

Blackness at the End of the World: A Theological Ungrounding

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that there exists no ontotheological grounds for black life. As such, black religion and, by extension, black theology should consider the ways in which black life is life that is lived ungrounded. The central claim of this paper notes that categories such as the good life, the human, freedom, and citizenship are inadequate to account for the reality of black life amid the totalizing effects of antiblackness. As such, black theology should position itself to imagine black theology beyond the confines of the science of faith and other colonial markers of life and humanity. In essence, this paper seeks to make two theological claims/interventions; first, it questions the use of the category of the human as a liberatory figure through which the black can attain freedom. Second, it throws into crisis the notion of eschatological time and salvation and the inability or difficulty to account for the black who has been rendered simultaneously in and out of time. Ultimately, this paper wants to think with black feminist futurity and Afrofuturist discourse as generative tools to imagine black life beyond the confines of antiblackness, if at all possible.

Keywords: afropessimism, afrofuturism, black nihilism, terra incognita, ontotheological

INTRODUCTION

Attending to the disentanglement of “the good life” and black life, this paper explores the inability of theological and philosophical categories to define that which is “good” for black life. Following Calvin Warren’s assertion that black life is negated, even in the utterance of its affirmation and further noting that black life is not secured on any metaphysical grounds, this essay argues alongside Warren’s project of black nihilism that the crisis of the good life exists insofar as black life is always in crisis, meaning that there exist no onto-theological grounds for black life.¹ Thus, there is a need to rethink what constitutes our theological renderings of the “good life.” By onto-theology or the onto-theological I simply mean as Warren avers the science of being or put differently, the conceptual structures of the world that govern ontology and theology inasmuch as concepts like the human, freedom, citizenship, and the likes are structured under Eurocentric concepts of whiteness and white supremacy.² Stated another way, the black is denied being under these structures, what Warren notes as *ontological terror*. As such, this paper’s central claim is that black religion and black theology must radically consider black life as ungrounded life. Therefore, if we want to think of the possibilities of “the good life,” there must be a rupture and abandonment of the onto-theological categories which engender new possibilities for black life beyond the world. Turning toward Afrofuturism and black feminist notions of futurity may offer generative models of theological “ungrounding” to imagine black life beyond that which cannot sustain it.

¹ Calvin L. Warren, *Ontological Terror: Blackness, Nihilism, and Emancipation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018); “The Just Shall Live by Faith: Living without Metaphysical Guarantee in an Antiblack World,” SSRN The Immanent Frame, March 4, 2021, <https://tif.ssrn.org/2021/03/04/the-just-shall-live-by-faith/>. The definition of black nihilism that I am using in this argument follows William David Hart’s formulation of black nihilism in *The Blackness of Black: Key Concepts in Critical Discourse*. Hart writes, “Warren uses black nihilism as a tool for unconcealing and Excavating the forgetfulness of black being.” Hart further avers that “black nihilism rests on the Afropessimist claim as enunciated by Sexton and Wilderson that the category of the human excludes Blacks.” Warren will extend this excluding black existence and the erasure of black being. In this way I want to argue that though black nihilism may be different from Afropessimism but shares some of the same initial arguments though philosophically they may arrive at similar or distinct conclusions and using varying methodologies. Hart’s analysis is one of the first long form interactions with Afropessimism and black nihilism. See: William D. Hart, *The Blackness of Black: Key Concepts in Critical Discourse* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2020), 209-229. Warren, “The Just Shall Live by Faith,” Matthew C. Haltman, “Ontotheology,” in Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2015

In addition to attending to Warren's claims and challenges, I want to take seriously this notion of crisis using the discourse of the Anthropocene and its critiques by scholar of black critical theory Axelle Karera which names the Anthropocene as a problematic of crisis, in her essay, "Blackness and the Pitfalls of Anthropocene Ethics."³ This is to note that the language of the Anthropocene discourse in large points to ecological crises that gestures toward grammars that position itself as liberative analytic of apocalypse and future world-making further sedimenting the colonial and racial histories upon which it builds itself, its world, and its construction of the human. Using the Anthropocene as a paradigm through which to think about blackness, particularly as it pertains to the notions of crisis, I would like to argue that the apocalypse has always been with us. Considering the historical nature of black suffering through the transatlantic slave trade to the present, onto-theological categories such as the good life or the human for example are unfit to account for the metaphysical damage inflicted on black life that ultimately make these concepts meaningless for black being and living. To gesture through the Anthropocene that the apocalypse, the end of the world or crisis has recently come upon us, is a privilege of white positionality, politics and ethics that does not account for the nature of black suffering and violence. In a way, I am attending to what Ashon Crawley refers to as blackness as an *anethical* performance.⁴

