

Black Futures and Black Fathers

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Ta-Nehisi Coates's memoir, *The Beautiful Struggle*, starts with a street fight.¹ The young Coates is in trouble, running from the violence of his Baltimore neighborhood. As Coates depicts it, the Black youth growing up with him inhabited a world of brutal chaos, stalked by violence inflicted by their peers and by police. Confronted acutely by this violence, fleeing from it, Coates reaches out to the only site of stability he can always count on. He calls his father. "When I was young," he writes, "my father was heroic to me, was all I knew of religion" (205).

Flash forward a quarter century. Coates himself is a father, raising a Black son. *Between the World and Me* is a meditation on American racism, but it is also, on its surface and at its core, a story of paternity.² The terms have changed in certain crucial ways, but the essential divinization of the paternal relationship has not. Coates describes his son as "God." While he represents his own father as distant, powerful, and wise, when Coates writes of his son he writes of the body. He describes incarnation: what is holy about his son (and himself) is located in the body.

Coates is seemingly proud of his atheism, of the atheism in which he was raised by his father, but it is hard to miss the deeply theological resonances in Coates's two books. Coates does not believe in God, but he does believe in fathers – in a very strong sense, in the mystical power of paternity. Where Carl Schmitt described the theopolitical, background ideas about God giving shape to political ideas about sovereignty, we might see in Coates's writings the workings

¹ Ta-Nehisi Coates, *The Beautiful Struggle: A Memoir* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2008).

² Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015).

of the theopaternal.³ Background ideas about God (shared cultural assumptions from a specifically Christian context) give rise to particular ideas about fatherhood. Indeed, Coates's repeated insistence on his atheism suggests just how strong a hold the traditional model of religiosity has for him, in contrast to the more diffuse language of spirituality that we might expect given the contemporary American religious landscape. Indeed, it may be the case that this traditional model of religiosity, of belief in an all-powerful being together with belief in an embodied God, does more than just shape how Coates depicts paternity. Coates's profusely, repeatedly denied beliefs about God may be displaced onto his views about fathers.

This is a problem. In the case of the theopolitical, complex theological debates in the background of political ideas about sovereignty are drastically simplified, giving rise to correspondingly simplistic political claims that are authorized by an aura of absolute truth, and those political ideas cannot be freely contested because the theological background on which they depend is always disclaimed. The result is the same for the theopaternal: the ideas about fatherhood at work are given their plausibility because of over-simplified theological claims, but there is no way to contest those theological claims because the theological register is ostensibly rejected. What results is not an intellectual problem about misunderstanding the concept of fatherhood. Rather, it is a problem that has to do with patriarchy and with racism, and particularly with how the two are entwined. The view of fatherhood implicitly supported by a simplistic theology is a key component of patriarchy (and with it heteronormativity), as it affirms the absolute power of the father and the privilege of the male heir; at the same time, this view of

³ This point is developed further in Vincent Lloyd, "From the Theopaternal to the Theopolitical: On Barack Obama" in *Common Goods: Economy, Ecology, and Political Theology*, eds. Melanie Johnson-DeBaufre, Catherine Keller, and Elias Ortega-Aponte (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 326-343.

fatherhood affirms racial purity ensured by smooth transmission of racial status from father to son.⁴

At its best, Africana thought contests this account of paternity.⁵ In the work of James Baldwin, to take the key figure Coates attempts to emulate, Blacks do transmit values, knowledge, and wisdom from generation to generation, but this transmission is not identified with father to son transmission. Where Coates frames *Between the World and Me* as a letter to his son, Baldwin begins *The Fire Next Time* with a letter to his nephew. When Baldwin meditates on his own father, as he does brilliantly in “Notes of a Native Son” and his first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, his goal is to loosen the hold of authoritarian models of paternity. Indeed, Baldwin is quite explicit about how aesthetics (specifically, the practice of writing well) displaces authoritarian paternity, opening the possibility for inter-generational transmission that does not rely on semen and eggs. Instead, it relies on painting, poetry, song, and dance. In other words, Africana thought at its best severs the tie between biological reproduction and intergenerational transmission, in doing so opposing both patriarchy and white supremacy. In contrast, when Africana thought tries to follow white models, biological reproduction and intergenerational transmission are identified with each other: witness how Barack Obama’s memoir is organized around his quest to find his biological father which makes him capable of inhabiting his own manhood – and, eventually, the presidency.

