Black Iconoclasm
Public Symbols, Racial Progress, and Post/Ferguson America

Charles Athanasopoulos

Black Iconoclasm

"Against the backdrop of urgent mandates to cultivate an abolitionist imaginary and discipline, Charles Athanasopoulos compassionately reminds readers to dwell in the twilight. In *Black Iconoclasm*, Athanasopoulos abides in the space of the liminal, the ritualistic, and the indeterminate to move against the registers of iconography and iconoclasm that often reside within Black radical traditions. Arranging and reading an eclectic set of texts for their fissures, messiness, and failures, Athanasopoulos attends to the everyday discursive, aesthetic, and material efforts to experiment outside of the orders and relations of Western Man. As a study of Black radical invention, Athanasopoulos elegantly writes toward and with traditions of Black fabulation that embrace the dexterities of Black experimentation, Black transgression, and Black critical theory."

—Tiffany Lethabo King, *author of* The Black Shoals: Offshore Formations of Black and Native Studies

"*Black Iconoclasm* is a systematized intellectual program of theoretical disorder that reads widely across and in the crevices of Black Studies to provide an account of what is at stake for Black being at this present conjuncture. This book does the work of revealing the deep tensions and overlaps between what happens on the streets and in the academy and it warns us to pay closer attention to both as sites of potential Black liberation or further capture."

—Rinaldo Walcott, *Professor and Carl V. Granger Chair of Africana and American Studies, University at Buffalo*

"In *Black Iconoclasm: Public Symbols, Racial Progress, and Post/Ferguson America*, Charles Athanasopoulos offers a cutting edge and timely exploration of how Black radical thought challenges and reframes the symbols of racial progress in the United States. Through innovative readings of contemporary activism and media, Athanasopoulos illuminates the complex interplay between iconoclasm and the persistence of racial iconography. This book is an essential contribution to understanding how Black resistance both disrupts and redefines the narratives of liberation in a post-Ferguson world."

—Bernadette Marie Callafel, *Indigenous, Race, and Ethnic Studies, University of Oregon*

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Charles Athanasopoulos
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For Ma Dukes

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This is for my mother, Christina. Ma Dukes! Thank you for everything; without you, none of this is possible. We went through a lot, but we were always in it together. You taught me that there is love and care to be found within the chaos. I dedicate this book to you.

This is for my father, Sal, for choosing to be my father. You've always loved me as your own, always encouraged me and impressed upon me the importance of living my passion for writing and teaching every single day. Love you, pops.

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[1] Athanasopoulos, Charles. 2021. ""A program of complete disorder": the Black iconoclasm within Fanonian thought." *Lateral* 10.1. https://doi.org/10.25158/l10.1.3.

[2] Athanasopoulos, Charles. 2022. "Fanonian slips: the rhetorical function & field of the white mask." *Western journal of communication* 87.3: 471–488. https://doi.org/10.1080/10570314.2022.2131461.

CONTENTS

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Charles Athanasopoulos is Assistant Professor of African American and African Studies and English at The Ohio State University (the United States). He received his Ph.D. in Rhetoric and Communication from the University of Pittsburgh, and his research interests lie at the intersection of Black rhetorics, media, and culture. He has published numerous peer-reviewed articles in venues such as *Lateral: The Journal of the Cultural Studies Association* and the *Western Journal of Communication*.

LIST OF FIGURES

Prologue: Twilight of the Icons

Black iconoclasm, n.

A program of complete disorder. The dismantling of Western Man's racial iconography to open space for Black radical invention.

To disorder, v.

To fracture any reproducible sequence.

Racial iconography/Racial icons, n.

The social values (e.g., race, gender, class, sexuality) of Western Man and corresponding rolodex of public symbols (positive or negative).

