


The future of Black Theology of Liberation: Narrative as epistemological resource

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The death of Black Theology of Liberation (BTL) has been announced, and many were invited to the funeral. This article rejects vehemently such a death as a myth, and provides two reasons why such a theology would have a place to address theologising in the world. It firstly argues that BTL attributes its birth through stories. These stories are captured in history; embodied stories that are told. Secondly, it is found in a broader epistemology than that provided by the Enlightenment paradigm. Therefore, it is not only found in conceptual, argumentative discourses, but other forms of knowledge systems, including stories, poetry, and personal storytelling. However, this has still not been equally appreciated and explored. Taking the above two reasons into account, the death of BTL cannot be announced by academics, since they were never the sole custodians thereof, only recipients of the tradition of an oppressed people.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: The article has implications for how theology is being done in all theology-related disciplines, moving from context, to scripture, to context in a continuous hermeneutical circle. It addresses the way in which all theological disciplines have been functioning within the Enlightenment paradigm, and how black theology itself has lent itself to it, but is continually reforming, because of its nature to be narrative in its approach.

Keywords: Black Theology of Liberation; story forms; narrative epistemology; eco-tones; post-foundationalism.

Introduction

In this article, it is argued that the future of Black Theology of Liberation (BTL) lies not only in its systematisation and the logical systems that subscribe to an objectivist (modernist) framework, but within a narrative framework. Bosch (1991:353), in his magnum opus *Transforming Mission*, does make a distinction between the objectivist framework and its quest to secure truth. This, he argues, had a crippling effect on human inquiry, because he argues that one must realise that it becomes impossible to 'prove' truth, because truth can only be probed (Bosch 1991:353). The latter therefore suggests that multiple avenues of probing the truth are necessary, which Bosch argues is not only through 'language' (for which 'truth' cannot be verified in absolute terms), but inclusive of 'non-conceptual forms of theologising' (Bosch 1991:355). This is where 'narrative theology' and 'theology of story' become equally important as epistemological and theological resources. This article therefore argues that the future of BTL has been born in the cradle of narrative knowledge systems, and therefore would only maintain its existence within such an epistemological framework. In concise terms, within a narrative epistemological framework the future and the relevance of black theology are secured.¹ Black Theology of Liberation can only be dead if there are no more stories of black oppression. If black theology was a construct or an 'idea' within academic spaces, it could have long been smothered and killed. However, to be confronted with stories of oppression, academia must respond. There is a need to interrogate this within black churches and faculties of theology.

The difference between modernistic and a narrative theology

Bosch (*Transforming Mission* 1991) and Newbigin (*Foolishness to the Greeks* 1986) are among the many scholars that discuss the challenge and the negative impact of the Enlightenment project on theology. Bosch (1991:353) contends that it is because the Pentecostal and Charismatic, including other experiential religions used their experience to inform their hermeneutics that

1. See Cone's quotation in above.

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such a religion would grow exponentially in the face of those traditions that follow a narrow rationalistic approach. It is in this context that he also argues that a narrative theology and *theology of story* (Bosch 1991:353) is an epistemological category that needs to be taken seriously in the future. However, there is more in Bosch's assertion than merely the praxis of *storytelling* which within a modernistic framework has become ridiculed because it is regarded as less academic material.² Though story forms should be taken seriously, it is their positioning within a broader epistemological shift that is crucial to acknowledge by academics and theologians. Story forms are then made intelligent and credible. The legitimisation of such approaches to truth is found and made credible within discourses of theologians such as Bosch (1991), Newbigin (1986) but also South African scholars like Muller (2004, 2011a, 2011b, 2012) and Van Huyssteen (1997).³

The latter (story forms) begs for a different epistemological paradigm in theology; a breakaway from a foundationalist approach towards a post-foundational one.⁴ It is in this sense that Muller (2012) discusses as illustration church confessional documents as more than just propositional, but the becoming and evolving of it as *storying* documents.⁵ Though the abovementioned scholars have explained it more on a conceptual, philosophical level, Hooks (1994) also a black scholar, discusses a narrative pedagogy in the context of academic spaces and classrooms, and how theological students should be teachers by telling their own stories.⁶

