concept of "recognition," according to political scientist Melissa

Harris-Perry's explanation, is originally derived from the Hegelian concept of "mutually affirming recognition that allows citizens to operate as equals within the confines of the social contract."[4] The recognition plays an important role in the development of human identity. However, the marginalized people face fundamental and continuing threats of their opportunity for recognition. Failure of achieving "accurate recognition" caused a psychological and a sociological pain to self, according to Harris-Perry.[5] Therefore, attaining accurate recognition becomes a prominent issue for the marginalized.

In the post-reconstruction era and the subsequent Jim Crow regime, the easiest way to obtain recognition was achieving a certain level of economic self-help and bourgeois cultural norms, in other words, "respectability."[6] Elite Blacks regarded bourgeois values of self-control and Victorian sexual morality as a crucial part of the racial progress, so that they uncritically accepted them in their habits and practices. They also propagated this White middle-class value systems and cultural norms to the masses of Black people in their communities.[7] According to historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, who first coined the term "the politics of respectability,"

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4 Melissa Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 35-6.

5 Ibid. , 37-8.

6 The post-Reconstruction era, following the end of Reconstruction (1865–1877), saw Southern states reversing many civil rights gains through legal and violent means, restoring white supremacist control. This period laid the groundwork for the Jim Crow era, beginning in the 1890s, when segregation laws were codified to institutionalize racial separation and oppression, persisting well into the 1960s. See Horatio Viscount Nelson, T*he Rise and Fall of Modern Black Leadership: Chronicle of a Twentieth Century Tragedy* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2003).

7 Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen*, 38.

this approach aimed to regulate and reform the individual behaviors of Black people to prove their qualification for citizenship.[8]

Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois represented contrasting approaches to Black progress in the post-Reconstruction era, often seen as two competing ideologies within African American leadership. Washington, an advocate of industrial education and economic self-help, endorsed an accommodationist stance, arguing that Black Americans should work within the existing social order, focusing on economic success and demonstrating respectability to gain acceptance from White society.[9] In contrast, Du Bois, through his concept of the "Talented Tenth," advocated for higher education and intellectual development as pathways to uplift. He argued that a small, educated Black elite could lead the race toward equality, challenging systemic injustice more directly.[10]

Black elites of this time considered themselves as the only qualified and legitimate agents for Black liberation who resolve the so-called "Negro Problem."[11] They failed to stand sincerely with and for their race by morally and culturally distinguishing themselves from the impoverished lower class. As such, Black elites of that time, according to Joy

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8 Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880~1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 187.

9 *Nelson, The Rise and Fall of Modern Black Leadership,* 17.

10 W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Talented Tenth," in The Future of the Race, edited by Henry Louis Gates and Cornel West (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), 133-158.

11 Though now considered nearly taboo, the term "Negro" was commonly used by Black elites in the early 20th century. Du Bois used the term "Negro Problem" in "The Talented Tenth" to advocate for Black people's access to higher education. Ibid., 133.

James, functioned as "race managers" whose vocation was creating "a racial class buffer zone between unprivileged Blacks and White society."[12] This ideological and social chasm between classes enervated leverage of anti-racist politics.

In his book entitled *Beyond Ontological Blackness*, black theologian Victor Anderson argues that what Black intellectuals of the Jim Crow era have developed is a counter-discourse in response to racism that Anderson labels "ontological Blackness."[13] The ontological Blackness has had a great influence on their cultural and intellectual descendants. Anderson states that the African American leaders refuted claims of White supremacy and ideologies of colonialism by presenting "Black heroic genius" as the indication for Black contribution to social progress.[14] This is an apologetic and reactionary way of self-identifying that presupposes the ontological Whiteness they aim to dismantle. With this responsive, rigid, and constraining category of race, Black intellectuals have served hegemonic normalcy by labeling the deviated or odd desires or lifestyles of different Black people as non-Black or bad-Black.

The internalization of dominant cultural norms is detrimental not only because it causes pathological identity formation but also because it continuously creates, marginalizes, and dehumanizes "the other" within the oppressed group. The internalization of the racial hierarchy yielded

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12 Joy James, Transcending the Talented Tenth: Black Leaders and American Intellectuals (New York: Routledge, 1997), 17.