The first time I laid eyes on Kehinde Wiley's *Saint John the Baptist* (2013), I was immediately enamored by Wiley's unique take on an otherwise familiar genre of painting. I was no stranger to the painting's wooden panel canvas nor Wiley's use of gold leaf and oil to depict a saint. Yet, this painting was unique for me in its depiction of Saint John as Black. As shown on his website, Wiley's (2013) painting represents Saint John as a dark-skinned Black man whose name, Craig Fletcher, features at the bottom of the wooden panel in the style of Orthodox Christian calligraphy. In some ways, the painting uses the traditional form of Orthodox iconography: Wiley utilizes the backdrop of empty golden space behind Saint John/Fletcher to create the sense of a saintly aura, and he positions the

body toward the viewer while fixing the Saint's eyes toward us with a calm yet piercing stare. Interestingly, Wiley positions Saint John's hands in an eerily similar fashion to Leonardo da Vinci's final painting *Saint John the Baptist* (c. 1513–1516), an oil painting on walnut wood which is currently part of an art collection held by the Louvre Museum. In each, the right arm of Saint John is curled diagonally across the chest so that the palm is turned upward. Yet, there are some differences worth noting. In da Vinci's sixteenth-century painting, Saint John's index finger is pointing upward as he stares at the viewer with a slight smile. In Wiley's 2013 painting, the palm instead opens toward the bottom of John's left cheek, and his facial pose reflects a quiet and poised demeanor. Over the traditional gold-leaf background, Wiley includes green stems and leaves accented by blue, pink, purple, and peach-colored flowers which protrude into portions of Saint John's body. Here, the inclusion of Black skin and bright colors gives the sense of various vocabularies colliding: Orthodox icon painting, Renaissance portraiture, and contemporary Black American culture. Such a collision disorders the siloing of these artistic vocabularies.

I begin with Wiley's *Saint John the Baptist* because it compels a meditation on the overlap between icon making in the artistic sense and icon making in the conceptual sense of race in American culture. Further, Wiley's painting highlights how icons are not solely confined to the realm of theology but seep into every corner of American culture including activism, politics, media, and art. This painting is just one of a broader *Iconic* series (Wiley 2014) exhibited in March 2014 by Sean Kelly at the "Art Dealers Association of America: The Art Show" at the Park Avenue Armory in New York. In an interview with the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Wiley explains that,

> Icons are different than the big chest beating paintings that I created in the past. Icons are demure; they're small, you have to paint them in your lap. And, they're loud; they're gold, and their blinging all out of nowhere. When I was twelve years old my mother sent me to Russia, and it was an art camp. And, it opened my eyes beyond anything you could imagine. Growing up in South Central Los Angeles, my purview with regards to what was possible politically, socially, and artistically was limited. In the Soviet Union, the then Soviet Union, I was able to go to the [State Hermitage Museum], I was able to go to the Winter Palace and see all of the extraordinary Russian icon paintings. Fast forward all these years, I'm in love with that vocabulary. I wanted to create a body of work that had that same sense of preciousness, that same sense of scale, that same sense of quiet, but also fuse the sacred and the profane. This notion of the sacred, pure, untouchable space where divinity rests sort of muddied and sullied by this perceived notion of the Black body. (Virginia Museum of Fine Arts 2016, 0:05–1:14)

The notion of "the sacred" and "profane" that Wiley speaks of is not simply that of the Christian God and devil; it implicitly references a racial iconography which positions "the Black body" as a dirty and evil figure which "mudd[ies]" and "sull[ies]" an otherwise "sacred" and "pure" white culture. Twisting the "vocabulary" of Orthodox icons, his paintings "fuse" the seemingly disparate contexts of Eastern Europe and Black American culture as well as the oppositional icons of whiteness and Blackness.

In fusing Blackness with Saint John, Wiley seeks to upend the terms of European iconography and portraiture by disordering the racial hierarchy of white-over-Black which positions Blackness as profane. Put another way, Wiley re-presents a traditional European icon to depict Blackness, normally portrayed negatively, in a positive register. For Wiley, to muddy this neat white icon of Saint John with Blackness throws into crisis the terms of divinity and damnation which not only ground Christian mythoi but also the "god" and "devil" terms of American society (Burke 1970). His choice to re-present Saint John is interesting when considering that this Saint was known for prophesying the arrival of Jesus to redeem society from sin. Wiley exhibited this painting within the cultural context of post/ Ferguson America: the acquittal of George Zimmerman for the murder of Trayvon Martin in 2013, the acquittal of Darren Wilson for the murder of Michael Brown in 2014, and the culminating Ferguson Uprising of August 2014. Taken together, one might argue that Wiley's *Iconic* series is a kind of commentary which prophesies a reckoning with anti-Black violence and the messianic force of Black Lives Matter (BLM). Wiley's earlier *Down* series (2008b) similarly confronts anti-Black violence evidenced by his oil painting *The Lamentation over the Dead Christ* (2008a), which fuses portraiture of Black urban masculinity with traditional portraiture of Jesus. In doing so, this painting harkens to the persecution of Black men, framed through the heroic and messianic figure Jesus, and the lamentation over their deaths in contemporary Black American culture as "an answer to the negative views of young Black men in American society. It recognizes an idiom that can be seen from a distance as a negative form transformed into something more fabulous and joyful" (Wiley 2008b, para 5). Here, Wiley confirms how his paintings function as public symbols meant to re-present Blackness from a negative to a positive register within our broader conceptual racial iconography. Wiley's use of icons as a genre of portraiture and his desire to upend the terms of Western Man racial iconography spoke to me not just on a theoretical level but also on a personal level.

