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The Politics of Theology, Critique, and the Errant Ethics of Blackness

Joseph Winters

Departments of Religious Studies and African and African American Studies, Duke University, Durham, NC, USA

At first glance, the term "political theology" presents a juxtaposition that invites one to inhabit and think within the space between Christian discourse about God and the art of constituting and governing people. The enterprise of political theology prompts a simultaneous inquiry into the politics of theology, or how theology is invested in securing and/or contesting the ordering of things, and the theology of politics, or how secular liberal regimes are underpinned and organized by theological ideas and rituals. The latter register is epitomized by Carl Schmitt's claim that "all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts."[1] On his reading, the sovereignty of the State is a rearticulation of the absolute power attributed to the Christian God; the state of the exception is analogous to the miracle that breaks with natural patterns. Alongside the Schmittian legacy, there are other trajectories of thought and practice that have pondered, described, and re-imagined the relationship between politics and theology. Here I am thinking of black radical traditions, black literature, slave narratives, and contemporary black studies. Consider for instance Frederick Douglass's description of the plantation as a kind of government or a "little nation of its own … [where] the overseer is generally accuser, judge, jury, advocate, and executioner"[2] and the enslaved are disciplined to treat and fear the master as a "demigod."[3] Similarly think of Harriet Jacobs' description of a preacher who, after the tumult caused by Nat Turner's 1831 insurrection, warns an enslaved congregation they might be able to disobey and deceive the plantation master but the heavenly master always hears, sees, and remembers the transgressions of the slave.[4] In this case, an earthly sovereign figure and the divine sovereign are extensions of each other; the latter reinforces, defends, and perfects the former's drive to mastery, control, and surveillance. For the slave, especially the unruly slave with dreams of rebellion and flight, politics and theology frequently co-participate in the violent containment of black flesh.

But of course there are other, more promising, paths that political theology can take. In the special issue, "Political Theology, Democracy, and Virtue Ethics," the contributors attempt to think within, outside, and around conventional understandings of political theology. These insightful essays bring political theology into conversation with radical

CONTACT Joseph Winters joseph.winters@duke.edu
[1]Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 36.
[2]See Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 64.
[3]Ibid., 45.
[4]See Jacobs, "Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl," 815. Nat Turner would have had a very different understanding of the God that hears and can be heard.

democracy, MacIntyrean commitments to tradition and virtue, racial capitalism, and post-criticism discourse. As Luke Bretherton describes in the introduction to the special issue, these essays explore the prospects of practicing politics in an ethical manner, an endeavor that involves pursuing freedom and justice through consociational struggle and transformative relationships rather than relying on "bureaucratic procedure," vanguard politics, or top-down modes of organizing power. Keri Day's essay advances these overall aims by reading the 1906 Azusa street revival as "offering resources in rethinking the Christian political imagination." For Day, early Pentacostal gatherings and forms of (interracial) intimacy provide us with a non-Statist conception of citizenship and belonging. For Jennifer Herdt, the German Bildung tradition, which influenced WEB Du Bois, encourages a thinking beyond certain binaries, such as tradition vs. critique or individual agency vs. communal formation. Herdt turns to this tradition to ferret out a notion of dialogical humanism as an alternative to the post-human and anti-humanist sentiments in recent academic discourses. Similar to Herdt's essay, Bretherton's contribution thinks at the nexus of virtue ethics and radical democracy by situating MacIntyre's ideas on tradition and character formation against his Marxist commitments, his early writings on Marxism and Christianity, and debates within the British New Left. Jonathan Tran's essay builds off of the insights of Rita Felski's critique of critique and Bretherton's rejection of Manichean ways of approaching social problems (thinking in binaries, dividing the world into sheep and wolves, permitting problems to obscure the broader Christian story) to interrogate the limits of whiteness as a category of analysis. Finally, Vincent Lloyd's article asks us to consider anger as a theological concept, a claim to authority that draws energy from below but gestures toward a world beyond the current order of things. Anger is righteous, even prophetic, as it refuses secular immanence and the modes of domination that organize the world.

There are a cluster of themes and concerns that connect these timely essays. One that stands out is the relationship between critique, or the work of the negative, and positive attachments to practice, tradition, and relationality. Or as Bretherton puts it, "The articles in this Special Issue make a move beyond critique to put forward constructive proposals at the intersection of both ethics and politics and 'apophatic' and 'cataphatic' approaches to political theology." Indebted to authors like Felski, Latour, and Sedgwick, the essays in this contribution are guided by a spirit of construction, creation, and "bearing witness," which surpasses the exclusively iconoclastic impulse in certain strands of critique and critical theory. This aim dovetails with Frantz Fanon's insistence that the human is an affirmation *and* a negation; a yes to life, love, and generosity and a no to contempt and exploitation.[5] But let us linger a bit on the conjunction, the "and" between negation and affirmation, that critique supposedly does not explore. Does the problem with critique, and the emphasis on limit, aporia, contradiction, and disavowal, lie in its inability to affirm something positive and constructive or does the general concern reside in its unwillingness to fall in line with acceptable patterns of affirmation, valorization, and affective attachment? To put it differently, is the issue with those who tarry with the negative (itself an activity and practice) that they are reticent about offering a constructive proposal or is it that they understand (de)-construction in a manner that does not align with eschatological or teleological frameworks? To think with Day's contribution

[5]See Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 197.

and her work more generally, does critique draw us toward the apocalyptic, a break or rupture, without the promise of redemption, making whole, and reparation; or does the apocalyptic need to be balanced by something like an eschatological promise adumbrated by the Cross?[6] Finally, how does the eagerness to bring the errant negative in line with legible traditions and recognizable social practices prevent an exploration of the ethics of negativity – which involves refusal, retreat, periodic alienation, ambivalence, dissonant affects like anger, coherence-dissolving excess, and wounded intimacies?

