Chapter One

THINKING THE THEOLOGICAL: A HAUNTING

This world—already our own—is the world of bodies. Because it has, because it is, the very density of spacing, *or the density, intensity, of* a place. . . . *What is coming to us is a dense and serious world, a* world-wide *world, one that doesn't refer to another world, or to an other-world . . .*

Our world has inherited the world of gravity: all bodies weigh on *one another, and* against *one another, heavenly bodies and callous bodies, vitreous bodies and corpuscles. . . . But bodies weigh lightly. Their weight is the raising of their masses to the surface. Unceasingly, mass is raised to the surface; it bubbles up to the surface; mass is thickness, a dense, local consistency.*[1]*—*Jean-Luc Nancy

*You know as well as I do that people who die bad don't stay in the ground.—*Toni Morrison[2]

1. Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus,* trans. Richard A. Rand (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008 [French, 2003]), 93.
2. Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Knopf, 1987), 188.

This book's discernment of the theological as a dimension of agonistic political thought and practice, and as unfolding especially in the prodigious force of artful images deployed in practice, is a discernment that is backgrounded, conceptually, by the conjoining of two recent approaches in contemporary theory. These are, first, the theories of power emerging from Michel Foucault's key theoretical moves, and, second, certain theories of specters, of haunting, perhaps "hauntology," to recall Derrida's neologism.[3] I wrote in the preface that this book is not so much a political theology as it is a political theorization of the theological. That theorization begins to take form within the intersection of Foucauldian studies of power and other critical theorists' reflections on haunting and spectrality. My turn here to "thinking the theological" is undertaken not only to make clearer the notion of "the theological," but also to situate it, to inscribe it, in the languages of theoretical discourses. Even though we may not find a single disciplinary home for the theological in the academies of the West, and certainly not alone in the discipline of Theology, this turn to theory is a way to locate the kind of disciplined discourse that the theological is. To the question, "Where is the home of a disciplined reflection on the theological?," my answer does not consist in pointing to any one disciplinary unit (say, represented by the university departments, anthropology, sociology, comparative literature, political science, certainly not Theology). Instead, a first answer is that its home is wherever there is a disciplined reflection on how theories of power and of specters (their haunting and ghostly presences) interplay.

Accordingly, this chapter will, in a first section, introduce key moves in Foucault's theories of power and also of select critical theories of spectrality. These provide the background for further theorizing of the agonistic political in the following chapter. The second section presents what "world" is, wherein both its weight and density are extended and/or concentrated, showing when and how a haunting and liberatory power is borne by sufferers of imposed social suffering. A third section argues that the world's weighing bodies includes an understanding of "sense" that challenges the "imperio-colonial sense" of Theology, a sense dramatized, for example, in the theoscopic "God sees you," referenced in the preface. In a final section, "The Theological as Theology's Hydra," I clarify further how the theological is born in the struggle of those who weigh-in with

---

3. Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of Debt and the Work of Mourning, and the New International,* trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994 [French 1992]), 10.

spectral transformative practices, thus haunting Theology and its imperio-colonial sense.

Theorizing Power and Specters

Theorizing Power with Foucault

Foucault's importance to this work is already apparent from the opening lines of the preface. There he points tellingly to the agony and oppression of the cell, and yet he situates that state of confinement in the context of what can be called a networking view of power, one that can be contrasted with a notion of power as repression. This approach is evident in an oft-quoted passage from a well-known interview with Foucault:

> It seems to me now that the notion of repression is quite inadequate for capturing what is precisely the productive aspect of power. In defining the effects of power as *repression* . . . one identifies power with a law which says no, power is taken above all as carrying the force of a prohibition. . . . What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a *productive network* which runs through the whole social body, much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression.[4]

Scholars who cite this passage do not always note that Foucault here is not completely rejecting the notion of power as repression. Indeed, Foucault's life of contesting with power in the streets and society, especially with police power,[5] should admonish any who would cite this passage to gloss the need for political contesting of repression. The main force of the passage, however, is to insist that the notion of power as repression, while necessary, is not sufficient. It is inadequate for grasping what makes power "hold good," or "what makes it accepted." He wants readers to

---

4. Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon, 1980), 119.

5. For one example, see David Macey, *The Lives of Michel Foucault* (New York: Vintage, 1995), 350.

see that power not only says *no* in a kind of top-down fashion, but that it also abides in a social system's microrelations and everyday interactions. It, again, "traverses and produces things," thus inducing forms of knowledge, producing discourse, inducing pleasure. Foucault's focus on the cell as a culmination of "an entire parapenal institution" is one example of his insistence on focusing on the networking of power through many relations and everyday practices. There is still domination, but it must be complexly approached through its networking.

The contrast between repressive and networking power is more fully developed across Foucault's writings as a distinction between "juridical" and "biopolitical" notions of power. The juridical model pivots around notions of law and sovereignty, with power, mainly "repressive," viewed largely as "power over," pressing upon agents and groups. As Foucault stresses at several points, there is a persistent binarism with power as sovereignty in the juridical model: the ruler and the ruled, controlling laws and the legally bound subjects—in prisons, the jailors and the jailed; in war, the victors and the vanquished; or again, in murder, the life taker and the slain victim. Foucault also sees this juridical structure at work in racism, as it still pervades the global division of labor and power in the West, marking who "legitimately" belongs among the exploited classes at risk of death, and who are to live among the more entitled and privileged.[6]

The other model of power is "the biopolitical model," often the one with which Foucault is today more readily identified. It is closer to what I identified as the networking mode of power. It is built around Foucault's notion of "governmentality," and refers to the multiplicity of ways that power develops among complex relations, the way it produces "technologies of power." Governmentality, for example, sets terms that often are conditions for indirect killing, "political death." It characteristically operates through circuitous and unexpected ways of working across many sites, folding a variety of social domains into one another. On this

---

6. Foucault, *"Society Must Be Defended": Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–1976*, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003 [French 1997]), 254–55. Foucault's notion of race and racism is uniquely—some would say idiosyncratically—linked to certain acts of "counterhistory" by repressed groups suffering under juridical sovereignty (see 69–84). On the "global division of labor and power" (GLDP), which is often marked by race, see John Mittelmann, *The Globalization Syndrome: Transformation and Resistance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 4, 34–107.

model the negativity of killing can appear as part of the productivity of life, as "positive."[7] The complexity of racial marking and discrimination, for example, can be a complexity that is death dealing. Ruth Wilson Gilmore's study of prisons and California political economy captures this in her very definition of racism. "Racism," she writes, "is state-sanctioned or extra-legal production of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death."[8]

As Gilmore's definition suggests, we should be careful not to view Foucault's two modes of power, the juridical and the biopolitical, as mutually exclusive. They often dwell together. The biopolitical does not supplant the juridical concerns of maintenance and protection of sovereignty. In the United States, certain post–9/11 practices—resurgent war, torture, heightened nationalism, and suspension of constitutional rights—function as a sharp wake-up call for any academic complacency that would overlook the exercise of brutal sovereign power in the name of some kind of biopolitical complexity in whose dense opaqueness all systems of repression and judicial sovereignty disappear. Considering this context, Judith Butler, in her book *Precarious Life*, thus makes a point that is more fully in keeping with Foucault's view of how the two models of power interact: "governmentality might become the site for the reanimation of that lost ground, the reconstellation of sovereignty in new form . . . the deployment of sovereignty as a tactic . . ."[9] I would go further and suggest that governmentality and its biopolitics presuppose and often stage exercises of sovereign power, especially when its more expansive and intensive technologies of power are seen to be breaking down, not securing desired power efficiently enough. This is particularly true in "states of emergency." In such a state, what Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben has termed a "state of exception," biopolitical governmentality and juridical sovereignty merge. In fact, in states of exception, the everyday, biopolitical conditions are subject less to governmentality and more to a juridical sovereignty, one that invokes its power to "decide the

---

7. Foucault, "*Society Must Be Defended,*" 70.

8. Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 28.

9. Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (New York: Verso, 2004), 97.

exception."[10] This is not the place to debate the complexities of Agamben's political theory of the state of exception.[11] The main point here is that much of Agamben's theory underscores the need to acknowledge that the biopolitical and the older juridical models often dwell together.

Why is Foucault's theory of power important for this book? His models of power, both the juridical and the biopolitical, as theorizations of the repressive *and* networking modes of power, respectively, structure a distinctive approach to study of human enmeshment in structures of power. Human enmeshment in structures of power is essential to understanding the being of humans in the world. Thus, the theorization of power in Foucault enables an ontology of power, a political ontology. Foucault himself referred to his writings on power as a "historical ontology of ourselves."[12] This is not an ontology of Heidegger-like fundamental structures, but a historical and social ontology.

Recent thinkers who have followed in the wake of Foucault's "historical ontology" include such figures as Ian Hacking, Judith Butler, Chantal Mouffe, Jean-Luc Nancy, Giorgio Agamben, and numerous others. For articulating my own historical ontology of the agonistic political in this book, I rely particularly on Theodore Schatzki and Pierre Bourdieu. Both of these thinkers respect Foucault's way of theorizing power, and yet, with a finer-grained theoretical vision, they articulate the historical ontology of power with respect to social practices. This will give my ontology of the agonistic political greater specificity than ontology usually displays, and also allow me to write with more concreteness about how the theological emerges as a dimension of agonistic politics. Schatzki, in particular, enables us to think the conjuncture between being and practice, while Bourdieu, building on that conjuncture, also enables us to reflect on another conjuncture, that of power and symbol. This latter conjuncture, especially, bridges to the theological's role as transimmanentally engaging power with the symbolic force of art and image.

---

10. Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 3, 6–7.

11. For one recent critical discussion of Agamben, see Alison Ross, ed., *The Agamben Effect*, special issue of *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 107, no. 1 (Winter 2008), esp. Ewa Płonowska Ziarek, "Bare Life on Strike: Notes on the Biopolitics of Race and Gender," 89–105.

12. Michel Foucault, "What Is Enlightenment?," in Paul Rabinow and Niklas Rose, eds., *The Essential Foucault: Selections from Essential Works of Foucault, 1954–1984* (New York: New Press, 1994), 53–57.

Theorizing the Spectral

The turn to spectral theory in Western academies has a largely poststructuralist academic pedigree, especially through Jacques Derrida's 1992 work, *Specters of Marx*. Derrida's reflections on specters, ghosts, apparitions, spirits, and conjuring make up what he termed a "hauntology," discourse about what haunts, what is absent but still unsettlingly present, to all being.[13] He calls for what has not been: scholars who dare to think the ghost—this, his "hauntology."[14]

Other poststructuralist theorists have taken up Derrida's dare. As Jeffrey Weinstock writes in his *Spectral America*, literary theorists have traced in a host of "deconstructive gestures" the shadowy realms that attend the allegedly clear and distinct theoretical arguments and programs. Derrida is not the only figure here, of course. Other texts making this theoretical turn, as Weinstock identifies them,[15] are Jean-Michel Rabaté's *The Ghosts of Modernity* (1996), Peter Buse and Andrew Stotts's *Ghosts: Deconstruction, Psychoanalysis, History* (1999), and Peter Schwerger's *Fantasm and Fiction* (1999).

There are also the nearly uncountable works of fiction that work ghostly figures and specters into their prose. In such fiction it is especially history's mountain of the systematically and unjustly slain that provokes thought about the spectral. In fact, while it cannot be my task here, the turn to spectral theory should be viewed not simply as a Western turn of theory. It is especially indigenous peoples, but also African, Asian, and other colonized peoples, whose legacies of political and cultural repression, and often genocide, have spawned memories—"re-memories," writes Toni Morrison about "the six million and more" lost to slavery and the Middle Passage—of ancestors, ghosts, and haunting presences. These traditions are freed up from the secularist strictures of much of the Western academy, thus able to forge new knowledges from seething presences. The rise of Western academic theories of haunting, then, are themselves a haunting generated by communities that have suffered epistemic and political violence by the West.

---

13. Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 10.
14. Ibid., 11–12.
15. Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, "Introduction: The Spectral Turn," in Weinstock, ed., *Spectral America: Phantoms and the National Imagination* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), 5.

In recent times, the momentous 1987 work of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* offers a story of a ghost, a fingering of the jagged edge of pain amid souls who still haunt the living. Leslie Marmon Silko's novel *Almanac of the Dead* is but one of many other texts that invoke the spectral, in her case, from the traditions of indigenous peoples. "The truth is," writes Silko, "the Ghost Dance did not end with the murder of big foot and one hundred and forty-four Ghost Dance worshipers at Wounded Knee. The Ghost Dance has never ended, it has continued . . ."[16] Those swept away by disappearance and torture in "the dirty war" in Argentina still haunt the lives, and so the stories, of Argentine writers, especially in Luisa Valenzuela's *Open Door* (1988) and *Strange Things Happen Here* (1979).[17] Argentina's dirty war also provided stories about spirits and ghosts for Lawrence Thornton, as in *Imagining Argentina* (1991) and *Naming the Spirits* (1995).

In social science, there is the eminent work of sociologist Avery Gordon, already quoted in this work. Her book *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (1997) seriously engages the fictional material, but also takes its cues from earlier theorists in the West. These include Karl Marx in his *18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852); Walter Benjamin as he reflects on how the past weights the present and the future in his "Theses on Philosophy of History" (1923); Max Horkheimer and Theodore Adorno's short note "On the Theory of Ghosts" (1944) in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*; and especially Raymond Williams's work on "structures of feeling" in his *Marxism and Literature*.[18]

Weinstock reads these poststructuralist interests in theorizing the ghostly as largely due to recent poststructuralist millennial anxieties.[19] To privilege a general millennial anxiety in the Euro-American West, however, is to miss the deeper roots of postructuralist critiques, that is, in their own complex resistance to the nature of Western sovereignty as a

---

16. Leslie Marmon Silko, *Almanac of the Dead* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988), 724.

17. See the extensive examination of Valenzuela's fiction in Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 63–136.

18. Max Horkheimer and Theodore Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1997 [1944]), 216; and Raymond Williams, "Structures of Feeling," in his *Marxism and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 128–35.