13 Victor Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness: An Essay on African American Religious and Cultural Criticism* (New York: Continuum, 1995).

14 Ibid., 13-15.

a pathological pursuit of assimilation through interracial sexual relationships among the colonized minds.[15] Exclusion of Black women, queers, and other minority groups from the public sphere is the most striking evidence of this "othering" effect of the colonial assimilation project. The Black minority groups were particularly susceptible to judgment by the concept of respectability because the racial uplift ideology uncritically accepted the White middle-class gender roles as a sign of success and progress that Black elites should emulate. The depoliticized understanding of the White middle-class gender construction connived with patriarchal family ideology.[16]

Even for Black male leaders who were more progressive on women's issues, like Du Bois, a deeply internalized male superiority still influenced their thoughts and practices. Joy James reveals how Du Bois obscured the pioneering works of his contemporary female leaders in his autobiographical works.[17] James argues that despite Du Bois's "exceptionally progressive positions on gender equality, sexual violence, and the victimization of women," he failed to recognize the political agency of his female contemporaries, depicting specific Black women leaders through "fictive," "generic," and "non-specific" images rather than detailed, empirical ones in his memoir.[18] This non-specificity within his representation of female Black leaders "erases subjects, deeds, and events, while simulta-

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15 Ibid., 24-63.

16 Kevin Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 78.

17 James, *Transcending the Talented Tenth*, 41.

18 Ibid., 38; 40-1; 54.

neously discussing them."[19] James precisely points out that:

> Engaging in non-specificity and erasure misrepresents intellectual abil-
> ity and political agency and detracts from comprehensive and pro-
> gressive political analyses. Gender erasure reconstructs politics as the
> purview of male elites. Whether the elites are determined by race, gen-
> der, or education and wealth, dominance is reasserted when racially,
> sexually, and economically marginalized groups are presented as cate-
> gories or characterized in symbolic and abstract terms.[20]

In sum, African American leaders of the post-Reconstruction era failed
to dismantle the construction of the racist White supremacist hegemony
by clinging to their accommodationist respectability politics. Their cul-
tural values and practices have had a negative influence on the Black life
by putting a great emphasis on conservative patriarchal norms and rules
for racial progress. The pursuit of Black identity and subjectivity turned
into an eagerness among Black elites for public recognition and a mid-
dle-class lifestyle, leaving the Black masses behind as unworthy of their
respect. Black elites functioned as a racial manager, policing their own
people to not jeopardize their entrance into the bourgeois world. African
American women, in particular, endured the double exclusion in this
process because of their sexual and racial modes of being.

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19 Ibid., 54.
20 Ibid., 55.

III. Contemporary Respectability Politics and Secondary Marginalization

In the contemporary U.S. context, Black Americans face systemic discrimination, differing from Jim Crow-era discrimination in its more covert forms. While Jim Crow laws explicitly enforced racial segregation and disenfranchisement, today's discrimination operates through policies that, while not explicitly racial, disproportionately impact Black communities, such as discriminatory policing practices, restrictive zoning laws, and inequitable school funding. This modern framework of discrimination maintains racial hierarchies indirectly, perpetuating inequalities under the guise of race-neutral policies. In response to this pervasive structural discrimination, Black communities have adopted various creative strategies of resistance; yet among these is a concerning reliance on modern forms of respectability politics that may reinforce exclusion and division.

The concept of "secondary marginalization," first introduced by Cathy Cohen in her work on the anti-queer ethos in Black communities, addresses how a Black political agenda can aim to erase and eradicate non-desirable Black identities, such as LGBQ individuals.[21] Cohen provides a vital concept for understanding these internal dynamics of exclusion. "Secondary marginalization" addresses how internal hierarchies and exclusionary practices emerge within already marginalized communities, often driven by respectability politics. Cohen highlights

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21 Cathy J. Cohen, *The Boundaries of Blackness: AIDS and the Breakdown of Black Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

how the desire for social acceptance and progress can lead to the side-lining of subgroups deemed "deviant" or "undeserving" within a larger oppressed group.[22] This internal adoption of dominant social norms perpetuates exclusion, even within movements for liberation. In the contemporary context, secondary marginalization is closely tied to the resurgence of respectability politics, as explored throughout this chapter. By applying Cohen's foundational work, this chapter examines how respectability politics shapes political priorities and cultural narratives in Black communities, often at the expense of those who do not conform to mainstream norms.

