Not Out of the Dark Night:
Beyond Sanitized Theological Scenes of Instruction

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Abstract

This work disrupts and re-envisions normative or traditional theological scenes of instruction anchored around imago Dei, dignity, and hope. These elements comprise "sanitized scenes of instruction" that are unable to adequately and creatively respond to the complex epistemes that have shaped and continue to guide contemporary death-dealing atmospheres of violence as manifested in necropolitics, biopower, and intensified precarity in the Anthropocene. The result is theological reflection, social analysis, and education that is out of touch with the perpetual dark night of the soul that we all experience but that is especially felt by those bodies considered disposable or as fodder for Orwellian visions of societal homeostasis (biopower) on an increasingly precarious Earth.

Instead of providing easy chimeras or a quick way out, this work invites readers to rethink imago Dei, dignity, and hope without escaping the dark night (the atmospheres of violence). It does so by juxtaposing scenes, unsanitized ones, with traditional theological accounts on imago Dei, dignity, and hope—challenging them in the process. The hope is that such juxtapositions will jolt imaginations into considering other possible scenes of theological instruction that go beyond, but that do not discard, the normative ones.

This work ends by offering some contours for a rhizomatic theological imagination and pedagogy that can perhaps facilitate an "active" sitting in the dark: one that still manages to move in all directions and that envisions infinite possibilities within states of suspension. The penultimate chapter hones in on the centrality of a theological hermeneutics that embraces plurality and ambiguity—crucial to any theological project that seeks to respond to complex contemporary concerns. The final chapter tentatively concludes with some possible fragments of

scenes for consideration in developing future theological scenes of instruction. It models the pedagogy that I currently find most useful in my writing and teaching, namely a rhizomatic and pluriversal one. Rather than end the work with yet another system or scene of instruction, I offer the fragments as an exercise for the reader to think through his/her/their own experiences with theology and the precariousness that we all, to different extents, share.

Para mi madre y padre: siempre con admiración y agradecimiento por todo.

Contents

Acknowledgements

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Introduction

Setting the Stage

Theological education—or perhaps theology itself—is at a crossroads.[1] I don't just mean the obvious: decline in enrollments at theological schools and seminaries, fewer undergraduate students electing theology or theological studies as their major, and the sliver of full-time faculty positions available each year to teach theology.[2] I don't think even the most alluring theology will be able to stem the bleeding of academic theology.

Did theology ever belong in the modern research university to begin with? What did theological imagination, writing and teaching sacrifice when moving from medieval universities, monasteries, and the streets (think of Saint Francis and mendicant orders) to the hallowed halls of the world's finest research universities? What forms has theological writing and teaching adopted in its efforts to adapt to a changing world that equates academic respectability with marketability and usefulness to corporations and the state?[3] The *Theological Education Between the Time Series*[4] explores these and other concerns currently haunting theological education, so I

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[1] By theology or theological education, I mean theological inquiry, writing, and teaching that attempts a social analysis or formation of students. For the purposes of this dissertation, then, theology refers to academic theology that makes pronouncements on material reality or that seeks to form a particular vision or habitus. Theology in this dissertation might not refer to patristic or historical theology, unless, of course, attempts are made in those disciplines to engage in social analysis, to offer commentary on contemporary social issues, or to form students.

[2] See, for example, Shelby Kearns, "Our Religious Studies Programs Are in Trouble," *America Magazine*, April 15, 2021, https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2021/04/15/catholic-religious-studies-intellectual-education-universities-239825.

[3] Mark D. Jordan raises this question and others in *Transforming Fire: Imagining Christian Teaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2021).

[4] The series has spawned several insightful texts from established scholars in different theological subfields. For more information on the project which launched the series, see "Theological Education Between the Times," Emory Candler School of Theology, accessed April 10, 2024, https://tebt.candler.emory.edu.

will not delve into the issues. I reference only a few salient concerns of some authors in the series—concerns that coincide with mine. But first a vignette.

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I have been in theology classrooms as both a student and teacher for quite some time now. Not counting my time as a student in elementary and middle school "religion" classes at a Catholic parochial school, I have now inhabited theology classrooms for 18 years. Fourteen of those years I spent as a student in secondary, undergraduate, and graduate school. I spent four years as a high school teacher in both Boston and Miami, and during the last three years of my doctoral program, I have taught over fifteen undergraduate "core" theology courses at Boston College. It is safe to assume that I am drawn to theology and theological education.

But there was a period of roughly eight years between my studies at Harvard and Boston College when my interest in academic theology significantly waned. Theology, or at least the version of theology I had encountered and known, was simply too obtuse. How could theology, with its grand claims that seem to provide *only comfort* or justification for apologetics, speak to the realties all around me, not least ongoing environmental degradation and violence upon bodies of all sorts within and outside Christian spaces? More specifically, I found the dominant scenes of instruction in theology to be unalluring because too simplistic, too "sanitized." Most theological writing (in ethics, ministry, education) I encountered in the classroom as a student and teacher did not account for colonialism or coloniality. Few theologians discussed sex, sexuality, and gender outside the polite parameters of dogmatic or church theology. And few theologians outside and inside the classroom seemed willing to venture beyond a set of methods, texts, and pedagogies that simply left students (myself included) bored, skeptical, or simply indifferent (when not feigning interest, that is). I did not have the understanding of why that was

so; I simply had an intuitive feeling that theology—like church rituals—required a forced attention that relied on assumptions and assurances of god talk as coherent.

Forced Attention and Affection

For Willie James Jennings, theology depends on the forced attention and affection of its intended audiences (pupils). This is because theological writing and teaching have never actually spoken the languages of or instructed the bodies and souls of people outside classical Western Christendom. (Instruction did no doubt happen, but it was (and is) instruction become discipline to form a certain character in the Western Christian drama as it spread via conquest.)[5] Christian theological education remains, for Jennings, trapped within the wine skins of colonial ideologies and designs.[6] He writes, "Colonial design is not one thing but many things organized around attention, affection, and resistance, each aiming, each navigating—each a design that designs."[7] Attention, affection, and resistance are not inherently negative, Jennings notes; indeed, each component is crucial to the educational enterprise. Attention is necessary to learning, affect allows passions and desires to motivate waning attentions, and resistance keeps the teacher and ideas under consideration always fluid, always in movement as a result of various interpretations. The problem, however, is when these energies "have been drawn into a distorting creativity that slowly drains us of life by pressing us to perform a particular type of man."[8] The man is, of course, the serious scholar whose systematic research in a Hegelian key offers sophisticated insights into how to live, love, arrange societies and communities, and find salvation—among

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[5] I will discuss this more in depth in Chapter 1.

[6] Willie James Jennings, *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2020), 49.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid.

other topics that theologians claim to offer counsel on. A few theologians even claim to have unlocked the secret of the cosmos, proposing orthogenesis as the key to comprehending not only human fates but all cosmic fate as well.[9] Quite the undertaking, indeed.

The character of the serious man might be the goal of theological formation for the graduate student seeking to become a scholar and theological teacher. But I often wonder how forced attention, affect, and resistance affect undergraduate students who have no idea what theologians do or what theology is apart from preconceived notions learned in high school theology classes or from what they have heard from peers (i.e. a brainwashing session or apologetics or evangelization—or perhaps all three and more). The reality, put crudely, is that most undergraduate students (at least the ones I've encountered) begrudgingly take theology classes simply to fulfill a curricular requirement (a core course). A common statement in my course evaluations is, "I didn't expect to get so much out of a theology course." Or "who would have thought that theology could open spaces to explore issues that actually matter." Among my favorites: "I actually paid attention to the lectures, conversations, and readings instead of using theology class to answer emails, shop online, or finish work for another class." (While teaching high school theology, quite a few students admitted that they have done work for other classes (most notably math) while sitting in theology classes). Have I succeeded in turning forced attentions into curious attentions? I don't presume that I (the teacher) have made the difference. Instead, I credit my deconstruction of a few assumptions—deconstructions that paved the way for more inclusive, curious, and playful spaces in the ruins of systematic edifices and the ossuaries of theological writing and teaching.

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[9] See, for example, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's classic text *The Phenomenon of Man* (New York: Harper, 1975). De Chardin suggests that all matter, including inorganic, is progressing toward a telos, namely a higher universal consciousness. See especially the section titled "Book Two: Life."

Deconstructed Assumptions in the Classroom (And in This Dissertation)

Deconstructed assumption one is that I, as the teacher and scholar, am the ultimate holder of expert knowledge on *all* matters theological—or even more presumptuous still, on matters divine. Ted Smith notes that "the process of professionalism draws a circle around some body of knowledge, charges it with status, and then anoints a select group as its authoritative interpreters."[10] The professional theologian is one who, by virtue of completing training in reading, interpreting, and writing what counts as theology, has been transformed into the holder of knowledge—or more precisely, the owner of texts, languages … of a discipline. The guild then authorizes the owner to teach some portion (always a fragment) of it to others—but in ways already predetermined and often linear: sanitized scenes of instruction. Here I will resist defaulting into a conversation on Paulo Freire's categories of banking versus transformative education (a well-known if not clichéd analysis in theological education circles). I generally resist the now marketable call that education should be transformative, but not because I don't believe that education should and can transform the teacher and learner.

Deconstructed assumption two is that theological education will de facto result in transformation. I resist calls for transformation because the classroom itself—especially the theological one—is too saddled with assumptions about knowledges (for instance, what counts as theological knowledge and writing), ontologies (the "human," the Christian, or the atheist who can perhaps be made Christian), and telos (the purposes of theological education itself). Jennings claims that these assumptions laden in theological education and formation result in the creation of the "white body-mind."[11] For undergraduates, it might buttress the subjective-couched-as-

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[10] Ted A. Smith, *The End of Theological Education* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2023), 144.

[11] Jennings, *After Whiteness*, 56.

objective "white body-mind"[12]—that contextless, timeless, and universal enunciator of divine revelation and arbitrator of desires, passions, and being. Hiding behind sacrosanct ideologies, the white body-mind (meaning the dominant, homogeneous thinker and teacher) expands his reach through normalizing epistemologies and recognized (read: authorized) languages. Passive or bored students then play the game: just get the coursework done. Read a few pages from a primer, stich together some quotes from Augustine, Aquinas, and David Tracy, and voilà, a discussion post on sin or grace or ecclesiology is born. Write a few brief papers and ask forced (staged) questions every now and then on topics vaguely familiar at best or totally esoteric at worst. Theology requirement completed… congratulations, now on to the classes that will prepare the student for life in the real world. Leave that esoteric material to the original owner, to the theologian, the serious scholar preoccupied with transmitting facts and analyzing the social milieu in light of theological sources, including, of course, the bible.

And the cycle repeats. When the classroom becomes a place for the transmission of fragments presented as a unity (as a whole), spaces or gaps for thinking otherwise—for transformation—shrink (though resistance will always be present in various forms, not least student reticence to memorize biblical quotes or facts easily found on Wikipedia). The result: ennui for both teacher and student.[13] The tragedy: forced attentions and affections become normalized, as just the way things are in theology. The capitalistic-oriented university already

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[12] As we will see in this work, especially given the "lynching of the mind" that is emblematic of coloniality, I seek to go beyond the usual white-black binary of identity politics when describing homogeneous views or ideologies. Such concepts can be held by all bodies of all phenotypes. But for sake of clarity, I use "white" to describe normative, homogeneous views when using Jennings as my main interlocuter.

[13] Jennings, *After Whiteness*, 56.

socializes students (and professors) into demanding formulaic summaries for each lesson.[14] If the lesson veers off course, if a student introduces an impromptu question, or if the teacher leaves students without an answer, students might consider the class session a failure, or the entire course a waste of time and money. The teacher must make connections en route to solidifying the constellations already in place, leading students to some grand truth or endpoint that will presumably change lives (the key for formation and transformation). The PowerPoint should always end with three main takeaways, lest transformations be delayed.

Deconstructed assumption three is that *all* students actually feel a passion for life's "grand" questions. A common quip from some students: "Just get the requirement out of the way. And don't forget that most education is boring anyway. Detach yourself from the material, set the deadlines in your calendar, and just do it." Meanwhile, some well-intentioned professors and mentors earnestly believe that all students are there to unpack life's perennial questions (such as concerns about meaning, purpose, destinations, and free will). Throughout my experiences as student and teacher (and both simultaneously) in many theological classrooms, I have encountered students of all persuasions and (non)passions. Some are indeed searching for answers to grand questions. Others are there to ace an exam or to perform intellectual aerobatics. And still others could care less about most topics, focusing only on the PowerPoint's three main takeaways. Perhaps those students who don't care are on to something. Could they somehow sense the forced attention and affection required in the theological classroom, as I did before I knew how to identify it? Why would the answers to life's most complex puzzles be found within existing constellations or scenes of instruction? Jennings words are worth repeating here:

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[14] See Daniel O. Aleshire, *Beyond Profession: The Next Future of Theological Education* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2021). Chapter 1 is particularly insightful to glean the current state of theological education in the United States.

> All of us have been told in the face of this formation to toughen up, to become hard-nosed, to desensitize in an environment grasping for the goal of cold hard truth. But this is one of the main reasons why theological education fails and is failing. It forms an unreal world of petrified attention inside the real world, a real world calling us to attend to the wonders of a God working in the place never released from the rain of divine presence.[15]

An unreal world of petrified attention—if only theology were *actually* producing fiction that creates other worlds, even unreal ones, perhaps student attention wouldn't be so forced or feigned. Instead theological education, especially at prestigious institutions, remains rather siloed. Privileged students encounter worlds *already* built by epistemological architects who simply cobbled together fragments, aligned them in ways that made sense to them and their grand narratives, and presented them through writing, teaching, and lecturing as "Tradition." Jennings calls these theological fragments-turned-whole theories and stories "designs"—the consequences of choices by real bodies at particular junctures of times and in different places.[16] Borrowing from Mark Jordan, I prefer to think of "designs" as "scenes of instruction." We will examine some of these designs (or scenes) throughout the dissertation, with ones built around imago Dei as perhaps the most salient example of a contextual theological claim turned universal and forced on all bodies, even those whose deaths and pains belie any claim to the equality of all humans.

Mark Jordan writes that "learning begins best in desire."[17] But how to conjure, activate, or channel that desire in an undergraduate theological classroom? The question becomes more pressing when acknowledging that debates over the purposes of theological education (and education broadly) are far from settled. Here is but a sample of opinions culled from my shelves.

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[15] Jennings, *After Whiteness*, 56-57

[16] Ibid., 65.

[17] Jordan, *Transforming Fire*, 2.

For Jennings, one aim of theological education is to imagine "a form of resistance that builds community" in response to colonial and racist designs in theology.[18] Thomas Groome believes that Catholic education is meant to inculcate faith-based values that encourage "students to live their lives with a sense of Ultimate Horizon—God, if you will—in order to find meaning and purpose…."[19] Gustavo Gutiérrez and other liberation theologians hone in on education for consciousness raising and social justice. Hosffman Ospino has dedicated his scholarship to concerns around theological education for Latinx inclusion, ministry, and leadership in the Catholic church and beyond. Thomas Berry conceives of education more broadly, meaning beyond theological confines. For Berry, "The historical mission of our times is to reinvent the human—at the species level, with critical reflection, within the community of life-systems, in a time-developmental context, by means of story and shared dream experience."[20] The late bell hooks, in a similar vein to Jennings, sees teaching as an opportunity to transgress dominant academic norms that stifle student desires and attentions and that quash excitement in academic spaces.[21] Education should facilitate pedagogy, hooks says, that "respects and cares for the souls of our students"— an approach to teaching that provides "the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin."[22] And for Jordan, theological education should

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[18] Jennings, *After Whiteness*, 72.

[19] Thomas H. Groome, *What Makes Education Catholic: Spiritual Foundations* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2021), x.

[20] Thomas Berry*, The Great Work: Our Way into the Future* (New York: Bell Tower, 1999), 159.

[21] See bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

[22] Ibid., 13.

disrupt the vice of knowingness, which he describes as "more than a claim to possess knowledge. It is the affirmation that there is a knowledge waiting to be possessed and then professed."[23]

I have been fortunate to learn with and from this wide array of scholars and teachers—both in person and through their texts. From them I borrow many of my own convictions for teaching. But I don't intend to settle the perennial debate of what constitutes a solid theological education. Much less do I venture into metaquestions about educational theory and philosophy. Education is both an art and science and much more.[24] I see it as a craft that evolves with each risky conversation, with each fleeting gesture toward some inklings of nascent or activated desires that wish to probe beneath and beyond the course objectives and the sanitized scenes of theological instruction they produce.

"Sanitized" Scenes of Instruction and Theological Language

As mentioned, instead of "designs," I find Mark Jordan's notion of "scenes of instruction" useful to think about how fragments of knowledge come together into constellations that seek to convey an ethical lesson or create (form) certain characters.[25] Simply put, a scene of instruction requires a setting, either real or imagined, and a (any) time period (including the future). The characters, however, comprise the main ingredient of any scene. Jordan reminds readers that "[c]haracters in ancient philosophic teaching are more stylized and diverse than human beings. They do not have to possess bodies, though disembodied characters—souls, virtues, laws, deities—are often lent bodies for the scene's duration."[26] Without characters, and

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[23] Mark D. Jordan, *Queer Callings: Untimely Notes on Names and Desires* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2024), 197.

[24] See Werner Jaeger, *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture: Volume 1* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969).

[25] Jordan, *Transforming Fire*, 15-27. See also Mark D. Jordan, *Teaching Bodies: Moral Formation in the Summa of Thomas Aquinas* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017).

[26] Jordan, *Transforming Fire,* 18.

without change (or transformation) occurring in at least one of the character's soul or body, a scene of instruction becomes simply a "scene," a given space that breeds predictable outcomes and that leaves language (and imagination) intact. An "aura" or even a cult of idolatry then develops around the language. This protective encasement provides certain language an air of eternal impenetrability.

Thus, once certain language—especially language that instructs, informs, and elicits desires from souls and bodies—remains undisturbed, it becomes static, revered, authoritative… and dangerous. It becomes the language of police powers—a language unable to rejuvenate or reimagine itself because of vanity: the vanity of those who utter the words in order to exclude and of those who utter the words without regard for their power to (de)form souls and bodies. "Tradition," for example, relies on the establishment of authoritative language to police its boundaries, to determine who belongs based on the adherents' knowledge of and very repetition of the particular community's language. More insidious is when such stale language seeks to masquerade as universal, as comprehensible by all selves across time and space. To repeat: a scene of instruction becomes just a scene when characters remain safely in place or when they present themselves as wholly formed and set in their ways.

Stale scenes result in dead language, and vice versa. The result: a complete excision of imagination, of envisioning the pluriversal and infinite possibilities of self-stylized existences. This is a sanitized scene of instruction. Toni Morrison, in her Nobel Prize acceptance speech, describes a dying language as "ruthless in its policing duties, [and] it has no desire or purpose other than maintaining the free range of its own narcotic narcissism, its own exclusivity and dominance." A text, language, or scene of instruction becomes lifeless when it becomes self-enclosed, when it becomes too systematic. And when it loses life, the language will seek to

resurrect via epistemological violence on the listener, speaker, writer, or reader—foreclosing

one's ability to imagine other worlds, other scripts, other selves, other languages (or grammars).

Misery loves company: a dying language will seek to kill lively imaginations, snuffing them out

as they approach the precipice of some breakthrough.

In theological education, any scenes that foreclose change in the characters (those in the

text and those in front of the text) slowly kill the Divine's transformative possibilities for present

and future souls and bodies. The notion of theological tradition, Jordan writes, "changes a living

tradition to a code of law subject to forensic debate and authoritative determination."[27] Scenes

now look like courtrooms, classrooms, hospitals, churches, and the offices of the Congregation

for the Doctrine of the Faith. What do these have in common? Rather than allow characters to

unfurl through experimental and continuous self-realizations amid infinite possibilities on

alternate planes of existence, these scenes already presuppose a telos for *all* characters, namely

their submission to the disciplinary technologies and authoritative (medical-juridical-theological)

gazes of a world all too familiar.[28] Material success in this world depends on internalizing an

arbitrary disciplinary regime that frames virtues and vices, goods and evils, in rather simplistic

terms through heuristic scenes that become examples for deterrence or for the killing of desire

and the will to life. "Don't act like this or you will end up like that" is the scene's chief teaching–

–a far cry from scenes that encourage experimentation and multiplicity toward ongoing

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[27] Jordan, *Transforming Fire*, 23.

[28] Foucault argues that Protestant ethics, and especially Luther, challenged the notion of seeking a radically different world. He writes, "And it is this relation between an *other* life and the other world—so profoundly marked within Christian ascetism by the principle that it is an *other* life which leads to the other world—which is radically challenged in Protestant ethics, and by Luther, *when access to the other world will be defined by a form of life absolutely comfortable to existence in this world here. The formula of Protestantism is, to lead the same life in order to arrive at the other world.*" Michel Foucault, *The Courage of Truth: The Government of Self and Others II, Lectures as the College de France 1983-1984*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2012), 247.

transformation. And a far cry from the philosophical life: "May not, must not the philosophical life, the true life necessarily be a life which is radically other?"[29]

Throughout this work, I present three dominant theological themes—imago Dei, dignity, and hope—that anchor scenes of instruction common to theological spaces that attempt to reflect on the atmospheres of violence I outline in Chapter 1. I argue that these themes and scenes are sanitized, in that they do not allow for languages (grammars) and imaginations beyond the ones they already assume or produce. The scenes are sanitized also because they seem to ignore conflicting scenes and characters that disrupt pretensions to the coherence, universality, telos, and even intelligibility of the lessons and formation of character the scenes seek to enact. Sanitized scenes of instruction are unable to hold the contradictions that mark existence, favoring instead a carefully constructed "reality" that usually ends in trite promises of equality and dignity for all and hope in some utopia (either in this world or in the afterlife).

Unsanitized scenes, on the contrary, are always shifting and looking for their own breaks. They are rhizomatic (more on this in Chapter 5), unpredictable, unabashedly fragmented, unstable, and open to pluriversal reconstitutions. Some unsanitized scenes might not even have a plot (or an end lesson). They might simply be "scenes" (with no end goal) instead of scenes of instruction. These scenes, which might not have a readily available lesson to offer at the moment, could serve as a fragment that disrupts a current stable scene of instruction or that forms another one. The possibilities for combinations of meaning are indeed endless, if not dizzying. But these endless combinations hold the promise of a theology not yet here for an infinitely complex world. The key is seeing theology as an enterprise of stitching together fragments instead of a wholistic or coherent discipline that holds timeless and contextless truths.

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[29] Foucault, *The Courage of Truth,* 247.

On Fragmenting Theology and Theological Education

One important function for theological teachers—maybe even the most crucial for our context—is to inspire learners through accompaniment to live as best they can in an uncertain, ever-changing, and always-fragmented world. Teachers should accompany (not force) nomadic bodies toward different arrangements or designs of their own fragments. Indeed, according to Willie James Jennings, "Many people come to theological education looking for help with the fragment, hoping that those who teach about their faith can help reassemble what was shattered, help them gather together what remains."[30] The problem is that teachers and students fail to recognize a given tradition's—and thus life's—fragmentary reality. "It is a pedagogical and theological mistake," Jennings warns, "to imagine tradition prior to the fragment."[31]

David Tracy argues that "our present cultural and intellectual situation—more exactly, our existential, spiritual tradition—is both negatively and positively more fragmented than any earlier Western form of our traditions."[32] Many philosophers, including Charles Taylor, have pointed to the "negatives" of our fragmented times, including two: the emergence of the buffered self who dictates meaning according to self-interest and the loss of enchantment in daily life.[33] With so many options for belief and unbelief now around, Taylor laments the loss of a once unified Christian worldview, at least in Europe. But consider Tracy's statement: "The positive possibilities of our own fragments shatter or fragment any false whole—that is, any totality system with its imperialist ambitions."[34]

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[30] Jennings, *After Whiteness,* 35.

[31] Jennings, *After Whiteness*, 44.

[32] David Tracy, *Fragments: The Existential Situation of Our Time* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020), 9.

[33] See Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2007).

[34] Tracy, *Fragments*, 9.

Perhaps it is more accurate to say that there was never a coherent "whole," a universal truth (or truths) applicable across all time and space. The alleged "wholes" were simply arrangements of fragments posited by those in epistemological power (what Walter Mignolo calls the Master Voice) as timeless and contextless truths. So recognition of fragments presents the possibility to shatter any arrangements of fragments that claims to be universal and timeless (sanitized theological scenes of instruction). Fragments—and fragmentation—is not purely negative. Yes, fragmentation introduces loss of meaning, cohesion, and identity. But fragments also present exciting possibilities of what never was. Out of seeming chaos bursts forth moments of deep creativity. What we need are vastly different reconfigurations of fragments to open toward "difference and otherness"[35]—toward a pluriverse of rhizomatic possibilities.

Christian theological education should be a lifelong process of *unlearning* or *delinking* from totalities that reduce others to caricatures and that attempt to capture the Divine's essence through orthodox speech. Yet Jennings rightly argues that those in theological education view fragments as inconvenient truths, as threats to some desire for a unified and singular Christian tradition that is applicable to all peoples across time and space.[36] Jennings observes that "[w]e who journey in theological education … often fail to realize that we always and only work in fragments."[37] The process of crafting a syllabus, for example, should make obvious that teachers and students deal only in fragments. Choosing the fragments that students will be exposed to is a deeply political act. The fragments have the power to shape imaginations, to either constrict or expand imaginaries. How the teacher organizes the fragments matters. Are the fragments placed alongside other fragments in an arbitrary sequence meant to facilitate some teleology, some

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[35] Tracy, *Fragments*, 2.

[36] Jennings, *After Whiteness*, 16.

[37] Jennings, *After Whiteness*, 16.

supposed outcome or maturity in the learners' formation? Or, should fragments, as Marcella Althaus-Reid urges, be arranged in a way to displace and create new meanings?[38] Jennings laments that "[t]oo much theological education … takes the fragments of faith, aligns them with colonialist aspiration, and invites us to compositions that drain life."[39]

Educators should resist the temptation to organize fragments into a holistic composition and instead acknowledge the limitations of all human knowledge, including knowledge of and about faith and religion, humans and God. What if educators were to allow the fragments to enact their power without the need for a singular formative outcome? There is no way to control the power of a text (of words) when in the hands of certain learners. (We will delve more into hermeneutics in Chapter 5).

So what to teach remains a question best explored with fragments in mind rather than with fantasies of an ordered or unified Tradition. Different fragments will speak to different learners at different times and in different places. Reality is an event, not a substance, as Tracy reminds us.[40] Reality and being are ongoing and unfolding—a verb, not a noun.

While learning takes place in community, theological education is radically about spiritual, epistemological, and ontological self-discovery. Tracy puts it well: "Discover the right fragment—in one's own and other traditions, in one's own and other lives—and you will discover an entry into the eventful, infinite character of reality itself."[41] Such exciting and radical self-discovery will remain delayed until both teachers and students learn to appreciate the

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[38] Marcella Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God* (London: Routledge, 2003), 3.

[39] Jennings, *After Whiteness*, 34.

[40] Tracy, *Fragments*, 2.

[41] Tracy, *Fragments*, 2.

tensions and anxieties,[42] as well as the joys and excitements, that fragments present to contemporary bodies living in these most existentially and ontologically precarious times. Seeking "dialectically conflicting voices" is an important practical strategy for approaching fragments.[43] Fragments can speak for themselves without being positioned in an arrangement. Tracy pleads with his readers to "let go of hope for any totality system whatsoever, paying attention to the explosive, marginal, saturated fragments…."[44] Fragments are not meant to make one feel better about a precarious present—though they can serve this function too; instead their function is to help render totalities discontinuous, thereby demythologizing them in order to create conditions conducive to imagining alternatives (however improbable).

Perhaps fragments can now seduce and lure those once repulsed and deterred by arbitrary constellations drawn from the imaginations of traditional theological scriptwriters and enacted by their eager teachers. But theological education needs to reevaluate whenever they seek to "form" a particular person. Perhaps "accompaniment" can replace "formation," since we are all on our personal and collective journeys. In certain strands of the Buddhist tradition, the teacher is seen as a friend who guides others on their journeys—sometimes to nowhere. Teachers serve as a type of center who, while pointing toward possible routes, never force bodies down any of them. Bodies know best what they desire and need at any given moment. Fragments open up bodies to a pluriversality—a multitude of routes once inconceivable because still unfolding under shifting constellations.

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[42] Marcella Althaus-Reid seeks a theological re-reading and discourse that produces tensions and differences that might be irreconcilable and even adversarial. See, for example, *From Feminist Theology to Indecent Theology: Readings on Poverty, Sexual Identity, and God* (London: SCM Press, 2004).

[43] Tracy, *Fragments*, 7.

[44] Tracy, *Fragments*, 30.

From Fragments to Pluriversality: Is it Possible Within Existing Higher Education Context?

While it is not the intention of this dissertation to offer a comprehensive vision of theological education, it is important to note the context within which theological education happens today. The very term "university" connotes an epistemological search for some unified paradigm to understand the world and one's place within it. Such assumed paradigm is normally western oriented, with origins in medieval and then Enlightenment thought, and reaching its current expression in market ideologies. Walter Mignolo observes that "epistemology and hermeneutics, in the Western genealogy of thought, investigate and regulate the principles of knowledge … and the principles of interpretation…. Both strains are embedded in the self-proclaimed universality of Western cosmology and act as its gatekeepers."[45] Thus, many voices––and epistemologies––are excluded from influencing the discourses at universities at the center of knowledge production. Even more concerning, a western cosmology presented as value-free and objective can lead to a new, more subtle form of colonialism––a sort of lynching of the mind,[46] as Cornel West calls it, or of coloniality, as Mignolo calls it.

To challenge the western tendency to universalize its epistemological paradigms, several postcolonial thinkers––Mignolo among them––propose a pluriversal epistemology. Such epistemology holds in tension all the ways of coming to know the world, with no single epistemology considered the ultimate truth, the starting point or the end point. No society, person, or institution can claim exclusive ownership of knowledge. Mignolo observes: "Stripped of its pretended universality, Western cosmology would be one of many cosmologies, no longer

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[45] Walter D. Mignolo, "Foreword: On Pluriversity and Multipolarity," in *Constructing the Pluriverse: The Geopolitics of Knowledge*, ed. Bernd Reiter (Durham : Duke University Press, 2018), ix.

[46] See Cornel West, *Democracy Matters: Winning the Fight Against Imperialism* (New York: Penguin, 2004).

the one that subsumes and regulates all the others."[47] Western theology—in all its variants—also needs to come to terms with its position as just one among many ideologies, lenses, and systems of thought. Once theologians admit to Christian theology's highly contextual nature, the theological enterprise can begin a true process of kenosis that will open it to several other more persuasive attempts, not least because other voices can now contribute to theological writing and teaching.

The goal of a pluriversal project is to shift peoples' beliefs and understandings of the world so that they can change the way they live in the world.[48] The project does not seek to change the world; it seeks to critically interrogate the way knowledge is constructed, disseminated, and consumed by the public in an effort to bring western cosmology off its high horse. In effect, such project is decolonial in nature. But envisioning a pluriversal epistemology does not mean proposing some grand global design for how people should think or live, since this would amount to a totalizing exercise that mimics colonial projects.[49] A pluriversal and decolonial project, therefore, "starts with the transformations and liberations of subjectivities controlled by the promises of the state, the fantasies of the market, and the fears of armed forces, all tied together by the messages of mainstream media."[50] To put it differently, an efficacious pluriversal epistemology facilitates one's epistemological transformation from seeing the world as governed by a singular paradigm (or "Truth") to a world full of multiple "centers of truth" in tension with each other—paving the way for new ways to view the world.

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[47] Mignolo, "Foreword: On Pluriversity and Multipolarity," x.

[48] Ibid., x.

[49] Ibid., xiv.

[50] Ibid., x.

Universities are arguably the main sites of knowledge production and perhaps of consumption in the world. In the age of the "mercantile" or consumer-driven university, the purpose of higher education seems to be 1) training more students in STEM who can later contribute to economic development through research or applied skills, and 2) producing techno-scientific knowledge that can enhance military technology and corporate profitability.[51] Thus, as Henry Heller points out, "The quest for disinterested knowledge or knowledge for knowledge's sake, including focusing on basic or theoretical sciences as against immediately useful or profitable knowledge, was deemed to be out of date."[52] What counts is knowledge that can produce profits or grants in a relatively brief period, leading to increased research output efficiency, which is then recognized by world and national higher education rankings as *the* metric of a university's quality. Education administrators and the general public view critical thinking that upsets the neoliberal narrative as useless, wasteful, and out of touch with market and consumer (student and employer) demands. This is the context that theological education has to contend with in addition to its own internal squabbles over correct method or best subfield.

Teachers, especially theology teachers, interested in fostering imaginative breakthroughs face an uphill battle in an educational system that has little patience for ideas that do not produce instant economic benefit or that dare to imagine a fundamentally different world. But theological education, which some might argue is already an outlier in the neoliberal educational paradigm, can serve as a vehicle for education that can resist models of capitalistic knowledge transfer. Theological education must go beyond simply a banking method of education, beyond teaching philosophies and methods that assume students are *tabula rasas* ready for deposits of

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[51] See Henry A. Giroux, *Neoliberalism's War on Higher Education* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2014).

[52] Henry Heller, *The Capitalist University: The Transformations of Higher Education in the United States (1945-2016)* (London: Pluto Press, 2016), 184.

information. Theological education should embrace teaching and learning that makes students uncomfortable—what theorists have called a "pedagogy of discomfort."[53]

A Contribution to Epistemological Breaks (Fragmentations) and Reconstitutions

Theological education itself needs to go undergo an epistemological break (fragmentation) and reconstitution. As largely practiced in the hallowed halls of academia, theology remains steeped in Enlightenment-era ideals of scholarship. Indeed, Jeannie Hill-Fletcher and J. Kameron Carter argue that Christian theology was instrumental to developing white supremacy and its concomitant narratives of the inferiority of African and indigenous peoples.[54] In light of the Black Lives Matter protests, Chance the Rapper recently called out Christian churches in the United States for what he perceives to be their collective failure to address white supremacy either via official church teachings or in the pews on Sunday.[55] Until teachers of theology themselves come to terms with the discipline's long history of complicity with structures of dominance,[56] theological education will continue to exacerbate epistemologies of ignorance that fail to prepare introspective students with critical outlooks and a pluriversal intellectual palette. Or worse still, theological education will continue to peddle themes and scenes of instruction that foreclose imaginations and grammars for other theologies waiting to be written amid shifting necropolitical landscapes.

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[53] Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, "Feeling Race: Theorizing the Racial Economy of Emotions," *American Sociological Review* 84, no. 1 (2019): 18.

[54] J. Kameron Carter writes that "modern racial discourse and practice have their genesis inside Christian theological discourse and missiological practice, which themselves were tied to the practice of empire in advance of Western civilization?" J. Kameron Carter, *Race: A Theological Account* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 3.

[55] See "Chance the Rapper Spent the Weekend Shutting Down Pastors Who Minimized Racism," *Relevant Magazine,* June 15, 2020, https://relevantmagazine.com/culture/chance-the-rapper-spent-the-weekend-shutting-down-pastors-who-minimized-racism/.

[56] See Steffano Montano's insightful dissertation, "Theoretical Foundations for an Intercultural, Antiracist Theological Education" (PhD diss., Boston College, 2019).

Commenting on the need for "threatening theoretical work," Toni Morrison states that "it is more urgent than ever to develop an epistemology that is neither intellectual slumming nor self-serving reification."[57] Can the theologically subaltern voices dream or speak in a landscape where narratives—as told by dominant storytellers—shape scripts and mold characters? Can language, especially theological discourses, be used to effectuate some epistemological change? Not unless theology makes room for the "threatening theoretical work" of disrupting sanitized scenes of instruction, especially ones anchored around some of its most cherished themes: imago Dei, dignity, and hope.

I am engaged in an effort to both disrupt and envision theological scenes of instruction in response to the complex epistemes (coloniality and the colonial matrix of power) that have shaped and continue to guide contemporary death-dealing atmospheres of violence as manifested in necropolitics, biopower, and precarity in the Anthropocene. Such "contexts" are amorphous and without a telos. Contra a Hegelian "spirit" hovering over society and inching toward a grand Christian synthesis, the epistemes and its conditions simply are. They mimic tableaux while paradoxically enacting power in all directions. The result: a perpetual dark night of the soul for all but especially for those bodies considered disposable or as fodder for biopower (the search for societal homeostasis) on an increasingly precarious Earth. Theological scenes anchored around imago Dei, dignity, and hope, I contend, do not adequality allow undergraduate (and perhaps graduate) students to sit in the dark night long enough to activate imaginations and languages that might actually be useful to living within atmospheres of violence. Instead, these scenes are ready-to-serve chimeras. And everyone knows how the stories end: "The world is burning, there

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[57] Toni Morrison, "Home," in *The House that Race Built: Black Americans, U.S. Terrain*, ed. Wahneema Lubiano (New York: Pantheon Books, 1997), 11.

is so much suffering and pain, but we all have equal dignity because we are made in God's image—and so you should have hope in a better world (either here or in the next)." No wonder students are bored or skeptical in theological classrooms.

Chapter Outline

Chapter 1 takes a macro dive into the atmospheres of violence and its conditions of necropolitics, biopower, and precarity—all exacerbated by ecological devastation in the Anthropocene. The chapter also presents the founding and guiding epistemes that have produced the current contexts of violence. It also discusses why theological education's dominant purposes and aims are unable to conjure scenes of instruction for the dark night.

Chapters 2 through 4 present the dominant theological themes that I have encountered as both student and teacher in response to any perceived social ill. The sanitized scenes of instruction anchored around imago Dei, dignity, and hope seem almost generic in their application as solutions in any social analysis. Hence, they do not present an opportunity to sit in the dark night—always offering easy ways out. Theologies written from within the dark night are logically better able to respond to the dark, to the atmospheres of violence, in ways that are neither trite nor silly. In order to disrupt the cherished (almost sacrosanct) themes and scenes of instruction, I juxtapose other scenes or fragments that challenge the theoretical and practical applications of each. The hope is that such exercises will jolt imaginations into seeing other possible scenes of instruction that go beyond (but that do not discard) imago Dei, dignity, and hope. Perhaps those themes simply need new writers willing to offer a more complex staging in light of the conditions discussed in Chapter 1.

Chapter 5 offers contours for a rhizomatic theological imagination and pedagogy that can perhaps facilitate an "active" sitting in the dark: one that still manages to move in all directions

and that envisions infinite possibilities. The chapter hones in on the centrality of a theological hermeneutics that embraces plurality and ambiguity—an observation David Tracy made long ago. It also calls attention to the many shifting parts inherent in theological education both in the classroom and beyond.

Chapter 6 closes with some possible fragments for consideration in developing future scenes of instruction. In other words, this chapter models the pedagogy that I currently find most useful in my writing and teaching, namely a rhizomatic and pluriversal one. Rather than end the dissertation with yet another system or scene of instruction, I offer the fragments as an exercise for the reader to think through his/her/their own experiences with theology and the precariousness that we all, to different extents, share.

Chapter 1

Meta-Cotidiano Dive into Atmospheres of Violence:
Necropolitics, Biopower, and Anthropocene as Conditions for Precariousness

Entering and Sitting in the Dark Night[1]

Chaos. Uncertainty. Destruction. On the cusp. Catastrophe. Apocalyptic. Hopelessness.

These are among the words I often hear from my students as we discuss and analyze the "current" state of the world. I place "current" in quotations because upon further discussion, my students realize that social divisions and violence—these oppressions upon oppressions[2]—are anything but a modern manifestation. Violence has been and will continue to be endemic to human civilizations. What changes now, with all the technology, is the scale and calculated organization of such violence and the will to dominate. Perhaps we can refer to our socioeconomic reality as a necropolitical society—and its dominant mode of relating as one of enmity.[3] These are uncomfortable (some might say, pessimistic) claims about our collective state.

Staring into the abyss—the conditions of multiple oppressions that occasion violence—is anything but easy or pleasant. On the contrary, it should be painful, traumatic even—opening wounds once thought sutured and closing pathways toward imagined futures, possibilities, and utopias. It is never easy to confront the terrors within and outside, not least because many

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[1] Mention of the "dark night" or "dark night of the soul" might remind readers of the Spanish mystic St. John of the Cross's classic text, *Dark Night*. I am, of course, indebted to St. John for this phrase, but I use it as powerful imagery for the atmospheres of violence. In other words, dark night throughout this work means the atmospheres of violence the envelop us all.

[2] Foucault writes, "Human does not gradually progress from combat to combat until it arrives at universal reciprocity, where the rule of law finally replaces warfare; humanity installs each of its violences in a system of rules and thus proceeds from domination to domination." Quote taken from Foucault's provocative essay, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Vintage Books, 2010), 85.

[3] Necropolitics and relationships of enmity will be explained in detail later in this chapter.

contributing factors are out of our control. One can think of nuclear warfare, ecological catastrophes, the rapid advent of artificial intelligence, corporate greed, governmental corruption, etc…). Acknowledging the terrors should entail a deep grappling with mortality, with the very real possibility that life all around us is consistently being extinguished—and not through natural means. Confronting one's end is integral to this existential journey into the netherworlds or the deathworlds that Achille Mbembe describes.[4]

Probing the dark night is much more than a simple one-night stay in the abyss. It is a much prolonged—perhaps even permanent—sojourn that only death can promise to end… perhaps. When one's eyes stare into the realities around us, one will notice death, decay, and suffering. Ezekiel's vision of dry bones suddenly comes into sharp focus (Ezekiel 37: 1-14).

Death comes in many forms, of course: from natural causes, violence, illness, accidents, neglect, and from a combination of all these and more.[5] But in this chapter and throughout the rest of this work, I am referring to death intentionally produced through calculated mechanisms of oppression that are the product of atmospheres of perpetual violence. Death also might not be the end…. Some bodies are subject to "overkill," which Eric Stanley defines as "the technologies necessary for, and the epistemic commitment to, doing away with that which is already gone."[6] This surplus violence seeks to annihilate the body at the moment of or after death to convey a jarring message of complete destruction not just for that one life but for all life that resembles the

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[4] Achille Mbembe defines deathworlds as "new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to living conditions that confer upon them the status of the living dead." *Necropolitics*, trans. Steve Corcoran (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 92.

[5] For an excellent philosophical exploration of death, see Shelly Kagan, *Death* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012). Kagan also teaches a "Yale Open Course" on death.

[6] Eric A. Stanley, *Atmospheres of Violence: Structuring Antagonism and the Trans/Queer Ungovernable* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), 33.

annihilated body. Possibilities for being are threatened and foreclosed—the ultimate ontological violence.

Death does not always mean the physical cessation of bodily functions and synapses. Indeed, some bodies experience social deaths that precede the physical.[7] Stigmatization, slavery, non-person status, and legal labels such as illegal alien all represent forms of social death (bodily alive but ontologically dead). And some bodies—some flesh—are so elastic that they are never seen as truly living, as fully human even. These bodies are useful only insofar as they assuage status anxieties or fortify social, economic, and gender arrangements through their own disposability. One example comes from Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, who describes the practice of rendering black flesh elastic as "plasticity": bodies "cast as sub, supra, and human simultaneously and in a manner that puts being in peril because the operations of simultaneously being everything and nothing for an order—human, animal, machine, for instance—constructs black(ened) humanity as the privation and exorbitance of form."[8] More on this in Chapter 2, where I argue that Catholic theological anthropology must reckon with the Afropessimist notion of ontological terror—the prospect of (non)existence of blacks within western ontologies and so excluded also from considerations of *imago Dei*.

Sitting in the abyss—in the dark night—and sitting with those whose flesh is and has been decimated is difficult, if not morbid, work. Christina Sharpe calls this "wake work" and describes it as "hard emotional, physical, and intellectual work that demands vigilant attendance

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[7] See, for example, Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982) and Lisa Marie Cacho, *Social Death: Racialized Rightlessness and the Criminalization of the Unprotected* (New York: New York University Press, 2012).

[8] Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiblack World* (New York: New York University Press, 2020), 35.

to the needs of the dying, to ease their way, and also to the needs of the living."[9] Not turning away is an ethical call and commitment to refuse to allow deaths to go unnoticed or ignored. In *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis laments what seems to be the norm, that is, the constant averting of gazes to the death and suffering of others. He writes, "Sadly, there is widespread indifference to such suffering…. Our lack of response to … tragedies involving our brothers and sisters points to the loss of that sense of responsibility for our fellow men and women upon which all civil society is founded."[10] Sitting with is an act of care; sitting within the dark night is an act of sacrifice and salvation. Sacrifice because it demands untethering from colonial arrangements and shedding illusions that the current state of affairs is just and equitable, and salvation because it propels one to care in a deep way for the self, others, and the ecosphere on the brief journey toward deaths of all kinds. *Memento Mori*.

Meta-Cotidiano Dive: Expanding Scenes

My attempt here to dive into the conditions of the dark night and to sit with bodies teetering on the edge of (non)existence on a precarious ecosphere takes inspiration from Latinx theology's call to take seriously "lo cotidiano" as a *locus theologicus*. Carmen Nanko-Fernandez notes that "theologizing from *lo cotidiano* appreciates the particularities of context in ways that challenge scholarly flights of abstraction and temptations to impose homogeneity."[11] Indeed, *lo cotidiano* as a theological concept paved the path to theological reflection on concrete contexts and peoples' lived experiences—their fears, joys, anxieties, and desires. Early Hispanic[12]

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[9] Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 10.

[10] Francis, *Laudato Si* (24 May 2015) §25, at The Holy See, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco /en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html .

[11] Carmen Nanko-Fernandez, "Lo Cotidiano as Locus Theologicus," in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Latino/a Theology*, ed. Orlando O. Espín (Malden, MA: John Wiley and Sons, 2015), 16.

[12] I use the terms Hispanic, Latinx, Latinos interchangeably, recognizing that no term is perfect and that diverse Hispanic communities in the United States employ different terms at different times for distinct purposes.

theological scholarship focused on borders, exiles, and diasporas as conditions affecting the lives of Latinos in the United States. In particular, Latino/a theologians focused on communities (ecclesial and secular) in New York, Texas, and California as scenes of instruction for theology broadly writ.[13]

The work of Ada María Isasi-Díaz stands out as an example of *lo cotidiano* in relation to theological reflection. As a mujerista theologian, Isasi-Díaz contends that Latinas' lived experiences and realities must remain at the center of any theological undertaking or "it will be irrelevant to our communities."[14] She insists on looking at the "problematized daily reality" of impoverished Latinas who struggle to make ends meet—or simply to procure a meal for the night. Questions such as how much a bus ticket costs or whether certain social and medical services are available to Latinas were essential, not peripheral, to Isasi-Díaz's theological reflection, teaching, and writing. In fact, her theology's purpose is to devise strategies for the survival and flourishing of poor Latinas who struggle (*lucha*) as inhabitants of a sexist and racist American landscape.

Marcella Althaus-Reid, who took readers through unsanitized scenes where salvation seems both possible and nonexistent, is another major influence on my thinking and work. Her concerns were broader than Isasi-Díaz's. I contend that Althaus-Reid challenges theological reflection at a paradigmatic level, seeking epistemological breakthroughs via hermeneutical indecencies.[15] Her work will feature prominently throughout these pages.

See Paola Ramos, *Latinx: In Search of the Voices Redefining Latino Identity* (New York: Vintage, 2020). See also Ed Morales, *Latinx: The New Force in American Politics and Culture* (London: Verso, 2018).

[13] See discussion in the Introduction of this work.

[14] Ada María Isasi-Díaz, *En La Lucha = In the Struggle: Elaborating a Mujerista Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 38.

[15] Commenting on Althaus-Reid's work, Mark D. Jordan writes that she "provoked embarrassment on the way to theology. Among readers of her Indecent Theology, for example, you can produce blushes by repeating four

In a sense, I seek to expand the concept of *lo cotidiano* by examining not just the concrete experiences of particular communities but the paradigms or ideas that structure the conditions of violence. What follows is partly a social analysis but mostly a *meta-cotidiano* probing of the conditions which are making life unlivable for the vast majority of bodies and for the ecosphere. My contribution to *lo cotidiano* starts by going back to a foundational document and its call to not turn away from major issues and questions, no matter how daunting.