Does re-envisioning paternity, when paternity is implicitly linked with theology, require re-envisioning God? Might a Black perspective on paternity open a pathway to understanding

⁴ For a recent exploration of these entanglements, see Grace Kyungwon Hong, *Death beyond Disavowal: The Impossible Politics of Difference* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

⁵ Most famously, Hortense Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” *Diacritics* 17:2 (1987), 65-81. See also Vincent W. Lloyd, *Religion of the Field Negro: On Black Secularism and Black Theology* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), Chapter 5; on Baldwin in particular, Chapter 2.

what it might mean to worship a Black God? This should not be such a radical suggestion. Aligning paternity with aesthetics rather than biology quite clearly improves the accuracy of the fatherhood metaphor for God. Biological reproduction is essentially worldly; aesthetics opens to that which is beyond the world, to beauty aligned with truth and goodness, all irreducible to worldly terms, all markers of participation in the divine. In other words, Black accounts of intergenerational transmission hold the possibility of righting our theology, in addition to combatting the idolatries of patriarchy and white supremacy, but this potential is quashed when such transmission is taken to be biological, when fathers are taken to be gods in the crude, authoritarian, heretical sense of the term. This is my worry about Coates's persistent emphasis on fatherhood.

It is also a worry about hope. The claim of this essay is that Coates's much-discussed pessimism is the only option available when fathers and gods are identified.⁶ The only hope that would be possible is hope in worldly terms, that is, optimism, and Coates is right that optimism (about, for example, racial justice) is not warranted. He is wrong, however, that pessimism is the only alternative to optimism. There is also hope – hope made possible when secularism is rejected, when the world does not set the limits on our (theological, political, racial) imagination.

The Authority of the Father

The first photograph in *Between the World and Me* depicts the author holding his infant son; the last photograph depicts the author wrapping his arm around his teenage son. Even before the opening scene of *The Beautiful Struggle*, the reader is confronted with biological

⁶ See, for example, Melvin L. Rogers, "Between Pain and Despair: What Ta-Nehisi Coates is Missing," *Dissent* (July 31, 2015), https://www.dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/between-world-me-ta-nehisi-coates-review-despair-hope

reproduction positioned as the narrative's backbone through the opening illustration: a family tree. There is no doubt that these books are stories of paternity. In that vividly narrated opening scene in *The Beautiful Struggle*, Coates is fleeing and afraid, chased by neighborhood miscreants. "Son, I'm on the way" his father reassures (5). Like a superhero, his father arrives and saves the day: "Dad ran off into the swarming night," Coates writes. "For the first and only time, I was afraid for him" (7). After the rescue, the young Coates knew his father to be invincible. Whatever chaos or violence might surround the boy, the author, the father could withstand it. The father could bring order. (Note how, in contrast, Baldwin writes of the death of his father concurrent with the violent chaos of race riots.⁷)

The power that Coates attributes to his father is both physical and intellectual. "He stood a solid six feet, was handsome, mostly serious, rarely angry" (12). His father was a man in charge of his emotions. He was deeply learned. Indeed, learning was his occupation: he was an archivist at Howard University, collecting and caring for great works of Africana thought. In other words, not only was this father omnipotent, he was also omniscient. If one wanted knowledge, the person to ask was Coates's father. And this role was sacred: Mecca is the name Coates gives to Howard, where his father worked compiling knowledge, and where Coates himself would eventually go to study. Coates's father continued his work at home, in the family's basement, called by his father a "temple," where he would collect, reprint, and sell books about Black life and thought (137). Like any sacred figure, Coates related to his father with "hatred and complete reverence" and describes how, despite knowing that his father was flawed, "he retained the aura of a prophet" (30).

⁷ James Baldwin, "Notes of a Native Son" in *Notes of a Native Son* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), 85-114. Coates's depictions of his father, including the physical descriptions and his holiness, follow Baldwin's essay very closely.