19. Weinstock, *Spectral America,* 5–6.

colonizing project, an awareness and struggle of the many who suffer the "modern/colonial world system."[20] Tracing spectral theory to the West's millennial anxiety credits the West with too much, slighting the way the theory has in fact emerged more from the fracture in the West's history created by its colonialism and imperialism. Spectral thought is one of those theories, a form of "border thinking," that has sprung up from that fault line between colonized and colonizer, what Walter Mignolo has also termed, "the colonial difference."[21]

Robert J. C. Young, in his historical analysis of postcolonialism, under-scores how important the "colonial difference" is to poststructuralists, pointing out that it has another politics, especially when recalling its key formative thinkers, whose key crucible and matrix for reflection was the French Algerian war. Young's words should be attended to carefully:

> Many of those who developed the theoretical positions subsequently characterized as poststructuralism came from Algeria or had been involved in the war of independence. Fanon, Memmi, Bourdieu, Althusser, Lyotard, Derrida, [Hélène] Cixous— . . . None of them, it is true, were Algerians proper, in the sense of coming from the indigenous Arab, Berber, Kabyle, Chaouia or Moabite peoples that make up the population of modern independent Algeria. . . . They were, so to speak, Algerians improper, those who did not belong easily to either side— . . . *The poststructuralism associated with these names could better be characterized therefore as Franco-Maghrebian theory, for its theoretical interventions have been actively concerned with the task of undoing the ideological heritage of French colonialism and with rethinking the premises, assumptions and protocols of its centrist imperial culture.*[22]

But what of spectrality, in particular, of haunting and the "ghostly matter"? The short answer is that the ghostly and spectral are what the

20. Walter D. Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 33–38.

21. Ibid., 24. I do not deny, and have in fact argued elsewhere, that poststructuralism can often reinforce some of the most exploitative patterns of Western globalization. See Mark Lewis Taylor, "Subalternity and Advocacy as *Kairos* for Theology," in Joerg Rieger, ed., *Opting for the Margins: Postmodernity and Liberation in Christian Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 23–44.

22. Robert J. C. Young, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (London: Blackwell, 2001), 414. Italics added.

poststructuralist traces as fault lines, fissures, infiltrations operating in the colonizer's centralizing cultural and political apparatus. To trace them is to find the vestiges of the vanquished, often to highlight and strengthen long-colonized peoples, aiming to eviscerate the strength of colonizing and imperial projects.

We can summarize three key notions that are perhaps at the core of spectral theory: haunting, the specter, and ghost(s). Consider first the term, *haunting*, the active presence—better, the "presence-ing"—of something taken to be absent (erased, effaced). As Avery Gordon writes, there is a "seething" aspect to this process of being present,[23] which is all the more pronounced when the effaced ones are those who have been unjustly slain. Noting connections between the presence of the dead and writing, Margaret Atwood observes, "Having the dead return when not expected can be a hair-raising experience, especially if they are feeling slighted, and needy, or worse, angry."[24] The seething presence of the effaced— "seething" not just as filled with anger but as also turbulent, portending change—gives to the Western present a certain charge. Its "occluded and forgotten past" is heavy.[25] It weighs heavy upon, and in, the present. Morrison's words persist: "You know as well as I do that people who die bad don't stay in the ground."[26]

Haunting, as this general process of seething presence amid structural dynamics that would efface it, can then be elaborated in relation to two other notions in spectral theory. The second is that of *specter*, the central term for which the theory can perhaps be named. The specter is haunting congealed into a portentous promise or threat, one that carries and suggests an accountability, a demand upon the present to remember, often to effect a liberation for the effaced ones. Then, the third is the notion of *ghost*, a term usually used in spectral theory for specific instances and images discerned amid the haunting, which may or may not become specters in the specific sense—as portentous, potentially transformative promise, threat, demand. The character Beloved in Morrison's text is a "ghost," related to the ghosts of six million African and African-American others lost to the Middle Passage and slavery. Chinese American laborers

---

23. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 8, 17, 21.
24. Margaret Atwood, *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing* (New York: Anchor, 2002), 159.
25. Ibid., 195.
26. Morrison, 188.

are also ghosts; their bones resting still in the railway track beds of the U.S. West, where their labor secured the most difficult transit areas of the economically essential transcontinental railway system.[27] So also are there ghosts of the massacred in the indigenous territories of the Americas.[28] There are the dead from land theft and dispossession of Mexico in the U.S. nineteenth-century Southwest,[29] and then also those lost to "shock and awe" aerial assaults upon Iraqi lands.[30] Whether and how all of these constitute a haunting of the present such that they might also become portentous specters, transforming the present, depends on the further conceptual work of treating them and upon further strategic practices of remembrance and action. Here, however, it is important to note that the intersection of Foucault's theorization of power with key insights from spectral theory yields the conceptual background of this book. But what point of this intersection will be most important? It is here that the notion of "weight of the world" is important.

Weighted World: A Prisoner's Hurled Tray

In this section, I develop several insights from Jean-Luc Nancy's reflections on weight that also set important meanings of "world." This enables a particular way of viewing power and spectrality together. What results also is a distinctive understanding of writing and "sense," which will become significant to the style and concern of the theological as it haunts Theology.

I begin with a personal vignette to initiate reflection on the notion of the "weight of the world."[31] In 1977, when I was a theological student—in

---

27. Iris Chang, *The Chinese in America: A Narrative History* (New York: Penguin, 2003), 53–64.

28. David E. Stannard, *American Holocaust: The Conquest of the New World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

29. See Laura E. Gómez, *Manifest Destinies: The Making of the Mexican American Race* (New York: New York University Press, 2007).

30. For the first careful analysis, see Gilert Burnham, Riyadh Laftu, Shannon Doocy, and Les Roberts, "Mortality after the 2003 Invasion of Iraq: A Cross-Sectional Cluster Sample Survey," *The Lancet* 368, no. 9545 (October 21, 2006): 1421–28. For respected sources that since place the Iraqi civilian losses as high as one, or even two, million, see the Just Foreign Policy Web site, at http://www.justforeignpolicy.org/iraq, accessed September 14, 2010.

31. The fruitfulness of the metaphor is evidenced by the many meanings at play in Pierre Bourdieu's work in the English translation of the edited collection Pierre Bourdieu

fact, while first reading Michel Foucault's book *Discipline and Punish*—
I worked as an intern for the Virginia State Office of Attorney General,
investigating prisoner complaints of abuse in the Virginia State Peniten-
tiary. On one of my first visits with officials to the prison, a man being
held in a holding cell deftly hurled his full tray of food through the bars
in my direction. The food and drink missed me but hit a prison official.
Nevertheless, after officials hustled me from the room, I knew that I, too,
had been struck—by his rage.

The rage I felt was part of a complex sensibility, and one that would
become all the more complex over years of confronting similar situations
and reflecting on the unprecedented and exponential growth of U.S. pris-
ons after 1977.[32] Part of the complexity that day was that there was also
a rage in me, which I sensed was not separate from that of the prisoner.
Not that I was experiencing the trauma he must have faced on the way
to a most immediate and acute imprisonment. My anger was focused
more on the whole setup, a "world," which, for whatever reason, could
present one human being behind bars and another, me, outside of them.
I was enmeshed, feeling confined, not in that man's cell, but within that
"parapenal institution, which is created in order not to be a prison," as
Foucault put it in the epigraph to this book's preface.[33] I felt what I would
now call "the weight" of this world, my own enmeshment in it as well
as his. In my case, the parapenal institution was the government office
where I was an intern, but also the theological academy, as well as forces
of racialized power, economic stratification, and other dynamics of the

---

et al, *The Weight of the World: Social Suffering in Contemporary Society*, trans. Priscilla
Parkhurst Ferguson (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000). In it, the English translator
reflects on how the French word *la misère*, in the title *La Misère du monde*, carries a sur-
plus of interacting meanings, not all of which would have been preserved for English read-
ers if *la misère* had been rendered using the false cognate term *misery*. Bourdieu's entire
book plays upon the multiple meanings and resonances of *la misère*, suggesting "poverty"
in economic, spiritual, and moral terms. It invokes suffering, unhappiness, and misfortunes
of the collectivity, as well as of individuals. There are echoes of Pascal's reflections on the
misery of man without God, as there are of Marx's *La Misère de la philosophie* (*The Poverty
of Philosophy*), itself a reply to Proudhon's *La Philosophie de la misère,* and Victor Hugo's
novel *Les Misérables.* The notion of "weight," used to translate *la misère,* will also feature
a rich and polyvalent significance.

32. Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblind-
ness* (New York: New Press, 2010), 6–9.

33. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Pan-
theon, 1977 [French 1975]), 294.

state apparatus of which prisons are a part and in whose tangle each one of us around that man's holding cell was enmeshed. The racialized dimension was especially strong, as I, a white man, watched another en route to incarceration in this case an African American, joining the sea of other black men and women who disproportionately make up the more than two million imprisoned in the United States today among those of other communities of color.[34] In short, I felt the weight of the parapenal institution that systemically, in different ways, pressed upon us both, and culminated in that man's cell.

This complex sensibility would be replicated later for me at other sites, during times of my meetings with survivors of torture across the Americas, with others in U.S. prisons, with those who endure sexual and physical violence in home and street, with survivors of massacres in Guatemala, Mexico, El Salvador of the 1980s and 1990s, more recently Peru and Colombia, also with Palestinians whose lives are sundered and lands plundered by "the wall" and by practices of apartheid that Israeli government officials maintain.[35] As powerful and often overwhelming as these structural violations can be, the complex sense of the world's weightedness can also be known when confronting the rage and struggle of a single mother, of a homeless man, of an immigrant community, of persons ostracized for their mode of sexual practice and identities, or of impoverished families struggling to forge dignity and survival out of unrelenting want.

I am hardly alone in this sensibility. Others share it. I do not believe that this sensibility can be dismissed as guilt over freedoms, opportunities, or entitlements that I and some may have, which others do not. Those are of course operative. But the "weight felt," I suggest, should be approached more as a sense of a persisting connection intrinsic to shared humanity being disrupted, of a copresence to one another that,

---

34. Blacks are six to eight times more likely to be in prison or jail than whites, and Hispanics three times more likely. See Bruce Western, *Punishment and Inequality in America* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2007), 30–33.

35. On Israel's construction of the wall, see *International Court of Justice Reports of Judgments, Advisory Opinions And Orders: Legal Consequences of the Construction of a Wall in the Occupied Palestinian Territory* (New York: United Nations Publications, 2005). For background on the phenomena of separation of peoples in Israel, see Ilan Pappe, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2007).

paradoxically, can be startlingly provoked by the separation worked by bars, Plexiglas walls, and slamming doors.

This "weight" I take, first, as referring to the suffering known by the most acute and direct victims of social constraints and oppressive structures, whether these be from imprisonment, war, poverty, the daily violence and burden of racial, gender, and sexual discrimination, or of the economic and military burdens of imperial and neocolonial impositions. The "weight," however, is borne, second, as the different but not unrelated weight of those who know of, empathically relate to, wonder about, and reflect upon the dividing these forms of socially imposed suffering work. What is it about being and power that the most brutal of social divisions can impose a weight registered on both sides of a dividing of flesh?

These are queries emerging from my reflections on the personal vignette and other cognate experiences. We need to interrogate some of the assumptions in my recounting of this experience. Consider, first, the very notion of "world" that this kind of weightedness provokes and perhaps assumes. Philosophers have problematized the notion of "world" from the beginning. One route for reflecting on the notion of world emanates from Heidegger's reflections, taking world as surroundings, environs (*umwelt*), in which entities around one are not only "ready-to-hand" but meaningfully so, laden with care.[36] Nancy, in querying "what world means" in the most general sense, responds in his 2007 book, *The Creation of the World* or *Globalization*, with a claim typical of Heidegger's legacy: world is "a totality of meaning."[37] This totality is "of meaning" because the totality in question is not just a location that envelopes or situates us along with other people and entities; it is also something in which we are interested. There is not only sense of location in the totality, but also of belonging to it. With the sense of belonging comes interests in it, cares—it is meaningful for those in the totality. Nancy, especially

---

36. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 91–95, 114.

37. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Creation of the World* or *Globalization* [hereafter, *CWoG*], trans. and with an introduction by Francois Raffoul and David Pettigrew (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 41. In spite of the similarity to Heidegger, the marked departure of Nancy from Heidegger, especially on the issue of *Mitsein* (being-with) and *Dasein* (being-there), is important to note. See Mary-Jane Rubenstein, *Strange Wonder: The Closure of Metaphysics and the Opening of Awe* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 99–110.

in his recent work, distinguishes this "world" from another experience of the totality, a homogenizing one, where embraceable meaning(s) often are *not* known, where values are abrasive and excluding, turning world into "globe" (or *glomus,* as he writes), where places all too often become a "land of exile" or "vale of tears."[38] It is still a meaningful totality, but the way it means is by excluding, destroying the kind of habitation that evokes belonging.

World, then, is labile. It is a set of spacings and balancings that can shift in their character and form. It cannot be reduced in the first instance simply to some basic antagonism, but it is agonist in the sense that the world's being is tensively poised, a precarious and fragile balance, always vulnerable to the outbreak of acute struggle and along various lines of antagonism and opposition. World has the character of being a total-ity of meaning, but its distribution of meanings and power can easily change. Most significantly, its labile character is a proneness to alternate into globe, where homogeneity takes over, where at-homeness and basic freedoms from suffering are withdrawn. World is lost. What, we may ask, keeps us in world, as distinct from globe? Or, what marks the difference between that totality we welcome as world and that we lament as globe and glome?

Here is where the notion of "weight" comes into play, indeed, a certain distribution of motions intrinsic to weight and weighing. In Nan-cy's book *Corpus,* notions of weight and weighing become especially constitutive of how one has and constructs world, or maybe loses it as it becomes homogenizing globe, or *glomus*. Nancy's philosophical reflections on weight, as in all of his writings, come in the form of often cryptic and polyvalent expressions that are difficult to interpret and susceptible to diverse readings. Here, it is Nancy's notions of weight, and later transimmanence, that emerge as most significant, even though other aspects of his philosophy will need to be accessed from time to time.[39]

---

38. Nancy, *CWoG*, 41–42.

39. For fine secondary treatments of Nancy's work, in addition to Rubenstein, *Strange Wonder*, 99–132, see B. C. Hutchens, *Jean-Luc Nancy and the Future of Philosophy* (Mon-treal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2005); Ian James, *The Fragmentary Demand: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Jean-Luc Nancy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006); and Philip Armstrong, *Reticulations: Jean-Luc Nancy and the Networks of the Politi-cal* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

Consider, first, his treatment of weight. It is important to stress that weight involves motion, different kinds of motions. In fact, he often writes when referring to world in ways that interchange weight and the verbal form, "weighing." Everything, he says, "ends up communicating with weighing. A body always weighs or lets itself be weighted, poised. . . . It weighs on, it presses against other bodies, right up against other bodies. Between it and itself, it's still weighing, counterweight, buttressing."[40]