Reading the Signs of the Times: Beyond Traditional
Social Analysis and Pornography of Violence

Beyond Traditional Social Analysis

Gadium et Spes, the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, notes that "the Church has always had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel."[16] The phrase "signs of the times" has since found favor among popes (of all political and theological persuasions), liberation theologians, and even conservative Catholics to mean, generally, a reflection on and response to contemporary matters of universal and local significance for all "humans."[17] In essence, the phrase connotes a social analysis[18] on issues that parties identify as "perennial questions … about this present life and the life to come, and about the relationship of one to the other."[19]

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words: 'women lemon vendors without underwear….'" Althaus-Reid never squandered her readers' embarrassment. She raised it up into scenes of instruction." Jordan, *Transforming Fire*, 39.

[16] Vatican Council II. Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gadium et spes* (7 December 1965) §4, at The Holy See. https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html .

[17] I place humans in parenthesis to denote my resistance to calling all flesh—all bodies—human, given the sordid history of the development of "man" and "human" as an Enlightenment category initially applied only to light-skinned Christian male bodies. More on this in Chapter 2.

[18] See Joe Holland and Peter Henriot, *Social Analysis: Linking Faith and Justice* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1983).

[19] Vatican Council II, *Gadium et spes*, §4.

However, there is no general consensus on these "perennial questions." For conservative pundits in the United States, for example, the "culture wars" take precedent.[20] To them the "signs of the times" might involve a social analysis on the evils of abortion or what they perceive as attacks on the institutions of hetero marriage and the bourgeoise family. For "progressive" Catholics, "perennial issues" might include lack of affordable health care, poverty, racial inequality, women's ordination, and now environmental catastrophe.[21] Latin American liberation theologians were concerned with structural reasons for the crushing, widespread poverty of those on the margins of US-backed dictatorships and the disappearing and murders of priests, community organizers, and others at the hands of death squads.[22] Early Catholic Hispanic theologians, inspired by the call to read the signs of the times, honed in on the importance of "context"—leading to the emergence of the rich theological category now known as "lo cotidiano."[23] Whatever the issue(s) or resulting analysis, the centrality of context for theological reflection can be attributed to *Gadium et Spes*.

Popes since John XXIII have also employed the phrase to address different realities. In *Pacem In Terris*, John XXIII condemns the then (?) looming threat of "atomic power" as a means of resolving conflicts among nations. "Love, not fear," he urges, "must dominate the relationships between individuals and nations."[24] Pope Paul VI, in *Populorum Progressio* (1967),

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[20] An example of a prominent conservative commentator in the United States is George Weigel, a frequent contributor to conservative publications like *First Things*, *National Catholic Register*, and syndicated columns for archdiocesan and diocesan newspapers throughout the country.

[21] See, as examples, Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Global Justice, Christology and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013) and *Blessed are the Peace Makers: Pacifism, Just War, and Peacebuilding* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2019).

[22] The seminal works by Gustavo Gutierrez, Ignacio Ellacuría, Leonardo Boff, and Jon Sobrino are all prime examples of the theories and methodologies of liberation theology.

[23] See Nanko-Fernandez, "Lo Cotidiano as Locus Theologicus."

[24] John XXIII, *Pacem In Terris* (11 April 1963) §§ 126-129, at The Holy See, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_j-xxiii_enc_11041963_pacem.html.

discusses "signs of social unrest" stemming from "flagrant inequalities" both in "enjoyment of possessions" and "exercise of power."[25] He notes the dangers of "public upheavals, civil insurrection, [and] the drift toward totalitarian ideologies," and he calls for a just development across nations.[26] John Paul II explicitly cites *Gadium et Spes'* clarion call in at least two of his social encyclicals: *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (1987) and *Ut Unum Sint* (1995). Benedict XVI directly cites the same phrase in two of his three encyclicals (with *Spe Salvi* as the outlier). Finally, and perhaps most curious given how central *Gadium et Spes* and Vatican II are to his papacy,[27] Francis neither reproduces the exact phrase nor references *Gadium et Spes* much in his three encyclicals to date.[28] Perhaps this is because the entire encyclical tradition since Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* can be understood as social analysis,[29] with *Gadium et Spes* explicitly calling for an ecclesiology more in tune with society and culture and in solidarity with the poor.[30]

This snapshot of the deployment of "reading the signs of the times" is meant only to show that Catholic theology and ecclesiology (of all political persuasions) engages the perennial issues of the times. They seek to delve into the realities that impact life. Reading the signs—notwithstanding the diverse issues of interest—calls for the laity, theologians, and religious educators to enter a social analysis, which in Christian circles has often unfurled through the

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[25] Though acknowledging the bourgeoning inequality across the globe is laudable, the pope is sympathetic to colonizers, praising their "skills and technical know-how" that he claims brought "benefits to many untamed lands." Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio* (26 March 1967), §§ 7, 9, at The Holy See, https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_26031967_populorum.html

[26] Ibid., §11.

[27] Massimo Faggioli, "Reading the Signs of the Times through a Hermeneutics of Recognition: *Gadium et Spes* and Its Meaning for a Learning Church," *Horizons* 43, no. 2 (December 2016): 333.

[28] Across his three encyclicals, Francis references *Gadium et Spes* a total of five times: *Lumen Fidei* (0), *Laudato Si* (3), and *Fratelli Tutti* (2).

[29] See Joe Holland, *Modern Catholic Social Teaching: The Popes Confront the Industrial Age, 1740-1958* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2003).

[30] See Faggioli, "Reading the Signs of the Times through a Hermeneutics of Recognition."

pastoral circle methodology.[31] Though there are now several iterations of the see-judge-act method, the pastoral circle was arguably made famous (at least in North America) by Joe Holland and Peter Henriot's brief book *Social Analysis: Linking Faith and Justice*. Holland and Henriot differentiate between an "academic" and "pastoral" social analysis. The academic approach, as expected, "studies a particular situation in a detached, fairly abstract manner, dissecting its elements for the purpose of understanding," while the pastoral approach examines reality "from an involved, historically committed stance, discerning the situation for the purpose of action."[32] The authors favor the pastoral approach, emphasizing that social analysis must be "in the service of action for justice."[33]

Thus, the pastoral circle (which uses social science and economic analyses) emerges as the privileged methodology for a pastoral social analysis. The circle is comprised of four moments: first, insertion (what is the issue?); second, social (scientific/economic) analysis (what are the causes, factors, main players, and historical trajectory of the issue?); third, theological reflection (how do scripture, Catholic social teaching, the living faith, and other resources from the tradition help to analyze and understand the issue?); and fourth, pastoral planning (having identified and analyzed the issue, what actions can the community take to respond?).[34] Such methodological approach was made possible in Catholic circles by *Gadium et Spes*, subsequent "social" papal documents, liberation theology's engagement with the social sciences and economic theories (especially Marxist ones), Latinx theological reflection, and the emergence of

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[31] See Holland and Henriot, *Social Analysis.*

[32] Ibid., 7.

[33] Ibid.

[34] Ibid., 8-9.

Catholic social teaching as a doctrinal body encapsulated in the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*.

In a sense, this dissertation is a form of social analysis—of sorts. It attempts to read the signs of the times, but it does so using critical queer theory and theology, poststructuralist philosophy, Afro-pessimism, Latinx theology, mystical theology, and a sprinkle of decolonial thought. But it also deviates from traditional social analysis in several ways, not least in the skepticism for any political-juridical redress for the problem of "man." (More on this in Chapter 2.) The complexities and uncertainties spawned by precarity and precariousness demand a wider frame of analysis. Anna Tsing's words on social analysis of precarity and precariousness will guide this project: "Thinking through precarity changes social analysis. A precarious world is a world without teleology. Indeterminacy, the unplanned nature of time, is freighting, but thinking through precarity makes it evident that indeterminacy also makes life possible."[35]

This chapter considers some salient conditions of our times, including necropolitics, biopower, and biocide. Power is too complex to reduce to binaries of oppressed and oppressor, so I will refrain from using such terms. Instead, I seek to adumbrate a multitude of problems not in the formulaic or systematic manner of social analysis but in fragments. Any project that fancies itself as laying out *the* issue or *all* issues in a complete manner simply reifies the stagnant thinking and paradigms that have led us to become tethered to the guiding rationalistic and positivist epistemes of our times. Knowingness is a nefarious academic vice that pervades our institutions.[36] So I present snippets of issues that have haunted me for quite some time now

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[35] Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 20.

[36] See Jordan, *Queer Callings*, especially pp. 195-201.

without subjecting readers to pornographic violence (i.e. the death of a particular sex worker in Mexico City or the story of a black man killed by police).[37]

What are the perennial issues of our times? I don't seek to answer that question, for that is a grand undertaking—and a rather presumptuous one for a single writer. Instead, I propose a thought experiment to begin a conversation on why it is necessary for theological imagination and religious education to grapple with the precarity of elastic flesh amid a necropolitical landscape that breeds atmospheres of violence, suffering, death, and hopelessness—atmospheres that none of us can ultimately escape. Like a pharmakon, the poisoned air from the atmosphere allows us to live while also killing us and others. Or perhaps some flesh acts like trees, taking in the carbon dioxide to produce oxygen for others.

So while I do not take on the mantle of traditional social analysis by addressing specific issues in isolation (i.e. pollution, racism, economic injustice, etc.), I nonetheless attempt to respond to *Gadium et Spes'* call to address "perennial questions … about this present life and the life to come, and about the relationship of one to the other."[38] Life and death. Life. Death. The end has already come for so much flesh. At present, given what we know of the "slaughter bench of history" and current gross inequalities, the promise of an afterlife seems like a puerile attempt to placate anxieties over the precariousness of life. Instead of ruminating on the afterlife,[39] I call for a wider conversation on the possibilities of imagining other ways of living and being … *in the here and now*. But before that happens, it is necessary to enter and sit in the pain, sorrow, and

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[37] Eric Stanley notes, "Representing death, even only in word, tends to reproduce a pornography of violence through which the fullness of those harmed, their material lives and the force of their ends, is decomposed into tropes of speculative pain and sensational disapperance." For an insightful disucssion on pornographic violence, see Stanley, *Atmosopheres of Violence,* 29.

[38] Vatican Council II, *Gadium et spes*, § 4.

[39] See, for example, Karl Rahner, *On the Theology of Death* (New York: Seabury Press, 1973).

anger occasioned by our present conditions, to which we now turn. Entering and sitting in the

abyss is a meta-cotidiano undertaking, calling us to not turn away from death and suffering—and

of our roles in causing both, whether intentionally or not. Now let us consider the dominant

epistemes and paradigms that have paved the way for and continue to sustain the atmospheres of

violence.

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Epistemes and Dominant Paradigms:
Coloniality

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Mayra Rivera notes that "[e]pistemes shape not only what can be thought but also what

subjects can be."[40] Epistemes set the rules (limits) of the game and determine the players,

configuring the field of possibilities and governing what is possible. The grammars that emerge

from the game restrict speech to forms knowable and known by its players—a discursive practice

that in turn gives credence to a certain way of perceiving and being in the world (a scene of

instruction). In *The Order of Things*, Foucault writes: "In any given culture and at any given

moment, there is always one episteme that defines the conditions of possibility of all knowledge,

whether expressed in a theory or silently invested in practice."[41] A certain grounding episteme,

then, makes (im)possible ways of knowing—and that episteme may often be unspoken and so

assumed as valid, taken for granted even. By referring to the "one episteme," perhaps Foucault

implies that there can only be one grounding or dominant episteme at any given moment.

Yet, in a later interview, he slightly modified and complicated his view on epistemes: "I

would define the episteme … as the strategic apparatus which permits separating out from

among all the statements which are possible those that will be acceptable within … a field of

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[40] Mayra Rivera, "Embodied Counterpoetics: Sylvia Wynter on Religion and Race," in *Beyond Man: Race, Coloniality, and Philosophy of Religion,* eds. An Yountae and Eleanor Craig (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), 60.

[41] Michel Foucault, Order of Things (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), 168.

scientificity, and which it is possible to say true or false. The episteme is the apparatus which makes possible the separation, not of the true from the false, but of what may from what may not be characterised as scientific."[42] Foucault's use of apparatus for separation for governmentality seems to presage what decolonial scholars later refer to as the colonial matrix of power first defined by Anibal Quijano. Epistemes categorize and order all fields of knowledge and perception, legitimizing or punishing (often by dismissing or ridiculing) certain forms of knowing and being and therefore encouraging or chilling what might later constitute knowledge essential to perceptions of self and others. Epistemes set the rules and limit the players— effectively forcing the "modern" self to play a game rigged to the benefit of an economic system (neoliberal capitalism) and its normalized bodies and their ideals.

Epistemes emerge from myths, which in turn come from stories that a people tell to make sense of their collective place in the world. These myths then become narrative logics that shape societies, inform identities, and determine some actions. "The sense that a people makes of their practices and productions for living together in a particular time and place," writes Burton L. Mack, "is written into their myths as a kind of narrative logic."[43] A narrative logic provides structure and organization to what would otherwise be a vast, incomprehensible chaotic cosmos that has no regard for human desires and outcomes. These logics then "register as mental agreements about the way life should be lived."[44] They become a mentality, a way of uncritically viewing the world through epistemological lenses that become normative. The myths-turned-narrative-logics-turned-mentalities ultimately provide a center to an otherwise centerless world;

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[42] Michel Foucault, *Ethics: Subjectivity/Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: New Press, 1994), 197.

[43] Burton L. Mack, *Christian Mentality: The Entanglements of Power, Violence and Fear* (London: Routledge, 2011), 7.

[44] Ibid., 7.

they provide a *comforting sense of control* to counter feelings of nihilism and ontological nothingness. But they also discipline and condition, setting borders and encasing certain knowledges as above myth—as somehow sacrosanct—in the form of certain knowledge (which is often theologically backed). Enter "Truth."

What is this "truth" with a capital T? Walter Mignolo and others note that the "encounter" of 1492 between two worlds set the foundations for the modern global system of asymmetrical relationships. Modernity (neoliberal capitalism) and coloniality[45] (continuation of colonialism in epistemic and ontological forms) are the byproducts of violent territorial conquests and the trans-Atlantic slave trade, as well as the ideologies (often metaphysical) used to justify those incursions into unfamiliar territories and the killing, handling, and shipping of bodies not considered human or subhuman.[46] European mythmaking-turned-narrative-logic (episteme) sustained European prominence as a center of enunciation that dictated for the rest of the world what and who counts. Coloniality, therefore, as distinct from colonialism (the foundations of the modern global system) underscores that domination entails not simply material conditions but epistemological and imaginative ones. Lynching of the mind (meaning indoctrination into a certain episteme) continues to occur, despite former colonies and colonial subjects gaining "independence."

The colonial episteme, as a "spatial articulation of power," spread on a perceived linear trajectory out from the west (center of enunciation) to the globe through the Atlantic circuit and

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[45] Eleanor Craig and An Yountae define coloniality as "the universalization and normalization of matrices of power that historically enacted colonization itself and he presumption of superiority that these forces collectively grant to discourses articulated from colonizing and western perspectives." See "Introduction," in *Beyond Man*, 3-4.

[46] See Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010).

mercantile capitalism.[47] Mignolo states, "The expansion of Western capitalism implied the expansion of Western epistemology in all its ramifications, from the instrumental reason that went along with capitalism and the industrial revolution, to the theories of the state, to the criticism of both capitalism and the state."[48] Tink Tinker[49] and Jeannine Hill Fletcher[50] have both identified religious/faith education in missions, boarding schools, and churches as prime spreaders for sanctioned knowledge and normalized cultural values and mores. The imbrication of European political theory, continental philosophical imagination, and imperial Christianity allowed for the emergence of "colonial difference"—essential to preserving and legitimizing a world system built on bifurcation between those who matter and those who matter strategically but are nonetheless disposable. This system and its epistemological foundations became perceived as superior, universal, totalizing, eternal, and always progressing toward some perfection—as a Truth.

Mignolo argues that "colonial difference is a connector that, in short, refers to the changing faces of colonial differences throughout the history of the modern/colonial world-system and brings to the foreground the planetary dimension of human history silenced by discourses on modernity, postmodernity, and Western civilization."[51] Since the West has been the center of enunciation for both knowledge creation and meaning making, other knowledges and other ways of being and thinking have been repressed or, if tolerated, adopted as lesser

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[47] Walter Mignolo, "The Geopolitics of Knowledge and the Colonial Difference," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 101, no. 1 (2002): 60.

[48] Ibid., 59.

[49] See George E. Tinker, *Missionary Conquest: The Gospel and Native American Cultural Genocide* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).

[50] See Jeannine Hill Fletcher, *The Sin of White Supremacy: Christianity, Racism, and Religious Diversity in America* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2017).

[51] Mignolo, "Geopolitics of Knowledge," 61-62.

knowledge, as a curiosity that will ultimately be unable to make a splash in the epistemological

stream. There is always an asymmetry of knowledge and encounters. Relationships seems

doomed to exist within a loop of domination upon domination.

Finally, Achille Mbembe, Robert Williams, and Mignolo remind us that the idea of

Western Civilization was built on the binary of savage/civilized.[52] Mbembe describes racial

capitalism as a "compulsion to categorize, to separate, to measure, and to name, to classify and to

establish equivalences"[53] among objects, bodies, animals, and the natural world for the purpose

of assigning value and for extraction of that value. Some bodies, as Chapter 2 explores, become

the fodder (the instrument) for the sustainability of the current system. Mignolo too notes that the

"idea of Western civilization that emerged at that juncture [European Renaissance] was based on

pure and simple identity politics."[54] Negros and savages replaced the Barbarians, argues

Mignolo.[55]

Western civilization's inception is in its ideas and myths that turned into narrative logics

(epistemes) that now structure reality. Although non-Europeans have contributed to Western

civilization, Mignolo writes that "the rhetoric of modernity has been predominantly put forth by

European men of letters, philosophers, intellectuals, officers of the state."[56] Nonetheless, all

types of bodies subscribe to the epistemes, including those marked as worth less. Rivera

therefore urges others "to be heretics against our own order of knowledge—imbedded in the

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[52] See also the fine book by Robert A. Williams, Jr., *Savage Anxieties: The Invention of Western Civilization* (New York: Saint Martin's Press, 2012).

[53] Mbembe, *Necropolitics,* 158.

[54] Walter Mignolo, "Delinking," *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2-3 (March/May 2007): 467

[55] Ibid., 470.

[56] Mignolo, "Delinking," 469.

structure of academic disciplines."[57] This requires, Rivera argues, stepping outside the prevalent

order of knowing and being, which is essentially an experiment in imagination—imagining

ourselves outside the limits of current dominant epistemes.[58]

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Entering the Atmospheres of Violence:
Conditions Shaping Contexts

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How to describe our contexts? I say "contexts" because all realities are layered, with

infinite possibilities for (mis)description. There is no "one" context (or worldview/paradigm) that

encompasses even the reality of a single local community or the self. To limit the scope of this

section, I will focus on three overlapping conditions currently shaping our glocal contexts—and

so conditions that any theological meta-cotidiano analysis should grapple with: necropolitics,

biopower, and the anthropogenic destruction of Earth (the Anthropocene). These are by no

means the only conditions at work across public spheres, but they are, in my analysis, at the core

of the overall cheapening of flesh and of the devaluing of life considered expendable or even

sacrificial for the survival of other life[59] and for the continuation of modernity.[60]

These conditions coalesce to form atmospheres of violence. "Atmospheres envelop,"

writes Eric A. Stanley. "Thinking atmospherically, then, reminds us that there is no escape, no

outside place to hide….[61] We all breathe these atmospheres of violence, and our public spheres

(political actions) are shaped by it. Violence stems from direct actions and from paradigmatic

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[57] Rivera, "Embodied Counterpoetics," 79.

[58] Ibid., 80.

[59] See César "CJ" Baldelomar, Haunted by (Ontological) Ancestors and Bodies in Precarity: Religious Education Confronts Ontological Terror, Biopower, and Necropolitics," *Religious Education* 117, no. 5 (2022): 439-451.

[60] Stanley argues that violence against trans bodies is key to the state's violent expansion. He notes that the "scattered cases" he presents throughout the book, "when read together, build my claim that anti-trans/queer violence is foundational to, and not an aberration of, modernity. *Atmospheres of Violence*, 5.

[61] Stanley, *Atmospheres of Violence*, 16.

neglect.[62] And overkill, representing the climax of violence, "names the technologies necessary for, and the epistemic commitment to, doing away with that which is already gone."[63] Surplus violence and overkill affect especially those considered worthless, nonbeings, threats to social and economic optimization, dependents, and/or flesh necessary for the continuation of other life.

How does this general atmosphere of violence disrupt theological imagination and education? And how can theological scholars and teachers work together to respond to the complex conditions shaping our various contexts? One important suggestion is to not look away from the horrors, contradictions, and catastrophes that conditions of necropolitics, biopower, and destruction of Earth occasion—and of our complicity in atmospheres of violence that continue to nourish some at the expense of most life (of all species). Indeed, delving into the conditions— and if possible sitting in them—is a taxing undertaking, not least because of the devastating implications to any claims of innocence or purity. Helping to stare into the abyss, into the dark night, should be one of the principal aims of theological reflection and education, lest theology becomes yet another well-intentioned tool that ultimately serves to perpetuate the status quo and its attendant violences.[64]

Each condition should both disrupt and buttress theological reflection and education on the ongoing task of reducing all kinds of violence and still possibly imagining other ways to live and relate. Each condition should also serve as a reminder that no field alone can grasp the enormity—or import—of these atmospheres. The work ahead will have to be collaborative ("en

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[62] Ibid.

[63] Ibid., 33.

[64] Marcella Althaus-Reid charges certain strands of liberation theology as simply reinforcing normative epistemic commitments in order to enter the North American theological marketplace. She argues, "Economic interests are tied to ideological ones. Theology becomes a product to sell, but not allowing new producers to come on the scene. No new creative process can occur, except those that somehow come from the original dogmatics and perpetuate its preservation." From *Feminist Theology to Indecent Theology*, 133.

conjuto") and inter- and trans-disciplinary. It takes an imperfect village. But first some words on "care" before entering the atmospheres.

A Note on Praxis of Care (or Suggestions for Entering the Atmospheres of Violence)

Sitting with and sitting in call for a praxis of care—for one's self and for others. How to theologize about such difficult and profoundly painful topics for sustained periods? How to talk about and be in solidarity with flesh no longer here? Or with decaying flesh? Or with transformed flesh? How to care for bodies and minds, especially within educational contexts (such as the theology classroom)? How to prevent the representation of death from turning into "a pornography of violence through which the fullness of those harmed, their material lives and the face of their ends, is decomposed into tropes of speculative pain and sensational disappearance"?[65]

To read is to enter scenes of all kinds. You are about to enter some scenes that, though might seem somewhat abstract, are very real conditions that shape the inequalities, injustices, mass suffering, and overall death-dealing social and economic arrangements that seem endemic to contemporary societies. Anibal Quijano describes these arrangements as colonial in nature, the result of the colonial matrix of power that pervades all aspects of life and death.[66]

Entering the scenes through the written words on the page is similar to when students—or the teacher, for that matter—enter the classroom. As a teacher, I am well aware of some of the scenes we as a class are about to inhabit: from the actual classroom setting, to the ideas presented, to the texts themselves. Worlds within worlds (an infinite number, most of them

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[65] Stanley, *Atmospheres of Violence*, 29.

[66] See his seminal essay, "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America," *Nepantla: Views from South* 1, no. 3 (2000): 533-580.

invisible) engage and disengage in a sort of dance. Even the expected can yield the unexpected—

or not. Reading (or writing) theology with the possibilities of radical contingences can yield

imaginative hermeneutics and epistemologies that "care."

This section is not meant to be exhaustive. It presents a preview of themes that I will

expand on in the final chapter, where I develop a more extensive praxis of care for sitting and

sojourning in the dark night. I offer these snippets with the caveat that writing, while sharing

some characteristics with teaching, is nonetheless different from the act of committing words to

paper. A writer's words or intentions can become muffled or lost in a milieu of assumptions,

misreadings without the benefit of clarifications, and uneven libraries among author and

audience.

On "Care"

Care is a polysemic concept. Since it is a common term in both common parlance and

practice, its meanings are multiple—and often confused. The ancient Greeks, from Heraclitus to

Socrates to the Stoics (most notably Epictetus and Seneca), emphasized the need for care,

particularly of the self. But self-care was not meant to be for the sole benefit of the self. Michel

Foucault points out that care of the self in some Greek texts (like Plato's *Alcibiades*) has "an

objective, a precise justification: It is a question of taking care of oneself so that one will be able

to exercise properly, reasonably, and virtuously the power to which one is destined."[67] One

cannot adequately care for a polis without caring for the self, posited some Greek philosophers.

Similarly, bell hooks notes, following Thich Nhat Hanh, that a teacher must care for himself or

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[67] Michel Foucault, *Hermeneutics of the Subject*, ed. Frederic Gros, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2005), 82.

risk being an ineffective—even harmful—guide for students.[68] hooks also connects care to the soul: "To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin."[69] Of course, Christian theologians from the church fathers to present ones also consider care of the soul to be paramount.[70] In contemporary usage, at least in the United States, care can mean an external self-care, shaped and promoted by the billion-dollar industry of wellness spas, bath bombs, detoxifying juices, gym memberships and fitness programs, and vacation packages. Clearly, to "care" can mean various things to different communities and selves during distinct time periods.

I use care not as a term meaning to guard against or prevent something negative but rather as embracing the dark night—sitting in it with attention. To care, in other words, is to acknowledge our shared vulnerability in the face of precarity and precariousness.[71] Care means recognizing that "we suffer from a radical ontological weakness" brought about by our permanent fragility and ongoing vulnerabilities in light of "the possibility of nothingness."[72] The fact that we can lose what we value at any moment "without the power of keeping these things within existence" engenders a sense of fragility.[73] Vulnerability stems from the realization—at

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[68] Thich Nhat Hanh writes that "the practice of a healer, therapist, teacher or any helping professional should be directed toward his or herself first, because if the helper is unhappy, he or she cannot help many people." Quoted in bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 15.

[69] hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 13.

[70] Tertullian, Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine, and Aquinas are well-known examples that readily come to mind.

[71] In her book *Lean on Me*: *A Politics of Care*, Lynne Segal explores how a "universality of vulnerability" should lead to the shattering of the myth of the completely autonomous, sovereign self that is lionized by political philosopher John Locke and philosopher/ethicist Immanuel Kant. (New York: Verso, 2023). See especially the Introduction, 3-5.

[72] Luigina Mortari, "The Primacy of Being," in *Care Ethics in the Age of Precarity*, eds. Maurice Hamington and Michael A. Flower (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2021), 148.

[73] Ibid., 150.

once existential and physical—that each body is a single entity that must often confront life's anguishes in solitude. One experiences death, for example, alone, despite having loved ones near the deathbed.

Rather than guard against radical ontological weakness, care entails confronting it both individually and together—bringing multiple perspectives to bear on conditions that have been and will continue to be in loops of violence and domination. Care also necessitates a form of self-penitence: *mea culpa* for my own participation in the suffering and deaths of other lifeforms. Illusions of innocence are a vice meant to shield against the realization that all life depends on the death of other life. One's precarity is another's (fleeting) security.

The other form of care I propose is two-fold: 1) to sit with those lives on the edge and with those already extinguished that come to mind as you read and 2) to refuse to move on from the conditions that shape our lives and societies. Abstracting the conditions or theologizing death away (for example, via theodicies or accounts of justified suffering and salvation) hinders profound care for flesh that remains overexposed—overly vulnerable—even within our shared fragility and vulnerability.

Finally, back to reading with care. To exercise care in reading requires a certain restraint against what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick calls a paranoid mode of reading. She writes that "paranoia is characterized by placing, in practice, an extraordinary stress on the efficacy of knowledge per se—knowledge in the form of exposure."[74] Paranoid writing and reading, then, places too much premium on exposure. A typical claim is that by knowing more the subject will act differently. Exposure, therefore, equals an unveiling—a gnostic-type knowledge imparted by

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[74] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 138.

an authority that then leads to revolutions and transformations of all sorts. This is a quixotic approach.

Are not certain forms of, for example, violence already known (in some way) and used by authors simply as spectacles to garner attention? What do audiences gain by reading about particular acts of violence inflicted on particular bodies, such as femicide in Mexico or the killing of George Floyd, followed by theological reflection done from the comforts of a library or office? Indeed, as Sedgwick remarks, "The paranoid trust in exposure seemingly depends … on an infinite reservoir of naïveté in those who make up the audience for these unveilings."[75] Teachers, especially of courses that are required, know better than to assume that students care about a given subject or topic. Similarly, when reading (or even writing) about specific scenes of violence, I ask the same questions that Sedgwick poses: "What is the basis for assuming that it will surprise or disturb, never mind motivate, anyone to learn that a given social manifestation is artificial, self-contradictory, imitative, phantasmic, or even violent?"[76] Over-reliance on knowledge and narrative (or testimony) as the only paths to transformation has and will continue to be an academic and theological vice that seems inevitable in most projects, including this one.

Do suffering and death provide material for conceptual frames? Sedgewick notes that "paranoia is drawn toward and tends to construct symmetrical relations, in particular, symmetrical epistemologies."[77] How tragic when the suffering and deaths of actual bodies become the basis for theological knowledge production and consumption stylized as reflections on reality. These lives (and deaths) become encased as objects that can no longer speak or act.[78]

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[75] Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 141.

[76] Ibid.

[77] Ibid., 126.

[78] Writing in the context of violence on black bodies, Biko Mandela Gray states that "making a theory out of these lives would situate them within a closed system, a set of definitions and logics that would foreclose their

They are temporarily useful in enclosed (and often sanitized) narratives, eventually forgotten when the next scene is written or read.[79]

Is trauma-porn or pornography of violence simply inescapable when writing about quotidian violence? Exposing audiences to specific instances of violence can actually widen the gulf between the reader and the event, leading the reader to place all blame for conditions of violence on external powers or on a specific individual (i.e. a cop). Empathy for bodies becomes a fleeting emotion that is forgotten with the flip of a page, a few keyboard tacks, a stroke of the pen. Care in this analysis means turning that judgmental finger from pointing outward to the self. I recall here the teaching of an ancient teacher: "Remove the wooden beam from your eye first; then you will see clearly to remove the splinter in your brother's eye" (Luke 6:42). To care is also to acknowledge that some conditions are beyond our control, even with the "correct" knowledge in hand.[80]

With "care" in mind, let us explore the conditions.

Necropolitics

Not all humans are worth or valued the same. As black, brown immigrant, and trans bodies continue to brunt violence and overkill, it is clear that lives do *not* matter equally.[81] Liberal humanist and Judeo-Christian language have produced a myth of social equality. Generally speaking, both humanist and Christian anthropological doctrines (i.e. *imago Dei*)

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capacity to still speak—to keep speaking." *Black Life Matter: Blackness, Religion, and the Subject* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2022), 16.

[79] Most theological writing that I have encountered on expendable bodies does not adequately convey the rawness (the unsavory, the rated X or R) of daily life in situations of extreme precarity. An exception is Marcella Althaus-Reid's body of work.

[80] See Jordan, *Queer Callings*. See also Sedgwick on the benefits of reparative readings, *Touching Feeling*.

[81] See Gray, *Black Life Matter*.

understand the human as a universal subject with equal rights, dignity, and privileges.[82] But as I have stated elsewhere, notwithstanding rhetorical flourishes of equality,

> evidence that humans are assigned different values in capitalism are ubiquitous, from insurance companies calculating the monetary worth of the dead based on a person's net worth, earning power potential, and education, to the fact that some human are held in cages simply for trying to cross a border that others cross with impunity, even overstaying their visas.[83]

Though discourses of equality enjoy prominence in public, equality remains a de jure rather than de facto reality.

Some bodies are simply "worth" more than others, with some even considered disposable or surplus. In *Ultimate Price*, Howard Friedman examines how the monetary value of a human life is calculated using several metrics. His conclusion is rather obvious because brutally honest, belying humanist rhetoric: "Price tags are placed on our lives from the day we are born to the day we die."[84] This is hardly an innovative claim. Almost two hundred years ago, Karl Marx and Peter Engels identified the surplus army of workers crated and sustained by the then localized capitalist arrangements. These workers were expendable and replaceable in a callous cycle that now continues beyond workers and the economic realm.

Necropolitics speaks to the fact that some bodies are disposable and others not (to different degrees based on worth and value). Coined by Mbembe, the term refers to how death and its influences—at the hands of the sovereign and its subjects—dictate and organize life.[85] Sovereignty, a crucial term for necropolitics, benefits from western rationality's techniques of

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[82] César "CJ" Baldelomar, "The (Non)Existence of Uprooted Bodies: The Limits of Authorized Imaginations and Languages in Assisting Bodies on the Move Due to Environmental Causes," in *Shifting Climates, Shifting People*, ed. Miguel A. De La Torre (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2022), 47-60.

[83] Ibid., 51.

[84] Howard Friedman, *Ultimate Price: The Value We Place on Life* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2020), 170.

[85] Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, 80.

massacre and bureaucracy, with education facilitating socialization and buy-in into normative

ideals of what it means to be a subject (i.e. citizen) of the sovereign.[86] Filtering and categorizing

bodies based on perceived worth or value set the stage for the necropolitical context: one of

marked differences and tight (though arbitrary and porous) boundaries where there are "different

rights for different categories of people, rights with different goals but existing within the same

space…."[87] Cristina Beltran defines this space within the United States as a "Herrenvolk

Democracy" which is "democratic for the master race but tyrannical for the subordinate

groups."[88] Within a single space, in other words, one can ascertain margins within margins

inhabited by different bodies.

Though sovereignty as a concept is usually tied to the state or to issues in international

studies/political science, I understand it as a concept that extends to individual selves, local

communities, and educational institutions. The power to decide who lives and who dies, whose

lives to prolong, who matters and who doesn't—that power, while certainly the rational state's

prerogative, is, I argue, exercised at all levels down to the individual. We are all capable of

violence insofar as violence is not simply the explicit infliction of bodily harm but also the

"paradigmatic neglect" of the harm others experience in our immediate contexts.[89] Individual

sovereignty (always precarious) hinges on its concealment through simplistic analyses of power

as operating only vertically (top-down) or between two groups (oppressed and oppressor). Hence

it is necessary to "explore power beyond the confines of sovereign power if dreams of

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[86] Baldelomar, "Haunted by (Ontological) Ancestors and Bodies in Precarity," 444.

[87] Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, 79.

[88] Cristina Beltran, *Cruelty as Citizenship: How Migrant Suffering Sustains White Democracy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 14-18.

[89] Stanley, *Atmospheres of Violence*, 16.

compassion, resistance, and freedom are to surface."[90] Or at least if we are to adequately theorize atmospheres of violence.

<div align="center">Biopower</div>

While necropolitics is critical to analyzing (to reading) contexts of violence and death, another concept is equally, if not more important, to grasping the complexity of contemporary contexts from the macro to the micro: biopower. Lauren Berlant cogently defines biopower "as the power to *make* something live or let it die, the power to regularize life, the authority to *force* living not just to happen but to endure and appear in particular ways."[91] Authorized life or forms of being—which follow normative scripts—tracks as crucial to the development and maintenance of several centers and margins.[92]

Michel Foucault traces biopower's origins to the seventeenth century, a time when the "management of life" flourished to ensure the efficiency of the colonial enterprise (and presumably, of the institution of slavery).[93] Simply killing—especially in light of emerging "democratic" nation-states and a nascent humanistic international law—no longer ensured the sovereign's survival, respectability, or socioeconomic efficiency. "The old power of death that symbolized sovereign power," Foucault writes, "was now carefully supplanted by the administration of bodies and the calculated management of life."[94] Achieving social and economic homeostasis and equilibrium—reaching a fabled, predictable societal "good life"—

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[90] Baldelomar, "Haunted by (Ontological) Ancestors and Bodies in Precarity," 442.

[91] Lauren Berlant, "Slow Death (Sovereignty, Obesity, Lateral Agency)," *Critical Inquiry* 33, no. 4 (Summer 2007): 756.

[92] Gray calls this "authorized lifeform" a "normative subject." *Black Life Matter*, 4.

[93] Michel Foucault, *Society Must be Defended*, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 1997).

[94] Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1990), 139-140.

depends on a "continuous regulatory and corrective mechanism" that exceeds law's grasp over the self.[95]

Biopower *reshaped* sovereignty—perhaps even providing it a cloak of innocence and an identity as paternalistic protector, especially when it deploys aspirational aims of equality and justice for all. After all, who doesn't want to ensure the "thriving" of life, particularly within modes of being and living that align with our own ideologies and beliefs? We all exercise biopower in the mundane of the quotidian, "in a zone of ordinariness, where life building and the attrition of human life are indistinguishable … in the reproduction of predictable life."[96] Paying attention to the quotidian—to our everyday actions, including ones we deem simple—is crucial to any attempt to lessen violence.

To summarize: the nefarious aspect of biopower is its attachment to "optimal" life, to life that maximizes society's chance at homeostasis. While all life fall within biopower's ambit, certain lives are so beyond hope, so unsalvageable that they, in effect, become enemies to progress and biopower's cold and calculated version of survival of the fittest toward a utopic (or rather dystopian) social body. These bodies have neither "being" nor instrumental use, save for one: to provide ontological security or coherence to well-managed lives (to normative subjects). In what could be an iteration of the Protestant ethic, surely the "healthy" participants of capitalism are doing the right thing compared to those teetering on the edge of nothingness, such as the homeless, sex workers, working poor, trans bodies, felons. Their non-being—their practical non-existence within rational political and economic spheres of influence—is read as proof that the "more inferior species … die out, the more abnormal individuals are eliminated"

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[95] Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 144.

[96] Berlant, "Slow Death," 754.

so that there will be "fewer degenerates … in the species as a whole…."[97] The key words in Foucault's text: *die out* and *eliminated*. Biopower and necropolitics, paradigmatic neglect of violence and the infliction of violence, succinctly—though hauntingly—summarized in those three key words.

<div align="center">Precariousness and Precarity in the Anthropocene:
Breeding Enmity</div>

Necropolitics and biopower are facilitated and accelerated by the precariousness and precarity of living in the Anthropocene. The prospect of ecological catastrophe suddenly does not seem so far away. The Doomsday Clock, created by the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists in 1947, metaphorically marks humanity's proximity to extinction, with midnight representing the ominous event of our collective demise. In January 2023, scientists set the clock to 90 seconds before midnight, citing four major threats: nuclear risk (due principally to the Russia-Ukraine conflict), biological threats, disruptive technologies (misinformation and drones), and climate change.[98] Indeed, in my own lifetime, I have witnessed scientists and experts change the years of catastrophic environmental threats from 2050 to 2040 to 2032 to now, in recent reports, 2025.

The Doomsday Clock underscores the intertwined nature of threats to both the ecosphere and societies. In *Birth of a New Earth*, Adrian Parr describes how environmental degradation is affected by "rapid urbanization, industrialized agriculture, dirty energy, war, and a growing middle class of eager consumers…."[99] Our current ecological moment—billed by some scientists as the "sixth extinction"—is characterized by accelerated human-induced catastrophes. Biologist

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[97] Foucault, *Society Must be Defended*, 255.

[98] "Doomsday Clock," Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, accessed March 10, 2024, https://thebulletin.org/doomsday-clock/

[99] Adrian Parr, *Birth of a New Earth: The Radical Politics of Environmentalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), xvi

Michael Soulé even suggested "Catastrophozoic" as a possible name for our current geological era.[100]

Whatever terms we use to describe our current era and epoch, evidence abounds that humans exert a significant impact on the environment, particularly on the composition of the atmosphere.[101] Though not without controversy, Anthropocene—popularized by Dutch atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen—seems an apt term to denote the recent (cene or *kainos*) force of human (*anthropos*) actions on the environment. Of course, bodies participate unequally in impacting the environment. As Wes Jackson and Robert Jensen observe, "Just by living 'on the grid' in the affluent industrial developed world, we are in some sense contributing to the destruction of ecosystems."[102] Those in the Global North bear much of the responsibility for ravenous consumption of resources and astronomical carbon emissions. Even well-intentioned, environmentally conscious individuals need carbon energy—to the deprivation of other lifeforms.

Most of us living in the Global North destroy simply by existing and living. But the uncomfortable and inconvenient truth is that *all* life, regardless of geographic location, depends on other life (and its death) for survival. Since we all carry price tags, and since we all possess bodies in need of resources, we are in constant competition with others (human and non-human animals) to increase our chances for survival (biological function) and to establish degrees of separation from those deemed less valuable and threatening to socioeconomic order and efficiency (socioeconomic and existential function). The "Other," however defined, represents

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[100] See Elizabeth Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History* (New York: Henry Holt, 2014).

[101] Ibid., 108.

[102] Wes Jackson and Robert Jenson, *An Inconvenient Apocalypse: Environmental Collapse, Climate Crisis, and the Fate of Humanity* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2022), 17.

not only an existential threat but also a physical threat to one's sovereignty, or more precisely, to the "ontology of individualism."[103] Relationships of enmity thus become the dominant mode of relating.[104]

Ecological crises only exacerbate enmity among bodies guarding against precariousness, which is "an existential angst shared by all bodies at the realization that all life is contingent on others' being and actions in the world."[105] Precariousness implies "exposure both to those we know and those we do not know; a dependency on people we know, or barely know, or know not at all," writes Judith Butler. "Reciprocally, it implies being impinged upon by the exposure and dependency of others, most of whom remain anonymous."[106] In a utopian world, such inevitable exposure amid our shared precarious condition should yield cooperative relationships of love, support, and care for all life forms. But in a necropolitical world (of multiple violences) managed through biopower's false promises of achieving certain and stable life, relationships of enmity reign supreme. The "Other" is at once an obstacle and indispensable to the sought-after stability and predictability of social life and to the (false) security of an alleged sovereign, autonomous, and consistent self.

The search for existential and physical security at any and all costs results in domination of others considered less valuable, less deserving of protection, which leads to increased precarity. Isabell Lorey notes, "Precarity as the hierarchized difference in insecurity arises from

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[103] Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (New York: Verso, 2009), 33.

[104] Mbembe writes, "The perception of the existence of the Other as an attempt at my life, as a mortal threat or absolute danger whose biophysical elimination would strengthen my life potential and security—that is, I maintain, one of the many imaginary dimensions characteristic of sovereignty in both early and late modernity." *Necropolitics*, 72.

[105] Baldelomar, Haunted by (Ontological) Ancestors and Bodies in Precarity," 439.

[106] Butler, *Frames of War,* 14.

the segmentation, the categorization, of shared precariousness."[107] Acknowledging our interdependence with others and with all life within the ecosphere, in a horrific and ironic turn, might lead not to mutual understanding and compassion but to intensified forms of violence and obsessive management of life (especially of the most vulnerable). Who can outlive whom—and with more accouterments, gaudy toys, and padded saving accounts? Or put differently and perhaps in a crasser way: Whose death or diminished life will serve to bolster my sense of self and raise my own price tag? How can I shed my own precariousness through the increased precarity of others? Nations also engage in such cold calculations to increase their security and standing in the geopolitical realm.

Distancing—seeking as much separation from precariousness as possible—has deep ecological implications. In fact, several scholars, especially those working in the fields of cosmology and environmental ethics, blame anthropocentrism (the view that only human-centric concerns matter, since humans stand above and apart from nature) for our collective relationships of enmity with the ecosphere and its lifeforms. Lynn White's infamous essay, for instance, holds Christianity accountable for the emergence of anthropocentrism and ecological degradation.[108] He famously wrote that "especially in its Western form, Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen."[109]

Yet anthropocentrism, argue Fritjof Capra and Pier Luisi, is merely a symptom of a deeper though faulty paradigm or worldview. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries— also the centuries when biopower emerged—the mechanistic (Newtonian-Cartesian) paradigm

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[107] Isabell Lorey, *State of Insecurity: Government of the Precarious*, trans. Aileen Derieg (London: Verso, 2015), 21.

[108] Lynn White, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis, *Science* 155, no. 3767 (March 1967): 1203-1207.

[109] Ibid., 1205.

displaced the organic as the dominant one in Europe. Capra and Luisi write, "The notion of the organic, living, and spiritual universe was replaced by that of the old world as a machine, and the mechanistic conception of reality became the basis of the modern worldview."[110] Mechanical efficiency, bolstered by predictable and even "certain" mathematical calculations and mechanical laws of nature, provided security against the mercurial and whimsical natural and cosmos. Thinkers like Rene Descartes and Isaac Newton believed that all matter could be reduced to its smallest parts, revealing the inner workings of all automata as simply following patterns and so bereft of mystery or spiritual meaning.[111] Perhaps this mechanistic worldview represents a premodern attempt at guarding against precariousness.

The mechanistic worldview (though infinitely more complex than presented here) cemented an exalted anthropology. Enlightenment and humanistic pride-laden anthropologies resulted in haughty conceptions of man and his ability[112] through reason to transform and control nature and those lifeforms identified with nature (i.e. non-human animals, indigenous bodies, and women).

But first philosophers had to prove that human reason was indeed privileged because beyond doubt. The only certainty that requires little proof (if any at all), according to Descartes, is one's own existence—verified by the simple fact that one can think of oneself thinking, notwithstanding the accuracy of one's actual thoughts at the moment.[113] "I think, and therefore I

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[110] Fritjof Capra and Pier Luisi, *The Systems View of Life: A Unifying Vision* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 19.

[111] See Joe Holland, *Postmodern Ecological Spirituality* (Washington, DC: Pacem In Terris Press, 2017).

[112] I deliberately use the gender exclusive term "man" to emphasize that not all "humans" were welcomed into the fold of rational man whose prerogatives included certain rights and agency. For more, see *Beyond Man: Race, Coloniality, and Philosophy of Religion* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021).

[113] In part IV of his lesser-known *Discourse on Method*, published four years prior to *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Descartes presents his famous phrase "cogito ergo sum" for the first time. He writes, "I noticed that while I was trying to think everything false, it must needs be that I, who was thinking, was something. And observing this truth, I am thinking, therefore I exist was so solid and secure that the most extravagant suppositions of

am" also speaks to the myth of the coherent, individualistic, and totally untethered self, independent from all systems and networks of interdependence, except for a relation to a self that thinks or reasons.

Reason, as Descartes explains in *Passions of the Soul*, was the sole province of "man," the only being capable of possessing a rational and immaterial soul. Since only man can reason, non-human animals and other non-self-sufficient, non-rational beings (i.e. slaves, women, indigenous peoples, sodomites) were categorized as beasts or savages to be killed or controlled.[114] Here we have the ideological origins of organized subclasses of bodies—of automata that breathe but are not truly ontologically existent—that sovereignties could once dispose of but that now must be managed (and occasionally killed) to ensure an optimal and predictable social body (i.e. law and order). The subclasses are simultaneously feared and needed (at a distance). The same can be said of nature.

Ecological degradation challenges both biopower and necropolitics, since *all* life is now subject to augmented precariousness (and precarity). After all, unless some colonize another planet or the moon, this ecosphere remains the only place for life to unfurl.[115] Tragically, I

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the sceptics could not overthrow it, I judged that I need not scruple to accept it as the first principle of the philosophy I was seeking." *Discourse on Method* (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1956), 36.

[114] Legal scholar Robert A. Williams posits that "from its very beginnings in ancient Greece, Western civilization has sought to invent itself through the idea of the savage…. Lacking in sophisticated institutions of government and religion, ignorant of property and laws, without complex social bonds or familial ties, living in a state of untamed nature, fierce and ennobled at the same time, the savage has always represented an anxious, negating presence in the world, standing perpetually opposed to Western civilization. As I argue in this book, without the idea of the savage to understand what it is, what it was, and what it could be, Western civilization, as we know it, would never have been able to invent itself." *Savage Anxieties: The Invention of Western Civilization* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2012), 1.

[115] Carl Sagan's words seem as relevant now as ever. Reflecting on a picture of Earth taken by *Voyager 1* in 1990, Sagan writes: "Look again at that dot. That's here. That's home. That's us. On it everyone you love, everyone you know, everyone you ever heard of, every human being who ever was, lived out their lives. The aggregate of our joy and suffering, thousands of confident religions, ideologies, and economic doctrines, every hunter and forager, every hero and coward, every creator and destroyer of civilization, every king and peasant, every young couple in love … every saint and sinner in the history of our species lived there—on a mote of a dust suspended in a sunbeam. The Earth is a very small stage in a vast cosmic arena…. There is perhaps no better demonstration of the folly of human conceits than this distant image of our tiny world. To me, it underscores our responsibility to deal more

suspect that necropower and biopower will likely intensify as ecological catastrophe escalates. The purging of populations (either through genocide and war or through techniques of control) and the siphoning of resources to wealthy populations are but some obvious examples. Proponents of ecological homeostasis should be careful not to inadvertently or unintentionally condone an even more draconian approach to social homeostasis on the quest for a utopia of optimal socio and ecological relations.

