Organizing Race:

Taking Race Seriously in Faith-Based Community Organizing

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"Nowhere is the promise of organizing more apparent than in the traditional black churches." This is the conclusion reached by Barack Obama (1988) after three years of organizing on the far South Side of Chicago. Black churches had financial resources, membership, and moral authority that could be mobilized to do more than charity. They could foster grassroots leadership and direct action, building power in black communities to demand justice for black communities. Moreover, according to Obama, "organizing teaches as nothing else does the beauty and the strength of everyday people." This revelatory power, which Obama sees exemplified in "the songs of the church and the talk on the stoop" woven, by an organizer, into a shared vision, hints at a religious significance to community organizing. Indeed, Obama himself came to Chicago because he found in organizing "the promise of redemption" (1995:135). In other words, it is not just religious institutions that might facilitate organizing; organizing itself might be understood as a religious practice.

There is an increasing amount of scholarship examining not only the sociological and political significance of faith-based community organizing, but also its ethical and theological significance (Snarr 2011; Bretherton 2011; Stout 2010; Fulkerson 2012; Hauerwas and Coles 2008). This scholarship reflects on how organizing might be viewed from within a religious tradition, particularly Protestantism. Community organizers have long appealed to Bible verses and religiously inflected concepts of justice and love, and the seminal book on organizing,

Alinsky's *Rules for Radicals*, aligns organizing with "those rights and values propounded by Judaeo-Christianity and the democratic political tradition" (1971:12). Such appeals are easy to view as instrumental, in the service of organizing. In recent scholarship, religion is being taken as more than a resource to be tapped, more than a repertoire of symbols and stories that can motivate action.

In contrast, there has not been a similar deepening of reflection on the significance of race in community organizing, and there has been little if any reflection on the way that the entanglement of religion and race should affect our understanding of organizing. This is perplexing, given the way that the civil rights movement is so often central to the story of organizing in the United States, and to be a religious story. Further, community organizing is frequently held up as an exemplary, and relatively unique, site of interracial cooperation just as it is a site of interfaith cooperation. In most of what follows I track the absence of substantial reflection on race in faith-based community organizing, as well as the presence of shifting conceptions of race. Following the change from what Jodi Melamed (2011) has called the era of "racial liberalism" to the era of "neoliberal multiculturalism," I argue that faith-based community organizing often participates in a style of management of difference characteristic of contemporary culture – better, contemporary ideology. Unmanageable dimensions of difference are muzzled. Finally, I offer some preliminary thoughts on how a more substantial account of race may be insinuated in discussions of faith-based community organizing in a way that advances the early promise of black theology.

Organizing for Civil Rights

A shift in the historiography of the civil rights movement in the United States has caused a shift in the way organizing, race, and religion are thought to intersect. The three were once thought to reach a grand convergence in the 1950s and 1960s, embodied in Rev. Dr. Martin

Luther King, Jr. (Morris 1984). The momentous Montgomery bus boycott was catalyzed by church networks which offered lines of communication with the black community, financial resources, and leaders. It was ministers who called the boycott. It was at a church-style mass meeting that the black community of Montgomery ratified the boycott and began to organize committees and mobilize resources to support the boycott. With the success in Montgomery, King and other religious leaders founded the Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC) to replicate the successful religious organizing model developed in the year after Rosa Parks was arrested, with its techniques for communicating, fundraising, carpooling, and negotiating. According to this older version of the historical narrative, the civil rights movement began to decline when the religiously committed leadership of SCLC was displaced by more secular, more radical protesters, proclaiming an allegiance to black power that substituted rhetorical flourish for organizing effort. With King's assassination, faith-based organizing for the rights of African Americans effectively ended.

Critics have charged that this account of the civil rights movement focuses too much on the top-down leadership of charismatic figures, much loved by the media, such as King. They have charged that it overlooks grassroots leadership, both from older generations and developed within the movement. Further, they charge that the term organizing is misused when it is applied to charismatic preachers calling for a protest or leading a march. Historians have uncovered intergenerational networks of local, grassroots activists existing well before protests captured the national spotlight, and they have shown the central, but rarely visible, role of women as organizers in the movement. In this version of civil rights movement history, it is the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) that takes center stage, with its emphasis on facilitating the development of local leadership through sustained organizing using techniques

with closer affinities to the labor movement than to black churches. Organizers went house to house, listened to community members' stories, explained how the organizing effort was in their interest, and carefully chose tactics to confront the powers that be. A result of this shifting emphasis is that true organizing in the civil rights movement is now portrayed as a secular activity, with the young, overall-clad SNCC worker living in the attic replacing the immaculately clad preacher as the paradigmatic organizer. While the most famous of this type of organizer, Ella Baker and Bob Moses, are sometimes portrayed with a spiritual aura, they have none of the Christian commitments of King, Rev. Joseph Lowery, or Rev. Ralph Abernathy (Payne 1996; Ransby 2003).

