I appreciate this opportunity to respond to my colleague and friend Dr. Dwight Hopkins’s paper on “Black Theology: The Notion of Culture Revisited.” Hopkins is one of James Cone’s most brilliant and prolific students. His doctoral dissertation provided an in-depth analysis and comparison of Black Theology in the US and South Africa. His subsequent research and writing has always contained very useful and cogent cultural analysis. Hopkins observes that an affirming relationship is assumed and asserted among various black theologies between Black Culture and God’s activity; however, what is still needed is an explication of what is presumed about culture (pp. 1-2). “Culture,” writes Hopkins, “is where the sacred reveals itself” (p. 12). I agree with this last statement but I think that the issue becomes, therefore, one of demonstrating when and how culture becomes such a vehicle of expression is the specific instance of the North American black experience. Hence, although I am, very supportive of Hopkins’s overall project, I must raise some criticisms of the way it has been undertaken in this particular paper.

My primary contention has to do with the sources he relies on in his attempt to describe the scope and meaning of the term “culture.” I think it was a mistake to have depended so completely on the thought of African scholars. I know, from personal conversations and group collaborations, that Professor Hopkins has done extensive work on Foucault and is well grounded in Neibuhur’s work (<Christ and Culture>), Paul Tillich’s (<Religion and Culture>), and, as well, the leading figures of the Frankfurt School. I am guessing that Professor Hopkins decided to privilege notions of culture being generated by African scholars in order to forge a connection and dialogue between African and African American Theologians. This initially suggests a uniquely African or, might I say, Afro-centric approach to the notion of culture. Upon examination, however, I found nothing original in the definitions cited or anything that seemed to specifically derive from or apply to the multi-ethnic/multi-cultural contexts that pose such tremendous obstacles to the forging of national identities in modern Africa. There would have been nothing wrong with Professor Hopkins having launched his analysis with a discussion of the definitions of culture found in, for example, Clifford Geertz’s <Religion as a Cultural System> or Clyde Kluckhohn’s <Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions>. In other words, the definitions of culture that were cited are fine as general definitions go but inadequate in serving the need of African and African American Theologians to always engage in the three pronged tasks of: 1) critique, 2) description, and 3) construction—and not necessarily in this order. This three-pronged mode of thought must occur especially during the process of formulating definitions.

It is not that I am seeking to challenge the definitions of culture that Professor Hopkins takes over from Randwedzi Nengwekhulu, Amilcar Cabral, Barry Hallen, Kwame Gyekye, or Mercy Amba Oduyoye. My problem is that these definitions are much too general to be of use in the African American context. Here a culture arose among a people of African ancestry concomitant with their assumption of a Black racial identity over and against a dominant and oppressive white culture to which they were related by exclusion and exploitation. Since slavery the progress of integration for some African Americans and the realities of socio-economic stratification within the race complicate any attempt to completely collapse culture into race in the
Although there may be numerous cultural similarities between African and African Americans we should not gloss over the significant difference in the political context wherein our different cultures are produced. The basic difference between the African and African American cultural contexts is that with the former culture is an obstacle to national unity whereas with the later it is viewed—at least by Black Nationalists—as the means to unity over and against or, in spite of, the state. With the former culture is a function of ethnicity (but not entirely) whereas with the later it is a function of race (but not entirely). Any discussion between African and African American scholars on the issue of culture must deal with an honest appraisal of these fundamental differences early on. But even that part of the discussion should be preceded and fore-grounded by another level of critique.

What I mean by critique is that our method must always entail a mode of interrogating the basic discursive terms and categories employed in any given discipline so as to challenge the manner in which certain of its epistemological presuppositions function to our (African American’s) detriment. In <Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Study of Religion>, the Historian of Religion Charles H. Long tells us that certain categories mask how ideas that emerged historically from non-reciprocal power relations—wherein the less powerful were signified—can continue to operate as justifications of those relations. The concept of culture was one such category. In <The Invention of Africa>, V. I. Mudimbe cautions us that merely because it is African or African American scholars who are generating the discourse about culture does not change this fact. In order to realize how we have been formerly signified in the discourse about the notion of culture it is important to recall that it was a term that gained currency during the Enlightenment—the period when European’s were participating in a worldwide conquest and colonization of the rest of the world. It became the subject of the new discipline of Anthropology. A hierarchal view of culture that grew out of the English literary tradition gave way eventually to the notion of culture as “a whole way of life, material, intellectual and spiritual” (Raymond Williams, <Culture and Society, 1780-1950>, p. xvi). Intellectuals in Germany seized upon this definition of culture to trump the French who had enjoyed the association between themselves and the term “civilization.” German culture evoked an association with “an organic folk spirit (Volkgeist)…” (see: Tomoko Masuzawa, “Culture” in <Critical Terms for Religious Studies>, ed. Mark Taylor, p. 77). Such a genealogy ought to discipline our use of the term “culture” and help us appreciate Mudimbe’s point that it always entails some sort of constructive grid regardless of whether the scholar is European, African, or African American. Nor is the earlier status notion of culture as something one acquires entirely escaped through the African American identification of Black Culture as Folk Culture. Once a definition is posited that decides what is included under the notion of culture it will contain an implicit assumption about what ought to be excluded.

