

Introduction

THE THEOLOGICAL IN A POST-THEOLOGICAL WORLD



What is the fate of theology in a post-theological moment?—
Corey D. B. Walker¹

Corey Walker's query in the epigraph provokes a number of other questions. We need to ask, for example, what is this "post-theological moment" in which the fate of Theology might be considered? What is meant by the often controversial notions of "Theology" and "the theological"? These questions are central for understanding this book's overall purpose, which is to foreground "the theological." It is the purpose of this introduction to clarify the notion of a "post-theological moment," and then to provide a preliminary sketch of what this book will explore as "the political," and then as "the theological."

A Post-Theological Moment

Take first the question of a "post-theological moment." Maybe a groan and a sigh greet the emergence here of yet another "post-" word, to join

1. Corey D. B. Walker, "Theology and Democratic Futures," *Political Theology* 10, no. 2 (April 2009): 199–208, at 200.

poststructural, postmodern, postcolonial, perhaps also post-Christian and postdemocratic, among others. How long before we are debating the meaning of the hyphen in this new term, *post-theological*? All these terms can be wielded in ways that show a deficit of careful thinking, marking instead the next academic project's "cutting edge." Moreover, the "post-" designation often functions largely in a chronological sense, suggesting that some new era—the one we are in, of course—is now underway, in a time that is supposedly "after" that of the structural, the modern, the colonial, the Christian. Whatever these older formulations may have meant, we can lay them to rest, so it might be thought, to move into some new period, in which we have "come of age." (And always we need to ask: Who is this *we*?) Sometimes, particularly with the terms *post-Christian* or *post-theological*, the intent seems to be not to exult in the coming of age, but more to lament the passing of an era, to mark a degeneration of one's epoch from some better past.²

As slippery and obfuscating as these "post-" terms can be, there are lessons to be learned from their coining. What all of them share is not primarily a claim that the present moment constitutes a new epoch in a chronological narrative, but that there is a crisis in understanding underway, as well as, perhaps, an opportunity for fresh thinking. This is especially so with the post-theological. Some may use it to lament the passage of an era when theology, as in fourteenth-century Europe, could be touted as the reigning "queen of the disciplines because of an alleged supernatural origin of its principles,"³ or in various other times when it was thought possible to formulate and celebrate theology's beliefs and practices within some Christian haven, thinking them protected from the challenges of secular thought, of other religions, or of the plurality of other Christian cultural readings.

The notion of the post-theological is an important one to engage because it marks a certain crisis in which Theology is interrogated anew. Moreover, it usually connotes also an ethical query, which asks about

2. Walker, of course, is not the first to use the term *post-theological*. Philosopher John T. Lysaker uses it to discuss Ralph Waldo Emerson's challenges to Christian theology, referring to it as "post-theological," in *Emerson and Self-Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 137–39. Another author, writing mainly to evangelical audiences, uses the term to lament a problem that evangelical theology might rectify. See Stanley J. Grenz, *Renewing the Center: Evangelical Theology in a Post-Theological Age*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006).

3. Edward Farley, *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 38.

the value and the good of these discourses we call “Theology.” What I find particularly important about the post-theological is that the notion emerges especially as reflection on the relation of the theological to the political. This moment has often been discussed as the resurgence of a particular kind of “theologico-political,” viewing Theology, with its diverse beliefs and practices of its faith as rife with political meanings and consequences for wide sectors of secular and public life, even for purportedly nontheological and nonreligious sectors. This “theologico-political” is often today linked to discussions of Spinoza’s 1670 *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, and ushering in a new take on “political theology.”⁴

Again, I stress that I am not offering here a political theology—that is, say, a Christian theology that unfolds its meanings for political life, advocating political forms or treatment of political processes from the viewpoints of, for example, a belief in God, a Christology, some view of the church, and so on. Instead, the book is a political theorization of the theological. It is an analysis of the politicality of Theology, which persists as “the theological.” Although this is not a political theology, the conjunction of the political *with* Theology in this post-theological moment is crucial to understanding what the theological is. Corey Walker’s discussion explores the political and theological conjuncture as “the problem of multiple theologies animating various forms of religious fundamentalisms,”⁵ not only the much-referenced Islamic fundamentalisms, but also those of the West. The laudable goal of a “separation of church and state” has not meant a successful quarantine of religion from politics and state power, or of theology from statecraft. George W. Bush’s citing of prayer and scripture as playing key roles in his calculus for the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003 is almost too facile an example of a resurgent theologico-political that can be destructive of the international community.⁶ To think the post-theological, then, is not to endorse a political theology, nor is it to think we can simply be done

4. Hent de Vries and Lawrence E. Sullivan, eds., *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 25–31.

5. Walker, “Theology and Democratic Futures,” 200.

6. To assess the destructive impact on the international community, one excellent starting place is Ahmed Rashid, *Descent into Chaos: The United States and the Failure of Nation Building in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia* (New York: Viking, 2008), esp. 265–316.

with Theology. It is to realize that Theology is freighted with powers in our present that have potent political import. They are not easily set aside. Although often declared dead and spent of strength, the powers of Theology roar back upon us with a vengeance, romping through our time with their political claws.

