

Audio file

[Ebony Marshall Turman.m4a](#)

Ebony Marshall Turman teaches constructive theology, ethics, and African American religion at Yale University Divinity School. Her research interests include the varieties of 20th century U.S. theological liberalism, most especially Black and womanist theological, social ethical, and theo-aesthetic traditions. In addition to several journal articles and book chapters, she is the author of *Toward a Womanist Ethic of Incarnation: Black Bodies, the Black Church, and the Council of Chalcedon*. Her current book project is tentatively titled, *Black Woman's Burden: Male Power, Gender Violence, and the Scandal of African American Social Christianity*, and she has recently begun preliminary research for her third monograph titled, *Loves the Spirit: The Black Womanist Theological Idea*. You may follow Dr. Turman @ebonithoughts.

Transcript

Ahmad Greene-Hayes

What is your full name?

Ebony Marshall Turman

[Ebony K. Marshall Turman.](#)

Ahmad Greene-Hayes

Do I have permission to record this interview?

Ebony Marshall Turman

You do have permission.

Ahmad Greene-Hayes

Thank you, Professor Turman, for joining us.

Where do you currently work and where have you worked over the course of your career?

Ebony Marshall Turman

I am currently the [Associate Professor of Theology and African American Religion](#) at Yale University Divinity School. Prior to coming to Yale seven years ago, I was at Duke University as the Assistant Research Professor of Theological Ethics, Black Church Studies and African American Studies. I was there also as the Director of the Office of Black Church Studies. Prior to

going to Duke, I held a visiting appointment for, one academic year, at Hood Theological Seminary in Salisbury, NC.

Ahmad Greene-Hayes

Thank you for sharing that with us.

Where were you trained and in which disciplines?

Eboni Marshall Turman

I was, very proudly trained, at the Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York, which works in tandem on the doctoral level with Columbia University Graduate School of Religion. I was trained in the fields of Christian Theological Ethics and Systematic Theology.

Ahmad Greene-Hayes

Who were your mentors, advisors and teachers?

00:02:19 Eboni Marshall Turman

During that time, they were [James Hal Cone](#), [Delores S. Williams](#), [Emilie M. Townes](#), [Vincent Wimbush](#), [Edwina Wright](#) — do you want just Black or People of Color, or should I state all of them?

Ahmad Greene-Hayes

Let's do both. We might think about white or non-Black People of Color who helped contribute to the field as well.

Eboni Marshall Turman

I also had [Gary Dorrien](#), [Christopher Morse](#), [Larry Rasmussen](#). For history, I had Michael Harris. Also, [Brigitte Kahl](#), and [David Carr](#).

I also worked very closely in the [Institute for Research in African-American Studies](#); the then Institute, now department at Columbia University, with [Manning Marable](#), [Farah Jasmine Griffin](#), and [Robin D.G. Kelley](#)... and several others.

Of course, some names are eluding me in fields that were really secondary to my primaries, but those folks kind of stand head and shoulders above the rest.

Ahmad Greene-Hayes

Thank you, a wonderful constellation of scholarly voices there.

Can you tell me about your Graduate School experiences, in particular with Dr. James Cone and Dr. Delores Williams?

00:04:27 Eboni Marshall Turman

So, I went to Union to study with Emilie M. Townes. And I went there because two of my undergraduate professors told me I should go. They were [Mark Chapman](#), who was a doctoral student of Dr. Cone, and [Joy Bostic](#), who was then a doctoral student of Delores Williams. And she was teaching as an adjunct lecturer at Fordham University, which is where I went for undergrad.

I mean, I read [Kelly Brown Douglas](#) — they had us reading everybody — but it was really the pull toward working with Emilie Townes. And when I got to Union, I was introduced (which is not really a fair word because I had read some Cone and a little bit of Williams prior to arriving) but I was really introduced to the powerhouses that they were in the flesh. I mean, everyone who came through the doors of Union Seminary had to take class with Dr. Cone. It was not like nowadays where one could just pick and choose the classes they want. There was a core curriculum, as I believe there should be. We had to take Systematic Theology with James Cone for a year. Then, we could go into the second part of Systematic Theology which was usually taught by Christopher Morse and sometimes it was taught by Delores Williams. So, I was introduced to Cone that way, because I had to be introduced to him, even though I was drawn more to a Womanist initially (and still). But Cone was just kind of the father of it all, in a sense, at Union.

