epistemological relativism to 'weak thesis postmodernism', in Sue Patterson's *Realist Christian Theology in a Postmodern Age*, Cambridge University Press 1999. Patterson deals with an almost entirely different set of writers, but her aims seem to be similar to mine.

15 The terms derive, of course, from Wittgenstein, who was probably an epistemological relativist. Cf Fergus Kerr, *Theology after Wittgenstein*, SPCK 1997, Chapter 6: Assurances of Realism.

16 *Faith beyond Resentment*, DLT 2001.

17 Cf e.g. *Dogmatics in Outline*, SCM 1949, pp.35-6.

18 Barth himself later corrected some of these tendencies in his beautiful booklet, *The Humanity of God.*

19 Don Cupitt, *The Revelation of Being, op. cit.*, p.94.

20 *Shadows of the Mind*, Oxford University Press 1994, pp. 413-4.

21 Some modern cosmologies actually make observation by human consciousness constitutive of cosmic reality, without denying consciousness as something that has evolved within the cosmos. This creates a similar kind of circle.

22 Cf Jean-Luc Marion, 'Metaphysics and Phenomenology: a Summary for Theologians', in *Radical Orthodoxy, op. cit.*, pp.279 ff.

23 *It is on this basis that one might take issue with Lindbeck's post-liberalism.* Cf Rowan Williams, 'The Judgement of the World', in *On Christian Theology*, Blackwell 2000, pp. 29 ff.

Brer Rabbit Christology

Francesca Aran Murphy

James Cone begins his book about *The Spirituals and Blues* by defining this music as 'the power of song in the struggle for black survival'.[1] The quality of spirituals and blues is 'an optimism that uses the pessimism of life as raw material out of which it creates its own strength'.[2] The use of human life at its roughest as a source of power is also the meaning of *comedy*. Comedy is not just a funny ha-ha plot, it is a *milieu*. It is a milieu over which love presides. Speaking about the earthiness of the blues, Cone observes, 'People cannot love physically and spiritually ... until they have been up against the edge of life, experiencing the hurt and pain of existence.'[3] The painful, raw sounds of the blues and the spirituals venture further into the comic milieu than do Hollywood

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romantic 'comedies.'

Richie Havens used to sing a spiritual called 'Motherless Child'

> Sometimes I feel like a motherless child,
> Sometimes I feel like a motherless child,
> Sometimes I feel like a motherless child,
> A long ways from home,
> A long ways from home.
>
> Sometimes I feel like I'm almost gone,
> Sometimes I feel like I'm almost gone,
> Sometimes I feel like I'm almost gone,
> A long ways from home,
> A long ways from home.
>
> Sometimes I feel like a feather in the air,
> Sometimes I feel like a feather in the air,
> Sometimes I feel like a feather in the air,
> And I spread my wings and I fly,
>
> I spread my wings and I fly.

The words on the page do not carry the passion which Havens made them convey. Spiritual and blues singers hover on the word, pulling and stretching words like 'almost.' Richie Havens, or Arethra Franklin expand the meaning of individual words into musical depths where the intellect which says 'almost' is drowned out. The music to which the spirituals are sung draws their words into a range of emotional connotation which is peripheral to the cognitive use of language.

In the 1920s, when he believed that the 'Old-time Negro preacher' was a dying breed, James Weldon Johnson used his memory and imagination to 'fix something' of African American preaching in verse.[4] He turned a funeral sermon for 'Sister Lucy into these lines:

> I seen our sister in life,
> An' she done her duty,
> She served her God
> An' done her best earthly labor
> As best she knowed how,
> An' listened for the blowin' of the trumpet.
> Death had no fears for her
> For the blowin' of the trumpet,
> The Master's trumpet,
> Was the Music that she loved;
> The blowin', the blowin' of the trumpet,
> The Master's trumpet.[5]

In the trumpet sound, God calls Lucy to immortality.

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James Cone has said that the 'Jesus of the biblical and black traditions is not a theological *concept*, but a liberating *presence* in the lives of the poor'.[6] The contrast of 'concept' and 'presence' points us back to a pre-theoretical experience. When we take part in a religious ceremony which celebrates the presence of Christ amongst us, we hear the words of hymns, sermon, and Biblical text. Ritual actions are performed, and the words of the liturgy are supposed by some to explain what the sacred actions mean. But, underneath and underwriting the visuals and the verbals, we just register the ritual, in an affective *connection* with what's going on.