Coates's father received his powers from another powerful man: Coates's grandfather. This grandfather, though also "intellectual," was religious, and attempted to transmit religious knowledge to his son; Coates's own father attempted to transmit Afrocentric knowledge to the young Coates, giving him esoteric books to read about the greatness of the Black race. These books took the place the Bible had held for Coates's grandfather, revered as the exclusive source of sacred knowledge. Indeed, Coates's father was militantly atheistic, and there was a ban on religious expression in the Coates household. When one of Coates's siblings was caught praying, his father responded, "You want to pray, pray to me. I put the food on this table" (20). This god-father even invented quasi-religious dietary rules for his family, prohibiting meat and restricting other foods. Coates describes his father's beliefs as "Consciousness," as "theology" that his father preached, or prophesied. All worldly things must be subordinated to Consciousness, even food and life itself, or so Coates understood his father to believe.

While Coates's father had extraordinary power, at least in his young son's eyes, this power did not usually extend beyond the household. In the streets and at school, brute force reigned. The closest that one could come to the authority of the father, on the streets, was to possess a gun. (That both father and gun stand for the phallus, for the cornerstone of patriarchy, requires no argument.) This was the path chosen by some of Coates's peers, but it was not his. For Coates, Africana knowledge was the only "sorcery to counter death for suade, leather, and gold" (107). In a world where premature death seemed likely if not inevitable, where there was no social or state authority that could be trusted to bring life stability, it was the sacred knowledge of his father that offered a chance at life, at new life instead of life en route to death.

Rather than power emanating from a position on top of the world, ruling over the world, on Coates's view his father's power came from his position among the marginalized. The powers

that be in the world repressed truth; truth was only to be found in the shadows, among the oppressed, and many of the oppressed had themselves forgotten that they were bearers of truth. This was the source of Coates's father's intellectual power; his physical power similarly came about because of marginality. "My father swung with the power of an army of slaves in revolt. He swung like he was afraid, like the world was closing in and cornering him" (141). Because his efforts were continually stymied, Coates's father was filled with rage. This rage accumulated into physical power that was unleashed, by means of his belt, on his son.

What eventually allows the young, wayward Coates to become a man, to defy death, is finding his own entry point to that African wisdom of his father. Reading the countless books in the family "temple" may have primed him, but it was participation in an Afrocentric cultural organization that began to give his life meaning, on his account. That meaning coalesced only when the young Coates took up "traditional" African drumming. Like the guns that circulated around him but he rejected, the drum was another phallus; Coates is explicit about the connection. "The djembe, the way it hangs between the legs, is virility itself and has a special call to young boys looking for ways to express the change popping off inside... The drum sounded like a gun if guns were made to be music" (148). The boy experiences collective effervescence as he plays with his peers, against the background of repressed, esoteric Africana knowledge, and the boy becomes a man. Drumming offered access to the "pantheon of ancestors," connecting him with "the direct current to the Motherland" (150). (He also undergoes a "traditional" initiation rite.) His childhood had been lived in the shadow of his god-like father, but to come of age Coates needed to connect with the generations before, with the imagined African past that would allow him to wield his own masculinity in the present as he beat his drum.

The Body of the Son

In *The Beautiful Struggle*, Coates reports that his father has a dream: “mass resurrection” (14). This is Coates’s theologization of a political aspiration. What revolution means, for his father, a former Black Panther, is a transformation of the masses. They would have new knowledge, a new self-understanding. They would realize that the history they have been taught in schools and throughout their lives by a system of white supremacy is wrong. They would realize the greatness of the African inheritance that was theirs. They would seize political power for themselves, and in this self-assertion they would have new life. Coates’s father was very much aware of the temptations of the world and of the tendency of humans to desire what is not best for them. A transformation was needed, a conversion.

Coates’s father had secularized his own father’s Christian faith, and Coates further secularizes his father’s account of conversion and resurrection. Yet the essential Christian background remains. Indeed, it becomes even more explicit in *Between the World and Me*. Where Coates’s first book is a coming of age story, where manhood is achieved by accessing the African ancestors and spirits guided by his god-like father, a process represented primarily as intellectual, as about belief, knowledge, and spiritual communion, Coates turns in his second book to the body. Resurrection is no longer connected to mental conversion; if it is possible, it now would mean resurrection of the body. This is announced from the very first page, from the very first line. It is Sunday morning, and Coates reflects on losing his body. The Sabbath timing is clearly significant, even if that significance is repressed. Even more significant is the occasion of this new reflection, this new book. It is a text addressed to Coates’s son. Coates the father is reflecting, on Sunday, about possible bodily resurrection for Coates the son.