The subsequent story of race and organizing, told as a story of decline, rarely includes religion. The urban uprisings of the late 1960s entailed chaos and destruction, the opposite of organizing. In Oakland, and then nationally, the Black Panther Party tapped and channeled this energy. They combined flashy, media-friendly images of berets, leather jackets, and guns with a commitment to freeing black communities from American "internal colonialism." This commitment manifested as organizing alternative institutions for the black community: patrols to prevent attack from the police, a free breakfast program for children, and a medical program focusing on diseases particularly affecting black Americans. Despite the religious background of key Panthers (Huey Newton's father, for example, was a Baptist preacher), the Party spoke in a Marxist idiom, and it was sometimes severely critical of organized religion. However, religious institutions offered the infrastructure for some of the Panthers' social programs. Many free breakfasts were cooked in church kitchens and served in church halls, to take but one instance (Bloom and Martin 2013).

A focus on building black community institutions developed in the 1970s as the concrete manifestations of the "black power" slogan required funding. The foundations that had once supported civil rights organizing, along with the federal government's anti-poverty programs, channeled funds into this new type of organizing. So did some church organizations, in part as a reaction to James Forman's demand – dramatically announced through a statement he read as he interrupted the service at Riverside Memorial Church – for $500 billion in reparations to black Americans from white churches and synagogues. This funding went to develop industrial parks, cultural institutes, and community service projects. Organizing became institutionalized, professionalized, and subsidized by outside forces that were not at all interested in supporting challenges to the powers that be (Fergus 2009).

With this next act in the story of organizing for racial justice came a decline in the reputation of race-based community organizing, and a re-description of earlier organizing projects. Organizing more and more transformed into social service subsidized by, and used as a tool of, the increasing number of black elected officials. The civil rights movement, both from SCLC-centric and SNCC-centric perspectives, came to be remembered not as an example of race-based organizing but as an example of organizing against unjust laws, an entirely different project than the easily corruptible, already sullied project of black cultural nationalism. The civil rights movement became the organizing project that preceded feminist organizing and followed labor organizing, with lessons on offer for the organizing projects of today and tomorrow. In this narrative of the left, race is one difference among many, one site of struggle among many. Faith-based organizers today learning about organizing history track the involvement of religious communities in each of these endeavors, and they can track the way that religious values guided these organizers of earlier generations.

Eliding the specificity of race in the history of organizing is worrying. It complements

and reinforces contemporary multiculturalism's muzzling of the critical and unmanageable

aspects of difference (Duggan 2003; Melamed 2011). But it also obscures the long and rich

history of black community institutions, such as freemasons, fraternal orders, and women's

church groups, that have been committed to race-based organizing, and that should be

understood in continuity with the civil rights movement (Ernest 2011; Walker 2008; Skocpol et

al 2006; Higginbotham 1993). When this history is obscured, the effect is a sense of "nihilism in

black America," as Cornel West (1993) has put it, with no institutions seeming to offer visions of

the future or values for the present. When black America is understood to be devoid of

institutions and traditions, the only hope to address problems of the black community is to form

coalitions with those whose institutions and traditions seem to run deeper.

The Alinsky Organizing Tradition

In 1964, the city of Rochester, New York experienced a race riot. In response, liberal

white clergy decided to ask for outside help in addressing the city's race problem. They did not

turn to the SCLC; they turned to Saul Alinsky (Alinsky 1971; Horwitt 1989). Since pioneering

neighborhood organizing on Chicago's South Side two decades earlier, Alinsky had gained a

national reputation for mobilizing the diverse people and resources of a community to address its

problems. His pugnacious and often crude manner was accompanied by an abiding commitment

to American ideals of freedom and equality – the determined effort which he labeled "radical."

As he wrote in 1946, "The Radical believes completely in *real* equality of opportunity for all

peoples regardless of race, color, or creed" (17). Alinsky condemned unions for their racial

discrimination, which he considered "an attack on the very soul of America," and he made sure

the bylaws of his first organization began by stating the group was concerned with all, "regardless of their race, color, or creed." What organizing meant for Alinsky was bringing people together, particularly bringing together those who were already leaders in some way in their community, whether they were leaders of a city park or a choir or a group of youths. By joining resources and identifying shared concerns, these local leaders could advance the interests of their community in the face of opposition from the wealthy and the powerful. Alinsky, or another professional organizer, would simply catalyze the natural process of leadership development and cooperation. He writes, "[M]ankind from time immemorial has always organized, regardless of what race or color they were, whenever they wanted to bring about change" (1971:110-111).

