

Afro-Pessimism and Christian Hope

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In a world of violence and suffering, it is hard enough to have faith. It is hard enough to believe, without evidence provided by the world, that there is a God who is good, who assures peace. Yet Christians are called not only to have faith but also to have hope. In other words, Christians are to be committed to a vision of the future in which goodness prevails, a time when violence and suffering end. This vision produces an uncannily bright disposition, a disposition discordant with the violence and suffering that surrounds. Christians are called to do more than endure or persevere in a world of wretchedness. They are called to thrive, to have a radiance guaranteed by the eternal happiness they know is to come – to have a radiance that itself participates in that happiness.

Hope is the definitive experience of the Christian: more definitive, we might even say, than prayer or creed or sacrament (in a sense, it is all three). It is Christianity in practice, lived, embodied. Adversity allows for Christian hope to be made visible. In comfortable circumstances, Christian hope and worldly hope are difficult to distinguish. But in the face of adversity, sustained adversity, worldly hope retreats. After all, worldly hope is really optimism, a disposition enabled and sustained by worldly circumstances.¹ Optimism is a precarious individual disposition; Christian hope is a virtue entailing affect that circulates, that swirls amidst

¹ On the distinction between hope and optimism, see Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics* (New York: Norton, 1991).

the Body of Christ. Comfortable circumstances bring with them the performance of optimism: this is part of the spirit of late capitalism, a Christian simulacrum. There will be more, or better, or cleaner, or smarter. In these comfortable circumstances, we will inevitably be disappointed, but we will inevitably find a new site to imagine more, better, cleaner, smarter: what Lauren Berlant has called “cruel optimism.”² In deep adversity, away from the comforts of the consumer class, the hollowness of such optimistic performance becomes unsustainable. If there is any hope left, it is theological.

To put it strongly, Christian hope is normative for theology, and we can see Christian hope most clearly among the wretched of the earth: the martyrs and the colonized, the saints and the paupers. Blackness names one category of wretchedness, and it names wretchedness as such. In what follows, I will explore the possibilities and perils of Blackness as a site for theological reflection on hope. By tracking the dialectics of Black theological development, there are vital lessons to be learned about Christian hope – and so lessons to be learned for Christian theology as such. Secular theorists have also grappled with hope in the most dire circumstances, but I conclude that it is in the thought of Edward Schillebeeckx that Black theology can find especially productive resources for reflecting on hope in the face of deep racism.

Black Theology

Hope has been a remarkably consistent feature of Black Christianity, and hope has often been a topic of Black theological reflection. However, recent work on Black theology has focused particularly on the apparent hopelessness of the Black condition, leaving an open question what role hope may play as Black theology continues to develop. Before examining

² Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

these recent developments, it is useful to review the historical trajectory of Black theology. There have been three generations of Black theologians, by which I mean theologians who have explicitly taken Blackness as a key concept in their theological reflection. It is important to remember that Blackness, as a category, and Black theology, as a project, emerged at the same time, in the late 1960s, in the United States. The shift from “Negro” to “Black” at this time was a political shift, an effort to reject a name that a group had been given by their oppressors and to name itself, with pride. In this atmosphere Black theology meant doing theology that, at least in principle, rejected white idioms and named God in Blacks’ own language, as it were. This is the project of Black theology, but this was only part of the project of the first generation of Black theologians. For them, as for the secular proponents of Black power, Blackness was more than an identity in need of affirmation. Blackness was a privileged mode of existence.

To understand this claim, and to understand how it is theologically plausible, the claim can be reframed: Christ identifies with the “least of these,” so theology should start with reflection on the experiences of the “least of these.” Or, more strongly, the religious insights of the “least of these” are authoritative for theology because they represent those through whom we can hear God speaking the most clearly today. In Matthew 25, Christ labels “the least of these” the hungry, the stranger, the naked, the ill, and the prisoner. The first generation of Black theologians argued that “the least of these” today are Blacks (often with an expansive sense of the African diaspora). The word “Black,” then, took on two senses at once: it named a specific group of individuals experiencing oppression and it named the oppressed as such.³ Black theology is not just theology in a Black idiom but a uniquely insightful mode of theology. If

³ See Vincent Lloyd, “Paradox and Tradition in Black Theology,” *Black Theology: An International Journal* 9:3 (2011), 265-286.