Thus, we come to the problem addressed by Martin Favor in his book, <Authentic Blackness>. It once was considerably easier for African American intellectuals to identify Black Culture’s principal representatives. W. E. B DuBois’s achievement was to apply the German Romantic notion of <volkgeist> to a certain class of African Americans living in a particular region of the country—the South—in his <Souls of Black Folk>. This was the class of African Americans that were closest to the historical experience of slavery and most socially distant from the rapid cultural changes that were occurring in the country’s northern urban centers. Presently, however, African American scholars have no easily identifiable class to point to as the bearers of Black Culture. Some scholars have assumed that popularity—as in Rap and Hip-Hop Music—is synonymous with culture. However, in a modern capitalist society this is not necessarily the case. African Americans do not always determine their cultural productions or consumptions. The statement the Black Nationalist intellectual Harold Cruse made in 1967, in <The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual>, is as pertinent as ever: “Culture and art
are spiritual, intellectual, ethical, aesthetic, revolutionary, political, etc.—but they are also a business aspect of private enterprise or of the state” (p. 38). Therefore one of the questions that black people often argue among themselves is what qualifies as Black Culture. As a black parent I certainly engage in this discussion with my teenage kids about their choice of music and mode of speech. W. E. DuBois wondered about the same thing in his 1926 article in Crisis Magazine—“Criteria of Negro Art.”

The author of the novel <Invisible Man>, Ralph Ellison, makes another kind of argument in <Shadow and Act>. Ellison was in the Integrationist camp and firmly opposed to the association of culture and race. He did, nevertheless, recognize an “American Negro culture” as one of the many varied subcultures comprising the United States. Ellison insists: “It must be pointed out, however, that due to the close links which Negro Americans have with the rest of the nation these expressions are constantly influencing the larger body of American culture and are in turn influence by them” (p. 254). Here we run against the crux of the problem in discussing Black Culture in the US—it never ceases being American; it is always both black and American. How then do we comprehend and elucidate the nature of this cultural dialectic that produces opposing yet related identity formations? In my view African scholars do not experience the problematic of culture in the same way it is apprehended by American blacks. It therefore makes more sense to rely on African American sources for revisiting this issue.

I become very excited when I read Ellison’s account of the “creative act” (I am borrowing this term from Nicolas Berdyaev’s chapter “The Ethics of Creativeness” in his <The Destiny of Man>). Ellison wrote: As I see it, it is through the process of making artistic forms—plays, poems, novels—out of one’s experience that one becomes a writer, and it is through this process, the struggle, that the writer helps give meaning to the experience of the group” (<Shadow and Act>, p.150). When I read that line I recalled Charles Long’s description in Significations of hermeneutics along quite similar lines and of the primary forms of the world as being constituted in consciousness through religious symbols. What is suggested here is that the Black Theologian’s basic method is no different than Ellison’s description of the writer’s or Long’s description or the hermeneute’s because the religious act, the creative act, and the interpretative act are all interrelated and quite similar.

My first choice with regard to African American sources would have been W. E. B. DuBois’s <Souls of Black Folks> because I believe the “double-consciousness” concept he posits is one that defines the cultural problematic and predicament of, not just of African Americans, but of modernity in general. Alfred Schutz’s (<Collected Papers 1. The Problem of Social Reality>) notion of culture enables us to view African American as inhabiting multiple cultural realities—everyday practical life, dreams, religion, art, and science. Schutz interest in specifying “the relationship between the reality of the world of daily life and that of theoretical, scientific contemplation.” In studying Black Culture we world want to describe how people switch grids to make sense of the diverse cultural worlds they happen to inhabit even in the process of making and participating in Black Culture. In saying this, however, I might be assuming a stance that is more “objective” than what I am really comfortable with. I therefore would bring lift up Ralph Ellison’s literary approach to culture and his discussion of everyday life myth and ritual that he derived from his reading of Eliot, Joyce and Hemingway. “Beneath the surface of seemingly rational human relationships there seethed a chaos before which I was helpless. People rationalize what they shun or are incapable of dealing with; these superstitions and their rationalizations become ritual as they govern behavior. The rituals become social forms, and it is one of the functions of the artist to recognize them and raise them to the level of art” (<Shadow and Act>, pp. 174-5). So too is it the Theologian’s function identify the mythic and ritualistic dimensions of everyday life and to subject these to theological critique and analysis.