Alinsky did not immediately pack his bags and move to Rochester when he was called. He responded that organizers "were not a colonial power like the churches who sent their missionaries everywhere whether they were invited or not," and he waited for an invitation from Rochester's black religious leaders, which came soon thereafter (1971:102). In Rochester, as in Chicago and elsewhere, religious leaders were central to Alinsky's organizing efforts. Alinsky himself was a secular Jew, but he wove references to Jewish and Christian sources into his writings. The first epigraph to his 1971 *Rules for Radicals* is from Rabbi Hillel, "Where there are no men, be thou a man." He describes the professional organizer as "reaching for the highest level for which man can reach—to create, to be a 'great creator,' to play God" (61). Seemingly much more than his successors, Alinsky really believed that Judeo-Christian values are integral to American democratic politics, ideals to fight for, not just weapons to wield in the struggle. For Alinsky, religion or race could define a community; they were not just a box to check on a demographics form or part of a tossed salad of many cultures.

After Alinsky, and after a decade of decline, several community organizing networks formalized Alinsky's process and made a major change. Now, community organizations would be funded by churches which would become members and whose parishioners would become organization leaders. Additionally, organizing became "broad based," reaching many communities across a city, rather than defined by a neighborhood. This helped address the increased mobility of families – living in one part of a city, shopping in another, and working in another – and it also made possible alliances of very different sorts of people. White suburban churches and Latino Catholic churches and inner city black Protestant churches could all be members of the organization, all pooling resources and developing leadership to address the ills of their city.

Describing this new organizing model as one aimed at "reweaving the social fabric," Ernesto Cortes (1994) embraces the culture of multiculturalism. Where Alinsky went to Rochester to help blacks address discrimination, Cortes, who led the growth of faith-based organizing in the 1990s, sees organizing in grander terms, building trust across racial and ethnic lines. Moreover, on his account organizing is motivated by a shared faith, which Cortes explains as not being "a particular system of religious beliefs, but a more general affirmation that life has meaning." This reduction of religion to affirmation accompanies a sociological reduction of religious institutions: they are "built on networks of family and neighborhood." Religion and race come together, for Cortes, in a magnificent unity: "The best elements in our religious traditions are inclusive -- respecting diversity, and conveying a plurality of symbols which incorporate the experiences of diverse peoples. The mixed multitudes in Sinai and Pentecost are central to the Judeo-Christian tradition; they represent the constant incorporation of different traditions in our social and political fabric." Good religion brings "diverse peoples" (presumably a euphemism for racial or ethnic difference) together in harmony, many voices singing together. It is hard not to read this as a theological, or crypto-theological, claim: that all difference ultimately resolves in unity – and if it cannot, then

then we must be misunderstanding the difference in question. In this way, proper racial difference is difference than can be submerged in unity – presumably in something like the affirmation of common humanity to which religious difference is reduced.

According to a survey conducted in 2011, faith-based community organizing groups exhibit an impressive degree of diversity at every level (Wood et al. 2011). Five million Americans belong to a congregation or organization that is a member of one of these groups, and African American congregations make up 30% of this membership, more than twice their representation in the population. More than half of the staff and board of directors members of these groups are non-white, with 32% of board members and 21% of staff African American. In sum, the survey report concludes, these groups "are actually getting people to collaborate across racial and ethnic lines."

In the 1990s, racial difference was rarely discussed in faith-based organizing groups (Wood et al 2011; Warren 2001), even though issues of racism were often addressed by these groups – discussed in non-racial terms. The poor education offered at a predominantly black school might be an issue around which there was organizing energy, but it was not condemned as racist. It was shared religious faith, even if that faith had little content besides the proclamation that one "has faith," that was seen as uniting a community, allowing divisive issues of racial difference to be put to the side. Sociologist Mark Warren summarizes the groups' views: "In a society so fractured along racial lines, people from different racial groups often have difficulty seeing a common interest. A set of common beliefs, a shared identity as people of God, helps people to identify themselves as members of the same community" (2001: 117).

This silencing of racial difference led to tension in some organizations. For example, Warren examines the 1993 case of a racially motivated murder outside of Ft. Worth, Texas that

prompted protests organized by some of the African American clergy participating in the Ft. Worth organizing group. The multiracial group as a whole did not respond to the murder. Warren suggests that "Anglo and Hispanic leaders, and the white lead organizer, may not have grasped quickly enough the unique importance of the verdict to the black community." The group had its strongest roots in the Latino community but had cultivated African American participation. According to Warren, "[T]he event revealed a significant weakness in the organization's level of multiracial understanding" (119). Over the next years, the network of organizing groups of which the Ft. Worth group was a part, led by Ernesto Cortes, offered a series of seminars for group leaders on African American issues, bringing in speakers including Cornel West and James Cone.