Cone was like a ball of fire in class. He was like nothing I had ever experienced, in terms of the way that he *really* lectured to us. I mean, he stood there flat footed and lectured to us on every aspect of systematic theology. Not only was he lecturing, but his lectures would always kind of turn into a proclamation. And he was so committed — not only toward an explicitly Black theological discourse, which was his, but also toward explaining the discipline and explaining the field in ways that were graspable for folk. I mean, we were in New York City in the early 2000s. And I'm talking now about the Black students, we were just young and Black, and most of us at that time were like, "We love the church, and we love Jesus" and Cone was just breaking down systematic theology to us like we were in kindergarten and making us understand specifically liberal theology, in relation to Orthodoxy and Neo-orthodoxy. And you could grasp it! And Cone held you accountable. I remember those blue book exams where he would hold you accountable for knowing Barth, Harnack, Schleiermacher, just everybody. You had to know that through and through. And he would write back to you on your exams about how terrible you were, your grasp and what needed to happen, or how amazing you were.

00:09:31 Eboni Marshall Turman

He also always had the most interesting, robust and committed doctoral students. When I was a master's level student, before I even thought about doctoral work, I remember Cone's doctoral students always being intellectually astute and sophisticated; just brilliant and Black. And they were also committed to communities of people, whether it was the church or community groups and social activism. They were just committed and interested. Committed and curious. That was always so exciting to me, and it was through systematic theology that I was brought into his courses on Malcolm and Martin, his courses on Christology, his courses on Niebuhr. It was through systematic theology, which we all had to take, and the vibrancy and the brilliance. I mean, he was on fire! He used to stand up in front of the classroom and sweat! Just talking to us about theology and making us believe — and when I say us, the systematic theology [lecture course] was everybody, so it was a big class. But, seeing him there doing this work made us, the Black students, believe that there was a place for us in the field. That, we could do this work too, that our voices mattered for the theological enterprise and for the discipline. He was brilliant. He was mean. He was loving. He was compassionate. He was spitfire. He was everything. His work and even more specifically his methodologies made space for all of us and all of who we were.

And I will tell you that he would get nasty with people in class; Dr. Cone was good for cussing people out [laughter] — Not cussing people out but putting people in their place! I remember white students when we would get to the segment on Black theology, they would try to come for him. And Dr. Cone would read them left to right, and back again. And their faces would be on the floor! Not to say that is the kind of aggression and violence we want to use in the classroom, but it was just something to behold. You know, this Black man just being so certain, so convinced, and so committed to Black flourishing that he wouldn't take anything from anybody.

I also remember — and I still practice this to this day — that he would never allow auditors to speak in his class. If you were auditing the class, you could not speak in class. I think that is that is like, oppressive in a sense, so I just have turned it into not accepting auditors in my class. I don't accept auditors. If you want to take the class, everyone should be able to speak — I guess that is the womanist in me, the dialogical commitment, everyone should be able to speak — so if you want to take the class, do so. And if you are unable for whatever reasons, or the class must be secondary to other things, then you are not actually ready to be in this class, so wait until another time. But Dr. Cone would be like, you can come but don't talk. I could talk about Dr. Cone till the day... but Dr. Cone would also say, if you haven't done your work, if you haven't done the reading, don't talk. And he would call you out! He would say, essentially, “You don't know what you're talking about, so you need to not talk if you haven't done the work. If you haven't done the work, the reading it is evident. So don't talk in my class.” And I love that because Dr. Cone was serious about the work. One time when I was a doctoral student, I was at his in his apartment. And at that time, Dr. Cone was living — Let me see because they moved them all around — in McGiffert Hall. And Dr. Cone was good for quizzing you on the spot and then telling you how awful you were when you missed a question! I remember him saying, “Eboni, you have to read — you have to read — for eight hours a day. That is the life that we

must live into, as scholars.” I remember thinking, Wow. Well, that's intense. But I tried my best to get to half of that or two-thirds of that daily.

For Cone, reading, grasping concepts, understanding the argument, being able to analyze, and being able to critique was the most important thing. I remember, and still live into this day, and try to pass this wisdom down to doctoral students now, Dr. Cone was a big, and this is old school, a big proponent of knowing thinkers. It is old school, but you can't tell me that I don't know Niebuhr, Barth, Tillich, Bonhoeffer, or thinkers, through King. Some of the pre-moderns. You have to know them through and through and as a carrier of the discipline you have to be able to interpret that knowledge and transmit that knowledge in a clear and concise way. And he held you to it! He would tell you if you were a failure. There were many days where I would leave Dr. Cone's apartment — we met in his office sometimes, but as I got further into my studies, we would often meet at his apartment or at Henry's around 103rd and Broadway. There were many days where I would leave defeated. I mean to this day I sometimes think of some of the things he said because he held such a high standard for his students. He held us to such a high standard. And yet, later in his life, even toward the end, after I had finished, he would say things to me like, “You're one of the brightest minds in the theological world right now” at the very end, I think he actually said that. When he came to Yale just a few months before he died. I think it was one of his last public lectures.