Wiley's *Saint John the Baptist* and his broader *Iconic* series moved me in how it reflected both the lived experiences of anti/Blackness[1] but also the vocabulary of Orthodox Christianity. Growing up in the Greek Orthodox Church as a mixed-race Black man (Afro-Puerto Rican and Greek-Roma) in Queens, New York, made me familiar with the vocabulary of icons that Wiley recalls from his experiences at art camp in the former Soviet Union. It is a vocabulary that I first found myself enamored with as these icons brought to life the Biblical stories I had learned. It is a vocabulary I eventually became disheartened with when I came to realize that my mother and I symbolized the profane within this iconography much like the Black bodies in Wiley's paintings. As a student at a local parochial high school, I spoke to the resident Orthodox priest during mandatory confession about struggling with my faith in the Christian God; I was unable to reconcile the lived realities of anti/Blackness with the Church's colorblind narrative of Christian community. During this conversation, I described to this priest what I felt was a hypocrisy in supposedly celebrating Jesus, who aligned with those marginalized in society, while pathologizing marginalized people in American culture. Using my mother as an example, I argued that she felt like more of a saint to me than some white man who spent his life in a monastery during the Middle Ages. I explained how I had watched my single mother work three jobs in recent years to support me, that I knew she stifled her own hunger to feed me, that I listened at night as she cried overwhelmed by the stress of bills, that I admired her compassion despite it all. If anyone is a saint, I told him, it's not these white hermits; it's working-class Black women like my mother. The white male priest did not receive these comments well; to him, my words were blasphemy as I was comparing saints to a woman far from the standards of white Christian femininity. This same priest would later explain to my class during his weekly religious lecture that Greeks should avoid marrying across different "cultures" to avoid cultural and religious disputes even as I and two other mixed Afro-Caribbean and Greek classmates sat in discomfort. My conversation with the priest during confession was the final straw. Over that year, I left the Orthodox church and, like Wiley, committed myself to sullying the racial icons of white divinity.

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[1] Engaging Louis M. Maraj, I use slashes between terms to note the spaces where meanings can fracture between the two terms involved in the equation. Louis M. Maraj. 2020. *Black or right: anti/racist campus rhetorics*. Logan: Utah State Press. xiv.

I walked out of that confession where I proclaimed my mother a saint feeling like I had upended the priest's sense of sacred and profane. More than good, I felt a sense of righteousness. And although I would never regret standing up for my mother, as I grew older, I would witness the limits of simply replacing one "negative" icon for a "positive" one. For example, I began to reflect over the years on the re-naming of the Bronxdale Houses in the Bronx, New York, in honor of **Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor. A former resident of the Bronxdale Houses, Sotomayor's pers**onal success serves as a symbol of the potential opportunities for its current residents. During the ceremony, Sotomayor remarked,

> I am deeply humbled and touched that these houses will now bear my name and I am so grateful for all they have given me in my life […] It is important for the broader community to remain committed to assisting the residents of this place so that other little Sonia's will reach their dreams. (Rocchio 2010, para 4)