Political scientist Fredrick C. Harris provides a critical analysis of the evolution of respectability politics in Black American communities, particularly its resurgence during the Obama era.[23] He argues that respectability politics, which once operated as a covert strategy within Black communities, has now adopted a neoliberal ideology, urging Black individuals to "lift themselves up" through self-discipline and self-correction. This neoliberal slant reframes systemic problems as issues of personal responsibility and market readiness, effectively aligning with broader trends of neoliberal accommodation. Harris critiques how respectability narratives, popularized by figures such as President Obama and entertainers like Bill Cosby and Tyler Perry, emphasize individual discipline and self-reliance while downplaying systemic barriers such as economic inequality and racial discrimination.[24] Harris criticizes this "bootstrap"

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22 Ibid., 41-43.
23 Fredrick C. Harris, "The Rise of Respectability Politics," *Dissent* 61 (2014): 33-37.
24 For example, Harris describes how, during a 2013 MSNBC event commemorating the

rhetoric for shifting focus away from collective action and the need for political solutions to systemic inequalities. This accommodates neo-liberalism because "the virtues of self-care and self-correction are framed as strategies to lift the poor people out of their condition by preparing them for the market economy."[25]

Harris also examines how respectability politics perpetuates exclusion by marginalizing individuals who fail to align with mainstream norms. For instance, he recounts Philadelphia Mayor Michael Nutter's response to violence involving Black youth, which included condemning young Black men for wearing "hoodies" and sagging pants. By focusing on appearance and behavior, Harris argues, such rhetoric deflects attention from structural issues—such as high unemployment and inadequate public services—that disproportionately affect Black yout h.[26] By focusing on clothing and behavior, Nutter and others deflect attention from pressing structural issues—like high unemployment and inadequate public services—that disproportionately affect Black youth. This approach risks blaming individuals rather than addressing systemic injustices, perpetuating classist and, at times, misogynistic standards that frame nonconformity as "unrespectable."

Harris-Perry's aforementioned work illuminates how respectability politics deploy damaging stereotypes that marginalize Black women in partic-

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March on Washington, Black celebrities shared personal success stories but largely avoided discussing structural obstacles faced by the Black poor and working class. Ibid., 36.

25 Ibid., 33.

26 Ibid., 35.

ular by reinforcing restrictive, mythologized images.[27] These images have "subjectified" Black women in a destructive way, forcing them to identify with negative stereotypes and feel ashamed of themselves. "The Mammy myth" depicts Black women as asexual, docile, and dedicated to her White master's family, while being estranged from her own race. This image has political implications because it presumes that Black women will be loyal to Whites and race-traitors to African American political concerns. "The myth of the Jezebel" constructs Black women as indecent and hyper-sexual; it allows state policies to limit Black women's access to the public space due to their lack of respectability. To suppress Black women's political demands, "the Sapphire myth" is employed to suggest that Black women are angry and cannot advocate on their own behalf.[28] Through these crooked images, Black women are framed as unrespectable, which not only undermines their social standing but also limits their political engagement—an exclusion akin to secondary marginalization.

Black women have had to contend with these misrepresentations by reconstructing themselves as strong and independent. However, as Harris-Perry analyzed, such struggle has birthed another myth, "the strong Black woman," which cunningly renders Black women to take sole responsibility for their lives outside of any means of social protection.[29] This image of strong Black woman is problematic because it dehumanizes Black women as incapable of being weak and over-emphasizes their individual responsibilities. At the same time, as mem-

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27 Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen.*

28 Ibid., 51-97.

29 Ibid., 184.

bers of a stigmatized group, Black women suffer shaming.[30] It is a shame that makes women to blame themselves for not being respectable enough to achieve social recognition. Shame urges stigmatized women to internalize these painful and distorted images and the "destructive, totalizing normativity."[31] Shame is also a part of the political project of the state to force Black women to feel ashamed so that Black women disengage from politics, echoing Cohen's observations about the internalization of dominant social norms.