Interestingly, this discussion of the post-theological overlaps with yet another “post-” term of our period, “postsecular.” The two terms may seem like simple opposites—the first *theologically* concerned, the second more *secular*—but their discourses set us on the same ground, if from somewhat different starting places, namely, on the terrain of the theologico-political. In the extensive collection *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World*, editors Hent de Vries and Lawrence Sullivan cite a host of literatures that chastise secular confidence in its modern or postmodern criticisms of religion and theology. Those criticisms presume they can lay aside, or move beyond, theology and religion as determinative phenomena in public life. Such confident criticisms are described as “utterly misplaced” or “to have missed the point.” They conclude that “the wall between religion and government is now so porous as to be an unreliable guide to attitudes and actions.”⁷ The notion of the postsecular, writes de Vries instructively in his own introduction to the volume, refers not to a return to religion, a repenting of secular critiques, but to a “changed attitude by the secular state or in the public domain with respect to the continued existence of religious communities and the impulses that emerge from them.”⁸

Again, as with the post-theological, so with the postsecular. The center of concern becomes the nature of the theologico-political, that is, the political as variously charged, animated, driven, and maybe dominated by theological beliefs (in God, sacred scriptures’ inviolability, future promises that theologians derive from religious beliefs, and so on). The present “moment” is felt as especially charged by the resurgence of theological fundamentalisms—a “clash of fundamentalisms”—whether an Islamic fundamentalism assumed to be at work in the September 11, 2001, attacks in the United States, or a Christian fundamentalism of the “Christian

7. De Vries and Sullivan, *Political Theologies*, x.

8. Hent de Vries, “Introduction: Before, Around, and Beyond the Theologico-Political,” in *ibid.*, 3.

Right.”⁹ Whether as post-theological or postsecular, our moment is one of renewed contemplation on the theologico-political.¹⁰

The Political

This book does not and cannot survey all the ways Theology—or notions of the theological—animate and interact with the political. Because the book’s main argument, however, is that the theological is a dimension of the political—in particular, of the agonistic political—it is necessary to offer here a first introduction to the notion of the political as it bears on the emergence of the theological. I do this by discussing, first, the scope of the political, and then what makes it distinctive.

As to its scope, the political is much more than what is usually referred to as politics. It refers to a certain mode of organizing the human practices that structure social interaction and the dynamics of collective action in history, but also, by extension, the interests, beliefs, and ideologies of individual actors. The social practices of the political are not to be identified with governmental policies or state and party functions, typical understandings of “politics,” but more importantly with our very ontological condition in all spheres of human living. Chantal Mouffe puts it well when she emphasizes that “the political cannot be restricted to a certain type of institution, or envisioned as constituting a specific sphere or level of society. It must be conceived as a dimension that is inherent to every human society and that determines our very ontological condition.”¹¹

This scope of the political is so broad, one may wonder, next, what makes it distinctive? What I term its distinctiveness not only further clarifies what the political is, but also partly accounts for its ontological scope already mentioned. I suggest that the social practices that distinguish the political are those pervaded by agonistic tension and strife. This agonism extends from the ways social orders are fragilely dependent upon and in

9. For more studies and a problematization of the very term “Christian Right,” see Mark Lewis Taylor, *Religion, Politics, and the Christian Right: Post-9/11 Powers and American Empire* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 61–62, 71–95.

10. De Vries and Sullivan are well aware that they are writing about political theologies now reconnected to a discourse of the “theologico-political” that characterized Spinoza’s 1670 *Theologico-Political Treatise*. For the treatise itself, see Spinoza, *Theologico-Political Treatise*, ed. Jonathan I. Israel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

11. Chantal Mouffe, *The Return of the Political* (New York: Verso, 2005), 3.

tension with orders of nature, to the ways different social groups interact (cooperate, contest, compete) with one another. My claim is not that every element of nature and human being is agonistic. After all, as Abdul JanMohamed suggests when reflecting on the agonistic friction of Hegel's master/slave dialectic, there is an ethnographic record that suggests, in contrast, that "in practice, human sociality is grounded in the immediate and abundant offering of recognition."¹² There may be a problem, he admits, that the West, especially following Hegel, has been too quick to assume a primary agonism in all social life. Nevertheless, this book will follow JanMohamed and others who decide that a certain primacy of the agonistic mode cannot be avoided. Even the more pacific and generous options in "the ethnographic record"¹³ have those options amid their awareness and anxiety concerning the costs of social agonism. This awareness and anxiety point to a certain inevitability of the agonistic. For this and other reasons, this book's notion of the political remains agonistic, tapping into a tradition of political theory as explicated by Andrew Schapp in his *Law and Agonistic Politics*.¹⁴ This distinctively agonistic character of the political opens up that critical space in the political, the body politic, where large segments of the population—"the part that has no part," as political philosopher Jacques Rancière describes them¹⁵—are often rendered absent or subjugated to structured and systemic violence.

The political, in sum, is rendered in this book as a mode of being affected by our socially and historically mediated ontological constitution. This is the broad scope of the political. The agonism of the political, what is distinctive of the political for this book, means that the world's being—which is always socially and historically mediated being—is weighted with agonistic tension. What Johannes Fabian in *Time and the Other* describes as the "scandal of domination and exploitation of one part of

12. Abdul R. JanMohamed, *The Death-Bound Subject: Richard Wright's Archaeology of Death* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 267.

13. Mohamed doesn't cite "the ethnographic record," but of many possible, see historian Donald Fixico, *The American Indian Mind in a Linear World: American Indian Studies and Traditional Knowledge* (New York: Routledge, 2003), esp. 142–79.

14. Andrew Schaap, *Law and Agonistic Politics* (London: Ashgate, 2009). I am grateful for Princeton Seminary doctoral candidate Elías Ortega-Aponte for calling my attention to this work amid his own groundbreaking research and writing on U.S. Latino/a ethics and theology.

15. Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 7–14.

mankind by another”¹⁶ is an affliction that weighs heavily upon, even as it is culminant of, an “entirety” of systems and structures, to recall Foucault again. The sufferers’ acute pain and struggle is a culmination of a struggle borne by the whole, even if agents of domination have their singularities and responsibility. All this is the weight of the world, and it is the distinctive feature of the political, the agonistic political.

The agonistic political emerges in a number of contemporary theorists’ discourses, and in different ways. Groups weighted by imposed social suffering, in modes both blatant and subtle, both covert and overt, are enmeshed within and constituted by what Achille Mbembe terms a “necropolitics.” This is a set of political practices effective toward death, marked by what Mbembe terms “a generalized instrumentalization of human existence and by the material destruction of human bodies and populations.”¹⁷ The world is heavy, then, with social practices that generate and organize death and dying. Though this necropolitics consigns more and more people to “zones of abandonment,”¹⁸ relegating increasingly larger numbers to the status of surplus populations or disposable peoples, those subordinated to the necropolitics nevertheless rework the agonism, insist on being human, “weigh-in” with counterpractices that are not only agonistic in their own right but also are often motivated by nonagonistic visions and practices. Nevertheless, as nonagonistic as they may be in their visionary origins, they do not escape having to be fought for in an agonistic world of being and practice.