Christians want to learn about how to speak rightly about Christ, the Church, liturgy, hell, or hope, they should listen to Black theologians – or so this first generation claimed. This is what James Cone meant when he wrote that Blackness refers both to an “ontological symbol” and to a “visible reality.”⁴ Black theology attends to the Christian faith of those with dark skin but it also speaks to Christian faith as such since, when Blackness is understood as an “ontological symbol,” it is obvious that God is Black.

What insights does this first generation of Black theologians offer regarding hope? To learn about the theological meaning of hope, we are to turn to the experiences of Blacks – to slavery, segregation, colonialism, and racial violence. In such dire circumstances, Blacks produced stories and songs that expressed faith and hope.⁵ This was not just belief in an other-worldly God and a commitment to endure worldly travails – that would be faith without hope. The stories and songs of Blacks expressed a belief in better things to come both in the next world and in this world as well as a belief that these worldly and other-worldly futures are connected but not identical. Representative of this heritage is the North Star, featured frequently in Black stories and songs. It represents both the heavens, a world beyond the miseries of the present, and the Northern states and Canada, viewed as a place of safety for those in the Southern states. There is hope in the future, and this future is both other-worldly and this-worldly. Faith in God and other-worldly hope fuel this-worldly hope. Indeed, the heavens quite literally offer a practical route to a better future in this world: by “reading” the heavens rightly, by locating the North Star and following it, racial violence can be escaped. Similarly, the famous slave spiritual

⁴ James Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1970), 7.

⁵ See, for example, James H. Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation* (New York: Seabury Press, 1972); Arthur C. Jones, *Wade in the Water: The Wisdom of the Spirituals* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993).

“Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” includes the line “Steal away to Jesus,” commonly understood to refer to escape from slavery in addition to its more obvious, religious meaning. The spiritual “Canaan” likewise includes the equivocal lines “Run to Jesus – shun the danger” and “I am bound for the land of Canaan.”

While the hope expressed in slave stories and songs can certainly be inspirational, what seems most useful for theological reflection is the clarity such expressions can bring regarding the relationship between this-worldly hope and other-worldly hope. It is tempting to understand the other-worldly hope expressed as exoteric and the this-worldly hope expressed as esoteric, protected from broader view because of the looming threat of racial violence. In other words, it is tempting to dismiss the religious language of Black stories and songs as simply expressing secular concerns – and expressing secular hope. But this quick dismissal reflects a misunderstanding about hope, a reduction of hope itself to either a plan for the future or an improbable but fantasized future. Neither view captures hope as a disposition or virtue, hope as a typical way of responding to dire circumstances, without despair. Such a virtue necessarily finds expression in concrete, worldly terms: desires for *this* and *that*, obtainable through *these* channels. But such a virtue is not exhausted by such expressions - just as Blackness may be a concrete, worldly expression of the “least of these” even though the experiences of Blacks do not offer an exhaustive account of who God is. In the songs and stories of slaves, the irreducible equivocation between the this-worldly and the other-worldly is a pointed marker of hope’s irreducibility to specific desires or fantasies. Indeed, this is another marker of the paradox at the heart of Christianity: the divine and the human together yet distinct, the supernatural inhering in the natural. It is tempting to forget this essential paradox when discussing hope, a concept that

seems at first so unequivocal, but Black theology reminds us that hope, to be Christian, must contain paradox within it.

Yet this is only the first moment in the development of Black theology, and tracking the dialectical development of Black theology will offer further insights into our understanding of hope. The initial development of Black theology was precarious for two reasons. First, the world is in motion. Once one group in particular is identified with the “least of these,” what happens when circumstances change and that group no longer counts, empirically, as “least”? What happens when slavery ends, when colonialism ends, when *de jure* segregation ends? Or, what happens when new forms of oppression take aim at a similar, but not exactly the same, community as had previously suffered deep oppression? Once a theological endeavor takes hold and becomes institutionalized in the academy, and the church, it reproduces itself rather than responding to dynamic conditions on the ground. In other words, a theology built on any particular “least of these” has a tendency to lag behind the actual experiences of worldly suffering and so has a tendency to say things about God that are systematically amiss. The second problem faced by initial endeavors in Black theology was that choosing any particular name for the “least of these” elides the internal differences and complications within the group to which that name refers. A growing scholarly literature on multiple marginalization and intersectionality points to the way that, for example, treating the experiences of Black women simply under the heading of Black experience significantly misrepresents Black women’s experiences and could even amplify the violence of white patriarchy. In short, naming Blacks as the “least of these” is a blunt instrument that can itself do violence; more nuance is necessary to describe the world and its ills as they really are.