Worldviews and paradigms (though often simplistically presented) matter because they, even if misunderstood, shape thought, being, and relations—in sum, our contexts. These contexts are the scenes upon which the drama of life and death continually unfolds, though unevenly.

The question now becomes whether theology can operate beyond dominant epistemes and paradigms? Can theology's dominant scenes of instruction speak to the conditions of violence in ways that don't simply reify divisions, claims to absolute truth, and other trappings of coloniality? These are the questions that guide the next three chapters. But first, it is worth assessing some aims, purposes, and assumptions of theology and theological education.

Dominant Purposes and Models of Theological Education

Most accounts of theological education in the United States (or North America) usually begin with the colonial period, particularly with the founding of Harvard College in 1636 and subsequent colonial colleges whose task it was to educate free white males for service to church or civil society.[116] But theological education on the North American continent began well before Harvard's Puritan origins. Perhaps this is an inconvenient truth for Christian theology, but theological education—via the field of "faith formation"—had its inception in the Conquest's

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kindly with one another, and to preserve and cherish the pale blue dot, the only home we've ever known." See Carl Sagan, *Pale Blue Dot: A Vision of the Human Future in Space* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994), 6-7.

[116] Aleshire, *Beyond Profession*, 32.

main tool of "faith" transmission: the missions.[117] Tink Tinker notes that missionary activity on

the continent was motivated by writings and practices that not "only preached a new gospel of

salvation, but also just as energetically imposed a new cultural model for existence on Indian

people."[118] Theological teachings on salvation were indistinguishable from European cultural

norms and mores—and both were imposed on indigenous peoples through faith formation in

order to replace indigenous cultures and facilitate conquest.

Faith formation took place on missions, like the one in California led by Junipero Serra.

Missionaries, with military and government backing, displaced (often through violent means like

burning down villages) and rounded up natives from several tribes and confined them to town-

like structures.[119] Once at the missions, missionaries subjected natives to highly regimented

schedules and disciplinary schemes in order to form the "whole" person. Some practices

included mandatory attendance at religious instruction and mass, dress and hair styles (short hair)

according to European customs, construction and organization of homes *a la* European models,

replacement of native sexual practices and customs with Christian ones,[120] forced labor to

advance the interests of the mission, and the inculcation of a reward system that reinforced

values of hard work and obedience to Christian morality.[121] Subordination, "massive social

modification," and cultural genocide were somehow related to Jesus' gospel of salvation. An

early purpose of theological education, then, was the pacification and cultural genocide of

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[117] See Fletcher, *The Sin of White Supremacy*.

[118] Tinker, *Missionary Conquest*, 4.

[119] Tinker, *Missionary Conquest,* 45.

[120] For a robust discussion on the diverse Nahua "sexual" practices and complex understandings of "gender" before the Spanish conquest, see Pete Sigal, *The Flower and the Scorpion: Sexuality and Ritual in Early Nahua Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

[121] Tinker, *Missionary Conquest*, 45-49

indigenous peoples through formation, notwithstanding "good intentions," in order to secure land for the nation building of European crowns and the kingdom of God (two sides of the same coin).[122]

Formation of a particular type of person suited for some type of missionary work is thus one dominant purpose of theological education.[123] Indeed, this purpose has resurfaced and remains dominant in all eras of theological education from the conquest to the present. For example, Daniel Aleshire notes that in the Roman Catholic context, seminaries emphasized human formation as their goal—a model then replicated in Catholic colleges and universities after Vatican II.[124] Protestant and evangelical schools focused either on forming "cultured gentlemen" (*bildung*) or men with a persistent drive to holiness.[125] These men, now formed, were then supposed to go out into the world and bring humanity "to its full potential" in the kingdom of God.[126] For theological institutions and churches at different times and places, the "best Christian was the person who engaged in the struggle, was working towards the kingdom, or winning souls for Christ."[127]

Theological education has always sustained and justified missionary activity aimed at society building, despite shifts in methods. David Kelsey points to two purposes of theological education: *paideia* (which is the educational formation of a citizen) and inquiry (professional

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[122] Tinker writes, "To secure the conquest, all culturally divergent native peoples had to be either brought into compliance with Christian (that is, European) values or exterminated." *Missionary Conquest*, 66.

[123] Elizabeth Conde-Frazier, *Atando Cabos: Latinx Contributions to Theological Education* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2021), 8.

[124] Aleshire, *Beyond Profession*, 50-51.

[125] Aleshire, *Beyond Profession*, 58.

[126] Glenn T. Miller, *Piety and Plurality: Theological Education Since 1960* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2015), 26.

[127] Miller, *Piety and Plurality,* 61.

studies for church leadership).[128] Both seek to form—to shape—a person for service to society or church or both. Kelsey states that the Greeks understood *paideia* as the cultivation of the soul (character formation) for service to the polis. The oldest Christian models of education then adopted *paideia* to mean "a theological education whose goal is knowledge of God and, correlatively, forming persons' souls to be holy."[129] *Paideia* prepares the soul to search for God––and for God's purpose in the world.

The emergence of the research university in the nineteenth century shifted both the conceptual organization and methods of theological education, but not necessarily its main purpose of formation for the world or church. Scholars credit theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher with fashioning the curriculum for theological education within the modern research university.[130] In *A Brief Outline of the Study of Theology*, Schleiermacher sketched what would become his response to questions surrounding theology's justification as a discipline within the research university dedicated to critical and open inquiry of verifiable facts. Once the "queen of the sciences," theology was now demoted because too speculative. The discipline could no longer rely on its two authorities: God and God's revelation through scripture. And it could not rely on church police powers for its assured place in the university. The Enlightenment had indeed put theology in a perilous position.

Schleiermacher rescued academic theology from oblivion through two proposals: 1) rearrange theology from the broad four-fold pattern (exegesis, church history, dogmatics, and practical theology) to three specialized disciplines with subfields (practical theology, historical

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[128] David H. Kelsey, *Between Athens and Berlin: The Theological Education Debate* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 6-16.

[129] Kelsey, *Between Athens and Berlin,* 11.

[130] Conde-Frazier, *Atando Cabos*, 81.

theology, and philosophical theology—each possible of critical inquiry); and 2) unify the

seemingly disparate fields of theology through the aim of forming church leaders who could

benefit society.[131] Schleiermacher argued that every society needs properly trained leaders—an

amenable task for academic theology.[132] Whereas the fourfold pattern, with origins in scholastic

theology (taught in universities and monasteries) seemed to consider practical theology an

addendum to the three other disciplines, Schleiermacher's method privileged practical theology.

This was because practical theology demonstrated the usefulness (utility) of theoretical

theological knowledge, expressed in well-formed and intelligent leaders who could respond and

shape society.

       This model continues to dominate in the present, since theology continues to be largely

an academic discipline with subfields housed in educational institutions. Farley decries

Schleiermacher's rearrangement as responsible for the "dispersion of theology into

'sciences'."[133] This fragmentation, he claims, has led to a "cafeteria approach to curriculum"[134]

that no longer presents theology as a search for God through wisdom. Instead the perceived

unified purpose of theology seems to be ministerial formation, which Mark Jordan calls an

unfortunate consequence of the *Wissenschaft* model of theological education.[135] But, as I have

argued, theology's meta-purpose of formation for some end—whether for ministry, societal

improvement, or the search for God through wisdom, or all three—remains the norm. Theology

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[131] Edward Farley, *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2001), 88.

[132] Kelsey, *Between Athens and Berlin,* 16.

[133] Farley, *Theologia,* xi.

[134] Farley, *Theologia,* 5.

[135] Jordan, *Transforming Fire*, 8.

is thus still understood as a soul- and identity-shaping discipline. The question is what type of shaping?

Formation and the Scholastic Disposition

The *Wissenschaft* theological education model—beholden to positivist logic—reduces the possibility for theological imagination. By rigidly categorizing the discipline and its subfields, epistemic gatekeepers at educational institutions also narrow the acceptable (decent, according to Althaus-Reid) sources and methods for theological reflection. Acceptable sources, for instance, might include Aquinas, Rahner, Luther, Moltmann, Metz, Tracy, Cone, and Gutierrez but not 2pac, Waman Puma, Marguerite Porete, Althaus-Reid, or the Marquis de Sade. The result of a narrow set (or arrangement) of texts and methods is a limited capacity to engage the world creatively, with a fresh set of lenses or through a pluriversal lens. As a consequence, the theologian's formation is rather streamlined, resorting to the same texts by the same voices to seek similar answers to complex questions. Normative scenes of instruction emerge—which the next three chapters explore.

Though theologians might emerge with slightly different readings of the same text, a curriculum or syllabus usually outlines some order of reading and its possible field of interpretations. Lectures by professors have the potential to further limit the hermeneutical field, especially for students with limited knowledge on the subject. Comparing a lecture to a meal, Rubem Alves writes: "words are distributed to be eaten. And like the dinner party, it also has an etiquette, a ritual."[136] Lectures serve words in a particular order for the student consumption. Remixing or dispensing of the recipe is strictly forbidden, lest students become ill or reticent to try something new.

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[136] Rubem Alves, *The Poet, The Warrior, The Prophet* (London: SCM Press, 1990).

According to Willie James Jennings, "it is a pedagogical and theological mistake to imagine tradition prior to the fragment."[137] Imagining tradition and theological education as a coherent whole risks forming bodies and minds that are unable to work within the fragments, within the messiness and brokenness of reality.[138] It is a formation that resists ongoing change and uncertainty—a formation that seeks "the quest for maturity that has been presented to theological education and all western education as the goal of formation…."[139] Committing and locking oneself within a singular design or system can result in missing vital connections to difference or seeing the severing of connections previously thought solid. It can also provide the illusion of safety and comfort from the inherent vicissitudes and griminess of life. Indeed, a unified theological view risks forming "an unreal world of petrified attention inside the real world…."[140] This unreal world leads to utopias, idealisms, and a willed naïveté even. It results in bodies formed within the colonial design, unable to envision different possibilities, even if improbable.

Jennings refers to the person formed by dominant designs of theological education as the self-sufficient white man, both a metaphor for a system and for a person who is both "master" of knowledge and arranger of designs for education. This person resists looking beyond his limited context or self-contained knowledge for other possibilities. On the contrary, he takes his contextual knowledge and universalizes it—creating an ideal world in the process through theological reflection.[141] He, in turn, forms others through a habitus of forced attention that

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[137] Jennings, *After Whiteness*, 44.

[138] Ibid., 46.

[139] Ibid.,

[140] Ibid., 56.

[141] Ibid., 8-9

reifies what counts as theological knowledge and meaning. In a similar vein, J. Kameron Carter critiques what he describes as the formation of a scholastic disposition common in theological education. This disposition approaches learning to "escape from the worlds of pain, suffering, violence, and, if not actual death, then escape from that commuted death sentence … called social death."[142]

The scholastic disposition and the self-sufficient man—products of a theological education seeking totality, coherence, and certainty—leave those in its educational wake woefully unprepared to face the complex realities spawned by necropolitics, biopower, ontological terror, environmental degradation, and the specter of nihilism and hopelessness. Theology becomes a mastery of limited knowledge that the master perceives as total or complete because blessed by God. With such holy knowledge, who needs to rearrange fragments in different ways or even look for fragments? Order and coherence: the two logics (the science) for the kingdom of God.

We now turn to three dominant themes that anchor normative scenes of instruction in response to any perceived ill in society. Imago Dei, dignity, and hope serve as common theological chimeras. Theologians—as both teachers and writers—continue to present these themes as though sacred or universally accepted. Most of the students I have taught and learned from, however, persistently question some of the main assumptions inherent in imago Dei and theological presentations of dignity and hope. What follows is a disruption of the dominant themes and their scenes of instruction (through juxtaposition) in hopes of imagining other possibilities for theological responses to dominant epistemes that buttress atmospheres of

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[142] Carter, *Race*, 375.

violence and their pervasive conditions. In other words, I seek imaginations, pedagogies, and

writing that refuse an easy out of the dark night.

Chapter 2

Man (Un)made:
Scenes of Instruction Beyond *Imago Dei*

I am an invisible man. No, I am not the spook like those who haunted Edgar Allen Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fibers and liquids—and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. Like bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imaginations—indeed, everything and anything except me.[1]

—Ralph Ellison

"Whatever it takes to switch places with the busters on top / I'm bustin' shots / make the world stop / They don't give a f**k about us."[2]

—2pac

Becoming Man[3]

Besides divine beings (God and angels), no character enters the theological classrooms—or imagination, for that matter—more than "man" or "the human." After all, theology would be an impossible undertaking without human pronouncements and reflections on the divine, and the incarnation itself is a testament that the Christian tradition (broadly writ) takes with utmost seriousness embodied existence. Of course, humans also inhabit the physical spaces where formal theological reflection and education occur: university and pastoral classrooms. The ubiquitousness of the human might lull one into taking the very concept of "human" for granted–

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[1] Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man (New York: Vintage International, 1995), 1.

[2] 2pac, "They Don't Give a Fuck About Us," featuring Outlawz, track 13, disc 2 on *Better Dayz*, Tha Row Records and Amaru, 2002, CD.

[3] I deliberately use the gender exclusive term "man" to emphasize that not all "humans" were welcomed into the fold of rational man whose prerogatives included certain rights and agency. For more, see *Beyond Man: Race, Coloniality, and Philosophy of Religion* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021).

–as a given, coherent reality that irrefutably exists in a Cartesian sense across all time and space. The human, unlike the Divine, can be analyzed and understood with certainty because familiar and because, well, I am human and so can deduce a few things about a shared experience. But that is the problem. Humanity is not felt equally… not then and not now.

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The quotes above read and sound like elegies. Both Ralph Ellison and rapper 2pac (Tupac Shakur) are mourning a range of losses, particularly of a self understood as either invisible or worthless (and even hopeless). Ellison's quote, spoken by an unnamed narrator in the novel *Invisible Man*, exhibits a significant deal of angst, frustration, and even melancholia at being and feeling invisible amid constructed perceptions of visibility. People cannot see the invisible man without first distorting that man's identity, without trying to force his somewhat incongruent puzzle pieces onto a standard and intelligible puzzle board. In the end, however, despite all the best efforts to conjure an identity that best suits the perceiver, the invisible man remained invisible … to himself. The exterior flesh might be seen and even understood through the shifting gaze of prevailing epistemes and accepted anthropologies, but the holder of that flesh is himself unable to render it something else—that is, to reconfigure the self outside accepted norms—without once again becoming invisible or despised. This inability to own one's own flesh while being subject to external plasticity[4] is, to put it mildly, a form of personal hell—a torturous, taxing and breakdown-inducing feeling that could prompt one to mangle or destroy one's flesh in an attempt to exit existence.

Though known for his poetic lyrics, 2pac was also often very literal. His lyrics in the posthumously released track "They Don't Give a F**k About Us" exhibit a deep feeling of

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[4] Jackson, *Becoming Human*.

hopelessness and even despair at the socioeconomic reality of blacks (especially young poor black males) in the United States. In the song's third verse, 2pac exclaims: "I'm watchin' my nation die/ genocide the cause / Expect a blood bath / the aftermath is y'alls." The state-sanctioned killing of black bodies with impunity or the poverty-stricken conditions of certain black neighborhoods will only result in a wider bloodbath, in a perpetual cycle of violence that, paradoxically, will claim more black flesh in order to sustain other bodies.[5] Other lyrics speak to trying to hide amid an atmosphere of violence in hopes of evading the destruction of one's flesh: "I see you tryin' to hide / hoping that nobody don't notice / You must always remember: you're still a member of the hopeless." Yet another set of lyrics speaks to a form of self-loathing so common among those whose flesh has been rendered less than optimal or farther from the ideal image of man (more on this later): "I'm seeing it clearer / hatin' the picture in the mirror / They claim we inferior…." 2pac's unparalleled rawness—which during his lifetime upset many, including those within the black community—was a cry more powerful than lament—a cry with the ability to break theological chatter on the image of God and its corresponding dignity, all within the span of a few verses on an unreleased song.

This chapter examines a dominant (and durable) theme in theological scenes of instruction: imago Dei. Teachers and scholars usually mention the terms in tandem with dignity, for, the argument goes, human dignity flows from being created in the image of God.[6] Several theological texts and theological classrooms offer these two as responses to the atmospheres of violence presented in Chapter 1. Exhortations and proclamations usually invoke imago Dei and

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[5] See the insightful essay by Stephen C. Finley and Biko Mandela Gray, "God Is a White Racist: Immanent Atheism as a Religious Response to Black Lives Matter and State-Sanctioned Anti-Black Violence," *Journal of Africana Religions* 3, no. 4 (2015): 443-453.

[6] See *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Washington, DC: United States Conference, 2005).

dignity to argue for upholding human rights, promoting the common good, and seeking justice (both locally and globally).[7] Hence the terms stir an affective reflect that gives them immense rhetorical power, which then imbues the concepts with an almost universal and timeless aura. Writers, students, and professors accept the concepts as given and unquestioned—and thus as unquestionable. But the forms in which the concepts have been deployed invite suspicion or at the very least some critical conversation.

In an effort to show that imago Dei is neither universal nor stable, this chapter traces some genealogies and neglected voices that complicate the notion of imago Dei and the platitudes that usually emerge (i.e. all are worthy of respect because made in the image of God). After sketching understandings and uses of imago Dei in Christian speeches, I introduce two scenes that invite discord to the traditional understandings of the two concepts: the debates at Valladolid and *Ontological Terror* (as a text representative of Afropessimism). Chapter 3 will repeat the exercises attempted in this chapter with respect to dignity. The specter of nihilism and hopelessness, examined more in depth in Chapter 4, also looms large throughout this chapter—though in the interstices of the text.

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**Imago Dei: Made in God's Image or
God Made in Man's Image?**

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Accounts of imago Dei can and have been written in a multitude of ways, which should serve as an immediate reminder of the term's non-universal nature. Where to start but in the "beginning"? Genesis 1:27, the oft-cited biblical passage in support of imago Dei, reads: "God created mankind in his image; in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." From these few sentences, voluminous writings have emerged to both cement and justify

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[7] See, for example, David Hollenbach, *The Common Good and Christian Ethics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

what was once called the doctrine of man but what theologians now call theological anthropology.[8] Michelle Gonzalez notes that there is "no one unified anthropology."[9] To purport to formulate *the* unifying theory about the human in relation to God is as presumptuous as attempting to come up with the one totalizing theory of all existence or, as Stephen Hawkins attempted, of the universe.[10] Flesh is simply too enigmatic and unruly to distill into neat formulae, no matter how divine or inspired the speeches aspire to be.[11] Sharon Betcher, whose work focuses on theology and disability, questions any projects that perpetuate "the hallucinatory delusion of wholeness" when it comes to enfleshed life.[12] Kristien Justaert beautifully captures the flesh's non-static, and so presumably uncapturable, nature: "Flesh indicates a dynamic embodiment—it is the locus where life is exposed in all its complexity, like a 'teacup crackled with ten thousand veins.' Flesh is necessary to experience life."[13] Complexities stemming from different embodiments and their likewise dizzying multifaceted experiences should lead to equally rich and always-in-motion theological anthropologies that are always subject to revision.[14]

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[8] Michelle A. Gonzalez argues that "given the privileging of men's experiences, the doctrine of man can be seen at times as a more appropriate name for the field of study." "Who We Are," 65.

[9] Ibid.

[10] See Stephen W. Hawking, *The Theory of Everything: The Origin and Fate of the Universe* (Essex, UK: Phoenix Books, 2006).

[11] See, generally, Mayra Rivera, *The Touch of Transcendence: A Postcolonial Theology of God* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007).

[12] Sharon Betcher, "Becoming Flesh of My Flesh: Feminist and Disability Theologies on the Edge of Posthumanist Discourse, *Journal of Feminist Theology* 26, no. 2 (2010): 108.

[13] Kristien Justaert, "Life Beyond the Doctrine of Man: Out of This World with Michel Henry and Radical Queer Theory," in *Beyond the Doctrine of Man: Decolonial Visions of the Human*, ed. Joseph Drexler-Dreis (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020), 225.

[14] See César Baldelomar, "Toward a Reimagined Theological Anthropology: Freeing the Excluded and Re-envisioning Scenes of Instruction," *Journal of Hispanic/Latino Theology* 22, no. 1 (2020): 1-24.

Christian theologians and classrooms are heirs to different assumptions about the flesh's nature in relation to the ineffable and to each other. Yet that doesn't deter the more systematic among us to attempt the impossible, namely to develop language that seeks to capture the story of the flesh's journey from divine origin to the present. One major issue (among several) with this ambitious undertaking is that is assumes a universal experience and possible collective trajectory for *all* flesh across time and space. Put differently, theological anthropologies usually run the risk of essentializing all experience, ignoring the experiences and even horrors of those usually excluded from traditional theological anthropologies.[15] So a major vice emerges in the traditional doctrines of man, one that theologians have perhaps been reluctant or unwilling to jettison: a totalizing story of the "human" in relation to the Divine within a linear digenesis.

Here goes the attempt to retell the "sanitized" version of the doctrine of man or imago Dei—the authorized version usually rehearsed in introductory and advanced theological courses. It usually begins with Augustine's interpretation of the disobedience in Eden—an exegesis that is found scattered throughout his many seminal works, including the *Confessions*, *City of God*, and *De Trinitate*. Traditional theological anthropologies are thus intertwined with the doctrine of original sin, a fundamental Christian belief because of its implications for Jesus' salvific mission.[16] Man is in a perpetual fallen state and inherently prone to sin and vice (concupiscence) because of Adam and Eve's original sin. Imputed to all humanity (presumably including those peoples whom Augustine did not have knowledge about), original sin clouds the image of God within us, exposing humans to the weaknesses of the flesh and its incessant temptations. Only

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[15] Ibid.

[16] See Paula Fredriksen, *Sin: The Early History of an Idea* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

those who remain fully oriented toward God are capable of restoring a pristine image of God within.[17] And even then, only God's grace can save us from the endless torments of the flesh.

Augustine sought to establish a "coherent" vision of the human in relation to the Trinity. Augustine's theological anthropology set the stage for later imaginings of the "*ad Imagnem*," which he describes as stemming from an interior ability to participate in wisdom (resting in God).[18] In Book 14 of *De Trinitate*, he writes, "The mind is God's image par excellence in virtue of its capacity for knowing God … The perfection of the divine image in the mind is the divine gift of wisdom, by which the mind becomes aware of God…." Augustine asserted that humans have a special relationship with God and, in true Platonic fashion, are set apart from the rest of creation. Though rational creatures, humans can lapse—thus introducing sin and evil. But human nature, even in its evil fallen state, "could never lose its appetite for blessedness." The imago Dei within is, as already noted, diminished but never fully destroyed.

Other prominent voices reflect the human duty to journey back to God in order to restore imago Dei. Irenaeus believed that, though God created Adam in God's image and likeness, Adam was divided from God at the outset. Life is therefore a pilgrimage back to God; it is this journey that imbues humans with dignity on the way to becoming whole. Thomas Aquinas, too, believes that humans discover their true identity on this journey toward union with God. Full personhood and dignity come via agentic movements on the pilgrimage.[19] But not all flesh is equal, according to Aquinas. The mind (which is the "highest power of our soul") is what facilitates the return to the divine—and also to redemption and to the actualization of the image

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[17] See Gonzalez, "We Who Are."

[18] Dominic Robinson, *Understanding the Imago Dei: The Thought of Barth, von Balthasar and Moltmann* (London: Routledge, 2011), 8.

[19] Ibid., 15.

of God within the person. For Aquinas, both men and women are capable of the rationality (intellectual reflection) that stems from imago Dei. Yet women, he argues, reflect the divine image in a diminished sense for they remain closer to the flesh, to nature, and so less elevated— and less in proximity—to the divine image and essence. Aquinas cements the elevated position of men as evident in natural law: "The image of God, in its principal signification, namely the intellectual nature, is found both in man and woman … But in a secondary sense the image of God is found in man, and not in woman, for man is the beginning and end of woman, just as God is the beginning and end of every creature."[20] So far three common themes appear in this brief genealogy: imago Dei is not inherent in all, nor equally found in all, and it must be earned only through reasoned belief that comes from a predisposition to the Divine.

Both Martin Luther and John Calvin reject the agentic view that makes possible acquiring or repairing imago Dei. For Luther, humans have no agency, since human identity and nature are as sinners, fully depraved and totally dependent on God's grace. For Calvin, humanity can never approximate God, whose essence is incomprehensible to human minds. For both reformation theologians, one is either saved or damned through God's prerogative alone.[21] The Counter Reformation, especially through decrees promulgated by the Council of Trent (1545-1563), condemned reformation theology's non-agentic teachings. The Council's decrees reaffirmed that righteousness "is in fact mediated through the sacraments of the Church which set us on a pilgrimage back towards union with God in whose image we are made."[22] The Decree on Original Sin uses the term "anathema" often to describe categories of people: the unbaptized,

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[20] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I-II, q. 93, a. 4. New Advent, https://www.newadvent.org/summa/2093.htm

[21] Luther's theology, however, could open the door to universal salvation (as Origen had taught).

[22] Robinson, *Understanding the Imago Dei*, 22.

those looking for "remedy [for fallen condition] other than [through] the one mediator, our Lord Jesus Christ, and for those not living the Christian virtues."[23] Only through baptism and actions that bolster and spread Christian virtues can the Christian attain wholeness and oneness with God. Trent provided the metaphysical goal of achieving a "whole" ontology: become more like God through actions and works that adhere to doctrinal edicts and proscriptions. As Robinson notes, "The human being's creation in the imago Dei involves a belief in the God-given ability of the human being to become holy, to become more like God."[24]

Perhaps man can become more like God through the construction of a God more aligned with the man that emerges during the Renaissance and the colonial period. The Renaissance witnessed an explosion in claims about the privileged, exalted place of man in creation. Sylvia Wynter notes a shift from medieval Christianity to the secular humanism of the Renaissance, which she argues is really a hybrid stage because of its dependence on the Divine and other theological categories as the source and legitimation of man's reason and agency.[25] Man went from the bearer of a fallen nature in need of God's redemption to one capable of attaining reason and agency through right (doctrinal) instruction and action on behalf of teleological progress. Suddenly, man found agency; he could imagine, mold, and build societies and worlds—either for princes or for God (and Church), or for both. The field of faith formation, as Hill Fletcher mentions, was (and perhaps remains) the main conduit for the transmission of agentic possibility in service of the "Divine" mission.[26]

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[23] Decree quoted in Robinson, *Understanding the Imago Dei,* 21.

[24] Ibid., 24.

[25] See Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (Fall 2003): 257-337.

[26] Hill Fletcher, *Sin of White Supremacy*, 9.

Leading humanist figures began to craft powerful metanarratives that bolstered the place of "man" and his ability to forge new worlds. Petrach (1304-1374), Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-1375), Poggio Braccioloni (1380-1459), and Erasmus (1466-1536) are but a few of these notable figures. These educated and elite clergy sought to reconcile church teachings with knowledge from authors of Classical Antiquity, such as Cicero, Lucretius, Plato, Aristotle and others, as they attempted to make sense of a Europe undergoing both turmoil (holy wars and reformations) and rapid change (expansion of empires beyond the known world and cosmological shift from the Ptolemaic worldview to the Copernican).

As with the construction of any narrative and corresponding scenes of instruction, some inconvenient texts have to be either interpreted anew or, if unable to fit within the narrative, discarded completely. Some of the "Pagan" writers—such as Lucretius (i.e. "our world is already in decay")—appear to offer pessimistic takes on man's ability and society's progress in light of a the constant flux of existence. Also not taken into consideration by the eager optimistic humanists are popular medieval "Catholic" texts like *De Miseria Condicionis Humane,* composed between 1194-95 by Lotario Dei Segni (later Pope Innocent III).[27] As the title suggests, the book is a robust meditation on what its author, a prominent cardinal from a noble Italian family, considers to be the miserable human condition. Reflecting on human nature and actions, the cardinal writes, "He does depraved things by which he offends God, offends his neighbors, offends himself…. He will become fuel for the inextinguishable fire that always flames and burns…"[28] As a result, man is nothing but "food for the immortal worm that always eats and consumes; mass of horrible putridness that always stinks and is filthy."[29] Hardly the

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[27] Lotario Dei Segni, *De Miseria Condicionis Humane* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1978).

[28] Ibid., 94.

[29] Ibid.

exalted views of man that humanists would later advance, Dei Segni seems bent on reminding man of his place, that is, as a vile creature whose final destination as dust and ashes should serve to temper any haughtiness: "Therefore, mud, what are you proud of? Dust, what are you puffed up about? Ashes, why do you boast?."[30] Dei Segni even refers to children as weak, "differing very little from dumb animals, in fact having less in many things: for[animals] walk as soon as they are born…."[31] Man, in the cardinal's view, is ridden with anxiety and misery, no matter their social and economic status, their age, their marital status, and their moral virtues or vices. As if the torment of living weren't enough, the book ends with a macabre description of what awaits the damned (which includes every man): "There shall be weeping and moaning, wailing and shrieking, grief and torment … fire and stench, darkness and anxiety … distress and sorrow … tortures and pain … hunger and thirst, cold and heat, brimstone and fire burning forever and ever."[32] *De Miseria* remains a neglected scene of instruction, one best winnowed when plotting the rise of a universal rational man created in the image of God and so imbued with intrinsic worth and value.

The humanists strove to paint a picture of man as capable of achieving progress, of establishing a Golden Age in their lifetimes through the use of existing knowledges. Erasmus, for example, referenced the coming golden age "to describe a world enlightened by the rediscoveries of antiquity but still guided by the true knowledge of Christ."[33] These thinkers would entertain none of the "pessimistic" views espoused by Dei Segni and others, views that tempered man's agency. Man and society, the humanists imagined, had certainly progressed from the primitive

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[30] Ibid., 96.

[31] Ibid., 102.

[32] Ibid., 232.

[33] Williams, *Savage Anxieties*, 164.

savagery of the pagans or even from those who lived in darkness during the so-called Dark Ages to the wonders and improvements of Renaissance Florence. Indeed, re-readings of texts from antiquity clearly show, in the minds of the humanists, a direct trajectory (or genealogy) from ancient Greece to Renaissance Europe, with the Renaissance man as the heir of an alleged coherent, unbroken chain of rational (and divine) thought.[34] From unreason to reason, from trust in only God to trust in man to construct a Golden Age through his God-given faculties—this is the vital epistemic shift in the development of modern man.[35]

Of course, a particular lead character emerges as the prototypical man who embodies the over-optimism spawned by reason and the agentic search for the utopian Golden Age or Kingdom of Man.[36] The so-called Vitruvian man represents the apotheosis of the age of unbridled optimism in the rational faculties of man and his agentic abilities. This "civilized" man is capable not only of creating new forms of thinking and being but also of traversing territories and building worlds in lands for the taking because inhabited by non-peoples, the savages (irrational peoples) of the new world.[37] The Renaissance man's placement atop the pinnacle of all creation proved the veracity of the sliding scale or chain of being with roots in certain tenants of Natural Law. Sharp ideological distinctions began to crop up to divide bodies, with rational and irrational, civilized and savage as the main ontological characteristics to filter beings—with the rational and civilized understood as more simpatico with the imago Dei.[38] Indeed, theological

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[34] See Richard Waswo, "The Formation of Natural Law to Justify Colonialism, 1539-1638," *New Literary History* 27, no. 4 (Autumn 1996): 743-759.

[35] See Rivera, "Embodied Counterpoetics."

[36] Williams, *Savage Anxieties.*

[37] For a cogent essay on the major papal bulls that formed the theoretical paradigms to justify conquest, see Valentin Y. Mudimbe, "Romanus Pontifex (1454) and the Expansion of Europe," in *Race, Discourse, and the Origin of the Americas: A New World View*, eds. Vera Lawrence Hyatt and Rex Nettleford (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995), 58-65.

[38] Rivera, "Embodied Counterpoetics."

speeches and imagination cannot be separated from the forging of different categories of peoples. "Theology will indeed become the trigger for the classificatory subjugation of all nonwhite, non-Western peoples," notes Willie James Jennings. "But that classificatory subjugation began simply as the reassertion of a doctrinal logic—that God created the world."[39] European Christian man, made in the image and likeness of God, also possesses the right to create worlds, designating humanhood as it wishes.

The ability to create worlds—in other words, to forge the kingdom of God on earth—assumed belief in Jesus and by extension the Catholic faith (and perhaps even the primacy of the pope). Thus, to be truly created in the image of God meant that one possessed two qualities: 1) an unwavering rational belief in Jesus (being Christian), and 2) the ability to work toward establishing the kingdom of God on earth. The Council of Trent only buttressed the missionary impulse, which was already fueling the civilizing and "salvific" agency of Catholic missionaries who sought to expand the Kingdom of God in lands unknown among strange beings.[40] Some might have done this with the intention of approximating God and attaining wholeness of being––but at the expense of bodies constituted as animalistic and savage. Enter colonial difference through a limited ontology built on metaphysical fiat posing as universal, desirable, and timeless.

The concoction of an alleged universal and objective (natural) metaphysics, theology, and legal principles coalesce to create a singular world on a linear temporal and spatial trajectory (a salvation history) but with categories of different bodies. Hill Fletcher calls this powerful concoction the "witchcraft of white supremacy," that is, the "Christian theo-logic [that] rests in [the] dynamic of a singular unity of the created world, the oppositional distinction of Jesus as

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[39] Jennings, *Christian Imagination*, 87.

[40] Hill Fletcher, *The Sin of White Supremacy*.

only begotten and 'for our salvation,' and a resultant hierarchy within humanity, wherein

difference means deficient."[41] The material outcomes of this "theo-logic," bolstered by Christian

speeches on imago Dei, are numerous, not least the inferiority usually attached to non-Christian

bodies who are always at the disposal of pastoral, theological, and legal "protection," correction,

coercion, and annihilation.

The 1512 Law of Burgos are but one example of theological, philosophical, and legal

fragments uniting to form a comprehensive set of juridical pronouncements that allegedly

safeguarded the welfare of the indigenous persons of Hispaniola. Scholars have historically

heralded these Laws as early human rights documents, the culmination of theological humanism

in the face of mass indigenous suffering, injustice, and death.[42] But upon closer reading, as

Eleanor Craig observes, "the Laws at best attempt to set limits on violence performed under

specific conditions."[43] Violence was permitted under conditions governed by just war theory—

another invention of Christian theologians and jurists reading Natural Law Theory. The Laws'

"larger philosophical work" was "not to prevent violence at all but to integrate its justifications

into religious philosophies of salvation and the soul."[44] Translation: the Laws sought to establish

a Christian order in lands where Christianity was foreign under the guise of "care" for the souls

of the Indians. Christian scenes of instruction, and especially their leading character (the rational

believer), supplanted, bulldozed, or subsumed existing scenes and their several non-Christian

bodies. The Laws, Craig notes, "were written to affirm and entrench coloniality and colonial

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[41] Ibid., 44.

[42] See Eleanor Craig's insightful chapter, "We Have Never Been Human/e: The Laws of Burgos and the Philosophy of Coloniality in the Americas," in *Beyond Man: Race, Coloniality, and Philosophy of Religion,* eds. An Yountae and Eleanor Craig (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), 86-107.

[43] Ibid., 87.

[44] Ibid.

legitimacy."[45] What emerged was a bipolar and schizophrenic rhetoric that became the basis for future legal pronouncements on Christian-Indigenous contact. Craig writes: "What is ultimately most striking about the rhetoric of the Laws is their casual juxtaposition of declared concern for Indians' well-being with calculated ways to control as much of Indigenous life as possible."[46] The Laws regulated the labor, appearances, relationships, behaviors (including sexual) and even living and sleeping arrangements of Indigenous peoples. Christians know best, so all other bodies should gladly and willingly submit to their pastoral care and correction—for the well-being of their souls and for all Christian civilization.

What Fletcher calls the witchcraft of white supremacy, Jennings terms the diseased Christian social imagination. Jennings writes, "I argue … that Christianity in the Western world lives and moves within a diseased social imagination."[47] This "sick" imagination does not permit thinking or dreaming outside the parameters, or scenes of instruction, already in circulation. Legal regulation parading as pastoral care for the soul is a hallmark of Christian colonialization and its strict scenes of instruction. For Jennings, then, the progenitors of the diseased imagination were the Christian colonial marauders and settlers who forced indigenous peoples into the theo-logics of the Christian narrative and its various scenes. Christians and so by extension their theologies, metaphysics and laws "claimed to be the host, the owner of the spaces it entered, and demanded native peoples enter its cultural logics, its ways of being in the world, and its conceptualities."[48] Imago Dei was one such conceptual logic thrust upon native peoples. As we will see later this chapter, imago Dei was never simply inherent; indigenous peoples had to at the

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[45] Ibid., 90.

[46] Ibid., 100.

[47] Jennings, *Christian Imagination*, 6-7.

[48] Ibid., 8.

very least accept Jesus as savior for the logics and protections of imago Dei to kick in. An assent to Christian theo-logics was always a precondition for sharing in God's image and divinity—a theo-logic that continues today.

Though the Catholic church has attempted to distance itself from imago Dei conditioned by belief and actions, the existence of hierarchies within the church (with clerical status still seen as privileged)[49] and the belief among Catholics in Christ's supremacy[50] belie any notions of all equally made in God's image. Fletcher highlights how even "progressive" Vatican II documents, such as *Lumen Gentium*, offer a "qualified equality among humanity, one that is comfortable with the idea of persons being of various 'ranks.'"[51] God created all humans equally, according to Vatican II's anthropological vision, but the Holy Spirit bestows gifts "among the faithful of every rank (no. 13)"—with some described as "outstanding" and "extraordinary" while others are just "more simple."[52] Those holding "Episcopal consecration" demonstrate a "special outpouring of the Holy Spirit (no. 21)" and so rightly preside over others in yet another iteration of natural law's quasi-scientific ordering of bodies.

But Catholic laity should not fret, for their belief in Christ provides them with rank over those outside the Church. Christian supremacy holds that believers of Christ, no matter their rank within the Church, are favored by the Divine. Christians curry special favor from God, especially with soteriological matters. "Outside the church there is no salvation" continues to hold sway, as evident in paragraphs 846-848 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. In unequivocal

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[49] See Joe Holland, *Roman Catholic Clericalism: Three Historical Stages in the Legislation of a Non-Evangelical, Now Dysfunctional, and Sometimes Pathological Institution* (Washington, DC: Pacem In Terris Press, 2018).

[50] Hill Fletcher, *Sin of White Supremacy*.

[51] Ibid., 31.

[52] Ibid.

language, the Catechism states: "[Christ] explicitly asserted the necessity of faith and Baptism, and thereby affirmed at the same time the necessity of the Church, which men enter through Baptism as through a door. *Hence they could not be saved who, knowing that the Catholic Church was founded as necessary by God through Christ, would refuse either to enter it or to remain in it.*"[53] The following two paragraphs attempt to qualify the church's exclusivist stance. Paragraph 847 states that "this affirmation is not aimed at those who, through no fault of their own, do not know Christ and his Church." But salvation can be theirs if, upon learning of the Gospel of Christ, they attempt with a "sincere heart" and "moved by grace" to do Christ's will. Finally, paragraph 848 notes, "Although in ways known to himself God can lead those who, through no fault of their own, are ignorant of the Gospel, to that faith without which it is impossible to please him, the Church still has the obligation and also the sacred right to evangelize all men." The next section of the *Catechism* is titled "Mission—a requirement of the Church's catholicity."

One sees here the familiar script of the church recasting a contextual claim into a universal maxim that is supposed to galvanize one into action, lest one's imago Dei—and corresponding dignity—be diminished. More troubling, however, is the continual exclusivism in matters of salvation, which speaks volumes as to the particular standing of beings along a spectrum of rational believers and foolish (sometimes childlike and innocent) savages. And so we see the familiar scene of instruction, the result of a sanitized theo-logic, persist in the present. As a character, then, one is either Christian and enjoys the assurance of salvation that can be lost only in extreme circumstances, or a non-Christian who will never know for certain whether one

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[53] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 2000), § 846.

is worthy of that salvation or a beneficiary to some extent. One is either just made in the image of God or made in the image of God but with a wink and wry smile.

Next we explore two scenes that should unsanitize our rather utopian concept of imago Dei as a universal and even desirable concept to deploy in response to necropoilitics, biopower, and precarity. The Valladolid debates are but one example of the nefarious consequences of imago Dei theology, human dignity and rights talk, and the unchecked agency of those doing "God's work." Here we see the emergence of a new man, propped against the disposable bodies of those farthest away from the ideal.

Unsanitized Scene 1: The Valladolid Debates: Divine Mythmaking Turns into Man Making

Theorizing on the Divine and on humans' nature in relation to the Divine are based on Christian metanarratives (grand scripts and tropes)—such as the *imago Dei*, Jesus' universal salvation for all humans, and Christian supremacy vis-à-vis other faith traditions—have led to hundreds (if not thousands) of years of exclusion, subjugation, and even colonization. Just as "being researched is synonymous with being colonized,"[54] so is sculpting the Divine into something resembling the sculptor's own image synonymous with deep epistemic and ontological violence to those not in the sculptor's image. Violent especially for two reasons: 1) a singular perspective (or tradition) is shaping the image of God; and 2) such contextualized image masquerades as divinely decontextualized to the detriment and exclusion of those unable to shape the image in the first place.

But who are those excluded from and by dominant Christian theological anthropologies? While it is beyond this section's scope to delve into the long and tortured history of those

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[54] Linda Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London: Zed, 2012), 102.

considered less human by the historical Christian imagination, a brief roll call of those not fully imago Dei is in order: heretics, women, pagans, indigenous peoples from all over the world, those suffering from plague, gays, lesbians, witches, sorcerers, the irrational, the mad, black slaves, non-Christians (such as Muslims and even Jews), heathens, sinners, the indecent, savages, barbarians, Satanists, voodoo practitioners, freethinkers, the poor, and several other groups lost to historical memory. Even black cats have suffered from faulty and superstitious Christian theological anthropology.[55] Basically, the excluded constitute any group barred by Christian gatekeepers from contributing to its theological anthropology and dogmatic development by virtue of their subhuman status (due to their "sinful" behavior, or epistemological refusal to accept Christian doctrines and dogmas, or simply by being "different" during particular contexts).

Since the list of excluded is far too long, perhaps it would be best to envision the excluded as characters missing from scenes of instruction and formation. Scenes of instruction can provide powerful imaginary landscapes within which characters act and interact. Thus, scriptwriters (especially those formerly excluded from writing) can expand scenes and characters in order to reimagine a fresh theological anthropology. Exploring different modes of being human does not mean presenting the best "logical" argument for what it means to be human in relation to God, but rather envisioning and exploring complex and fragmentary scenarios that could have several potential outcomes and consequences for the characters involved; it is not a sum-zero, one singular outcome scenario.[56]

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[55] According to one scholar, admirers of St. John the Baptist burned cats on John's feast day throughout Europe in an effort to eradicate witchcraft often associated with cats, especially black cats. See Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York: Basic Books, 1984).

[56] Jordan writes that "writing ethics is not so much confecting arguments as presenting scenes." Jordan, *Teaching Bodies*, 68.

Traditionally, Christian anthropological scenes of instruction (as we have seen) have presented characters as dualistically simplistic (like caricatures) who are either exemplary or non-exemplary. Consider, for example, the Valladolid Debates of 1550-1551, during which two European Christian males debated whether the Native peoples of the "New World" were fully humans (meaning with souls and the ability to reason). In his infamous *Democrates secundus* not published until 1892, Theologian Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda argues that the Spaniards—as the embodiment of the great Romans before them—have the right to subdue those "whose natural condition is such that they ought to obey others."[57] He also cites the natives' alleged "vices" of cannibalism, devil worship, and human sacrifice as evidence of their savagery and barbarism.[58] His main argument is that "the New World natives were inferior to the Spaniards 'as are children to adults, women to men, the cruel and inhuman to the very gentle, the prodigiously intemperate to the self-controlled and finally'—in a climax erased in the most complete manuscript—'I would almost say monkeys to men'."[59] Sepúlveda rehearsed the tropes of savage/civilized, full of vice/virtuous, imperfect/perfect, violent/temperate, irrational/rational, and animal/human. These dichotomies—staged to represent the absolute and unquestioned superiority of one group over the other—find roots in Christian hermeneutics that universalize the rational God as the ultimate expression of the Divine in the cosmos.

Christians made in the image of God, and especially Christians "faithful" to the dictates of centuries of doctrines developed at imperial behest and under imperial guise, likewise hold a

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[57] Cited in David A. Lupher, *Romans in the New World: Classical Models in Sixteenth-Century Spanish America* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2003), 113.

[58] Ibid.,

[59] Lupher, *Romans in the New World*, 117.

privileged place.[60] How could they not? They wrote the scripts for the scene, they invented the

characters, and finally they camouflaged their biases to make the logic appear divinely ordered (a

natural law). As David Carrasco points out, "Lodged within this argument [or narrative] of

Aristotelian logic is a destructive, grandiose conception of European superiority, perfection, and

virtue."[61] The savage Indians—along with all their vices and ontological inferiority to

Europeans—are stylized as undesirable bodies to inhabit, undesirable characters to emulate.[62]

These us/other tropes have found expression in Catholic speeches on homosexuality (which we

will explore in Chapter 3), Christian superiority to other religions, and even in the current

political-cultural wars among US Catholics (real Catholics versus cafeteria Catholics), just to

name a few examples.

Effective scenes of theological anthropology will thus require more complex, fragmented,

and constantly evolving characters. Enigmatic characters—characters at once whole and broken,

sinners and saints, ascetics and whores, heretics and orthodox—better represent the human

condition as flawed and contradictory creatures. Indeed, even the tropes of oppressor and

oppressed are inadequate, for depending on the situation, one can be both an oppressor and

oppressed, or the roles can switch. Think, for instance, of intersectionality. White women might

be in a position of less power in comparison to white men, but these white women might inhabit

spaces of more privilege vis-à-vis black or Latina women. Interactions change the dynamics of

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[60] On this point see, Karen Bollerman, Thomas M. Izbicki, and Cary J. Nederman, "Introduction," in *Religion, Power, and Resistance from the Eleventh to the Sixteenth Centuries: Playing the Heresy Card*, eds. Karen Bollerman, Thomas M. Izbicki, and Cary J. Nederman (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

[61] David Carrasco, *Religions of Mesoamerica: Cosmovision and Ceremonial Centers* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 1990), 8.

[62] David M. Solodkow, "The Rhetoric of War and Justice in the Conquest of the Americas: Ethnography, Law, and Humanism in Juan Gines de Sepulveda and Bartolome de Las Casas," in *Coloniality, Religion, and the Law in the Early Iberian World*, eds. Santa Arias and Raul Marrero-Fente (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2014), 196.

characters and of the scene. Thus, stale characters—characters representing a trope—are

inadequate for a fresh theological anthropology that seeks to shed its problematic and exclusivist

history.

But what happens when the scriptwriters make characters slightly more complex in an

effort to still convey some theological-anthropological supremacy that benefits the scriptwriters

and their patrons? Returning to the Valladolid Debates, Bartolome De Las Casas challenged

Sepulveda's claims, but still within the same scenes of instruction (an exclusively Christian

landscape) and using the same sources and speeches (i.e. Aquinas, Church Fathers, scriptural

passages, etc.).[63] While liberation theologians have praised Las Casas as a champion of the

natives, he still considered them barbarians—but more noble barbarians.[64] Within the matrix of

different "barbarisms," Las Casas assigned the New World Natives a more benign designation

because they simply lacked the skills of a refined European. The natives "lacked a literary

expression, discipline, and training in letters."[65] They also lacked complex urban social,

economic, and political organization and so could learn from the advanced Europeans. Yet Las

Casas pointed to a redemptive factor: "the indigenous population was naturally predisposed to

healthy and moderate customs and was therefore ready to receive the Word of God."[66] Of course,

Christendom and European mores were the reference points to gauge the moderateness of native

customs. Thus, for Las Casas, natives were human because they had the "potential" to be

Christians, meaning to understand and accept Jesus. This potentiality argument is still rehearsed

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[63] For a solid and easily accessible background on the common sources used by both Sepulveda and De Las Casas, see Agustin Parise, "The Valladolid Controversy Revisited: Looking Back at the Sixteenth-Century Debate on Native Americans While Facing the Current Status of Human Embryos," *Journal of Civil Law Studies* 1 (2008): 108-138.