The weightedness that marks the agonistic political is also operative in the patterns of exclusion that are revealingly traced in its more subtle mode, in what Gayatri Spivak has termed “foreclosure.” This is a dynamic that is evident, for just one example, in Immanuel Kant’s clear decision in his *Critique of Judgment* to dismiss “New Hollanders” and “inhabitants of Tierra del Fuego” as subjects who shed any light on “why it is necessary that men should exist.”¹⁹ Their exclusion occurs with little fanfare in

16. Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 31.

17. Achille Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” trans. Libby Meintjes, in *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003): 11–40, at 14.

18. See João Biehl, *Vita: Life in a Zone of Social Abandonment* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

19. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 26–29. For the passage in Kant that Spivak addresses, see Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans.

Kant's book, but it discloses a significant part of a foreclosure that Spivak interprets as part of an "axiomatization of imperialism."²⁰ There seem to be no operative norms compelling Kant and his readers to see these peoples as "recognizable," to adapt Judith Butler's language; certainly there seem to be few schemas in Kant's thought to make their subjectivity intelligible or valuable.²¹ With a few penned phrases he can assume readers will not object if he waves them aside as he moves on through his argument. A reader might not advert to the foreclosure at all. Kant simply apprehends his sensible world through what Rancière points to as an "aesthetics" at the core of politics, one that subtly determines "what is seen and what can be said, organizing, in fact, determinations of who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time."²² The sensible world is subject to divisions, the most notable one for the political being the dividing off of those social groups who are a part of society but without rights to participate equally, "the part that has no part."²³ Kant's subtle but emphatic distinction among worthy and unworthy lives—those undeserving and deserving of grief, as Judith Butler addresses this problematic²⁴—is judged quickly in passing. This, too, is all part of the agonism of the political that structures human being in society.

The foreclosures Spivak discusses, and the framing of affect (Butler) or the divisions of the sensible world (Rancière), are all important for seeing how relations transpire in the powerful worlds of colonizing and largely European-American settings. It should not be forgotten, however,

J. H. Bernard (New York: Heffner, 1968 [1790]), 225. Kant's foreclosure of these peoples, not treating them as "subjects" in his analysis, but instead dismissing them as beings not at all helpful for reflecting on human existence's purpose, is exemplary of the moderate mainstream Enlightenment, which, unlike an earlier, more "radical Enlightenment," accommodated itself to a racial hierarchy of inequalities. See Jonathan Israel, *The Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man 1670–1752* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 40, 49, and 590–614. On Kant and racial hierarchy, see Robert Bernasconi, "Kant as an Unfamiliar Source of Racism," in *Philosophers on Race: Critical Essays*, ed. Julie K. Ward and Tommy L. Lott (New York: Blackwell, 2002), 145–66.

20. Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, 330. Compare with pp. 19, 34, 26, 48, 120–21, 340, 409.

21. Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (New York: Verso, 2009), 9.

22. Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (New York: Continuum, 2004 [French 2000]), 13.

23. Rancière, *Disagreement*, 10–12.

24. Butler, 22–31.

that the likes of Kant and Hegel could also be far less subtle, more blatantly antagonistic to foreclosed peoples, with Kant advocating outright eradication of these “others” and Hegel deciding that “Africa has no history,” no spirit, and so on.²⁵

The agonistic political is not carried simply in thinkers’ manifestations of an antagonistic viewpoint toward subordinated and colonizable others; or, conversely, in those thinkers who decry their subordination and colonization. To be sure, those stances are ways to participate in the agonistic political. But the agonism of the political is first and foremost that which is at work in the more general dissemination of practices and powers that mark our very ontological condition. It is this agonistic political that will figure prominently in this book, and from which the theological emerges with its haunting power.

The Theological

The political, understood as this ontologically constituting, agonistic dimension of human thought and practice, then, sets the stage for understanding “the theological.” The theological is a discourse that discerns and critically reflects upon the motions of power in this agonistic dimension. More particularly, it traces and theorizes the ways that persons and groups rendered subordinate and vulnerable by agonistic politics and its systemic imposed social suffering nevertheless haunt, unsettle, and perhaps dissolve the structures of those systems. The theological traces and theorizes the way this haunting congeals into specters and forces both threatening and promising alternative patterns and lifeways. Again, the theological as a discourse should not be confused with Theology, the guild discipline long established in the theological institutions, seminaries, divinity schools, and, more controversially, in some Western university religion departments.²⁶

25. These attitudes of Enlightenment philosophers were traced early on by such works as Cornel West’s *Prophesy Deliverance!* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1988), and more recently by J. Kameron Carter, *Race: A Theological Account* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 79–95.

26. By “the West,” I refer to those cultures and regions where Eurocentric views of modernity predominate, both politically and ideologically. Crucial to the notion is that the West sees its European heritage as leading to, and then descended from, a period of “modernity,” the latter held to be a good and originative with European peoples, then