Religious studies scholar Monica Miller, in her essay entitled "I am a Nappy-Headed Ho," analyzes how the respectability politics are deeply engraved in the Black community and it expresses a defensive denial of a negative categorization of the Black female as "the nappy-headed ho."[32] Miller observes, "the materiality of the 'nappy-headed ho' became the deviant signifier by which respectable Black women's bodies were used in comparison," effectively creating a hierarchy within Black womanhood

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30 Ibid., 105-6.

31 Ibid., 106-7.

32 Monica R. Miller, "I am a 'Nappy-Headed Ho': (Re)Signifying 'Deviance' in the Haraam of Religious Respectability," in *Ain't I a Womanist Too?: Third-Wave Womanist Religious Thought,* edited by Monica A. Coleman, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2013), 123-137. The phrase "nappy-headed ho" references a controversial incident from April 2007, when radio host Don Imus used this derogatory term to describe the predominantly Black players on the Rutgers University women's basketball team. His remarks, combining the term "nappy-headed," often used pejoratively to refer to Black hair texture, with "ho," a slang term for "whore," highlighted deep-seated racial and gender biases. This incident sparked national outrage and debates over racism, sexism, and respectability politics in media portrayals of Black women, leading to Imus's temporary suspension and an apology amid public backlashes. See "Radio Host Don Imus Apologizes for Offensive Remarks About Rutgers Women's Basketball Team," *History.com,* accessed November 13, 2024, https://www.history.com/this -day-in-history/don-imus-offensive-remarks-rutgers-womens-basketball-team.

that mirrors Cohen's concept of secondary marginalization. This defensive comparison, Miller argues, "is representative of a more deeply ingrained ideological positionality of denying 'difference.'"[33] By reinforcing internal hierarchies, this process marginalizes those who deviate from dominant norms of respectability, excluding them from full participation in collective identities or movements for racial and social justice.

Lori D. Patton's qualitative study on Black queer youth's experiences at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) highlights systemic contradictions between these institutions' racial uplift missions and their complicity in marginalizing queer students. The authors found that the contemporary versions of respectability politic at HBCUs create the "environmental press" that exclude or silence non-heteronormative identities, often leaving queer students to navigate hostile or indifferent institutional climates.[34] HBCUs prioritize racial respectability and normative notions of Blackness, which render queer students' experiences invisible or invalidated. The research highlights that such invisibility is compounded by the cultural and institutional emphasis on traditional gender roles and heterosexual relationships as markers of acceptable Black identity. The study also identified the "double-edged sword" of respectability politics experienced by queer students, who feel pressure to conform to dominant heterosexual norms to gain acceptance while simultaneously negotiating the erasure of their sexual identities within

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33 Ibid., 128.

34 Lori D. Patton, Reginald A. Blockett, and Brian L. McGowan, "Complexities and Contradictions: Black Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Queer Students' Lived Realities across Three Urban HBCU Contexts," *Urban Education* 58 (2023): 1355–1382; 1359.

their racial community.[35]

　　To conclude, contemporary respectability politics operates as a defensive collective identity against racism by stigmatizing and excluding behaviors or expressions deemed inappropriate or "unrespectable." This rigid and illusory conception of Black identity hinders the community from fully embracing the diversity and complexity of its members. Consequently, nonconformist individuals within the Black community, often subjected to derogatory stereotypes (e.g., "black hooded man with sagging pants," "nappy-headed ho"), endure multilayered oppression and exclusion—secondary marginalization—which reflects broader mechanisms of marginalization at play. The following chapter will shift focus to how African American theologians respond to these challenges, providing frameworks that address structural inequities while resisting the exclusionary practices inherent in respectability politics. These theological insights aim to envision a more inclusive and transformative path toward racial and social justice.