It's interesting because so many of Dr. Cone's students were also working in Black churches, not all of them, but so many of them. And in fact, so many of Dr. Cone's students ended up forgoing the Academy for the Church. Which is odd, because Dr. Cone was giving the church his — how do I say this in a politic way — he was not here for the Church. The church was not giving for Dr. Cone [laughter]. So, it is odd that so many of his students ended up really turning to the church and finding their voice and their ministry as Black theologians through the church. I was working at Abyssinian as well, and he would come to Abyssinian (he must have come two or three times during my tenure there) and he would say things very plainly, in front of the senior pastor (the now deceased Calvin Otis Butts III) “The only reason I am here is because of Eboni Marshall” (I think that was before I was Turman). He would come and affirm me in community. He preached there several times.

00:21:01 Eboni Marshall Turman

I mean, there's so there were so many sides to Dr. Cone, and I saw many of them. I will say that he softened as he aged, especially toward Black women. He was still hard, and we see that show up in his posthumous [\*Said I Wasn't Gonna Tell Nobody\*](#), but he softened. And I think he softened toward me in a particular way.

I think that I was like the last Black woman — I mean Black women kind of avoided Cone like the plague because he was not always wonderful. I think I may have been the last Black woman to come from under him into the Theological Academy and to lay claim to him, and for him to lay claim to me. So, it's an odd place to be, right? Because I know what so many of my foremothers lived through under his 50+ year reign at Union. But also because of the warfare or

terror that they endured, making space for me. And for him to be transformed in ways that would make some of those conversations toward the end of his life, that we had, possible.

At the end of his life, he was very sick at that point. We had a conversation. And he I think we were at Henry's. He was really sick at that time; his nose kept running and from the treatments he was just sick, and he was telling me that the most important thing is family. He said, "The most important thing is family." and this is odd, right? I mean there are stories about Cone and his relationships (I'll just say it like that). Yet he was telling me about how his children had come to care for him in his illness. I don't know all the ins and outs of that relationship and would never pretend to, but just knowing the dynamics between things that can happen between parents and children, especially strongman, parents and children, I think that there was some reconciliation that happened for him in those final years, and it really touched his heart. Now, this is this is kind of odd because one response could be "Get out of my uterus, Dr. Cone. Mind your business." But he was like "Ebony, you gotta have some kids." At that point I didn't have any, and I remember thinking that was weird [laughter]. Especially for someone who also says, a few years prior, "You gotta read 8 hours a day! If you wanna do this, you gotta read 8 hours a day." To go from that to "have you some kids", it was just kind of evidence of how he softened. And I think it was probably one of the greatest lessons to me about how we as Black scholars are called to negotiate our professional lives and our personal commitments. And the importance of that at the end.

00:26:09 Eboni Marshall Turman

I just remember at his funeral — were you there, Ahmad?

Ahmad Greene-Hayes

Yes, I was there.

Eboni Marshall Turman

His children were walking down that center aisle at Riverside Church, and I just remember him saying that. And speaking so lovingly of them; he did not use this precise language, but from the language he did use, I remember thinking, wow, they really came through for him in his final days and hours. Just to see how he — I don't want to say change, but to see the shifts. When he was really at the height of his career, I was a 'Cone-head' before [\*The Cross and the Lynching Tree\*](#). You know what I'm saying? And all the acclaim that finally brought to him because of the way that his discourse became legible through that text, to the white Academy (which is problematic, and we can talk all day about that). But I was a 'Cone-head' way before that. So, I think he was at the top of his career with [\*Black Theology and Black Power A Black Theology of Liberation\*](#) and [\*God of the Oppressed\*](#) and the [\*volumes with Wilmore\*](#). And everything else that came in between, like [\*Martin & Malcom & America\*](#), which I was reading as an undergraduate. I thought he was amazing then.

So, I saw Cone across a span of twenty years, really. It is just interesting to see people's ends, when you knew them before they got there.