These concerns with the initial thrust of Black theology spawned a second wave of Black theologians who saw the project of Black theology as one among many forms of contextual theology, all important and all interlinked. While this might be called a second generation of Black theology, even the most recognizable figure from the first generation, James Cone, began to re-describe Black theology as simply explicating the Christian faith of the Black community. Among the consequences of this shift was a change in emphasis from politics to culture, from struggle against oppression to embrace of African American history and values. Through the late 1970s and 1980s, and beyond, theologians explicated the Christianity of Black women, immigrants, queers, and multiracial individuals, among others. Each of these groups was also marginalized, and also resilient. Myriad differences – a rainbow of differences – no longer had to be subsumed under monolithic labels like Blackness. Indeed, everyone qualifies, in some way, as part of a group that has been among the “least of these,” and these aspects of ourselves that we can now learn to embrace. Each community speaks of hope in its own way, based on its own history, its own struggles, its own insights – literally or figuratively, in its own language. Black theologians are some among the many voices that can enrich our conversation about hope, or so this second wave of Black theologians suggested.

Afro-Pessimism

Over the past decade, several currents in Black studies have been consolidated under the name “Afro-pessimism.”⁶ These currents have been both theological and secular; they have also challenged the division between the theological and the secular. They have been consolidated by

⁶ Frank Wilderson coined the term and offers a powerful, synthetic account of the issues involved in the introduction to his *Red, White, and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

Black studies scholars, and their consolidation has given new justification to the existence of Black studies departments: Afro-pessimism names a complex, global problem that can be addressed with many disciplinary methodologies but, most essentially, it is a problem that has to do with Blackness. In other words, Black studies does not have to justify its existence modeling itself on other ethnic studies models, on Latino or Asian-American or Native American studies. Afro-pessimism is now inflecting the work of Black theologians, pushing the conversation in Black theology beyond the contextual focus of the second wave. Afro-pessimism promises to renew the importance, authority, and intellectual ferment of Black theology as it has for Black studies.

What is Afro-pessimism? Bringing together elements of the thought of Franz Fanon, Sylvia Wynter, Hortense Spillers, and Achille Mbembe, among others, Afro-pessimism makes four basic claims. First, Blackness is not like other differences. It is not like other racial or ethnic differences nor is it like the differences of gender, sexuality, or disability. Second, Blackness does not assimilate and fade away. Integration, at least as conventionally understood, is impossible. Third, Blackness is an ontological condition. It names the condition faced by a person for whom the very possibility of being is foreclosed. Fourth and finally, Blackness is woven deeply into the fabric of Western metaphysics. In other words, the oppression of Blacks may be an empirical condition, but it is also much deeper, and so addressing that oppression requires much more than reducing present suffering. Altogether, Afro-pessimism is so labelled because it points to the depth and gravity of Black oppression, and it suggests that the many efforts at ameliorating that oppression over the years, and decades, have been in vain.

The claims of Afro-pessimism are supported by appeals to empirical evidence, by accounts of the history of Western thought, and, in some cases, by theological engagement.

Empirically, Afro-pessimists point to data showing how, for example, the end of de jure segregation did not improve the conditions of Blacks in the United States (or how the end of colonialism did not improve the conditions of Blacks in Africa). They point to continuities between the treatment of Blacks during slavery, during segregation, and today, in what has been dubbed the era of mass incarceration. The cultural currency of such arguments has increased dramatically in recent years as police brutality and racial violence have again caught the attention of the American public: Trayvon Martin, Ferguson, stop-and-frisk. Yet the hard numbers have been there for any to see for years. There is a one in three chance that a Black boy will go to jail, the percentage of Black children in segregated schools has stayed around seventy-five for the last fifty years, and the average wealth of Black households stands at around \$6,000 compared to around \$110,000 for white households. There are similarly stark empirical differences when comparing Blacks to other minority ethnic groups within the United States that show significantly greater signs of upward mobility, and when comparing Africa to other “developing” regions. The severity and apparent permanence of these many disparities motivates Afro-pessimists to posit deep roots for Black oppression.