Coates's depiction of his own father had focused on distant power and intellectual authority, and Coates defended the possibility of god-like fatherhood for Black Americans, against the forces of white supremacy. In *Between the World and Me*, Coates defends the possibility of Christ-like sonship for Black Americans, the possibility that the absolute power and authority of a father could be transmitted to a child who is embodied. Just as the white world wanted to take knowledge away from the father, the white world wants to take the body away from the son. The challenge for the narrative of the more recent book is to show how incarnation might be possible, how knowledge of truth and bodily existence might coexist, despite the worldly forces aligned to prevent this possibility.

Paternity remains unequivocally good in *Between the World and Me*, as it was in Coates's first book. Coates now elaborates, arguing that race is the product of society, racist society, not the product of parentage. In other words, focusing on father to son transmission allows access to a relationship beyond race, and beyond worldly distortions more generally. The way racism works, concretely, is to capture the body of one who is marked as Black. "Racism is a visceral experience" (10). The body becomes vulnerable, the object of violence from the police but also from within the Black community itself as racial hostility deprives and distorts the Black community. In this chaos, with social norms distorted or absent, there is only brute force left – applied to the body. "To be black in the Baltimore of my youth was to be naked before the elements of the world," Coates writes (17). There was no place to turn for protection, no common authority to assure stability. While Coates describes this in the specific historical context of his youth in a drug and violence plagued Baltimore neighborhood, Coates also describes this as the existential meaning of Blackness. Coates's father was exposed to the elements, different elements, and so too will his son be exposed.

The Christomorphic tendencies in Coates's portrayal of his son are barely concealed. "You were the God I'd never had," he writes to his son (67). In contrast to his father, a distant and powerful god-figure, his son was worldly, physically present, embodied. Whatever physical affection he may have desired but never received from his father he could lavish on his son. But incarnation is about more than embodiment. Coates's son fires up the author's own intellectual curiosity, waking his mind. Where Coates's father had taught him to understand himself in relation to (imagined African) tradition, his son teaches him to passionately pursue his own questions. Coates can become himself, can become an author, in response to such questions. These are questions about how the world fits together, why Blacks are marginalized, but most importantly, they are questions about the body. The profoundest questions of all, those prompted by Coates's child-god, are not questions about the meaning of justice or goodness or piety. They are questions about how a body that is so worldly, so subject to pain and violence, can exist together with a mind that seems above all such concerns. These are questions of our shared humanity, but they are posed particularly acutely by and for Blacks, whose bodies are especially vulnerable.

Coates's depiction of incarnation clearly depends on background assumptions about Christian theology, but because these assumptions are suppressed their over-simplicity goes unquestioned. On the one hand, the claim that Coates implicitly makes, that non-Blacks take their bodies for granted because of the illusion of invulnerability while Blacks must face directly a profoundly human and ultimately irresolvable question about the body in its relationship to the mind (or something like it) seems right. The Christian story, similarly, calls attention to the fraught relationship between, on the one hand bodily existence and vulnerability, and, on the other hand, absolute knowledge, truth, and power. The Christian theological tradition has

struggled with the complexities of this problematic over two millennia. A hard separation between fallen body and God-given mind or spirit was long ago rejected as heretical; the natural world, including the body, is understood to be created good by God and so in some ways oriented toward God, even though many distortions interfere with that orientation. In short, by his insistence on his own atheism, Coates is cutting off access to precisely what he purports to desire: robust questioning of how we can relate to our vulnerable bodies.

According to Coates, the natural and apparently appropriate response to alienation from the body is affective investment in children. “Black people love their children with a kind of obsession” – a conclusion he describes as “a philosophy of the disembodied, of a people who control nothing, who can protect nothing” (82). Given the chaos and violence that characterize the world, and the lack of protection afforded to Blacks, the always thwarted desire to protect one’s own body is projected onto the child. Coates assures his son that he was loved by his parents, that he loved his parents, and that he loves his son – though he protests that this has nothing to do with “religious feeling” (88). Because of Black vulnerability, there is all the more investment in Black paternity. In one sense, this certainly is not a religious feeling: it is locating value – the only site of value in what Coates otherwise describes as a value-free universe – in worldly things, namely, fathers and sons. In another sense, this is a very religious claim. There are, in fact, many things that we value, and that Coates values; what he is really doing is locating the sites of absolute value, those that trump all other worldly values. He locates these in paternity. In a theological idiom, he embraces idolatry: treating certain worldly things (relationships with parents and children) as if they were God.