The epistemological shift towards a more inclusive *truth-seeking* project in science has also to do with perceptions of reality. The question of what is real is at the foundation of discussions of seeking truth. In this regard, the objectivist framework David Bosch was referring to was to argue that reality is *out there* – a reality that has not been corrupted by subjective realities. In terms of developments within research, research paradigms have become important components when discussing one's research approach. In this regard much have been written, and quite extensively, but in theology, it is almost assumed that reality might either be approached from a positivist paradigm meaning only in the biblical text, or a social constructivist paradigm (often referred to as the *hermeneutical turn*), that is mostly embraced

2. Lately, Baron (2022) has also made reference to the role that testimonies of Pentecostals within liturgical spaces can play in order to ensure the resilience of religion in times of adversity. These are acts that strengthen the integration between God and everyday life challenges. See his chapter, Baron (2022).

3. See in particular his book, Van Huyssteen (1997).

4. This should in no way be mistaken as 'anti-foundational' as anti-foundational will only assume some sort of static positioning, and in opposition to a foundationalist approach. In anti-foundationalism, it would mean to commence from no foundation. However, postfoundationalism suggests that we have some knowledge which is integrated knowledge, and continually undergoing changes.

5. Muller makes specific reference to the Belhar Confession that was adopted by the then Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRC) in 1986 in South Africa, and since embraced by the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa. It has, since the talks on unity between the black church and the white DRC, become a contentious document, and almost seen as the stumbling block towards organic unity between the two churches.

6. Hooks was influenced by the work of Paolo Freire on liberative educational praxis. She, however, focussed more on black women in academic spaces. Her book *Teaching to Transgress* is here of particular importance.

by practical, ecumenical theologians, that wants to take the context serious. Obviously BTL forms part of contextual theologies including feminist and other liberation theologies (Dalit theology etc.).

What has not been adequately added to theological paradigms is the critical realism. This is one in which Paul Hiebert (1999) has been making a crucial contribution as a theologian and missiologist. In a narrative epistemological framework, Africans' perspective on reality is also taken seriously. This is what Hiebert (1999), as a missiologist, is interested in, when he studies the lived reality, world, and stories of Africans. The social constructivism paradigm might be able to take stories seriously in only a subjectivist framework, but still does not take seriously the difference in worldview in which stories are told. It is therefore crucial to include the perspective of Hiebert in taking a narrative epistemological framework seriously. However, Hiebert would still argue that God and the Bible are part of the reality in which critical realism would function. The source of one's personal experience of God is the lens through which other realities are engaged with.

Perhaps another crucial important concept within the narrative theology discussion is the fact that truth is *embodied*, and not abstract theories but is emerging from persons, inclusive of the influence of emotions and cognitive experiences. This has been quite extensively discussed in the seminal work of Stephen Crites (*Narrative Quality of Experience* 1971) and his assertion that all sense-making of reality includes a conflation of body and mind. Therefore, a narrative theology would take the perspective of people seriously before the engagement with lifeless theories. Although one could argue that the theories at times originated from an embodied person, they should continuously be subjected to different contexts from a person's interaction with their environment as social change often changes the perspective of the person (Bevans 1992:3–27).

The origins of black theology as a narrative theology

Hopkins (2002:156) argues that black folk during the emergence of black theology thought critically 'about the nature of their faith and their relation to God'. He reminds us that when BTL started in America, it was not only professors that gave content to BTL, but the clergy, as well as Church administrators (Hopkins 2002:155). Evans (2012:309) argues that though BTL in America has been changing in content, it has always been able to answer concrete and real questions that black Americans were asking at the time. The content of black theology for James Cone was always to be the gospel of Jesus, and primarily liberation of the 'full humanity', and the 'practice of freedom for the economically poor, the broken-hearted, and the vulnerable on earth' (cf. Hopkins 2002:156). If black theologians approach the Bible, they would be more interested in 'history-like' stories of the Bible (cf. Frei 1980) than mere metaphors or engage in an allegorical reading of

biblical texts. To do this, BTL focussed on emotions and the cognitive (intellectual) and physical circumstances and embodiment of the gospel.