Some may query, given the difference between Theology and what I propose as “the theological,” why keep the adjectival form at all? My response here is threefold, even though each point will become clearer only against the backdrop of the book’s entirety. First, *the theological* names the kind of discourse deployed by nontheologians, especially political theorists, when they delve into sources and meanings of Theology without sanctioning its traditional concerns as guild discipline. This hardly makes them “anonymous theologians.” That is not my claim. The theorists often express their ambivalence about these deployments from Theology. Recall Alain Badiou’s claim “to care nothing” for Paul’s gospel, while yet writing a full-length text on Paul’s militant subjectivity as exemplary. We could cite also Spivak’s dreaming of an “animist liberation theology” that might express her “impossible vision of an ecologically just world.” She then adds, however, and this is telling, “Indeed, the name theology is alien to this thinking.” Moreover, not only does she not embrace Theology, especially “individual transcendence theology,” she also announces her conviction that none of the major religions should be invoked to facilitate our reach for “that impossible, undivided world of which one must dream,” which is the internationality of ecological justice.²⁷ Note that both Badiou’s and Spivak’s retrieval of, or desire for some part of, Theology’s discourse is occasioned by reflection on the agonistic political. Thus, Paul’s “militant subjectivity” is attractive to Badiou in spite of his gospel, and Spivak mentions liberation theologies because, especially if worked out in an “animist” mode, they enable contestation with a financialized and unjust international order. Because their sense of agonistic politics drives them to consider and deploy notions from Theology, I refer to discourse like theirs as “theological.” But because of their severe ambivalence about their own moves, rooted in a critical rejection of Theology and the religions, its discourse cannot properly be said to belong to Theology. It is, instead, a discourse of the theological, occasioned and provoked by the agonistic political.

A second reason for preserving the term *the theological* is that there is no antitheological anti-space that might be counterpoised to the cultural history that has been shaped and stamped by Theology and its practices

diffused outward to other peoples and continents. In the ideology of “the West,” the colonial roots of modernity are usually unacknowledged and unstudied. On Eurocentrism and the West, see J. M. Blaut, *The Colonizer’s View of the World: Geographical Diffusionism and Eurocentric History* (New York: Guilford, 1993).

27. Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, 382–83.

in the West. This reason may offer the cultural historical condition for the first reason given above. If the likes of Badiou and Spivak find it necessary to engage, however tangentially and ambivalently, the offerings of Theology, this is because even those who reject it must work in the ruins of its failure. Later in this book I will discuss Ernesto Laclau's notion of "failed transcendence." Even for those who argue that there can be no return to transcendence, there is still a necessity to work in its ruins. Especially in the contexts of agonistic politics, where contestation will often necessitate working in, and reworking, the ruins of transcendence and of Theology—precisely there is it appropriate to speak of this puzzling notion of the theological.

My third reason for preserving the term *the theological* is not the most significant, but does warrant comment. Etymologically, it is not necessary for theologically interested discourse to make reference to a transcendent or to "a God," even less to require belief and reverence for such. Many may assume this and, indeed, the standard etymology for "theology" (*logos*, "discourse," about *theos*, "God") would seem to confirm this. But further digging into the etymology of the Greek, *theos*, opens out more possibilities. Among them is the possibility that its meaning is bound up not so much with a singular divine figure, a god, but with a multiplicity of "gods," and, perhaps more elusively, with a revered presence.²⁸ Then, too, there are the playful etymological musings that Plato has Socrates offering up in his *Cratylus* (397d), well known for its speculative punning on word origins. Recall Socrates's musing on why the planets in motion were called "*Theoi*."

Socrates: My notion would be something of this sort: I suspect that the sun, moon, earth, stars, and heaven, which are still the god of many barbarians, were the only gods known to the aboriginal Hellenes. Seeing that they were always moving and running, from their running nature (*θεῖν*) they were called Gods (*θεοὺς*) or runners (*θεόντας*); and when men became acquainted with the other Gods, they proceeded to apply the same name to them all. Do you think that likely?

Hermogenes: I think it very likely indeed.²⁹

28. "God," *Oxford English Dictionary*, eds. J. A. Simpson and E.S. C. Weiner, volume VI (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989), 639.

29. "Cratylus," in Edith Hamilton, ed., *The Collected Dialogues of Plato: Including the Letters* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 435.

Again, Plato's thoughts in the musing of Socrates does not in itself constitute an argument for what the theological is or should now be taken to be. This passage, however, from the mythology and reflection of the past, does indicate that the theological need not be so closely attached in its first meanings to a notion of god or gods, but instead may attach to something more inchoate, indeed, perhaps unfocusable, too—here, the “moving and running,” the “running nature” of the world and its bodies. If the theological of this book is a tracing of, and critical reflection upon, the motions at work in an agonistic politics, upon the diverse modes of motion in the weight of the world, we are—granted, in a most general way—in keeping with this early musing on the theological as related to running and moving, not just to a god or gods.

More particularly, however, how will the theological differ from Theology? To be sure, Theology is not completely incapable of harboring the theological as I will unfold it in this book, but usually its discourses depart from the theological in two senses. First, the primary discursive language of guild Theology, especially in Christian theological institutions of the West, tends to focus on doctrinal loci, traditional topics of God, creation, sin, Christology, Holy Spirit, church, eschatology, and so on, all of which provide an ordering function, its parts drawn from established church formulae, creeds, and the biblical narrative's view of history.³⁰ Strictly observed, arrangements of these loci structure a sense of “orthodoxy,” and in some quarters are enforced over and against other notions of “heresy.” More loosely held in modern and contemporary theology, the loci still limn a “web of symbols” that the guild looks to in order to distinguish their work, even if they often accept the task of reworking them in imaginative and often radical ways.³¹ The concerns of the theological may intersect with some discourses of the traditional loci, but doing so is not the distinctive focus of the theological.

Instead, the primary discursive language of the theological is the artful image, with symbolic force to convey the promise and threat of the spectral, the haunting by peoples and groups who are often rendered disposable, excluded, and oppressed. Their imagery, their art forms—in

30. Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 4th ed. (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006).