These questions are meant to introduce a moment of doubt and hesitance regarding the way critique, and the interaction between negation and construction, is generally understood and depicted.[7] I wonder if the Felskian critique of critique (powerfully analyzed in Tran's essay) misses something in strands of thought and practice that are not immediately associated with critical theory. Consider for instance Cedric Robinson's description of the black radical tradition, a tradition that includes WEB Du Bois and CLR James, thinkers/activists that are discussed at various moments in this special issue. According to Robinson,

> Black radicalism is a negation of Western civilization, but not in the direct sense of a simple dialectical negation … [Furthermore] it is a specifically African response to an oppression emergent from the immediate determinants of European development in the modern era and framed by orders of human exploitation woven into the interstices of European social life from the inception of Western civilization.[8]

Here I am not interested in Robinson's sense of the oneness of African culture and consciousness. I am interested in how he thinks of black radical thought as an intervention and interruption with respect to Western civilization and its guiding logics (such as anti-blackness and the accumulation of capital), an interruption that is inseparable from participation in various practices extended across time – marronage, voodoo, communicating with the dead, revolt, abolition, literature, art, etc. Robinson's notion of negation, which is not a simple moment that can be sublated into a civilizing Western movement, is inseparable from the "making" of tradition and endeavors to preserve black being.

In line with this interaction between construction and negation, think of Du Bois's description of the general strike on plantations during the Civil War.[9] In response to historians that depicted the enslaved being rescued by Union soldiers and Marxist scholars who did not consider slaves as a central component of the proletariat, Du Bois underscores how "the yearning for freedom found its climax during the American Civil War where slave increasingly ran away, took up arms against their masters, and intentionally sabotaged and disrupted global cotton production."[10] While this general strike – which is combination of refusal and action, a disruption and a gathering, a concerted stoppage – might appear spontaneous and unorganized, it is important to keep in mind that these strategies of refusal were anticipated and emboldened by a constellation of practices

[6]Here I am thinking about Day's brilliant engagement with Walter Benjamin in her book, *Religious Resistance to NeoLiberalism*. While she appreciates Benjamin's critique of linear notions of time and progress, Day worries that Benjamin places too much emphasis on Divine agency (without human participation) and that his notion of redemption is too final and complete.

[7]I am thankful to conversations with Matt Elia on these matters.

[8]Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 73.

[9]See Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 55–83.

[10]Emerson Mount, "When Slaves Go on Strike."

that the enslaved developed on and at the edge of the plantation field. We might think of bush arbor meetings, unlawful gatherings, conspiracies to escape, revolts against slaveholders, the destruction of property by those reduced to a mode of property, and forms of care, assistance, and protection in the face of overseers, patrols, and slave catchers. Following Saidiya Hartman, I remain mindful that Du Bois's lexicon and his heroic conception of worker agency obscures the sexual and reproductive labor of black women, labor that does not easily fit into his idea of the general strike.[11] Notwithstanding these limitations, I highlight the general strike by the enslaved as both a historical event and an ensemble of practices that entail negation, resistance, flight, and destruction in addition to care, intimacy, and anticipation (of the coming of the Lord).

In response to the special issue's concern about critique and critical theory needing a constructive moment, an affirmative stance, I suggest that further exploring black studies and radical thought might shift and modify our understanding of the conjunction between yes and no, affirmation and negation. Instead of accusing critique of needing to supplement its diagnosis with a reparative moment, we might see the ethics of the negative as itself enabled by what Adorno calls a "consistent sense of [and attachment to] non-identity."[12] Here non-identity stands for that which appears "divergent, dissonant, and negative" according to the inculcated desire for unity and order. The negative is frequently marked by pain, suffering, and woundedness. But an enduring sense of non-identity also draws attention to an immanent more, a kind of lambent excess that signals that things could be otherwise.[13] My sense is that this interplay between the wound and an openness to the otherwise resonates with the pursuits of political theology and radical democracy.

Disclosure statement

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Notes on contributor

Joseph Winters is the Alexander F. Hehmeyer Associate Professor at Duke University in the Departments of Religious Studies and African and African American Studies. His work lies at the intersection of black religious thought, Af-Am literature, and critical theory.

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[11]See Hartman, "The Belly of the World," 166–73.
[12]Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 5.
[13]The language of "lambent" is indebted to Stanley Corngold's work on Kafka. See Corngold, *Lambent Traces*.

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