The world of bodies, for Nancy, is constituted by this weighing, this always moving weight. One notes throughout his discussions that while weighing down, being heavy, is part of weighing, it is not the only kind of motion. There is also a kind of lateral movement, of bracing against, which occurs between persons and entities that are side by side. There is also the kind of movement or shifting that refers to bodies weighing lightly. "Their weight" can be "the raising of their masses to the surface. Unceasingly, mass is raised to the surface; it bubbles up to the surface; mass is thickness, a dense, local consistency."[41] So, weight is not just susceptibility to down-pressing movement, a response to gravitational pull. It *is* that, but also includes buttressing, a bracing laterally and involving multiple directions of pressure, even those directed upward in modes of rising. Think of the kinds of multiple pressures at work in an arch forged of heavy, fitted stones over a walkway, maybe secured by some adhesive, but also cut, distributed, positioned one to another so that distributed weight makes up the strength of the arch, keeping the heavy stones pressed against one another to create the arching effect. In the arch, weight is distributed between surfaces of stone—upward, outward, downward, and often along a continuum of directions. All these motions need to be thought to understand "weight" among bodies that make up "world" for Nancy. We might say that weight is a play of forces and of balancing pressures, moving in many directions to keep tensively in place the manifold and teeming bodies that make up what he so often refers to as our "singular plural world." In *Corpus*, this kind of balancing of pressures is articulated in terms of spacing that occurs as *extension*, in which there is a tense interplay of intimacy and distance between bodies. Precisely this spacing of extension is what constitutes world. "The world

---

40. Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus,* 93.
41. Ibid.

is spacing, a tension of place, where bodies are not in space, but space in bodies."[42] World, for Nancy as for this book, emphasizes an "embodied being-in-the-world *as* finite spatial existence."[43]

Now there is another kind of motion that I want to introduce, that o*f shifting weight.* "Shifting," with respect to weight and how the world weighs, is not a term I know Nancy himself to use. Nevertheless, it is crucial for naming an important change that can occur when considering how the world weighs, the mode of its congealing, we might say, at particular sites. I deploy the word *shift* for a distinction that Nancy *does* make between the world's weight as distributed and "extended," on the one hand, and as "concentrated," piled up, amassed, on the other. I am aware that with this notion of shifting between extension and concentration I may be inserting a mode of antagonism into Nancy's thought that is not always easy to discern in his focus on multiple relations in his "singular plural world." Yet the distinction seems necessary, especially in light of his later works. Moreover, antagonism, though not the first thing to say about being, is nevertheless an always present possibility in the tense, agonist poise of the world's fragility.

"Shifting" names what happens when the world's weight is no longer sustained by extension, by the delicate spacing of bodies, involving both mutual intimacy and distancing of bodies.[44] Shifting names what happens when the labile extension and delicate spacing of world bodies is disrupted. The results are not extension, relation, and spacing in a singular plural world, but "masses, gatherings, crowdings, crammings, accumulations, demographic spurts, exterminations," and so on.[45] Consider again the stone arch: if its stones are cut askew, thus abutting one another awkwardly, the whole weight can shift, allowing them to tumble en masse, forming a pile. This result can illustrate what Nancy terms "concentration." With respect to human bodies losing their extension—that delicate spacing of intimacy and distance crucial to their weighing and their world—there occurs instead a deprivation of "living space." Nancy terms this "evil," even "absolute evil, a wound opened up on itself, the sign of a self so far reabsorbed into itself that it's no longer a sign, no longer

---

42. Ibid., 27.
43. James, *The Fragmentary Demand,* 110.
44. Ibid., 101.
45. Ibid., 79.

a self."[46] Elsewhere, Nancy says that especially "capital concentrates." I quote here a passage, the clarity and concreteness of which illustrates weight as concentrated and laden with suffering:

> Capital means: a body marketed, transported, displaced, replaced, superseded, assigned to a post and a posture, to the point of ruin, unemployment, famine, a Bengali body bent over a car in Tokyo, a Turkish body in a Berlin trench, a black body loaded down with white packages in Suresnes or San Francisco.[47]

It should be underscored, however, that this shift from weight as extended to weight as concentrated does not set up a strong duality of good and evil. They are instead related, almost as the same weight, differentiated only as one might know the difference between shifting one's body weight from one foot to the other. While that shifting of body weight may nicely illustrate the intimacy and closeness of connection between the delicately sustaining weight of extended bodies on the one hand, and their piling into concentration on the other, the consequences of concentration in the world are severe. In a concentrated world—what Nancy would more see as "globe" or "unworld" (*immonde*)—we know "bodies, murdered, torn, burned, dragged, deported, massacred, tortured, flayed, flesh dumped into mass graves, an obsessing over wounds."[48] Here there is an absence of that sustaining intimacy and distance of the world's bodies related in extension. There is, he writes, "no winding-cloth to define the spacing of one, and then another, death." There are instead "the cadavers in a mass grave . . . wounds heaped up, stuck in, flowing into one another, the soil tossed right on top."[49] Injustice, in fact, for Nancy, is defined as "the mixing, breaking, crushing, and stifling of bodies, making them indistinct (gathered up in a dark center, piled up to eliminate the space between them, within them—assassinating even the space of their just death)."[50]

I return to my sense of the world's weight when facing the holding cell in the Virginia penitentiary of 1977. In light of Nancy's theorization,

---

46. Ibid., 81.
47. Nancy, *Corpus,* 109-10.
48. Ibid., 77
49. Ibid.
50. Ibid., 47.

as I have distilled it above, what I felt on that occasion, was my rage intersected by that of the confined man in the parapenal entirety of an imprisoning U.S. society. What I felt, I stress, was not just a weight pressing down, but the whole conspiring of motions together that marked the shift—from a world weighted through extension of spacings that enable sustained mutual intimacy and distancing, to *immonde* or globe, of concentrated weight in the prison system. By deftly hurling his tray through the bars, the confined man marked the shifting of weight to that which piles on, instead of that which sustains. Quite actually, the prison is a place that piles bodies, stacks them, crams them, routinizes and regulates them. The prisons are sites of world's concentration—better said, they mark an end of world, a congealing of concentration, the rise of *immonde,* of globe, of an "absolute evil." Even time is concentrated to devastating effect, "becoming in prison a thick dull mallet that pounds consciousness into a coma," amid the "mind-numbing, soul-killing savaging sameness that makes each day an echo of the day before with neither thought or hope of growth."[51] It is the result of the world's weight shifting—to use Nancy's words, again—from extension to concentration. To be sure, personal agents and political forces are the immediate performers of the shift, with their diverse activities setting conditions for the shift, enabling concentrated power to hold good. But these personal agents and their activities are a part of shifting of whole structures in the delicate forming of world, in the always labile tension between the different motions of weighing. It is that shifting that I felt, sensed, as I stood before the confined man hurling his tray. As I felt weight being concentrated into *immonde,* into piled-up, massing, and cramming evil, I also mourned the loss of world (*monde*) which comes only through sustaining that delicate labile balance of mutual intimacy and spacing that constitutes living.

The Weighted World's Haunting "Sense"

Nancy's mix of the deftly turned literary phrase with conceptual rigor, as he explores the relationships between world and weight, has important implications for clarifying how it is that the theological haunts the guild discipline of Theology. Before taking this issue directly to Theology,

---

51. Mumia Abu-Jamal, "Killing Time," *Forbes* (November 30, 1999), 106.

though, we need to approach the difficult issue of how the weighted world has sense, or, as Nancy would prefer to say, is a "body of sense,"[52] for this helps to clarify how the theological has a distinctive sense.