Given that Sotomayor was the first woman of color Supreme Court Justice ever appointed in the United States, the re-naming of the now Sotomayor Houses also serves as a symbol of racial progress in the United States. For Sotomayor and her constituency, the re-naming of these projects was meant to serve as a beacon of pride and hope in producing "other little Sonia's" who "will reach their dreams." Indeed, many residents were inspired by this re-naming of the Bronxdale Houses and were proud to have Sotomayor represent their community from her vantage point as a member of the Supreme Court of the United States (SCOTUS). Thus, the Justice Sonia Sotomayor Houses and Community Center might be understood as a public symbol created to mark a change in the American cultural landscape. Here, the re-naming signals a shifting landscape where it is now possible for children of color to become a Supreme Court Justice or even the President of the United States. Historically, public housing projects like Bronxdale are born out of the New Deal of the 1940s and were created to help resolve housing inequality in the United States. Yet, at the same time, public housing projects have come to symbolize the housing and economic inequality experienced by Black people and other people of color in contemporary America. Put another way, the fact that the projects exist is itself a symbol of racial stratification and corruptness in American culture. So, while it may seem counterintuitive to some, having

a public housing project named after Sotomayor did not represent racial progress but instead represented something like a contradiction for me. In my mind, having housing projects named after you is like having a prison named after you. Why is this an honor that a liberal Justice like Sotomayor would accept? A month before the re-naming ceremony, the Houses were just six points away from failing an inspection carried out by the Department of Housing and Urban Development with inspectors noting deteriorating conditions (Otis 2010, para 14). In fact, the New York City Housing Authority dedicated US$8000 on invites and re-assigned maintenance workers from projects to repair the Houses to instead help prepare for the re-naming ceremony (para 4). I began to consider that this re-naming ceremony and my conversation with the priest represented the same error: both relied on a reactive desire to create a counter-icon rather than dismantling the terms of the iconography. I wanted my mother to be registered as a saint not a demon, and I hadn't yet considered that it was the entire frame of demons versus saints, not just the particular icon, that was the problem. Similarly, Sotomayor celebrated her name donning the projects rather than lamenting the continued need for their existence.

Taken together, Wiley's icon paintings, my conversation with the priest, and the re-naming of the Sotomayor Houses each would seem to support anthropologist Michael Taussig's (2019) argument that "iconoclasm is written into the icon" (22). Each of these examples seems to support the notion that iconoclasm exists in a reciprocal logic in which the breaking of old icons leads to the creation of new icons, which leads to new iconoclasms in a recurring cycle. These racial icons include public symbols such as Black Lives Matter (BLM), former President Barack H. Obama, films like *Black Panther* (2018) and *Get Out* (2018), monuments/paintings created by artists like Kehinde Wiley, and burgeoning BLM street art (graffiti and muralism). Interestingly, many of these icons originate in iconoclastic challenges to Western Man. By Western Man, I invoke Black feminist Sylvia Wynter's (2003) meditation on the ideological and historical regime which establishes Western European culture as the supposedly universal definition of humanity (Man). This so-called New World instantiated a complex iconography of race, gender, class, and sexuality which places various conceptual and public symbols into a hierarchical constellation. Our cultural and communicative habits establish and maintain the anti-Black social reality of American culture by "ritually" (Carey 1989) placing these icons into the realm of lived experience. Indeed, these habits are so ingrained that often the way we come to narrate our opposition to

Western Man still reflects residues of its racial iconography. In warping the traditional vocabulary of Orthodox icons, for example, Wiley produces new Black icons valorized within American popular culture. In shattering the image of the white male hermit Saint, I establish my mother as an iconic image and standard to be valorized. In getting rid of the name Bronxdale, Sotomayor becomes the new icon of this Bronx neighborhood and racial progress in the United States. The cycle of icons/iconoclasm can thus be thought alongside the seemingly recurring cycle of Black radical disruption and institutional capture. These cycles demonstrate how, despite potential shifts in representational content (from negative to positive), there is a deeper conversation to be had concerning the form of thinking underlying increasingly positive representations of Blackness.