IV. African American Theological Responses

1. Emilie Townes: The Fantastic Hegemonic Imagination and Countermemory

A prominent womanist theological ethicist Emilie Townes inter-

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35 Ibid., 1373.

rogates the cultural production of evil⎯stereotyping and margin-
alization of Black women⎯with the framework of what she calls "the
fantastic hegemonic imagination."[36] The fantastic hegemonic imagi-
nation describes what happens when human imagination works with
history to create structural oppression and material forms of hegemony:

> The fantastic hegemonic imagination traffics in people's lives that are
> caricatured or pillaged so that the imagination that creates the fantastic
> can control the world in its won image. This imagination conjures up
> worlds and their social structures that are not based on supernatural
> events and phantasms, but on the ordinariness of evil.[37]

The worldview that the fantastic hegemonic imagination tries to
make natural and inevitable is spread through the production of images
and narratives. According to her, the production of the distorted and fic-
tive images of Black women is the "the cultural production of evil" by
this fantastic hegemonic imagination of U.S. society.[38]

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36 Emilie M. Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 7.

37 Ibid., 21. In this sense, fantastic hegemonic imagination is similar "cultural hegemony." This term, developed by Antonio Gramsci, refers to the dominant class's control of a society by manipulating and imposing their beliefs, perceptions, values and mores, so that their ideology becomes the universal worldview that justifies the status quo as "natural and inevitable." The dominant group employs many methods to elicit the con- sent and obedience from subordinates. Their ideas and value systems are conveyed through sociopolitical and cultural institutions, such as school, church, family, media, etc. The aim of cultural hegemony is to construct "a kind of false consciousness… that there is one coherent and accurate viewpoint of the world." Ibid., 20-21.

38 Ibid., 21.

The fantastic hegemonic imagination exercises a profound influence on social structures, shaping perceptions, policies, and power dynamics in ways that maintain racialized hierarchies. By reducing Black women and their communities to the harmful and oversimplified caricatures such as "Black Matriarch" or "Tragic Mulatta," the imagination effectively dehumanizes them, stripping away the complexity and individuality that would demand equal treatment and recognition within society.[39] This reductionism legitimizes social inequalities by embedding the assumption that Black women, and by extension, Black communities, are incapable of or unworthy of access to the same rights, opportunities, and resources afforded to others. Consequently, these stereotypes do not merely reflect prejudiced views; they actively reinforce the systemic structures that produce and perpetuate social injustice, ensuring that marginalized groups remain trapped within the constraints of narrowly defined, socially constructed identities.

Although Townes does not explicitly address respectability politics,

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39 Townes examines a range of stereotypes imposed upon Black women, highlighting how these cultural caricatures perpetuate structural oppression. She discusses figures such as Aunt Jemima, a symbol that has long represented the "Black Mammy" stereotype, depicting Black women as servile, nurturing figures confined to domestic labor. Townes also addresses the image of the "Black Matriarch," often embodied in the stereotype of the "Welfare Queen," which portrays Black women as domineering, lazy, and economically exploitative—using social welfare systems irresponsibly. Another stereotype she critiques is the "Tragic Mulatta," a figure that represents Black women as inherently conflicted or damaged by their racial identities, evoking narratives of victimhood and racial ambiguity. Finally, Townes includes the figure of Topsy, or the "pickaninny," a dehumanizing image that depicts Black children as wild and uncivilized. These stereotypes are products of a cultural mechanism that sustains systemic injustices by reducing complex individuals to simplistic, harmful caricatures, thereby legitimizing social inequalities and maintaining racialized hierarchies. Ibid., Chapter 2.

her critique of the fantastic hegemonic imagination emerges from a sharp awareness of the double binds that Black minority groups have historically faced—caught between the oppressive force of White supremacy and the limiting narratives of Black respectability politics. Through the concept of the fantastic hegemonic imagination, Townes examines how those who deviate from the constructed ideal of "respectable" Blackness, particularly Black women, are reduced to pejorative stereotypes. This mechanism erases the rich narratives within Black communities and flattens the diversity of Black experiences into oversimplified caricatures. Her work reveals how the fantastic hegemonic imagination functions as a cultural production of evil, systematically dehumanizing those who do not conform to hegemonic ideals, thus reinforcing structures of exclusion and injustice.