By 2011, race was commonly discussed among community organizing groups. Indeed, 29% of faith-based community organizing groups tackled issues directly concerned with racism. In comparison, 70% tackled poverty issues, 66% education issues, and 54% immigration issues (Wood et al. 2011). Some organizing networks, such as the Gamaliel Foundation, have established national African American leadership teams. Yet the way race was discussed by these groups ensured that racial difference would remain manageable. For example, a group in New Orleans addressing the myriad issues raised by the aftermath of Katrina avoided framing these issues in terms of race. As Jeffrey Stout reports, "I found no reluctance among them to discuss the racial dimension of the situation. They present it, however, as one dimension among others; and they present it in this way, as far as I can tell, because they see it in this way, not merely because they are trying to draw whites, Asians, and Hispanics into the coalition" (2010:5; Swarts 2007:55). Stout further concludes that the shift to broad-based organizing from community- or race-based organizing ensured that successful campaigns do not become overly

invested in defending their newly achieved place of power, since they are not competing for that seat at the table with other communities or minority groups.

Participants in faith-based organizing groups report a sense of difference subsumed into unity, just as Cortes announced. Political Scientist Heidi Swarts reports her experience on the last day of an organizer training: "On the final day of a PICO national training, an African American female participant expressed the 'high' of solidarity that the training had produced for her as 'a glimpse of heaven. This is God.' A Filipino man became emotional about experiencing 'so many religions come together: to see black, Hispanic, Asian, Filipino all together – if we can do it here, up on the hill, why can't we do it down there?'" (2007:55). In the first case, the African American woman is offering a naturalized theological vision: God as (the feeling of) solidarity among different people with different stories. In the second case, the Filipino man's slippage between religious and racial identities mirrors Cortes's implicit suggestion that race and religion are two of the many differences that define who we are, and that all are subsumed under a larger, implicitly theological vision of unity "up on the hill." Just as some theologians have juxtaposed the Christian *mythos* of an essentially peaceful world in need of conversion with the secular liberal *mythos* of a fundamentally violent world in need of restraint (Cavanaugh 2002; Milbank 1993), this Filipino man has been shown the organizing *mythos* of unity in difference, and he is ready to go back to his community to make converts. Given the convenient way that this crypto-theological position coincides with the unity-in-difference prescribed by the contemporary cultural-economic order, we might venture to call the theological commitments of this Filipinio man, and perhaps of the organizing network training him, a *theology of neoliberal multiculturalism*. Significantly, this theology does not see itself as accountable to tradition or authority. It is taken as self-evident.

<u>Taking Difference Seriously</u>

In recent years, the way that difference is understood in community organizing has been called into question from two quarters: theologians and religious ethicists taking religious difference seriously and feminists taking gender difference seriously. Melissa Snarr's recent examination of community-labor-religion coalitions supporting living wage campaigns is an example of the former. Rather than filling out a theological position that supports an organizing campaign, Snarr develops an account of the religious meaning of the practice of organizing, from a Christian perspective. In other words, she rejects the split between specific religion, reduced to general affirmation of "faith," and the generic crypto-theology supporting the practice of organizing, unity in difference without tradition or authority. Encounters with difference do play an important role for Snarr. They are a crucial part of organizing not because they are needed to build power and win campaigns but because they enlarge the moral agency of those participating in organizing. Through struggling with difference while working on a joint project advancing shared goals, participants build their capacity to be sensitive to difference in the future, and to act accordingly. Furthermore, organizing across difference makes participants more aware of their interdependence, conceived theologically as "our creation by God as social beings" and mirroring "God's own nature, in Trinitarian formulation" (2011:60). Participants do not wallow in their unity or interdependence: they act on it, working together towards the common good. In this collective action, each has her or his calling; each can contribute (and develop) her or his skills in a specific way. But collective action gives all a way to share their stories, to have a voice.

For Snarr, the activity of organizing also builds moral agency by teaching suspicion of the powers that be and suspicion of the way the world is ordered. By identifying injustices and searching for their causes, organizing helps participants see that the ways of the world can be deeply corrupt that collective action can offer an effective remedy. Put another way, organizing shows that laws can be unjust, but that a commitment to justice shared with fellow citizens can transform the law, can make it more just. The meaning of justice is not revealed from on high but discerned through collective reflection – with neighbors, fellow congregants, coworkers, and with those one might never have thought to talk to before. Organizing for justice always meets resistance, and this resistance, too, serves a pedagogical function. The distortions propagated by the powerful are a reminder of the dangers of idolatry, the need for suspicion and critical examination of the messaging one encounters in the media and in conventional wisdom. Organizing builds virtue: it cultivates the disposition to commit oneself to the common good despite serious obstacles. This virtue is instilled regardless of whether a particular organizing campaign wins or loses, for it is the process of organizing that holds ethical and theological significance, not the outcome.