Those deep roots of anti-Blackness are located, by many Afro-pessimists, in the history of Western thought. From a secular perspective, Enlightenment thinkers including David Hume, Immanuel Kant, and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel all held deeply negative views of Blacks.⁷ Even when these views are ostensibly distinct from philosophical writings, Afro-pessimists argue that racism still infects the philosophical ideas that have come to dominate the West. Ideas that ostensibly proclaimed liberty also ensured servitude for Blacks. In the theological register, Afro-

⁷ See, for example, Emmanuel Eze (ed.), *Race and the Enlightenment: A Reader* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1997)

pessimists argue that Christian anti-Judaism continued in a new guise with anti-Black racism.⁸ Explicitly or implicitly supersessionist theology, even when it has little to say about Blacks, functions to authorize racial violence. To combat anti-Blackness, Afro-pessimists seek to reconfigure the philosophical or theological tradition in a way that affirms all humanity, not just white, European “man.”⁹ Until that task is complete, until the very structures of thought that shape our world are revamped, the dire empirical conditions that face Blacks will persist, no matter how much effort goes into racial reconciliation and “reform.”

Black theologians indebted to Afro-pessimist thought are unsatisfied with the felicitous diversity embraced by their second wave predecessors. Put starkly, framing theology in terms of the rhetoric, really the ideology, of diversity seems troublingly untheological. Not only is it untheological, it apparently buys into neoliberalism’s characteristic style of identity management: identities are choices, desires, never fixed or mandatory, always fluid, always subordinate to the individual free agent. Cultural specificities add richness to life – tasty food and music, curious customs and gregarious neighbors – but they never bring with them normativity. Further, and even more theologically troubling, the ideology of multiculturalism goes hand in hand with the ideology of secularism: religion (“religious identity”) is managed by the same mechanisms as race (“racial identity”), both allowed as entertainment, forbidden as anything more.¹⁰ Second wave Black theologians took their task to be explicating the Christianity of a

⁸ J. Kameron Carter, *Race: A Theological Account* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

⁹ Sylvia Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation – An Argument,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3:3 (2003): 257-337.

¹⁰ See Vincent Lloyd, “Introduction: Managing Race, Managing Religion” in Jonathon Kahn and Vincent Lloyd (eds.), *Race and Secularism in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, forthcoming).

community, but is this not, ultimately, a form of diversity *divertissement*? And is not theology, after all, supposed to be about God, not about humans?

The third wave of Black theology is not simply a return to the first wave. While both agree on the privileged, authoritative place of Black experience in the theological enterprise, for the first wave this role is contingent while for the second wave this role is necessary. Anti-Blackness, as a continuation of supersessionism, is the paradigmatic heresy, not just one more manifestation of marginalization. Put another way, if the first wave of Black theology was political and the second wave was cultural, the third wave is metaphysical, though the metaphysics at stake have clear and powerful political implications. The turn to culture, from the perspective of the third wave, is premature, for Black cultural production, like Black sociality, is always born out of pathology and, in its substance, offers no hope for redemption. At most, Black culture offers reminders that white, or colorblind, hegemonic culture is incomplete and unsatisfying.¹¹

What can Afro-pessimism and third wave Black theology teach us about hope? Unlike the first and second waves of Black theology, the third wave has remained relatively silent on hope. Whether or not the claims of Afro-pessimism are ultimately correct – thinking through the complications of race in a context like Europe, or thinking through the persistent nexus of Islamophobia and race, does urge caution - it is a sufficiently plausible theory to pose a dramatic problem for how we understand hope, perhaps accounting for the silence of recent Black theological writing on the topic. The depth of the challenge posed by Afro-pessimism suggests that this is an especially productive site for theological reflection. The Afro-pessimist bottom line

¹¹ On this issue, see especially Fred Moten, “Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh),” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 112:4 (2013): 737-780.

is that hope for improvements in the lives of Blacks has been misplaced. Does this mean that the only hope possible is other-worldly, that the earlier Black theological insights about the paradoxical connection between this-worldly and other-worldly hope were misguided? Before turning to further theological reflection on this question, it will be helpful to review how deep pessimism has resulted in novel accounts of hope in recent secular scholarship.

Deep Racism and Secular Hope

Afro-pessimist scholarship itself rarely turns towards practical questions and rarely asks: what are we to do, or how are we to hope?¹² Afro-pessimist scholarship is largely descriptive work, taking political events (lynchings and police shootings, for example) as symptomatic of a deeper, racialized metaphysics. There is, however, a broader scholarly conversation about deep pessimism caused by difference that may be instructive. Scholars of Native American studies, immigration, and queer studies have also explored how these categories of difference are deeply embedded in Western culture, but in some cases they have grappled more explicitly with questions of hope.