Thus, through such a paradigm the goal is to exhibit the untenable nature of the onto-theological claims that ground theology, ethics, and ecological analysis as one that can properly account for black life in such a universal fashion. In essence, it is to say that through a reading of Warren's *Ontological Terror* and concept of "just faith" the solution is not found in the expansion of the liberal white subject and onto-theological categories that account for the good life, the human and where one locates themselves in space and time, particularly as it relates to the divine.⁵ Rather, it is to acknowledge that the assumed subject of such discourse is not black and mark the *nowhereness* of blackness in space and time. This is precisely why Afrofuturism and black feminist notions of futurity offer a generative way of thinking about blackness at the end of the world, or rather to put it in a way that approaches Warren's challenge, ungrounded life.⁶

In a way, this paper is, in sorts a response to Calvin Warren's *black nihilism* that wants to push black theology to think about what it means to cultivate a life lived ungrounded, what he refers to as a just life of faith. Warren asks, "what type of life is possible without metaphysical guarantees? And what type of living and existence is possible without such grounding?"⁷ Warren pushes us to think about how we might wrest black theology from being and more specifically the category of the human and everything that it gestures toward.

THE NATURE OF APOCALYPTICISM: BLACKNESS IN CRISIS

In "Blackness and the Pitfalls of Anthropocene Ethics," Karera offers a critique of the apocalyptic language of the Anthropocene and the danger of Anthropocene ethics when it does not properly deal with black suffering.⁸ This does not deny the ecological impact that humans have had on the earth, rather it is to contend with the ways in which this impact obfuscates the impact of the 'Anthropocene' and the ecological damage that befalls black living. The argument that Karera puts forth in large questions the tenability of the Anthropocene and "post-apocalyptic political after-life,"⁹ amid the state sanctioning of black death. What Karera points to, that Warren expresses in philosophical language and that I want to draw out is the impossibility not only of

³ Axelle Karera, "Blackness and the Pitfalls of Anthropocene Ethics," *Critical Philosophy of Race* 7, no. 1 (2019): 32–56, <https://doi.org/10.5325/critphilrace.7.1.0032>.

⁴ Ashon T. Crawley, "Blackness and Anethical Performance," in *Anti-Blackness and Christian Ethics*, ed. Vincent W. Lloyd and Andrew Prevot (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2017).

⁵ Warren, *Ontological Terror*; "The Just Shall Live by Faith."

⁶ See: William David Hart, "Afterlives of Slavery: Afrofuturism and Afropessimism as Parallax Views," *Black Theology* 19, no. 3 (September 2, 2021): 196–206, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14769948.2021.1990495>; Kara Keeling, *Queer Times, Black Futures* (New York: University Press, 2019); Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*, Forerunners (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2018); Tiffany Lethabo King, "The Labor of (Re)Reading Plantation Landscapes Fungible(Ly)," *Antipode* 48, no. 4 (2016): 1022–39, <https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12227>.

⁷ Warren, "The Just Shall Live by Faith."

⁸ Karera, "Blackness and the Pitfalls of Anthropocene Ethics," 34.

⁹ Karera, 34.

ethics to offer a point of redress for black living but a challenge to reconfigure our theological framings.

Karera's critique of Anthropocene ethics is a way in which to contend with and articulate the crisis in which black life finds itself. Following Axelle Karera's critique of Anthropocene ethics, I want to consider that the Anthropocene like former instantiations of world-making is sedimented within a colonial history that is somewhat unprepared or "unequipped" to not only deal with the colonial realities of the current ecological crises but is also rather unwilling to deal with how the Anthropocene rather than becoming a liberative analytic of apocalypse and future world-making, it further sediments the colonial and racial histories upon which it builds itself, its world and its construction of the human. I want to consider how untenable the Anthropocene is in that it does not think of antiblackness as a constitutive element of its making. Thus, in this case, Blackness exists in the Anthropocene as far as its histories and its people are buried underneath the Anthropocene's neocolonial, capitalist structures that tell us that our houses are on fire. The fire did not become a problem until it began to burn the white world and materially scorch the body of the colonial man. It is, in fact, a reality that the house has always been on fire, and it is this very fire that has marked itself onto the bodies of the black. Thus, considering the logic of the Anthropocene as a paradigm reminds us that blackness is an *anethical performance* which exists "against the very constitution of ethical beings" and if black beings are through the logic of black nihilism in fact non-beings, then they are in effect a critique of ethics.¹⁰ Thus, what Karera notes is a critique of ethics and the way in which western thought structures the world.

By this, I mean Blackness exists ontologically outside of the sovereign, beyond the political and beyond the human. It has no time, space, or place. It is, as Fred Moten argues, an act of fugitivity, a way of being that refuses the constructions of man within the modern, sovereign, non-propertyed, self-actualized subject.¹¹ Blackness has no space to call its own, no place that is known to itself. In a way, one could argue, as I want to briefly attempt here, that Blackness is a being without a world. What I want to say here sets the stage for understanding how Afrofuturism as a cultural and an esthetic practice is a gestural refusal that attends to the world outside while continuing to somewhat *exist* in the spaces formed around us.¹² I am not arguing for an apocalyptic understanding of the Anthropocene that marks the world's ending because of our ecological crises. In fact, that world has ended, but this is something that we have not recognized. In being denied the world, time, and space, being and humanity, Blackness has had to be imagined outside. Put differently, and in sitting with the theme of this panel, blackness exists outside of the spatiotemporal locations in which the human is constructed. Therefore, in thinking on the faith of anti-human existence I want to briefly turn toward Afrofuturism as a way in which one might begin to gesture toward a theological ungrounding.