Reading Alinsky with Augustine, Luke Bretherton (2010) suggests that organizing offers a model of faithful citizenship in the secular world – by which he means the world between Christ's resurrection and his return. This world is deeply ambivalent, with both human and divine authorities having pull. Bretherton reads both Alinsky and Augustine as optimistic realists, acknowledging the difficult, messy work of politics necessary in this world and yet committed to a vision of peace and justice in the future. Both do not look for salvation from the state; they urge citizens to faithfully work together towards the world of justice they deeply desire. In the process, according to Bretherton, difference must not dissolve. Organizing resists

"the spirit of capitalism that precisely demands the dissolution of particularity and the formation of liquid identities in order to aid capital flows" (87). By listening carefully to the stories of others, by witnessing their passions, and by glimpsing the depths of their traditions participants in organizing are able to appreciate the complexity of the world in a time before Christ's return, refusing to simplify it under the gaze of ostensibly neutral liberalism.

Snarr and Bretherton take religion as more than one identity category, more than one set of propositions to believe about matters of ultimate concern. For them, religion involves a way of seeing the world and acting in it, informed by resources from the past and animated by a shared vision for the future. If religious difference can be understood in this way, can other differences be so understood as well? Before turning to racial difference, a review of feminist critiques of Alinsky-style organizing will help set the stage. These critics have pointed out that the process of Alinsky-style organizing, with its focus on demonizing an opponent, wielding power against that opponent, and the cultivation of indigenous leadership by outsiders is antithetical to feminist values, and is antithetical to many women-led forms of organizing (Stall and Stoecker 1998; Martin 2002; Taylor 1999). Even if a majority of professional organizers in Alinsky-style groups are now women, the world of practices, values, and dispositions opened by a gendered perspective may still be ignored as gender is treated as one difference among many to be unified – or so these feminist critics charge.

Saul Alinsky's model of community organizing is premised on organizing being an action in the public sphere, not the private sphere. This distinction is contested by feminists who argue that it is always artificial. When the distinction is ignored, new sorts of practices can be understood as practices of community organizing: friendship networks, breastfeeding support groups, family reunions, block clubs, and even gossip. I think of my own mother, who has

started newsletters for her neighborhood in each place she has lived, allowing neighbors to get to know each other, allowing them to share their passions and concerns, and alerting them to issues affecting the neighborhood. Such practices are neither purely private nor public. They can start informally, in the home, but then lead to demands on the state, such as demands for changes in school curricula. Stall and Stoecker (1998) point to settlement houses and consciousness-raising groups of an earlier era, and more recently tenant and welfare rights organizing, as employing what they call a "woman-centered" model. As opposed to the rigid procedures, slogans, and technical jargon deployed by Alinsky-style organizing groups ("one-to-ones," "accountability sessions," "leaders," the countless acronyms, etc.), woman-centered organizing is more informal. A human catalyst is not added to existing community relationships in the form of a professional organizer. The relationships already existing between women, often begun over a coffee table in the home, lead to demands for action against the powers that be. These deep relationships, unlike the artificially cultivated relationships of Alinsky-style organizing, are capable of sustaining an organizing effort over the long haul.

Note how this feminist critique of organizing does not simply urge that gender difference be discussed in organizing efforts, or that staff members be sent to diversity trainings to be sensitized to women's issues. The feminist charge runs much deeper, that the very way the activity of organizing is conceived needs to be rethought from a perspective that sees and values the world differently. The question of efficacy is bracketed (both Alinsky-style and woman-centered organizing campaigns have had their successes and failures). What matters is the sort of relationships that are visible in a community, and the sort of relationships that are seen as having the potency to affect change. Melissa Snarr (2011: Chapter 4) writes of the sacrifices made by the predominantly female organizers in Alinsky-style groups, working long hours for low pay.

From the feminist perspective, another misfortune can be added to their basket, that of false consciousness. As outsiders entering a community and seeing themselves as possessing the formula for organizing success, for building the power of everyday people to fight injustice, the key players and relationships they chart out overlook the already strong, and potentially fecund, bonds between women and families in that community.