James Cone stressed the manifestation of the gospel in the affairs of the world and not merely spiritualising the gospel so that it does not address the concrete realities that black people are confronted with. These realities Hopkins (2002:157) refers to as mundane ones, such as freeing the poor in 1st-century Palestine from racial exclusion or economic disparities and 'mundane stress over fundamental issues such as shelter, clothing and food'. This is how Crites (1971) sees the quality of experience, the combination of the sacred and mundane stories. These were important to address because the gospel was for human beings, and therefore, human dignity included the message and content of the gospel. In mentioning this, Cone's work went beyond addressing *pigmentation* but the historical conditions that Jesus addressed.

Therefore, Hopkins (2002:158) starts by stating that there is nothing sacred about being black, and then focusses on the realities that the poor were struggling with. Those realities were also in the church, when white people, the first missionaries during colonial times, took control of the church as spaces of oppression (cf. Biko 1978; Hopkins 2002:187). Black theology went against the grain of the history-like stories – that narrate white missionaries and western ideology as the only stories of the Christian faith (Hopkins 2002:188). In fact, it is about whose mundane story has been told and narrates the reality of the oppressed.

Bosch refers to the early days of black theology, as a time when it was about what people felt. He (1974:6) tells that in the early days of black theology in South Africa, people who listened to the tape recording of American black theologians said, 'We feel ... what Cones says in our bones' (see also ed. Mothlabi 1972). This links to what Paul Ricoeur would describe as the story which we are already part of and therefore the writing of it is merely the verbalisation of it.⁷ Ricoeur argues that we then only write the story that we are part of. Basil Moore (1991), the first proponent of the South African reflection on black theology in its beginning stages in 1971, states, that the gospel is always interpreted from the black experience. Perhaps one of Cone's important works that stress the *story form* of black theology is his book *God of the Oppressed* (1997). In this book, he states explicitly that for black theology to exist is for stories of oppression to exist (Cone 1997:24–26). Cone (1997:89–90) engages with the work of Satre,⁸ and therefore he argues that the experience of people is not only within the church but in everyday life, and there is no distinction between the two for him, in terms of sacred or mundane.⁹ Cone (2011:34), in his book *The Cross and*

7. (See Kearney's explanation on this phase of storying by Ricoeur in his book *On Stories*)

8. Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980) was a French philosopher.

9. See for instance Stephen Crites' argument that there are two different experiences, 'sacred' and 'mundane'.

the Lynching Tree, weighs in on Niebuhr, who was following a Christian Realist approach.¹⁰ He mentions that for Niebuhr, the starting point was not God's revelation as Karl Barth argues, but 'the facts of experience'.

Therefore, Cone was at least in agreement with Niebuhr because for him it must start with the brutal realities in society, while for Barth it started with the 'Trinity, with a focus on the Word of God' (Cone 2011:34). Nevertheless, Cone underscores Niebuhr's shortcomings. He states that though Niebuhr was able to identify black suffering, he was not able to empathize with black suffering. This is the reason, he argues, why Niebuhr still applauded the founding fathers of America for their noble deeds and the establishment of freedom and liberty. This *emotional* element, which is absent in Niebuhr and his academic alignment with BTL, is paramount in a narrative approach that also calls for the embodiment of knowledge.

On the contrary, Cone (2011:42) argues that Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a doctoral student at the Union Theological Seminary in New York who was quite the opposite of Niebuhr because he was interested in black suffering, to the point where some of his white colleagues wondered why Bonhoeffer got so involved with the 'negros'! Therefore, Cone (2011:42) argues that Niebuhr's Christian realism was not only the source of his radicalism but also his conservatism.

He further makes other distinctive issues between Niebuhr and Bonhoeffer. For instance, Niebuhr believes that racial injustice must *slowly erode*. The problem that James Cone has with Niebuhr's radicalism, is that he was not so deeply involved and exposed to the black experience to provide his realism more depth. Cone (2011) therefore concludes:

Like most whites, Niebuhr did not realise the depth of black despair because he did not listen to Malcolm X and other black nationalists who were speaking at Temple no 7, and in the streets of Harlem, only a few blocks away. (p. 48)

This emotive element that was missing in Niebuhr was confirmed through his response on white liberalism in America. Therefore, Cone (2011) writes about Niebuhr:

... [liberalism] ... lacks the spirit of enthusiasm. Not to say fanaticism, which is so necessary to move the world out of its beaten tracks. It is too intellectual and too little emotional to be an efficient force in history. (p. 56)