[64] Solodkow, "The Rhetoric of War and Justice in the Conquest of the Americas."

[65] Ibid., 190.

[66] Ibid., 191.

in *imago Dei* statements (i.e. the human potential to reason and to be self-aware, for example). In another exclusivist epistemological move, Las Casas states that natives are passive infidels compared to the active—and much worse—active infidels (Moors and Turks) who know the "true Doctrine" and still refuse to accept it.[67] Las Casas relies on a sliding scale script by which some humans are assigned more worth than others, with one type of human (European Christian) inhabiting the pinnacle of humanity—to the exclusion and silencing of those farther from that apex.

This sliding scale argument reappeared in America through Christian supremacy language that has in turn underwritten White supremacy.[68] It is yet another example of an exclusivist theological-anthropological scene of instruction. Jeannine Hill Fletcher does not mince words when writing that the "history of the United States has been that of a White Christian nation in which the dominant racial project has been to create the category of White, sort some people into it, and assign material benefits on the basis of it to the exclusion of non-White others."[69] She cites the "field of faith formation" as the conduit for passing on a totalizing Christian theology—created by trained theologians with a proclivity for law and order, colonialism, and Christendom—that resulted in the ideological justifications that allowed Christian nation builders to benefit from slave and indigenous labor when constructing the fabled city on a hill—that high point of Christian civilization in the New World.[70] Asserting that there is no salvation outside Jesus Christ and the church, Christian and Catholic narratives, as we have

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[67] Ibid., 191.

[68] This is Hill Fletcher's thesis in *The Sin of White Supremacy*.

[69] Fletcher, *The Sin of White Supremacy*, 3.

[70] Fletcher writes, "It was in the academic spaces of theological training that ideas of Christian supremacy were manufactured as knowledge, to be put to the project of conquest, colonization, and conversion as they made their way from lecture hall to pulpit to legislative assemblies." Fletcher, *The Sin of White Supremacy*, 9.

explored, conjured a "theo-logic of the singularity of humanity tending toward the perfection of Christ expressed in Western culture and civilization [that] allows for a judgment of some among humanity as falling short of the intended ideal and being deficient as a result."[71]

If the scene of instruction now shifted to the frontier lands of America, then the character exemplar shifted from an abstract God to Jesus Christ, who through his sacrifice, saved all humanity. In this universal and singular telos for all humanity, heathens, non-White, non-Christians had no choice but to accept Jesus and Christian doctrine or suffer the designation of lesser person according to a mytho-racial theological scale (with the Curse of Ham as front and center in theological ideas circulating in America from the 17th well into the 20th century). As the natural religion of Europe, so the script goes, Christianity's supremacy in the New World is simply a logical manifestation of God's singular plan for *all* humanity. Through evangelization, then, non-White persons "could be made noble and respectable…."[72] The Valladolid scene of instruction merges with the American expansionist project, with the White Jesus guiding the entire scene toward an eschatological point for all peoples, across all time and space.

Once again, god talk developed by a self-serving strain of theological imagination excluded—and thus opened the door to ill treatment—of peoples not identifying with a White, imperialistic Jesus. And supposing that some did in fact accept Jesus and Christianity as divine—either through coercion or willingly—their non-European, non-White status still prevented them from accessing full humanity within the singular totalizing universe created through a mytho-theological scene of instruction. Rosemary Radford Ruether reminds readers that a "fundamental

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[71] Ibid., 15.

[72] Ibid., 27.

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tenet of Christian faith has been the universality of Christ."[73] But Rosemary Radford Ruether then notes that, despite the supposed universality of Christ, "much of Western Christian tradition has said that [women] cannot represent Christ as priests."[74] Responsible for this view is an Aristotelian-Thomistic anthropology that ascribes to women a lesser rational nature than men. Women are, in this view, defective compared to men, and as such, they cannot access Jesus in the same manner as men. Radford Ruether then underscores how the global prevailing images of Jesus have depicted him as a white Western European male. Images of the resurrection present him as whiter still, almost luminous.[75]

This provincial representation of Jesus has far-reaching consequences for non-White peoples, such as internationalization of white as pure and beautiful, while non-White is devalued as dirty, defective, and ugly (ungod like). On a social level, a White god—a white and rational *Imago Dei*—has led and continues to lead to the ontological elevation of one bodily typology over others. Scenes of instructions, and the characters who inhabit them, have powerful psychological, social, political, cultural, and economic repercussions to those formed (either freely or by force) by them. Imago Dei should undergo contextual and localized revisions and rewritings, especially with so many bodies historically excluded from or violently subsumed under its universalistic, salvation-laden sanitized definitions. If anything, the Valladolid debates and the material outcomes of God talk should prompt some serious reflections for those still beholden to a term that never applied to all bodies equally.

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[73] Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Is Christ White?: Racism and Christology," in *Christology and Whiteness: What Would Jesus Do?*, ed. George Yancy (London: Routledge, 2012), 101.

[74] Ibid.

[75] Ibid., 102.

Unsanitized Scene 2: Ontological Terror

Calvin Warren's groundbreaking text *Ontological Terror*, especially if read in tandem with Frank Wilderson III's *Afropessimism* and Zakiyyah Iman Jackson's *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiblack World*, can and should disrupt sanitized scenes of theological instruction that present imago Dei and its accompanying humanism as the solution to the suffering and deaths of all sorts of bodies. Ontological terror, the fear-inducing realization of one's nonhumanness, presents a direct and haunting question with several implications for the uncritical use of a term so laden with optimistic humanistic overtones: who matters, who matters less, and who doesn't matter? In their essay "God is a White Racist," Stephen Finley and Biko Mandela Gray tell us that "mattering is a question of where and how someone shows up, how something appears within the context of collective human existence."[76] To matter is to show up in a set of relationships—"so much so that the erasure, exclusion, or elimination of something is still a form of mattering."[77] In a context where precarities produce relationships of enmity, Afropessimists argue that a fundamentally anti-black world requires the erasure, exclusion, and destruction of black bodies in order to provide meaning and security to non-black bodies and their vision of the world. Much like Christian scripts relied on indigenous and other non-Christian bodies to prop up the existence and superiority of "man," black bodies today represent a formless prop against which humanity comes into clear focus.

"Human life is dependent on black death for its existence and for its conceptual clarity," writes Frank Wilderson III. "There is no world without blacks, yet there are no blacks in the

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[76] Finley and Gray, "God Is a White Racist," 445.

[77] Ibid.

world."[78] Black bodies, or the Negro as both Calvin Warren and Achille Mbembe argue, provide the fodder for the ontological security or coherence of non-black bodies (human beings).[79] Warren urges his readers to resist the humanist affect and acknowledge an inconvenient truth (at once feared and dismissed as nonsensical), namely that "blacks have function but not Being—the function blackness is to give form to a terrifying formlessness (nothing)."[80] Ontology built on metaphysical fiat is essentially imaginary, a construction—it is a nothing but with real consequences. Black bodies and blackness, argue the Afropessimists, provide a (non)form (a tangible object or equipment without Being) that represents the antithesis to the ideal ontology.[81] Thus Warren notes, "The Negro is not a human being that is simply being mistreated, but is, instead, an invention designed to embody a certain terror for the world."[82] The annihilation of non-white flesh—the primordial existence before power imposes an identity and transforms it into a body or object—is a continuous feature of modern society/coloniality. Indeed, as both M. Shawn Copeland and Reinhold Niebuhr point out, all life requires the destruction (or death) for other life to continue.[83]

According to Warren, the black body (the Negro) is a tool, a toy, and ultimately a floating body (a specter of sorts). It is a *tool* because, as mentioned, it quells both ontological and metaphysical anxieties stemming from nihilism, thus providing a referent for what is not

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[78] Frank B. Wilderson III, Afro-Pessimism and the End of Redemption," *Humanities Futures*, accessed February 11, 2024, https://humanitiesfutures.org/papers/afro-pessimism-end-redemption/

[79] Calvin Warren, *Ontological Terror: Blackness, Nihilism, and Emancipation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 61.

[80] Ibid., 6.

[81] Ibid., 8.

[82] Ibid., 38.

[83] Shawn Copeland notes: "We owe all that we have to our exploitation and enslavement, removal and extermination of the despised others." Reinhold Niebuhr makes a similar observation: "all human life is involved in the sin of seeking security at the expense of other life." Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being* (Fortress, 2010), 100. Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1964), 169.

"human" to humans. It is a referent without a referent—a true conundrum for semiotics. It is a *toy* insofar as it is a "vehicle for fantasy—a vessel of the human's imagination and configuration of the world."[84] Black bodies are also playthings in a physical sense, useful only for their entertainment value to colonial gazes and desires. And finally, it is a *floating body* because it "lacks form or placement within a political/ontological landscape (a sign of formlessness)."[85] The black body can never find a resting place, a home. It is a nomad both "unassimilable and radically other, straddling nothing and infinity."[86]

Mbembe equates Negro lives with animal lives, for the animal too "lives in a state of suspension. It is … neither this nor that."[87] These formless and suspended bodies inhabit what Mbembe calls the Zero World—a place itself suspended and deferred, outside the ontological and metaphysical world but very much integral to its imaginary.[88] Residents of this world come and go, here one second and gone the next, always teetering on the edge of nothingness, of nonexistence—lives in precarity that live simply not to die, as Fanon states. "To exist means staying alive."[89]

But staying alive for what? For Warren, black life matters negatively, as both necessary and disposable to current metaphysical and ontological paradigms: "The Negro is the interstice of metaphysics, the formless form between man and animal, property and human, whose purpose is to embody formlessness as a corporeal sign. As an intermediary, its position within metaphysics is paradoxical, as an excluded inclusion, an untranslatable entity without proper

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[84] Warren, *Ontological Terror*, 147.

[85] Ibid., 56.

[86] Ibid., 47.

[87] Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, 167.

[88] Ibid., 168-69.

[89] Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 232.

referent…."[90] The Negro Question asks, "Can black "things become free? What is the status of such ~~beings~~?"[91] Warren would answer "no" to the first and would suggest that blacks are inherently something other than a human being. His entire project "challenges the claim that blacks are human and can ground existence in the same being of the human."[92]

As a paradoxical and non-being entity, the black body cannot be emplotted within a metaphysical humanistic framework or understood within the Euro-Christian concept of imago Dei. Language of human dignity and rights is therefore empty rhetoric fueling cruel optimism in a world of colonial difference sustained by metaphysical fantasies of hierarchical and categorical existences. Afropessimist scenes of instruction offer devasting critiques to the liberal-humanist (Christian) logics that continue to find meaning in imago Dei. Theologians must grapple with Afropessimism and the prospects of ontological terror instead of keeping blinders on to any discourses and scenes that disrupt sanitized, orderly accounts of the human. It is not a surprise that I have seldom seen, heard, or read Christian ethicists engage with pessimistic or hopeless voices that challenge optimistic Christian speeches (more on this in Chapter 3).[93] In fact, in Catholic ethical circles, I have yet to hear mention of Afropessimism, much less of the ontological nonexistence of Blacks. Why place so much emphasis on concepts like ubuntu when Black thinkers in the United States have developed a sophisticated critique of the dominant humanist Christian speeches of human and imago Dei? We live in a world haunted by the specters of bodies deemed nonexistent—without an ontology—or, if existent, as disposable or

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[90] Warren, *Ontological Terror*, 35.

[91] Ibid., 16.

[92] Ibid., 6.

[93] One exception is Miguel A. De La Torre's *Embracing Hopelessness* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017). Anthony Pinn also comes to mind, though I am unsure whether he would consider himself a Christian ethicist.

malleable forms that only come into conceptual shape through limited scenes of instruction for the benefit of fragile men seeking unbridled optimism in the face of precarity and precariousness.

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Some Parting Suggestions or Notes:
Returning to Silences?

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As I have argued in this chapter, narratives (or scripts) that guide scenes of instructions can cause exclusions: one form is exclusion of characters unable to inhabit those scenes on par with other characters, and the other is exclusion of characters from the creation of scripts from which the scenes of instruction flow. Tropes like the *imago Dei* and characters like the virtuous, godly European and the eternal White Christ present stale and unimaginative scripts that exclude a majority of humans from meaning making or from a "full" ontology. Rather than proposing another neat, unified theological anthropology, perhaps a theopoetical anthropological approach can dislodge the constraints preventing theological-anthropological imagination from envisioning others forms to represent bodies in relation to the Divine. "[H]ow we articulate our experiences of the Divine can alter our experiences of the Divine," writes L. Callid Keefe Perry.[94] How we articulate our experiences of the Divine can, as we have seen, also alter how individuals and societies treat people. Words matter. Scripts matter. Narratives matter. And scenes of instructions and the characters they present matter. As Judith Lieu states:

> Texts construct a world; they do this out of multiple worlds, including textual ones, that they and their others and readers already inhabit and experience as "reality"; that new world itself becomes part of subsequent "reality" within and out of which new constructions may be made. Yet this is not a self-generating system: constructions and worlds interact and clash with others, whether they are seen as congenial or alien.[95]

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[94] L. Callid Keefe-Perry, *Way to Water: A Theopoetics Primer* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2014), 12.

[95] Judith Lieu, *Christian Identity in the Jewish and Graeco-Roman World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 61.

Christian doctrines of *Imago Dei* and the universality of Jesus and Christianity have informed—and continue to inform—the imagination of countless theologians and non-theologians. The result of this formation: tomes upon tomes of thinking about human nature and humanity's relation to the Divine, always with exclusions, comparisons, hierarchies, and forced inclusion. Yet these tomes have followed a rather uniform script, namely, Christian supremacy with its unified promise of salvation for all humans, across time and space. Christianity itself, however, is a bricolage of fragmentary sources. Gabriel Vahanian points out that "not even the Gospels can be harmonized into one. There are at least as many christologies as there are gospels, even books of the New Testament."[96] Karen King also describes the various forms of "the way" in existence before councils established official doctrinal narratives.[97] And, just as with the uncertainty surrounding the human gene pool, there are several unofficial Christian narratives lost in time—many of which will never be known. Augustine noted that such disparate interpretations of Scripture were a sign of grace. Why not recover that sentiment?

Interestingly, the concept of linear time—in the form of the eschaton—serves as a powerful unifying and organizing tool for the official Christian script. But what of peoples outside the European-Christian timeframes, such as indigenous and non-Western peoples? Settler time imposes a common timeframe on all, but such project is obviously colonial.[98] So we return to fragments, to the constantly shifting and evolving scenes of instruction. Theopoetics, while hard to define, can be "understood as an embodied way of thinking, speaking, writing, and

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[96] Gabriel Vahanian, *Theopoetics of the Word: A New Beginning of Word and World* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 106.

[97] Karen King, *What is Gnosticism*? (Cambridge: The Belknap Press, 2004).

[98] See Mark Rifkin, *Beyond Settler Time: Temporal Sovereignty and Indigenous Self-Determination* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 25

experiencing ... a way of being-in-the-world."[99] A theopoetics should ultimately lead to a

cognitive breakthrough by opening "up a space for unanticipated dreaming in which the past,

present, and future are re-shaped as we reorganize and even re-create our own stories and our

relationships with others, the world, and the Divine."[100]

For such freeing of the imagination to occur, however, there needs to be a collective

theological process of letting go, of emptying of language that for too long as tried to unify an

entire species under exclusivist and universalist assumptions. Pieces. Fragments. This is the way

forward and backwards in an attempt to script new scenes of instruction with complex and

enigmatic characters. Theological anthropologies stem from the same "authorized" narratives of

the Western tradition. So alternative anthropologies should come from "unauthorized sources,"

or as Althaus-Reid calls them, "indecent" sources.[101]

The scenes themselves must shift: theological learning and knowledge production usually

emanates from the hallowed halls of academia, the classrooms, church settings, or conference

spaces. But what about talking about the Divine and human nature while in other spaces, such as

streets filled with the scents of the homeless, prostitutes, drug addicts, and women lemon

vendors with no underwear, or the bars where some seek respite from the world's harshness

through inebriation and promiscuous, one-time encounters, or the bedrooms where we perform

our sexual selves? "The dislocation of the theological discourse from the naturalized locus

produces several other dislocations," writes Althaus-Reid.[102] One such dislocation can be freeing

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[99] Silas C. Krabbe, *A Beautiful Bricolage: Theopoetics as God-Talk for Our Time* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock 2016), 14.

[100] Ibid., 15.

[101] See Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender, and Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

[102] Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, 29.

the mind from narratives (scripts) that have constrained imaginations of the Divine and of human existence through stale characters and the scenes they inhabit.

Or perhaps another suggestion: scenes of silence. Here the missing characters—the excluded throughout time and space—can be felt through a loud silence—a silence that is deafening to anyone who is honest and humble enough to admit that previous scenes of instructions and characters within were too simplistic because local. This simplicity led to caricatures that resulted in physical harm and death to many via theo-logics posing as universal and natural—as the way it's always been.

Maybe the best god-talk is no god-talk. It seems that god needs a rest from prideful (yet feeble) human attempts at classification. Less words—and more attention to bodies and their daily needs—could lead to freeing the imagination from a theological regime that requires reason, words, and argumentation for legitimization. Recognition of the excluded precedes theorizing, being precedes thinking about being, and the imagination of what could have been had countless bodies not been silenced and forgotten precedes any future "hopeful" attempts to once again capture what is ultimately elusive and enigmatic.

True love of the Divine and of others requires letting go of attempts to capture their essences through rational classification or of romanticizing their bodies as sites for new theories. "Love means to let the other be the other, commemorating together the revelation of differences."[103] Or as Mark Jordan notes in his reflections on the teachings of John of the Cross: the "more difficult lesson is that our lover cannot be possessed by us or integrated into us without being lost to us a lover. As soon as the lover is claimed as fully known, we have lost the

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[103] Frederico Pieper Pires, "Liberation Theology, Modernity, and Sexual Difference," in *Liberation Theology and Sexuality*, ed. Marcella Althaus-Reid (London: SCM Press, 2009), 120.

lover and the lover's gift of pleasure."[104] Love is letting the other simply be-in-the-world without much talk (even when such chatter claims to protect and solve issues endemic to the cycles of life and death). With the copious amounts of ink and blood now spilled in failed efforts to provide a clear definition of who is human, of who is saved, or who is worthy, might theological anthropology seek redemption by avoiding precise capture of enigmatic creatures such as we— creatures who largely resemble the ineffable, fleeting fire that we reduce to the divine. The soul's and flesh's essence and journey remain a mystery—too nebulous for even imago Dei to hold, not least across prolonged periods and across space. In the attempts to delineate, theologians and other scriptwriters account for everything except for the flesh that remains beyond man's reach, beyond his limited ability to speak and teach.[105]

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[104] Mark D. Jordan, *The Ethics of Sex* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 166.

[105] Teaching theology is an impossible task—for humans, as Mark Jordan reminds us. *Transforming Fire*.

Chapter 3

Disrupting Dignity

That expression, dignity of man, once uttered by Kant, afterward became the shibboleth of all the perplexed and empty-headed moralists who concealed behind that imposing expression their lack of any real basis of morals, or, at any rate, of one that had any meaning. They cunningly counted on the fact that their readers would be glad to see themselves invested with such a dignity and would accordingly be quite satisfied with It.[1]

—Arthur Schopenhauer

Dignity: A Shibboleth of the Perplexed?

As noted, I have spent much time in classrooms of all sorts. The legal and theological

classrooms I have occupied deploy certain terms in eerily similar ways. One example is the way

they employ the concept of dignity. Professors and classmates just always seemed to assume that

its meaning and usage are well known and universally accepted. Statements like "human rights

matter because we each have dignity" and "God loves us because we are made in His image and

so have dignity" are taken at face value. This circular logic obfuscates dignity's all-too-human,

limited, and contextual nature. Pamela Slotte reminds us, "Each framing narrative affords items

different weight, and these acquire their particular meaning from the particular context…."[2]

Hence, as Slotte rightly observes, "different settings, including institutional contexts, affect both

the way human dignity is understood and how it is referred to."[3] To translate to one of the

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[1] Arthur Schopenhauer, *The Basis of Morality*, trans. E.F.J. Payne (Cambridge, MA: Hackett Publishing), 100.

[2] Pamela Slotte, "Christianity and Human Dignity," in *The Oxford Handbook of Christianity and Law*, eds. John Witte and Rafael Domingo (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023), 765.

[3] Ibid.

themes in this dissertation, scenes of instruction, far from being divine and universal, are written and staged by writers with particular proclivities for a limited number of scripts.

In this chapter, I explore the framing narratives of dignity in normative (or mainstream) theological and legal speeches, which form scenes of instruction in theological classrooms within universities that shape how students perceive dignity. Rather than reevaluate dignity to reveal the term's complicated genealogy and limited application across contexts, theologians and teachers offer dignity as a sort of chimera to the major issues confronting bodies of all sorts. "Children in Africa are starving but they have dignity," I recall a teacher once saying. The claim is that dignity inheres in all "humanity" because all bodies are made in the image of God or because Kant says so. Neither holds up to scrutiny—and neither reflects how bodies are actually treated within the logics of necropolitics and biopower. Further, dignity doesn't apply to non-human animals or other matter, which exposes the term's irredeemably anthropocentric framing. Even more concerning, dignity has long been tied to certain acts or ways of "behaving" that align with normative (heterosexual) norms that only enhance the reach and pervasiveness of biopower. This chapter explores how dignity might be read alongside scenes of instruction where dignity is usually not applied to all characters evenly.

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Like the "human" or "imago Dei," the concept (or even just the word) dignity is often imbued with assumptions, most notably that it has been 1) a stable term throughout history, 2) an unquestionably positive term applicable to all humans, and 3) universal and universally accepted by all communities across time and space.[4] Theologically, the term is employed often in discussions on human rights or is taught—almost in blasé manner—as an inherent quality that all

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[4] Ibid.

beings possess on their way to salvation.[5] Particularly with the rise of human rights (in the wake of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948) and the prominence of Catholic social thought (particularly in Vatican II's wake and as articulated by Pope John Paul II's encyclicals),[6] the term dignity has assumed an elevated—holy almost—status in theological speech, reflection, and teaching (across several scenes of instruction).

Latin American liberation theology—and Christian liberation theologies in general—stand firmly on the commitment that dignity inheres in all bodies but especially the oppressed.[7] Those on the underside of history have a special dignity. The fact that oppressive structures continue to diminish their dignity means that Christ, who shared in diminished dignity as a marginalized Jew under Roman occupation,[8] is on the side of the oppressed and poor, affirming their dignity in the face of continuous and multiple onslaughts.[9] Within the US gay Catholic community, dignity also holds special significance. It is the name of the organization that "serves as an advocate for change in the Roman Catholic Church's stance on homosexuality."[10] Dignity's statement of position and purpose read: "We have an inherent dignity because God created us, Christ died for us, and the Holy Spirit sanctified us in baptism, making us temples of the Spirit, and channels through which God's love becomes visible."[11] Dignity's use of church

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[5] See, for example, any iteration of liberation theology or Christian sexual ethics.

[6] Most notably among his encyclicals, see *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (30 December 1987), at The Holy See, https:// www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_30121987_sollicitudo-rei-socialis.html

[7] As a seminal example, see Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1973).

[8] See the fine series of by John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus* (New York: Doubleday, 1991).

[9] See, as a prominent example, Leonardo Boff, *Passion of Christ, Passion of the World: The Facts, Their Interpretations, and Their Meaning Yesterday and Today* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987).

[10] "Our Mission," Dignity USA, accessed 16 February 2024, https://www.dignityusa.org/mission

[11] Ibid.

speeches on dignity to affirm the dignity of LGBTQ peoples is admirable and an important

rebuttal to Vatican statements like "On the Care of Homosexual Persons." It is also a persuasive

rebuff to those who use the infamous (though tired) "clobber passages" and other Catholic

speeches (i.e. "objectively disordered") to strip queer persons of their dignity and rights. There is

no doubt that dignity is loaded with political and affective layers, not least when considering its

use by abolitionists or former slaves in their struggle for freedom and recognition of rights in the

face of dehumanizing systems and arbitrarily cruel anti-black laws.[12] To expose the social and

linguistic constructions of dignity, then, seems almost heretical—like an ode to repressive forces.

Contrary to all popular and even theological language and teaching, dignity is an elusive,

enigmatic even, term. Slotte characterizes "talk of human dignity" as "elastic and 'indeterminate'

in some sense."[13] It possesses an unstable genealogy of meaning and usage—multifaceted

throughout its history in the Latin west.[14] Though this section avoids presenting yet another

tedious historical lesson of the term and its use, it does offer snippets if its usages and

deployments at particular times to demonstrate its inherent fluidity. These snippets are not meant

to settle questions of meaning or usage. As will become clear, there is no one single "correct"

definition or use of dignity. Some questions to consider include: What implications does

dignity's unstable genealogy have for talk of imago Dei? For conceptions of international law?

For claims to the rights (allegedly) granted equally to all? Grand questions, indeed. For our

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[12] See, for example, Frederick Douglass' call to black men to fight for the Union Army: "rise up in the dignity of our manhood, and show by our own right arms that we are worthy to be freemen." See "Institute for Colored Youth in the Civil War Era," Villanova University Falvey Librray, accessed February 16, 2024, https://exhibits.library. villanova.edu/institute-colored-youth/community-moments/icy-and-civil-war

[13] Slotte, "Christianity and Human Dignity," 774.

[14] For a cogent discussion on the term's evolving and often confusing genealogy, see Bonnie Kent, "In the Image of God: Human Dignity after the Fall," in *Dignity: A History*, ed. Remy Debes (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 73-98.

purposes, better to focus on the implications for the teaching of theological ethics and religious education. How does dignity talk fail to address the atmospheres of violence? Even more concerning, could dignity talk somehow exasperate the atmospheres of violence, particularly biopower's already longarm reach?

These questions are particularly pertinent in light of the foundations of the modern world, with epistemes based on differences and hierarchies,[15] with a large number of flesh excluded from sanitized discussions of dignity because considered subhuman, nonhuman, or a pliable monstrosity (see Chapter 2). The designation of beast or savage throughout history—and into the present—belies any claims to a universal dignity that is inherent in all bodies.[16] In order to unsanitize the scenes of instruction and therefore expand them beyond normative confines, disrupting dignity is of paramount importance. Otherwise cliché words, though well-intentioned, will continue to placate anxieties of difference in a world enveloped by violence—with imaginations continuing on their funneled trek within existing discursive possibilities and well-known scenes (some of which we will examine the coming pages). Or as Slotte puts it, "There is a need to examine continually and critically the various meanings attributed to the talk of human dignity, including in a Christian and legal context."[17] What follows is a sustained exploration of the sanitized (or normative) uses of dignity in Catholic theological discourses and texts, which are central to classroom teaching and learning.

A Brief Detour: Uses of Dignity Generally

Before delving into the theological uses of dignity, it is important to discuss the term's prevalence and prominence in wider society. After all, it is a fantasy to imagine theological

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[15] See Quijano, "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America."

[16] Williams, *Savage Anxieties*.

[17] Slotte, "Christianity and Human Dignity," 775.

speech as unaffected by culture and vice versa. Dignity is central to any human rights discourse

and to the wider human-rights regime, which is, as Michael Rosen notes, "the closet that we have

to an internationally accepted framework for the normative regulation of political life, and it is

embedded in numerous constitutions, international conventions, and declarations."[18] Modern

jurisprudential and legal systems all across the world depend on the building block of dignity to

strengthen their grand constitutional edifices. Most will point to the 1948 Universal Declaration

of Human Rights (UDHR) as the most salient example of the use of dignity as a bulwark against

injustice. The Preamble mentions dignity right away as the justification for claims made

throughout the entire Declaration: "Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal

and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice,

and peace in the world…."[19] Article 1, which I remember as the one most often repeated in the

classroom and reproduced in texts, affirms that "All human beings are born free and equal in

dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one

another in the spirit of brotherhood."[20] The religious (particularly Christian) foundations of the

Universal Declaration are clear even if not explicit.[21]

David Hollenbach points to an "overlapping consensus" over the need for dignity talk to

ensure that the international community, in conjunction with the Catholic church, safeguard the

practical principles in the UHDR.[22] But is there an overlapping consensus of the term's meaning

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[18] Michael Rosen, *Dignity: Its History and Meaning* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 2.

[19] United Nations, *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights

[20] Ibid.

[21] See, for example, Gaven Kerr, "Human Rights and Human Dignity," Iona Institute for Religion and Society, accessed February 17, 2024, https://ionainstituteni.org/2018/11/01/human-rights-and-human-dignity/

[22] David Hollenbach, "Human Dignity in Catholic Thought," in *The Cambridge Handbook of Human Dignity: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, eds. Marcus Duwell et al. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 256.

and usage? Talk of dignity abounds to support contradictory causes. Opponents and proponents of abortion, euthanasia, and even IVF use dignity to rally for their respective causes.[23] Black Lives Matter and All Lives Matter (a pro-police movement) both deploy dignity in efforts to establish why certain lives deserve respect and rights. (Brief examination of conscience: Pause and reflect for a moment on the last time you heard, read, or even used dignity. Was it recent? In what context? Did you assume its meaning? What was the use of dignity trying to elicit or enact?)

Despite the ubiquitousness of dignity, the term has surprisingly received scant philosophical attention.[24] Remy Debes explains that "given the weight the concept bears in western value systems today as the implicit or explicit grounds for egalitarianism and theories of human rights, as well as the principle of legal theory, judicial reasoning, and even written law—the paucity of research in dignity is odd."[25] Odd indeed but not surprising given the normative, sanitized status it has achieved both in society and the academy. At this point, dignity is as inconspicuous as sky or water. But when academics, mostly philosophers, do treat the term, it is with disdain, much in the vein of the Arthur Schopenhauer quote at the start of the chapter.[26] They present dignity as a useless term that is simply a proxy for autonomy, rationality, or applications of legal and cultural rights.[27] Certain queer theorists argue that dignity is simply respectability. More on this later.

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[23] Slotte, "Christianity and Human Dignity," 773.

[24] Rosen, *Dignity,* 4.

[25] Remy Debes, "Introduction," in *Dignity: A History*, ed. Remy Debes (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 8

[26] Rosen, *Dignity,* 5.

[27] For a discussion on some of these dismissive views, see Rosen, *Dignity,* 5.

Nonetheless dignity remains a popular term and concept. Rosen's book aims to respond to the question of why there are so many understandings and (often conflicting) uses of dignity? "To untangle the idea of dignity," Rosen asserts, "the best way … is to reach back to its roots…."[28] Rosen is careful not to present dignity within the "expanding circle" narrative mode by which the term is understood progressively as one initially applicable only to a small elite and then eventually to larger swaths of people to now universal—all because society has clearly progressed from the barbarous middle ages to the age of globalization and human rights.[29] The story, as we will see, is much more messy and complicated—much more unsanitized. Historical exploration shows that the term has applied in different ways to distinct subjects and objects across time and space. Though this is the case, the myth of dignity as a normative concept emerges within a Kantian loop, to which we now turn.

The Kantian Invention of Dignity

Most contemporary academic, legal, and theological understandings of dignity are laden with Kantian overtones. Samuel Kerstein argues, "No philosophical discussion of dignity influences current debate more than Immanuel Kant's."[30] Indeed, Kant's influence on current understandings of the principle of dignity has been incomparable, influencing the conversion of dignity from an abstract unconditional and intrinsic value that all humans possess to one operative in practical moral and legal decisions.[31] In two foundational texts, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* and the *Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant puts forth his famous claim that

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[28] Rosen, *Dignity,* 7-8.

[29] Ibid., 8.

[30] Samuel J. Kerstein, "Kantian Dignity: A Critique," in in *The Cambridge Handbook of Human Dignity: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, eds. Marcus Duwell et al. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 222.

[31] Rosen, *Dignity*, 10.

"dignity is an unconditional and incomparable value possessed by all persons and only persons."[32] The well-known maxim that human persons are ends in themselves rather than a means emerges from the Kantian imagination. In a nutshell, according to Kant, humans are the only creatures with the capacity to act morally with the use of reason, which makes them autonomous.[33] Humans thus have a "rational nature," which is developed to different degrees depending on the person.[34] Presumably, the more rational are to help the less rational develop those abilities—all in a moral effort to help all persons set and pursue certain rational ends that are morally beneficial to the self. Rational nature equals personhood equals autonomous being with dignity—in sum, a person with purpose and agency.

For Kant, dignity means worth or value, which has three main features: attaches to something that already inheres in the human via reason, is unconditional, and is of incomparable worth (meaning that it cannot be exchanged and so has no price). All three features suggest a radical sameness among persons. This highly idealistic and aspirational notion holds, as Kerstein observes, that "an individual's dignity does not … vary with his wealth, social status, and achievements."[35] Kant, the narrative goes, has influenced the language of the UDHR, social justice, and perhaps even Catholic social teaching. Kant's notions of dignity are caught in a loop of assumptions: dignity because rational and rational because possessing dignity. Do other deployments of the term fare better than the circuitous claims by Kant, now taken as commonsense and so just the way it is?

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[32] Kerstein, "Kantian Dignity," 222.

[33] Slotte, "Christianity and Human Dignity," 769.

[34] Kerstein summarizes this rational nature as a "threshold concept." He writes, "If a being has the capacities that are constitutive of rational nature, it has rational nature, regardless of how well developed those capacities may be." See "Kantian Dignity," 222.

[35] Kerstein, "Kantian Dignity," 223.

Quiz most people on by what virtue we have rights, and the response will invariably be an iteration of this: "these rights derive from the fundamental worth of humans…."[36] Dignity is, according to prevailing (Kantian) rhetoric, both unearned and distinctive to humans.[37] This dignity-affirming response belies the fact that common contemporary understandings of dignity differ remarkably from ones before the rise of human rights in the early twentieth century.[38] The shift of dignity as connoting a social status to a moral one happened only in the last hundred years. Before then, as Debes describes, "dignity connoted social status of the kind associated with nobility, power, gentlemanly comportment, or preferment within the church…."[39] One would be hard pressed to find mention of dignity in any constitutions prior to the 1917 Mexican and 1919 Weimer constitutions. And even those documents don't necessarily deploy it in a moral sense or to ground rights—the two most common uses today. The UDHR is really the first instance of the term's consistent use as a moral concept. Debes describes this moment as a watershed event that led to dignity's now widespread usage to denote some moral, inherent quality of persons.[40]

It is a misconception, however, to assume that dignity talk broadly writ (not talk of dignity specifically as a moral concept) began to spread only within the last hundred years or before that with the western liberal constitutions of the 18th and 19th centuries. Debes elaborates on other common myths or misconceptions of dignity's history. It does not originate with

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[36] Debes, "Introduction," 2.

[37] Ibid., 5.

[38] Ibid., 2.

[39] Ibid.

[40] Debes, "Introduction," 3.

Immanuel Kant's theories. It also doesn't stem from Renaissance thinkers, even though Giovanni Pico della Mirandola's work *Oration on the Dignity of Man*[41] (1486) is often cited as the example par excellence of humanist hubris regarding human standing and dignity. Pico, contrary to popular belief, wanted humans to become angelic, for that represented in his worldview the highest dignity and rank. Humans, in that cosmology, were not the pinnacle of creation.[42] Actually one of the most sustained Renaissance accounts on dignity is found in Manetti's *On the Dignity and Excellence of Man*. Therein the term *dignitas* is found significantly more often than in Pico's work.[43] Finally, Debes counters the idea that since dignity derives from the Latin *dignitas*, and since Roman common law is an ancestor of contemporary common and even civil law, *dignitas* is clearly the forbearer of current uses of dignity in relation to legal rights and standing.[44]

So where to look, especially for Western and traditional-minded readers with a predilection for "origins"? Cicero offers one of the earliest sustained and consistent discussions of dignity. In fact, he uses the term over a thousand times across his corpus.[45] His use of dignity is tied to occupation or the holding of public office; dignity for him signifies a status—for example, "the dignity of the president." According to Cicero, dignity also attaches to those civic leaders who excel at practicing *ataraxia*—that is, the ability to be tranquil under the pressures and temptations endemic to the office and its power.[46] Dignity is a status earned through position

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[41] (Washington, DC: Regnery Gateway, 1956).

[42] Brian Copenhaver, "Dignity, Vile Bodies, and Nakedness: Giovanni Pico and Giannozzo Manetti," in *Dignity: A History*, ed. Remy Debes (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 134.

[43] Ibid., 141.

[44] Debes, "Introduction."

[45] Copenhaver, "Dignity, Vile Bodies, and Nakedness," 143.

[46] Ibid., 144.

and actions; it therefore comes and goes, depending on one's random luck and (un)ethical maneuvers. Interestingly, contrary to popular uses of dignity today, Cicero's understanding and application of dignity seems to still apply today. Bodies usually become more or less dignified depending on behaviors, statuses, and even which families or neighborhoods they are born into. Cicero also ties dignity to beauty and utility. *Dignitas*, *decorum*, and *dignas* are all "Latin words [that] connote what can be judged aesthetically."[47]

In sum, here are the various meanings of *dignitas* discussed by Cicero and those after him: status, office, rank, socioeconomic status, beauty, usefulness, rhetorical abilities, ability to achieve *ataraxia*, and others too numerous to mention here. Roman uses of it are varied and hard to pin down. As Copenhaver reminds us, even "the few free adult males who could pay the price for *dignitas* might lose it and regain it: it was transitory, circumstantial, and not inalienable."[48] Dignity hinges on the situation, on the scene of instruction or context—which seems like a more honest understanding of the term than its current universal and universalizing ambitions portray.

The next section turns to the meanings of dignity given by Christian-Catholic speeches and uses—also meanings and uses that both betray and exceed their all-too-local genealogies and origins.

Catholic Theological Speeches on Human Dignity

As in secular and legal contexts, dignity also features prominently in contemporary Catholic speeches and instruction. In the Catholic (Latin West) tradition, or in dominant Catholic theological scenes of instruction, dignity is often presented as something *all* humans possess simply because they are made in the image of God.

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[47] Ibid., 147.

[48] Ibid., 148.

The Catholic Church's two principle compendia on doctrines cement the church's current stance on dignity. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches: "The dignity of the human person is rooted in the image and likeness of God…."[49] Teachers, religious educators, priests, and others often present imago Dei alongside dignity—like two peas in a pod, inseparable and incomplete without each other. *The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* discusses human dignity at length in Chapter 3, "The Human Person and Human Rights."[50] Its language is emblematic of how dignity is theorized in the theological classroom. One section begins by claiming that "God shows no partiality, since all people have the same dignity as creatures made in his image and likeness."[51] The section continues by proffering an explanation for the dignity that inheres in humans: "Since something of all the glory of God shines on the face of every person, the dignity of every person before God is the basis of the dignity of man before other men."[52] Since all people equally possess dignity, nothing human should interfere with the dignity, according to the *Compendium*. Societies must always have the human person in mind. "A just society can become a reality only when it is based on the respect for the transcendent dignity of the human person," states the *Compendium*. "The person represents the ultimate end of society, which is ordered to the person."[53] In summary, all persons have dignity because all persons are created in the image of God, which allows for God's grace to shine on each and every face.

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[49] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, § 1700.

[50] *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*.

[51] Ibid., § 144.

[52] Ibid.

[53] Ibid., § 132.

But, as Bonnie Kent tells us, "very few [early Christian] works expatiate on some dignity that all people have just because we are human, or because humans are created in God's image."[54] Like in Roman texts, early Christian works use dignity in a rather narrow (or specific) sense.[55] Some texts discuss the dignity of Christ as the highest office holder, with other offices (kings, bishops, popes, priests) also—though less—dignified. Still other texts underscore the dignity of the soul or of the virtues. Readers will have a difficult time finding texts that assert a species-wide, species-specific inherent dignity before the advent of the human rights regime and Catholic social teaching after Vatican II.[56]

The more typical discussions on dignity (pre-twentieth century) consider dignity a conditional concept or something aspirational that Christians must work toward. Notwithstanding the claim that dignity is biblical, "*dignitas*" doesn't feature in the Bible, not even in the New Testament.[57] So Christians had to read into scripture (exegesis or perhaps eisegesis) and extract the meaning. On that account, the first sustained mention of *Imago Dei* in relation to dignity comes in the meditation from Alcuin (800), who intimated that humans were created by "the will of the blessed Trinity and by an act of divine lordiness, so that man would understand from the honor of his original condition how much he owes his Creator, in keeping with the privilege that the Creator bestowed on him in his original state of *dignitas*…."[58] Alcuin continues by distinguishing among distinct *dignitates:* "intellect, will and memory… not three

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[54] Kent, "In the Image of God," 73.

[55] Ibid., 78.

[56] Ibid., 73-74.

[57] Copenhaver, "Dignity, Vile Bodies, and Nakedness," 148-49.

[58] Alcuin, *Dicta Albini de imagine*, in John Marenbon, *From the Circle of Alcuin to the School of Auxerre: Logic and Philosophy in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 158-61.

souls in one body, but a single soul having three *dignitates*." [59] These three natures in one, which mirror the Trinity, carry the image of God, which is found within and which is directed toward loving the Creator. Note how the three essences are non-material, non-flesh.[60] Matters of the flesh are by implication beneath the Godhead who transcends the material. In essence, as Copenhaver writes, "The *dignitas* carried by the image is worthiness and also a rank, gauged theologically as higher or lower, merited or unmerited, saved or lost."[61]

Also consider Aquinas' claim that "people can fall away from human dignity by sinning, becoming in a way like mindless animals, so that it can be good to kill them."[62] Aquinas, it seems, believed that a Christian (and usually *only* a Christian) could acquire dignity through correct belief (orthodoxy) and right actions (ethics) instead of simply possessing it like an ontology. Dignity for Aquinas is like an attribute that one must always earn—and usually by accepting or assenting to Christian teachings on God and salvation. Further, as Copenhaver alleges, "*dignitas* feeds on comparison and starves without it."[63] For instance, both Augustine and Aquinas consider angels as having more dignity because they are fashioned closer to God's image than humans.[64] But humans, because they have a soul and use reason, are higher than animals. So supposing humans stoop to the level of animals, because they have a soul that animals lack, "even sinful human beings, enslaved to our own desires and destined to hell, have

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[59] Alcuin, *Dicta Albini,* 33.

[60] Copenhaver, "Dignity, Vile Bodies, and Nakedness," 151.

[61] Ibid.

[62] Cited in Kent, "In the Image of God," 74.

[63] Copenhaver, "Dignity, Vile Bodies, and Nakedness," 161.

[64] See Augustine, Book XII, *City of God*. For Augustine, humans are beneath angels, but because of free will, humans have the choice to rise to the level of angels or stoop to the level of animals. See also Aquinas, Summa, I.93.3.

more dignity than animals."[65] Finally, in contradiction to any claims of universal (or species-wide) dignity, for Aquinas, Christians seem best positioned from among all humans to possess higher degrees of dignity, for their deformed nature—the result of Adam's sin imputed to all humans—has been reformed through Christ's incarnation. Even the most charitable readers would be hard-pressed to find mentions of a dignity that inheres in all humans, regardless of status, belief, or actions.

That changed with Vatican II and with the rise of Catholic social teaching in response to human rights. David Hollenbach notes that since Vatican II, human rights have come into sharp focus within the church—with dignity also coming to the fore. Before Vatican II, and especially before the papacy and encyclicals of Leo XIII (particularly *Rerum Novarum*), the church's stance toward society was one of distrust—a stance that prompted a staunchly defensive (paranoid even) position against modernity.[66] Pope Pius IX's "Syllabus of Errors" is perhaps the best-known example of the church's reactionary position.[67] *Rerum Novarum* and later *Quadrageismo Anno* led to social Catholicism, which Hollenbach defines as "a tradition that appeals to human dignity as the basis of its strong commitment to social justice."[68]

But what is the basis for this human dignity? Hollenbach writes, "Human dignity is theologically supported by the biblical teaching in the book of Genesis that human beings are created in the image and likeness of God."[69] He further highlights Aquinas' assertion that

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[65] Kent, "In the Image of God," 81.

[66] See Holland, *Modern Catholic Social Teaching,* especially 60-106, wherein Holland examines what he calls "the Pre-Leonine encyclicals from Benedict XIV to Pius IX."

[67] Hollenbach, "Human Dignity in Catholic Thought," 251.

[68] Ibid., 252.

[69] Ibid., 252.

humans are the "only creatures God has created as valuable in themselves."[70] Yet Hollenbach

also claims that the viability of dignity has secular warrants: "Catholicism's long-standing,

natural-law based conviction that fundamental ethical responsibilities can be grasped by human

reason and by philosophical reflection on what it is to be human."[71] Reason, perhaps in a Kantian

vein, once again surfaces to justify both human and dignity. He builds on the works of Aristotle

and Aquinas to propose three secular warrants for dignity: transcendence of mind, sacredness of

conscience, and excellence of liberty. Hollenbach also claims that humans' relational and

functional natures (that humans "exercise a creative, sustaining and governing role in the world")

prove that dignity is a fundamental, intuitive even, concept.[72] Dignity seems to be always

conditioned on difference and on agency.

Up to this point, one can argue that Hollenbach's view of dignity is almost simpatico with

Kant's. Here is one point of divergence: "Human dignity is not realized by persons acting

autonomously on their own," Hollenbach states, "but only through collaboration and

solidarity."[73] As social beings, or in Aristotle's words, social animals, dignity is safeguarded and

promoted only in community or in solidarity. This ties into Catholic social teaching's view that

dignity is also a political category that the state has a duty to protect—an argument that in a

single stroke binds dignity with rights talk.[74] This concoction continues to intoxicate teachers and

students alike, especially when considered alongside imago Dei. But its limits are exposed in

Catholic speeches and teachings on "homosexual" persons.

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[70] Ibid.

[71] Ibid., 253.

[72] Ibid.

[73] Ibid., 254.

[74] See, for example, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, § 145.

Queer Human Dignity?

For my students, the church's conflicting teachings on "homosexuality"[75] present perhaps the most significant obstacle to their honest considerations of both imago Dei and dignity. My students often pose a version of this question: If each person has inherent worth because made in the image of God, then why does church teaching—and Christians, in general—police and demean queer persons? Their queries don't stop there. Several students have also questioned what they characterize as the church's outdated teachings on gender. Indeed, I have yet to see mention of trans persons in any official Vatican document or teaching document. Their existence is ignored; their realities not important. Existing Catholic scenes of instruction do not yet produce scripts for trans bodies.

In this section, the notion of a universal dignity for all is further challenged, if not already exposed by Valladolid, ontological terror, and the preceding sections. First, let's consider the church's teachings on gender or, as its speeches call it, the two sexes. Paragraphs 146 and 147 of the *Compendium* address the equal dignity of male and female:

> Male and female differentiate two individuals of equal dignity, which does not however reflect a static equality, because the specificity of the female is different from the specificity of the male, and this difference in equality is enriching and indispensable for the harmony of life in society.

The key takeaway: biopower or social homeostasis, synonymous with the common good, depends on the harmonious cooperation of male and female.

Developed most notably by Pope John Paul II, the theology of mutual complementarity continues to be taught via the theology of the body, compiled from a series of lectures delivered

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[75] The term homosexuality seems to represent an "umbrella" term for identities today considered "queer." Until recently, the Magisterium did not address "gender" apart from sexuality. See Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Dignitas Infinita.* See https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2024/04/08/240408c.html

early in his papacy. The theology of the body, which significantly relies on a theological anthropology that essentializes gender, establishes the "norms" for Christian bodies, loves, and desires. These teaching have influenced current Catholic speeches on gender. Paragraph 147 of the *Compendium* states, "Woman is the complement of man, as man is the complement of woman: man and woman complete each other mutually, not only from a physical and psychological point of view, but also ontologically." This duality of male and female allows the human to become a "full reality." By this logic, only when man unites with woman, or vice versa, does one become a full human. So does one lack imago Dei and dignity otherwise? The paragraph ends by noting that "in the encounter of man and woman a unitary conception of the human person is brought about, based not on the logic of self-centeredness and self-affirmation, but on that of love and solidarity."[76] It seems that homosexual love, then, is self-centered and self-affirming—a selfish desire that leads to a diminished humanity and to less degrees of dignity.