00:28:41 Ahmad Greene-Hayes

Wow, there's so much here. I want to return to something you said earlier. Just thinking about Cone in relation to Black women at Union. There is a wonderful [documentary by Anika Gibbons](#) that narrates the founding of womanist theology and ethics. I am curious to hear more about that moment. Both, for you as one who operates in that lineage, but also, thinking about Union itself as a site for all this development. So please, if you could comment on that but also thinking more about the tensions. I think in some ways people kind of dance around it or it is palpable in the scholarship, you can feel it. We just want to hear more about how Black women worked with Cone; and not just the names that we know, but perhaps other names that aren't remembered properly.

Eboni Marshall Turman

Well, I'm sitting here crying right now. I told you I would cry a lot because I was at Union at the tail end of what we who are 'Unionites' would call the golden years. It was unheard of to have all those Black faculty in one place — leading Black faculty. Who were really pushing the field and challenging white normative theological presuppositions, interpretation and imagination. To think of what was and then what is currently is just [sigh]. And I should say what is *at Union*. Not to diminish what is happening at Union now, but it is really heartbreaking in terms of the loss that the faculty has suffered over the last twenty years, up until this very moment. The generativity, the life force, the axé that was born and systematized there. That really has been [cries] well, it could never be erased, but it has been allowed to dwindle, unnecessarily.

It is heartbreaking. Because these people, like Dr. Cone, Dr. Washington, Dr. Williams, Dr. Townes, and Dr. Wright, they saved us! They saved so many of us. They saved students who did not even come to Union, but just read their books, and heard about them and were able to find their voice and their place as we moved to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Their voices held us and helped us along. And I just feel like they could be lost, because of the cover up that so many white theologians and colored theologians participate in and want to promote. But that said, I get so emotional because you are asking about Black women and about womanist theology and ethics. I will say, Ahmad, I am a millennial. I am an older millennial and there are not many of me in my generation of Theology, out of the Union school. There just are not. This is a disclaimer. My perspective might be different from one of the women, like Jacquelyn Grant, who was there. Or, Katie Cannon, who is no longer with us. Or even Emilie Townes, [JoAnne Terrell](#), or Kelly Brown Douglas. I mean we could go down the road.

I say very, very definitively, and I think Brown Douglas and Williams would affirm it — I think their work speaks to it — and Grant would affirm it. As challenging as it is to admit, I think that fundamentally, there is no womanist theology as such, without Dr. Cone. Even though he was a

sexist, *completely*. And he admits it in his 50th anniversary of *Black Theology and Black Power*. In the preface, he says it without qualification. He has always been a sexist. I mean, even how he wrote about Delores and in *Said I Wasn't Gonna Tell Nobody*, It's like, oh, God, here we go. But he softened.

I think it is remarkable that, although many of them stopped talking to him forever because of some of his ways (because of his brand of patriarchy and sexism) there really is no womanist theology. And I would contend further, there is no womanist ethics without James Cone. I was in Brazil with Katie Cannon — I have a video of it actually — for the [Society for the Study of Black Religion](#) travel tour (this was years ago; we were in Bahia). We were at one of the Axé houses and she actually ends her talk by saying “so I became a revolutionary” But the question that leads her to kind of this revolutionary posture as a womanist ethicist, was “I wanted to know, what would make white people treat Black people so terrible.” That is a direct quote from her. That was the guiding question. She had to know, what would make white people treat Black people so terrible? Not “terribly”, terrible. That is what she said.

And I am like the only person who was asking that kind of question at the time she was at Union Seminary was James Cone. Like she had to, even though she worked primarily with [Bev Harrison](#), she had to go through Cone to get that question. Then, that question is further developed with a gender analysis and a class analysis. Because of the intersectional nature of womanist inquiry and womanist religious inquiry. Perhaps even more specifically, womanist theological inquiry. Kelly Brown Douglas' first book is [The Black Christ](#). Which is the content. One can pinpoint that content in Cone's work. Cone posits the Black Christ as the Christological intervention in Black theology. So, Kelly Brown Douglas enters the conversation as a junior scholar, thinking through the Black Christ *and* the limitations of the Black Christ, for Black women! That is how she gets to [Sexuality and the Black Church](#). And now to [Resurrection Hope](#) and so on. Her corpus is vast, like Dr. Cone.

I think there was a point when Dr. Delores Williams would not even sit in the same room as Dr. Cone. It got so bad. Because Dr Cone was a lot of things. But Dr. Williams' whole project is taking on Dr. Cone. The whole project! That is part of the frustration, and she is brilliant at it because it could be nothing less; if you are going to cut off the King's head, you better do it. You know what I'm saying? If you are gonna go for the King's head, you better get it on the first time.