Similarly, the iconoclasm/icon cycle seems to be reflected in the historical creation of an Afrocentric canon within the humanities and social sciences. Wynter (2006) describes how the formation of Black studies originated in the iconoclastic movements of the 1960s but ultimately resulted in Blackness being re-presented within the University as one genre or canon of the humanities and social sciences. She argues that this new map of the University which revalorized Blackness through the creation of Black studies and ethnic studies Western Man's "governing sociogenic code (the territory)" (117) was left intact. What Wynter describes as mistaking "the map for the territory," I describe as mistaking the icon for liberation. Which is to say that Wynter identifies the way Black studies and ethnic studies came to function as new icons of racial progress which left untouched the broader framing of the humanities through the conceptual iconography of Western Man. Similarly, cultural theorist R.A. Judy (1993) critiques the attempt by scholars such as Henry Louis Gates, Jr. to create a unified poststructuralist African American literary canon. Like Wynter, Judy argues that Gates, Jr. and others reproduce the same form of history-telling and canon-making even as they shift the content from Eurocentric to Afrocentric. This historical conversation around Black studies echoes seemingly disparate conversations about iconoclasm within the context of neoliberalism. Communication scholar Ned O'Gorman, for example, argues in *The Iconoclastic Imagination* (2015) that neoliberalism relies on iconoclasm to feed its continued success and evolution. Simply put, O'Gorman examines how neoliberalism manufactures moments of crisis and iconoclasm to shed old icons and simultaneously produce new evolved forms of control. Relatedly, art historian David Freedberg comments in *Iconoclasm* (2021) that icons and iconoclasm exist in a dialectical

relationship and thus "the hallmark of the iconoclast is ambivalence" just as ambivalence is the mark of "art" or icon making (234). Such a reading of iconoclasm as paradoxical seems commonplace across various theories and disciplines.

Much of the discourse around iconoclasm, such as art historian WJT Mitchell's *Iconology* (1986), has spurred an understanding of iconoclasm as situated within the rationalist paradigm of European enlightenment and the desire to control images (Finnegan and Kang 2004). In this understanding, the iconoclast is imagined as a secular European rationalist who prefers scriptocentric culture and frames visual imagery as irrational idolatry. In this way, Freedberg and Taussig represent iconoclasm as bound up within an inherent ambivalence and paradox. For communication scholars Cara A. Finnegan and Jiyeon Kang (2004), iconoclasm represents the destruction of certain bad images to champion pure images. These scholars' understanding of iconoclasm is framed through the theological dispute in the Byzantine Christian church between iconolatrists who venerated icons as a means of worshipping their God and iconoclasts who believed such veneration to be idolatry. This history and the development of iconoclasm studies within European contexts and theories support reading iconoclasm as the spectacular destruction of physical images as well as a matter of controlling the public through the censorship of images. Across the various disciplines and commentaries on iconoclasm, philosopher Bruno Latour's (2002) notion of the "iconoclash"—the refusal to cherish specific images in favor of cherishing the process of relationality and movement surrounding them—has come to represent a mode of thinking which can potentially move beyond iconoclasm's paradoxical relationship to icons. Why, then, write a book embracing iconoclasm given the apparent revelation that it seems to be an outdated project which simply feeds neoliberalism? How do we discern Black radical thought and activism from the co-options of Western Man? Are we doomed to repeat a cycle of destroying a few icons only to inevitably produce new ones? These conversations and complex questions surrounding anti/Blackness, culture, and iconoclasm animate my alternative approach to thinking what I coin as Black iconoclasm (Athanasopoulos 2019, 2021).

Black Iconoclasm: Public Symbols, Racial Progress, and Post/Ferguson America offers an alternative approach to thinking Blackness and iconoclasm through an engagement with scholars of the Black radical tradition such as Frantz Fanon, Wynter, Hortense J. Spillers, Édouard Glissant, and Judy. I also engage contemporary Black studies scholars such as Christina

Sharpe, Frank B. Wilderson III, Fred Moten, Jared Sexton, Saidiya Hartman, Zakiyyah I. Jackson, Nicole Fleetwood, and Louis M. Maraj. My engagement with Black studies similarly contextualizes my engagement with cultural studies, communication studies, media studies, and street art studies. Bringing this engagement with the Black radical tradition into contact with contemporary iconoclasm studies has the effect of disordering traditional readings in both fields to open space for new ways of imagining and narrating Black liberation. Thus, while shaped in part by iconoclasm studies, my theorizing of Black iconoclasm disorders the charted histories and theories of iconoclasm exemplified by scholars like Taussig, Freedberg, Latour, Mitchell, Finnegan and Kang, and O'Gorman.