In response to this cultural evil, Townes proposes "counter-memory" as a tool to disturb the hegemonic symbolic world without capitulating all differences among the Black life to narrow categorization or classification.[40] Counter-memory refers to the collective memory of oppressed people—muted and forgotten within the meta-narratives politicized by the fantastic hegemonic imagination:

> Counter-memory is another way to talk about particularity in womanist moral discourse. Particularity begins with a narrowed focus on the lives of Black folk, particularly Black women, to pry on open teleological ruminations that often demand closure while seeking to discipline life's

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40 Ibid., 23.

uncertainties to conform to a future structured by the fantastic hegem-
onic imagination.[41]

Townes conceptualizes counter-memory as an ethical tool that dis-
rupts the cultural amnesia fostered by the fantastic hegemonic imaginatio
n.[42] Unlike dominant memory, which simplifies history to serve the in-
terests of those in power, counter-memory insists on the importance of
"micro histories," or the specific and localized narratives of oppressed
individuals, to reveal a fuller, more honest historical account.[43]

As an example of counter-memory that challenges traditional narra-
tives of race and gender, Townes reinterprets the stereotype of the
"Tragic Mulatta." Traditionally, this figure—a biracial woman caught be-
tween Black and White worlds and doomed to tragedy—served as a cul-
tural tool that evoked both pity and revulsion, reinforcing racial and so-
cial hierarchies. Townes reframes the Tragic Mulatta as a witness and
critic of systemic injustice rather than merely a victim of it. By reexamin-
ing the narratives surrounding this stereotype, she transforms the Tragic
Mulatta into a figure with agency, capable of illuminating the intersect-
ing oppressions of race, gender, and sexuality in a way that critiques
U.S. empire-building and its legacy of racial subjugation. Townes re-
defines her as a "spy in the house of evil," a figure whose in-between sta-
tus allows her to reveal the underlying racial and sexual tensions of the
empire.[44] Townes also references nineteenth-century Black writers,

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41 Ibid., 23.
42 Ibid., 58.
43 Ibid., 62-63.

such as Frances Ellen Watkins Harper and Pauline Hopkins, who used the figure of the Mulatta not as a tragic victim but as a symbol of resistance and empowerment. This reconfiguration disrupts the simplistic image constructed by White abolitionist narratives, instead presenting the Tragic Mulatta as a complex figure who reveals the hidden "almostness" of identity—her proximity to, yet exclusion from, Whiteness—which challenges rigid racial categories.[45]

Townes' process of reinterpreting oppressive images of Black women into empowering counter-memories relies on what she terms "the true true," a concept she borrows from French writer Patrick Chamoiseau.[46] This idea represents a layered form of truth derived from blending multiple narratives—the "almost true," the "sometimes true," and the "half true"—to reveal a more complex and authentic account of history. In doing so, she seeks to uncover the multiple layers and partial truths that construct the Black women stereotypes by tracing their origins, exploring their cultural significance, and identifying the myths underlying each image, thus challenging its superficial coherence and its role in reinforcing racial hierarchies. Townes emphasizes that these figures, emerging from the White imagination, do not capture the lived realities of biracial women but instead reflect White anxieties around racial boundaries.

Townes' method is also notable for its ethical intentionality, as she frames counter-memory as a practice that not only challenges historical inaccuracies but also fosters moral accountability. She sees coun-

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44 Ibid., 85-88.

45 Ibid., 88.

46 Ibid., 84-85.

ter-memory as a means of reconstructing collective identity by emphasizing inclusivity, honesty, and justice. For example, in Chapter 8, she explores the concept of "everydayness," arguing that ethical transformation occurs through daily acts of remembrance that honor marginalized stories and challenge comfortable narratives about race and gender.[47] This idea of everydayness reinforces the ethical dimension of counter-memory: by making it an accessible, ongoing practice, Townes transforms historical re-evaluation into a tool for personal and social change.