00:41:11 Eboni Marshall Turman

So, Womanist theology does not find its footing without Cone. For as much as we want to say about the scholarly erasure of Black women in his work and also his interpersonal deficits as it relates to intergender relationality. I wrote about this in [one of my last articles on Dr. Cone](#), except for his mother. Dr. Cone always invoked Lucy Cone. He always invoked her. There was theological weight attached to his invocation of his mother and his constant invocation of Macedonia AME Church.

I mean, there is so much more that could be said about that, but there is a lot of tension. We could say the same thing for Jacquelyn Grant's dialectic. The Christological dialectic she sets up between [White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus](#), she is working specifically out of a

Conian method there, that dialectical method. I don't think you can come to that kind of racial gender analysis without Cone. It just does not exist otherwise. I am not saying Cone alone, we know there are many things at play in womanist theological origins, but I think Cone and Black theology systematized plays a primary factor in the development of womanist theology.

I don't know if that answers the question?

00:43:50 Ahmad Greene-Hayes

That certainly is helpful. Just to kind of think about him in relation to Womanists and the problems that are embedded right in that interrelation.

I think it would be helpful to hear a bit more about your experiences with Delores Williams and the other womanist scholars who are at Union, circulating around Union, at this time. What courses did you take with them? Then we could perhaps transition to thinking about your dissertation. How does that come about, working with them and then Cone?

00:44:48 Eboni Marshall Turman

Dr. Williams was amazing. I was on the very tail end of her tenure at Union, but she was very influential. I took [Tillich](#) with her, for sure (she taught his systematic theology). I continue in that vein; I teach Tillich now (I teach his corpus, though, and maybe I should just teach his systematic theology, but that is neither here nor there).

I want to say I took something else with her, but Tillich is what I remember. Dr. Williams, toward the end of her tenure, would always look like she was sleeping in class [laughter].

Dr. Williams would come to class, sit down and close her eyes at the table and. A couple of semesters ago, I started doing the same thing. Just closing my eyes on people. I certainly am not as old, or as seasoned, as Dr. Williams was at the time when I was in class. But I got it. She would close her eyes and still be very much present. She would know exactly what was going on. She would pick it up. She had a very soft voice, but also a very commanding voice. And she was brilliant. She was brilliant. Dr. Williams had more of an impact on me outside of the classroom. But before that, I will say that Dr. Williams' *[Sisters in the Wilderness](#)* was like Bible for the Black women at Union. Unpacking that Hagar, Sarah, narrative that Dr. Williams really led us to was like a rite of passage at Union. I remember taking major tests and having to differentiate and her know backwards and forwards her survival and quality of life tradition.

Dr. Williams, in my estimation, was gentle. She was very light skinned — going to say it anyway — but there was never any question about the depth of her blackness and the commitments. There was never any question about just the depth of her blackness and her commitment to Black women. I remember thinking it was fascinating at the time. Now remember, I am 20/21 in seminary, and I thought it was fascinating that this woman had four kids. Four kids! And no husband — by that time she was widowed. I hate to say it this way, but in my family, women

with four kids like weren't doing theology. Well, I shouldn't say they weren't doing theology. Rather, they were not professional theologians. So, I found that fascinating, and kind of wondrous and curious at the same time.

She was an artist, as so many womanists are. She was the faculty advisor for the Black Women's Caucus. She would open her home to all of — which in times of COVID it's like “we really bring 25 students into the living room? I don't think so.” But back then, we would sit in her living room, and we would just talk about the violences that were happening against Black women at that time. I remember a noose was hung at Union. I remember a Black woman was assaulted at Union, by a white man during my time there. And Delores Williams was just always there. She was always present. Her door was always open. She was a poet, and she was into literature and art. I remember her singing for some reason (I hear her singing, like right now). I just remember her being, I don't want to say a mother to us because she wasn't a mother to us. But that is the only word that comes to mind and the only language that really fits the character that she was and presented. She was like a salvific for us. I don't want to say she was a savior, but she was salvific for us. She talked back and she would cut these white women down. And it was brilliant. It was precise. It was amazing. Her corpus modeled mutuality and reciprocity in ways that, completely were not present in Black theology. Cone did not have fifty students in his house. He might bring one at a time. I do not remember Cone ever being communally oriented in that way. We had a lot of one-on-ones and outside of class I do not remember it at all. But Dr. Williams was present for Black women. And I do not think that presence has ever been replaced since her retirement many years ago.