It is also important to note that BTL recognises that 'white theology' cannot claim 'rational objectivity', which presumes cultural and ideological positioning. In essence, black theologians argue that any white Christian is speaking and arguing from a specific cultural, historical and ideological perspective. That one's history and story form part of such ideological positioning is a given for black theologians (Mosala 1989:13). This is where BTL starts from (like any

10. See his Chapter 2, 'The terrible beauty of the cross'.

contextual theology), not with the Bible, but with the stories of oppression. Bevans' (1992:4–8) argument is that all reality is 'mediated by meaning'. He argues that we are all culturally conditioned. The implication is that our reading will always be from where we find ourselves within our own cultural (symbols, metaphors), and common personal experiences (e.g., death, birth, marriage), our social location (black, gender, race), as well as within the reality of social change, which is the idea that no context is static (growth, improvement, declining of context). It is these lenses that according to Bevans constitute the readers' contextual hermeneutics.

Mosala (1989:67) as a biblical scholar and black theologian, discusses the historical and cultural struggles of black people as a hermeneutical starting point for black theology. A black person, he argues, will read the story of the Bible from the liberation of their 'productive forces' (land, cattle, machinery, etc. that produce wealth). For him, the story lies in such captivity. Though under imperial reign, they claim to be going first to the text as the authority. Mosala (1989:20–21) argues that biblical texts were under the spell of imperial forces itself, and it was convenient for colonial masters to use the biblical scriptures to serve their ideals.

Therefore, Cone argues that the story of black people should also inform their biblical and contextual hermeneutics. Cone (1997:49) argues that the difference between the content and form of black and white theology in America is precisely the slave experience of black people. It is their story that informs their hermeneutics. He shows the difference between the content and form of the two knowledge systems as such:

The form of black religious thought is expressed in the style of a story and its content is Liberation. Black Theology, then, is the story of black people's struggle for Liberation in an extreme situation of oppression. Consequently, there is no sharp distinction between thought and practice, worship, and theology, because black theological reflections about God occurred in the black struggle for Freedom. White theologians built logical systems; black folks told tales. (Cone 1997:49)

Cone (1997:51) contends vehemently that black thought did not emerge from the studies on Darwin's publication on the *Origin of Species*, or any other academic discourse on Augustine or Calvin, or even Descartes's *Cogito ergo sum*. Black people did not always possessed the 'art of philosophical and theological discourse'. But was this necessary for their theologising? Therefore, as he asserts, it was never for black people a priority to engage in discourses on proving rationally¹¹ whether God existed or not. In fact, 'Divine existence was taken for granted, because God was the point of departure of their faith' (Cone 1997:50). However, the metaphysical was taken for granted. Still, for them, it was a departure from the 'real' which was the oppression that they were experiencing (Cone 1997:50).

11.This is obviously in Bosch's terms a narrowed understanding of rationality, which would exclude 'experience' as a rational category and source of knowledge production.

Perhaps Cone (1997) argues strongly that the issue of black oppression would not be solved by philosophical debates (alone? or exclusively), but by engaging the issue from 'reality' (realism) and concrete history (real life stories). He (1997) states:

Slaves, therefore, had to devise a language commensurate with their social situation. That was why they told stories. Through the medium of stories, black slaves created concrete and vivid pictures of their past and present existence, using historical images of God's dealings with people and thus breaking up a future for the oppressed not known by ordinary historical observation. (p. 50)

Hopkins (2002:165) argues that black professors have become so occupied with publishing, and academic jargon that it has consumed much of their time, and left little time to be connected and involved in the black church. They had little time to be informed daily of the needs, and be rooted at the grassroots, which will enable them to firsthand taste and feel the suffering of the people. This links with Bevans' (1992:4–6) argument that because of the 'social change' that takes place in various contexts (and culture), one needs to be in sync with the changes that occur to remain relevant. This concurs with the argument of Klaasen (2012) that the narrative should remain *open-ended*. Hopkins (2002) states:

Clearly part of the gap between black professors and the church pew results from a well-organised educational system that demands time. Still, African American theologians must maintain creative and critical relationships with the black church – whether in the forms of teaching and preaching in the church, being associate pastors, leading workshops and seminars, consulting, or regularly sharing ongoing academic work with laypeople. (p. 165)

Hence, Cone (1997:51) asserts, 'God for Black people was also not a metaphysical idea, but was manifested in history, God made flesh through a peasant who came to set the captives free'. In terms of Cone's argument, black people can easily see God's work in their everyday life experiences. The content of black theology, therefore, could be found through 'preaching, singing, and praying' (Cone 1997:51), but also, as Baron (2022) argues, through personal testimonies in liturgical spaces.