Black iconoclasm is an orientation toward dismantling the anti-Black world and its accompanying racial iconography. Black iconoclasm is not reducible to the physical shattering of a piece of art, the refusal to watch a film, or the toppling of a monument. Rather, Black iconoclasm is a conceptual iconoclasm aimed toward uprooting Western Man's social codes of race, gender, class, and sexuality. *Black Iconoclasm* orients us toward the liminal spaces of Black radical disruption and how they open space for Black radical invention. By disorder, I invoke Fanon's (1967) theory of decolonization as a "programme of complete disorder" which instantiates a "tabula rasa" (27)—the clearing out of *a priori* values—where true radical invention can occur. Fanonian radical invention, then, cannot be reduced to the creation of a new telos or product which can be schematically reproduced. Instead, radical invention denotes a process of unmooring and fracturing which pushes us beyond our current intellectual charters. I approach the terms "disorder" and "chaos" interchangeably in the context of Black iconoclasm as referring to a liminal process of shattering any reproducible sequence. By reproducible sequence, I mean to emphasize that there is no set blueprint for engaging in Black iconoclasm(s) as one's performance of such is contextually performed on the level of everyday experience. *Black Iconoclasm* does not offer a vision of a new Black(ened) world beyond Western Man nor any set tools or stringent methods. This iconoclastic orientation calls into question the concept of "worldforming" as itself a kind of icon which constrains the inventive possibilities of Black radical disruption (Palmer 2019). This project takes seriously the concerns of contemporary iconoclasm studies regarding the paradox of iconoclasm by refusing to offer a specific image of a pure Black

world against the corrupt anti-Black world.[2] I distinguish the terms icons from the term idols for a similar reason: idols imply an image of *false* Gods implicitly asserting a *true* God,[3] whereas term icons instead refer to a matter of likeness and being rendered culturally relevant. In this way, Black iconoclasm moves beyond strands of iconoclastic thought which seek to control public thought. If icons and iconoclasm exist in a kind of cyclical relationship, then Black iconoclasm wrestles with that liminal space between the breaking of one icon and the making of another. Black iconoclasm seeks neither control nor telos; it is an orientation which fully appreciates that this liminal space contains *both* opportunities for Fanonian invention and the risks of warping that invention into yet another reproducible sequence.

It is from this liminal vantage point that *Black Iconoclasm* moves beyond the notion that iconoclasm is inherently doomed to repeat the creation of icons in a recurring cycle. Rather than rendering yes/no judgments on cultural products or entire schools of thought, *Black Iconoclasm* zooms in on different objects of analysis to consider how they each reflect both Black radical excess and iconographic residues. This critical orientation yields practices and theories which fracture narratives that reduce Black liberation to reproducible sequences. The liminal vantage point of Black iconoclasm is marked by the metaphor of the twilight. The title of this prologue riffs on Friedrich Nietzsche's *Twilight of the Idols* (1997) which,

> refers to that time between the dark and the light of day, with no immediate indication of which comes after which. Therefore, "Twilight of the Idols" does not indicate whether it marks a transition from day to night or the other way around. All it claims to do is to sound the clear note that comes between being out of tune and being in tune: like twilight, it marks the time between what came before and the beginning of that which comes after. It is intended to make it impossible to live with idols. (x)

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[2] Echoing Tiffany King's statement that "To be rendered Black and fungible under conquest is to be rendered porous, undulating, fluttering, sensuous, and in a space and state at-the-edge and outside of normative configurations" which along with being subjected to anti-Black violence also gestures toward "a discursive space of possibility." King, Tiffany Lethabo. *The Black shoals: offshore formations of Black and Native studies*. Durham and London: Duke University Press. 23.

[3] The term idol is thus related to the term "fetish" originally coined by Portuguese slave traders to frame the religious beliefs of West African cultures as falsely assigning magical power to objects from their Christian perspective.