I have studied a lot of theology and I have worked with a lot of theologians. I work contemporarily with a lot of white theologians, and I will say that Dr. Williams. Dr. Williams, period. Dr. Cone, the most brilliant theological minds I have ever known, period. On the side of Black people. And on the side of Black women? Dr. Williams was radical. I mean, to be on the side of Black women is radical. Also, she would not partake in communion. What she wrote was really what she meant. She would not partake in the Lord's supper. She held a radical critique about African American churches and the sexism that was part and parcel of their legacies.

00:55:33 Eboni Marshall Turman

I mean, I think it is still radical now, to call out the Black Church for its sexual gender discrimination. But then, it was unheard of. It is through Williams, really, that I came into my voice as a critic of the Black Church. That did not come from Cone, that came from Williams. And directly. That is radical even today. She is a much more hostile factor, theologically, in our present context, than Dr. Cone. Because Dr. Cone was still navigating those white theologians, He was ‘Barthing up’ until the day he died. And he couldn't really rock with Black women. And I saw that at the end. I mean, for as much as he had been transformed, he also remained unchanged as it related to Black women's critique. And Delores Williams was public enemy number one in that regard. So, what I appreciate and pick up on about her, Kelly Brown Douglas, and Katie Cannon is that they were committed to Black churches — and continue to be, for Kelly Brown Douglas — even in the critique. There is always a word for the church in their work. Even if it's a harsh word, which is what Delores was doing, and Jacquelyn Grant as well.

That picks up on what I was saying about Cone. All of his students were like church people, they were church folks. And I give that to Delores too, even as she outright rejected what she would call the African American Churches. Because there was still space there. And she was still trying to make sense of the symbols that meant something primarily. The symbols that were primary for Black Church people. Which were Jesus and scripture. She is trying to make sense of it.

00:59:05 Eboni Marshall Turman

Going towards the dissertation, I remember Emilie Townes asking me at one point, “Why do you want to write about Jesus?” Because my dissertation is in effect, a Christology. A very different Christology from Williams, Douglas, Grant, and Terrell. But a Christology, nonetheless. And she was confused about why I want to write about Jesus.

It is through Williams, and it is through Cannon. Cannon was not really talking about doctrine. Cannon talked a lot about Black preaching. And, in one of her most influential essays to me, [“Remembering What we Never Knew”](#), the entire analysis about women in religion emerges from her experience of Black preaching at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta many years ago.

I say this all to say, this really is my lineage. So, for me it was, how could I not talk about this? Grant was Christology; Cannon was Black Church, concerned ethically; Douglas begins with Christology; and Williams worked across doctrines, but Christology was a major one. She is remembered and most well regarded in the Academy for her Christological interventions. So, for me it was no question that Jesus matters for Black Church people. I am digressing a little bit, but I think Jesus matters even beyond Black Church people. I think about the people that I saw during my tenure working full time in a Black congregation. We did not just see Church people. Everybody came through that Church at some point. Everybody. In terms of religious sensibility and non-theistic sensibilities. Jesus actually matters for the enterprise. This is what that first generation of womanist theologians used in a very loose way, because we know Katie was an ethicist and stood in that identity squarely. But I think they knew that too. It is interesting because Dr. Townes is Union by being grafted in. She is grafted in as one who taught there, but she was not trained there. So, there is something different I think happening theologically, for those of us who were trained there, and I still say you could not come out of Union — no matter what subdiscipline/subfield you were in — and not be a theologian. It was not possible. Even if you did history at Union, you would be a historian who was also deeply a theologian as well. It just was not possible, during those golden years, to come through Union and not be a theologian.

I think I am all over the place, Dr. Greene-Hayes.

01:03:36 Ahmad Greene-Hayes

No, no, you are not at all. This confirms comments from some others who have been interviewed, just thinking even about how many doctoral students in Black religion, come out of Union in particular, and are engaged across so many different fields beyond theology. Even religious history being another component. So, I think your comments are helpful there. As we are near the end of our time together, and you have talked about this in different ways, but more

pointedly, how would you define or characterize Cone, Williams, etcetera as quite literally, shaping theology? Or the systematic theology as it relates to Black people and what lessons did you learn from them about how to systematize a field, to shape a field?

I am curious to hear more about that as a process, intellectual production, a strategy. In terms of thinking about the dangers or potential hazards of institutionalizing, theologizing, that is being done by Black people. I am just curious, at that moment in time, what did it mean to shape these fields?

01:05:29 Eboni Marshall Turman

That was such a big question. So, say the first part of that question again, Ahmad.