To conclude, Townes's womanist theoretical project starts from "radical particularity," focusing on localized experiences of oppression through counter-memory.[48] Only through this particularity, Townes argues, can one challenge those pejorative and denigrating images and "open up subversive space within dominant discourses that expands our sense of who we are and, possibly, create a more whole and just society in defiance of structural evil."[49]

2. Victor Anderson: Categorical Racism and the Grotesque Genius

Victor Anderson's Beyond Ontological Blackness provides as a foundational critique on overly deterministic and monolithic in describing Black identity.[50] As discussed in Section II, Anderson is concerned with

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47 Ibid., 159-164.
48 Ibid., 23.
49 Ibid., 22.
50 Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Racism,* Chapter 2.

a mode of thought that essentializes racial identity, specifically how it risks reducing Black identity to an overarching racial ideology that demands a uniform representation of Blackness—one that centers on narratives of resistance, heroism, and survival. He emphasizes that these narratives are predominantly framed through the figure of Black masculinity, which becomes emblematic of the "black heroic genius."[51] This emphasis on masculinity reinforces a narrow conceptualization of Black cultural achievement, one that privileges the masculine struggle and survival while marginalizing other expressions of Black life, such as those shaped by different genders, sexual orientations, classes, and ethnicities. He terms this fixation on ontological Blackness "categorical racism."[52]

Anderson is particularly attentive to how this perspective permeates African American cultural theology, which he names "Black Theology Project." He contends that by defining Black theology through an oppositional relationship to white racism, the project remains tethered to the very structures of white supremacy it seeks to transcend. In this sense, Black theology becomes a "crisis theology," one that is perpetually in need of legitimization through the lens of oppression. Anderson also highlights how James Cone's emphasis on Black masculinity as the embodiment of heroic resistance marginalizes other expressions of Black subjectivity, including those shaped by gender, sexuality, and class. This critique extends to the Afrocentric approaches of later theologians like Dwight Hopkins, who, according to Anderson, still rely on essenti-

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51 Ibid., 73-74; 118.
52 Ibid., 16.

alist notions of Blackness that ultimately fail to break free from the constraints imposed by white supremacist ideology.[53]

Anderson critiques the limitations of this heroic, masculine conception Blackness by bringing in Friedrich Nietzsche's counter-discourse on the grotesque. Nietzsche provides an alternative aesthetic in which the grotesque genius challenges the heroic by embracing contradictions, tensions, and dissonances that cannot be reconciled or synthesized. Nietzsche's "Dionysian" aesthetic privileges the grotesque, which, unlike the heroic, does not strive for aggrandizement or idealized harmony but instead highlights the coexistence of conflicting forces—such as attraction and repulsion, comedy and tragedy, or the absurd and the sincere.[54] "The grotesque genius," according to Anderson, does not negate the heroic but displaces it, opening up possibilities for a more dynamic and multifaceted understanding of cultural expression. This displacement encourages a form of cultural criticism that is less concerned with grand narratives of heroism and more attuned to the nuanced and often messy realities of human experience.[55]

Anderson suggests that African American cultural criticism needs to move beyond the "cult of heroic genius" by shifting towards the grotesque. He stresses that past cultural efforts often centered around proving Black humanity and cultural legitimacy by reflecting the standards set by a white supremacist society, which demanded that Black people demonstrate their capability to create "great" art and culture.

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53 Ibid., 87-104.

54 Ibid., 129-132.

55 Ibid., 127.

This response was crucial during its time, serving as an effective counter-narrative to racist ideologies that denied Black humanity. However, Anderson suggests that this aesthetics are now insufficient for addressing the complexities of contemporary African American life, which requires a more nuanced, differentiated approach.[56]

Anderson also reevaluates the role of the Black church in protest politics, arguing that the church's influence is often overstated.[57] He challenges the portrayal of Black churches as the driving moral force behind civil rights activism, framing them instead as supportive institutions rather than initiators of political change. This critique is significant because it underscores the limitations of viewing Black cultural and religious institutions solely through the lens of heroic resistance. Anderson uses this critique to illustrate how the traditional narratives of Black heroism can obscure the more mundane but essential forms of community building and political engagement that occur outside of the spotlight. He calls for a more grounded form of religious criticism that engages directly with the diverse interests and realities of African American public life, particularly in the differentiated and fragmented contexts of contemporary society.

Ultimately, Anderson advocates for a form of African American cultural and religious criticism that is "dispositionally grotesque"—one that embraces the ambiguities, contradictions, and complexities of Black life rather than reducing it to a singular narrative of resistance and heroism.[58]

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56 Ibid., 128.
57 Ibid., 144-145.
58 Ibid., 145.