Continue to reflect on the rage of the man in the prison cell hurling his food tray. He is part of the weighted world in yet another mode. He marks the way bodies have sense, indeed *are* a kind of sense, especially as world shifts its weight toward a concentration of bodies, and thus bodies in pain. His hurling of the tray was a gesture by which he sought to shift back from *immonde* to *monde,* from weight as concentrated and collapsed piling, to weight as extended for identity and relation in a singular plural world. As such, his hurling was a performance, a kind of sign of the way those who undergo the shift into concentrated weight nevertheless haunt that concentration, are spectral to it. They remind that the shift to concentration is a departure from that mutual intimacy and distancing of bodies that constitute world. The hurling gesture marks the fact that concentrated bodies are, as Nancy himself states at one point, a "haunting presence . . . anonymous and exponential."[53] Concentrated bodies are a perpetually suppurating wound, where bodies and beings are compressed. And yet, there is from the wound a transformative action that at least points, however desperately, to world amid "unworld." It is also a way of communicating. Key to any such transformative impact is a gesture's or action's capacity to haunt, to unsettle those concentrations of power and knowledge where weight is amassed, where injustice as the indistinction and extinction of bodies occurs through breaking, crushing, and stifling.[54]

The man's hurling of the tray is just one performed gesture of haunting arising from the wound, and, as we will trace throughout this work, it is only one hint, maybe but a tiny act that is suggestive of many such actions that become part of spectral practices bearing upon the multiple weights of concentrated power. Even in the prisons there are many other such acts, and the most effective of them may be the acts wherein rage, sadness, and fear are forged into written communications.[55] In them,

---

52. Nancy, *Corpus,* 21–27.
53. Ibid., 79.
54. Nancy, *Corpus,* 47.
55. For one collection of works by especially adept prison writers, see Joy James, ed., *Imprisoned Intellectuals: America's Political Prisoners Write on Life, Liberation, and Rebellion* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003).

bodies of the amassed in prisons come to expression. Bodies concentrated in such actions and communications we may identify as "exscriptions," another term of Nancy's. The basic idea is not, to stay with our prison example, simply that writers communicate "outside" prison walls. That's part of it. But as exscription in Nancy's sense, his gesture exceeds its action, has an excess. In Nancy's thought, it means that communication of this sort is more than the gesture, whether a meaningfully hurled tray, or, more traditionally, the inscribed words on a page. Exscribing is the writing out from a body. Indeed, all signifying discourse, Nancy insists, any act of speaking or writing, especially communication through the arts, is an exscribing, a touching (with intimacy and distancing) of embodied existence. Nancy can even speak, as he does in *The Gravity of Thought*, of this exscription as the "final truth of inscription,"[56] indeed, of all thought, because writing never lacks this excess, this writing of the body. It never escapes this touching of bodies in a weighted world. In *Corpus,* Nancy summarizes the point:

> With thoughts about the body, the body always forces us to think farther, always *too* far: too far to carry on as thought, but never far enough to become a body.
>   Which is why it makes no sense to talk about body and thought apart from each other, as if each could somehow subsist on its own: they *are* only their touching each other, the touch of their breaking down, and into, each other. This touching is the limit and spacing of existence.[57]

Prisoners who write, who gesture with hurled tray or with pen in hand, "weigh-in," I suggest, from their place amid and under concentrated *immonde*. They write not only texts expressing their emotions and to friends and family, but also legal motions as "jailhouse lawyers,"[58] or communications to activists working with them on the outside amid and against the present world of mass incarceration.[59] This weighing

---

56. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Gravity of Thought,* trans. Francois Raffoul and Gregory Recco (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1997), 79.

57. Nancy, *Corpus,* 37.

58. Mumia Abu-Jamal, *Jailhouse Lawyers: Prisoners Defending Prisoners v. the USA* (San Francisco: City Lights, 2009).

59. See prisoners' contributions to broader activist work at the Prison Activist Resource Center, http://www.prisonactivist.org/.

in against compressed and concentrated weight is an attempt to rec-
reate world by writing and rewriting bodies. This weighing-in occurs
wherever weight concentrates, not just in the prison houses, but also
in the warehouses of neglect that hold our infirm, aged, and mentally
distressed—in the shanty towns of the poor, every "Gaza" where bod-
ies are amassed, abandoned, reckoned disposable, weighed, finally, as
of no account. These bodies, though, also weigh-in and weigh against
the weight of the world that shifts into concentrated and burdensome,
crammed "unworld." They write not just for their bodies. They write
their bodies. They seek, from within a place where bodies are squeezed
and concentrated, a re-creation of world, one sustained in part by a
memory or a hope of world as that sustaining interplay of mutual rela-
tion and distance. The re-creation is a process that makes "freedom"—
and the emphasis for Nancy is on freedom as having to be *made or
created*, not something that can be presupposed or shown to have a
ground. Thus, Nancy situates his notion of freedom in the context of
his somewhat abstract views of extension, weight, and spacing: "For
freedom *is* the common nonpresupposition of *this mutual intimacy and
distancing* where bodies, their masses, their singular and always indefi-
nitely multipliable events have their absence of ground (and hence,
identically, their rigorous equality)."[60]

Here is where Nancy's distinctive views on "sense" begin to emerge.
He plays off of what in English we might describe as meaningful sense,
on one hand, and sense as perceptibility of our bodies, sensing, on the
other. It is not so much that texts or statements have or make sense, but
they and their writers/speakers are "in sense." We are extended, spaced
as bodies with other bodies, are indeed bodies "in sense," not only as liv-
ing the multiplicity of daily exchanges but also when knowing freedom
or unfreedom, justice or injustice—both of these latter weighty options
depending upon whether the world is in extension or shifted into some
state of concentration. These are all parts of belonging to world, to a
world that is a body of always circulating sense.

Let us contrast Nancy's notion of sense with others that have held
sway. "Sense," along with "reference," is usually taken as one of two ways
to speak of language's functioning, and particularly of how language
"means" or has "meaning." Sense, according to Paul Ricoeur, following

---

60. Ibid., 101. Italics added.

Gottlieb Frege, focuses "the what" of discourse, while reference concerns more the "about what" of discourse.[61] Or, in philosopher Tim Crane's terms, *sense* is a word's looking "inward" to language's other words, while *reference* is more a term looking "outward," as it were, into the world.[62] Nancy's "sense," however, is not to be identified with this "sense" opposed to "reference." He is trying to excavate and illumine another kind of meaningful presence, one crucial to interpretation amid the proliferation of meaning(s). It is an alternative interpretive movement, not one shuttling between sense and reference, between the "what" and the "about what" of discourse, but, rather, a movement that cuts across them both, and circulates in their many manifestations. The "sense" of interest to philosopher Nancy is one that combines being steeped in the sensate with human orientation toward an ever more open embrace of a totality (which, however, is never had).[63] What thinking does is to traverse, cross through, the plurality "sensed" everywhere—and especially traversing or crossing through those places where singularities[64] are overlapping and intersecting other singularities or groups of singularities. This is a "sense" far more complex than that of sense opposed to reference. The latter encourages a kind of intellectual two-step between sense and reference. Instead, with Nancy, there is a much more intricate and multiple sliding along and between passageways of a singular plural world. To think as well as to exist, then, is not simply to connect sense with what sense refers to; it is also to be caught up in a tangled, at times labyrinthine, sensate experience of singularities in multiple relations. Nancy thus can write in *Corpus* of the "veins of sense," not only intimating sense's circulating character but also its embodied way. To have a "world," and to think and interpret within it, is to be in a "body of sense" with meaning(s) continually circulating through world's extended or concentrated bodies. To clarify this further, we can turn to Hutchen's language, which is worth quoting in full:

---

61. Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), 19.

62. Tim Crane, "Meaning," in *Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, new ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 575.