Evans (2012:310) asserts that the problem is that black theologians think the content will stay the same for black theology. Therefore, they fail in future to listen to the cries of the oppressed, while the profile of the oppressed might also have changed since their last engagement with the masses. Therefore, Evans (2012:313) raises some contemporary challenges, such as that of the emergence of *eugenics*¹² and the threat of the prosperity gospel on black South Africans and for a BTL. He asks how a BTL would respond to neo-charismatics and pro-capitalist missionaries flooding developing nations. Therefore, for Evans, BTL has a new agenda, or a continuing agenda in society if it continues to engage the 'cries of the oppressed'.

12.According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, it entails 'the practice or advocacy of controlled selective breeding of human populations (as by sterilization) to improve the population's genetic composition'.

The movement of Black Theology of Liberation as *academic* category

Hopkins (2002:163) notes that BTL is to speak from one's social location. Nevertheless, many black professors have become academic intellectuals and mainly dislocated from the struggles of the people. Therefore, they are socially located in some authority positions. This, he argues, poses a threat to the relevance of BTL because academics might become more pressured by 'structural authority' to 'blunt an accent on the liberation of social relationships on earth' (Hopkins 2002:163). Cone (2011:48) illustrates this best when he refers to Niebuhr that is rigorously engaging in the intellectual discourse but was caught with 'his pants down' when he had to radically confront and address the racism of his white friends.

Though most theology faculties claim a more 'objective' approach to teaching and learning, lecturers and academics do not always acknowledge the 'social location' that they are articulating from. However, to have a black lecturer in front of the class also does not mean that they might be speaking from a BTL epistemology. Still, even in such cases, it should always be placed within perspective and from which social location and which narrative or story is influencing the module or academic course or the hidden curriculum.

However, this would mean that the *avenue* for knowledge generation, even for BTL, has in most cases been reserved for black theology textbooks and a narrowed rational (excluding experience) discussion on black theology. Hence James Cone has warned against such a 'book learning' as the only means of knowledge production. Therefore, it is still open for scrutiny whether his followers and students have constantly been allowing themselves to be informed by the stories and treated the stories of the oppressed with the same academic value as with other 'rational' (conceptual) forms of knowledge production.

A narrative Black Theology of Liberation: Contesting for its future

Story forms in Black Theology of Liberation

Hopkins (2002:162) distinguishes between a BTL and a 'vague' BTL. The former would be for him one that focusses on 'good news for all broken humanity' while the other on 'maintenance of individual advancement and communal privileges'. The other for 'social change' and the other to 'preserve the status quo for black middle-class representatives'. He argues that BTL was never about an 'ivory-tower' exercise, or belonging to an 'individual', but liberation is God's gift to the poor, and working-class black people. He (2002:163) states, 'Black theology arose from a spiritual and physical life-and-death situation for the bottom of African American communities as they accepted God's movement for justice'. In a similar vein, the South African Black Consciousness leader, Steve Biko (1978:28) refers to 'spiritual poverty'. A situation in which the black man should

come to themselves, and move from a position of self-depreciation to self-appreciation. Therefore his famous slogan, 'Black man, you're on your own!' There seem to be more 'self' appreciating stories to be told, which would not be articulated adequately within academic discourses.