Jonathan Lear has identified a virtue he labels “radical hope” in Native American communities facing the elimination of their ways of life.¹³ Focusing on Plenty Coups, the last chief of the Crow, Lear studies a context where the social practices that constituted the Crow world were no longer possible. For example, with lands stolen by the US government and traditional means of resolving conflicts disrupted by firearms, the practice of bravery in battle -

¹² For an exception, concluding that Afro-pessimism must reject hope and embrace nihilism, see Calvin L. Warren, “Black Nihilism and the Politics of Hope,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 15:1 (2015): 215-248.

¹³ Jonathan Lear, *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

which involved face painting by a wife, care for horses, and recounting the victory post-battle, so was woven into Crow life in many ways - was no longer possible. To be a Crow meant to do the social practices of the Crow, but when those social practices are foreclosed, Lear echoes Plenty Coups in concluding that “nothing happened.” Crow continued to live, but with their culture gone it was only the barest form of biological existence. The good life, its meaning culturally determined, could no longer be pursued; practical reasoning went haywire when there were no longer goods to be pursued. However, all was not lost. As Lear tells it, Plenty Coup had a dream (significant because it indicates a break with practical reason) which the chief interpreted to mean that the Crow must acknowledge their traditional way of life was coming to an end, but they also must be committed to the notion that the Crow will survive and new social practices and new goods will come about, even if it is impossible to know what they are or how they will come about now. This radical hope rejected as futile practical reasoning, self-destruction, and fantasy. Soberly assessing the world as it is, radical hope persists in acting as if a wholly new world is possible – and so exercises the virtues of adaptability and perceptiveness. Yet radical hope only works, Lear argues, because of the Crow’s premise that God exists and is good.

Might radical hope offer a way for Black theology to respond to the problem of Afro-pessimism? There are clear similarities between the cultural devastation faced by the Native American community Lear studies and the cultural devastation wrought on Blacks through, among other things, the slave trade and the prison system. Unlike the Crow, Black cultural devastation was not a one-off event but, according to the Afro-pessimist critique, is an ongoing process inherent in Euro-American culture itself, continually grinding away at the social practices of Blacks. Or, put another way, the continual pressures on Black individuals and communities tend not simply to take away social practices but to corrupt them, changing them at

times from incubators of virtue to incubators of vice (one thinks of the corporate appropriation of Black music or the performance of Black respectability necessary for success in the white business world). Lear's account of radical hope depends on a robust culture that once, in the not-too-distant past, existed to fuel hope for the future (this past is the source of the chickadee, the symbol of hope in Plenty Coups' dream, along with the Crow view of God and the crucial practice of dream interpretation). The Afro-pessimist charges that Western anti-Blackness is so deep-seeded that there was never a robust culture from which such a radical hope could flow; even if there was, the centuries of fruitless hope and embattled community would surely lead to the collapse of the virtue.

Another approach to deep racism found in recent secular scholarship is to reject hope altogether. Such approaches propose two different sorts of alternatives: an embrace of grief or an embrace of the present. Anne Cheng's *The Melancholy of Race* exemplifies the former approach.¹⁴ She agrees that racialization has an enormous, persistent impact – in the context of her study, on African Americans and Asian Americans. She agrees that race shapes the ideological foundations of the West. On her view, the usual response to racism, articulating grievances and pressing for them to be addressed, does not adequately address the depths of the problem; indeed, it masks those depths. By formulating a list of grievances and putting one's hopes in the possibility that they will be rectified, the racialized subject imagines that she will achieve equality and dignity. Then, she will be just like everyone else: the world will be post-racial. Cheng argues that grievances obscure grief, the deeper process that afflicts the psyche of racialized subjects who know they will never be “normal” – and grief distorts the psyche of

¹⁴ Anne Anlin Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

white subjects as well since white identity is constituted in relation to the racialized other. In the face of deep pessimism, the proper response, on this view, is to look beyond the specific grievances (and hopes) of a racial minority and instead explore the varied ways that the wound of racism sabotages the affective economy of that minority. Acknowledging and interrogating rather than rejecting grief – racial melancholia – is the only way to see the world rightly and so is the prerequisite for any properly directed social or political action.