31. Rebecca Chopp and Mark Lewis Taylor, eds., *Reconstructing Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 14–15.

song, poetry, story,³² literature, painting, graffiti, the sewn designs of the *arpillera* quilts of culturally traumatized peoples of Chile and Peru,³³ for example—all these and more constitute the primary discourse of the theological, insofar as they convey and constitute the haunting power of peoples bearing the weight of the world, but weighing-in spectrally with resistance and flourishing. As a foretaste of the powers of this language, which I will discuss in detail across later chapters, I offer these haunting stanzas from Richard Wright's poem "Between the World and Me,"³⁴ in which, as Abdul JanMohamed observes, Wright both gives persona to a man being lynched and burned in the Jim Crow era and also works readers' identification with his horror:

And my skin clung to the bubbling hot tar, falling from me in limp patches.
 And the down and quills of the white feathers sank into my raw flesh, and I moaned in my agony.
 Then my blood was cooled mercifully, cooled by a baptism of gasoline.
 And in a blaze of red I leaped to the sky as pain rose like water, boiling my limbs.
 Panting, begging I clutched childlike, clutched to the hot sides of death.
 Now I am dry bones and my face a stony skull staring in yellow surprise at the sun . . .³⁵

In this language there is not simply a recounting of a brutal event. Wright does not merely traffic in horror. His poem, to the contrary, is

32. The role of the story—written, but especially oral—has been frequently remarked upon in this regard, especially in indigenous nations' traditions. It is dramatically exemplified in Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony*, 30th anniversary ed. (New York: Penguin, 2007 [1988]), 2–3.

33. "Threads of Hope: The Story of the Chilean Arpillera," *International Center for Ethics, Justice and Public Life*, Brandeis University, <http://www.brandeis.edu/ethics/events/past/tellingthestory/agosin.html>, accessed September 13, 2010.

34. I discussed this poem previously in my essay "Today's State of Exception: Notes on Abu-Jamal, Agamben and JanMohamed," in *Political Theology*, special issue on "Theology and Democratic Futures," ed. Corey D. B. Walker, 10, no. 2 (April 2009): 305–24.

35. This segment from Abdul R. JanMohamed, *The Death-Bound Subject: Richard Wright's Archaeology of Death* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 29. For the full poem, see "Between the World and Me," in *The Richard Wright Reader*, ed. Ellen Wright and Michel Fabre (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), 246–47.

poignantly and startlingly about a “face,” yes, a “stony skull,” but one “staring,” engaging the present, indicting its perpetrators and indeed all “humanity.” Wright’s art—here and in his other writings, in his and others’ creativity—works a most severe mercy, exorcising the social death lived by such sufferers, but releasing them toward a radical engagement with liberating possibilities that he and others might mobilize in the present. Thus, what Avery Gordon would term a “seething presence” is created, as bodies live in spite of death through such symbolic force in artful form. Gordon’s notion of seething presence is used also by her for the power of Argentine women writing about absented/forcibly disappeared friends and family.³⁶ As “seething” they make striking impressions. Their artful language “makes everything we do see just as it is, charged with the occluded and forgotten past,” but with an eye to an “emergent solution,” a material practice of “something to be done.”³⁷ The force of this kind of language constitutes the theological that this book will explore. In terms of liberatory and transformative potential, Theology’s doctrinal language is no rival to the symbolic language of such an art-force.

Second, guild Theology, as I refer to it, departs from the theological in that the former is usually marked by some discourse of transcendence, that is, a thinking across (*trans*-), which involves a going above, a climbing (*scandere*), beyond the finite, somehow to another dimension above world and history. The kind of transcendence involved may be complexly structured, with discourses about a “this-worldly transcendence,” or of “the immanence of the transcendent,” but still the opposition of the transcendent and the immanent remains,³⁸ with guild Theology’s distinctive concern focused largely on a valuation of the transcendent that can “go immanent.” Even in some radical embraces of “pure immanence,” the transcendent retains its controlling power by being the obverse that must be countered.

By contrast, this book does not seek to replicate the binary—transcendence *or* immanence—by simply shifting to embrace or celebrate

36. Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 195.

37. *Ibid.*, 195, 202.

38. William Temple, *Nature, Man and God*, the Gifford Lectures at the University of Glasgow, 1932–1933, 1933–1934 (London: Kessinger, 2003). This text is still a key example, with its two parts being “The Immanence of the Transcendent,” and “The Transcendence of the Immanent.”

an immanence over and against transcendence. It surely is not marked by proposing a new version of transcendence, however attractive some recent attempts to do so may be.³⁹ Rather, the theological of this book discerns, within the agonistic political, a distinctive realm of human being and social practice, what I will explore, with the aid of Jean-Luc Nancy's thought, the "transimmanental." I hasten to add that in this turn to Nancy for interpreting the theological, I do not seek to "theologize" Nancy, reintroducing some notion of the divine or of transcendence into his project. I thus welcome B. C. Hutchens's telling critique of theologians who would use Nancy to somehow rescue a notion of God, or to guide some ability to trace divinity in human experience. Nancy's discourse of transimmanence does not offer Theology a way to cling, in some new fashion, to its desperate faiths in god; rather, as Hutchens writes, Nancy "enables the secularist to wrest poetry's transcendent value from the theologians."⁴⁰ Even this secularist avowal by Hutchens, however, makes too much of the transcendent, here mainly transporting its function to the poetic. The transimmanental is sufficient, it seems to me, for pointing to the power of the poetic and of the theological without bringing in either transcendence or immanence.

So what is transimmanence? As a first statement, I present it as a practice or reflection that steps *into* and moves *within* the political. It is the liberating opening and closing, and continual opening and reopening, of existence to itself, to and through its many singularities and pluralities. Transimmanence is existence thus refusing to be locked in place, "locked down" in systems that resist continual opening and reopening. It is a kind of passing, a traversing of manifolds and relations of immanence, which can be discerned especially along the boundaries marking agonistic strife between the powers that seek to dispose of weaker peoples and those peoples who resist being so disposed.⁴¹ Transimmanence is disclosed especially in that realm of life and struggle where the prodigious

39. Regina Schwartz, *Transcendence: Philosophy, Literature, and Theology Approach the Beyond* (New York: Routledge, 2004); and John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon, *Transcendence and Beyond: A Postmodern Inquiry* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007).

40. B. C. Hutchens, *Jean-Luc Nancy and the Future of Philosophy* (Montreal: McGill/Queens University Press, 2005), 95.

41. Vijay Prashad, "Thinking in the Wound," unpublished presentation, Columbia University/Barnard College conference, "Live from Death Row—Mumia at the Crossroads in the Age of Obama," April 3, 2010.

art form—as in Wright’s poem “Between the World and Me”—wields the figural form of the oppressed to show that their powers and presence have not been erased.