63. On this combination of notions, see Hutchens, *Jean-Luc Nancy and the Future of Philosophy,* 43.

64. Ibid., 43–44.

One must be "in" sense, in the sense of this world composed of the joining, playing, speaking, sharing, intersecting and communicating of itself. Articulating itself as such along the interstitial edges of such relations, the sense of the world is not something set over against the world [as in the sense/reference paradigm, again], not a co-incidence of being with itself; it resides immanently in the articulations of all possible singular beings and events within it. Specifically, one is only permitted to speak of a world that is a totality completed by *the openness of existence to itself*.[65]

It is this kind of "sense" that is at work when Nancy writes of world as "totality of meaning." It is a fullness of sense to which we belong that is known in the weighing of bodies. They weigh against, weigh under, weigh upward, and also, as we noted, sometimes can "weigh-in" with transformative impact under conditions of concentration. Nancy can also sum up his approach to sense in a weighted world—after again repudiating the easy juxtaposition of sense and reference—by writing that "this sense depends on the in-finite swerve of the coming of the one to the other."[66] With the notion of "swerve," Nancy accents a process of securing meaning, marked by a set of departures from the straight path, but also from a single path. It is marked by an openness to the many bodies' pathways that world is.

What might this imply for interpretation, for methodologies in scholarship? Nancy is pointing to a way of finite thinking in our weighted world that is distinctive. Perhaps recent words of another thinker, Judith Butler, capture the implication best, when she writes, "interpretation does not emerge as the spontaneous act of a single mind, but as a consequence of a certain field of intelligibility that helps to form and frame our responsiveness to the impinging world (a world on which we depend, but which also impinges upon us, exacting responsiveness in complex, sometimes ambivalent forms)."[67] Sense, meaning, and hence a discourse that would make sense is "a wandering labor," one that acknowledges and lives toward an impinging world of conflicts and insights that emerge from different experiences and readings of world, especially as they emerge from various clusterings of bodies, from contexts of meaning. In

---

65. Ibid., 43. Italics added.
66. Ibid., 103.
67. Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (New York: Verso, 2009), 34.

deploying the image of the "wandering labor of sense," I am borrowing an important notion Nancy uses that he, in turn, took from Jacques Rancière.[68] This "wandering labor of sense" is not so much a passive drifting, as it is a receptive openness that entails a labor traversing passageways, circulating insights, embodying different ways of being world. Its labor is not a work for control, but a working through the multiple. It is a contemplating of relations between bodies in extension, and, depending on context, a pondering of that shifted distortion in the world's weighing that Nancy names "concentration." Especially when the world impinges from this latter shifted weight, from the world's contextual sites of concentration that breed antagonism and resistance, from the realms of accumulated, imposed social suffering—especially then the weighted world bears upon, haunts, the sense of Theology. This is because the sense of Theology is often caught up in, if not actually a constituting factor in, the world's weight as concentration.

Theology's Imperio-Colonial Sense

The thinking that tends to predominate in the guild discipline of Theology—and often whether or not its credentialed theologians are politically *or* theologically "Left" or "Right"—is often in a state of resistance to Nancy's type of circulating and contextual, finite sense. Theology is by and large still committed to another kind of "sense," which frames the way its thinkers not only approach world, but also position their bodies and subject-positions in it and shape the ways they interpret it. Theology in its interpretive stance still shows itself steeped in what I will name in this section an "imperio-colonial sense," with four distinguishing features.

First, Theology's imperio-colonial sense often has a sustaining precondition, its *projection of a transcendent outside,* a beyond, toward that which is other to world. This construct preserves the sense/reference distinction in Theology, which I have already contrasted with Nancy's circulating through "veins of sense," in a "body of sense." Sense, in Theology, especially that guild discipline rooted in the structures of European and

---

68. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Sense of the World,* trans. J. S. Librett (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 115, and 193 n.124; Jacques Rancièré, "The Politics of Literature," in *Substance* 103, vol. 33, no. 1 (2004): 10–24.

U.S. higher education, usually focuses sense as structured by doctrines or other language, which define belief in a religious community, the church, and then which have a referent to some outside, some beyond, a transcendent. Meaning is pursued, sense is developed and produced, by a credentialed cadre of academic practitioners. Even if the expertise of this cadre is not emphasized, performed with an air of humility and gentility, Theology as discourse is steeped in this kind of sense, being a community of inquiry whose meanings refer to a beyond, whose trafficking in meanings constitutes its "ethos of transcendence." In this ethos, the primary value is on a kind of sovereignty of the transcendent to which their discourse refers. The sovereign located outside and beyond is taken as necessary to guard against the sovereignties of self, or of nation and other collective forms—all of which are thought to be preserved from destructive effect (from "idolatries" of self, nation, and collectivity, for example) by continual reference to *the* Sovereign.[69]

I do not deny, as can be seen in many practitioners of Theology, that the reference to a sovereign God is a reference to a "one" that is thought as multiple and dynamic (a "triune" figuring in much Christian theology) and that the virtues of accommodation, of humility, of love in community are built into the God taken as sovereign, so that a "condescendence" is made integral to transcendence, multiplicity to sovereignty. There can be a beauty to this discourse, attempting to mitigate the supremacy and summitry at which the sovereign one is positioned, as when the transcendent is rendered as "incarnate" in the baby of a lowly manger amid shepherds of the hills in Rome-dominated Palestine, a key feature of the Christmas story for many Christians. Moreover, a God language about a sovereign one who is beyond world and history can articulate, and continues to orient, many of the religious dreams and visions at work in liberatory actions of oppressed peoples.

---

69. Perhaps a recent and most clear example of this is to be found in Jean Bethke Elshtain's 2006 Gifford Lectures, *Sovereignty: God, State, and Self* (New York: Basic, 2008), 233–45. Elshtain is careful not to set up a singular sovereign, a "God, the Father Almighty." Hers is a sovereign God that she situates in a broad tradition emanating from Augustine and readings of Christian scriptures, where the one who is sovereign is an incarnating God, who embodies humility, who is "the man for others" (Dietrich Bonhoeffer), and whose incarnating ways of intricate enfleshment in world can be traced in many ways, but especially through the poignant and earthy renderings of Czeslaw Milosz's and Albert Camus's writings.

And yet, I argue that this reference to one positioned above and beyond self and society, outside their worlds, only to enter largely as special acts of creation, intervention and as condescendence, is problematic and to be resisted. To be problematic, the reference to the transcendent need not be a theocratic reference, oriented to a radically omnipotent Other, who, projected as "God Almighty," anchors, in a very marked way, the sovereignties of state or grandiose sovereignties of self, these ordered to one another in a great chain of sovereign being. Even the "softer," nontheocratic references to transcendence are not necessarily a safeguard against the excesses of imperial and colonial domination and destruction.[70] Their references to the beyond tend to consign the living-ness of nature, society, and history to a derivative and dependent status. In short, the reference "outside" is essential to that parapenal entirety of which Foucault wrote, and of Nancy's piled-up, compressed and crammed, concentrated world—and thus carries the seeds of destruction. How this is so becomes evident if we move to the second feature of imperio-colonial sense.