The narrative centers the institution of Christian marriage as a highly dignified scene, for it ritualizes the completion of man and woman as one flesh. The next section explores scenes and speeches on marriage and juxtaposes them with the undignified scenes of bathhouses—all in an effort to destabilize the notion that dignity inheres across all contexts and bodies.

<div align="center">Christian (?) Marriage</div>

The scene replays in the imaginations of young girls. Men ready to "establish themselves" in society through mature domestic life also replay the scene in their minds as they plan (script) the scene meticulously. (The more well-planned the more he ingratiates himself to his lover.) The scene is meant to be movie-like—an episodic scene of ecstatic romance that

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[76] *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, § 147.

culminates in the perfect freeze frame. (Now with social media, someone is usually there to capture the moment.) The ideal frame is of the couple, usually on a beach or some tourist destination known for romance, the Eiffel Tower serving as the best prop, kissing while the bride somehow manages to showcase her new bling through a not so subtle extension of her ring finger. The couple, ring and all, are now on their way to a dignified life as husband and wife.

Of course, the more important upcoming scene now comes into sharper focus for the couple: the wedding. Will it be religious or not? Perhaps spiritual but not religious? Who will officiate? Who will attend? Who will bake the cake? What design will the cake feature? What of the venue? What of the afterparty? Photographer? Dress? Disc jockey? And the list goes on. The wedding planner becomes, in effect, the chief ritualist, responsible for allaying the couple's concerns and anxieties occasioned by the dizzying array of logistics that go into staging the perfect wedding—the ideal scene of love.[77]

In both theological and judicial speeches, marriage occupies a place of utmost prominence because seen as natural and widely accepted by communities. Indeed, both speeches present the union of two, usually of the opposite sex, as a timeless institution that has changed little over time. In the majority opinion for the now (in)famous Supreme Court case *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015), Justice Kennedy writes, "From their beginning to their most recent page, the annals of human history reveal the transcendent importance of marriage."[78] Marriage is central to the human condition, Kennedy argues, so it is "unsurprising that the institution has existed for millennia and across civilizations."[79] Marriage has united strangers and forged bonds across

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[77] Inspiration for this paragraph comes from Mark D. Jordan, *Blessing Same-Sex Unions: The Perils of Queer Romance and the Confusions of Christian Marriage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 79-99.

[78] *Obergefell v. Hodges*, 576 US 644 (2015), 3.

[79] Ibid.

families and communities. It is essential to the common good—to the establishment and functioning of civil society. These hallmarks lead Kennedy to conclude: "The lifelong union of a man and a woman has always promised nobility and dignity to all persons, without regard to their station in life."[80] Not only does marriage provide an elevated status to persons but it is "essential to our most profound hopes and aspirations."[81] Without marriage, one may wither in solitude with nothing to show for it.[82] One remains incomplete, one half of a full self, a shell of a person.

It is astonishing (or not) how much "objective" jurisprudence borrows from religious language. Paragraph 216 of the *Compendium* states that "in every culture there exists a certain sense of dignity of the marriage union, although this is not evident everywhere with the same clarity." Echoing Kennedy, church teaching would have us believe that marriage has been the same across time and space. For the church, marriage harkens back to Christ: the alpha and omega of cosmic time. The main function of marriage: the unity of the two to form one flesh that is then supposed to create new flesh. "In its 'objective truth,' marriage is ordered to the procreation and education of children."[83] Progeny are a gift not only for the parents but for society as a whole. The family becomes the locus for an "authentic community of persons" and the privileged place for making love known.[84] And love, the *Compendium* tells us, is "the essential reality for defining marriage and the family that every person—man and woman—is

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[80] Ibid.

[81] Ibid.

[82] Ibid.

[83] *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, §217.

[84] Ibid., §221.

recognized, accepted and respected in his dignity."[85] Justice Kennedy's words or the *Compendium*? Rather indistinguishable at this juncture.

The *Compendium* next introduces a series of anthropological claims: all humans are "made for love and cannot live without love"[86]; gender ideologies are erroneous and erode the dignity of marriage between two opposite sexes that work in harmony and depend on their complementarity according to the precepts of natural law;[87] and unions between homosexual persons are objectively incongruous, as evident by their inability to procreate or to complement each other (physically and emotionally). Quoting John Paul II, the *Compendium* reiterates: "It is only in the union of two sexually different persons that the individual can achieve perfection in a synthesis of unity and mutual psychosocial completion."[88] In a seemingly pastoral (or paternalistic) tone, the paragraph continues by urging Catholics that "Homosexual persons are to be fully respected in their human dignity and encouraged to follow God's plan with a particular attention in the exercise of chastity."[89] Yet the teaching makes clear that respect for their dignity "does not justify the legitimization of behavior that is not consistent with moral law, even less does it justify the recognition of a right to marriage between persons of the same sex and its being considered equivalent to the family."[90]

In an ironic twist, the state, which according to Catholic social teaching should safeguard dignity, now works as a vigilant moral police power to prevent the "grave detriment to the common good" that same-sex marriage poses to the institution at the foundation of all society,

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[85] Ibid.

[86] Ibid., §223.

[87] Ibid., §224.

[88] Ibid., §228.

[89] Ibid.

[90] Ibid.

marriage between a man and woman. The *Compendium* notes, "By putting homosexual unions on a legal plane analogous to that of marriage and the family, the State acts arbitrarily and in contradiction with its duties."[91] Notwithstanding any theologizing that might be done to ameliorate the teachings, when read in tandem the Compendium's phrases produce this interpretation: the state must safeguard the dignity of opposite sex couples at the expense of same-sex couples. Marriage, historically and theologically understood, is between a man and woman—the only dyad capable of uniting their flesh for the purpose of creating new flesh, as dictated by natural and moral law.[92] Full humanity and so full dignity emerge only when the two become one to create a family for the benefit of all society. Thus, "the civil community cannot remain indifferent to the destabilizing tendencies that threaten its foundations at their very roots."[93] Homosexual unions are de facto, then, a threat to social order and stability because they threaten the dignity of marriage. In the name of safeguarding dignity, the state must prevent unions that weaken marriage as always understood. A boy and a boy can never have their cake and eat it too.

Or can they? According to Justice Kennedy, same-sex couples should reap the benefits of the dignified institution of marriage. In the landmark *Obergefell* case, the Court granted certiorari to a set of consolidated cases that raised two legal questions: 1) "whether the Fourteenth Amendment requires a State to license a marriage between two people of the same sex?"; and 2) "whether the Fourteenth Amendment requires a State to recognize a same-sex marriage licensed and performed in a state which does not grant that right?"[94] Before providing a

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[91] Ibid.

[92] See Jordan, *Blessing Same-Sex Unions.*

[93] *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, §229.

[94] *Obergefell v. Hodges, 2-3.*

ruling, the analysis—which often reads like text from the pages of the *Compendium* or even John Paul II's Theology of the Body—reiterates almost ad nauseum that the various petitioning couples are all deeply in love and in long-term committed relationships. Kennedy, for example, underscores a lesbian couple's commitment: "They celebrated a commitment ceremony to honor their permanent relation in 2007."[95] This couple also adopted three children. Another couple includes an Army Reserve veteran, whom Kennedy notes has "served this Nation to preserve the freedom the Constitution protects…."[96] And, of course, mention of the case's eponymous couple is necessary. Kennedy narrates that James Obergefell and John Arthur met more than two decades ago. "They fell in love and started a life together, establishing a lasting, committed relation." When Arthur was diagnosed with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), the couple wanted to "commit to one another" through marriage before Arthur's demise. Kennedy presents each couple as exemplary and so respectable according to normative societal markers: the lesbian couple adopted children who were sick and abandoned, another couple included a military veteran, and Obergefell and his partner had been in love and in a committed monogamous relationship before death parted them.

Kennedy does not stop there, however. He also acknowledges that while the couples in the consolidated cases seek to challenge the time-honored institution of marriage between one man and one woman, they do not seek to destroy or undermine the institution itself. Kennedy seeks to placate any anxieties perhaps partly stoked by the Catholic church's teachings that denigration of marriage equals the disintegration of society or the common good. "Were their intent to demean the revered idea and reality of marriage, the petitioners' claims would be of a

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[95] Ibid., 5.

[96] Ibid., 6.

different order," Kennedy writes. "To the contrary, it is the enduring importance of marriage that underlies the petitioners' contentions."[97] And this becomes central to his final ruling: "Far from seeking to devalue marriage, the petitioners seek it for themselves because of their respect—and need—for its privileges and responsibilities."[98] Translation: the couples have bought into the notion that marriage is dignified, and since each couple is respectable, they should be allowed to dignify their committed relationships through state sanction of their unions.

State recognition, Kennedy argues, will ensure that same-sex couples contribute to safeguarding society by, among other acts, protecting children. "Marriage … affords the permanency and stability important to children's best interests."[99] He then notes that "many same-sex couples provide loving and nurturing homes to their children, whether biological or adopted. And hundreds of thousands of children are presently being raised by such couples."[100] Of course, this rhetoric is a welcome shift from nefarious speeches that have long circulated and which present same-sex couples as recruiting and brainwashing children in efforts to swell their ranks.[101] Yet it still places children as the cornerstone and telos of sexual desire, much in the style of Catholic speeches on marriage. It's all about the children: "Without the recognition, stability, and predictability marriage offers, their children suffer the stigma of knowing their families are somehow lesser."[102] This, in turn, might disrupt the common good and social order, since "the Nation's traditions make clear that marriage is a keystone of our social order."[103] By

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[97] Ibid., 4.

[98] Ibid.

[99] Ibid., 15.

[100] Ibid.

[101] See Mark D. Jordan's immensely insightful *Recruiting Young Love: How Christians Talk about Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

[102] *Obergefell v. Hodges*, 15.

[103] *Obergefell v. Hodges*, 16.

locking same-sex couples out of marriage, they are unable to contribute to upholding the social

order—making them doubly undignified in the process.

Dignity in these cases seems tied not to some inherent quality but to certain choices and

actions that seem to Kennedy and others as already respectable enough for the state to dignify.

Stephen Engel and Timothy Lyle argue that dignity in the marriage cases, *Windsor* and

Obergefell, "implies respectability via verisimilitude to heteronormative romance and

marriage."[104] In other words, the rulings imply that "same-sex couples who adhere to these

requirements—coupled, private, outwardly romantic, and monogamous—are entitled to civil

marriage."[105] Perhaps that is because the couples in the cases are familiar to Kennedy and others;

they mirror straight, vanilla arrangements that the church might approve if not for the

inconvenience of similar genitals mixing in the bedroom. The couples don't deviate from sexual

and societal norms, and they don't seek to "demean" or destroy the sacred institution of

marriage. Kennedy's ruling is worth replicating in whole:

> No union is more profound than marriage, for it embodies the highest ideals of love, fidelity, devotion, sacrifice, and family. In forming a marital union, two people become something greater than once they were. As some of the petitioners in these cases demonstrate, marriage embodies a love that may endure even past death. It would misunderstand these men and women to say they disrespect the idea of marriage. Their plea is that they do respect it, respect it so deeply that they seek to find its fulfillment for themselves. Their hope is not to be condemned to live in loneliness, excluded from one of civilization's oldest institutions. They ask for equal dignity in the eyes of the law. The Constitution grants them that right.[106]

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[104] Stephen M. Engel and Timothy S. Lyle, *Disrupting Dignity: Rethinking Power and Progress in LGBTQ Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2021), 265.

[105] Ibid., 276.

[106] *Obergefell v. Hodges*, 28.

Equal dignity, which the State grants, comes via adherence to State norms. According to the opinion, no norm is more sacred than marriage, which is at the foundation of civil society.[107] A couple's bonds—whether same-sex or not—are dignified through marriage. Certain statuses are extolled over others. Married over single seems preferable, as noted by Engle and Lyle: "to be married is to be more complete."[108] The language of completeness echoes Catholic anthropological speeches that imply human completeness and dignity only through the union between a man and a woman. For Kennedy, arrangements or kinships outside the confines of state-sanctioned romantic marriage are non-existent—perhaps because outside natural law.[109] Polyamorous and polygamous relationships are excluded from the dignified behaviors that the state should sanction with its sacrosanct institution. They are not respectable because not monogamous or oriented toward child rearing; they are fleeting, unstable, and hard to police—they are unnatural.[110]

Once again, dignity feeds off comparison—and, notwithstanding rhetoric to the opposite, dignity needs parameters. It needs characters that fit a certain script of what is imagined as dignified, as natural in any society across time and space. Other bodies are then measured and disciplined by the parameters that might be accepted as naturally desirable to health and wellbeing (biopower).

Disrupting Dignity: From Churches and Marriage Halls to Bathhouses

Can dignity survive its alignments with biopower and pastoral power? Or will it continue, despite the well-intentioned deployments of its adherents—to function as a disciplinary tool that

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[107] Engel and Lyle, *Disrupting Dignity*, 266-267.

[108] Ibid., 267.

[109] Ibid.

[110] Ibid.

limits the possibilities for desires and ontologies? Will dignity continue to produce lesser bodies because of unrespectable desires and actions? How can theological education escape the controlled and sanitized scenes of the bride and groom saying "I do" and kissing in front an altar and their approving families? In order to begin considering these concerns, let's turn to a scene that, compared to the venerable scenes of marriage, seems farthest removed from dignity and dignified behavior. Let's briefly enter the dim and "unsanitary" (literally and metaphorically) environments of bathhouses, especially when HIV/AIDS, then known as GRIDS or the "gay cancer," was ravaging communities of gay men in San Francisco and New York City in the 1980s.

Semen on the floor and the presence of glory holes, the smell of sweat mixed with brand and cheap colognes, the sounds of grunts amid conversations of all kinds…. If you are blushing, dear reader, I've already accomplished a modest disruption of dignity as something innate and not based on status or acts. Now imagine repeating that scenario to a group of theologians in a formal setting? Respectability, decorum, dignity—all would be questioned of the one posing the question. As Mark Jordan so aptly writes, "If we can be squeamish about parts of our bodies and how they behave, we are sometimes even more squeamish about parts of Christian speech that refer to them."[111] Yet I agree with Jordan that in order to approach Christian sexual ethics seriously, the squeamishness must be overcome, lest dignity and other concepts only remain relevant in sanitizes scenes that offer no new teachings within their closed parameters.

Contact Under the Dim Lights

Bathhouses as places for gay men to find kindship, which sometimes involves sex, are nothing new. Accounts of bathhouses in the United States date to at least the 1920s. Their

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[111] Jordan, *The Ethics of Sex*, 77.

numbers swelled throughout the 1950s and 1960s, particularly in San Francisco and New York City. Bathhouses afforded gay men spaces to gather—rare spaces for socialization much too taboo to occur in quotidian settings. These spaces encouraged "a vibrant, safe, and prideful gay male sexual culture" during periods and in places where gay men were seen as monstrous, unnatural, or as vectors for disease.[112] But they were safe spaces that facilitated much more than sexual activity. Several bathhouses began to offer an array of programming that rivals if not supersedes what would have been locally available to gay men in civic community centers. Cafes, game rooms, dance floors, holiday parties, and even poetry slams were not uncommon in some bathhouses of the 1970s and 1980s.[113] As Engel and Lyle put it, "Because they provided safety, democratic camaraderie, and mutually understood and valued sexual pleasure free of stigmatization—particularly when homosexuality was criminalized—they contributed immensely to the development of emotional empowerment and community-building."[114] Bathhouses formed counterpublics that facilitated queer kinship, understood as often fleeting spaces for quick sex or one-night stands and other times more permanent.[115]

Helpful here is what Samuel Delany describes as contact instead of networking, though bathhouses were certainly sites of both. Rather than define contact, Delany provides vivid examples of its quotidian nature: "Contact is the conversation that starts in the line at the grocery counter with the person behind you while the clerk is changing the paper roll in the cash

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[112] Engel and Lyle, *Disrupting Dignity*, 32.

[113] See Dianne Chisholm, "The Traffic in Free Love and Other Crises: Space, Pace, Sex and Shock in the City of Late Modernity," *Parallax: Journal of Metadiscursive Theory and Cultural Practices* 5, no. 3 (1999): 69-89.

[114] Engel and Lyle, *Disrupting Dignity*, 32.

[115] Engel and Lyle define counterpublics as "alternative spaces that probe and resist normativity to offer subordinated communities different possibilities and divergent logics. They act as vital sites of contestation, possibility, and reformulation." *Disrupting Dignity*, 35.

register."[116] Contact also occurs when neighbors exchange morning pleasantries, or when one

encounters and engages strangers on similar routes each day—police officer, mailman, store

clerk, or person walking the dog. In essence, contact occurs in passing; it is fleeting, perhaps

random, and without some grand purpose or telos. This is distinct from the clear aims of

networking, namely to establish a connection with someone of comparable or higher

socioeconomic class or educational background to yield some benefit (usually monetary) for the

self.[117] For Delany, then, "given the mode of capitalism under which we live, life is at its most

rewarding, productive, and pleasant when large numbers of people understand, appreciate, and

seek out interclass contact and communication conducted in a mode of good will."[118] Contact

produces the potential to crosspollinate—to engage with those outside one's usual tribes, circles,

and scenes of instructions in organic ways that disrupt linear temporal logics of relationship.

> Importantly, contact also applies to physical and conversational intercourse, which
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> blooms in and as "casual sex" in public rest rooms, sex movies, public parks, singles bars, and sex clubs, on street corners with heavy hustling traffic, and in the adjoining motels or the apartments of one or another participant, from which nonsexual friendships and/or acquaintances lasting for decades or a lifetime may spring, not to mention the conversation of a john with a prostitute or hustler encountered on one or another street corner or in a bar—a relation that, a decade later, has developed into a smile or a nod, even when (to quote Swinburne) "You have forgotten my kisses, / And I have forgotten your name."[119]

Contact can be a useful term for accounts of lo cotidiano that wish to go beyond either sanitized

scenes (for example, describing only polite and dignified exchanges among parishioners or

between devotees of La Virgin) or melodramatic, pornographic scenes of extreme violence (like

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[116] Samuel R. Delany, *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 123.

[117] Ibid, 122.

[118] Ibid., 111.

[119] Ibid., 123-24.

descriptions of mutilated bodies or the extreme plight of a poor family). Are not the forms of contact Delany describes among the most common? Or is contact omitted because it might wade into undignified territory, such as conversations with drug dealers, pimps, sex workers, and other bodies considered too unsavory for dignified theological speeches and consideration? Or maybe better to ignore fleeting encounters at a nightclub. They don't count as furtive scenes of theological instruction.

Perhaps these brushes (sometimes trysts) with strangers are too unpredictable and random to capture with sociological precision or through theological categories and speeches that purport to always pronounce on lived realities across contexts to proscribe ethical meaning. Contact presents limits to clean categorical imperatives; it exposes the closed parameters—the controlled conditions or staged scenes of instruction—upon which dignity depends for its coherence and application in both the law and theology. After all, if contact, as Delany writes, can also "be two men watching each other masturbating together in adjacent urinals of a public john," what can existing theological speeches assert about its instructional value besides appeals to how the scene violates laws on public morality, is utterly and objectively indecent and disordered, and contravenes its own speeches on modesty and masturbation? Clearly, this scene offers little as a theological scene of instruction other than to showcase the undignified—dirty and illegal— behavior of these two characters. Predictable script, even more predictable outcome. Conversation closed. On to the next fruitful scene: the love of a dignified Christian couple out to save the world as Maryknoll missionaries, perhaps?

Back to bathhouses. Because of their reputation as spaces of reckless, often anonymous and untethered pleasure—where gay men went to "abandon order or the promise of

tomorrow"[120]—their regulation and eventual closures became a focal point for public health officials, politicians, and religious leaders of all political persuasions. In the minds of many, nothing positive, good, or productive can ever happen in a dim, seedy establishment that exists only to lubricate libidinal desires of bodies considered ungovernable because unnatural.[121] Sex acts and locations became one and the same. The scenes and their characters indistinguishable. Spaces that promote concupiscence would represent an affront to the dignity of a monogamous, committed relationship between man and woman—initiating the precipitous downfall of civil society and the eroding of the common good.

Context matters to the meaning and uses of dignity. The HIV/AIDS crisis of the 1980s, which many "experts" blamed on the behavior of gay men and which others believed to be divine punishment for an unnatural and perverted lifestyle and identity, only heightened the calls to reign in these houses of vice and rampant promiscuity, lest they become the new rats of a new plague.[122] Disease, sex, and bathhouses became synonymous. In a clear nod to biopower, death became associated with bathhouses, so clarion calls to shutter them resonated with the sentiments of a public in search of homeostasis and optimal health. San Francisco supervisor Harry Britt is quoted in an article as saying: "Sexual activity in places like baths or sex clubs should no longer be associated with pleasure—it should be associated with death."[123] Slogans like "behave or die" soon began to circulate. Now bathhouses and their patrons became vectors that, if not policed, could spread their "filth" beyond the seedy nightclubs. The undignified, dirty behavior within bathhouses constituted, according to one memo, a public nuisance, defined as "whatever is

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[120] Engel and Lyle, *Disrupting Dignity*, 39.

[121] Ibid., 60.

[122] Ibid., 51

[123] Ibid.,

dangerous to human life or detrimental to human health."[124] As Eric Stanley perceptively puts it, "Queer contagion, including the anxiety triggered by gender nonnormatively, found its viral materiality in the early 1980s."[125] It also found its institutional materiality in places where polite folk don't visit—or at least visit openly. A New York City public health memo defined these spaces as "breeding grounds of disease and, therefore, as something that the state should not countenance as a site of normatively dignified behavior."[126] To the general public, bathhouses were unworthy spaces synonymous with incubators of the "Gay Cancer," GRIDS, and other diseases of the deviants.

Its patrons were reduced to disposable characters, unless their deaths served as a teaching tool that warned others not to deviate from the scenes of instruction that champion dignified marriage within gender normative scripts.[127] Visit the bathhouses and you will meet your end. The state, in its infinitely paternalistic (and pastoral) capacity, cannot just stand by and risk contagion spreading to respectable, productive members of society. Thus, since bathhouses now became a scene of death, "their clientele was either to be rescued by the state or culpable in the spread of disease and irresponsible for neglecting their own health and that of others."[128] Bathhouses were staged as necro-houses, with patrons as undignified, sex-crazed and selfish characters unable to add anything of value to society's march toward the common good. The only solution was to close these dens of sin in a last-ditch effort to save future gays from the

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[124] Ibid., 50.

[125] Stanley, *Atmospheres of Violence*, 53.

[126] Engel and Lyle, *Disrupting Dignity*, 51.

[127] Stanley notes how bodies who succumbed to AIDS, bodies that were denied information and treatment, were reduced to a "pedagogy of disposability—as a warning, beyond sacrifice, for the trespass of existing against the parameters of gender normativity." See *Atmospheres of Violence*, 55.

[128] Engel and Lyle, *Disrupting Dignity*, 53.

undignified behaviors that caused plague—a plague that eventually mattered because not limited to the bathhouses. Go back into the bedroom with a single partner, or better yet adopt a chaste life to keep yourself and everyone around you safe. That is the path to dignity—to a life of "restraint and maturity." Grow up or die. Submit to state (and religious) surveillance and repent. Behave or disappear among a graveyard of bones that were never meant to see the light of day.

Closing Thoughts: Dignity as a Dead End?

Offering the scene of the bathhouses, the acts of contact, and the characters of diseased, sex-crazed gay men should help theologians reconsider the uses and abuses of dignity as a concept applicable to all across time and space. Dignity shifts, morphs—applies to different bodies at different times and in different locations and situations. To redeem or salvage dignity— that is, to employ it in a non-universal or sanitized way—theologians should grapple with its use outside the strict parameters of theological scenes of instruction or consider how the knotted nature of legal and theological language produces a theological speech that mirrors codes or laws.[129] One way to begin complexifying dignity is by considering some of the critiques raised by queer voices, to which we turn. Though some of the critiques have already appeared peppered throughout this chapter, it is helpful to lay out a few more. I conclude this chapter by briefly considering how an "ethics of the passerby" might jolt theological imagination to consider how fleeting, often anonymous encounters could lead to a rewriting of dignified scenes and bodies.

Disrupting Dignity

A helpful text to read alongside lofty judicial and theological speeches on dignity is *Disrupting Dignity: Rethinking Power and Progress in LGBTQ Lives*, by Engel and Lyle. This book has been instrumental in helping me articulate some of my intuitions on the use of dignity

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[129] See Jordan, *The Ethics of Sex*.

in legal and theological classrooms—and beyond. Of course, I have depended on the text already

throughout this chapter, especially with regard to the discussion on bathhouses. The various

chapter titles capture the overall project: to wrestle dignity talk away from "polite" contexts—or

from what I have been calling sanitized scenes of instruction—to demonstrate dignity's rather

parochial and controlled deployment. "Do You Swallow?, "Isn't' Straight Love the Default?,"

and "Is Dignity a Dead End?" all should provide ample fodder for thoughtful conversations on

topics not usually considered in a theological classroom, much less in a church or pastoral

setting. How would reading this book alongside the *Compendium* or Pope John Paul II's

Theology of the Body change one's reading and understanding of dignity? Or not?

In general, the text explores how dignity is deployed by "state and cultural authorities

across the domains of public health, popular culture, and law."[130] A limitation of the study is that

religion and theology are omitted from much of the book. Religious speech, usually bolstered by

theological reasoning and institutional power, deploys dignity talk in several contexts, as this

chapter has shown. Nonetheless, the book makes an important contribution to existing studies on

dignity, not least because it doesn't consider the term and its deployment solely from a

philosophical, political, or academic lens. Its dive into bathhouses and hook-up culture facilitated

by dating apps like Grindr, its astute analysis of certain television shows and movies, and its

attention to legal and public health debates all make this a valuable and accessible book for

anyone seeking to understand dignity's multivariant (ab)uses in our contemporary contexts.

The authors pose the following guiding question: "does the recognition of the dignity of

LGBTQ+ individuals expand the boundaries of equality and foster inclusion, or does it mark and

maintain new boundaries of respectability, delimiting who has value and who remains

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[130] Engel and Lyle, *Disrupting Dignity*, 4.

unvalued?"[131] The question itself, irrespective of the answer, should occasion at least a pause for those who write about dignity in a sure-fire manner without considering its history and usage outside theological parameters. Indeed, one's reaction to the very question reveals much about one's commitments to speeches and scenes—and bodies—not under one's methodological control. Unfamiliar scenes and their characters could represent an opportunity or a threat to theological speech, imagination, and education. What if dignity is simply a proxy for respectability, as the authors argue? Is there a non-defensive, creative way to theologically accommodate the authors' contention that "since dignity is deployed as an individual quality as well as an aspirational universal value, it is useful to the aims of neoliberal governance?"[132] Dignity's subservience to biopower might be an interesting topic to explore or develop more fully, but will it be permitted or taken seriously? Or will "serious" theologians and ethicists (pretend to) never encounter such issues with a term so precious, a term so embroiled with human rights talk and with Catholic social teaching?

Perhaps dignity is hopelessly entangled with too many languages to allow for a reevaluation that does not completely annihilate the term. But the fact remains that current usages of dignity might be foreclosing other ways of being and living. Dignity, as Engel and Lyle note, equals respectability—it requires that queer characters (and others) act according to set scripts within particularly staged scenes. These actions "align with heteronormative ways of being and interacting in the world but also privilege privacy, individualism, and a notion of universalism that centers whiteness and cisgender norms."[133] Might these arguments be too much to bear because of their complexity? Or is it the call to hold accountable certain bodies who

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[131] Ibid., 3.

[132] Ibid., 7

[133] Ibid., 7.

privilege and profit from dignity? Maybe both. As currently deployed in church speeches and in "progressive" jurisprudence, dignity consolidates and amplifies "heteronormative and neoliberal logics" and "comes with costs for certain bodies and for particular alternative ways of worldmaking."[134] Alternatives or even imaginations of other possible worlds and meanings present a threat to the power of all kinds of authorities, especially those claiming to be divine under the mantle of all-too-human speech within all-too-familiar settings.

<div align="center">Strangers in the Night?</div>

"Strangers in the night / Exchanging glances / Wondering in the night / What were the chances we'd be sharing love before the night was through?" Frank Sinatra's bellowing and haunting voice adds to the longing of an unexpected love, of two bodies making initial contact under the cover of darkness. A certain romance pervades, eliciting a sense of wonder of what could be. But the inverse is also true: these strangers might not exchange anything besides those sultry glances. The initial contact yields a sense of nostalgia at what never was. Several scenes of intensity flash at a moment's notice in the strangers' imagination before it is all gone—certainly before the early dawn lights refract on surfaces and flesh once obscure. I wonder whether Strangers in the Night was on regular rotation at the bathhouses. Might its lyrics peter out when Sinatra began to make the love more permanent for the listener? From fantasies of unfulfilled trysts to actual long-term partnership: "And ever since that night, We've been together / Lovers at first sight / And love forever / It turned out so right for strangers in the night." What changes for the strangers once glancing at the "other" turns into touching the other? Has the enigma that is the other now vanished, even under the mysterious beauty of darkness and dim lights—of a cloud of unknowing?

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[134] Ibid., 25.

I don't conclude this chapter with the proper way to "look at" or deploy dignity. Instead I attempt to remain "true" to what I intend to accomplish in this work, namely to juxtapose several scenes of instruction—constructed by speeches of all kinds and inhabited and *remade* by several possible characters including ones not identified or even known—in order to dislodge any fantasies of a universal and stable definition or usage of any theological concept, especially one as common and sacred as dignity. For theological language to remain vibrant, meaning not tied to the same known, tired scenes and scripts, for it to allure novice and experts alike, the language must undergo a consistent fracturing and reconstellation. Dead languages still have the potential to kill—or lead to new life under new forms. This process of reconstituting will allow new scenes, new characters—thoroughly messy and contradictory ones—to emerge in a continual effort to inhabit the assemblages that have been there all along, in their inchoate undignified forms.[135]

Here it might be helpful to invoke the passerby. Achille Mbembe describes this figure as someone just passing through, a figure from elsewhere who remains mostly unknown to others.[136] Unavailable for others to pin down, the passerby might stoke anxieties, excitement, curiosity, or desires (among a range of possible feelings). The passerby is often limited to "contact" or solitude but seldom to committed or teleological relationships. Does dignity even figure into the conversation? Perhaps only if one encounters the passerby inside a church or a bathhouse or some other "morally charged" location? Even then, the passerby remains enigmatic and could be anyone, including a smuggler or a mystic.[137] For Mbembe, the passerby should remind us that bodies are constantly passing through, whether in a literal or metaphorical sense.

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[135] Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, 188.

[136] Ibid.,

[137] Mbembe discusses the several meanings of "passant" in *Necropolitic*s, 186.

Flesh, like ideas, are elastic and porous, mixed in with all sorts of fragments to form constellations of all kinds. Mbembe calls this the "project of transfiguration," which "demands that the subject consciously embrace the broken up parts of its own life" to remake itself anew in unexpected ways—in turn creating new scenes, speeches, and possibilities for the self and others.[138]

If honest, theologians will admit that all scenes are painfully incomplete and all human knowledge fragmentary and subject to critique.[139] Can theology allow divine traces to instruct without filling in those shadows? Can removing artificial borders and barriers allow one to be affected by others, even in ways that hurt? Are we able to better feel our vulnerabilities—our very mortality—when encountering the risks and opportunities of untethered flesh with unknown destinations? The communion of saints demands journeying with bodies of all sorts, including ones that have already passed as undignified because judged unnatural, incomplete. In a sense, are we not all perpetual passerbys or strangers (Samaritans even) to others and to ourselves? So many scenes not yet written because not yet imagined—the unfortunate results of already scripted, suffocating scenes, the aftermath of dignified theological speeches and their all-too-human enforcers. Enforcers who respectfully hide with dignity.

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[138] Ibid.,

[139] David Tracy reminds us that "theologians can never claim certainty but, at best, highly tentative relative adequacy. Theologians cannot escape the same plurality and ambiguity that affect all discourse." David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 85.

Chapter 4

Lessons in Theological Hope(lessness)

A Recapitulation: The Trinity of Imago Dei, Dignity, and Hope

So far I have examined some common responses in theological classrooms and scenes of instruction to the atmospheres of violence discussed in Chapter 1, namely necropolitics, biopower and their cumulative effect of precarity (intensified by ecological degradation). These common responses are so hackneyed that they operate almost as elevator music: simply there in the background, unquestionably accepted perhaps because seemingly harmless. The widespread usage of imago Dei and its cousin dignity lulls listeners, students, and readers into believing the terms and their deployments are universal, stable, and benign or even for the benefit of *humanity* (yet another uncritically accepted concept).

As asserted throughout this work, neither imago Dei nor dignity are universal or hardly harmless. Both terms stem from local speeches that then spread via Catholic colonization and humanism, with its culmination in Catholic social teaching and human rights. Troubling these seemingly timeless concepts by juxtaposing them with other scenes that belie their universal applicability and stable nature is only the beginning of an imaginative journey to the development of richer theological scenes of instruction and speeches—ones better equipped to respond to the complexities of the atmospheres of violence that envelop us all. Ambiguity offers a richer, more honest path toward theological scenes that respect a range of experiences.[1]

But there is a specter that perhaps looms larger than both imago Dei and dignity, though undoubtedly related to and often deployed in tandem with them. In my experience, this term is

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[1] See Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity*. I will elaborate on this claim in Chapter 5.

the one with most cache in our speeches, chatter, and scenes of instruction. Though it is a theological virtue, its use exceeds theology; it is used by all sorts of characters for multiple and contradictory purposes. From politics to sports to healthcare to stock trading, the term has enjoyed an unprecedented period of glory. Just one example: Barack Obama's widely popular (viral even) 2008 presidential campaign poster features the term prominently displayed under Obama's face. He also published a bestseller with the term in the title.[2] So common is this term that most of us, I am sure, have used it or seen it as a part of the salutary sentence in an email. The word is even Rhode Island's motto. Indeed, it seems like an inescapable word in our common parlance. I am speaking about hope—a four-letter word that, to say the least, packs a powerful punch.

In popular discourse hope is often conflated with optimism or positive feelings of manifesting future possessions or a goal.[3] My students, for example, often equate hope with meeting their own career aspirations or with living the lives they envision for themselves. Seldom do I hear of hope as a theological virtue or as a concept tied to and interdependent on an eschatological in-breaking of the Kingdom of God on earth. Even after we discuss a theology of hope, the concept remains for them synonymous with probabilities for a desired outcome, usually of a personal nature. Have they learned nothing?, I wonder. Might a theology of hope be, after all, even too utopian for my students? Or are the assumptions, which this chapter explores, too much of an obstacle to overcome in entertaining the merits of hope as a theological virtue in response to present violence and injustices?

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[2] See Barack Obama, *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2006).

[3] See "Hope," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, accessed March 24, 2024, https://plato. stanford.edu/entries /hope/

In this chapter, I delve into Christian hope as typically presented. The scenes I introduce are common ones throughout my experience as a student and instructor in Catholic theological classrooms. But since I am unable to reconstruct these scenes from memory (and to avoid charges of hearsay), I rely instead on texts emblematic of the speeches and teachings found in the scenes I am attempting to present.

A few notes on the limits of the chapter. I do not delve into a thorough philosophical (especially in the "analytical" sense) exploration of hope. I also avoid discussing hope from a psychological or psychiatric vantage point. Finally, I do not offer a comprehensive moral theory on hope, for that would distract from the chapter's aim, namely to present a typical theological scene of instruction on hope and juxtapose it with other scenes that expose some limitations of how hope is theorized, spoken, and taught in theological classrooms. Discussions on hope should carve some space for unsanitized scenes that challenge hope and utopia. Accordingly, expect to encounter anti-utopia teachings, the prospects of nihilism, the critiques of hope leveled by Afropessimists and the "moralist theology" of religious studies scholar Anthony Pinn,[4] and hopelessness generally.

Not leaving space for the "dark night of the soul"[5] will only cement what some scholars might perceive as an already ineffective concept, or worse, a harmful one that promises utopia but delivers more of the same toward dystopia.[6] In my experience, teaching hope as sanitized from real feelings of despair and melancholia will drive students farther away from embracing

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[4] Anthony Pinn describes his critique of dominant theological reflections on hope as a "moralist" theology. More on this later in the chapter.

[5] In keeping with the theme of this work, I do not employ the phrase to denote insights from St. John of the Cross or Catholic spirituality studies generally. Instead, I use the phrase to describe the sense of fragmentation and disorientation that results when one confronts the atmospheres of violence that make life unlivable or impossible.

[6] See Calvin, *Ontological Terror*.

that which can actually launch new worlds—persistent feelings that the present and its trajectory are anything but divine or hopeful. Unlike the preceding chapters, I offer suggestions for what theological discourse might consider to salvage scenes of instruction on hope from the clutches of theological speeches that cannot escape themselves.

Hope in the Theological Classroom
Sanitized Scene of Instruction

Imagine this scenario: Students are taking a mixed (undergraduate and graduate) course titled "Catholic Responses to Suffering and Injustice: Hope 101." The instructor has organized the syllabus thematically to address what he perceives to be the gravest forms of injustice today. This week, the students are considering the plight of migrants. What follows is the scene—culled from recent news headlines—that the professor presents.

Planned Scene One

A makeshift fishing boat with almost 250 souls on board capsizes in the unforgiving, relentless waters of the Mediterranean Sea, only about three miles from the shores of Lampedusa. The desperate pleas for help, recorded on Italian coast guard radio, eventually gives way to silence. It is a deafening radio silence that makes it difficult to grasp the true scene of chaos, terror, and despair that unfolded in the aftermath of the rickety vessel hurling bodies of all ages into the sea. Pope Francis reflected on a similar incident in 2013 in the same waters, which observers have dubbed a nautical cemetery because of the frequency of the tragic loss of life. Pope Francis states: "Immigrants dying at sea, in boats which were vehicles of hope and became vehicles of death."[7] (Perhaps hope quickly morphs into death, but I digress until later in this

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[7] Francis, Homily for Visit to Lampedusa (8 July 2013), at The Holy See, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco /en /homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130708_omelia-lampedusa.html

chapter.) Pope Francis is haunted by this event: "When I first heard of this tragedy a few weeks ago, and realized that it happens too frequently, it has constantly come back to me like a painful thorn in my heart."[8] Throughout his sermon he cites the frequency of so many lives lost—lives in search of an alternative to their bleak existences, in search of new horizons and possibilities for themselves and their extended networks.

For many on that boat, the hope was extended to bodies not yet here—a better life for progeny. Hope suddenly extinguished in a moment's notice by unforgiving, unfeeling sea waters. These bodies have now joined other remains forever lost on a journey that others will continue to take despite the dangers. "Today has anyone wept in our world?," Francis asks in his sermon. The pope worries about the "globalization of indifference" that has made us de-synthesized to the suffering of others: "We have become used to the suffering of others: it doesn't affect me; it doesn't concern me; it's none of my business."[9] The scene ends with that quote, revealing the teacher's intention to spark feelings of care among the students before entering into how hope can serve as a viable response. (One student wonders, without stating it to the class, "What if the suffering affects me? What good is it to make it my business? Aren't they already gone? Who is hope serving here?")

Before the professor moves on to deliver the lesson on hope in response to the migrant tragedy, another student brings up the extreme violence against trans persons. This topic is not on the syllabus, leaving some students to wonder about whose suffering matters more. Are some lives more grieveable than others? Whose lives do we collectively grieve? "When is a life greiveable?", as Judith Butler asks.[10] Though the professor hesitates to engage the topic, the class

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[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Buter, *Frames of War.*

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has agreed to press on and address the subject. With the professor's limited knowledge on the subject the student agrees to present a scenario for consideration—another one drawn from the headlines.

Impromptu Scene Two

An eighteen-year-old Hispanic trans woman was found brutally murdered in a ditch along a major Texas highway.[11] A person riding an ATV found her maimed body wrapped in a trash bag almost four days after the killer dumped her in the ditch. The autopsy report indicated that she was stabbed over sixty times and had suffered at least fourteen significant blows to the head. The stab wounds, some of which extended to her neck, were so deep that the killer almost decapitated her. Police have yet to find a suspect. Some community activists are questioning whether the police actually care to find the killer. The nearby communities seem to care less, with no witnesses coming forth. Headlines read: "Cross-dressing teen, a suspected prostitute, found slain near I-10." A whole life, a future, snuffed brutally in a slaying that can only be described as overkill.[12] Do murdered sex workers, especially when Latino or Black and trans, figure into the Christian scenes of instruction on hope? Or as the professor's syllabus indicates, do some lives remain outside Christian hope?

For many students, the questions now shift to: What of hope in these scenarios? What can theology say about these all-too-common incidents? A more pressing question also emerges for some students: Who is hope for in theological speeches and teaching? Is it for these lives already extinguished? Or is the concept of hope a way for those in the classroom to cope with senseless tragedies that betray promises of a better tomorrow or of the inbreaking of the reign of God on

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[11] Accounts culled from Stanley, *Atmospheres of Violence.*

[12] Stanley writes, "Overkill names the technologies necessary for, and the epistemic commitment to, doing away with that which is already gone." *Atmospheres of Violence*, 33.

earth in the present? How are collective utopic and eschatological teleologies—the second coming and the resurrection of all (Christian) bodies—disrupted by so much targeted death and suffering? What of whole populations that have already met their collective ends through genocides and wars? If these bodies are already gone and don't benefit in the least from hope talk, who does?

A Theology of Hope?

Though suspecting that the lesson on hope has been derailed with these scenarios and students' thoughtful questions and suspicions, the professor or speaker decides to nonetheless press forward with a lesson on the traditional theology of hope. Is it tone deaf to proceed? I now reconstruct a familiar Catholic scene of instruction on hope by using the following three texts: 1) *Hope: Promise, Possibility, and Fulfillment*[13]; 2) *What Makes Education Catholic: Spiritual Foundations*[14]; and 3) *A Theology of Liberation*.[15] I chose these texts because they rehearse the common speeches on hope as currently understood and deployed in theological classrooms and pastoral spaces. In other words, imagine these texts as speeches filtered through actual bodies teaching in these spaces. Instead of reconstructing the scene by summarizing each text, I will cull from each to stitch a typical, coherent lesson on hope. If you were tasked with crafting a course on a theology of hope, each of the three books would contain the main ingredients for a solid outline on the topic. You might even use the three texts for your reading list.

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[13] *Hope: Promise, Possibility, and Fulfillment*, eds. Richard Lennan and Nancy Pineda-Madrid (New York: Paulist Press, 2013).

[14] Groome, *What Makes Education Catholic*.

[15] Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation.*

Normative Theological Lesson on Hope

Nancy Pineda-Madrid acknowledges the "evils and barbarities of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries," which "are overwhelming numerous and widely documented."[16] She cites some well-known examples, such as the Holocaust, genocides, and ecological degradation. Pineda-Madrid then chides Westerns for remaining "out of tune with our times" and for resisting "any serious consideration of tragedy and evil."[17] Citing the Enlightenment's project of unbridled progress and American exceptionalism as the reasons for our callousness at the suffering of others, she argues: "We have a hard time allowing such tragedies to penetrate our consciousness fully."[18] The inability to accept the evil and suffering limits "our capacity to be people of hope."[19] If we actively respond to such evils and tragedies, Pineda-Madrid claims, we can break "open hope in history."[20] Refusing to act on behalf of the victims leads to the temptation of despair, a vice that, in conjunction with egocentrism, "distorts the historical process of salvation by denying the possibility of our efforts to cooperate with God so that the world becomes more in line with God's will."[21] The will of God is for a sort of utopia where "freer, more human persons, [are] protagonists of their own history."[22] The base has been established for a political theology or spirituality that seeks to motivate agents to work toward a utopia—fueled by a hope in a better present and tomorrow. Or a hope for a different socio-economic arrangement in the here and now.

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[16] Nancy Pineda-Madrid, "Hope and Salvation in the Shadow of Tragedy," in *Hope: Promise, Possibility, and Fulfillment*, ed. Richard Lennan and Nancy Pineda-Madrid (New York: Paulist Press, 2013), 115.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Ibid., 116.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Ibid., 120.

[22] Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 204.

Having established that callous inability to fully acknowledge the suffering of others and the evil in the world are symptoms of despair and egocentrism, theologians of hope usually distinguish theological hope from optimism. Optimism is a "psychological disposition" that depends solely on human imagination; it is simply positive thinking, an assurance that something "good" will happen through human agency alone.[23] It is a feeling. Optimists expect for everything to turn out fine in the end. It is blind expectation.

So what distinguishes it from Christian hope? For starters, hope is a theological virtue. Yet, unlike its two counterparts of faith and charity, hope remained conceptually underdeveloped until Aquinas' *Summa*.[24] The Angelic Doctor builds on Augustine's understanding on virtue by defining it as a "good quality of mind, by which we live righteously, of which no one can make bad use, which God works in us, without us."[25] Dominic Doyle, paraphrasing Thomas Aquinas, succinctly defines hope as "the desire for a future, difficult, yet possible good."[26] Hope is a mix of desire and uncertainty, but is ultimately an expectation that God will deliver on the promises of "salvation, consolation, and mercy" as established through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.[27] Indeed, as a theological virtue, hope is a gift from God.[28] So human agency *alone* will never

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[23] See Natalia Imperatori-Lee, "Hope," in *A Pope Francis Lexicon*, ed. Cindy Wooden and Joshua McElwee (Collegeville, MN: 2018), 88-90.

[24] David Elliot, "Hope in Theology," in *Historical and Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Hope*, ed. Steven C. van den Heuvel (Springer Nature, 2020), 121.

[25] Ibid.

[26] The Latin: *bonum futurum arduum possibile haberi* ("future good possible but arduous to attain"). Dominic Doyle, "A Future, Difficult, Yet Possible Good: Defining Christian Hope, in *Hope: Promise, Possibility, and Fulfillment*, ed. Richard Lennan and Nancy Pineda-Madrid (New York: Paulist Press, 2013), 17.

[27] Imperatori-Lee, "Hope," 89.

[28] Groome, *What Makes Education Catholic*.

achieve God's reign. In order to reach the hard to get (but not impossible) good, one must be a co-worker with God and in solidarity with the community.[29]

The journey toward God does not permit a flight from the world, even though for Aquinas the beatific vision remains the ultimate hope.[30] Rather, as Elliot notes, earthly conduct dictates whether one will attain the beatific vision, and the collective Christian journey toward the afterlife should, in theory, produce positive efforts for earthly projects.[31] In essence, the long trek toward the ultimate aim of hope, the beatific vision, begins on earth. The working together of the entire human family toward the reign of God offers a foreshadowing of the age to come.[32] This, in turn, provides hope for what could be in the terrestrial present.

But the path toward the heavenly city is an arduous journey—one fraught with setbacks and repeated defeats while sojourning in the city of flesh.[33] Hope sustains the perilous journey toward a promised future, namely the inbreaking of the reign of God in the present and the eschaton.[34] The virtue of faith, however, takes precedent over hope, according to Aquinas' hierarchical ordering.[35] This is because hope is proper to the will, while faith belongs to the intellect and the direct pursuit of truth. As a virtue of the intellect, or of reason, faith directs and elevates hope. It provides hope with the promise of what is possible, though arduous, to seek: the eternal friendship with God.[36] Without faith, which "supplies the epistemic evidence needed to

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[29] Pineda-Madrid, "Hope and Salvation in the Shadow of Tragedy," 121.

[30] Elliot, "Hope in Theology," 123.

[31] Ibid., 131.

[32] See Vatican Council II, *Gadium et Spes*.

[33] Pineda-Madrid, "Hope and Salvation in the Shadow of Tragedy," 125.

[34] Doyle, "A Future, Difficult, Yet Possible Good," 17.

[35] Elliot, "Hope in Theology," 311.

[36] Ibid.

ground hope in God or another," hope would simply devolve as comfort for a personal quest or to a feeling indistinguishable from optimism.[37] Faith provides hope its certain goal, that is, unison with God. Or as Aquinas himself puts it: "Faith shows the goal, hopes moves towards the goal, charity unites with the goal."[38] Hope thus precedes charity or love, for one learns to love God and others by hoping to receive their assistance on the quest to unite with God. Doyle writes that "charity is the culmination of the theological virtues since it unites the person to God and to neighbor in friendship."[39] Now having experienced the love of unity, one can hope for the ultimate unity with God—which keeps one journeying toward the absolute end goal. In this way, "Hope and charity are thus mutually reinforcing, co-operating to ensure that we are properly in another's assistance."[40] One's life meaning and purpose should come into clear focus from the dynamic interplay of faith, hope, and charity.[41]

Though unison with God is one's ultimate purpose, faith, hope, and charity demand that one assist others in achieving a difficult future good.[42] Elliot argues that "[b]y relying on the virtue of faith to ground trust in an object's possibility and another's power to assist, the virtue of hope 'stretches' our appetite toward goods that are difficult to obtain," which in turn helps us avoid the twin vices of despair and presumption.[43] Thus situated, one will desire the good, especially the ultimate good—and will rely on and trust in the grace-filled and gratuitous assistance of God. With one's appetite now expanded toward the good, one cannot help but assist

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[37] Doyle, "A Future, Difficult, Yet Possible Good," 20.