Transimmanence, then, while pervading the entire human condition, abides in and flashes forth along the agonistic boundaries of being, especially as agonistic tension shifts from a fruitful balance of power into a more concentrated and onerous exercise of power over others. The theological addresses this concentration, grates against it, engages and deflects it. Ultimately, tracing the transimmanental will offer us a way to discern the powers that sustain and liberate world, through the at-times strange conspiring of human flesh, heart, will, and mind, all of which are at work in the specters of the dying and lost, particularly of the excluded and oppressed, in ever creative ways. These whom Judith Butler renders as “spectral humans” amid the agonistic political, then, take on a surprising power to haunt, and at times also to dismantle and erode, the forces that freeze and subjugate. In more poetic language, we may recall the words of Victor Serge, activist for the dead and dying of many contexts, who suffered imprisonment in both Western capitalist as well as Soviet revolutionary societies:

in time flesh will wear out chains
in time the mind will make chains snap⁴²

What kind of power of the flesh is this? What sort of flesh might “wear out chains?” What manner of flesh with what mode of mind can step into the world, be steeped in it, and so inhabit time and space to have such a wearing power? Whatever it is, Serge saw it as a power *in* the world to open another future one:

I see growing on the ripples of the water
The revivifying specter
Of a barbarous freedom drunk on its tears.⁴³

Discerning and reflecting on the possibility of such a future, heavy with the dead upon the living, but transimmanentially weighing-in with the

42. Victor Serge, “Be Hard” (fragment), in Victor Serge, *Resistance: Poems*, trans. James Brook (San Francisco: CityLights Books, 1972), 33.

43. Victor Serge, “Stenka Razin,” in *ibid.*, 21.

specter of revivifying practices, gives us a foretaste of the critical space of the theological.

The Theological and Post-Theological Alternatives

It is against the backdrop of three theological tendencies, in present post-theological discourses, that we can clarify still further the theological that this work focuses as transimmanence of the agonistic political. Walker has given his own expression to these three, and though I recast them somewhat in my own terms, I depend on the options he identifies for situating my sense of “the theological.” As will become apparent, the theological of this book is closer to the third tendency, but with some important differentiations.

A first tendency is viewable in the works of John Milbank and other theologians working in support of projects in Radical Orthodoxy. This group seeks to engage the political order, making extensive use of secular theories of modernity and rationality, aiming to forge a radical politics (the “radical” part), but then also moves deeply into the biblical and ecclesial traditions (here’s the “orthodoxy” part) in ways that shift theology from the margins to the center of public intellectual discourse. The result, as Walker notes, is not only a retrieval of writings by theologians and orthodox theologians, both mined for their politically transformative meanings, but also a “bulwarking” of Christian claims and doctrines that are given a “*sui generis* gloss,” one that sets theological discourse over and against critical and secular theoretical discourses.⁴⁴ The result of these maneuvers is often more orthodox than radical, as in Daniel M. Bell Jr.’s critique of liberation theology, which faults Latin American liberation theology because its leading themes of oppression and justice lead, allegedly, to a vengeful reactive spirit. Instead, Bell proposes for liberation theologies a new discovery of the Christian message of forgiveness, expressed by victims toward their oppressing agents.⁴⁵ Bell’s book evidences a trait of this post-theological tendency, especially as Walker formulates it: “Such projects are indebted to and predicated on historic and traditional flows of conceptual certainty, epistemic privilege

44. Walker, “Theology and Democratic Futures,” 202.

45. Daniel M. Bell Jr., *Liberation Theology after the End of History: The Refusal to Cease Suffering* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 189–95.

and theoretical imperialism that mask the exploits and consolidations of political and intellectual power.”⁴⁶ As a part of this problem noted by Walker, there is also the tendency of Radical Orthodoxy to reinforce the foreclosure of long unrecognized populations and groups. This is evident, I would argue, in Bell’s call to Latin American peoples to forgive agents with official responsibilities in systems that long have repressed them. In this call, there is a near-complete neglect of the host of movements and texts among Latin Americans in postgenocidal settings, where “truth and reconciliation” commissions do their work, and where victims of oppression have laid foundations for a whole new approach to thinking through forgiveness.⁴⁷

A second tendency that Walker identifies—and one very strong in current discussions of political theology in the United States—is indebted to the influential writings of Slavoj Žižek. We might term this theological tendency, “post-Christian materialism.” This is my rendering of Žižek’s description of his position in *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity*: “My claim here is not merely that I am a materialist through and through, and that the subversive kernel of Christianity is accessible also to a materialist approach; my thesis is much stronger: this kernel is accessible *only* to a materialist approach—and vice versa: to become a true dialectical materialist, one should go through the Christian experience.”⁴⁸ By materialism, Žižek means no mere opposite to “idealism,” or some reference to the world of bodies and their languages over and against consciousness and thinking; rather, he means something much more complex, that is, the primacy of a social-symbolic order of practices and beliefs for understanding humanity and world. It is “materialist” in giving primacy to this complexity, instead of to something that is outside of very human practices and beliefs. It is “Christian” because he interprets the message of Christ as, above all, signaling that “the

46. Walker, “Theology and Democratic Futures,” 202.

47. As one example, see *Guatemala: Never Again! REMHI Recovery of Historical Memory Project*, The Official Report of the Human Rights Office, Archdiocese of Guatemala (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1999), esp. “The Wrath of Injustice,” 25–28, and “The Path to Social Reconstruction,” 313–24.

48. Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), 6. On Žižek’s materialism, see Adrian Johnston, *Žižek’s Ontology: A Transcendental Materialist Theory of Subjectivity* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2008).

difference between God and man is transposed into man himself [sic].”⁴⁹ As “Christian,” Žižek reads Christ’s words on the cross “Father, why hast Thou forsaken me?”, as throwing all focus onto “man himself” left alone, with, now, the “nonexistence of the big Other.”⁵⁰ Žižek’s fundamental project is a materialist one, then, but it passes through Christian theological claims, and continually borrows from them. In Walker’s language, there is in this tendency a “dialectical engagement between particular theological ideas and concepts and other theoretical frameworks and discourses . . . ,” with the result that there emerges a “critical thinking in which the theological is pressed into service for the elaboration of other radical and subversive non-theological discourses.”⁵¹ This renders Žižek’s project not only conceptually rich and complex, but also enigmatic: it is fundamentally nontheological, and yet at the same time Žižek drops in theological notions on an occasional basis, often drawing upon quite orthodox traditions, giving them fresh, and at times eccentric, twists. This is evident especially in the way he uses G. K. Chesterton’s work *Orthodoxy*. Yet this does not make Žižek a theologian of “radical orthodoxy,” as with the above tendency. This is because he does not position orthodox theology at the center of his work, and then over and against critical and secular theoretic discourses. Indeed, he steeps himself in those, too. At best, the theological for Žižek is a necessary passageway and an occasionally invoked perspective, borrowed from Theology to bolster his unfolding materialist project.

Žižek’s approach is evident if we note some of Žižek’s other theological points. In his *In Defense of Lost Causes*, along the way of his analysis of Hegel’s view of Napoleon in Jena, Žižek lets drop a view of “the mystery of incarnation” as meaning that “what happened in the case of Christ is that God himself, the creator of our entire universe, was walking around as a common individual.”⁵² That view hardly does justice to Hegel’s view of the incarnation, much less to the alternative renderings of incarnation that theologians and others have debated. Žižek can go on to invoke substitutionary atonement theory for rebellion⁵³ and comment that Che

49. Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), 6.

50. Slavoj Žižek, ed. *Revolution at the Gates: Selected Writings of Lenin from 1917* (New York: Verso, 2002), 180.

51. Walker, “Theology and Democratic Futures,” 201.

52. Slavoj Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes* (New York: Verso, 2008), 133.

53. *Ibid.*, 438.

Guevara has a “weird Christ-like aura.”⁵⁴ Although this kind of discourse all portends a new seriousness given to theological discourse, Žižek keeps it subordinate to his materialist ends. The theological is pressed into service for materialist ends. Precisely this materialism makes Žižek an energizing read for many—and I count myself among them—who are eager to see critical thought address and seek to redress the systemic and political suffering that Žižek addresses throughout his work. The problem, however, is that Žižek’s occasional hijacking of theological notions leaves unaddressed, and often uncriticized, the way those theological notions often underwrite a very antimaterialist ethos of transcendence, of the “big Other.” In this sense, Žižek leaves strangely uninterrogated the epistemic sovereignty and theoretical imperialism of much Theology, particularly those methodologies that continually function to exclude the subaltern knowledges that seek to weigh-in upon Theology’s discourse. For all his differences with radical orthodoxy, then, in this hesitance to interrogate orthodoxy there is in Žižek’s work a similarity to it.⁵⁵

The third tendency, more seemingly anti-theological, is the one in relation to which I would clarify my book’s approach to the theological. Walker sees it largely exemplified by the work of Alain Badiou, particularly as this French philosopher formulates his materialist ontology with the aid of mathematics.⁵⁶ The historical ontology of my book does not pretend to deploy anything like that found in Badiou’s *Being and Event* or in his *Logics of Worlds*. My work does feature, however, a key trait of Badiou’s, that is, his tendency to admit to “the theoretical efficacy of certain theological concepts and constructions without admitting the entire panoply of theological claims and commitments into its discourse.”⁵⁷ Although Walker doesn’t mention it, a key example of his point might be Badiou’s book *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*.⁵⁸ Here, among many

54. Ibid., 433.

55. For Žižek’s engagement with radical orthodoxy, particularly John Milbank, see Slavoj Žižek and John Milbank, *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?* ed. Creston Davis (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009).

56. Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (New York: Continuum, 2000 [French 1988]). See also Badiou’s more recent *Logics of Worlds: Being and Event 2*, trans. Alberto Toscano (New York: Continuum, 2009 [French 2006]), and *Polemics*, trans. Steve Corcoran (New York: Verso, 2006).

57. Walker, “Theology and Democratic Futures,” 201.

58. Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. Ray Brassier (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003 [French 1997]).

other interpretive moves, Badiou extracts from the “mythological core” of Paul’s notion of “the Christ-event,” a “formal, wholly secularized conception of grace” as “affirmation without preliminary negation,” a truth, for Badiou, of “pure and simple encounter.”⁵⁹ Resurrection is similarly given a meaning extracted from Paul’s mythological core, emphasizing that the “event’s sudden emergence never follows from an evental site.”⁶⁰ We need not trace here how Badiou puts all this together, nor compare this familiar move with those of the Heidegger-influenced New Testament scholar Rudolf Bultmann. The point is that extracts from Theology are seized upon and taken even more seriously than Žižek often does, but alongside a more vigorous disclaimer of their import. “For me, truth be told,” says Badiou in his opening lines to *St. Paul*, “Paul is not an apostle or a saint. I care nothing for the Good News he declares, or the cult dedicated to him.”⁶¹ Nevertheless, Paul’s thinking is theoretically efficacious, usable for promoting his philosophical meditations on a militant theory of transformative event. “For me,” Badiou continues, “Paul is a poet-thinker of the event, as well as one who practices and states the invariant traits of what can be called the militant figure.”⁶²

Two other traits tend to distinguish Badiou from Žižek, and certainly from the Radical Orthodoxy approach to the theological in our politically weighted post-theological moment. Walker observes, for example, that Badiou and his supporters first issue a forthright rejection of any transcendental guarantee standing behind the thought they derive from certain theological concepts. Second, they reject the doctrinal matrix of beliefs and concepts that are structured into theologians’ language and customary expression. These two rejections strike right at the heart of what defines much guild Theology, not only its claims to have knowledge of a sovereign god, a claim maintained by an ethos of transcendence, but also its doctrinal ordering of reflection in terms of authoritative texts and loci.