AFRO-FUTURISM: A THEOLOGICAL UNGROUNDING

What is at stake here for the study of theology, particularly as we think of black theology are a few things. First, the use of the category of the human as a liberatory figure through which the black can attain freedom or rather, liberation. Second, this throws into crisis the notion of eschatological time and salvations inability or difficulty to account for the black who has been rendered simultaneously in and out of time. Taking what is theologically at stake here seriously as well as Warren's suggestion that black religion and theology abandon onto-theology for what I will call here a "theological ungrounding" how might Afrofuturist discourse be a tool that gets us to the place beyond antiblack violence and suffering where we might find black life that is generative and not in crisis, if at all possible?

As we consider the generativity of Afrofuturism as a tool for ungrounding theology, I want to briefly sit with the work of Kara Keeling and offer an initial provocation. In *Queer Times, Black Futures*, Keeling defines Afrofuturism, and more broadly black futurity as sitting at the

¹⁰ Crawley, "Blackness and Anethical Performance."

¹¹ J. Kameron Carter and Sarah Jane Cervenak, "The Black Outdoors: Humanities Futures After Property and Possession," Text, *Franklin Humanities Institute* (blog) (Franklin Humanities Institute, November 17, 2017), World, <https://humanitiesfutures.org/papers/the-black-outdoors-humanities-futures-after-property-and-possession/>.

I strikethrough the term "exist" to mark to non-existence of blackness in a similar fashion as Warren does with black being. It is simply to note the negation of black existence in the way that existence is conceptualized in the modern world which is antiblack and denies the black existence. Put differently, the strikethrough denotes the erasure of black being in the world.

intersection of imagination, technology, the future, and liberation.¹³ Moreover, for Keeling the future is defined through a queer temporality that produces risk and names this dimension of her conceptualization of futurity as “unknowable, unpredictable.”¹⁴ The future in this case is “terra incognita,” noting the unmappable nature of the future. Thus, black futurity presents a *risk of faith* that relies on an ungroundedness and a faith in anti-human existence.

Tiffany Lethabo King writes that the “space-time of Blackness finds itself in the stars of Afrofuturism” and moreover notes that Blackness also finds itself in the “quotidian spaces of the earth.”¹⁵ I want to think further how Blackness finds itself in the *stars of Afrofuturism* as a mode of worlding that not only interrupts and challenges the political but one that exists in such spatiotemporal suspension amid ecological crises, environmental racism and the afterlives of colonial dispossessions and the extraction of natural resources and people. It is not that Afrofuturism should exist materially in exchange for some intergalactic existence in hopes for an earthly apocalypticism and it is not escapist in the same ways that discourses of the Anthropocene are. Instead, it is a challenge to rethink that which grounds us and the way that antiblackness structures the world. If we are thinking about how we might unground theology we must reconsider our relation to time and it must become what Michelle Wright notes as epiphenomenal, that is that time is simultaneously in the past, present and future, an amalgamation.¹⁶

What Afrofuturism/black futurity offers to black theology is a conversation partner that considers many cultural and aesthetic practices that take seriously the question of William R Jones that asks, “what is the liberation/exaltation event of black theology?”¹⁷ In so doing, it turns the question back to the critique of ungrounding theology. The risk here is in noting that liberation is *terra incognita* and if there is to be any liberation for the black then theology must be willing to take a risk of faith that suspends the terms of order that desire liberation as that which is knowable and definable.¹⁸ Instead, in considering the way in which since the hold of slave ships the black has suffered a natal alienation and has like Spillers notes has been suspended over the oceanic, might black theology find its liberation/exhalation event through an ungrounding theology that may be uncertain about everything except that we must abandon the human.¹⁹

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¹³ Keeling, *Queer Times, Black Futures*, 4.

¹⁴ Keeling, 19.

¹⁵ King, “The Labor of (Re)Reading Plantation Landscapes Fungible(Ly),” 1029; Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*, 54.

¹⁶ Michelle M. Wright, *Physics of Blackness: Beyond the Middle Passage Epistemology* (Minneapolis; London, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 4.

¹⁷ William R Jones, *Is God a White Racist? A Preamble to Black Theology*, C. Eric Lincoln Series in Black Religion (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1973), 18–28.

¹⁸ Keeling, *Queer Times, Black Futures*; James H. Cone, *Risks of Faith the Emergence of a Black Theology of Liberation, 1968-1998* (Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 1999).

¹⁹ Hortense J. Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 72, <https://doi.org/10.2307/464747>.

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