Ahmad Greene-Hayes

The main through line for both parts of that question are around quite literally, naming Cone, Williams, and all the other brilliant Black women you have named, as not just participants in the Theological academy, but as developers of a field of thought, a school of thought as strategists too. Who were institutionalizing a field at a moment in time where that was radical and revolutionary. And you have written about this, how despised figures become celebrated and commemorated in all these different ways, and we do not think about the process that they had to undergo to even get things situated in these institutions.

So, I'm curious if you could just think aloud about that as a process and what insights might we glean from those productions?

01:07:10 Eboni Marshall Turman

Let me think about this a little bit because there is a way that Union was doing something that no other seminary or divinity school was doing during that time. So, the 80s though Cone's death (but Cone was like the last strand, so there came a time when it was just like, "Oh Cone, right." and that was it).

And of course, Gary Dorrien was there, and Gary is amazing and very kind of committed to amplifying Black religious life right in his way. Then, [Cornel West](#) was in and out in those last years, and he was there at the beginning of his career as well. In fact, I think I was a TA for all of them. But there were these golden years in the 80s, 90s and into the early 2000s. They were doing something. No other Theological School was doing. It was doing Black liberal religion. Which is a thing. It is how one can make claims like, the cross is not salvific, that we cannot glorify it. It is how one can make claims that there is something wrong with white women's Jesus. It is stepping outside of the orthodoxy. Some Seminaries and Theological Schools, like Chicago, Yale, Princeton, even Harvard, to a certain extent at that time — things have changed now — were committed to the faith in other kinds of ways. So, what was happening at Union

was a privileging of voice in opposition to the privileging of tradition that was the priority informing religious leaders at so many other Theological Schools.

This is a roundabout response to your question, but Cone would always say, up until the end, and I remember him like looking at me pointing his crooked finger, "you got to find your voice." He would argue that it was *your* voice. That it was *your* voice that made room for breaking open theology. That is actually antithetical, it is oppositional, to the normative claim of what theology is. I can say this because I am at Yale — my goodness — theology is supposed to be this attention to the tradition. According to the Yale School, it is about a certain kind of recitation of the tradition in order to reproduce the tradition. Kind of the empirical method at Chicago. So, all these schools, the personalism happening at Boston, had their own kind of thing. But what Union made space for is specifically students who were outcasts of the tradition to matter theologically. That is what Black theology does, because it is through Black theology that, as I have already articulated, Black women come to articulate; that Asian liberation theology is born; [Gary Comstock](#), I think was Cone's student; we are talking about gay theology; Red theology, [Robert Warrior](#) and [Vine Deloria](#). We do not get that in a way that departs from the orthodoxies, without Cone. We do not get liberation theology *in the U.S.*, because we can talk about [Gustavo Gutiérrez](#), and that is arguable. But we do not get it in the U.S. continental without Cone. Cone breaks it open. For everything that can be said about him, Cone's discourse makes space for individuals to find their own theological voice. And I think that must be the beginning of constructive work. And the beginning of what we would say contemporarily, imagination. And that is what Union did. I have said elsewhere that Cone trained more Black theologians than any other theologian in the modern world. Now, considering there were not many of us to begin with in the Theological Academy — and there still are not — that claim is tempered a little bit. But he trained more of us than anybody else. I think that he made a choice. He had some white students, Asian students, a couple of white women — one, I don't know what happened to her, but that is neither here nor there, but she had a hard go.

But he trained Black students. He had a politic that guided his intellectual project, and not just what he wrote down on the page. When we talk about shaping a field, it does matter what you write. Unfortunately, because of the logics in which we work as academics, what we write is probably primary. But there was so much more that he did in terms of formation. And Williams! And Brown Douglas! And the womanists who brought me into the fold, Joy Bostic, who teaches at Case Western Reserve. And so on and so forth.

Delores's career was much shorter than Cone's. She finished later, and you know the realities of her time and life shortened her career. So, she did not have as much runway as Cone. But really it was about allowing Black students and Black women **to find...**

01:17:32 Eboni Marshall Turman

People were good for saying, "Well, what's missing here about his theology..." and Cone would put his hand on his hip, cocked his head to the side and replied "Well, you write that! You write that." His brilliance is all over. Same for Williams, Townes, and Grant. Maybe this is even more so for Grant too... well, I cannot speak definitively about this because I was never her student per

se, but I will say, it is about finding your voice. Today, theology is about finding your voice. That is what I lead with, with my students. Because as Black scholars and as minoritized scholars across the board, our voices are still illegible, inaudible and quickly shut down within the normative conditions of the Academy.