This metaphor of the twilight thus reflects the liminality of Black radical disorder which sits with the impossibility of racial icons. The twilight of the icons opens the clearing of *a priori* values that Nietzsche refers to as "the revaluation of all values" (3) and Fanon describes as *tabula rasa*. This twilight-like liminality where potential for iconoclasms and icons exist can be read in the introduction of *Black Skin, White Masks*, where Fanon (2008) declares to his readers "Don't expect any explosion today. It's too early … or too late" (xi). Like Nietzsche, Fanon confronts the corrupt society before him but remains unsure about what is to come which is why he warns his readers that he is "not the bearer of absolute truths" (xi). In this way, Black iconoclasm moves beyond traditional renderings of iconoclasm as exclusively explosive or spectacular acts and instead points us to iconoclasm on the level of the everyday. Black iconoclasm reflects an imperfect lived and contextual orientation toward ritual transgression in an anti-Black world. To begin with the premise that this book doesn't offer a definitive answer on Black liberation is to begin with the premise that *none of us got the answer*. To admit that we exist in the twilight, to admit that it is hard to distinguish iconoclasm from iconography, is a necessary mode of humility in how we approach Black liberation. Rather than a spectacular moment of destruction, Black iconoclasm is more like weathered cracks in white pavement. Like that split second when you're suspended in the air after letting your feet lift off the security of a diving board. What would it mean to let go? Not only of the perverse violence of the anti-Black world but also the rigid model of spectacular Black resistance we cling to so desperately in response. What would it look like instead, to commit to Black resistance as a life-long, messy, non-linear process inevitably riddled with failures?

The liminality of Black iconoclasm similarly disorders traditional readings of Black liberation theology which make recourse to a Black sovereign God. In *Religion of the Field Negro: Black Secularism and Black Theology*, for example, Vincent W. Lloyd (2017) proceeds from an explicitly Christian perspective on theology which criticizes Black secular politics and discourses of negative theology[4] as abandoning the Black sovereign God's judgment of the corrupt white world. This notion of judgment has historically been central to Black Christian critiques of Western Man as

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[4] Negative theology refers to the idea that one cannot assert positive and essential qualities of concepts like God, heaven, or *nirvāna* due to the limits of human imagination and language.

explored by Andre Johnson (2020) in his meditation on the prophetic pessimism of Bishop Henry McNeal Turner. Black iconoclasm operates outside of Abrahamic notions of an omniscient and omnipotent God figure, even when that figure is rendered as a liberator of the oppressed. This is not a claim to secularism but a different type of theological orientation. I am wary of asserting a Black God which renders judgment on the white world as itself performing the paradox of iconoclasm: you shatter one's investment in the icons of Western Man only to re-assert another Black counter-icon. While different on the level of content, it follows a similar form of iconographic thinking which renders the white world and secularism as buying into *false* and worldly idols at the expense of the *true* worship of a Black God. Such a reading risks performing a kind of theological certainty in asserting a teleological narrative of Black liberation that surrenders the liminal space of disorder. As explored in Chap. 3, Black iconoclasm alternatively engages Buddhist theology as a means of fracturing our harmful attachments to racial icons and teleology.

Black iconoclasm performs what Sharpe (2016) calls "anagrammatical Blackness" which moves "in and out of place and time putting pressure on meaning and that against which meaning is made" (76) by orienting us toward this twilight of the icons. Reading Wynter's discussion of Western Man's social codes alongside Spillers (2003), I approach racial iconography as a "grammar" from which the cultural vocabulary of Western culture (e.g., human, subject, citizen, nation, freedom) is constructed. In her chapter "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," Spillers explores the way Blackness marks the individual as interchangeable with a collective pathology. Summoned and invoked in a variety of ways, "peaches," "sapphire," "welfare queen," "lazy thug," these images are fetched from a global treasure chest of anti-Black tropes. Thus, as Spillers explains, Blackness signals a captive stripped of humanity and transformed into an instrument to be utilized by their captor. Spillers offers the infamous Moynihan report as an example of how the rhetoric surrounding the white nuclear family, for example, is rooted in tropes of the welfare queen and the "mama's baby, papa's maybe" that position the Black family unit as failed or abject (228–229). She argues that these rhetorical tropes are drawn from an "American grammar" that demarcates human from captive by "[borrowing] its narrative energies from the grid of associations, from the semantic and *iconic* folds buried deep in the collective past, that come to surround and signify the captive [emphasis added]" (210). I further read Wynter and Spillers alongside Fleetwood who argues in *On Racial*