'Shouting' is a regular feature of the Christianity of the American South. An anthropologist notes, 'there is a great deal of individuality displayed in "shouting."' In a Nashville church 'one man shouts by leaping from one bench to another over the heads of his fellow worshippers.'[7] Cone recalls that, in the Georgia Christian community he grew up in, 'When the pastor would say, "I know the Lord is in this place! Can I get a witness?" the people responded with shouts of praise saying "Amen" and "Hallelujah." ... Some would smile and others would cry. Another person, depending upon the Spirit's effect on him, would clap his hands and tap his feet.'[8] The black 'shouters' may just be creating icons of the religious affectivity which accompanies even a colourless Anglo-Saxon Christian ceremony. Emotional participation in religious rite does not require flamboyant displays of enthusiasm. The common contrast of rote ritual and charismatic service is misplaced. It may be that when religious observants are at their most mindless, vacant and robotic, they sink down into, and get carried along by, an untheorised feeling of the milieu, and its appropriate etiquette.

Affectivity, and religious affectivity too, is a thin layer of consciousness away from direct physical sensation. Slave testimonies about conversion describe this spiritual transformation in physical language. One man records that 'When God struck me dead with his power I was living on Fourteenth Avenue ... I died. I fell on the floor flat on my back. I could neither speak nor move, for my tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth; my jaws were locked and my limbs were stiff.'[9]

Likewise, in describing the most immediate experiences of the comic, we speak of something that affects our bodies: *belly* laughter. This is the comicality which emerges in relaxed companionship, when humorous observations bubble up into the conversation from 'nowhere.' The humour here is not like the pre-conceived witticisms which one introduces into a talk, or jokes that one heard on the radio, and repeats. It is, rather, the shared mood of humourousness, when everything anyone says or does becomes laughable, because everyone has turned

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themselves over to belly laugh immediacy. That can happen in a theatre or movie audience, when the show is so funny that comedy becomes a common *medium*, which everyone participates in. Another physical element is the gasping of breath, the quickened breathing out of compulsive laughter. It is not verbal humour that gets us giggling; it is comedy of situation which brings on compulsive laughter. Religious affectivity, the sense of the sacred, can be compared to fits of giggles in an increasingly ridiculous situation or placement. What happens in both cases is an attunement to a certain medium, with its own rhythm; that is, attunement to the milieu of comedy.

When the 7th century Iconoclasts brought up the Second Commandment, the Iconophiles replied with the Incarnation. John of Damascus, and others, claimed that the Incarnation of God in human form renders God aesthetically picturable, canceling the second Commandment by giving the invisible God a sensibly perceptible body. The authors of slave sermons extend the incarnate-ness of God, devising with a backward glance a God who has been picturable since the Creation. In his versification of a Creation sermon, Johnson captured a visible, solemn-comic God creating humans:

> And the great God Almighty
> Who lit the sun and fixed it in the sky,
> Who flung the stars to the most far corner of the night,
> Who rounded the earth in the middle of his hand;
> This Great God,
> Like a mammy bending over her baby,
> Kneeled down in the dust
> Toiling over a lump of clay...[10]

If Incarnation makes God picturable, by that very token, it makes God funny. But this poem, and the sermon it comes from are not intended to be *satirical*: they don't wink at us, and slyly imply that, of course, God isn't really a mammy. William Lynch asked us not to 'take incongruity as the secret clue to comedy, but ... congruity, ...the tie between the earth and Christ, with all the logic omitted.'[11] It is the lack of logical progression, the immediacy of the image that is comic, and the spontaneity is that of the preconscious Christian perception of God. It's the laughter of recognition, putting one's finger on an unspoken truth.