As Co-chair of the Black Theology unit of the American Academy of Religion, for which I've been for the last five years, we see what that looks like. We see through [Dianne Stewart](#), for instance, who was Cone's student, and the work she is doing at Emory. And the students who have come out under her, what that looks like in the development of Africana theological imagination. Even more recently, in Africana Eco-theologies. We see what that looks like even in [Dianne's most recent work](#) around how she is proposing an interesting dialectic between womanism and motherhood in African diasporic religions. We see it in just the interactions between budding Black theologians and Afro-pessimism. We see it in how Black theology is engaging popular culture. Black theological thinkers, and religious thinkers, really finding their voice and pushing the field to that to that point. I guess I'll stop here: Dr. Cone loved the arts. Just like Dr. Williams. I used to be like a professional concert dancer before retiring (I probably did that a little prematurely), giving my complete life over to theology and religious studies. And he used to love to see me dance, I used to dance at Union all the time. One particular time I danced to Oleta Adams, Beams of Heaven. You would have thought he had caught the Holy Ghost! He was excited and just thrilled. I mean, this guy who was telling me to read eight hours a day. He was caught up in the spirit that Black dance can induce, and I will never forget that.

In finding my voice, through Cone's methodology and through Delores Williams' artistic commitments, I have come to Black aesthetic practices and specifically for me, dance. As the primary entryway into My witness as a Black Womanist theologian. Methodologically it is very easy to see how it traces back to Cone. Just one look at [The Spirituals and The Blues](#) and you understand it. But it traces back to the fulcrum of what was happening at Union, among everybody. Among even [Edwina Maria Wright](#), who died prematurely and was a Black biblical scholar, the first black woman to earn her PhD in Semitic Philology from Harvard and taught Hebrew Bible at Union. I remember taking Hebrew with her when I was able to read for the first time, Emmanuel meaning "God With Us," in Hebrew. And my entire dissertation is built around this idea of God with us. My claim of the en sarki Dei is very much that. It is this kind of vocalization of Black life — I hate to sound trite here — mattering to God, Black voices having something to say about God. I think that was the fulcrum, the underpinning, of what was happening at Union. It is also why I am quick to cry. Not so much about the state of the field, I think that there is some hope yet for the field. I am not sure, but I think so. But what is happening at Union now? I am not sure where Black people come to theological voice in any sustained way in the Academy right now. We might be able to pinpoint two or three places, maybe. But even as I would count my current institution to maybe be one of those institutions, I can say it does not hold a candle to what was happening at Union during those golden years. So, I mourn what was.

To wrap up our time together, this is a question I have been posing to folks and there are all kinds of responses. It is really a question in the spirit of acknowledging those who have passed on as ancestors. As archival ancestors or intellectual ancestors. It is a moment for you and others to think about if you could say something to them, what would you say? What would you say to Dr. Cone, Dr. Williams, or any other Black scholar of Black religion who has passed on?

Eboni Marshall Turman

What I say? My gosh, Ahmad. I would have so many things to say. But I think that I would probably... Around the time when [Emilie Townes's \*Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil\*](#) came out, she signed my copy, and she wrote "The life you save echoes into future generations." I think beyond the unrelenting gratitude and love that I would want to communicate with them, I would also tell them that they saved my life. And so many others. But if I am telling them, I would tell them for me, that they saved my life. That the opportunity to study. And, I hate to be churchy, but to show myself approved under their watch, care and harassment [laughter] and other projects. I am seeing Dr. Marable's face now. It saved my life. In terms of that echoing which Townes pointed me toward, I want them to know that the project is not dead. That because of that work that they did of saving so many Black students, that they live. My only prayer is that I can find a way to do a portion of what they did. During the time that I have left. So that I can actually be worthy of what they did for me.

That is what I would tell them.

Ahmad Greene-Hayes

Thank you so much, Dr. Turman, for your time and for sharing with us.

Eboni Marshall Turman

Oh, Ahmad, you got me crying! I can't stand you [laughter].

Ahmad Greene-Hayes

Listen, this is soul work, in the words of Dr. Cannon. It is the work our souls must have. It is intimate care work. So, I really appreciate you for bearing yourself before us in this way and reflecting. And helping us to tell the story.

Eboni Marshall Turman

Well, thank you for calling on me to participate and I hope that something I said was valuable for the project.

Ahmad Greene-Hayes

Absolutely, absolutely.