Cheng's response to deep racial pessimism is decidedly secular and decidedly individualist. Her critique of grievance, which could be read as a critique of hope directed at specific objects or as desire for specific goals masked as hope, is in a sense of critique of idolatry, but her response to idolatry is to reject transcendence altogether in favor of the folds and wrinkles of immanence – of our affective economies. But what if we consider grievances not as ends in themselves but as instrumentally used in collective (anti-racist) struggle? Might the process of collective struggle, and not any particular goal, provide a means of healing psyches damaged by racism? Tracking and probing this damage seems less important than commending the forms of collective practice and community organizing that could cultivate the virtues which serve as a buffer against disabling grief. Indeed, this is a point made forcefully by the first and second generations of Black theologians: Black communities are essentially communities of struggle and, as such, shape character in a way that holds off despair.

Like Cheng, Lee Edelman rejects hope and acknowledges the radical exclusions faced by minority communities.¹⁵ Edelman is particularly concerned with queer men, and for him queer identity is fundamentally opposed to any future orientation – and so to any hope. The normative,

¹⁵ Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

heterosexual world is concerned with the future because it is concerned with reproduction: individuals with reproducing themselves through their children and societies with reproducing themselves from generation to generation. The figure of the child is sanctified, according to Edelman, because she or he represents this reproduction of the way things are. Yet queers, as incapable of reproduction, are excluded from this heteronormative way of seeing the world. Indeed, queers disrupt the smooth reproduction of the ways of the world – and, Edelman contends, they ought to embrace this role. They ought to embrace pleasure in the moment rather than pleasure deferred to the next generation; they will not suffer now so that a child can have a better life. In short, queers are a minority structurally excluded from Western metaphysics, and the proper response for the minority is to happily embrace hopelessness along with all temporality other than the *now*.

Edelman helpfully demonstrates the way that interest in the future is closely tied to self-interest and to the powers that be in the present. He also helpfully demonstrates the way that minority groups whose exclusion is fundamental to regnant ideology can potentially short-circuit that ideology by refusing to participate in normative future-directed practices. Indeed, there is at times a messianic tone to Edelman's project, finding the fullness of time in the present moment. Yet the heart of Edelman's project is an extension of Cheng's, an extension from the critique of idolatry to the critique of ideology. Where Cheng took issue with specific hopes, Edelman presents himself as taking issue with hope as such – but in fact he is taking issue with hope motivated by present social structures and institutions. In other words, Edelman is warning against an embrace of hope that is really not about the wholly new, hope that advances the interests of the old with the rhetoric of the wholly new. For Edelman, as for Cheng, the only alternative is making ourselves into gods: an even deeper form of idolatry (an even subtler rouse

of ideology). Black theologians grappling with Afro-pessimism can learn much from these secular efforts and their sharp critical perspectives, but Black theologians also bring to the problem of racism a view of hope directed towards a God who is irreducible to worldly terms or desires.

God the Future of Blacks

The quick and easy response of Black theologians to Afro-pessimism is to simply present Christ as the solution. In the Afro-pessimist framework, Black being is an oxymoron: Blackness has no being, is defined by its exclusion from being. Christ raises the dead, turning non-being into being, flesh defined by death into flesh defined by life. Participation in Christ means participation in His resurrection: denying the world's denial of being. Such a stance does not take the form of overcoming Blackness, of becoming white. That Blackness is defined by death does not mean that whiteness is defined by life. To the contrary, whiteness hubristically claims life, being, on its own – whiteness claims ontology without theology and that is idolatry. Blackness is not outside of being but paradoxically inside and outside at once, being that is not counted as being, that thus disturbs the regime that would define being. J. Kameron Carter, working along these lines, labels Blackness “paraontological.”¹⁶

Concealing the being of the slave, or the prisoner, or the native, takes much ideological work, for the principle of Black non-being must overcome the stubbornness of lived reality. Blackness points to the precariousness of ontology, reminds that the present order of being is not natural, not universal. Blackness essentially destabilizes the order of things, so the resurrection of

¹⁶ J. Kameron Carter, “Paratheological Blackness,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 112:4 (2013): 589-611, though my formulation here differs somewhat from his.