African Americans of earlier generations preached 'a personal and anthropomorphic God'. Their 'bold and unfettered imagination'[12] was rooted in *literality*, which in its elastic forms is another word for concreteness. The black Christian imagination was conscious of the funny side of Biblical literalism. One anecdote from black folklore tells how 'Elduh Sample, de pastuh of Mothuh Mt. Zion Chu'ch,' preached

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on the text: "Gawd so lacked de worl" in such a way, dat he done sen' de onlies' son he got down to de urf so dat dem what believe on im gonna be saved."' Two men from his congregation went forth to a river to chop logs, and spy an alligator, which

> done rech de boat an' turn hit ovuh an' lit out to swimmin' at Steve an' Tim. Tim 'bout to git away, but de alluhgatuh gainin' on Steve all de time; so Steve calls to min' what de preachuh say, and he pray: "Gawd, Ah knows youse got a habit of sen'in' you' son down heah to do yo' work, but Ah wanna tell you rat now, don' you come sen'in' you son down heah now. You come down heah you'se'f, 'caze savin' me from dis alluhgatuh is a man's job.[13]

Having a body entails being vulnerable to rain, accident, disease, and consummation by alligators. The *God of the Oppressed* is a God of people who notice their embodiment with a sharp tang. Black slaves 'were deeply moved by the Passion story because they 'saw themselves' in Jesus' death and they unleashed their imagination, describing what they felt and saw.'[14] Their sermons were compulsively drawn to the precise instruments with which Jesus' body was tortured:

> On Calvary, on Calvary,
> They crucified my Jesus.
> They nailed him to the cruel tree,
> And the hammer!
> The hammer!
> The hammer!
> Rang through Jerusalem's streets.[15]

In the 1970s, Cone could uncritically quote the details of the Spirituals' relish for the minutiae of Jesus' sufferings: 'Dey whupped him up de hill,' 'dey crowned him wid a thorny crown,' 'dey nailed him to de cross,' 'dey pierced him in de side,' 'de blood came twinklin' down, 'an he never said a mumbalin' word, he jes hung his head an' he died.'[16] More recently, Womanist theologians have objected to this. Dolores Williams argues that the image of the 'Suffering Son' has been used to manipulate African American women to assume 'exploitative' 'surrogacy' roles: the role of the Mammy, or mistress, for instance, the woman substituting herself for work which others were unable or unwilling to perform.[17] The black woman as Christ-figure is identified with 'the image of human sin in its most desecrated form'. This execution, Williams says, 'destroyed the body but not before it mocked and defiled Jesus by publicly exposing his nakedness and private parts ... The cross thus becomes an image of defilement, a gross manifestation of collective human sin.'[18]

Like the black Mammy, Christ as penal substitute is an object of

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satire. Satirical comedy is that in which an audience projects its collective guilt and violence onto a villain. Satire is the kind of comedy in which one laughs *against* or *at* someone else's suffering; it's non-participatory comedy. In this context, it is helpful to recall the verbal distinction between the comic, and the comic*al*. Christ as penal substitute is comical. We get our deflationary and satirical idea of comedy from recollection of the comical *villain*. But, because it's a hopeful genre, the primary impulse behind comedy is identificatory: it has to do with comic *heroes*, and our participation in their surprising triumph.

The comic imagination tends to remark upon the observable fact that, vulnerable though it is, the finite human body *bounces* back from water, wounding and alligators. One word that comes up repeatedly in Cone's *God of the Oppressed* is *survival*. A slave-class, or an oppressed class has to focus on survivability. Humour was important to black survival.[19]

There is nothing blandly upbeat about this, no trace of the contemporary Christian Gnostics' 'power of positive thinking.' It was a matter of faith in miracle for the slaves to sing

> Oh Mary, don't you weep, don't you moan,
> Oh Mary, don't you weep, don't you moan,
> Pharaoh's army got drowned,
> Oh Mary, don't you weep.

Cartoons propel their heroes over a cliff, whence the hero runs in the air, or locates an unpredicted means of bouncing back from the consequences of vertical drop to mortal flesh. The character has to have a body for that to be funny; angelic flight evokes no humour. The predominant Christ-figure of African American folk literature is not a comical victim, but a miraculous comic *hero*.