[38] Cited in Doyle, "A Future, Difficult, Yet Possible Good," 20.

[39] Ibid., 21.

[40] Elliot, "Hope in Theology," 313.

[41] Doyle, "A Future, Difficult, Yet Possible Good."

[42] Elliot, "Hope in Theology," 315.

[43] Ibid.

others in experiencing the joy of friendship with the Divine. In Doyle's words, "as hope develops

into love for this divine helper, that love empowers the person to become an agent of God's

mercy to others, in their difficulties."[44] In other words, one who accepts through faith the

ultimate goal of unison with God will progress in virtue and will be unable to contain the hope of

Christ's resurrection—a hope that seeks to usher in a new age now in preparation for a future,

heavenly one.[45]

This is where political theology, especially Liberation Theology, dovetails with

normative accounts of theological hope. In most classrooms, the instructor opens space for

considerations of what is normally called theodicy. Why does a loving God allow for so much

suffering, death, and evil in the world?[46] To begin to approach this concern, the accounts of

theological hope usually turn to some familiar conversation partners, such as Jurgen Moltmann's

Crucified God and *A Theology of Hope*, James Cone's *God of the Oppressed* and *The Cross and*

the Lynching Tree, and in Catholic contexts, Gustavo Gutiérrez's seminal *A Theology of*

Liberation or selected works by Jon Sobrino.

It is beyond this chapter's scope to delve into each work, but a unifying theme of all these

texts is their unwavering belief that God stands on the side of the oppressed, of those continually

crucified, of those on the underside of history. While rational inquiry will never yield a

satisfactory answer to theodicy, these theologians of liberation believe the answer to evil and

suffering is found in the cross, which is symbolic of death as never final.[47] Moltmann, in

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[44] Doyle, "A Future, Difficult, Yet Possible Good," 26.

[45] Groome, *What Makes Education Catholic*.

[46] A perennial question, heightened during the Enlightenment and the Holocaust, still captures students' interest in the theological classroom.

[47] Groome, *What Makes Education Catholic*, 34.

Theology of Hope, observes that "by accepting the cross, the suffering and death of Christ, by taking upon it the trails and struggles of obedience in the body and surrendering itself to the pain of love, it proclaims in the everyday world the future of the resurrection, of life and the righteousness of God. The future of the resurrection comes to it as it takes upon itself the cross."[48] Responding to suffering means actively choosing, making a continuous commitment, to fight evil and injustice with steadfastness, knowing that salvation history will culminate in the reign of God already initiated in history with the death and resurrection of Christ. The paschal mystery provides hope that death and evil will never have the final say. The resurrection of Christ, in particular, vindicates the hope in new life even amid the death and suffering of the present one. Thomas Groome writes, "Jesus's being raised up from death to new life ensures the enduring hope that eventually good will triumph over evil, love over hate, justice over injustice, peace over violence, inclusion over discrimination, and so on…."[49] One activates Christian hope for the world to come, then, through one's actions in the world as is, however imperfect and evil.

Hope thus helps one endure for what it is promised to come, despite all hardships, obstacles, and pain. Suffering always presents, according to Pope John Paul II, a "great test not only of physical strength but also of spiritual strength."[50] Similarly, according to Colleen Griffith, "practicing hope in the concrete will take will, grit, and determination to step into what discernment has caused us to anticipate … and to act in whatever small or large ways manifest themselves in creative collaboration with the Spirit of God."[51] Taking up one's cross in solidarity

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[48] Jurgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), 67.

[49] Groome, *What Makes Education Catholic*, 29.

[50] Pope John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, ed. Vittorio Messori (New York: Knopf, 1995), 25.

[51] Colleen M. Griffith, "Christian Hope: A Grace and a Choice," in *Hope: Promise, Possibility, and Fulfillment*, ed. Richard Lennan and Nancy Pineda-Madrid (New York: Paulist Press, 2013), 14.

with those already crucified is a difficult task—indeed, an impossible one without God's grace and gratuitous gift of hope.

Some Questions

At this point, one might be wondering how practical this theology is, and whether the theologians of hope proclaiming these words actually take up the cross. Some of my students, for example, have voiced concern about language of "taking up the cross" when coming from theologians working at privileged universities.[52] What does taking up the cross even mean? More to the point, does this theology of hope, presented in outline form, actually respond to the two scenarios presented above? Did those on the boat or the trans woman found in a ditch not have enough will, grit, and determination? Was their hope not enough? How have their deaths advanced the reign of God?

Utopia and Catholic Social Thought

Theologians and teachers of theological hope usually address these and other concerns of practicality by focusing on utopia and Catholic social thought.

Natalia Imperatori-Lee writes that "hope impels us to embrace those who suffer."[53] It calls, as Pope Francis notes, for an accompaniment with the most vulnerable, which in turn "demands poverty and martyrdom."[54] In more concrete terms, the content of Christian hope is expressed through a commitment to transform the present unjust and oppressive structures that continually betray and kill the most vulnerable.[55] It calls for us, as Pineda-Madrid writes, to

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[52] See Althaus-Reid's sustained critiques of the "popular theologian" in *From Feminist Theology to Indecent Theology*, 133-137.

[53] Imperatori-Lee, "Hope," 90.

[54] Ibid.

[55] See Jon Sobrino, *Jesucristo Liberador: Lectura Histórico Teológica de Jesús de Nazaret* (San Salvador: UCA, 1991).

"directly face real situations of ongoing crucifixions and then act on behalf of those who are being crucified today, demanding an end to their crucifixion."[56] For hope to take on flesh, the Christian must seek those on the margins. Imperatori-Lee understands Christian hope as "an expectation that must journey outward, encountering the least of these and enkindling hope in desperate situations like prisons, hospitals, and refugee camps."[57] Working toward a more just present is the ultimate proof that Christian hope remains relevant.

Theologians of hope offer some notes on the value of utopia, especially in the face of skepticism of a better society and future, a topic I will discuss later in this chapter. How to respond to overwhelming evidence that history has been one of domination upon domination, as Foucault describes it?[58] A usual response: One's faith in the world to come calls for one to alter the unjust social structures of this world. Hope entails stopping ongoing crucifixions—paving the way for the inbreaking of the kingdom here and now through justice, love, and compassion.[59] One of the main tenets of liberation theology reminds us that Jesus' death and resurrection defeated the evil of this world, showing what the reign of God could be. *Gadium et Spes* calls for the transformation of this world as a duty of all Christians.[60] The path to heaven—to the city of God—begins here as Christians strive to transmogrify the realities of a world on a calculated march toward material progress and profit at all costs.

But is wholesale transformation—indeed, transforming the cosmos—possible or even desirable? The future seems rather set in stone: Artificial intelligence will dominate, Jeff Bezos

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[56] Pineda-Madrid, "Hope and Salvation in the Shadow of Tragedy," 123.

[57] Imperatori-Lee, "Hope," 91.

[58] Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," 85.

[59] Pineda-Madrid, "Hope and Salvation in the Shadow of Tragedy."

[60] Vatican Council II, *Gadium et Spes*.

and Elon Musk will continue to accumulate unimaginable wealth, the environment will continue to deteriorate, migrants will perish by the boatloads, and injustice will simply continue. Some might ascertain whether we're actually backtracking. What to make of the election of far-right, fascist candidates all around the world? Perhaps the human species yearns for domination? Violence does seem endemic to civilization—savages we all are![61] Is it not true that all life depends on other life (and its death) for survival?[62]

In response to these nagging, persistent concerns, eschatology and utopia come into focus. Gustavo Gutiérrez argues that we need to have confidence in the future to support our "commitment to the creation of a just society … and to a new human being."[63] Eschatology does not call for disengagement from the world, notwithstanding the feelings of pessimism that occasionally grip us. To hope does not mean that one can foretell the future. It means to "be open, in an attitude of spiritual childhood, to accepting hope as a gift."[64] Hope demands a suspension of skepticism and perhaps even reason. Yet, for Gutiérrez, hope is not escapism; it is rooted in the present, and it allows for liberation to occur.

But without utopia, visions or dreams of alternate socioeconomic realities remain merely conceptual. The danger of quixotic chimeras looms large. Gutiérrez distinguishes between ideology and utopia, the former promising false hopes borne of faulty human desires. He warns against a "politico-religious messianism" that promises an end of history via the latest political

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[61] Speaking of colonial societies, Aimé Césaire writes "that no one colonizes innocently, that no one colonizes with impunity either; that a nation which colonizes, that a civilization which justifies colonization—and therefore force—is already a sick civilization, a civilization which is morally diseased, which irresistibly, progressing from one consequence to another, call for its Hitler, I mean its punishment." *Discourse on Colonialism*, trans. Joan Pinkham (New York: Monthly Review Books, 2000), 39.

[62] Baldelomar, "Haunted by (Ontological) Ancestors and Bodies in Precarity."

[63] Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Essential Writings*, ed. James B. Nickoloff (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 197.

[64] Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 125.

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movements.[65] In order to avoid false and dangerous alternatives that might prove more fatal than present realities, Christian utopia should guide the way when envisioning and forging a new society, world, and human. Utopia sustains the search for a present society undergirded by freedom and justice.[66] Utopia is a society without social inequalities: "it moves forward, it is projection toward the future, a dynamic factor which moves history."[67] Utopia does not look backward to some imaged "Golden Age" or to a hallowed past (though it does nonetheless look toward a restoration of the covenant with God). It looks forward to transformations of the current social order. It seeks to carve its own history of liberation. Liberation and utopia are inextricable, since liberation from oppression necessitates a "utopia [that] leads to an authentic and scientific knowledge of reality and to a praxis that transforms what exists."[68] Utopia is thus a form of political liberation—"an emancipation from the chains that prevent most of humanity from living free, authentic lives, that prevents them from being protagonists of their own histories."[69]

Gutiérrez argues that utopia must always have a relationship to history and reality and must be rational.[70] Otherwise it risks devolving into dystopias. Since utopia is a revolutionary project, it requires a commitment to denounce and annunciate.[71] To effectively denounce, the person, now acting as prophet, must know which issues ail society. What prevents the inbreaking of the reign of God? Whatever it is—greed, evil, cruelty—must be denounced, and forcefully.[72]

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[65] Gutiérrez, *Essential Writings,* 204.

[66] Ibid., 205.

[67] Ibid., 202.

[68] Ibid., 203.

[69] Ibid., 204.

[70] Ibid., 201.

[71] Ibid., 201-203.

[72] See O. Ernesto Valiente, "From Utopia to *Eu-topia*: Christian Hope in History," in *Hope: Promise, Possibility, and Fulfillment*, ed. Richard Lennan and Nancy Pineda-Madrid (New York: Paulist Press, 2013), 198-210.

The prophet must show others, in a persuasive manner, why the current society is dysfunctional and evil. Once he accomplishes this, the prophet must next annunciate plans for the world to come in the here and now. This alternative world is guided by Christian faith, functioning as a preview of the world that awaits in heaven—the ultimate utopia. One's liberation is implicated in the liberation of all; one's salvation is imbricated with social salvation from structures of sin.[73]

The promised kingdom of God is utopia to the highest degree. The kingdom, according to Ernesto Valiente, "is a vision of the perfected world-to-come that orients Christian life toward God's future by shaping and nurturing Christian life in the present."[74] Valiente provides some flesh to Gutierrez's utopic visions. He argues that a minimum, salvation requires "the credible promise that all human beings will be able to satisfy their basic life necessities."[75] What he calls a "eu-topian" project must be "historically feasible" and is modeled on a "civilization of poverty" that centers love, work, and austerity.[76] Ultimately, a eu-topia should lead to a "society that is rooted in truth, human dignity, and fraternity."[77] Valiente also claims that the church should lead the struggle to eradicate "sin," an onerous task possible only by establishing a Christian social order that appeals to reason for future decision making toward the common good.

Lest all this still remain too utopic or theoretical, a theology of hope might emphasize that Catholic social teaching/thought is the church's practical attempt to eradicate sin and usher the hope of the kingdom to come. Thomas Massaro, a noted authority on Catholic social

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[73]See Pineda-Madrid, "Hope and Salvation in the Shadow of Tragedy."

[74] Valiente, "From Utopia to *Eu-topia*," 198.

[75] Ibid., 203.

[76] Ibid., 199-206.

[77] Ibid., 203.

teaching, observes that hope is a common theme across the documents and statements that comprise the magisterial corpus of Catholic social thought ("CST").[78] Massaro also argues that the mix of idealism and realism in CST is a crucial tension that inspires others in the struggle against seemingly untouchable and unchanging structures. Echoing theological discussions on hope, Massaro advocates for a balance between utter despair and naive optimism.

Hope in CST calls Christians to focus on the "proper social order."[79] Thus, Christian social ethics becomes paramount to the quest toward a just social order. Examining how institutions (public and private) operate to either enhance or stifle the common good is at the heart of social ethics. Social justice is undoubtedly the flagship concern of ethics, though the cultivation of the self still remains important.[80] The fight against social sin (or what John Paul II calls "structures of sin") will be won only with hope, faith, and charity—all in a spirit of intense solidarity.

Massaro states that the path to social progress, though fraught with setbacks, is "divine work" that all Christians must partake in.[81] Importantly, Massaro acknowledges that all societies, however progressive, are imperfect. No society has achieved the full measure of "hope for justice."[82] And human history, he observes, is defined by examples of hierarchy, categorization, separations, and anxieties. Conversations of hope are therefore central to any human agency in

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[78] Thomas Massaro, "Hope for a More Just Future: Wisdom from Catholic Social Teaching," in *Hope: Promise, Possibility, and Fulfillment*, ed. Richard Lennan and Nancy Pineda-Madrid (New York: Paulist Press, 2013), 155.

[79] Ibid., 156.

[80] Ibid.

[81] Ibid.

[82] Ibid., 158.

the face of otherwise insufferable realities that might well paralyze action. (I think here of paralysis by analysis, popularized by Martin Luther King, Jr.)

Hope is crucial precisely because of the impossibility of a perfect, optimal society. Massaro cautions against succumbing to despair, though. He instead suggests that Christians think of themselves as a pilgrim people, "with our feet in each of the two worlds, the already and the not yet."[83] The realization that some or all might never reach utopia should not distract from one's commitment to a just equitable social order. Solidarity with one another on the journey toward the common good demands and provides hope. Massaro calls for a "great patience" as the pilgrim people collectively sojourn toward God's kingdom. Sacrifices on behalf of all are necessary: "In the very willingness of members of society to sacrifice substantially for the good of others in a spirit of solidarity lives our hope for a society that is fair and just."[84] Sacrifice, selflessness, solidarity, and adherence to Christian social order: these are the main ingredients of hope. Indeed, "if our hope is to be effective, it must be incarnated in concrete actions of justice that witness to the Christian faith."[85]

A theology of hope also reminds one that since each person is made in God's image, one must co-create utopia on earth with God. One's hands carry the history that is to come. Glorifying God means forging a civilization of God—a society that benefits each person equally. The promise of a better tomorrow, according to theologians of hope, holds the key to a more equitable today! A normative or typical reflection on theological hope: "Students can always make their own best efforts with God's grace empowering them to keep on with hope. In sum,

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[83] Ibid., 161.

[84] Ibid., 165.

[85] Ibid., 167.

because of Jesus's dying and rising in the grace of God that this paschal mystery releases into human history with abundance, all people can live with hope, come what may."[86]

Unsanitized Scenes of Instruction: Anti-Utopia, Nihilism, Afro-Pessimism, Moralist Theology, and Hopelessness

In what follows, I propose alternate, unsanitized scenes of instruction that challenge or disrupt normative, sanitized scenes of instruction on Christian hope. I juxtapose the thoughts of E.M. Cioran against utopia, the possibilities of learning from nihilism, the challenges to hope by Afropessimism and Anthony Pinn's moralist theology, and the prospect of hopelessness in general. What would happen were theology students exposed to these ideas, to these lessons? Would theological speeches break or fragment to finally speak beyond their self references and certainty at unproven concepts?

Unsanitized Scene 1: Cioran's Anti-Utopia

Hope, in a Christian key, makes some grand claims regarding time and possibilities. As we have seen, liberation theologians, in particular, are prone to emphasize the importance of utopia. For Valiente, following the teachings of Gutierrez, utopia represents "a human aspiration toward a truly just social order, a social world that is wholly human, which corresponds to the dreams, needs, and deepest aspirations of human life."[87] The aspiration is supposed to galvanize and sustain action toward achieving this utopic landscape, where inequality does not exist, where the bells of freedom loudly toll ever so often.[88] Indeed, for Gutierrez, utopia is a historical blueprint for a different society that reorients human relationships from enmity to solidarity. Utopia demands a commitment to unmask the ideologies of the existing world order—part of

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[86] Groome, *What Makes Education Catholic*, 36.

[87] Valiente, "From Utopia to *Eu-topia*," 200.

[88] Gutiérrez, *Essential Writings*, 204-205.

which entails critical self-examination of one's role in perpetuating systems of oppression and injustice.[89] Paying attention to one's role in maintaining existing structures should also, ideally, transform one's minds and hearts. As such, utopia is also a "cultural revolution which attempts to forge a new kind of person."[90] Collective and individual awareness and action then lead to the ultimate utopia: "a single process of liberation" that ends in the ideal society where equality, justice, and love reign across all contexts.[91] End of history. End of story. The grand narrative promises to make us whole—both as individuals and as a society.

Fortunately, thinkers and writers have pushed back against fantastical notions of utopia in history, especially in light of the repeated failures of both religious and secular utopias throughout (recent) history. Here I introduce reflections by E.M. Cioran (1911-1995), a Romanian philosopher who didn't shy away from probing the limits and excesses of pessimism and skepticism. Deeply influenced by existentialism and nihilism, particularly the writings of Nietzsche, Cioran questions the validity of traditional beliefs and the pursuit of utopian ideals.[92] His works represent a full-frontal assault on the overly optimistic assumptions that guide pursuits of utopia. Quixotic thinking, he argues, always results in disillusionment and disappointment, not least because human endeavors are never perfect. Humans are deeply flawed and cruel—a reality corroborated by the harsh realities of societies and of utopias-turned-dystopias. Throughout his works, especially in *A Short History of Decay*, Cioran underscores the dangers latent in any human ideas and actions.[93] He quips, "I feel *safer* with a Pyrrho than with a Saint Paul, for a

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[89] Ibid., 203.

[90] Ibid., 203.

[91] Ibid., 206.

[92] As the biography in one of his books states, Cioran has been called "the last worthy disciple of Nietzsche."

[93] E.M. Cioran, *A Short History of Decay*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2012).

jesting wisdom is gentler than an unbridled sanctity."[94] In other words, Cioran prefers the company of a skeptic than of a prophet or saint.

For our thought experiment, I invite the reader to consider Cioran's reflections against utopia. How can theological accounts of Christian hope be rethought or reimagined in light of his critiques of utopia? Can hope survive without utopia? Cioran's ideas can be found in two brief but potent essays from the book *History and Utopia*: "Mechanism of Utopia" and "The Golden Age."[95]

"Harmony, universal or otherwise, has never existed and never will exist."[96] And with that slight, Cioran seems to eviscerate any claims of an Eden, heaven, and any dreams of an upcoming reign of God. "No use retracing the old paradise or racing toward the one to come: the former is inaccessible, the latter unrealizable," he claims.[97] Cioran wants readers to focus on the present, the only reality we actually inhabit. Nostalgic yearnings for a golden age or dreams of a utopian future are distractions—techniques for the mind to buffer against the grim, harsh realities of quotidian life in the present. Cioran exclaims: "If they have proscribed the before and the after, evacuated today and tomorrow as equally uninhabitable, it is because it is easier for them to live in imagination ten thousand years hence than to loll in the immediate and the imminent."[98]

Utopia, in other words, is an easy way out—a cop out in the face of so much inner and exterior suffering. The solution is to create a series of fantasies, one of which involves what time

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[94] Ibid., 4.

[95] E.M. Cioran, *History and Utopia*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2015).

[96] Ibid., 116.

[97] Ibid., 117.

[98] Ibid., 105.

could be rather than time as it *now* exists. Cioran says: "With the years, they will have thought more and more about time-in-itself than time passing, more about the indefinite than the effective, more about the end of the world than the end of the day."[99] There is no ultimate horizon to look to because there is no golden past; all we have is now. But the present is no paradise. Daily events reveal that harm, destruction, evil, violence, and horrors seem endemic to societies and the human condition. Future ideal cities curiously always mirror idyllic gardens, whether of Hesiod's or the Yahwist's invention matters little.[100] Phantoms overtake flesh. Perhaps Cioran is urging readers to accept things as they are in order to close false exits that lead to dead ends.

Evacuating the "immediate and imminent" is an act of the ego. When looking back, the ego reconstructs an illusion in order to deal with its woes and sorrows in the present. When it looks forward, the ego believes it is partaking in bringing history to its conclusion (a grand task indeed). This revolution will surely be the (last) one, thinks every revolutionary. Cioran argues that "all of us think the same thing in the sphere of our activities: the *ultimate* is the obsession of the living."[101] Telos: the object of a precarious ego's grandiose desire to live beyond itself. The ultimate horizon becomes man's ultimate task—an impossible one if not supplanted with idols. Cioran intimates that the search for a perfect state contradicts the teachings of Jesus, who warned that the kingdom of God "was neither 'here' nor 'there,' but within us."[102] The perfect horizon now became the idol; the notion of progress, its human promoters and their false promises, its high priests. "Unable to find 'the kingdom of God' within themselves, or rather too cunning to

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[99] Ibid., 105.

[100] Ibid., 111.

[101] Ibid., 106-107.

[102] Ibid., 91.

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want to seek it there," writes Cioran, "Christians placed it in the course of events—in becoming: they perverted a teaching in order to ensure its success."[103] Once again, in the search for something better, distortions arise, and teachers can be made to say anything to justify fanciful, though tempting ends. So Cioran repeats: "No new social form is in a position to safeguard the advantages of the old: a virtually equal amount of disadvantages is encountered in all types of society."[104] No perfection then, no perfection ever. This is the reality.

Most readers might be overcome with despair at the realization of what never was or will be. They might feel discomfort at Cioran's rather pessimistic words, which threaten the stability and coherence of a metaphysical Christian worldview that traffics in persistent promises for a better tomorrow here *and* in the City of God. But theological scenes of instruction should welcome those feelings of discomfort. Cioran hopes for a "crack in the self" that in turn might set in motion an untethering of the self from an order that continues to overpromise so as to self-preserve.[105]

Cioran's exposes the fatuousness of utopic thoughts. "To conceive a true utopia, to sketch, with conviction, the structure of an ideal society," says Cioran, "requires a certain dose of ingenuousness, even of stupidity…."[106] Indeed, he describes utopia as "a mixture of childish rationalism and secularized angelism."[107] It is a potent, tempting concoction that intoxicates architects of utopia and those who sustain it by buying into the dream. They possess a "supernatural talent for blindness" that permits them to entertain puerile fantasies of the

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[103] Ibid., 91.

[104] Ibid., 96.

[105] Ibid., 104

[106] Ibid., 83.

[107] Ibid., 87.

impossible in the face of so much precedence of broken, unjust, and violent societies and social orders across time and space.[108]

Blinded by the egoistic quest for some perfect social order or of an impending world order has resulted, time and again, in the emergence of new hells. Utopias consistently displace failed utopias, yielding dystopias that further demand other utopias. It seems like a vicious, noxious loop—one fueled by willed naivetes and, paradoxically, by the very structures of whatever perceived injustices they seek to upend.[109] But for Cioran, even if utopia were actually realized, it would be hell, too. Far from a world for everyone, utopia is a scene meant for certain character types. Inhabitants of utopia are "automatons, fictions or symbols: none is real, none exceeds its puppet status, an idea lost in a universe without reference points."[110] These inhabitants never disrupt social homeostasis, always act in the best interest of others, and consistently pursue altruistic goals. Even children, Cioran says, never steal or misbehave in utopias. Perhaps utopian citizens never curse or have sexual desires, either. A return to Eden before the fall? Deprived of all "ugly feelings," the humans of utopia seem to live as a cult; all difference and discord (any tension, really) is anathema to ideal living.[111] Cioran asks: "What is the use of creating a society of marionettes?"[112]

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[108] Ibid., 81, 116

[109] Cioran mentions poverty as an example. He states, "The delirium of the poor is the generator of events, the source of history: a throng of hysterics who want another world, here and now. It is they who inspire utopias, it is for them that utopias are written. But utopia, let us remember, means nowhere." *History and Utopia*, 82.

[110] Ibid., 85

[111] On the value and necessity of "ugly feelings," such as irritation, envy, and disgust, see Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

[112] Cioran, *History and Utopia*, 85.

Cioran continues his assault on utopias: "If you want to construct a society in which men do no harm to one another, you must admit only abulics."[113] Only sedated minds and highly regimented bodies seem to comprise utopian scenes of instruction. Utopia is not only an impossibility but also a tedium. It is a hell insofar as only a certain set of emotions and thoughts prevail while all others are snuffed or nonexistent. Cioran writes, "Here all shadows are forbidden; only light is admitted…. Hostile to anomaly, to deformity, to irregularity, it tends to the affirmation of the homogenous, of the typical, of repetition and orthodoxy."[114] Utopia is yet another manifestation of biopower. It seeks to purify and standardize thoughts, yearnings, and actions. The question, of course, is according to whose purity standards? Utopia is a path of correction: return to the "straight and narrow path" or miss out on idyllic pleasures for all eternity. One may also experience social death through social ostracization for not following the unitary path or for fear of corrupting others.

For Cioran, there is no pleasure or purpose in taking the straight and narrow path all the time. It is an illusory trajectory that prevents one from experiencing life in all its unexpected forms. Utopia forecloses consideration of this life—in all its pain and confusion—by opening doors to lives that will never be. Humans have become ghost chasers, ghostbusters with no tangible ghosts to capture. Cioran poses a question that deserves careful reflection: "The better to grasp your own collapse or another's, you must pass through evil and, if need be, plunge deep within it: how manage this in those islands and cities from which it is excluded by principle, by *raison d'état*?"[115] "Evil" simply does not figure into the imaginary of utopias, and this deprives one from ever probing one's condition. Only the rational, good people live in paradise; everyone

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[113] Ibid., 108

[114] Ibid., 86.

[115] Ibid.

else is banished, doomed to live life as it is. Cioran can shock readers by arguing that clichés (sanitized scripts) vanish with evil on the scene. Evil teaches us that life can simultaneously be absurd *and* replete with lessons to benefit ourselves and others, now and in the present, without recourse to utopias. Complex creatures such as we are mired in ambiguity, unknown even to ourselves. We are fractured. We are not neatly folded octavos. We are not chapters, clean breaks, limited pages, or word counts. We are not hero/ines or villians, with strictly good or bad dispositions. We are fragments beholden to cycles of death and rebirth.[116]

Cioran relentlessly seeks to undermine the comforts of evasion that utopias produce. He writes, "Our dreams of a better world are based on a theoretical impossibility. Hardly surprising if, in order to justify them, we must resort to solid paradoxes."[117] Can a scene of instruction be expansive enough to hold skepticism of the value of Christian utopias? Does not the reign of God impose itself upon non-Christians? What to do with Satanists? Will drug dealing, trafficking in flesh, and worldwide corruption suddenly just cease? What of the dead, of the corpses of those long gone? What would Christian marionettes look like? Frightening thoughts come to mind, with compulsory prayer gatherings just one. An ideal Christian city is "a torment to reason, an enterprise that does honor to the heart and disqualifies the intellect."[118] As Nietzsche would say, certain strands of Christianity are anti-life and nihilistic because they seek to deprive the experiences of life in all their messiness and pleasures.[119]

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[116] From my forthcoming book, *Fragmented Theological Imaginings* (Miami: FL: Convivium Press).

[117] Cioran, *History and Utopia*, 89.

[118] Ibid.

[119] See Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols, or, How to Philosophize with a Hammer* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

Any pretensions to a universal society, civilization, or scene of instruction smacks of imperialism and forced alignment with essentially context-based notions that emerged from the imaginations of a few.[120] Good intentions aside, forced alignments and attentions foment ennui, resistance, injustice, and violence. And these are the precise ingredients of the recipe of utopia—which makes for a delicious and tempting dish of hope for present and future connoisseurs who have grown tired with quotidian fare—and who drag everyone else along on their quest for ghosts.

<div align="center">Unsanitized Scene 2: In Defense of Nihilism</div>

Imagine introducing a text titled *A Defence of Nihilism* to theology students who have just been exposed to hope as a virtue that safeguards against despair. Normally, lessons on theological hope end without exploring hopelessness, much less the specter of nihilism. But scenes of instruction demand tension to be effective.[121] What if theological hope interrogates itself by examining nihilism in depth, leaving it to readers and students to rise to the occasion and draw meaning from the prospect of meaninglessness?

"Suppose there is no purpose for us, not even happiness. What you are being asked to suppose is the truth of nihilism."[122] I often ask my students to reflect on this statement in their journals, even if they refute nihilism completely. What thoughts emerge when students let go of their most cherished idea(l)s, even if for a fleeting, imaged moment? Do they have a clear idea(l) of the purpose of life, or are life's purposes nothing more than the product of products in circulation, whether epistemological, material, spiritual, or familial? Does their perspicacity

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[120] Jennings, *The Christian Imagination.*

[121] As we have seen, Cioran claims that scenes are too stale—and a hell—when envisioned as perfect. They remain too robotic and ultimately incapable to teaching anything. See Cioran, *History and Utopia.*

[122] James Tartaglia and Tracy Llanera, *A Defence of Nihilism* (New York: Routledge, 2021), 1.

come from relative material and ontological security, from yet another set of unexamined privileges that don't translate across contexts? What if certainty gave way to addlement ? Assuming that there is a singular purpose to life, can it ever be reduced to an apothegm? If so, doesn't that betray the messiness, uncertainty, and sometimes absurdity of life?[123]

Albert Camus argues that most of us, when confronted with the question of the meaning of life, practice "the act of eluding"—which principally depends on hope.[124] We pivot toward another reality, both earthly and heavenly, to ignore the difficulties, meaninglessness, suffering, or boredom of the present. Especially when faced with unfolding precarity or even eventual annihilation, the body deploys defense mechanisms. Camus writes: "In a man's attachment to life there is something stronger than all the ills in the world. The body's judgement is as good as the mind's, and the body shrinks from annihilation. We get into the habit of living before acquiring the habit of thinking. In that race which daily hastens us toward death, the body maintains its irreparable lead."[125] Camus seems to think that most of us live in a stupor, almost as if mindless automata going about our daily lives cruising on automatic pilot. No wonder we often crash—and are startled when we do.

The meaning of life is for, Camus, "the most urgent of questions. How to answer it?"[126] If anything, thinking through nihilism is a quest toward meaning and purpose, but one that entails an unlearning—a *kenosis* of sorts. Several of my students have already indicated a sense of aimlessness and even ennui. Perhaps these and other concerns about the purpose and meaning of

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[123] See Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Vintage International, 1983).

[124] Ibid., 8.

[125] Ibid.

[126] Ibid., 4.

life might actually kickstart thinking and imagination that doesn't rely on assumptions about the coherence, accessibility, stability, or durability of any ideas about how one should *think* about life or *lead* one's life. Nihilism respects bodies, I argue, insofar as it prevents any overarching universalisms to infiltrate bodies and minds fully.[127] To be cocksure of the perennial questions of purpose and meaning is to transform from mysterious bodies into automata or marionettes.[128]

Yet the meaning of nihilism remains shrouded in confusion, since it is, as Bulent Diken notes, "an ambivalent concept with more than one meaning."[129] Its ambivalence stems from the negative connotations that surround the term and that prevent further exploration of its multifaceted definitions and meanings.[130] Its literal definition, "nothing-ism," provokes feelings of emptiness, of a void that fills one with terror, despair, and angst. It also conjures images of destruction of all concepts held sacred. This paves the way, we are told, for the "will to power." Hence, according to some, nihilism led to Nazism and so should be avoided at all costs (a sort of fascistic stance in order to avoid fascism?). For other scholars, most notably Michael Gillespie, nihilism represents a feeling or even a mood that words simply cannot accurately capture.[131] And yet another cadre of thinkers, so sure of their readings of Nietzsche, has blamed the philosopher with a hammer for introducing, via a destructive imagination, a sort of malaise of confidence in Western civilization, Christianity, democracy and any other imaged sources of meaning for a normative subject.[132] As with most words, a lack of clarity envelops nihilism, which "puts it in

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[127] Coloniality seems relevant here. Simply put, coloniality extends beyond colonialism in that it depends not on territorial conquests but on ideological ones. Colonial arrangements—what Anibal Quijano calls the "colonial matrix of power"—survive because of their ideological acceptances across contexts.

[128] Cioran, *History and Utopia.*

[129] Bulent Diken, *Nihilism* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 6-7.

[130] Tartaglia and Llanera, *A Defence of Nihilism* 2-3.

[131] See Tartaglia and Llanera, *A Defence of Nihilism*, 2.

[132] Ibid.

danger of becoming a catch-all for everything bad."[133] This seems to hold in theological spaces and classrooms, where the word cannot even be mentioned without an immediate pushback from those certain of life's meanings and purposes—and of the very untested efficacy of theological hope.

Understood as a "subversive and dangerous doctrine," common understandings of nihilism regard it as a reckless assault on structures and systems that provide meaning and purpose. But James Tartaglia and Llanera suggest that we have a few things to learn from the nihilist. The nihilist denies the existence of any natural order (natural law) and moral principles. Nothing is sacred enough to elude criticism or deconstruction, and in some cases, reconstruction. Rather than eschewing all meaning, the nihilist seeks to rethink or shatter meanings that for too long have overpromised. The scripts, in other words, require revision from beginning to end. Instead of plotlines, the nihilist sees collages or montage—constellations from fragments of all sorts. Accordingly, grand teleologies (like the eschaton) do not figure into a nihilist's worldview. Life "has neither an external cause nor a final purpose."[134] Tartaglia and Llanera describe the possible freedom that nihilism can provide from obligations to utopias that can quickly become dystopian. He writes: "Nihilism removes the justification for thinking that everything is bound to turn out fine in the end."[135] The nihilist can teach us to be skeptical of any big plans or grand narratives (universalisms) that promise a certain and linear plotline for all.[136] Who knows? Perhaps the nihilist is the best line of defense against the rise of alt-right populism and cults of

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[133] Ibid.

[134] Diken, *Nihilism*, 10.

[135] Tartaglia and Llanera, *A Defence of Nihilism*, 9.

[136] Ibid.

personalities emerging around rather fascist personages and their visions for a renewed golden age.

In a sense, nihilistic positions leave one unshielded against the existential angsts of precarity and precariousness, but they can also protect us from anyone or from any idea/system that claims to have *the* solution to all our ills. A nihilist is weary of the alleged certainties offered by both scientific positivism and religious fundamentalism. Grand promises—secular, religious or both—that purport to reveal a destiny are destined to fail. Repeated failures and broken promises could, paradoxically, open the door to nihilism. Perhaps the nihilist simply wants to skip over the grand chimeras to embrace other possibilities sans the overly dramatic harbingers of yet other fantasies to come. A nihilist, above all, does not believe "in the power of the human race to overcome all obstacles."[137] Overconfidence in human agency and prowess is not part of the nihilist's toolshed. Might Augustine and the nihilist have reservations about human nature in common? And might the nihilist teach us how to sit in the dark night without the temptation to evade reality?

Unsanitized Scene 3: Afro-pessimism?

For Afro-pessimists, wholesale progress, particularly in the realm of social advancement, is a mirage with detrimental outcomes. Frank Wilderson III highlights Afro-pessimism's critique, indicating that Black bodies are often manipulated by various political factions for purposes that may contradict their community's interests—all in the name of democracy and liberalism.[138] He writes, "In its critique of social movements, Afro-pessimism argues that blacks do not function

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[137] Ibid., 11.

[138] See Joseph Winters, "Afro-Pessimism," in *Critical Terms in Futures Studies*, ed. Heike Paul (Springer Nature, 2019), 5-11.

as political subjects…."[139] Blacks, to put it differently, are objects that matter only during political campaign cycles. These political campaigns thrive on hope, fueling idealistic goals for those most desperate for the actualization of justice and equality. Wilderson and others question whether achieving these goals truly leads to utopia or toward cementing dystopias for Blacks already in existence.

Collective hope is acknowledged as a potent political tool, whether fueling perceived progress or facilitating regression. But actions aimed at justice and progress, say Afro-pessimists, often fail to benefit minoritized communities. Joseph Winters, reflecting on W.E.B. Du Bois' perspective, underscores that notions of progress can actually perpetuate isolation and unequal resource distribution. He argues: progress actually relies on the isolation of certain communities, the unequal distribution of resources, the maintenance of harmful power relationships, and the often-slow elimination of beings, objects, and ways of life that stand in the way of progress."[140] This view rejects the acknowledgment of losses incurred on the journey toward progress and sidelines discussions on setbacks, suffering, and pessimism, emphasizing a one-sided vision of what political history.

Afro-Pessimism challenges the notion of hope, advocating for a tempered approach to resist being exploited for political agendas that primarily benefit the state and its elite. Winters emphasizes that Black aspirations for a better future must be informed by past traumas, fostering spaces for pessimism and melancholia.[141]

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[139] Wilderson III, "Afro-Pessimism and the End of Redemption."

[140] Joseph R. Winters, *Hope Draped in Black: Race, Melancholy, and the Agony of Progress* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 61.

[141] Winters argues that Du Bois' reflections "show that black American strivings for a better future must be informed, shaped, and haunted by the memories of loss, neglect, alienation, exploitation, and suffering." *Hope Draped in Black*, 64.

Existing political structures are incapable of fundamentally altering dominant

socioeconomic paradigms to benefit those historically marginalized, for the state depends on

certain disposable bodies for its survival and cohesion. According to Wilderson, "the structure of

the entire world's semantic field—regardless of cultural and national discrepancies—is sutured

by anti-black solidarity."[142] The concept of "mattering negatively" captures the erasure,

exclusion, or destruction of Black bodies, essentialized for the benefit of non-Black entities

within societal constructs. For Stephen Finley and Biko Mandela Gray, Black life matters

negatively to the state, "emerging as always already guilty in the eyes of a state that sanctions

Black death as necessary to the maintenance of social order—in other words, as a theodicy or

defense of the goodness and sanctity of the state…."[143] Examples include Black bodies

indiscriminately gunned down by police as a show of force or to emphasize the state's arbitrary

power to kill in the name of law and order.

Calvin Warren asserts that Black lives have undergone a metaphysical holocaust,

resulting in a systemic destruction of their humanity. He defines metaphysical holocaust as "the

systematic concealment, descent, and withholding of blackness through technologies of terror,

violence, and abjection."[144] Wilderson equates blackness with Slaveness, emphasizing the

enduring objectification of Blacks and their absence from contemporary narratives structured

around their humanity. Blacks, in other words, do not exist within Western philosophical,

religious, or legal ontological categories.[145]

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[142] Frank Wilderson III, *Red, White and Black: Cinema and the Structure of US Antagonisms* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 58.

[143] Finley and Gray, "God Is a White Racist," 447.

[144] Warren, *Ontological Terror*, 13.

[145] Ibid.

Afro-pessimism offers critiques of liberal-humanist ethics and theological scenes of hope, challenging the belief that Blacks can attain genuine freedom through conventional means within existing state mechanisms. In existing scenes of instruction, Black bodies are commodified for their utility, perpetuating systemic devaluation and objectification. Afro-pessimists propose deconstructing dominant narratives and symbols and razing the entire current system.

Afro-pessimist texts can invite theological readers to reconsider notions of progress and equality within prevailing epistemological and ontological paradigms. They suggest that collective imagination is contaminated by narratives that exclude Black voices and bodies. Different theological paradigms are necessary to reimagine social existence beyond existing anti-black structures.

<center>Unsanitized Scene 4: Anthony Pinn's Moralist Theology</center>

In a sense, Afro-pessimism neither takes prisoners nor presents possible exits—at least not on the Western ontological and metaphysical plains undergirding religion and politics.[146] Afro-pessimism challenges the assumed epistemological, metaphysical, and ontological bases that theology depends on to make and promote its claims.[147] Though some might view Afro-pessimism as overly-theoretical—as yet another exercise by elite members of the academy—it is borne from the frustrations of very real material conditions, such as, for instance, the visible and palpable white supremacy of the Trump presidency and campaign or the indiscriminate police shootings and killings of black bodies. Afro-pessimists take context seriously.

So does scholar Anthony Pinn, who raises the following question for the theological enterprise in an essay on hope and futures: "What can be said theologically, or, what can be

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[146] Winters, "Afro-Pessimism," 9.

[147] Ibid, 8.

claimed theologically, in light of the historically arranged and ongoing existential-material conditions marking collective life?"[148] Theology professors and teachers should ask this question before preparing any lesson, writing any text. It should prompt an intense self-examination, which is crucial before demanding that others entertain claims that ultimately rest on the shifting and ambiguous grounds of faith. Pinn's question leaves plenty of room for challenging or rethinking theological speeches and imaginations generally—especially those too rooted in commitments and assumptions that fail to consider divergent viewpoints and experiences. Pinn's inquiry offers the possibility of shattering any totalities that stem from theological narratives that simply cannot be proven.

In another essay, "What Can Be Said?", Pinn hones in on hope, recasting his question somewhat: "Do current circumstances, and what they make evident, justify the continued use of hope as a theo-ethical category?"[149] Answering Pinn's questions in the theological classroom is only partly useful. Instead, simply making room for them in theological spaces where certainty looms large might be good enough to begin the process of reimagination—or at least of doubt toward assumptions masked as theological truths. It might even open the door to epistemological nihilism or nihilism generally. Teachers, particularly those dedicated to departures instead of arrivals, can never know where open inquiry leads. Allow the spirit to guide—that is, if so sure of the spirit's ability to lead.

Nonetheless, attempting to respond to Pinn's questions is a useful exercise, especially for those in need of argumentative comfort. After all, theological classrooms remain places where

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[148] Anthony B. Pinn, "Theology after Hope and the Projection of Futures," in *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy* 40, no.2 (2019): 24.

[149] Anthony B. Pinn, "What Can Be Said?: African American Religious Thought, Afro-Pessimism, and the Question of Hope," *Black Theology: An International Journal* 18, no. 2 (2020): 145.

content matters as much as form, where dedication to critical inquiry promises to displace blind adherence to half-baked truths.[150] Perhaps critical discussions around hope can paradoxically rescue theological classroom from forced attentions to claims and grand narratives that have run their course, as evident by the lackluster (cliché) tropes and scripts around hope. In her Nobel Prize speech, Toni Morrison points out that a dead language is unable to move beyond itself: it is self-referential in a disingenuous attempt to justify its rhetorical weight to the exclusion of other possibilities.[151] Dead language, Morrison tells us, "is unyielding language content to admire its own paralysis. Like statist language, censored and censoring. Ruthless in its policing duties, it has no desire or purpose other than maintaining the free range of its own narcotic narcissism, its own exclusivity and dominance."[152] Speeches and teachings on hope need a lifeline or jolt because stale, lifeless—and perhaps Pinn can help.

Pinn responds to his own questions by first challenging traditional accounts of the cross as a sign of redemption or salvation. Here he takes on a cherished black theologian, James Cone. The cross, Pinn asserts, is a sign of abject human failure to live in peace: "there is no redemption in blood."[153] Echoing Delores Williams, Pinn argues that "God does not offer radical change through the pain and misery of the cross; instead it is a cautionary tale undercutting all theodical arguments of redemptive suffering."[154] How could the suffering and death of disposable bodies––the overkill of flesh—be somehow redemptive or salvific? Such accounts smack of a

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[150] See Tracy, *Ambiguity and Plurality*.

[151] Toni Morrison, "Nobel Lecture," The Nobel Prize, December 7, 1993, https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes /literature/1993/morrison/lecture/

[152] Ibid.

[153] Pinn, "What Can Be Said?," 149.

[154] Ibid., 149.

voyeuristic masochism that refuses to acknowledge the hopelessness and absurdity of present existential-material conditions.

Continuing his criticism, Pinn states that Christian hope depends on some vantage point outside of material conditions that only the theologian can seem to access.[155] This is because, Pinn argues, theologies of hope depend significantly—or maybe even exclusively—on the imagination of the theologian, who then deploys it to justify his prerogatives or own hopes for what the future looks like (a claim that Cioran also echoes).[156] Hope is a mirror of what the theologian desires within the confines of limited Christian speeches and scenes of instruction. The theologian inexplicably can peek into a world others cannot see. He is effectively gnostic or esoteric even, trafficking in special knowledge or foresight. His projections rival those of Nostradamus. Such claims—pronouncements—of things unseen depend on a "radical" faith, a sort of blind trust in the theologian's privileged vantage point. "And through this 'radical' faith," Pinn writes, "theological work renders the theologian's pronouncements a matter of what she would like without suitable regard for what it is."[157] Circular reasoning and dead speech—a deadly though potent combination. Pinn seeks to call the theologian to account by having him return to Earth—to the material conditions that are indeed inescapable for bodies on the ground.

Possible solutions to gnostic theological claims or to fortune-telling are epistemological skepticism and metaphysical fragmentation. Pinn advocates the need to challenge theological assumptions operative in any account, even well-intentioned ones. Maybe he seeks languages and speeches that allow for their own breaks and fragmentation. Pinn is especially wary of any claims to grandiose, universal accounts of grand unities with cosmic implications (i.e. the reign

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[155] Pinn, "Theology after Hope and the Projection of Futures," 27.

[156] Pinn, "What Can Be Said?," 150.

[157] Pinn, "Theology after Hope and the Projection of Futures," 27.

of God). Those accounts represent an overreach of limited imaginations that strive to be divine, enveloping other possibilities, imaginations, and speeches in the process.

Pinn proposes what he terms "moralist theology" as an anecdote to theology run amok. He writes: "Moralist theology can be understood as the suffering of the uncomfortable, the troubling of assumptions, and the promotion of the unformed—the contrary."[158] These seem like calls to epistemological nihilism or nihilism generally. For Pinn, there are no "safeguards of knowledge" to fall back on as the world falls apart.[159] Order, coherence, linear trajectories, and stability are problematic for moralist theology.[160] In sum, moralist theology aims to "expose any claim to certainty, to a type of positive (or negative) knowledge regarding what has been labeled liberation, or freedom, or transformation, or even democracy—i.e., projected futures."[161] Pinn, tracking Afro-pessimist thought, challenges hope and utopia. Pinn wonders whether theology can return to basics and grapple with life drowned in suffering.

What can theology say, if anything at all? Before it can make pronouncements, theological scenes of instruction, speech, and its teachers would do well to reconsider long-held assumptions about theology itself. Hope and utopia are two prime starting points. Epistemological deaths give way to life—or to transitions. Can theology transition from itself?

A Coda for Audiences: A Lament for Theological Speech

When sitting in the classroom listening to how a theologian or students use or understand hope, or when reading normative theological accounts of hope and utopia, I cannot help but be haunted by the corpses—not the ghosts—of bodies already violently extinguished. A sense of

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[158] Ibid., 41.

[159] Ibid.

[160] Ibid., 42.

[161] Ibid.

despair (a vice) grips me and refuses to let go. I also think of the corpses to be, those bodies barely hanging on that scour the cities in search of scraps to eat amid a perpetual wasteland. These bodies—not seen and understood beyond their fleshiness—are perhaps what Hortense Spillers had in mind when discussing the differences between bodies and flesh. "In that sense," she writes, "before the 'body' there is the 'flesh,' that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse, or the reflexes of iconography."[162] I think of flesh for sale walking the tracks in search of their next fix, exchanging sexual acts for the promise of their next escape. In and out of cars, they are the objects of those with enough security to afford flesh for the taking. Those who purchase the flesh and its acts also search for their next escape in a loop of endless attempts to satiate unruly fleshy desires of all kinds.