The following quote from Biko (1978) illustrates the need for black people to tell their stories:

But the type of black man we have today has lost his manhood. Reduced to an obliging shell, he looks with awe at the white power structure and accepts what he regards as the 'inevitable position'. Deep inside his anger mounts at the accumulating insult, but he vents it in the wrong direction – on his fellow man in the township, on the property of black people. No longer does he trust leadership, for the 1963 mass arrests were blameable on bungling by the leadership, nor is there any to trust. In the privacy of his toilet his face twists in silent condemnation of white society but brightens up in sheepish obedience as he comes out hurrying in response to his master's impatient call. In the home-bound bus or train he joins the chorus that roundly condemns the white man but is first to praise the government in the presence of the police or his employers. His heart yearns for the comfort of white society and makes him blame himself for not having been 'educated' enough to warrant such luxury. Celebrated achievements by whites in the field of science – which he understands only hazily – serve to make him rather convinced of the futility of resistance and to throw away any hopes that change may ever come. All in all the black man has become a shell, a shadow of man, completely defeated, drowning in his own misery, a slave, an ox bearing the yoke of oppression with sheepish timidity. (pp. 28–29)

Nevertheless, Hopkins (2002:166) argues that the future of black theology also lies in establishing good theories, that would be able to work and contest with other disciplines. He (2002) states:

... the complexities facing the black community and church in the twenty-first century demand a more sophisticated theoretical framework. What structure of concepts can aid the liberation conclusions and practices of black theology? What insights might be taken from various academic disciplines and related experiences from liberation theologies in the Third World? What theories can help black theology move from its primary sources of African American experiences to its theological conclusions about God's intention for oppressed humanity? For example, how do those concerned with black religion take interviews with ex-slaves or the rap music of black youth and jump to conclusions about what Jesus Christ is telling poor black folk to say and do? Theory can become a vital tool for clarity in the story of God's working with the black poor to move them from being passive victims of oppression to being active people searching for a more compassionate and just lifestyle for all of creation. (p. 167)

Hopkins (2002) states the following that is near to a black theology of story:

Finally, the second generation will have to build and show models of basic Christian communities in local areas on the everyday level. Such locations, centred on a particular church or

household meetings of African American Christians, would teach, preach, and practice a black theology of Liberation for all to see and hear. (p. 169)

It is needed for black churches to question the rigid forms of liturgy that have become a covert form of oppression that fails to speak the language of their suffering because it starts from the academic discourses on liturgy that are often limited to European thinkers, which accidentally have also been referred to as Reformers. Reformers for what context? Through the singing, as Cone (1997:51–53) suggests the contents should speak to their concrete context, not only spiritual salvation but salvation for the ‘here-and-now’.

Therefore, it is strange that you still have Reformed Churches that critique many of the Pentecostal Churches, offering opportunities for members, mostly oppressed by their social, economic, and political realities, to tell their stories of Jesus’ intervention, where they are allowed to express their emotions to the oppressing realities, and the God of history’s intervention. Jacobs (2003:6) does offer some critique of ‘personal testimonies’ which is often self-glorifying than glorifying Jesus Christ, but this does not provide sufficient reason to jettison it and to elevate academic, philosophical content in the place of such a ‘social’ epistemology. There should be more other epistemologies used in worship services, such as poetry, music, personal testimonies than ‘book-learning’ pastors, as Cone (1997:53) warns.

A narrative approach in Black Theology of Liberation

Black Theology of Liberation can only be dead if there are no more stories of black oppression. However, a suggested storied approach for BTL is more than merely *story forms*¹³ (as the above section might suggest), but an approach which could be defined as providing epistemological ‘ecotones’,¹⁴ also vulnerable knowledge spaces, between different epistemologies, that would enrich the academic conversations, and arguments in search for a non-racial society. Muller (2017) offers this concept in his conversation of narrative not only as story forms but as a narrative approach that would allow the ‘co-habitation’ of knowledge systems to adapt and find ways to survive for the future. Emmanuel Katongole’s (2009) idea of ‘wild space’ denotes a similar idea, which he argues is needed in response to the Rwanda genocide that took place between the Hutus and the Tutsis. The question remains what will a narrative approach render for BTL in the future? It can become instrumental especially in the context of racialised identities in the South African context.¹⁵ A postfoundational approach is an approach that does not work from universalised principles,

13. See Ganzevoort’s (2014:3) distinction between *story forms* and *narrative approaches*.

14. Here is one of the definitions of ecotone, ‘a transitional area of vegetation between two different plant communities, such as forest and grassland. It has some of the characteristics of each bordering biological community and often contains species not found in the overlapping communities’.

