Where We Headed Now?

In this, the final chapter of this study, I want to outline a number of possibilities for the development of black theology, within the United States and in Britain. By definition, given that I am not a clairvoyant, this chapter will be much more speculative than the ones that precede it. There is a sense that every black theologian could mount an impassioned claim for what they feel should be the essential priorities to which black theology should attend if it is to progress in the future. In that respect, I am no less opinionated and biased in my assertions than are my many peers. So, this assessment about where we are headed now is very much my own idiosyncratic take on what black theology should be doing and in which direction it should be moving.

In order to write this chapter, I have attempted a significant gear change, in that I have adopted a rather different methodology than that employed thus far, in order to emphasize the alternative role black theology can undertake in the future. This new future is one that is beginning to display all the hallmarks of being a new epoch, somewhat divorced from the macrostructural certainties that have governed us thus far. This new thematic approach to and methodology for doing black theology will be somewhat removed from the roots from which this discipline emerged in the late 1960s. This thematic approach is one that is drawn from my previous work.¹

Black theology since its inception in the theological academy in the late 1960s and early 1970s has sought to radically redefine the very notion of God and the resulting activity and enterprise of theology. The work of first generation scholars such as Cone,² Roberts,³ Wilmore,⁴ and others have been supplemented by a later generation of womanist theologians such as Grant,⁵ Cannon,⁶ and Townes⁷ who have used the black experience as the initial point of departure in the
construction and articulation of their respective approaches to black theological discourse.

These and many other developments have made a notable contribution to the corpus of literature relating to the religious experience of black people across the world. What has been somewhat surprising and indeed quite remarkable, given the radical intent of the plethora of black theological work that has emerged in the past 30 or so years is the extent to which this discipline has continued to work within the conventional modes of scholarly inquiry within the academy.

The roots of the academy lie within monastic scholasticism with its emphasis upon hierarchical individual disembodied knowledge production, often fashioned for an elite peer group. The form in which this discourse is expressed is almost exclusively within a rarefied text-based format, in which the conventions of writing (densely, linear argumentation, complete with citations) seem to make little concession for those outside this self-defined group.

What I am not suggesting in this chapter is that this form of theological discourse lacks either legitimacy or efficacy. Rather, this chapter seeks to offer alternative vistas for the production of black theological thought.

Jazz Music as a Heuristic for a Future Trajectory for Black Theology

In this chapter I want to outline a means of reimagining black theology drawing on the aesthetics of jazz music, and attempt to put into practice some of the developing theoretical conceptions of an improvisatory approach to this discipline.

My introduction to jazz music did not come through the traditional route of being exposed to African American culture—that was to come later. One of the seminal moments in my life emerged when raking through my father’s old record collection. What first sparked my interest in the wonders that is jazz music was listening to a record by the premier instrumental group in Jamaica during the 1960s—the Skatelines.8 The Skatelines perfected a style of music that was a fusion of North American R & B and Caribbean Calypso.

I am not a musician of any sort, let alone a jazz one. In my attempts to use jazz music as a heuristic for engaging in black theology, I have sought to operate from within an artistic discipline in which I seem to possess a modicum of talent. In previous books, I have outlined an