Taking Race Seriously

Can a critique of race in organizing efforts be made along the same lines as the feminist critique? This would mean pointing out distinctive features of organizing among racialized communities, and it would mean pointing out the limitations of organizing models that do not take seriously the way race is not just one issue among many but is constitutive of social worlds. In the history of civil rights organizing briefly rehearsed above, it became clear that there was, in fact, a long and distinctive race-based organizing tradition. In some ways, this tradition resonates with the woman-centered organizing tradition.[1] Because blacks were excluded from the mainstream public sphere, it was through alternative institutions (such as churches, newspapers, and fraternal societies) and informal relationships that organizing could get its start. Bob Moses once described the key to starting the organizing process as bouncing a ball, literally (Payne 1996: 243). Soon children will come to watch, and eventually the ball will need to be retrieved from someone's yard, starting the process of building informal relationships.

Those black institutions and leaders that did exist before the civil rights movement were always precarious, their positions and often lives threatened if they challenged the powers that be. One reading of the tragedy of post-civil rights black politics is that the alternative public

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[1] Tera Hunter's (1997) account of black women's organizing after the Civil War shows these convergences particularly well, though the scarcity of evidence preserved from the period limits our view of the concrete practices involved, and Hunter pays only limited attention to religion.

sphere created by segregation collapsed, leaving leaders with no base, thus even more dependent on white patronage than ever before. Cornel West labels this the "crisis of black leadership," and he argues that broad-based (i.e., not race-based) organizing is the antidote, citing Alinsky's Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) as an example of the sort of "grassroots organization in principled coalitions that bring power and pressure to bear on specific issues" he recommends (1993: 66). West also argues that black leaders must be "race-transcending," critical of both black and white wielders of power while promoting a vision of social justice for all (1993: 70). But such a position refuses to contemplate the possibility that there might be distinctively black forms of organizing. Moreover, rather than seeking to rebuild black institutions desiccating since integration, West concedes their demise and, by urging the formation of broad coalitions, forecloses the space for their reemergence.

Taking racial difference seriously is precisely the intent of the Center for Third World Organizing, a network of groups organizing in communities of color. Sociologist Richard Wood (2002) compared the organizing techniques of this race-based style of organizing to an Alinsky-style group. Both groups Wood examined organized in the same neighborhoods of Oakland, both had similar levels of racial diversity represented among their participants, and both addressed similar social justice issues in their campaigns. While the Alinsky-style group drew participants from member congregations, the race-based group drew participants from people of color (and a few whites) living in downtrodden neighborhoods of Oakland. Where the Alinsky-style group's members' commitments grew out of their commitment to their congregation, the race-based group not only organized campaigns for social justice but also built commitments among its members by organizing cultural events with them. Wood asserts that the strongest bond racial

minorities in the United States have is a shared consumer culture, and he views race-based organizing as a way to foster bonds between minorities independent of that consumer culture.

Because the participants in the race-based group were, in fact, of many races, cultural events ranged from Kwanzaa to Cinco de Mayo and beyond. The Center for Third World Organizing is committed to a vision of a multiracial future, not a post-racial future. Its goal is "a future American society that is not only multiracial in its demographic composition, but that values and celebrates the diverse cultural expressions of minority communities and somehow fuses them into a shared political culture" (Wood 2002: 116). To achieve that desired future, race needs to be acknowledged and embraced in the present. Class and gender are also important, and their connections with race as "interlocking systems of oppression" are acknowledged by the group, but race is considered a "first among equals" among these categories (114). Wood concludes that race-based organizing is likely to remain marginal to American political life. While that marginality allows it to address more controversial issues, such as racial profiling and abortion, it is unlikely to build the power necessary to hold institutions accountable in a sustained manner – a possibility that is more realistic for Alinsky-style faith-based organizing groups (148).

Yet what Wood labels "race-based" organizing is not exactly that. It would be better labeled "multicultural" organizing, for racial difference is essentially reduced to cultural difference. Stories about a people's history, a meal with their typical foods, and a celebration of their most visible holidays are seen as sufficing to build bonds within a minority group, and between minority groups. Indeed, the distinction between race, ethnicity, and culture is further blurred by the term around which organizing occurs, "people of color." The term would seem to refer to biologically determined race, but it is actually used to refer to socially-designated non-

white groups, ranging from Asian immigrants to Native Americans to Latinos to African Americans. To assert that each of these groups even has a fixed, monolithic culture that can be embraced and shared with others buys into a problematic story about American pluralism. Most salient here, race-based organizing does not mean embracing culture and then using the same organizing process as everyone else. This is a lesson from the feminist critique. Race-based organizing means allowing a racially marked set of values and ideals to shape the practice of organizing itself, with culture relevant only secondarily.