The theological developed in this book embraces both rejections. First, it can affirm Badiou’s critique of the “transcendental guarantee,” since this usually functions as a way to guard the privileged standpoint

59. *Ibid.*, 66. Also, grace, for Badiou, “means that thought cannot *wholly* account for the brutal starting over on the path of life in the subject, which is to say, for the rediscovered conjunction between thinking and doing,” 84.

60. *Ibid.*, 71.

61. *Ibid.*, 1.

62. *Ibid.*, 2.

and perspective of groups that long have commanded power in guild Theology. The transcendental guarantee is usually advanced and presumed by those whose rights and powers receive regular social and ritual affirmation in the West, often without a need felt to make an argument for positions they claim to have transcendent value and truth. As already noted, Badiou's rejection of the "doctrinal matrix of beliefs" is also something that this book's view of the theological can affirm, especially given the role of those beliefs in inscribing and articulating the claims to sovereignty and transcendence that Theology usually makes.

Nevertheless, "the theological" of this book is here not positioned in mere oppositional rejection to transcendence and doctrine. The very fact that Badiou—and with him other post-theological or postsecular figures, such as Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben⁶³—find themselves laboring over a biblical and highly theological text like that of Paul's letter to the Romans, suggests that there is something more complex going on than mere rejection of transcendence and doctrine. When Badiou declares that he cares nothing for Paul's gospel, or the cult dedicated to Paul, it would be more accurate to say—and I believe close readings of Badiou bear this out⁶⁴—that he cares nothing for a move to transcendence or to ecclesial authority. However, he does care for, and is informed by, the noteworthy and valuable militant subjectivity that Paul displays in his poetic language. Badiou may also care little for doctrine, yet he spends considerable time theorizing the relations between elements of the traditional loci of doctrines: grace, sin, resurrection, salvation, love, and more.⁶⁵

The theological, then, has a much more complex relationship to transcendence and doctrine. In this book, there will be rejection, yes, and a repudiation, especially of claims to step outside, above, beyond world or materiality. There will be repudiation, particularly of claims to possess some fulcrum of knowledge for viewing the whole, some authoritative standpoint resting on doctrine that orders knowledge to a transcendent sovereign. These all fail. The claims to move "beyond," for all their claims

63. Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, trans. Patricia Dailey (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005 [Italian 2000]).

64. On the very page on which Badiou says, "I care nothing for the Good News he [Paul] declares," he moves on to say that there is in Paul "no transcendence, nothing sacred, [only] perfect equality of this work with every other, the moment it touches me personally." Badiou, *St. Paul*, 1.

65. On these themes, see *ibid.*, 42, 84, 59, 77–78, 82–83.

to have grasped a perspective or point that is other to finite humanity, remain steeped in, mediated by, and limited to the very dynamics they claim to transcend. And yet, in the aspiration and reach, in the attempt to move beyond—in these attempts that are failures—there is left a debris, a fallout from transcendental moves, past and present, in which thought and experience must labor today. Ernesto Laclau's musing at one point is both instructive and emblematic of the way of the theological, of transimmanence: "The social terrain is structured, in my view, not as completely immanent or as the result of some transcendent structure, but through what we could call *failed transcendence*."⁶⁶ The theological, in this post-theological moment, works amid this failed transcendence. This means that while there is a rejection of transcendence, there must also be an acknowledgment that the failures of transcendence partially determine the way transimmanental thought and being occur now.

A similar, not purely rejectionist, kind of thinking also characterizes the theological with respect to doctrinal conceptuality. The theological unfolded in this book does not work to accommodate doctrine, surely not that which orients theological minds to look beyond the world. The theological *does* respect a certain power of language and concept to catalyze and embody the transimmanental movement I find in spectral practice. It is precisely here that the imagistic art forms, the symbolic force mentioned above, become important. The prodigious arts of spectral imagery in practice, by which occluded, foreclosed, and oppressed peoples weigh-in from the regions to which they are often consigned and into which they are disposed, can at times find their place in doctrinal languages. What a discourse of the theological does entail, then, by way of a language, is not doctrine's conceptual ordering, but imagistic art forms' symbolic force in practice. These may be discernible in some doctrinal discussions. While there is here a repudiation of doctrine as a transcendently ordering concept and structure, there can be an embrace of the linguistic force that doctrinal language often brings, but only *if* it stays close to the originary discourses of faith and spirit that characterize movements and communities of struggle that use the artful force of images.⁶⁷ From amid this spectral imagery in practice comes what we will

66. Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (New York: Verso, 2005), 244.

67. For one of the most deft and promising proposals of a way forward for treatment of the theological in Christian traditions, see the work by South African theologian John W.

term a transimmanental world-making, which, as Pierre Bourdieu called for at the end of his life, is a way “to give *symbolic force*, by way of artistic form” to the critical ideas and analyses that patterns of foreclosure, exclusion, and oppression often generate.⁶⁸

In short, the theological of this book, while closer to the atheistic rejections of theology manifest in Badiou and his followers, nevertheless will develop those rejections in a more dialectical way. The notion of transimmanence will emerge more dialectically in relation to transcendence, acknowledging that we must work in the ruins of transcendence, that we must not simply oppose transcendence but reconstitute ourselves amid its “failure” (Laclau). The notion of transimmanence, with respect to its primary language, will also work dialectically in relation to the distinctive language of Theology, doctrine, rejecting its functions of ordering thought and practice to the transcendent, but tracing and nurturing the artistic forms of symbolic language, the force of which enables the repressed to weigh-in for change amid the weight of the world.

de Gruchy, *Christianity, Art, and Transformation: Theological Aesthetics in the Struggle for Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

68. Pierre Bourdieu, *Firing Back: Against the Tyranny of the Market 2*, trans. Loïc Wacquant (New York: New Press, 2003 [French 2000]), 25.