The exchange of flesh itself presents a challenge to wholesale accounts of hope. How does plastic flesh, itself vulnerable and mutable, seek a future when its present is anything but promised, clear, or stable?[163] On my mind are also the countless children who must learn in school or play at home under the looming threats of bombs or other violence in the never-ending battle for supreme sovereignty—the asinine result of a global system of sovereignty run amok. What of persons with neurodivergence who don't have the care or love of others? What of the disabled of all sorts? Synonyms: expendable and institutionalized. I think often of trans students and youth who must daily ward off imprecations and physical violence—commonly from family. I think of migrants of all kinds cut down by ruthless, blood-thirsty vigilantes or by unforgiving waters. What of the tragic phenomenon of overkill? It's not enough to simply murder, as if

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[162] Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (Summer 1987): 206.

[163] See Jackson, *Becoming Human*.

murder can ever be simple, but one must mutilate—annihilate—the body of another, reducing it to severed flesh that now becomes indistinguishable from any other inchoate carcass. Domination upon domination, bones heaped upon bones, the *Danse Macabre* continues—but without the music or pomp. A universal experience (death) now made unique to certain bodies through overkill and targeted violence.

These hauntings by corpses and *corpses-to-be* have for me diminished the efficacy of Christian hope.[164] Who is the audience for the essays in *Hope: Promise, Possibility, and Fulfillment*, for example? Who can afford hope? How much hope can one tolerate?[165] Who can sit in expectation at empty promises of hope as the all-too-real threats of necropolitics, biopower, and overkill presently ravage life and loom large over other bodies? What can reason grasp with its limits? What hope can children killed on a playground by the shards of a bomb have? What hope can a comatose patient of a ruthless beating have? What of eco-anxiety and the hopelessness of an ecosphere daily decimated? It seems that talk of hope moves on too quickly from these concerns or doesn't even consider them to begin with. Perhaps unruly flesh once again disrupts sanitized scenes of instruction and theological speech that struggles to say anything beyond its own confident, untested self references. Circular speech becomes necropolitical, simply feeding the loop to sustain it. Tautologies and circumlocution—hallmarks of speech struggling to speak.

Admittedly, any talk of hope is abstract or theoretical at some level. One would not be talking about "Christian hope" if in a life or death scenario. Such speech is reserved for those with at least some modicum of time to at least envision an immediate future or another scenario.

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[164] See César "CJ" Baldelomar, "A Reimagined Ethical Imagination: Considering Epistemological Nihilism and Afro-Pessimism as a Corrective to Ethics of Hope," *Perspectivas* 18 (2021): 23-42.

[165] Pinn, "What Can Be Said?"

Talk of hope, therefore, depends upon a hope of hope, or a vindication of hope that promises or sustains an outcome: faith, political programs/agendas, grand visions (cosmologies) and utopias, and belief in a coming reign of God—as if the Divine *thinks* in terms of an all-too-human sovereign or in terms of medieval, royal political concepts.

To care is to ask who the audience is for texts and teachings on hope. It is irresponsible to assume audience or attention, especially with indictments of Christian theology as a discourse that survives largely because of forced attention.[166] Questions for teachers of hope to ponder: What are the scenes where hope is operative? What does hope even mean if constantly confounded with optimism or other understandings prevalent in popular culture and common parlance? These and other concerns should help us gauge any account of hope. To remain accountable to the bodies that haunt means to temper any simple or theoretical notions of hope with the scenes that consistently call hope into question. Cioran on the foolishness of utopia, the teachings of nihilism and the nihilist, and the assertions of Afro-pessimists and others who advocate hopelessness in the face of seemingly impenetrable systems must all be taken into account when discussing hope.

At the very least, I argue that, as with any theological claims, context matters in discussions on hope. One's experiences and contexts dictate how much truth a theological claim (always speculative) holds. The same with claims of Christian hope. Far from a universal concept, the theological virtue is dependent upon bodies for its activation. Simply put, some can tolerate conversations on hope more than others. As with financial resources, some bodies have more disposable time on their hands—time to think, write, and teach about hope. Other bodies, reduced to flesh, are simply extinguished without hope to lean on, their temporal reality ceasing,

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[166] Jennings, *After Whiteness*.

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sometimes at the blink of an eye. To salvage hope from the dustbins of hackneyed feel-good phrases, honest acknowledgement of the concepts' limitations and audiences is essential. Demands for forced attention or affects will do nothing but continue killing an already fragile language and discipline (theology) that currently is unable to respond to impromptu, unsanitized scenes or scenarios. For me, the hauntings of corpses remain the ultimate measure of accountability for any theological speech that fancies itself brimming with possibilities of what never was or will be.

Chapter 5

Toward a Rhizomatic Theological Imagination (and Pedagogy):
Notes on Hermeneutics for Envisioning Scenes of Instruction

So far I have explored how theological speech and sanitized scenes of instruction—as currently imagined, crafted, and deployed—are woefully unable to respond to atmospheres of violence without falling into the very grasps of biopower and necropolitics. Lurking behind theological imagination is the incessant need for universals, unity, coherence—the elements for "Truth." Totalitarian theology (T-Theology), as Marcela Althaus-Reid calls it, demands a forced unity that depends on and produces stale and predictable speeches and scenes of instruction— enacted and given currency through forced attention and affection. I have examined three constitutive elements of a T-Theology: imago Dei, dignity, and hope. These elements operate only on sanitized scenes of instruction, that is, scenes already curated by writers and teachers to produce a certain end, such as a formative lesson or an affective sympathy for *los pobrecitos*. Try to apply these theological elements or themes to scenarios of overkill or mass death (as in Chapter 4) and they seem to ring hollow, silencing even the most staunch proponents of cherished virtues or theological themes. What is left from the fragments of scenes anchored around sanitized theological interpretations of imago Dei, dignity, and hope?

This chapter and the next offers some notes on possibilities for writing, doing, and teaching theology otherwise. This chapter considers the contours of a rhizomatic theological imagination and pedagogy, with careful attention to the dynamics of hermeneutics. By now, I hope my "method" of montage and collage—of juxtaposing different texts and experiences—has conjured some scenes other than the ones now cliché in theological classrooms and writing. At

the very least, the juxtapositions are meant to unsettle, disrupt, and point toward the excesses of current sanitized scenes of instruction that might make theologizing otherwise possible.

As such, this chapter does not proffer a comprehensive or systematic program to overhaul theological imagination and education. Such undertaking would betray the entire exercise of this dissertation: to disrupt sanitized scenes of instruction in order to expose their contextual and nonuniversal natures. Dislodging theology's dependence on its own tropes is one way to free theological reflection and education from the shackles of dehydrated rhetoric in the face of increasingly complex and intertwined violence that demands more than "hopeful" scenes. I have sought to contribute to such dislodging by fragmenting theological speech and scenes of instruction. The fragments or shards then become elements for new constellations of meanings (new scenes of instruction) always remade again amid ever-shifting necropolitical imaginaries.

As I note in Chapter 1, atmospheres of violence are pervasive and perhaps inescapable. The conditions that form the atmospheres suffocate us all. Finding pockets of air from within is what the next two chapters attempt. Death resurfaces anew, always remade through techniques that promise life. What would scenes and theological speech sound like and scenes look like with the realization of precarity and death always looming? Mark Jordan's words cogently express what my intuition feels: "If the felt nearness of death seems to scramble the sequence of teaching or the allocation of responsibilities for it, all pedagogy begins and ends with the fact of mortality."[1] How can theology respond to scenes of forced death without forcing attention?

What does it mean to theologize—to imagine—and to teach and learn within the darkness and the dark night of the soul? How do the clouds (of unknowing) shape our desires for the very safety that might lead us to settled theologies and fascisms of all sorts, not least of the fascisms

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[1] Jordan, *Queer Callings*, 36.

within? What does it mean to consider fragments of knowledge and experience while sifting through the debris of theological wastelands? How to relate and care within atmospheres of violence that suffocate each one of us as we barrel toward ends of all sorts? Are ends even ends or, as one of my students put aptly it, just transitions?[2] Can theology survive—and maybe even thrive—within the nebulous and suffocating clouds hovering over texts, pedagogies, classrooms, and bodies?

<div align="center">***</div>

What follows is a thought experiment in doing, teaching, and writing theology in what I call a rhizomatic way (more on this later). Admittedly, it is a sometimes haphazard undertaking, not too dissimilar from attempting to produce new beats or remixes from the fragments of a settled (but abandoned) genre. The hope: to resurrect, even if underground, the numerous potentials that theology might yet offer once unshackled from languages exhausted and from scenes that no longer allure bodies of all kinds without coercion. The reflections here are a modeling of a hermeneutics and pedagogy that complexify academic theological speech and imagination—leading to scenes of instruction that can offer possibilities for resistance (however small, however fleeting) to necropolitics, biopower, and precarity within the Anthropocene. What follows is also meant to jolt learners and teachers in theological classrooms in order to open pathways to seeing the discipline as far richer than current speeches and scenes of instruction would have us believe. A polyphony instead of a symphony… a blending of methods that encourage and welcome improvisation … a theology always with ellipses….[3]

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[2] My thanks to my former student Liri Cekaj for this insight.

[3] For more on thinking and writing in ellipses, see Lauren Berlant, *On The Inconvenience of Other People* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2022), 117-147, 153.

Alternative Routes?

I acknowledge the many familiar routes that this chapter could have taken. Here is a sampling of available theoretical lenses that I could have recommended to respond to the atmospheres of violence in light of the inadequacies of speeches and lessons on imago Dei, dignity, and hope: Marxist analysis (as in liberation theology), a reboot of liberation theology, a return to cosmology and thinking in terms of the "Universe Story," or a revitalization of queer theology.[4] Of course, given existing tropes of identities and identity politics in academic theology, readers might expect me to interpret these lenses through Latinx eyes. But I often ask myself: What does that even mean? Must I emphasize my family's past in Nicaragua or my ability to speak Spanish? Or is it my eye color and phenotype? Which imagined or real grid point of identity makes my analysis Latinx? A *testimonio* on immigration prompted by a biblical text (usually Exodus), perhaps? Is reflecting on hermeneutics or on the epistemological and ontological assumptions undergirding *general* theological writing and education only the province of the David Tracys?

These lenses are all valuable for expanding theology. I am by no means discounting or denigrating the utility of Latinx or Hispanic experiences for theology, or of the social analyses of liberation theologians, or the expansive (though perhaps a bit too extraterrestrial) claims of the new cosmologists.[5] And I often read and use queer theory and theology in my own writing and teaching. Indeed, I have learned much from scholars and teachers that employ all these lenses in their work and teaching. Their methodologies and conclusions are precious and necessary to

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[4] See Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry, *The Universe Story: From the Primordial Flaring Forth to the Ecozoic Era—A Celebration of the Unfolding of the Cosmos* (San Francisco: Harper, 1992).

[5] The new cosmologists include thinkers like Brian Swimme and Fritjof Capra, who try to envision cosmologies other than the dualistic, mechanistic, and materialistic-oriented one that they see as foundational to Western civilization. They are influenced by the work of Thomas Berry, most notably *The Great Work*.

rewriting theology. But their lenses and methods are already in wide circulation within our

classrooms and beyond. Some, like liberation theology, have enjoyed a lengthy partnership with

mainstream theological publishers like Orbis and even Notre Dame Press.[6] Rather than add yet

another block to the edifice of systematic texts that already center these lenses, I instead seek to

play in the dark.[7] I grasp for ways to stoke imaginations in ways that I simply cannot see at the

moment. And I accept the prospect of failure when doing so. I might not find anything other than

the sensation of my outstretched arm groping at air.

So this is not another attempt to prescribe how theology should be taught to

undergraduates or graduate students who feel the icy grips of a world always in collapse. I am

after multiple interpretations, especially unsanitized ones, of the classics in circulation in many

of our classrooms and in other theological spaces. The key is polyvocality… multiplicity. To that

end, this chapter suggests notes for a rhizomatic hermeneutics of theology. I search for a

polyphony from the various possible keys of theological reflection, opening doors to

epistemological paths that might currently be nonexistent or foreclosed by adherence to scenes of

instruction that promise only certain endings when followed correctly as ultimate Truth.

Theology should elevate only the divine to the status of the sacrosanct. The most convincing

theology does it through negation and silence.[8] All else is chatter that should be always subject to

critiques and re-evaluations, not least at moments of self-assuring stability. To sense what is

possible, theological language needs to enter the dark clouds of the impossible. Instead of

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[6] See Althaus-Reid's poignant critique of the Northern and Western theological marketplace, which she likens to theme parks, made possible by the suffering of the those in the South. *From Feminist Theology to Indecent Theology,* 127-142.

[7] Here I am influenced by the work of Toni Morrison, who does with literature what I am attempting to do with theology. See *Playing in the Dark* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

[8] For the most part, my students through the years have been intrigued by the apophatic writings of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite.

pronouncements, annunciations, and denunciations I propose juxtapositions of fragments, but not compare and contrast. What might emerge when incongruent texts, interpretations, and bodies meet in the theological classroom or when writing theology? What notes, sounds, desires will surface from within the dark night and the fragments that remain from theological excesses? What characters might emerge once the scripts unravel?

Toward a Pluriversal Design for Theology

Pluriversal designs for theology can help us approach the complex and intertwined violences unique to our times and common across the "human experience." From pluriversality can stem a sense of disorientation, of a centerless undertaking of discord. Some might become uncomfortable at my pedagogical choices, my hermeneutical approaches, my selection of texts and experiences. A chaotic, centerless, non-teleological theological teaching can remind us that comfort only keeps us in place and far removed from what is awry or inconvenient around us—and within us.

Discomfort is the condition that pushes imaginations and reorients attentions. Michalinos Zembylas defines a pedagogy of discomfort as "a teaching practice that can encourage students to move outside their 'comfort zones' and question their 'cherished beliefs and assumptions.'"[9] This pedagogy aims to unsettle students' epistemological and emotional comfort by calling on students to "recognize what and how one has been taught to see (or not to see)"[10] so that students can then "uncover and question the deeply embedded emotional dimensions that frame and shape daily habits, routines, and unconscious complicity with hegemony."[11] The hope is that once

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[9] Michalinos Zembylas, "Pedagogy of Discomfort and its Ethical Implications: The Tensions of Ethical Violence in Social Justice Education," *Ethics and Education* 10, no. 2 (2015): 163.

[10] Bonilla-Silva, "Feeling Race," 18.

[11] Zembylas, "Pedagogy of Discomfort and its Ethical Implications," 166.

students undergo this deeply personal examination of one's thoughts and emotions, students will practice continuous introspection during their entire lives—inoculating them from epistemological and emotional indoctrination or manipulation, not least from the theological type.

Yet, as with any polyphony, eventually the noise should give way to all kind of silences. The dizzying and labyrinthine plurality and ambiguity of a rhizomatic theological imagination should make one amenable to unknowingness and an eventual apophasis. Can theology be done (taught and written) beyond the promises and perils of categories and identities?[12] How can an apophatic theology push us to acknowledge and inhabit our precarities amid our perpetual brokenness within atmospheres of violence? How can a theology that embraces its own self-emptying and possibly its own unraveling aid us to simultaneously sit in the dark night and ignite the fires needed to quell the fires produced by all-too-human imaginations? I leave the answers to you as I continue to play in the dark, gasping for air that I have been unable to breathe fully.

Contours of a Rhizomatic Imagination and Pedagogy

What follows are contours of a rhizomatic theological imagination that can facilitate constellations toward alternative languages and scenes better able to equip students to confront the stark realities of necropolitics, biopower, and precarity. This is a "pedagogy" that I have experimented with in my theology classrooms and in my writing. It is a pedagogy that depends on reading and engaging odd bedfellows, of juxtapositions of seemingly incongruent texts and experiences—all within, alongside, and above familiar theological methods and structures.[13] A rhizomatic approach discards nothing, for one never knows—or much less foretell—what pieces

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[12] See Jordan, *Queer Callings*.

[13] Jordan, *Transforming Fire*.

may be of use to later constellation crafting. Fresh scenes are remixes of the scraps left by old

ones or from the excesses of present ones. So yes, even sanitized scenes of instruction,

theological vices of certainty and universality, unchecked assumptions, and clichés matter. For

just as a text never conveys the same meaning twice, the familiar can feel eerily unfamiliar when

seen through different lenses at different times. As Mark Jordan observes, "No course works the

same way when it is repeated. There are different students in it—and there are ongoing cultural

mutations around both students and teachers."[14] Changes, reconstitutions, movements of all

kinds—these are the (hidden) realities of all classrooms.[15] Indoctrination in authorized

theological methods and interpretations is not necessarily an obstacle to rhizomatic thinking and

imagining. Of course, it would be interesting to engage students pre-indoctrination in settled

methods and hermeneutics, but a core theology classroom is essentially a mixed space of vastly

different backgrounds, knowledges, and interests.

We all have much to unlearn and relearn. "Deep education is reeducation," writes Jordan.

"A theology that wants to persuade the world must make its place in the middle of what the

world counts as learning."[16] Unlearning and relearning means not discarding what one deems not

useful or inconvenient but rather reconfiguring these fragments into other arrangements. Lauren

Berlant puts it well: "To unlearn the objects that seem to be crucial to holding up the vastly

inadequate world is to unlearn how one or a collective holds attachments, motives, and interests

from within the lived space of an ongoingness that we want both to shred and maintain

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[14] Jordan, *Transforming Fire*, 82.

[15] See Elliot Eisner's observations on explicit, implicit, and null curricula. In particular see Chapter 4, "The Three Curricula That All Schools Teach" in *The Educational Imagination: On the Design and Evaluation of School Programs* (New York: Macmillian, 1985).

[16] Jordan, *Transforming Fire*, 78.

something of."[17] Fragmenting and reconfiguring theological discourse and scenes require much work and imagination, especially given the voluminous texts and plurality of experiences that can contribute to designing other constellations of meanings. A rhizomatic theological imagination and pedagogy can help meld different forms of learning without claiming to be all encompassing. Capacious but not pretentious.

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Rhizomatic Imagination and Pedagogy:
Some Key Themes

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French thinkers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari define a rhizome "as a continuously growing horizontal underground stem that puts out lateral shoots and adventitious roots at intervals."[18] Rhizomes have no center; they conjure images of multiplicities, assemblages of all kinds (including unexpected ones) that are always in movement. They are decentered and always traveling in unexpected directions, with no telos or end point. Rhizomes can spring up in several forms and at different junctures. And they occupy an in-between space, "interbeing intermezzo," disrupting settled concepts of all kinds. Rhizomatic connections, then, are simultaneously shifting and often saturated—frames are unable to contain them for long, if at all. They are offshoots capable of breaking through—or dancing around—even the most hardened encasements to form unforeseen alliances across seemingly irreconcilable differences.[19]

What I have called a "rhizomatic imagination" opens paths—other synapses and portals––toward a pluriversal re-conception of our own positionalities and epistemologies.[20] This renders any one worldview—any one consciousness or educational paradigm—as simply one among a

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[17] Berlant, *Inconvenience of Other People*, 151.

[18] Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 22.

[19] See Baldelomar, "Haunted by (Ontological) Ancestors and Bodies in Precarity."

[20] See César "CJ" Baldelomar, "The Possibilities of Rhizomatic Imagination and Ecopedagogy Amid the End of an Era," *Earth Charter Magazine* 1, no. 1 (June 2023): 5-12.

multitude of possibilities. In pedagogical terms, rhizomatic teaching and learning is always open to any and all connections beyond the systematic, strategic, or rational—though it undoubtedly acknowledges their importance. And that is the key: rhizomatic learning does not conceive of the educational craft as dualistic or as in search of closed totality systems. All is useful in forging knowledges, worldviews, and worlds. Nothing should be discarded, for one cannot know what combinations of fragments or offshoots will surface as possible next constellations of meaning and interpretation (as the next scenes of instruction).

I do not—and will never—advocate for abandoning the "western" theological, literary, or philosophical cannons. I say cannons because the texts that comprise cannons constantly shift. Depending on the time period, community, and reader, some texts are elevated in importance, others demoted, and others simply ignored or buried. I find it useful to think of cannons as comprised of Tetris pieces, fitting together at different times for variegated reasons.[21] I am, however, sympathetic to learners and readers, particularly from minoritized communities, who wish to throw out the Western cannons in favor of other cannons. And I am sensitive to claims that certain texts within the cannons have caused grave epistemic, physical, ontological, and spiritual violence and death to several bodies and communities.[22] Another critique leveled at engaging normative texts, what David Tracy calls "classics," is best articulated by Audre Lorde: "For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change."[23] The assumption is that certain people have definitive ownership over texts.

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[21] See David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1989).

[22] Conquest, for example, depended on theological and philosophical texts that buttressed the superiority of one people over another. See Chapter 2 for some examples.

[23] Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1984), 112.

But that is not the case, for even normative texts can escape the grasps of its most feverish interpreters. The cannons hold potential for infinite re-readings and deconstructions that pave the way for resistances against interpretations that attempt to domesticate all reality.[24] Further, if minoritized and marginalized communities simply abandon cannons, the same death-dealing interpretations will continue to unabatedly dominate and infiltrate the very bodies and communities being harmed. Cycles of reification will then repair the palaces of knowledges that are actually beginning to crumble. I also don't think it possible to completely unlink from prevailing epistemes. In a sense, all learners in the West are children of the Enlightenment.

But what I do advocate is challenging and deconstructing (fragmenting) interpretations that fancy themselves as offering more than they can or should. I am wary of interpretations put forth as ultimate truth or as divinely sanctioned, or worse still, as divinely sanctioned ultimate truth. Theology—and any grappling or imagining—is richer when it resists itself, that is, when it resists overreach and mythification. Over-speculation become truth, become dogma, become final and static—these are elements for any T-Theology or theology-turned-fundamentalist-ideology that bolsters authoritarianism.

In contrast to static theological truths, rhizomatic imaginations and pedagogies are consistently in motion and fluid, much like our bodies and lives, despite futile attempts to secure stability and protection against precariousness through forced mythic certainties.[25] Rhizomatic imagination rejects the artificial separation between humans and all other matter—challenging assumptions about the ontological superiority of hominins and what constitutes meaning (i.e. non-human animals, for example, reside within worlds of their own understanding). It also

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[24] Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity*, 15

[25] Baldelomar, "The Possibilities of Rhizomatic Imagination and Ecopedagogy Amid the End of an Era."

doesn't shy away from the inevitable cycles of life and death that are part of social and natural

existence—and to which we all are beholden (precariousness). A rhizomatic approach to

theological education could result, admittedly, in very complex—and at times seemingly

overwhelming and contradictory—reflections on our conditions and contexts. But that is fine—

and necessary. Arduous and exhausting analyses and heart-wrenching, nerve-wracking

conversations on the inextricable connections between life and death, which comprise

atmospheres of violence, might be the best antidote to grand but simplistic promises that could

actually reify biopower and intensify necropolitics (i.e. hope in the next world as bodies in this

one continue to suffer horrible fates). We must be capacious and flexible enough to acknowledge

road blocks—and to change course at a moment's notice.

Self-contained systems that form totalities, with rigid boundaries, cannot lead to new

possibilities, fresh scripts, thoughtful ethical formations, and reconstituted characters who inhabit

increasingly complex and shifting scenes of instruction.[26] Self-contained epistemologies—

circular knowledge systems that purport to have the final word on any matter and that claim to be

immune to outside criticisms—cannot undergo transformation, cannot continue to shift as

complex challenges arise. Totalizing epistemologies cannot adequately read the signs of the

times or present new ways to (re)form selves. Obsessed with order and logical argumentation,

totalizing epistemologies and T-Theologies represent the zenith of what Deleuze and Guattari

call arboreal—or tree-like—thinking.[27] Such thinking forces its roots in lands not yet fertile and,

with technological help, does everything it can to remain planted and to force growth from the

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[26] Mark D. Jordan notes that though some characters are fixed by exhibiting fixed patterns, "there can be no scene of instruction unless at least one character can change. A scene of instruction is an occasion for bringing new meanings into action, for binding new words into bodies." *Teaching Bodies*, 69.

[27] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*.

ground up for future generations to simply take shade under. "Arboreal practices are always rooted, rigid, and fixed—persistently calling for unity, wholeness, and boundaries to protect the trees of knowledge from being cut down.[28] Deleuze and Guattari distinguish rhizomatic practices from arboreal ones.

Rhizomatic thinking, practices, and connections can serve two purposes: fragmentation of systems and, once fragmented, can stoke inspiration to seek out connections once unimaginable, currently unknown, or even improbable from the leftovers of systematic shards. Perhaps this is the chief task of theology. To let the Spirit blow where it wills, theological systems need to reimagine themselves as shards, as fragments of traditions of thinking and practices pregnant with multiplicity and endless possibilities for selves. And theologians must also reevaluate their vocations and tasks. Rather than seeking T-Theology, what I call *arboreal theology*, or constitutional (doctrinal) theology, the search should be one for fragmented theologies that are better able to support the fugitive energies of disposable bodies, of an unpredictable Spirit, and of a Christ whose broken bones and ruptured flesh speaks not to the humanity of all beings but to the very nonbeing of bodies suffering domination of all sorts with no respite other than the looming prospect of sustained suffering or violent death.

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Theological Flatlands and a Pluriversal/
Rhizomatic Hermeneutics and Pedagogy

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In the novel *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions*, the main character, A. Square, travels from his two-dimensional home (called Flatland) to Spaceland (three dimensions),

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[28] Deleuze and Guattari write that "unlike trees or their roots, the rhizome connects to any point to any other point, and its traits are not necessarily linked to traits of the same nature; it brings into play very different regimes of signs …. The rhizome is reducible neither to the One nor the multiple …. It is composed not of units but of dimensions or rather directions in motion. It has neither beginning nor end, but always a middle (milieu) from which it grows and which it overspills." *A Thousand Plateaus*, 21.

Lineland (one dimension), and Pointland (no dimensions).[29] Having experienced these exotic

(because previously unknown) lands, A. Square's imagination comes alive. He begins to dream

of visiting a four-dimensional land but is soon imprisoned for speaking too much of Spaceland.

The four-dimensional land—which overwhelms with sensory overload but that also soothes—is

too taboo, too transgressive for the ethical imagination of Flatland's square rulers and inhabitants.

The novel ends with A. Square, imprisoned for seven years, in a hopeful but helpless mood. He

writes: "Yet I exist in the hope that these memories, in some manner, I know not how, may find

their way to the minds of humanity in Some Dimension, and may stir up a race of rebels who

shall refuse to be confined to limited Dimensionality."[30]

Decolonial scholars consistently remind us of the pluriverse and its ever-shifting multiple

worlds within worlds, with their several centers of truths (and their attendant universals),

accessible to all.[31] But one-dimensional hermeneutics blocks entry into these spheres of truly

polyphonic imagination and thinking.[32] Defining the pluriverse is and should be tricky, for it is

an always evolving concept that can morph depending on which voices add their languages to its

existing normative contours. It is a concept that should remain hopelessly inchoate, open to shifts

and possible incongruity, lest it become just another one-dimensional academic term of art (or

jargon) feigning multi-dimensionality.

My tentative understanding of the pluriverse is a hermeneutical approach that disrupts the

assumed superiority of any interpretation claiming to be the *one* that explains what constitutes

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[29] See Edwin A. Abbott, *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1992).

[30] Abbott, *Flatland*, 82.

[31] See, generally, *Constructing the Pluriverse: The Geopolitics of Knowledge*, ed. Bernd Reiter (Durham : Duke University Press, 2018).

[32] See Arturo Escobar, *Design for the Pluriverse: Radical Interdependence, Autonomy, and the Making of Worlds* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018).

reality, however understood, in its entirety. A pluriversal hermeneutics, which always remains tentative, can lead to a mosaic epistemology. Raewyn Connell understands this epistemology as comprised of "separate knowledge systems [that] sit beside each other like tiles in a mosaic, each based on a specific culture or historical experience, and each having its own claims to validity."[33] More importantly, like A. Square who seeks to stir up rebellion against one-dimensional thinking and being, Connell envisions a mosaic epistemology as a "clear alternative to Northern hegemony and global inequality, replacing the priority of one knowledge system with respectful relations among many."[34] The specter of relativism thus looms large when discussing the pluriverse and its mosaic epistemology. What to do with Walter Mignolo's claim that "there is no reason to believe that the Bible is universal and the Popol Vuh is not"?[35] And can one ever truly delink from Western epistemes? Can one escape the loops of coloniality and power? Or must resistance emerge within death-dealing epistemes, in spite of them and despite them?

Back to A. Square in his prison cell. His writing gives him hope—but only for a fleeting moment. A few sentences later, A. Square expresses utter disillusionment (even terror): "nay, when even this hard wall that bars me from my freedom, these very tablets on which I am writing, and all the substantial realities of Flatland itself, appear no better than the offspring of a diseased imagination, or the baseless fabric of a dream."[36] His writing bears the marks, the scars, of an imagination too enmeshed with languages long diminished to reproduce the dream of what never was. A. Square cannot escape his fate as a Flatlander, despite his journeys to other worlds.

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[33] Raewyn Connell, "Meeting at the Edge of Fear: Theory on a World Scale," in *Constructing the Pluriverse: The Geopolitics of Knowledge*, ed. Bernd Reiter (Durham : Duke University Press, 2018), 30.

[34] Ibid.

[35] Mignolo, "Foreword: On Pluriversity and Multipolarity," x.

[36] Abbott, *Flatland*, 82.

Not even his written incitements for rebellion and toward multi-dimensionality can replace the all-consuming, totalitarian metanarratives that tautly grip his imagination and body, as well as pen and paper. It seems theology, when understood within singular, normative interpretations, has suffered a similar fate.

On Hermeneutics

A rhizomatic theological imagination ultimately relies on interpretations—on hermeneutics—that are pluralistic, ambiguous, and never sacrosanct.[37] David Tracy's *Plurality and Ambiguity*, particularly the final chapter "The Question of Religion," can be quite instructive for teachers and writers of theology who desire to expand their epistemological and ontological horizons in rhizomatic and imaginative ways. Tracy maintains, as do I, that students and teachers can always re-read and reinterpret the "religious classics" (or classics in general) in multiple ways.[38] Tracy defines classics on two grounds. "On historical grounds," he writes, "classics are simply those texts that have helped found or form a particular culture."[39] The bible, Greek and Roman texts, and writings by political theorists are but some examples for, say, western culture. On "hermeneutical grounds, classics are simply those texts that bear an excess and permanence of meaning, yet always resist definitive interpretation."[40] The parables of Jesus or the fleeting languages of mystics are examples that readily come to mind.

Readers and interpreters cannot tame classics. Their teachings, activated through conversation with the texts and with communities, can yield to instabilities, including

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[37] By sacrosanct I do not mean "holy" in a theological or religious sense but rather as a concept that assumes its holy status in order to shield itself from criticism.

[38] Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity* and *The Anagogical Imagination.*

[39] Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity*, 12.

[40] Ibid.

destabilizing one's present self-identity.[41] In Tracy words, "The classic is important

hermeneutically because it represents the best examples of what we seek: an example of both

radical stability become permanence and radical instability become excess of meaning through

ever-changing receptions."[42] Simple extractive readings of a text will not suffice for creative re-

readings and reimaginations. What's the point of approaching a text, or a scene of instruction, if

one knows how its lesson should or must end?

> In what scholars consider his seminal text, *The Analogical Imagination*, Tracy writes:
>
> To grasp the full significance of hermeneutical understanding for systematic theology …
> demands further attention to the normative reality which drives all humanistic, including
> theological, enterprises forward: the existence of classics confronting, surprising,
> shocking and transforming us all.[43]

Perhaps "full significance" is a bit of an overreach, but I do believe that engagement with the

classics has the potential to instruct in unforeseen ways and to open pathways for a theology that

unravels itself and disrupts any stable senses of the self.[44] "To interpret the religious classics,"

Tracy claims, "is to allow them to challenge what we presently consider possible."[45] It is an

exercise in imagination more than a scholarly one. .

But to grapple with the classics, readers must have conversations with them. Converse

first with just the text, not with secondary sources of author biographies. Allow the writing to

penetrate without seeking definite answers or attempting to psychoanalyze the author.[46] I learned

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[41] Ibid., 15.

[42] Ibid., 14.

[43] Tracy, *Analogical Imagination*, 107.

[44] See Baldelomar, "Haunted by (Ontological) Ancestors and Bodies in Precarity."

[45] Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity*, 84.

[46] Mark Jordan asks readers to "imagine an authorship that forswears fame in order to attend only to the transient effects of its textual surfaces. That strives only to register ripples on a skittish surface. That strives to be ripples, undoing its own propensity to become a closed object. Imagine writing that is more interested in the play of its light and shadow than in plots and personages—or that uses its own plots and personages to project light into unfamiliar landscapes, on unintended readers. Imagine above all a writing that doesn't secure its unity or its relations

this the hard way while in graduate school. As an undergraduate, I had learned to read texts for extractive purposes, mining them for what can be useful in constructing (stitching together) a rigorous social analysis on, just to give an example, environmental degradation. And I excelled at the task, earning among my professors the reputation as the "most systematic thinker" they had encountered in some time. Then came my first graduate school assignment, which called for a 2000-word exegesis on only a select passage from one of the books we had read for the course. The professor noted on the syllabus that we should refrain from relying on secondary sources. I panicked and froze, unable to craft even a sentence. A blank page had never mocked me so brazenly.

In retrospect, it was at that moment, while engaging one paragraph from a text by Nietzsche, that I began to shed the illusions of a voice that was never mine to begin with. My unlearning and reeducation had begun, though I did not know that at the time. Quite the contrary, I remember feeling uncomfortable, unsettled with that assignment. So I turned to my familiar comforts. I relied on secondary sources and even read a brief biography of Nietzsche, layering my thoughts and voice with the chatter from others. Old habits die hard. To this day, I continue to grapple with the consequences of learning to read for extraction and argumentation instead of allowing the texts, classics and otherwise, to guide me wherever they may lead, including to unknowing or confusion.

Back to Tracy, who conveys specific advice for what constitutes a "real conversation" with a classic and others. He writes:

> Real conversation occurs only when the participants allow the question, the subject matter, to assume primacy. It occurs only when our usual fears about own self-image die: whether that fear is expressed in either arrogance or scrupulosity matters little. That fear

to bodies by appealing to the personage of the Author." *Convulsing Bodies: Religion and Resistance in Foucault* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 6.

dies only because we are carried along, and sometimes away, by the subject matter itself into the rare event or happening named "thinking" and "understanding." For understanding happens; it occurs not as the pure result of personal achievement but in the back-and-forth movement of the conversation itself.[47]

Unfortunately, most students I encounter have also been taught to read solely for extraction. They peruse the text and scan it almost with the deftness of a search engine. They search not for thinking, reflection, or understanding but for key words, phrases, and paragraphs that could be of utility in an upcoming assignment, usually a paper or examination.

This is one systematic way to read. Compile a list of 8-12 sources, skim as much as possible, and extract that which is useful to demonstrate mastery or acumen on the subject. (Make sure to develop a spreadsheet that tracks your progress!) The back-and-forth movement that Tracy describes might very well happen while reading for extraction. After all, the power of language rests in the possibility that just one word or phrase might rouse emotions and thoughts the reader never foresaw. Yet extractive or paranoid readings obsessively look for holes to poke in any text—sometimes even superimposing or inventing a "weakness" in a text. Since this mode of reading treats the text as an archive to pilfer, it lulls students into forced readings for predetermined outcomes. Impromptu scenes become nonexistent, transformation improbable. Forced attention and affection—demanding that students care because of the grade—lead to resistance against theology and the classics themselves. The hermeneutical enterprise then remains the domain of authorized experts in already scripted outcomes and conclusions rather than rhizomatic readings with infinite outcomes.[48]

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[47] Tracy, *Analogical Imagination*, 101.

[48] Teachers can learn much from the experiments in biblical interpretation that liberation-minded Catholic priest Ernesto Cardenal facilitated in Solentíname, Nicaragua, throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Cardenal writes: "Every Sunday in Solentíname, a remote archipelago in Lake Nicaragua inhabited by *campesinos* (peasants), instead of a sermon we held a dialogue on the gospel reading. The *campesinos'* discussions were often more profound than those of the theologians, but they reflected the simplicity of the gospel readings themselves." Ernesto Cardenal, The Gospel in Solentíname (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1982), xi.

"Expert readings" might also mislead students into thinking that a certain classic's meaning is limited to what the sparknotes say it is. Sparknotes mean not just the truncated main points of a text (helpful on exams or for a paper) but also the professor's remarks on the text or the expert knowledge of secondary sources. Seeking "key insights" or "main takeaways" before or after reading prevents hermeneutics as conversation. Sparknotes offer *one* way to interpret; in a sense, they do the heavy lifting for readers by replacing possible readings with one expert's reading—or worse, a list of themes—that seeks to demarcate borders around future acceptable meanings. The expert disciplines the reader's imagination by foreclosing it.

Since at least the 1990s, theologians like Isasi-Diaz and Althaus-Reid (among others) have underscored that a responsible systematic theology always reveals its context. Its limits are the limits of its authors, communities, locations, time periods, desires, and commitments, among other numerous markers of positionality. Indeed, library sizes and access to certain volumes are other makers (though underdiscussed) of epistemological positionality and knowledge construction. Fantasies of completeness or finality of analysis are the products of coloniality and its authoritarian minds, which theology has its fair share of. But even the doctrinal ruminations of a John Paul II, the analyses of a Michael Novak, or the admonitions of a Robert Barron are part of the theological cannons that should not be ignored or discarded, especially since those texts influence large swaths of the church beyond theological classrooms. Re-readings of their texts, especially when juxtaposed with other texts on similar topics but with different interpretations, might reveal other uses or purposes for their words or ensure their own unraveling.

Tracy argues that theologians are never exempt from the corruptions of the ego or from the domesticating impulses lurking within.[49] I would go further, adding that we are all part of the death-dealing machinations that keep societies intact.[50] "Whoever comes to speak in favor of religion and its possibilities of enlightenment and emancipation does not come with clean hands nor with a clear conscience," Tracy states. "If interpreters of religion come with any pretense to purity, they should not be listened to."[51] Imagine how refreshing it would be for a theology teacher or writer to admit his/her/their complicity in all sorts of oppressions and marginalization? Pretenses to innocence are as damaging as those to purity. Both facades prevent unraveling of selves or of theology itself. I wonder if such acknowledgements of impurity and complicity would make a theological lesson or even classroom more alluring to students, especially to those who harbor suspicions or preconceived notions of religious thinkers as faux saints? Or would such confessions upset students who view themselves as innocent, pure, or absolved of any responsibility for contributing to necropolitics, biopower, and overall violence? Who knows. At the very least, admitting that purity and innocence are non-existent can begin to undo the formation of the "theologian-type"—that is, the holier-than-thou scholar imbued with impeccable virtues because of incessant reflecting on God and the *Summa*. Hermeneutics that respect the classics on their own terms and that seek plurality and ambiguity hold the promise of undoing stale, rigid characters, not least the theologian-type, serious scholar, or student-as-extractor of information.

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[49] Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity,* 15.

[50] See Stanley, *Atmospheres of Violence.*

[51] Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity*, 85.

Jordan notes that theological pedagogy done well presents "strong alternatives to reductive emphases on information transfer."[52] Standard pedagogy in university classrooms (in my experience) consists of delivering material in units that resemble the chapters within a primer or textbook. While this "classical model" provides some order and coherence, teachers should play with or at least alter their pedagogical modes in light of persistent questions and ongoing classroom interactions. Pedagogy, especially theological ones, must adapt to changes in real time, not least because of the complex and morphing natures of atmospheres of violence.

Any reflections on the Divine or on life's major questions demand a radical openness to contingency, indeterminacy, to the unknown. The challenge is doing so within the parameters of any curricular or departmental aims. To give one recent example: what happens when a classic text (the *Summa's* discussion of just war), juxtaposed with, for example, the 2024 genocide in Gaza,[53] leads to utterances that resemble angry laments or bombastic frustrations from students who already feel unable to speak in a climate that fosters fear and retribution instead of academic freedom? Does the professor simply move on? (A common complaint of students). Does the elephant in the room, now somewhat exposed, only loom larger as the conversations or forced attentions move to the next class's topic?

Reflecting on his experiences in various classrooms over several decades, Jordan states that "none of my employing institutions could control what actually happened in their classrooms when certain authors were let loose."[54] Departmental aims are guides or signposts,

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[52] Jordan, *Transforming Fire*, 11.

[53] I recognize that the term "genocide" might lead some readers to shudder. But taking into account all the elements of the state of Israel's actions in Gaza, I conclude that they have met the elements of genocide as stipulated in The 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. Also, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the occupied Palestinian territories Francesca Albanese has concluded in a recent report that Israel's actions meet the elements of genocide.

[54] Jordan, *Transforming Fire*, 6.

not the ultimate destinations. A theology that takes hermeneutics, as Tracy describes, seriously refuses to be confined to its own methods or dogmas, is open to the unknown (amid the clouds of unknowing), and reconfigures classrooms from disciplinary spaces that immobilize bodies to places of wonder, creativity, and discomfort.[55] As currently structured, theology classrooms do not differ from those that socialize students to demand clear answers to every question or provocation. A classroom that teaches departures instead of arrivals[56] is seen as intellectually suspect (read: as not rigorous enough).[57] Theology has become, according to Jordan, the search "for information, to practice skills, to clarify … values—but not to be spiritually transformed."[58] Theology as science (as *Wissenschaft*) tricks students into equating a most queer[59] discipline with normative ones like sociology or anthropology or even with any of the "hard" sciences that currently sit atop the hierarchy of knowledge. Falling for the ruse, both teachers and students expect logical reasoning to be the *only* acceptable mode of reflection on expansive and enigmatic themes like the Divine or the body and its several often contradictory, desires, movements, emotions and thoughts.

Why can't theological reflection engage literature (including popular novels), music (and not just "sacred" music), rituals, popular culture overall, and any other fragments or scenes that are on the minds of students? These all instruct and mold bodies and desires in ways theology perhaps no longer does. Why must such theological reflection be called "practical" or even "cultural" theology? Anxiety over academic respectability looms large. But such rhizomatic

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[55] On the typical humanities classroom, see Jordan, *Transforming Fire*, 49.

[56] Rubem Alves, *The Poet, The Warrior, The Prophet.*

[57] See Jordan's comments on anxieties over intellectual respectability in theology. *Transforming Fire.*

[58] Jordan, *Transforming Fire*, 6.

[59] By queer, I mean a most unusual discipline that should throw standard academic categories of writing and teaching into disarray on the search for alluring speeches and imaginations on the divine and flesh.

theologizing and teaching actually demands careful attention and considerations, as well as expansive reading, which takes much time and energy. Primers and sequential thematic lessons now become only a small part of the teacher's toolkit. Hence, teachers must judiciously select from an expansive library, lest one risk losing others in a literary maze. But texts should not be stacked or organized in such a way that the teacher's biases for a desired end becomes painfully obvious. A common example in "progressive" theological classrooms is the portrayal of theology as always hinting at or leading to social justice. That certain theological strands foster social justice is simply one interpretation among several of what theology can be made to say toward a premeditated telos. Theological metanarratives, even when well-intentioned, can lead to disappointment when the story is fractured by another contradictory claim of theology's aims and purposes (i.e. to bolster conservative sexual ethics or norms).

Allowing texts to speak on their own terms, then, means dislodging them from sequences that belie the complex and unstable nature of hermeneutics. It also means trusting student by not subtracting their experiences, insights, and desires. Yes, a rhizomatic approach might introduce discord in the classroom; yes, it might contravene certain departmental aims; and yes, it might disquiet students who come seeking cocksure definitions and answers to human natures, desires, relations to the Divine and cosmos, and how best to relate to one another. But inconvenience is part of life.[60] Questions of meaning and purpose will never yield responses that are agreeable to all, particularly in a space where students already harbor suspicions of theological classrooms as spaces of tacit or explicit proselytization.

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[60] See Berlant, *On The Inconvenience of Other People.*

Island Universes: Worlds within Worlds

So what does the teacher (or writer) gain from loosening her grip on the texts or even on the discipline? I cannot answer that. Every classroom presents different challenges and opportunities. Every student is different—and I don't mean just in terms of positionality or identity categories. Even students who have had eerily similar experiences are never exactly the same. The secrets that reside within—encased by shames, fears, concerns for privacy, and so on——make us each worlds within worlds. We change daily or even from minute to minute—the ticks of the clock altering the ticks of our minds and bodies.

Despite seeking solidarities and belonging through political alliances or other affiliations, each of us ultimately experiences life and death alone. We experience external and internal phenomenon only through our own senses and processes, and we interpret through those lenses, which themselves morph with each sensory experience. Reflecting on his experiences of ingesting "four-tenths of a gram of mescaline dissolved in half a glass of water," Aldous Huxley awakens to the realization that "we live together, we act on, and react to, one another; but always and in all circumstances we are by ourselves."[61] We first grapple with texts by ourselves. Teachers and experts should guide readings, not dictate them.

The possibilities for miscommunication and failures to understand each world within a world are significant in theological education—nay, in any educational endeavor.[62] Huxley continues:

> The martyrs go hand into the arena; they are crucified alone. Embraced, the lovers desperately try to fuse their insulated ecstasies into a single self-transcendence; in vain. By its very nature every embodied spirit is doomed to suffer and enjoy in solitude.

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[61] Aldous Huxley, *The Doors of Perception* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2009), 12.

[62] Huxley writes, "But in certain cases communication between universes is incomplete or even nonexistent. The mind is its own place…. Words are uttered, but fail to enlighten. The things and events to which the symbols refer belong to mutually exclusive realms of experience." *The Doors of Perception*, 13.

Sensations, feelings, insights, fancies—all these are private and, except through symbols and at second hand, incommunicable. We can pool information about experiences, but never the experiences themselves. From family to nation, every human group is a society of island universes.[63]

For Huxley, the best hopes to communicate across island universes (if at all possible) is by "taking the appropriate drug."[64] Doing so unravels the self, spreading it into all sorts of directions without the expectation of rejoining. One loses and loosens oneself, even if just for a flash, permitting a less restricted communion with other island universes. By virtue of our pieces spread out in all directions, perhaps we can communicate with the pieces of another to form constellations of relations that can help birth some communication and possible connections.

Can theology induce similar states to those of mescaline? What if theology could actually transport one to another dimension? Might it open other doors of perception to worlds and universe islands totally foreign or not yet here? For Tracy, "The most powerful acts of resistance are often those where the first lesson is to resist oneself."[65] For the teacher or holder of knowledge, resisting the self means resisting one's own interpretations of a text or of life/reality in general. To encourage conversations with texts (themselves island universes)—to allow them to speak multiple languages and on several registers—the teacher must let himself go by always reevaluating any and all claims that might make it to student ears. The scholar must become perpetual student, willing to have views unsettled, to have lessons disrupted or even fall apart. Invitations to rhizomatic readings \are invitations to dispossessions. Tracy remarks: "The ego of the academic theologian, like that of all postmodern intellectuals, needs to learn better ways to

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[63] Ibid., 12-13

[64] Ibid., 14.

[65] Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity*, 105.

dispossess itself of its sense of having exclusive rights to interpretation."[66] Finding these better ways is difficult and always a work left unfished. The advice of many is better than the rumination of one.

After having observed one of my classes, a concerned colleague asked me whether I was "scared or concerned that the free-flowing conversation in class left my control?" Some context: The topic for that day was religious and theological themes in science fiction that could prompt creative resistances to ecological catastrophes and anxiety. Though students cited our common texts, which included Octavia Butler's prescient *Parable of the Sower*,[67] my colleague seemed to intimate that the conversation might have actually slipped from my control. I think she had in mind one particular comment by a student who said her depression became unbearable at the thought of ongoing ecological destruction. In the student's words: "Some days I just feel like all this shit [daily life and its tasks] is for nothing. This is all just a meaningless repetition that serves to distract us from the annihilation of our world." Sadly, the student's lament reflects the common phenomenon of eco-anxiety.[68] Though my colleague didn't mention it, I suspect that she interpreted the student's comment as not apropos in an academic setting.[69] Or perhaps it didn't sufficiently relate to science fiction and ecology. Her question still haunts me: did I lose control?

Control. What a word to use to describe pedagogical events in classrooms where students already experience fatigue because of forced attentions to scripted scenes. Perhaps I did lose

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[66] Ibid.