15. See further the chapter of Baron, “‘Racialised cultures’ within a Black liberationist paradigm” in the forthcoming book, Solomons and Baron (2023).

but from ‘fragments’¹⁶ bringing it in a domain with other ‘fragments’ or stories, to then develop, and co-construct with other oppressed, and oppressive story. Furthermore, this is not an ending process because what was created becomes another fragment, and so the ‘constructing narrative’ continues. This means that a post-foundationalist approach will work from a plurality of epistemologies, which BTL should espouse to keep its relevance.

For instance, Strauss analyses the memoir of Van Wyk,¹⁷ which tells of his experience of race relations in the coloured¹⁸ township of Riverlea (Van Wyk 2014). He lauded, in one way, the Black Consciousness Movement for opening up avenues for ‘interracial identification within which performances of colouredness – subsumed under the heading “blackness” – could be staged as resistance to apartheid’. He argues that this allowed for ‘...oppositional vocabularies forged by the BCM ...’ which broadened the identity narratives available to coloured South Africans by foregrounding intra-black connections’. However, he laments the limitations, ‘... despite its revision of interpersonal relations, Black Consciousness ideology did not always accommodate all oppressed groups equally’ (2014:37–38).

Therefore at least the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) calls us towards ‘self-identification’, meaning that though apartheid might have forced such a racial classification, it does not own coloured people’s culture that has developed as a result of such a ‘forced categorisation’ and the malicious reasons that went into it. Therefore, should someone call themselves a ‘coloured’ by their own choice, this would not be forced, but out of free will – to call them what they want (cf. Adhikari 2004). This would offer BTL the broader ‘oppressive narratives’. It would assist coloured people in saying that their cultural identity matters; that their ‘culture’ should not be demonised or excluded from black epistemologies. Often coloured people ‘forsworn’ their history, for political correctness.

However, part of the black project would be to write up their storied histories from their oppression and suppression in society. Through this, a ‘self-love’ would develop to write ‘black’ stories also from the different ethnic, gendered communities. This would indeed enrich the ‘texture’ of black theologies. Coloured communities, therefore, become itself an ‘epistemological resource’ for black liberation theologies.¹⁹ The BCM would provide the

16. This idea, I have taken from the work of David Tracy, and his book *Analogical Imagination*.

17. His book is named, Van Wyk (2014).

18. The word ‘coloured’ here refers to the apartheid government in South Africa’s racial classification for those not white, or African but from mixed descent. This was ratified through the *Population Registration Act of 1950*.

19. See for instance the illustrative work done by Jodamus (2022) on the role of the ‘Pinkster kerk’ specifically the version on the Cape Flats. See also the article of Baron (2020) on the ‘socio-political’ history of the neo-Pentecostal church on the Cape Flats, and how their spirituality was from the context oppression and marginalisation, and the ‘getuienisse’ [testimonies] was not only spiritual, but from the wells of oppressed coloured people on the Cape Flats.

cue for a 'broad epistemological base' for all oppressive histories and coloured identities to be at home.

Besides, the call for BTL to address oppressive identities such as 'racialised identities' in South Africa, we witness as well the call from women theologians to address the oppression of women in BTL,²⁰ as well queer ontology by queer theologians in South Africa.²¹ In pursuing a 'narrative approach' black theology become an engagement through an interdisciplinary, inter, cultural, inter-racial, and intersectional approach which a broader narrative epistemological approach would provide.

Conclusion

In this article, narrative was discussed both as a *form* and as part of a narrative *approach*. We are reminded of the words of Cone (1975:144), 'The [black people] did not debate religion on an abstract theological level but lived their religion concretely in history'. Though Cone has discussed and promoted narrative, there is still much to do to ensure a narrative approach is properly pursued within black theology.

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Authors' contributions

E.B. is the sole author of this article.

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Data availability

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Disclaimer

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20. See her thesis in 2018, 'A womanist dialogue with Black Theology of Liberation in the Twenty first century' an unpublished PhD thesis at the University of Pretoria, South Africa. See also Allan Boesak's book published in 2020 entitled, *Children of the Waters of Meribah: Black Liberation Theology, the Miriamic Tradition, and the Challenges of the 21st Century Empire*.

21. See the chapter of Moshoadiba, M.W., 'Black Liberation Theology and Queer Ontology: A Dialogue' in the forthcoming book, Solomons and Baron (2023).

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