One of the impediments to imagining race-based organizing in the contemporary United States is the very ambiguity between race and ethnicity, given the large and growing size of the country's Latino population and their ambiguous racial/ethnic status. Latinos' status near the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder has made organizers, and funders, particularly keen to organize in, or with, this community. Sometimes the issue of Latinos' place in the US ethnic/racial landscape is entirely averted by considering Latinos under the rubric of "immigrants," and immigration has received much attention from faith-based organizing groups. To consider Latinos as a race is not just to complicate the binary American racial landscape. Nor is it just to displace African Americans from their symbolic location as most denigrated, and so to divert resources away from blacks. To consider Latinos a race is to embrace a pessimism concerning their status in the United States. The cultural connotation of race is intractable hardship, a condemnation to eternal subordination, permanently locked in the position of "other."[2] The cultural connotation of ethnicity, in contrast, is optimistic. It connotes hardship to endure now, but rewards later on. It connotes a rich culture, with tasty foods and colorful clothes. Ultimately, it connotes something to be proud of. Ethnicity, then, can be reduced to culture with

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[2] I have found Frank Wilderson's (2010) development of what he terms the Afro-pessimist tradition particularly fruitful on these issues. See also Sexton's (2008) related critique of "multiracialism" and Barnor Hesse's (2011) related critique of the "post-racial."

minimal remainder – that remainder being ethnic beauty, a nose or eyes or skin color that marks assimilated difference. Mixing race and ethnicity, as the Center for Third World Organizing does, obscures the most fundamental workings of American racism: the pessimism so deep it might even warrant the label theology that accompanies racialization. Such pessimism requires a unique organizing process, one that does not merely demand a seat at the table but demands a new sort of table.

Race, Religion, Organizing

In sociologist Mark Warren's account of the variety of congregations participating in faith-based organizing, he concludes that, compared with other religious traditions, the "African American religious tradition has not been as readily available for IAF organizing … because the black tradition has been focused primarily towards racial justice" (Warren 2001: 200). African American churches have been primarily concerned with a message of liberation, but such a message does not fit with the more pragmatic concerns of broad-based community organizing. Professional organizers, like many black churches, take Exodus to be an important text in thinking about religious involvement in the contemporary world, but where black churches have interpreted the Exodus story as one of liberation from enslavement, professional organizers emphasize "the themes of inclusion and community building" (Warren 2001: 200).[3] Further, according to Warren, the "authoritarian leadership styles" of ministers in black churches poses a challenge for organizers invested in democratic process (202).

This misfit between the expectations and values of professional organizers and those of African American churches underscores the need to take race seriously in faith-based community organizing. Given the deeply entwined histories of religion and race (Hickman 2010), and

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[3] Alinsky offers a discussion of Moses as organizer in *Rules for Radicals* (1971: 116-118).

particularly of Christian theology and the subordination of African Americans (Carter 2007), such an account would need to think about how both categories, religion and race, can be taken seriously together, how both can refuse the bounds set on them by the ideology of neoliberal multiculturalism. From within the always already racialized tradition of Christianity, what meaning does organizing take on? Is it a religious, or an ethical, practice? And, does organizing look different when it is seen as part of an African American tradition? I do not propose to fully answer these questions here. My interest in this article is primarily identifying them, and in the process pondering why they so often go unasked. I do, however, want to offer some preliminary thoughts towards answers.

The challenge for black churches, according to Warren, is to reconcile an emphasis on grand narratives of liberation with the practical tasks of building power in a community in order to challenge the powers that be. This is precisely what one would expect to find in the writings of black liberation theologians, but it is not found there (a major exception is Jeremiah Wright). The most visible figure of black theology, James Cone, is a systematic theologian, and practical questions of ethics and politics are not primary concerns of his. Indeed, the heavy emphasis that he places on liberation at times seems antithetical to organizing. For example, in one of his first essays, from 1968, Cone describes the urban uprisings happening around him as "not a conscious organized attempt of black people to take over; it is an attempt to say *yes* to their own dignity even in death" (Cone 2000: 7). During this early, existentialist-influenced phase, Cone sees pure rebellion and pure liberation linked, with both receiving divine sanction. He emphasizes raw anger and emotion leading to action, unmediated by the processes or structures of organizing. Cone does not mention organizing again in his published writings until 1991, long after his seminal writings on black theology. Here he discerns a shared quality of Malcolm X and Martin

Luther King, Jr.,: the ability "to teach the people how to organize themselves for the purpose of achieving their freedom. Organizing for freedom requires thinking about the meaning of freedom and developing strategies to implement it in the society" (299). Even in this case, organizing is not an organic activity, already occurring and in need of catalysts. It is something new that needs to be taught from above, from someone with the time to contemplate the big theological and philosophical questions.

Perhaps the seemingly simpleminded message of liberation is just what is needed. Given the intractable pessimism that race connotes, not to mention facts on the ground like the million black men currently imprisoned in the United States, imagining smiling families with skin of all shades holding hands is not the right way to imagine the future. If the world has in store only suffering and death, and worse for our children, and worse still for their children, the language of liberation rings true. This is liberation without content, liberation which represents overturning the table, radically reconfiguring the social world in a way unimaginable from the perspective of the present. Any content to liberation evinces optimism, and so false consciousness, a refusal to acknowledge the depths of racial injustice in America.