Black being is not the assimilation of Blackness into the order of things, into whiteness, but rather is triumph of the theological over the ontological. What does this mean concretely? The resurrection of Black being means Black agency: Black writing, Black art, Black rhetoric, Black creativity that is unexpected, unauthorized, and, from the perspective of the white world, often unintelligible. The slave writes, the prisoner paints, or the native imagines. The objects of these verbs, these acts, need not be God – indeed cannot be God, for that would be idolatry. Independent of their object, these verbs represent participation in God because they represent the resurrection of non-being into being, Blackness triumphant, Christ triumphant.

This account of Black theology responsive to Afro-pessimism is appealing but ultimately deeply flawed. It suffers from individualism, a profoundly secular ailment – the ailment that defines the secular. The creativity and strength of the Black man (for such creative agency is gendered) will save the world from itself. In this theology there is no space for community, for love, or, crucially, for hope. There are no virtues of Blackness developed in community, just the act of individual rebellion against the powers that be. And there is no vision of a future world transformed, just a set of disconnected Black men doing art in their attics, as it were. The Black theologian inclined to such a view may respond that “church” would consist of the informal networks created among these, what Fred Moten calls the “undercommons.”¹⁷ But such networks seem a far cry from communities of virtue that could nurture, sustain, and properly order the Black rebellious spirit. Indeed, such a theological perspective suffers from an extreme Christocentrism, the theological vice corresponding to the secular vice of individualism. Christ

¹⁷ Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (Wivenhoe: Minor Compositions, 2013).

cleaved from God and Spirit defines all value; indeed, what matters on this account is not even a Christ who loves or suffers but exclusively a Christ who is risen.

What is needed is a Black theology responsive to Afro-pessimism but also concerned with the social world, with love, and with justice. The theological reflections of Edward Schillebeeckx offer a useful if unexpected resource to accomplish this task. Of Schillebeeckx's extensive, learned corpus, I will focus exclusively on one essay, "The New Image of God, Secularization and Man's Future on Earth," the final chapter of *God the Future of Man*.¹⁸ This is a particularly important essay, consolidating much of Schillebeeckx's thought and clearly developing the themes that are central to much of his writing over the decades before and after. In this essay, Schillebeeckx makes three key points. First, he offers a new way to think about secularization. Christians, instead of lamenting declining church membership rolls, should see secularization as part of a re-orientation away from the past and towards the future. Science and technology hold new possibilities while changing social arrangements create new ways of living. Life no longer consists of repeating the past or interpreting the past for lessons on the present. Instead of looking backwards we now look forwards. To determine what ought to be done now we look less to what has always been done than to what might eventually be done. We act on our hopes instead of on our memories.

Schillebeeckx's second point is that God is, as his book's title suggests, our future. Where the Christian tradition has embraced the slogan that God is the first and the last, the emphasis has too often been on the first, *in the beginning*, according to Schillebeeckx. Shifting this emphasis, Schillebeeckx encourages us to think of God as the "wholly New," that which is to come, and he encourages us to think of Christ as demonstrating that we ourselves can

¹⁸ Edward Schillebeeckx, *God the Future of Man* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1968).

participate in God by creating anew, leaving behind the sin of our past. For Schillebeeckx, God is the future not of any individual but of humanity collectively: *our* future. Given this second point, Schillebeeckx is able to view modernization and secularization cheerfully. Instead of mourning a decline in religiosity, Schillebeeckx sees secularization bringing with it a better religiosity, one based on a more correct understanding of God. Secularization strips away old idols that tied Christianity to this world, that made God an object of this world, determined by history. The shift in human orientation towards the future that happens with secularization is a shift in orientation towards God.

The problem with an orientation towards the future is that humans find themselves unmoored from norms of the past – so it would seem as though anything goes. It is clear how to look backwards for normativity, to judge based on what has been done before, but it is not clear what it would mean to look forwards for normativity. If God is the future of humankind, must this be a God without standards or morality? Schillebeeckx's third point in "The New Image of God" is meant to address this worry: "The Christian inspiration in socio-economic and political life is therefore directed, by its 'critical negativity,' against every image of man whose lines are strictly drawn or which presents itself as a positive and total definition and against the illusory expectation that science and technology are capable of solving the ultimate problems of man's existence."¹⁹ In short, Schillebeeckx embraces negative theology, or theology as the critique of idolatry (and ideology). The future must remain unnameable. If it is named, as so often happens when humans are oriented towards the future, this must be criticized by theology for so naming ascribes a worldly identity to the divine. Christian hope is distinguished from secular optimism because the former refuses to be sated with any object or concept. Secularization's reorientation

¹⁹ Schillebeeckx, *God the Future of Man*, 193-4.

of humans towards the future can be a proper orientation towards God or it can be another form of idolatry, like the orientation to the past. Schillebeeckx's third point, about negative theology, is necessary to render judgment on whether this future orientation is properly theological. Such judgment is rendered in a community that keeps alive the vision of God as wholly New: in church.