One of his names is High John de Conqueror. Langston Hughes called High John 'our hopebringer': High John came to the plantation South 'from Africa. The sign of this man was a laugh, and his singing-symbol was a drum-beat. He came walking on the waves of sound.'[20] High John was a slave with the slaves, as vulnerable as they. He is a mythological hero, but not a docetic Superman. The folk legends of High John's little games against 'Old Massa' sometimes have John winning out, sometimes Old Massa. One collector of the legends writes that 'The curious thing about this is that there are no bitter, tragic tales at all.'[21]

In one story, a group of slaves have an outstandingly mean master. High John tells them, 'What we need is a song, It ain't here, and it ain't no place I knows of as yet. Us better go huntaround.' The people hear 'a

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big sing of wings,' and, in a scene reminiscent of Aristophanes' *Birds*, 'John come back riding on a great black crow. The crow was so big that one wing rested on the morning, while the other dusted off the evening star.' The slaves mount the crow, and fly:

> They stopped off in Hell, where John . . .put some of the Devil's hogs to barbecue over the coals ... ran for High Chief Devil and won the election. The rest of his party was overjoyed at the possession of power and wanted to stay there. But John said no. He reminded them that they had come in search of a song. A song that would whip Old Massa's earlaps down. The song was not in Hell. ... The party escaped out of Hell behind the Devil's two fast horses. ... John decided that since they were in the vicinity, they might as well go visit heaven. ... Old Maker called them up before His great workbench, and made them a tune and put it in their mouths. It had no words. It was a tune you could bend and shape in most any way you wanted to fit the words and feelings that you had. They learned it and began to sing. Just about that time a loud voice hollered, 'You Tunk! You July! You Aunt Diskie!' Then Heaven went black before their eyes and they couldn't see a thing until they saw the hickory nut tree over their heads again.

The slaves resume their work, on earth. But 'Their gift song came back into their memories in pieces, and they sang about glittering new robes and harps, and the work flew.'[22] The musicality of the slaves signifies their immortal diamond humanity: 'You never seen a mule sing, have you', as Big Bill Broonzey put it.[23]

In the John the Conqueror stories, a literal imagining of heaven comes together with hopeful fantasy. People said that 'High John de Conquer got plenty power.'[24] He enabled a slave people to imagine themselves as free. High John's escapades express the leap of faith which it takes for dehumanized people imaginatively to make themselves actors in paradise. This is a movement towards a resurrection-future that is constructed by imaginative desire.

High John the Conqueror is compared to another hero of Southern folklore, Brer Rabbit. Mr. Rabbit was 'too sharp' for Mr. Fox. When Brer Fox caught him, and threatened to 'bobbycue' him Brer Rabbit begged, "'I don't keer w'at you do wid me, Brez Fox,' sezee, 'so you don't fling me in dat brier-patch. Roas' me, Brer Fox, sezee, 'but don't fling me in dat brier-patch,' sezee.' As Mr. Fox speculates on the pleasures of hanging, drowning, or skinning Brer Rabbit, the victim begs, 'Skin me, Brer Fox,' sez Brer Rabbit, sezee, 'snatch out my eyeballs, t'ar out my years by de roots, en cut off my legs,' sezee, 'but do please, Brer Fox, don't fling me in dat brier-patch.'" When, finally, Brer Fox deals out to the Rabbit the worst conceivable fate, the trickster 'hollers out: "Bred en bawn in a brier-patch, Brer Fox—bred en bawn in

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a brier-patch!' en wid dat he skip out des ez lively ez a cricket in de embers."'[25] Like Brer Rabbit's brier-patch, death and hell are the springboard Christ needs to bounce back from.

In 1975, a year steeped in stone washed denim and liberal theology, Cone boldly spoke up for the image of atonement as the defeat of the devil, because 'Jesus' conquest of the Satan and the demons also carries the theme of the liberation of the poor.' He notes that 'The expression of joy and gladness in the spirituals is directly related to the black slaves' experience of divine liberation from ... the bondage of Satan':

> Old Satan's mad and I'm glad
> That's what Satan's a-grumbling about ... [26]