This grotesque perspective allows for a more flexible and expansive understanding of cultural fulfillment, one that includes both the serious and the frivolous, the tragic and the comical. Anderson argues that by embracing these grotesque qualities, African American theology can move beyond the crisis of legitimation posed by postmodern Blackness. It can become a more relevant force in public life, capable of contributing to a new politics of difference that values both the collective struggle and the individual pursuit of thriving, flourishing, and fulfillment.

V. Conclusion: Embracing Radical Particularities

Even the most well-intentioned efforts to represent and advocate for marginalized groups inevitably create gaps, and within those gaps, new forms of exclusion often arise. These exclusions occur when representation leans toward what is palatable or acceptable to the dominant order, prioritizing docility and non-threatening traits over the full, complex realities of marginalized identities. The task is not to sugarcoat diversity to make it more acceptable but to recognize and embrace the unsettling, grotesque, or unrespectable aspects of identity in their unvarnished truth. True inclusivity demands a willingness to confront and accept difference in its most challenging forms, ensuring that no one is excluded, dehumanized, or oppressed because of their distinctiveness. This paper aims to search for ways to fully honor the diverse and often uncomfortable realities of minority identities without reducing them to what is deemed non-threatening or acceptable.

Emilie Townes' response to the oppressive mechanisms of the fantastic hegemonic imagination lies in her concept of counter-memory, which she employs to uncover and reclaim the silenced and marginalized narratives erased by hegemonic structures. Counter-memory actively resists the reductive stereotypes perpetuated by respectability politics, offering instead a way to honor the complexities of Black life, especially the lives of Black women, that defy neat categorization. For Korean theological ethics, Townes' approach illuminates a critical path: the importance of attending to the "micro histories" of marginalized groups without succumbing to homogenization or respectability-driven worldview.

Victor Anderson's critique of respectability politics through the lens of categorical racism leads to his proposal of the grotesque genius as an alternative paradigm for embracing the messy, contradictory, and often unsettling dimensions of human identity. The grotesque genius displaces the reductive heroic narratives of Blackness, emphasizing instead the richness and ambiguity of lived experiences that do not conform to hegemonic expectations. Anderson's approach suggests the need to move beyond rigid categories and essentialized identities, instead cultivating a disposition that welcomes the grotesque and the unrespectable as integral to theological ethics. Anderson writes:

> The public burden of African American theology is to participate relevantly in the grotesque character of African American life. Carrying out this task will not be easy; for post-modern blackness has put African American theology in a crisis of legitimation. As African American theo-

logians deliberate on the legitimation crisis of public theology in North America, cynicism and uncritical optimism are both out of order. *What is warranted is a healthy pessimism about the fragility of our efforts to transcend absolute cultural activities that threaten cultural fulfilment and a pragmatic hope that discerns and supports those activities that bring about more fulfilment of basic human needs and subjective goods.* By operationalizing these iconoclastic and utopian critical dispositions, African American theology (like African American literary and cultural criticism) will be freed up from ontological blackness to play in the grotesquery of both postmodern blackness and postmodern North American life.[59]

The path ahead for Korean theological ethics is no less daunting, yet it presents an opportunity to re-imagine how we approach difference and inclusion. Rather than attempting to categorize diversity into neat and acceptable frameworks or seeking to justify its value within the boundaries of dominant norms, there is a need to consider what it might look like to embrace these complexities with humility and openness. This could mean engaging with the grotesque—not as something to be tamed or resolved, but as a vital and discomforting force that has the potential to expand the horizons of theological and ethical imagination. It is not an easy task, nor is there a clear blueprint for how to proceed, but it invites those committed to justice and inclusivity to reflect on the ways in which they can create spaces for the radical otherness of marginalized identities. In this spirit, Korean theology might begin to cultivate an eth-

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59 Ibid., 157-158. Emphasis added by the author.

ic that honors the full complexity of human existence—not merely as a theoretical exercise, but as a practical commitment to fostering communities where the unsettling and the unconventional are not only included but recognized as essential to our shared humanity. This is not merely an act of representation but a transformative process of solidarity and mutual growth.

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