[67] Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Sower* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2019).

[68] See Britt Wray, *Generation Dread: Finding Purpose in an Age of Climate Anxiety* (Canada: Knopf, 2022).

[69] bell hooks reflects on similar incidents in *Teaching to Transgress.*

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control, though I didn't ever pretend to have it. I was ready to relinquish my own pretensions to control in favor of inciting non-forced attentions and affects. It is always a risk. But is not all education, any conversation, a risk? With so many languages and islands of meaning, the risk of speaking into the air is always present.[70]

Precarious Theological Inquiry as Pedagogy

To avoid asserting control as a pedagogical modus operandi on already bored, anxious, and skeptical students, theological inquiry will do well to embrace its speculative, ever shifting nature. Once again, David Tracy's insights are helpful: "As reflection on Ultimate Reality, and thereby on the limit questions of our existence, theological interpretations must always be a highly precarious mode of inquiry."[71] Control and claims of certainty (or assumed certainty) over interpretations easily bleeds into control and coercion in the classroom, which pushes forced attentions and affects to their breaking points or drives indifferent students to complete apathy. Resistance emerges, but not in the forms necessary for living in precarity and within the atmospheres of violence. Jordan worries that "much of theology is not the best. It is self-centered orthodoxy or preening erudition or punishing prescription."[72] I heed his words: "Because Christian theology remains an all-too-human science, it incurs its own history of power. It censors speech and punishes bodies. Theology taught seriously always risks becoming coercion––that is, tyranny."[73] Tyranny has and continues to form characters, shape bodies, and mold minds. But fascisms within forced on others will never lead to a mescaline-like state. A will to

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[70] See John Durham Peters, Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999).

[71] Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity*, 89.

[72] Jordan, *Transforming Fire*, 83.

[73] Jordan, *Transforming Fire*, 83-84

control forecloses the dreamlike states where one inevitably ponders and feels the Divine through experiences that are at once very much embodied and otherworldly—a liminal space the mystics know all too well.

If theologians are experts on anything, Jordan notes, "it must be knowing that there are no human experts when it comes to being fully human."[74] Only ellipses remain after any attempt to craft a theological sentence…. All that is possible within our all-too-human aspirations to divine language and truth are "some relatively adequate interpretations"[75] that must be revised ad-nauseum with the help of a motley assemblage of bodies (including textual ones), minds, and souls. Rhizomes can connect the island universes—but only temporarily. The spirit, the Divine, flesh and its desires—all enigmatic, unstable, and so unsuitable as markers of permanent meaning. "If any human discourse gives true testimony to Ultimate Reality," Tracy urges, "it must necessarily prove uncontrollable and unmasterable."[76] Theological discourse on grand questions needs to become ungovernable. These speeches should attempt to elude (or subterfuge?) the wide-ranging governmentalities of necropolitics and biopower.

Allowing the discourse to go where it may, including nowhere, is an act of relinquishing attempts to control, mastery, and governmentality. Letting our (theoretical) darlings die is part of abdicating the illusion of sovereignty. Permit the questions, the grappling, to dance and play within, along, and above current doors of perception. This is perhaps one way to lead learners outside and beyond existing knowledge hierarchies and the suffocating discourses that paradoxically promise clarity and life.

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[74] Ibid., 84.

[75] Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity*, 98-99.

[76] Ibid., 109.

Marcella Althaus-Reid calls on theologians to revisit and reconsider "the methodological process of ideological formation."[77] She encourages the death of certain metanarratives in order for other stories and scenes to emerge—but not in metanarrative format.[78] "Theology is for domestication and not for transformation when theological methods ask people to fit into them, and not vice versa," Althaus-Reid writes.[79] When theological speculation—and it is always speculative and precarious—settles or coalesces into a stable dogma or orthodoxy that expects the same from all bodies at all times, it becomes ideology for pastoral coercion or governmentality instead of rhizomatic theological imagining and dreaming.[80] Althaus-Reid is wary and weary of what she calls "mystical truths," since they confirm "dogmas as the dictatorship of divine illusions, where people tend to disappear in methods and ready-made theological responses to questioning from reality."[81] Do all *disputatio* require prepared responses? Or responses at all? A thought experiment: What happens when unruly flesh disrupts sanitized scenes? For example, imagine you are out dinning with a friend on a temperate summer night. You both decide to sit outside. Suddenly a homeless person who has not showered for weeks on the curb in proximity to your table. How does the stench of the unwashed body repulse you, despite your claim to have sympathy for the homeless? Or what if you were mugged by the same person while walking home? Now that the character of your theology readings on homelessness has come to life in real (unsanitized) ways, does the scene of instruction change for you?

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[77] Althaus-Reid, *From Feminist Theology to Indecent Theology*, 67.

[78] Ibid., 68.

[79] Ibid., 69.

[80] Ibid., 66.

[81] Ibid., 67.

I wonder whether a divestment from normative theological methodologies is possible. Can there be a kenosis of theology itself, an emptying of all its theorizing as truth? Can theology be more than ideology?[82] Can it exceed its own scripts? Or is it trapped in artificial divisions of systematic, practical, and fundamental—divisions conjured in dealings to fit within the modern research university?[83] Has rigorous, serious theological inquiry displaced theological reflection as art, camp, dream, imagination? How to revive depleted languages of theological teaching and writing? I follow Jordan's advice: "Especially in a wasteland of broken religions, the divine is best spoken otherwise than by confident naming."[84] Sifting through the shards of the theological wasteland might yet promise a second act … with fewer or no words.

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[82] Ibid., 72.

[83] See Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*.

[84] Jordan, *Queer Callings*, 193.

Chapter 6

Fragments for Scenes Not Yet Here

In this chapter, I turn to a few actual fragments, which I liken to flashing scenes of instruction. I offer them as snippets excised from larger scenes of instruction. This is my attempt to model rhizomatic theological imagination and pedagogy as I tried to outline in Chapter 5. I find this more helpful than simply adumbrating the exact elements of these proposed modes of theologizing. Engaging these fragments or scenes might be akin to experiencing music. You either feel a certain song or you don't, or perhaps you prefer a certain song's beat and not the lyrics, or vice versa. Nonetheless try to let the fragments speak in their own ways; then you can attempt your own "synthesis" or try to write and teach your own fragments, experimenting with possible constellations that might emerge.

At this juncture, Huxley's words are again instructive: "Systemic reasoning is something we could not, as a species or as individuals, possibly do without. But neither, if we are to remain sane, can we possibly do without direct perception, the more unsystematic the better, of the inner and outer worlds into which we have been born."[1] Huxley's hope is that tension between systematic and unsystematic modes of seeing and understanding reality will yield to a constant reconceiving of the self in relation to its own shifting self and to other indeterminate realities outside the self, including the Divine and even the cosmos.

As I mentioned in the previous chapter, theologizing should stoke movements within the dark night. The soul should bounce around, bracketed by moments of suspension. Even during

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[1] Huxley, *Doors of Perception*, 77.

moments of stillness, other movements still occur—whether around us or within the self. Theology can replace mescaline and induce euphoria and ecstasy, if only its methods and hermeneutics allow for their own dissolvement in a glass of water. Mark Jordan writes that "settled language can be broken by intense sensation and emotion but also through askesis and epiphany."[2] In my search for other languages and fresh scenes of instruction, I consistently find fragments. To destabilize control and disrupt mastery, the indeterminacy of fragments-become-constellations (that is, scenes of instruction) can teach us as much about ourselves as about any external consideration.

Instead of systems, I present conjectures or fragments of scenes that might (or not) lead to lead to unexpected convergences. Fragments can loosen the claims to unified knowledge that continue to anchor theological writing and teaching—the fixed constellations that continue to privilege certain scenes of instruction. While sanitized scenes prod some linear movement toward a desired and staged end, the scenes I am after resemble, in the words of Jordan, collage or montage.

This is the best I can currently offer for thinking within and beyond the atmospheres of violence that make breathing so onerous for so many. Anna Tsing perceptively states: "Precarity is a globally coordinated phenomenon, and yet it does not follow unified global force fields. To know the world that progress has left to us, we must trace shifting patches of ruination."[3] The fragments left from constellations (scenes) no longer alluring—these serve as building blocks for infinite combinations, for pluriverses, for scenes not yet written. These are the rhizomes that spur

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[2] Jordan, *Queer Callings*, 152.

[3] Tsing, *Mushroom at the End of the World*, 205-206.

connections amid dead ends. From death and decay, after all, comes life and rebirths—or so the best Christian theology would have us believe.

Curating the Fragments

As I do in the classroom, I offer the following fragments as different possibilities for theological reflection and application. I leave to the imagination the constellations or connections that might or might not surface them.

The question that guided my selection of the fragments of scenes is: How can theological reflection, writing, and teaching respond to atmospheres of violence without defaulting to the theological chimeras of imago Dei, dignity, or hope? Such solutions and the scenes they stage assume their persuasiveness. This assumed usefulness is fine in church spaces, but in a classroom full of non-Christian and agonistic students, rhetorical theological promises of an equal world or of a better existence to come is suspect at best. In a sense, I am suggesting that theology return to its roots of inventing language and developing scenes of all kinds in response to the fate we will all meet, death.[4] Can theology sit in the dark night while prompting movement in directions of all kinds, even uncomfortable or unexpected ones, or even toward dead ends?

I ask you to consider what follows an exercise in active reading—in hermeneutics as conversation. If possible, read with a notebook and pen in hand. After you read each fragment, jot down what comes to mind. Or reflect on how you felt while reading the fragment or even after. Your reflections or observations need not be of any particular length. Your words might even elude you, prompting confusion or silence. After you read all fragments, revisit your entry for each one and then ask yourself whether you see any connections, particularly ones that could

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[4] See Kyle Smith, *Cult of the Dead: A Brief History of Christianity* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2022).

help students think about and imagine life and death within atmospheres of violence. Do you see possibilities for writing and teaching theology that can potentially allure students to the queer undertaking of reflecting and writing on ghosts that consistently escape our grasps despite futile attempts to hold them tightly within existing scenes of instruction and authorized languages? If the exercise seems too esoteric, then simply ask yourself how each fragment can disrupt theology as usual in our classrooms and beyond. Or perhaps you might wonder whether the fragments are familiar to you in some way—or none at all.

Fragment 1: Scenes of Resistance in Public Sphere:
Serious Parody for Theological Education

A possibility for resistance in the public sphere and one that can provide meaning to the marginalized and excluded, is street theater, or creative public performances. When institutional political mechanisms—such as democratic procedures and party politics—become ineffective due to economic and political elites intentionally weakening, sabotaging, or corrupting them, disrupting or screwing with the system is perhaps the best option. Miguel De La Torre calls this an ethics *para joder*: "The only way for the powerless, the marginalized, the disenfranchised, the dispossessed to counter the prevailing status quo radically is *joder*."[5] Spanish for "to screw around," *joder* can mean to disrupt through action. And sometimes to disrupt is the only recourse in an otherwise constrained public sphere that operates within colonial epistemes and rules of engagement that privilege political and socioeconomic elites.

Three prime examples of *joder* come to mind: Diogenes the Cynic, Jesus of Nazareth, and the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence. If, as Fuat Gursozlu argues, political performances can

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[5] Miguel A. De La Torre, *Latina/o Social Ethics: Moving Beyond Eurocentric Moral Thinking* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010), 96.

lead to new political imaginations, these three examples can serve as inspirations for those

seeking alternative ways to engage a toxic public sphere.[6] What follows is a brief sketch of each.

Diogenes the Cynic (~ 412 BCE – 323 BCE) was a Socratic philosopher and student of

Antisthenes, which already would have made him an outsider in an Athens dominated by

sophists.[7] Regarded as a "performance artist," Diogenes has been described as Socrates on acid.[8]

He tried "to teach sensible ideas in a distinctly unpalatable manner…."[9] Diogenes relied on

humor and satire to convey his antisocial and subversive views. For instance, one account

presents him walking through the city in broad daylight holding a lantern. When asked why he

needed a lantern, he quipped that he was looking for just one honest man in the entire city. He

emphasized action over theory, particularly action that sought to overturn social conventions. No

idea, person, or convention was out of bounds from his harangues.[10] Some argue that Diogenes

advocated a cosmopolitan approach in times when identification with particular city-states was

crucial to identity.[11]

Han Baltussen characterizes Diogenes as a "fiercely independent individual who

advocates this position in contradistinction to his community: frugality, his challenge to

conventions, his belief in hard work, and frank speech."[12] He declared love of money as the

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[6] Fuat Gursozlu, "Democracy and the Square: Recognizing the Democratic Value of the Recent Public Square Movements," *Essays in Philosophy* 16, no. 1 (2015): 37.

[7] Han Baltussen, "A Bark Worse than His Bite? Diogenes the Cynic and the Politics of Tolerance in Athens," in *The Art of Veiled Speech: Self-Censorship from Aristophanes to Hobbes*, ed. Han Baltussen and Peter J. Davis (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 83.

[8] Baltussen, "A Bark Worse than His Bite?," 79.

[9] Baltussen, "A Bark Worse than His Bite?," 76.

[10] See Frédéric Gros, *A Philosophy of Walking*, trans. John Howe (London: Verso, 2014), 203-212.

[11] Ibid., 212.

[12] Baltussen, "A Bark Worse than His Bite?," 80.

mother of all evils," so he lived on the streets with few personal possessions.[13] Paradoxically, though he owned little more than a cloth sack, Diogenes considered himself among the wealthiest men in the world.[14] He attacked conventional wisdoms in an effort to help others see their delusions: Diogenes mounted a "battle against the 'madness' of society, especially the mindlessness of conventional knowledge and the pursuit of luxury and fame."[15] And he advocated deep introspection, a striving for self-knowledge and self-reflection that if successful would inoculate one from desires for luxury, power, wealth, status, and other comforts and distractions.[16]

Diogenes relied on frank speech to convey his iconoclastic ruminations.. While some might interpret this as speaking truth to power, Diogenes went beyond trying to hold those in power accountable through moral sermons. Frederic Gros remarks that Cynics did not preach or instruct a la Plato or Aristotle. Instead, the "Cynic barked, in short angry yaps, but insistently. Rather, a series of summonses, quips that cut in all directions, white-hot imprecations that spread like dye."[17] Through his public actions and self-debasement, he sought to disrupt *common* Athenian sensibilities—to shake minds in hopes of fresh imaginations without the need for words. The Cynic's body was itself a scene of instruction. The uncouth Diogenes reportedly urinated, defecated, and masturbated in public. He shamelessly devoured the slivers of meat on bones that mocking audience threw at him. Gros notes that the Cynic "used the simple assertion of his body, on the level of its biological functions, to denounce and expose men's tawdry good

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[13] Baltussen, "A Bark Worse than His Bite?"

[14] Gros, *A Philosophy of Walking,* 211-212.

[15] Baltussen, "A Bark Worse than His Bite?," 82.

[16] Baltussen, "A Bark Worse than His Bite?," 86.

[17] Gros, *A Philosophy of Walking,* 205-206.

education, received values and hypocrisies when they speak of Nature."[18] The body, reduced to bare life and exposed to the elements of raw nature, disrupts scenes of instruction that rely on disciplined bodies to function.

Jesus of Nazareth was also a political performer, perhaps not too dissimilar from the Cynics.[19] Indeed, some of his preaching borrows from Cynical themes. According to Pheme Perkins, "The anxieties of human life are to be met by looking at the natural clothing and food that God provides for plants and animals (Mt 6:25-32). The instructions to go preach without taking provisions for the journey (Mt 10:7-11) would have suggested to some of Matthew's readers that Jesus' disciples had adopted the life-style of wandering Cynics."[20] If Jesus and the gospel writers can borrow from fragments to construct new realities, so too can theologians learn to creatively piece together eclectic knowledges. But I digress.

Most are familiar with Jesus' flipping of the table at the Temple as a political gesture against merchants and the Sanhedrin who overcharged Jews for sacrifices. Yet, few perhaps acknowledge the deeply political street performance Jesus gave on Palm Sunday.[21] "Jesus' entry into Jerusalem was not really a religious event," notes Harvey Cox. "It was political, a brazen display of non-violent rebellion."[22] Jesus mocked the Roman's triumphalist pageantry, which Roman military forces would enact following the conquest of a territory. Instead of riding into Jerusalem—the "administrative hub for the occupying Roman militia"—on a white horse, Jesus

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[18] Ibid., 209.

[19] Pheme Perkins, *Understanding Jesus Today: Jesus as Teacher* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

[20] Ibid., 6.

[21] See chapter 19 of Harvey Cox, *When Jesus Came to Harvard: Making Moral Choices Today* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2004).

[22] Ibid., 212.

rode in on a donkey.[23] Rather than soldiers flanking him, Jewish peasants surrounded him, waving their palms in recognition of a new king and in defiance of Caesar. Cox argues that before this event, "it might have been possible for the authorities to overlook [Jesus'] subversive mission…."[24] Jesus' provocation and taunt, however, made it difficult for Roman authorities and Jewish religious elites to ignore his influence over the occupied peoples. Jesus lived less than a week after his public performance.

Jesus' street performance and some of Diogenes' antics could be understood as serious parody. Melissa Wilcox describes serious parody as "a form of cultural protest in which a disempowered group parodies an oppressive cultural institution while simultaneously claiming for itself what it believes to be an equally good or superior enactment of one or more culturally respected aspects of that same institution."[25] Diogenes parodied self-righteous and pompous Athenians while reclaiming Greek philosophy, and Jesus parodied imperial power to reclaim God's power. Serious parody does not seek to implode the entire institution or society; it is an activist strategy that aims to "support the lives and political objectives of marginalized groups"[26] through unconventional methods—namely methods outside state control and dominant political mechanisms.

The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence "enact serious parody by combining the familiar tropes of drag queen and female religious renunciant to produce an image and a role that have opened space for both vocal political protest and day-to-day community service and

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[23] Ibid.

[24] Ibid., 213.

[25] Melissa M. Wilcox, *Queer Nuns: Religion, Activism, and Serious Parody* (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 70.

[26] Ibid.

activism….”[27] Indeed, since their founding in San Francisco in 1979, the sisters' actions and public ministries have been salient and instructive. They comforted and entertained gay men succumbing to AIDS when no one else would; protested Pope John Paul II's visit to San Francisco in solidarity with the gay community's stance against homophobic church teachings; and performed during marches and other public events to complicate others' perceptions of spirituality, sexuality, and gender. The sisters are serious about being nuns. They do not seek to mock other nuns. Rather they intend to camp religious institutions that espouse anti-gay and patriarchal messages that belie theological calls to love, peace, and justice. The sisters actually value the approval of other nuns, but disregard—and even relish in—the male hierarchy's disapproval.[28] Through their activism in the public sphere, the sisters hope to shift perceptions of what it means to be "holy." Their actions attempt to rattle stagnant imaginations and pave ways for other religious characters even on familiar scenes. As Wilcox states, "If fabulously sexy queer nuns can exist, then perhaps anything is possible."[29]

Opening imaginative pathways is the key to a more robust public realm. By robust, I do not mean a public sphere where the best argument or the most reasoned dialogue carries the day; rather, by robust I mean a public sphere that can hold in tension several divergent opinions and ways of living—a pluriversal epistemology. Such public sphere would allow imagination to take flight so that participants can envision what never was. Words alone will never achieve imaginative expansion. And neither will actions devoid of deep understanding of the way power operates in obvious and subtle ways. But when facts do not matter, and when traditional mentalities and logics continue (via education) to constrain the imaginative power of those on the

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[27] Ibid., 2.

[28] Ibid., 94.

[29] Ibid., 103.

underside of socioeconomic and gender regimes, the examples of Diogenes, Jesus, and the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence remind us that sometimes one just needs to *joder*. Sometimes the only resistance is to jar others, to invade their psyche through in-your-face antics and reversals of norms. Creative and artistic resistance can at the very least forge new relationships, connections, and networks.[30] And who knows? Perhaps these networks will be the spark for a re-envisioned public sphere that rejects authoritarian tendencies and simplistic binary narratives. The public sphere should be the battleground for pluriversal imaginations, lest nihilism and hopelessness truly implode any hope for public engagement. Unruly bodies disrupt sanitized scenes, allowing for other characters to write scenes that can speak to the crushing pains of coming to terms with the inevitably of power and its loops of domination upon domination.

Fragment 2: Mystical Fragmentation

Marguerite Porete. The name called out to me as soon as I saw it on a doctoral course syllabus—partly because she was listed under the "heresy" class session and partly because of my ignorance about her. My ignorance only confirmed my hunch that my theological—mostly Catholic—education has followed a rather singular trajectory, focused mostly on scholastic and traditional texts written by male theologians. Porete's *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, I argue, is among the voices of those traditionally excluded from theological meaning making by theological gatekeepers, lay included, who have little patience for multiplicity, confusion, and complexity, especially when coming from a lay woman who in many ways remained enigmatic.

How can a text like the *Mirror* contribute to shattering or fragmenting what some scholars call hegemony and homogeneity in theological education and imagination? How does reading the *Mirror* in a classroom help resist categorization of bodies (and their lives) or of neat

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[30] Gursozlu, "Democracy and the Square."

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pedagogical schemas? And how does reading it help retrieve or recover its rhetorical power as a text that could both captivate and liberate, clarify and stupefy? Since knowledge consumption informs ethical identities (what religious educators call "formation"), can the *Mirror* inform selves who wish to remain enigmatic to themselves and to others, to selves who wish to touch transcendence as an act of radical love: a love free of attachment and possession (categorization)—a love that allows the other to be in the world without many words? Can the *Mirror* jolt imaginations to envision a world radically different, in which ethical selves understand themselves and others as always in movement and constantly on a journey that opens one to a pluriverse—to infinite ways of seeing and being in the world?

Stages (or Journeys) of the Soul Toward Annihilation

Porete describes seven stages along the Soul's journey to the "melting and joining of the soul to the Trinity, [so that] the soul is made completely transparent, so that only God sees Godself…."[31] Of course, most souls will not achieve their own annihilation, for desire and will (notwithstanding how ordered toward the holy) are powerful inhibitors of the soul becoming one with the divine. As Michael Sells puts is, "Only when the soul's own being and will are annihilated can the deity work through and in it."[32] But how to get there? Are not process (method) and ends (telos or outcome) the point of academic theology *and* spiritual searching?

If one misreads the *Mirror* as a self-help manual for the soul, one will miss its voice, namely a voice, as Sells underscores, that "speaks on the margins of institutional theology and its categories of reason."[33] This rings true now as much as it did when the text first began

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[31] Ellen L. Babinsky, "Introduction," Marguerite Porete, *The Mirror of Simple Souls* (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), 41.

[32] Michael A. Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 120-21.

[33] Ibid., 136.

circulating in the late 1200s. Its marginality in relation to institutional theology and spiritual formation is due to both its form and content.[34]

The *Mirror* is not a simple text to engage. It has potential to provoke frustration and even resentment, especially for seekers who approach its pages for guidance along a singular path. If approaching the text from a Western-categorical paradigm, the reader will also charge Porete with deception. "Doesn't it promise to take me through its seven stages on the way to God? Doesn't it hold the secret to better self-understanding?"

Instead, Porete teaches a lesson in working with fragments, which results in the possibility of configurations previously unknown when attempting to describe what is ultimately unknowable. Though the *Mirror* resists a linear plot toward the divine, it does nonetheless point to the annihilated soul as its "goal." So how to achieve this? Though Porete suggests seven stages[35] on her spiritual itinerary, she seems to gloss over the first three stages, which deal, respectively, with embracing the commandments, foregoing riches and other "delights and honors," and engaging in good works to perfect one's commitment to the divine. A cursory look at the text confirms that Porete glosses over these stages. In the English version translated by Ellen Babinsky, stages 1-3 occupy only one and half pages, while stage 4 takes up half a page. Stages 5 and 6 form the bulk of her discussion, with almost four pages. And, in true mystical fashion, the highest stage (stage 7)—the goal—remains essentially elusive, perhaps because unclear to the author, and receives only a few sentences. Porete writes: "The seventh stage Love

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[34] Sean L. Field, *The Beguine, the Angel, and the Inquisitor: The Trials of Marguerite Porete and Guiard of Cressonessart* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012), 9.

[35] See Chapter 118.

keeps within herself in order to give it to us in eternal glory, of which we will have no understanding until our soul has left our body."[36] She ends her descriptions there.

Stage 4, like the 3 preceding stages, still requires from the seeker an act of the will. While stage 4 places the seeker in a contemplative realm, where external actions such as feeding the poor are not required, the soul remains here enslaved to spiritual work—which is still work nonetheless. As Sells points out, the "fourth stage is the stage of spiritual poverty, comprising fasts, prayers, devotions, sacraments, ascetic practices, and martyrdoms."[37] While these practices can lead to detachment from material desires, too much adherence to them results in another attachment: to the delight felt in spiritual love. Porete is concerned here with love's potential blocking of the Soul from transcending its desire for spiritual love. She writes of the trap that the "delight" of contemplation can set for the soul: "And thus the Soul cannot value another state, for the great brightness of love has so totally dazzled her sight that she sees nothing beyond her love. And there she is deceived, for there are two other stages here below which God gives that are greater and more noble than this."[38]

These two other stages comprise the bulk of her discussion on the stages. And even then, the majority of her discussion focuses on the fifth stage, when the soul annihilates itself on its way to mystical union.[39] It would be a mistake to think of the stages as steps, as in writings that attempt to use developmental psychology to describe spiritual formation. Once deep in the fifth stage, the "Soul has fallen from love into nothingness, and without such nothingness she cannot be All. The fall is so deep, she is so rightly fallen, that the Soul cannot lift herself from such an

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[36] Chapter 118.

[37] Ibid., 120.

[38] Chapter 118.

[39] Ibid.

abyss."[40] Babinsky describes this stage as "the supreme peace of the soul, in which nothing can be given to her nor taken away from her."[41]

A modern reader could indeed find the contrasts in language challenging if not concerning. How can "supreme peace" come from a bottomless fall—from the prospect of a complete annihilation of will and agency and thus loss of complete control in one's life (and spiritual) direction? Even more concerning is that after undergoing 4 stages of what could be called "spiritual growth" (or in modern lingo, "self-growth"), stage 5 leads one to realize one's "own wretchedness, which is so deep and so great that she finds there neither beginning nor middle nor end, only a bottomless abyss."[42] The fifth stage is a perpetual descent—or fall—of which only the divine, through the Holy Spirit, can stop. The soul seeks nothing at this point, even from the church—a prospect that must have threatened the hold of church police powers as well as their epistemological claims to universal truths and answers. The soul has now traveled from virtues to good works to love to nothingness—only to return to its state at creation but before being. The Soul no longer desires anything, not even God.[43] It is in a state of perpetual freefall and complete surrender.

While the seven stages should not be considered steps, when the Soul inhabits stage 5, it can no longer revert to 4. It now oscillates between stages 5 and 6, though it does not remain in stage 6 for too long. For Porete, the sixth stage is like a rapture, which the Soul can only experience for fleeting moments, in lapses.[44] Sells describes the Soul in stage 6 as perceiving

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[40] Chapter 118.

[41] Babinsky, "Introduction," 42.

[42] Chapter 118.

[43] Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying*, 121.

[44] Ibid., 126.

eternity "as a flash, both timeless and in time, both permanent and evanescent."[45] The categories of experience melt away, just as the soul becomes one with the divine and loses its distinctiveness in the process. At this stage, Sells tells us, the "soul annihilated in love of the divine no longer exists in the formal sense as a subject that wills and acts—the only will and act are the will and act of the deity."[46]

So much of the *Mirror* can frustrate the spiritual pilgrim or student on a perceived linear journey toward understanding the divine. Porete does not shy away from fluidity (between stages 5 and 6), ineffability (of what occurs in the ultimate union of stage 7), and non-linear complexity of the spiritual journey (as evident throughout her non-systematic exploration of the Soul and its stages). The *Mirror* mirrors the soul's messy and dance-like journey toward itself and the divine—a pedagogy that embraces undergoing constant deaths and rebirths in order to see the ultimate infinity anew, even if only for a fleeting moment.

Writing Toward Fragmentation

As noted in Chapter 5 of this work, engaging a text can be an act of resistance, especially when the reader allows the text to speak on its own terms. Allowing a text's words to speak without authorial distraction—knowing about the author's background and context—is an elusive but worthy goal. I ultimately allowed the *Mirror* to take me in any direction. And it did. In the best of the mystical tradition, the *Mirror* hints at the tension "between apophatic union and the physical metaphors of union that are unable to contain it."[47] Porete's writing seduced me for this very reason. The *Mirror's* emphases on apophasis of desire, loss of self in love and then annihilation, and fluidity of the Soul's movements all showcase a text less concerned with being

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[45] Ibid., 127.

[46] Ibid., 130.

[47] Ibid., 126.

a systematic spiritual handbook and more a reflection on possibilities lost to or ignored in the Christian tradition (i.e. annihilation of the soul).

The *Mirror* is indeed a text that can frustrate a reader who approaches it seeking answers. And it is precisely for this reason that the text resists traditional modes of theological imagination and education, that is, rational, systematic approaches to reading, discussing, and writing. Indeed, the *Mirror* seems like a fragmented, piecemeal text replete with repetitions, contradictions, and interspersed silence—maybe a warning to the reader that its words will remain enigmatic. I look with anticipation to picking the text up again at some other point in my life and allowing the words to enact their wisdom in me at a particular phase of my life. How many deaths and rebirths will I have to experience before grasping—truly feeling—what Porete was intimating?

For now, I suggest that Porete's text opens up imaginations to a multiplicity of meanings, to the possibilities of multiple routes to self-love, annihilation, and the divine. The Soul's own vacillation between stages is evidence that Porete intended even her own text to be constantly rewritten by a divine teacher, confounding human teachers and learners in the process. And her invitation to constant deaths and rebirths hint at the (im)possibilities of ever reaching a spiritual goal through one's doing because of one's shapeshifting identities.

Sells writes that "the soul who ascends through the first states undergoes a series of deaths and rebirths that end in a folding back into itself of the telescope of hierarchical articulations."[48] Gloria Anzaldua suggests a similar experience when she writes: "Writing is a process of discovery and perception that produces knowledge and *conocimiento* (insight)."[49]

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[48] Ibid., 128.

[49] Gloria Anzaldua, *Light in the Dark: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 1.

Such discovery leads to painful realizations, particularly that unlearning what one has learned in order to expand one's circles of truths requires deaths: decapitations of one's epistemology as learned from dominant modes of thinking and being (scripts). Anzaldua calls this the "Coyolxauhqui imperative," which is "the act of calling back those pieces of the self/soul that have been dispersed or lost, the act of mourning the losses that haunt us."[50] The fragments are not glued back together through writing; rather, Anzaldua mourns the pieces that will never again form part of her current being as she now seeks new pieces of her (new fragments, new reconfigurations, new possibilities, new characters).

Epistemological and ontological deaths open paths to the (re)envisioning of selves that never were—an invitation that Porete extended many centuries ago! Indeed, as Saskia Murk-Jansen beautifully states, "By reacquainting ourselves with ways of dealing with the numinous, guided by those who have gone before us, we may find new ways of talking about God."[51] Porete's text shatters language, introduces chaos, and relishes in ambiguity and nothingness—all in an effort to implode one's expectations of reaching what will always remain tentative and enigmatic. The beguine's lesson, if taken seriously, can open teachers and learners to a pluriverse of possibilities for the self and the imagination—perhaps even providing a slight aperture about writing those possibilities in ways not yet here.

Fragment 3: Reimagining Theological Anthropology through Death and Theological Writing

For me, theological writing is, as Marcela Althaus-Reid reminds us, a method in its own right. Writing theologically is similar to painting, in that sources—stripped of their context—can

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[50] Anzaldua, *Light in the Dark*, 1-2.

[51] Saskia Murk-Jansen, *Brides in the Desert: The Spirituality of the Beguines* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1998), 13.

be placed on a canvas to produce new meaning, a new hermeneutics, a creative picture of a not so distant future or perhaps even a repainting of the "present"—to use the Western sense of linear time. To succumb to the regime of reason when writing theologically is to strip theology of its unique contribution in an academy obsessed with measurable—or quantifiable—ways of knowing, that is, positivism. Theological writing can dislodge, unsettle and inspire modes of understanding one's place within the cosmic expansiveness.

To do so, however, requires that the theological writer dwell in the liminal, in the ambiguity that Anzaldua describes in her classic text *Borderlands, La Frontera*: "She [the mestiza—the "mixed"] has discovered that she can't hold concepts or ideas as rigid boundaries. The borders and walls that are supposed to keep the undesirable ideas out are entrenched habits and patterns of behaviors; these habits and patterns are the enemy within. Rigidity means death."[52] The liminal—or dare I say, mystical—writer of theology paints a new painting from a bricolage of colorful sources. These sources must also include works outside of the traditional "theological" enterprise, as well as sources retrieved and "liberated" from the police powers of theological traditions and scenes of instruction.

Related to this, I often think about how theology can take place outside the normative spaces of the classroom. What does it mean to transgress spaces of theological production (written and oral) and consumption (reading of texts)? "Suddenly theology does not take place in the university or seminary but in the bedroom," remarks Althaus-Reid in her book *The Queer God*.[53]

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[52] Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands = La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco, CA: Aunt Lute Books, 2021), 101.

[53] Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, 29.

What if theology took place online, in the liminal platform of Instagram? Where truth is fiction, and fiction is truth—a place where most users are aware of this contradiction yet continue to dwell in it. Further, what if I could use DMs (direct messages) to unsettle, to throw people off as they begin their day? Three years ago, just as COVID was ravaging bodies, I asked 12 people to reflect on death by sliding into their DMs—the medium used by those attempting to engage in other sorts of salacious conversations. I wrote the following: "Hey! Can you please take a few minutes to answer the following three questions (don't need to be long answers): 1. What do you think death is? 2) What do you think happens after physical death? And 3) Are you scared of death?" Such loaded questions so early in the morning, but most responded within a few hours. Here are some of their responses to question 1: "Death to me is rebirth. Like morphing into another human's body and forgetting what your previous life was." // "I think death is not enjoying life and not being alive, but death can also be physical and mental like your being has left the vessel you were in so now you're dead." // "Death is the end of a life cycle in a human body. Overall, I think we were born to grow, reproduce and die." // "Death is nature. It's something that happens to every living thing and there is no way to avoid it."

All respondents come from Catholic homes, attended Catholic elementary and high school, and yet responded in ways that surprised me. Are they blissfully unaware of Catholic teachings on death and the resurrection? Or did they simply snooze through Catholic religion classes. Their language fascinates me. They equate death with "forgetting," metamorphosis, not enjoying life (the walking dead), as part of a cycle (like nature), and as utterly inevitable or inescapable. I am tempted to explore the striking similarities among their narratives and Egyptian narratives on death and the afterlife as contained in the ancient *Book of the Dead*.

Their words form theological fragments. In their responses, they wrote theology by engaging in the deep questions traditionally the province of theological or philosophical reflection, and most likely they did so without knowing it. By reflecting on death, through a social media platform dominated by the likes of Kim Kardashian, Kanye West, and a cadre of influencers, my Instagram friends engaged in camp. They reflected on a serious topic usually reserved for the "high artists" in a medium (space) usually used for gossip and heavily stylized distortions of reality—*á la* photoshop. And perhaps this is the best way to understand death: as the Divine's camping (or inversion) of "logical" and "rational" understandings of death or of humanity's egoistic self-aggrandizement in the face of incomprehensible cosmic voids.

I omitted the responses to questions 2 and 3 on purpose. I already committed theological violence on my Instagram friends by committing their words to paper as if final pronouncements. Would they still hold those views? An even more interesting exercise would be to ask them those questions again now and compare responses.

I end here with fragments from Marilyn Hacker's poem "Against Elegies."[54] Fragment one: "When I die, the death I face will more than likely be illogical: Alzheimer's or a milk truck: the absurd." What would theological anthropology look like if writers took the absurd—and yet, the complete mundane—nature of death seriously? Fragment two: "Each one, unique as our lives are, taints what's left with complicity, makes everyone living a survivor who will, or won't bear witness for the dead." Bearing witness to the dead, what Shawn Copeland refers to as *anamnesis*, might require a major sacrifice: the letting go of the notion of one's fixed "whole" identity as a radical and ultimate expression of true love for those excluded from and violated (or crucified)

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[54] Marilyn Hacker, "Against Elegies," Poets.Org, accessed May 25, 2024, https://poets.org/poem/against-elegies .

by the very narratives that give shape to our supposed identities. As Cherríe Moraga reflects: "If my mother's last years in the awe of Alzheimer's taught me anything, it was the necessity to love without holding on. It is a lesson the body refuses; that requires soul to enact; that must be practiced daily and relearned in ruthless confrontation with those most pivotal moments of change in our lives."[55] What does it mean to love a lover without "having" them? Or in the words of a 17-year-old Tupac Shakur: "I will die before my time/Because I feel the shadow's depth/so much I wanted 2 accomplish/Before I reached my death/I have come 2 grips with the possibility and wiped the last tear from my eyes/I loved all who were positive in the event of my Demise!"[56] Fragment three: "To survive the Borderlands/you must live *sin fronteras*/be at a crossroads." Rigidity is death. Perhaps some of us are already dead.

A Rumination or Confession?

Ever since I can recall, death has intrigued me. This fascination with the macabre has manifested itself in several discernable layers. One layer is aesthetic: on my writing desk I have a faux skull. On one of my bookshelves sits a skeletal figurine of Michael Jackson in one of his iconic glittering concert outfits, complete with the white glove on his left hand. And by my reading nook I put up a poster of a "Día De Los Muertos" exhibit from the National Museum of Mexican Art in Chicago. At one point, I owned candle holders made of tiny skulls. These symbols, which I intentionally placed around my centers of intellectual consumption and production, serve as a reminder that no single thought, no idea, no theory, no one reading of a text, no writing project or academic endeavor is ever done or final. All my endeavors—and those of every other human being—are always liminal, imperfect, in constant sporadic movement, and

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[55] Cherríe L. Moraga, *A Xicana Codex of Changing Consciousness: Writings 2000-2010* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 198.

[56] Tupac Amaru Shakur, *The Rose That Grew from Concrete* (London: Pocket Books, 2006), 150.

undergoing a sort of demise and rebirth. The seasons reflect this constant death and rebirth, this constant habitation of shifting ground—both physical and metaphysical.

On my body, I have four tattoos depicting some iteration of a skull: a cat skull (my favorite animal), a skull placed on top of a cracked hour class, a skull representation of theatre's laugh/smile now, cry later masks, and a skull with the yin and yang symbol within (this was my first tattoo, which I had done behind my parents' back at 13). Ironically, these permanent symbols will one day become as impermanent as the body that currently houses them.

I simply love seeing artistic depictions of the body in skeletal form. Perhaps my fascination with skeletons comes from a deep-seated desire to want to see humans for who they are underneath the coverings of clothes and even of flesh. Or maybe it's the fantasy of blurring the spheres of the living and the dead—similar to the sensations I imagine the ancient Egyptians and those who now celebrate the day of the dead feel by sitting at the precipice of the here and now and the then and there.

This leads to another layer, namely meaning making—which I suppose is a confluence of the intellectual, spiritual, and experiential. Movies, poems, scholarly texts, theological texts, sex, desire, rituals, crystals, incense, walking the cemetery at night, visiting "haunted" places, conversations, people watching, eating, drinking, the bar—all these are for me meaningful activities and spaces because I have death always with me. *Memento mori*. A constant companion—a companion that will not let me down. The possibility of death, physical and metaphysical, is always around the corner—or in a drink, a conversation, a serendipitous meeting.

If it's true that we are always undergoing transformation, I wonder what having a conversation with myself would be like eight years from now? How would someone I think I

know be different in a not so distant future, itself imagined through tropes of the past? If there is no change, then is this not the strict definition of death? According to the Uniform Determination of Death Act, which was approved by both the medical and legal professional associations: "An individual who has sustained either (1) irreversible cessation of circulatory and respiratory functions, or (2) irreversible cessation of all functions of the entire brain, including the brain stem is dead."[57] If identities settle and don't undergo transformations, then is this not a kind of death? A cessation of thinking beyond one's current self-assurances of how to be in the world is also a death. These concerns, these ruminations on physical and metaphysical death, throw into disarray any *one* narrative of what it means to be human in an ever-shifting world that attempts to impose universal meaning in simplistic ways. What if we reduced the imago Dei to its skeletal form? How would this shift theological meaning, simultaneously preventing death while welcoming it?

I often wonder if we (and by we, I mean me and those of us with relatively "healthy" bodies and minds and in contexts of relative material safety) actually take death seriously. How would our theological speeches—how would Catholic education—be different if we took physical, epistemological, and ontological deaths as our starting points rather than as a teleological end point couched within a salvation history that promises to overcome death? Perhaps the most crippling assumption in theology is that we all approach theological texts and pedagogical forms from an able-bodied, "healthy," and non-neurodivergent perspective. Perhaps most theology is done to avert attention from atmospheres of violence instead of how to sit in them and their deathscapes.

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[57] *Uniform Determination of Death Act. 12 Uniform Laws Annotated.* 320 (1990 Supp).

Fragment 4: Hollow Words?

How hollow words ring. How empty they feel when attempting to convey something that is intuitive to some and yet totally incomprehensible to others. Have I (re)constituted myself through this writing exercise? The answer awaits in those fugitive gaps, those words that elude me but that surface occasionally in different forms—when I least expect them. Am I writing in ciphers or in "clear" sentences as if pedantically adhering to Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style*?

How hollow words ring, indeed. Unless, of course, one can envision other possibilities for the words themselves. Like Jordan, I too "find that (my) theology's look-alike is literature."[58] For now, my theological writing seeks to undo conventional theological (and academic) writing while still playing within its forms—all to evoke what may lie dormant in another's (theologically) layered intuition. Invisible ink. Those flashes of partial understanding of the cipher are akin to the *ataraxia* (tranquility) of fugitive gaps before one resumes the journey within those spaces of misunderstanding, seeking even the slightest comprehensible phrase or sentence to hold on to—even if for a blink. As Jordan writes, "The literature I have in mind is often deliberately antinarrative: its stories trace labyrinths. I'm thinking of experimental fiction, fragmented testimony, cinematic montage, artistic assemblage or collage."[59]

I'm thinking of writing while in fugitivity: a writing that renders the self as transient as the effects of writing itself. Self-care in action! Now it is time for me to pause and perhaps indulge in some facile self-care before picking up again with those pesky thoughts that always find an (in)opportune moment to keep me searching again and again for the self that I never was.

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[58] Jordan, *Transforming Fire*, 81.

[59] Ibid.

<center>Fragment 5: A Tentative Coda</center>

Every bell tolls, every assumed plot comes to an end … time so relative on what we perceive to be relentless ticks forward but that are in reality nothing but a series of transitions.

With his at times haunting voice, Jim Morrison of The Doors, sings the following on a song called "The End"[60]: "This is the end, beautiful friend / This is the end, my only friend / The end of our elaborate plans / The end of everything that stands / The end / No safety or surprise / The end / I'll never look into your eyes again / Can you picture what will be? / So limitless and free / Desperately in need of some stranger's hand / In a desperate land."

What does it mean to bring something to a close? Is it an end? Or is it more of a transition? I see a bit of both. Finality and continuity in different forms on shifting landscapes within the decadences of rather stable and enduring wastelands slowly inching toward their own ends and transitions. T.S. Elliot's words come to mind:

<center>
What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
A heap of broken images where the sun beats,
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
And the dry stone no sound of water. Only
There is shadow under this red rock,
(Come in under the shadow of this red rock),
And I will show you something different from either
Your shadow at morning striding behind you
Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;
I will show you fear in a handful of dust.[61]
</center>

"This is the end, my only friend…. The end of our elaborate plans…." I read in these lyrics not a pessimistic finality. No, instead I see what is possible when plans fall through, when the world

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[60] The Doors, "The End," track 11 on *The Doors*, Elektra, 1967, CD.

[61] T.S. Elliot, *The Waste Land*, Poetry Foundation, accessed May 31, 2024, https://www.poetryfoundation.org/ poems/47311/the-waste-land.

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falls down, when the curtain falls on carefully plotted scenes. What will the fragments yield when in your grasps? What constellations will emerge? "Can you picture what will be? So limitless and free." A practice of freedom that can paralyze, liberate, spark fear or happiness or even induce serenity, lead to utmost purpose and meaning or fizzle into meaninglessness and nihilism. We are all radically free to begin practicing freedom. "Man is condemned to be free," claimed Sartre.[62] What opens before us is therefore a dizzying array of paths that our limited fields of visions simply cannot see or even imagine.

"Desperately in need of some stranger's hand / In a desperate land." Is Morrison calling us to find solidarity, even if fleeting? Two strangers in the night, exchanging glances without the promise of a longer (love) story. The initial contact yields a sense of nostalgia at what never was. Several scenes of intensity flash at a moment's notice in the strangers' imagination before it is all gone—certainly before the early dawn lights refract on surfaces and flesh once obscure.

Before it's all gone. Promises of solidarity, promises of love, a hand extended to a stranger—aren't these the actions of Jesus, that mystical and misappropriated because misunderstood teacher? I suggest that true solidarity, true communion with another—whatever that looks like—is not possible with possessiveness. According to Mark Jordan, "the more difficult lesson [that the mystic John of the Cross teaches us] is that our lover cannot be possessed by us or integrated into us without being lost to us lover. As soon as the lover is claimed as fully known, we have lost the lover and the lover's gift of pleasure."[63] John of the Cross was referring to the Divine, but we can also apply his lesson to each other—and even to ourselves.

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[62] See Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, trans. Carol Macomber (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

[63] Jordan, *The Ethics of Sex*, 166.

We are all enigmatic, even to ourselves.[64] What does it mean to be an enigma? It means to be patient with oneself, for one is always unfurling in different ways, some understood, others not so much. It means to give oneself and others grace, especially during difficult times and within a world that seems to be falling apart. It means to resist the urge to control others, to heavily script futures, and to judge oneself in comparison to others also on journeys to figure things out. In the Preface to *Anti-Oedipus*, Michel Foucault writes that

> the major enemy, the strategic adversary [to practices of freedom] is fascism…. And not only historical fascism, the fascism of Hitler and Mussolini—which was able to mobilize and use the desire of masses so effectively—but also the fascism in us all, in our heads and in our everyday behavior, the fascism that causes us to love power, to desire the very thing that dominates and exploits us. [65]

How do we tame the fascisms within without repressing ourselves?

One suggestion, or perhaps two. By aiming toward multiplicity (plurality) and embracing apophasis. Multiple possibilities, multiple centers of truth, multiple voices, several imaginations. Against universalism, against static coherence, and against one all-encompassing Truth. Nothing lasts forever, especially something that can be readily or easily captured by all-too-human imaginations and language. Be fine with mystery, with enigmas, with ciphers that have remained unsolvable throughout histories—throughout time and space. Ambiguity recognizes the limits of knowingness and of language—the two vices of theology and theologians. Recognition of the limits breeds creativity—opens imagination toward other scenes. Indeed, our best acts of creation are, at the same time, the best examples of our ambiguity. If honest, theologians will admit that all scenes are painfully incomplete and all human knowledge fragmentary and subject to critique. Can theology allow divine traces to instruct without filling in those shadows? Can removing

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[64] Jordan, *Queer Callings*.

[65] Michel Foucault, "Preface," in Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (New York: Penguin Books, 2009), xiii.

artificial borders and barriers allow one to be affected by others, even in ways that hurt? Are we able to better feel our vulnerabilities—our very mortality—when encountering the risks and opportunities of untethered flesh with unknown destinations? The communion of saints demands journeying with bodies of all sorts, including ones that have already passed as undignified because judged unnatural, incomplete. In a sense, are we not all perpetual passerbys or strangers (Samaritans even) to others and to ourselves? So many scenes not yet written because not yet imagined—the unfortunate results of already scripted, suffocating scenes, the aftermath of dignified theological speeches and their all-too-human enforcers. Enforcers who respectfully hide with dignity.

I end here. Words and concepts are often inadequate. Allow the Divine within to be set free to commune in a non-possessive way with the Divinity all around us. Perhaps that is our best shot at pushing back against the atmospheres of violence that continue to envelop each of us, forcing us into incessant chatter amid forced attentions and affections. "This is the end, beautiful friend / This is the end, my only friend / The end of our elaborate plans / The end of everything that stands / The end / No safety or surprise / The end." Or just a transition….

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