Though he knows that Brer Rabbit's function is to 'outwit'[27] the carnivorous fox, Cone does not explicitly endorse what Gustav Aulen ironically called 'the grotesque idea of a deception of the devil.'[28] But the materials are all there. Our harmless, herbivorous hero names his bag of sweets 'eye-ball candy' so that he can persuade Brer Fox that his own eye balls will taste just as good.[29] Old Massa and Old Miss 'did not perceive that they were not dealing with an ordinary slave' when they came up against High John.[30] Powerless people know that, to 'survive in an oppressive society, it is necessary to outsmart the oppressors and make them think that you are what you *know* you are not'. As one song puts it: 'Got one mind for the boss to see; Got another mind for what I know is me.' To be able to deceive the master was often the only means of freedom'.[31] A comic theology can add a 'deception' strand to liberation theology's drama of the defeat of the devil, and remain in good Patristic company. Christian theology since Gregory of Nyssa has made Christ's disguise or 'Incognito' the means of his conquest of the Devil; or even since the Gospel of Mark, with its messianic secret.

Brer Rabbit has amongst his ancestors an African trickster hare.[32] The rabbit-hare stands for the slave; both are disguised 'foxes'. For that reason, Brer Rabbit is a Christ image. A Brer Rabbit Christology is more imaginatively productive than a Christology of the penal substitute. The images of atonement as defeat of the devil evade both the trap of a John Wayne the Emperor Christ, and the trap of a powerless Christ onto whom we project our guilt. The comic action of a deceit of the old Alligator Satan imaginatively works out how Christ can be powerful in and through physical poverty and identification with the poor. If the 'humanity of Jesus was the emphasis of black slaves when they sang about his suffering and pain'[33], then that sneaking humanity is the vehicle of his defeat of evil. Concerned about the ethical implications of a trickster Christ, Gregory of Nyssa and other Fathers stressed that this

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is an 'emancipation'[34] from a tyrant who lacks moral rights; in the light of liberation theology, one can easily imagine enslavement as contrary to moral order. The satirical element is still in play, but at the expense, not of Christ and believers, but of Louis Armstrong's 'ole Pharaoh'. The Fathers' liturgical theology, their baptism catechesis, and their theology of the Eucharist, contain rich elements of biffing the Devil. Without it, the affective experience of Christian ceremony becomes uni-directional, lacking any dramatic element.

The Deists, like Matthew Tindal, in *Christianity as Old as Creation*, mocked the idea of atonement as penal sacrifice. The Deist's Designer God is an 'object,' which has to sit somewhere, either without or within the physical cosmos. The Eighteenth century ridiculers of religion made a sacrament of satire. For their heirs, comedy represents a displaced punishment. In Sigmund Freud's *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, every joke cited is an attack, a put-down, that is, a victimization of a clown or scapegoat figure, and Freud states that the jokes he himself finds most laughable are jokes about Jews.[35] For Freud, our underlying instinct seems to be *control*, and the corollary basic affectivity is *fear*. He says that jokes release the fear-control mechanism. There is a certain realism in this, which is why one can't eliminate satire from a complete theory of comedy.

A more expansive attitude has to articulate the truth that we *enjoy* getting to grips with reality. Aquinas expressed it by saying that, prior to any theorizing about the world around us, there is an underlying "consensus" or 'feeling with' reality. This is the 'with feeling' which I identified earlier as the affectivity which accompanies religious ritual and moments of spontaneous comic uproar. Thomas says that our 'consensus' or experience of 'intimate kinship' derives from 'joy in Being, whether this natural *delectatio* [delight] consists of spiritual or of sensuous delight and joy"[36]

Such an experience of *immediate* kinship or attunement to reality is *precognitive* because it runs underneath the flow of contact with specific objects. When I see a specific object, I cognize it, make a judgement about it: there is a car, it is about to run me over (so I feel fear), or, there is a rabbit, I'm going to throw it in the pot and eat it (so I take control). In relation to specified objects, I have to be passive or active, either they imprint themselves on me, or I make my mark on them.

The differentiating mark of religious experience is that God is not a particular object. Here, the object with which I 'resonate' is 'indeterminate'.[37] God, who is not a particular object of my experience, neither immanent nor transcendent, is nonetheless experienced as present. As Cone says, 'Then again another person would get down on

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her knees, waving her hands and moaning the melody of a song whose rhythm and words spoke to what she felt in her heart. All of these expressions were nothing but black people bearing witness to Jesus' presence among them.'[38] Christian ritual experience does not just have a musical accompaniment, but *is* the musical relationship with God.