Might we think of Black experience as involving a form of secularization? Might the experiences of slavery, segregation, imprisonment, and genocide offer the possibility of shifting Black orientation from the past to the future? Where the social transformations accompanying modernity severed the normative force of the past for whites, the normative force of the past was severed much more directly for Blacks: through violent displacement, incarceration, and death. Mothers and fathers, grandmothers and grandfathers, were taken away – are being taken away. One response is a nostalgic turn backwards to an impossible past: fantasy images of Africa, newly created rituals to remember “the ancestors,” and, at the intellectual level, a fixation on the experience of slavery as overdetermining Black experience.²⁰ Another response is to hope. Here hope means an orientation towards the future, necessitated by the inaccessibility of the past. When God is understood as wholly New, as God is for Schillebeeckx, experience can be said to orient Blacks towards God. Moreover, Schillebeeckx offers “critical negativity,” nurtured in loving community, as a tool to determine when this orientation goes wrong. On this view, Black theology is essentially negative theology on the conceptual level; on the level of practice, it embraces the theological virtues. Moreover, the sudden, severe breaks with the past experienced by Blacks suggest that, for Schillebeeckx, Black theology ought to be paradigmatic for all

²⁰ Stephen Best, “On Failing to Make the Past Present,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 73:3 (2012): 453-474.

theology: it offers a much more intense version of the gradual reorientation from backwards-looking to forwards-looking that Schillebeeckx identifies and commends in European modernity.

This Schillebeeckxian reading of Black theology is responsive to the worries of Afro-pessimism because it takes as its starting point that the denial of Black being is deeply entwined with the metaphysics of the West. This is the mechanism, in the realm of ideas, resulting in the violence, in the realm of practice, that severs Blacks from the past. A missing father can be found; an impossible father is irretrievable – resulting in melancholy, or in an orientation towards the future.²¹ The foreclosure of Black being is not just about police stops and incarceration rates, where humans are treated as non-human. Those practices are authorized by a metaphysics: that is the Afro-pessimist insight. According to such metaphysics, Blacks have no history; they are excluded from the unfolding of being through world history. Black community, and particularly Black religious community, church, gathers individuals who cannot be oriented towards the past and negotiates an orientation towards the future – towards God. That community is founded on the memory and real presence of Christ: the possibility for Black being to be resurrected. Christ offers the foundational norm for that community, a model of how death can become life and a model of how false hopes (in objects, in law, in self) are to be quashed. Together, as community, as Body of Christ, the Black church negotiates proper orientation towards the future – and so properly worships God.

Unlike the first generation of Black theology, this Schillebeeckxian inflection of Black theology accounts for the depths of anti-Blackness in the West. Unlike the second generation of

²¹ See also Vincent Lloyd, “From the Theopaternal to the Theopolitical: On Barack Obama” in *Common Good(s): Economy, Ecology, and Political Theology* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015) and idem, “Of Fathers and Sons, Prophets and Messiahs,” *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society* 16:3-4 (2014): 209-226.

Black theology, this Schillebeeckxian approach does not take culture or community as an end point. They do not provide the norms for Black theology; Christ does. But culture and community, for those forcibly detached from their past, provide a way to maintain proper orientation towards the future – to hope rightly. Like the secular theories of deep racism discussed above, the approach outlined here acknowledges how problematic hope is for those enduring intractable wretchedness, but unlike the secular theories theological hope can now be cleaved from idolatrous hope. But is this Schillebeeckxian inflection of Black theology at all political or is the hope it commends simply a religious ethical practice? The critique of idolatry and ideology is always political, and such critique is, first and foremost, the task commended by this account. This critique goes hand in hand with hope. It is a critique of those who would turn police into gods, prisons into hell, and settlers into saviors. The virtue of hope is political because it entails such critique, but it also fuels the activity of communities oriented towards the future, committed to building new practices and institutions together. It is not for theology to specify in advance what those practices and institutions will be – that would be idolatry. The task, rather, is to clear the intellectual space necessary for this essential, life-giving work to be sustained.