But is Warren's worry justified, that such a commitment to liberation is depoliticizing, or at least inappropriate in the context of organizing? No. A theological emphasis on liberation fits with the suspicion of worldly wisdom that Melissa Snarr finds to be taught by organizing. In the shadow of future liberation, the institutions and systems of the present are necessarily misguided in fundamental ways. That suspicion of worldly wisdom extends to the worldly wisdom conveyed by organizing manuals and trainings, to the processes and tactics entailed by faith-based community organizations. With pessimism about the present and a commitment to liberation in the future, black theology does not aspire to offer justification for particular

campaigns or tactics, does not attempt to hallow what is ultimately profane. Put another way, black theology trusts the grassroots, trusts the wisdom of ordinary people to continue doing what they have been doing for generations: working together, listening to each other's stories, consulting with community elders, and collectively confronting what strikes them as unjust.

The black theological vision of organizing moves beyond this austere silence when it proclaims that God is working through history. James Cone describes faith as "the perspective which enables human beings to recognize God's actions in human history" (1990: 47). It is from this perspective that the black organizing tradition should be read, theologically. Whether or not organizers understood themselves as Christian, the movement towards liberation is God acting in the world. That means telling a story of black organizing, from freemasons to Ida Wells' anti-lynching crusade to SNCC and SCLC to the Panthers, is telling a theological story, one in which we are all invited to participate. Faith illuminates that tradition, and calls for participation. It does not dictate tactics or opponents – all of these are choices made fallibly by individuals working together in the world, aspiring to participate in the spirit of God's work in the world. Faith involves discernment. Not all community organizing efforts are working towards liberation. Many are blinded by optimism, ignoring the depths of American racism. Some electoral campaigns may fit with the organizing tradition, with God's work in the world. Chokwe Lumumba's successful campaign to become mayor of Jackson, Mississippi in 2013 built on and reinvigorated an ostensibly secular tradition of black organizing, supported by the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement.[4]

This particularly black perspective on faith-based community organizing invites us to read differently the stories told about such organizing. Rev. Claude Black was reluctant to bring

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[4] Ironically, in the final days of the primary campaign remarks Lumumba made indicating his agnosticism on the question of Christ's resurrection were used against him by his opponent.

his congregation into the San Antonio affiliate of the Industrial Areas Foundation. In Texas, the driving force in the network had been Latinos. Rev. Black wanted to start an all-black community organizing effort. Eventually, as the neighborhood around his church shifted from black to Latino, Rev. Black concluded that joining the broad-based organizing group was in his congregation's best interest. His thinking was that "integration has changed our community structure. There is no way to improve this community as a black community. It must be improved as a biracial community" (Warren 2001: 125). Read through the racial lens developed above, this is a story about a minister refusing to persist in despair, turning too quickly towards a helping hand. The tradition of black organizing knows a thing or two about helping hands of different colors. What Rev. Black should have done is to see himself as part of this tradition, to invite his congregation to discern how God is acting in their world, and to remembering that peaks and valleys are a necessary part of how God works in the world. And then he should have begun a prayerful wait.

When we take race seriously in organizing, just as when we take religion or gender seriously, we can no longer measure success by the speed at which specific community goals are accomplished. Indeed, the notion that organizing is a way of efficiently achieving discrete desires is very much a symptom of our neoliberal moment. Yet it might be objected that there are other reasons to organize in broad based coalitions. Negotiating the many differences encountered in such coalitions force participants to question their own beliefs and values. Diverse coalitions provide space for diverse voices within minority groups to be heard – for example, black atheists or Latino lesbians.[5] But the pessimism of race, a pessimism so deep it may properly be understood as ontological, or theological, overwhelms these concerns. As Frank Wilderson puts it, "If the position of the Black is … a paradigmatic impossibility in the Western

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[5] Thanks to Bill Hart for pushing me on this point.

Hemisphere, indeed, in the world, in other words, if a Black is the very antithesis of a Human subject … then his or her paradigmatic exile is not simply a function of repressive practices on the part of institutions" (2010: 9). Race, understood as inextricably entangled with religion, marks non-Being, and so marks an ontological rather than an ontic difference, marks a difference that fundamentally structures the worlds not just of blacks but also of whites. To have faith in lives denied the status of human, to resurrect Being out of non-Being – that is the project of black theology. It is horizon on which virtues can develop and on which the plurality of human differences can unfold. But it must be taken as decisive for how we organize.

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