In the experience that circles around us during Christian rituals, the body becomes flexible and plastic within its finite form, like the vocal recitativing round the words of Gospel music. Within the milieu of Christian ritual, God does comic things to our physicality. And we intuitively feel that what's happening in the solemn rituals of Eucharist, baptism, and the rest, is funny. By rescuing us from the snout of the alligator, and immortalizing mortal bodies, God recreates us as a body which bounces back. As James Johnson put it in his versification of the 'Dry Bones' sermon:

> You can hear the word of the Lord.
> Or from my knee bone to my
> Thigh bone, or from my
> Thigh bone to my
> Hip bone, or from my
> Hip bone to my
> Rib bone, or from my
> Rib bone to my
> Back bone.
> Well, them bones, dry bones, that are
> Laid in the valley. [39]

1 James H. Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation* (Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York 1997), p. 1.
2 ibid., p. 87, citing Howard Thurman's *Deep River*.
3 ibid., p. 114.
4 James Weldon Johnson, *God's Trombones: Some Negro Sermons in Verse* (George Allen and Unwin, London, 1929), p. 20.
5 Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps, ed., *The Book Of Negro Folklore* (Dodd, Mead and Company, New York, 1958), pp. 245-246.
6 James H. Cone, *God Of The Oppressed* (Seabury Press, 1975, revised edition, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 1979), p. xiii. My italics.
7 Andrew P. Watson, "Negro Primitive Religious Services," in Clifton H. Johnson, ed., *God Struck Me Dead: Voices Of Ex-Slaves*, (Pilgrim Press, Cleveland, Ohio, 1969, 1993), p. 10.
8 Cone, *God Of The Oppressed*, p. 113.
9 Johnson, ed., *God Struck Me Dead: Voices Of Ex-Slaves*, p. 59.
10 James Weldon Johnson, *God's Trombones,* pp. 25-26.
11 William Lynch, *Christ and Apollo. The Dimensions of the Literary Imagination* (Sheed and Ward, 1960, Notre Dame University Press, 1975), p. 109.

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12 Johnson, God's *Trombones*, pp. 14-15.
13 "A Job for God," in J. Mason Brewer, ed., *American Negro Folklore* (Quadrangle Books, Chicago, 1968), p. 117.
14 Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues*, p. 47.
15 Johnson, *God's Trombones*, p. 45.
16 Cone, *God Of The Oppressed*, pp. 109-110.
17 Dolores S. Williams, "Black Women's Surrogacy Experience and the Christian Notion of Redemption," in *After Patriarchy: Feminist Transformations of the World Religions*, Paula M. Cooey and William R Earkin, eds., (Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 1991), p. 8.
18 ibid., p. 12.
19 Cone, *God Of The Oppressed*, p. 23.
20 Hughes & Bontemps, ed., *The Book of Negro Folklore*, pp. 93-94.
21 ibid., p. 98.
22 ibid, pp. 99-101.
23 Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues*, p. 105.
24 Hughes & Bontemps, ed., *The Book of Negro Folklore*, p 96.
25 Brewer, ed., *American Negro Folklore*, p. 6.
26 Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues*, p. 75.
27 Cone, *God Of The Oppressed*, p. 22.
28 Gustav Aulen, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of the Atonement*, trans. A.G. Hebert (first published 1931, SPCK 1970), p. 47.
29 See the story called "Eyeball Candy" in Brewer, ed., *American Negro Folklore*, p. 8-9.
30 Cone, *God Of The Oppressed*, p. 24.
31 Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues*, p. 26.
32 Brewer, ed., *American Negro Folklore*, pp. 3-4
33 Cone, *God Of The Oppressed*, p. 109.
34 Aulen, *Christus Victor*, 48-49.
35 Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. James Strachey (RKP, 1960, Penguin, 1990), p. 84.
36 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord. A Theological Aesthetics Volume I: Seeing the Form*, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982), pp. 243-244.
37 ibid., p. 245.
38 Cone, *God Of The Oppressed*, p. 113.
39 James Johnson's "Dry Bones," cited in Hughes and Bontemp, eds, *The Book of Negro Folklore*, pp. 253-254.

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