

## White Privilege and Black Power

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in America, black slaves absorbed, appropriated, and actually “stole,” from their white masters a blondy-haired, blue-eyed Jesus of orthodox Christian doctrine who was “blackened” in their reconstruction of him not so much in feature as in figure, not so much in skin tone as in bodily bearing, not so much in content of preaching as in meaning. This “contraband Jesus” authorized for them, at great risk: an *outlaw space* (the Invisible Institution), a *criminal time* (night-songs segmenting the darkness into percussive rhythms considered insurrectionary), an *illegal identity* (of personhood, rather than “property”)—and all of that in an *illegitimate* black Christian discourse whose specific difference from white Christian discourse was coded and carried in a necessarily surreptitious bodily style of profoundly critical significance.<sup>1</sup> Black practice cultivated ritual nuance—a God known in graceful glance, a Jesus loved in saving syncopation, a Spirit celebrated in potent possession. And those ritual instincts gave birth, finally, in the twentieth century, to a theology questioning not just the content, but also the form of godliness. James Cone became in the 1960s the best-known protagonist of the blackness of tongue giving theological expression to such a thickness of practice by rendering Black Power defiance and vision explicit in religious discourse.

The opening section of the work that here explores the meaning of such practice (and its discourse) for white identity and white theology in twenty-first-century America offers autobiography as “necessary confession” of my own position over time in relationship to black experience and Christian conviction and surveys the landscape of race

*vis-à-vis* the code of theology at the beginning of the new millennium. White Privilege and Black Power represent quick glosses on some of the themes tracked in the book. “Race” as definitive of the central relationship organizing social wherewithal and political opportunity in the history of the country yields a structure of white domination and non-white subordination in general, but also a particular paradox of empty passivity on one side of the color line and potent struggle on the other. Understanding the complexity of the contemporary American multiculturalism requires serious excavation of this historical paradox in white and black. The terms of the exploration take their specificity from the tactics of the resistance already noted: we will labor to uncover the codes of race in the infrastructures of space, time, and the body in seeking to outline the meaning of whiteness for the new millennium.