Oddly, despite the alienation of Blacks from their bodies that is the thesis of Coates’s book, the bodies of Black women are understood outside of this context of alienation – at least

from the perspective of the young Coates. When he went to the Mecca, Howard, he was impressed with the young women he encountered: “The physical beauty of the black body was all our beauty, historical and cultural, incarnate” (49). In contrast to Black men, for whom incarnation (joining the transcendental and the physical) is necessary but impossible, Coates sees no similar problem for Black women, even as he acknowledges the doubled vulnerability of the bodies of Black women. Here again deeper reflection on the theological would help untangle the knot into which Coates is weaving himself. If the body, as part of the natural world, is created good as well as beautiful, and if loving this beauty (regardless of gender) can orient us beyond the world, the beauty Coates witnesses among the Howard women need not be reduced to the (worldly) terms of libidinal desire that his prose invites.

If there is an obstacle to be overcome in the narrative of *Between the World and Me*, it is the obstacle elusively named in the title: that obstruction which prevents the protagonist-author from relating to the world like others – specifically, like whites. The book never directly names this obstacle, nor does it purport to show how it might be overcome. It is something like white supremacy, but Coates rightly avoids leaning on a label that could become a crutch, inhibiting deeper analysis. Rather than overcoming this obstacle, the book purports to show how Black Americans might live with this obstacle which we all face. Reading and writing, “study,” are the tools for enduring white supremacy. This antidote starts even more basically, with asking questions. This will not restore our bodies to ourselves, but asking, again and again, questions in dialogue with the thought of others, as we struggle to write, will make us aware of the loss of our bodies. When we are unaware of what, precisely, we are alienated from, we are deeply afraid. We know something is missing, and the inability to name the missing object terrifies. Questioning and studying help us name that object as the body.

On the one hand questioning and study – that is, the book itself as an exemplary performance of these – are presented as the antidote to the fundamental problem posed in *Between the World and Me*. They quiet the terror of white supremacy as it manifests in bodily alienation. But Coates also presents another means of quieting that terror, and he does not attempt to reconcile the two. This other salve is paternity. He writes to his son, “I feel the fear most acutely whenever you leave me” (14). The book itself is an exemplary performance of questioning in a quite specific sense: it is questioning directed at future generations, directed from father to son. If only enough knowledge could be accumulated and transmitted to his son, in this public letter, then his son might live happily. Coates is repeating the ambition of his own father, with the “temple” of Africana esoterica in the family basement, transmitting wisdom from father (and father’s fathers) to son. It turns out that the antagonist, that force inserting itself between Coates and the world, is really a displacement from that which inserts itself between Coates and his son. If only he could be the perfect father, transmitting himself wholly to his son, making his son into himself – then they could live without fear, in post-racial bliss (recall how Coates positions paternity outside of race).

Hope and Optimism

Optimism is one of the targets of *Between the World and Me*. Coates labels it the Dream, and he labels optimists Dreamers. They believe that America is a land for all, blessed by God, moving steadily in the right direction, toward inclusivity, mutual respect, and all around happiness. But Coates does not distinguish between hope and optimism; he uses the concepts interchangeably, and interchangeably with the Dream.⁸ Coates laments “all the people out there

⁸ For an account of the distinction, see Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics* (New York: Norton, 1991).

... reveling in a specious hope,” by which he means the Dream, the belief that the nation is moving inevitably in the right direction (10).

Coates frames his ability to distance himself from the Dream, from normative American optimism, as a product of his atheist upbringing. Americans closely identify their nation and (the Judeo-Christian) God, he asserts, and with this conflation comes the sense of inevitable progress. Even though many Black Americans buy into the Dream, the marginalization of Blacks provides us Blacks with the perspective necessary to demystify the Dream. “America understands itself as God’s handiwork, but the black body is the clearest evidence that America is the work of me” (12). With this demystification, the myth of progress shatters; the nation is morally ambivalent, and it could become better or worse. Throughout the nation’s history, many Americans have conducted themselves very badly, as has the nation as a whole. Coates’s own view, growing out of his father’s atheism, is decidedly less rosy than the Dream: “My understanding of the universe was physical, and its moral arc bent toward chaos then concluded in a box” (28). Coates the secularist sees no order in the universe beyond the physical world, sees the lower instincts of human beings, and concludes that the status quo (white supremacy) will persist or be exacerbated. In his youth, the streets of Coates’s Baltimore neighborhood were chaotic; the only way to manage the violence was to form neighborhood gangs and to understand the gang codes that were enforced with violence. The nation, situated against the backdrop of chaos, is run by a white supremacist gang with its own codes, similarly enforced by violence. There is no reason to believe that racial justice is on the horizon.

But this is because Coates is a secularist – not just without religion but dogmatically excluding that which is beyond the “physical.” In doing so, in his rejection of his grandfather’s Christianity, he is replicating that piety, displaced onto paternity. In the face of worldly chaos,

the only place to turn for comfort and security is the father and the son. The only hope in *Between the World and Me* is implicit: it is hope for the son, hope that the son will join in the revel of questioning and study. But this is a secularized theological hope. It is a hope for a future beyond the world, but it is, in its secularization, tied to the world – with the blood that joins father and son.

Coates declares, “The Dream is the enemy of all art” (50). This statement seems quite clearly true when the Dream is understood as optimism. If art at its best expresses imperfectly that which cannot be reduced to worldly terms, then allowing one’s horizon to be set by worldly terms – the Dream – cripples artistic possibility. For Coates, the alternative to the Dream is nihilism: brief life in a physical, value-free world, then death. But this does not bode well for art. All it can do is wallow in, or play with, the options on the table, endlessly repeating new configurations of what has already been done. Art loses its relationship to beauty, and thus to hope. Coates’s own prose reflects this: he is a good stylist and a thoughtful writer, but his ideas are essentially those of others, reworked. He aspires to greatness, and his prose is often well-disciplined, but discipline alone is not enough to reach toward beauty. Coates is shackled to the world: in his first book, to his father; in his second, to his son.

This is the reason for Coates’s pessimism. He presents it as a product of his atheism coupled with the fact of white supremacy, but in fact it is a product of his displaced theology. The horizon of hope is limited by consanguinity, and against the background of white supremacy that leaves little room for Black hope. On the one hand, Coates is quite aware of the connection between paternity and divinity that he represents, and he is wary of it. He writes in *The Beautiful Struggle* that “fatherhood was dictatorship [and] its subjects were at the mercy of a tyrannical God” (206). But Coates’s solution when he becomes a father himself is to act as a better father, a

more loving father. Switching from a wrathful god-father to a loving god-father does not address the more fundamental problem, namely, the identification of paternity and divinity. Coates substitutes love for hope and showers it on his son. He does not see this as motivated by hope for his son because he so thoroughly identifies with his son. It is they together against the morally vacuous world. They will question together, study together, be as human as they can be together, but the world will still be against them, as it is against all Black Americans.

What is lacking from Coates's narrative, because of his excessive focus on paternity, is a concern for sociality – and particularly for sociality as a site for hope. As Coates freely admits, the excessive focus by Blacks on paternity is a productive of white supremacy's foreclosure of the possibility of Black paternity. But why not embrace the other varied responses to this foreclosure? Why not embrace the aesthetic as an alternative mode of inter-generational transmission, or kinship structures that refuse the bounds of legality and heteronormativity? Again turning to theological resources cut off by Coates, why only imagine the body of Christ crucified two millennia ago as the model for sonship and not the body of Christ continually, globally circulating in the Eucharist, or the body of Christ institutionalized in the church? Why figure familial relations as only modeling those of Father or Son and not Spirit, as has so often and so creatively been done in Black religious communities?⁹ Finally, instead of secularizing the resurrection into the birth of a biological son, why not appreciate the queer temporalities of Christian eschatology, creating openings for hope not circumscribed by the dimensions of the world?

⁹ See, for example, Ashon Crawley, *Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017).