A second feature of Theology's imperio-colonial sense is its cultivation of *a transcendental ethos,* an elevated knowledge and practice held to be appropriate to the projected/constructed transcendent. The imperio-colonial sense, by referring to a transcendent beyond, secures for knowledge and practice a certain status of elevation above other knowledges and practices. While a sense of the transcendent may not be identical to a sense of the sovereign (sovereignty concerns more *the rule or power of* the transcendent, not just being in a direction or realm that is "beyond" or "outside" world), transcendence and sovereignty tend to blend in the emergence of this elevated knowledge and ethos. A community that refers to the transcendent beyond world tends to see its discourse of reference as participatory in that sovereign realm, and in this sense above other discourses. Sovereignty and transcendence mutually implicate one

---

70. Elshtain is, again, a case in point. She works with a supple and complex notion of the transcendent gleaned from readings of the Christian Augustinian tradition; and yet, she found herself during the George W. Bush administration's preemptive invasion and occupation of Iraq an early advocate of its war-making designs, even if she backed off later by foregrounding a more critical posture. I have analyzed her role among "liberal" thinkers and other supporters of the "war on terror," in Mark Lewis Taylor, *Religion, Politics, and the Christian Right: Post-9/11 Powers and American Empire* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 19–22.

another in a project of a governing knowledge. It is not surprising, then, that sovereignty has been referred to as a site in the human world of a "this-worldly transcendence."[71]

The special knowledge and its elevation may be urged upon adherents and supported by "faith." Faith's trusting in things unseen is taken here as a way to elevate a knowledge of an unseen other world, an outside realm, an unseen other whose cogency depends upon that faith. Or, the elevated knowledge may seek to raise itself upon arguments pertaining to various dimensions of world, which are taken as pointers to another world, certain "signals of transcendence," perhaps, in the immanental terrain that suggest a "something more." The language used in this knowledge, to be sure, always stresses that full or adequate knowledge is never attained. The transcendent is always some version of the *Deus absconditus,* "hidden God." And so Theology's language is always an indirect and figurative communication: analogical, symbolic, metaphorical. Minimal as the signals of transcendence may be, however, they still are taken as sufficient for creating Theology as elevated discourse pertaining to the transcendent, and this helps to shape further an ethos of transcendence in communities that routinely invoke the transcendent. Both to summarize Theology's elevated discourse oriented to a sovereign transcendent, and also to understand better the notion of sovereignty itself, I quote Nancy's reflection on "the sovereign":

> The sovereign is at the height because the height separates the top from the bottom and frees the former from the humility of the latter: from the humus, from the back bent from working the earth, from laying down in sleep, from malady or death, and from *extended things* in general. Extension holds everything at the same level, but the thing that is not extended, what looms over extensions and inspects it, is the *thinking thing* and the subject of the general government of things. In the place of a sensibility of the near, through touch, smell, and taste, it makes the organs of distance, sight and hearing, prevail.[72]

---

71. Tracy B. Strong, Foreword, in Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005 [German 1922, 1934]), xxx.

72. Jean-Luc Nancy, "Ex Nihilo Summum (Of Sovereignty)," in *CWoG,* 96–97.

Nancy's language points well to the rise of the imperial character of Theology's discourse, its taking a position that is on high, oriented as it is to the transcendent Other as sovereign. This tends to produce a set of scholars who enjoy a state of elevated discourse, easily entailing also a sense of entitlement to survey other discourses. This harbors a seed of control, of a "general government of things." At times this hardly seems consonant with the airs of gentility and humility that particular practitioners of Theology can exhibit, but it becomes evident especially in the failure to take with full seriousness the way references to the transcendent are mediated by very this-worldly dynamics. This becomes more evident, especially as we consider next the third feature.

A third feature of Theology's imperio-colonial sense is its *hermeneutical resistance to contextualizing Theology's language*. By this I mean a particular interpretative stance of Theology, wherein the beliefs and claims of its discourse are assessed intellectually, without considering the interplay of cognitive beliefs and claims with extradiscursive factors that come from contexts of interrelated bodies in the weighted world. The elevated discourse of Theology is akin to Nancy's "thinking thing," so intrinsic to concentrated power. Its orientation to the transcendent—even with all its insistences that the transcendent is incarnate and thus immanent—keeps it above extensions, where intimacy and distance between bodies congeal and concentrate in different modes of a weighted world. Its discourse privileges a "rationality" that is above the myriad constellations and contexts of related bodies, the "we" of the world.

Some will be quick to remind here that guild Theology's rationality is seen as related to, and even generated by, church contexts and for the sake of its various ecclesial, proclamatory, or faith practices. Thus, Theology can acknowledge that it always has its transcendent in very earthen vessels. But ecclesial forms of life and their practices are not the only way—not even the most defining ways—by which theologians and church members forge their "earthen" being in the world. More important are the multiple ways in which natural processes and social systems construct specific embodiments of the church and religious communities in the world—politically, economically, racially, sexually, and so on. If Theology attends to these latter defining forces, its theologians usually do so largely as a subsidiary concern, that is, keeping the primary focus of Theology's discourse on an ecclesial formation that nurtures and maintains the elevated discourse of the transcendent for its church communities.

It may be objected that these contexts of social, cultural, and political worlds are extraneous to the task of thinking, not as integrally connected to thought as we have seen Nancy to stress them to be.[73] It is difficult for this objection to be sustained by much more than assertion. If one has any respect at all for the role of critical reflection, especially when thinking referentially of the transcendent, then these contextual factors—the modes of the world's bodies weighing upon thinking—should not be treated as extrinsic to thinking. To my mind the power of context for being and thinking has been most forcefully put by philosopher Theodore Schatzki, in his book *The Site of the Social*,[74] and whose work later will enable our further reflection on the agonistic political.

Contexts, to summarize Schatzki, are the networks of our living, shaping our flesh, our affect, *and* our thinking. They have a surrounding, immersing aura, giving us ways of living like water does for a fish, like an electromagnetic field does for bodies (with some notable differences, to be sure). We can add to these similes further commentary on how contexts have powers of determination. Contexts' determining power may be *causative*, as when parents continually encourage a child to study hard and provide environments conducive to study, thus making likely the production of a student who excels in learning. Contexts may determine us by also being *institutive*, as when family wealth so grounds a person's life, as can happen for some, such that he or she never need worry about having a house to live in (with, perhaps also, a separate personal study well stocked with books). Concerning the affective dimension of contexts, being praised, loved, affirmed (or not) has a kind of instituting role, too, orienting one's very being toward the future in special ways. Contexts also are determinative by being *prefigurative*, suggesting not so much what our precise futures will be, but more what we will have to wrestle with, what opportunity structures we will be given or be denied. In short, contexts prefigure certain social constraints and enablements beyond those that we possess by reason of our individual differences.

Nevertheless, in spite of the persuasiveness of Schatzki's arguments, the issue of context for Theology cannot usually be settled by philosophical arguments alone. This is because the hermeneutical resistance

---

73. Nancy, *Corpus,* 37.
74. Theodore R. Schatzki, *The Site of the Social: A Philosophical Account of the Constitution of Social Life and Change* (Harrisburg: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002).

in Theology is due less to an intellectual conundrum, and more to a desire to maintain certain privileged knowledge and subject-positions. The debate about context in Theology's thinking is often an epistemological disputation that masks the guild discipline's routinized pattern of safeguarding the subject positions and subjectivities of those who long have been taken as the primary agents of discourse in Theology. This becomes more evident when one observes, in the Theology guilds of North American or European settings, what happens when certain thinkers with their long-excluded bodies and communities, bring new contextualized discourse into Theology. They begin to name their theological discourse from the communal backgrounds that are of concern to them, as in African American or black theology, U.S. Hispanic or Latino/a theology, Asian American theology, feminist theology, gay or lesbian theology, and so on. Let us grant, as we must, that each of these adjectives attached to theology in these locutions is itself a construct, an essentializing and ontologizing of groups of people that is fraught with many of the pitfalls of so-called identity politics. Peoples and theologies cannot, nor should they, be so easily categorized. We thereby risk glossing many differences internal to those groups, and glossing, too, many assemblages of traits and interests shared between them. People have what sociologist Gordon terms a "complex personhood," beautifully rendered in her *Ghostly Matters*. I cite just one of her phrases: "Complex personhood means that even those called 'Other' are never never that." Nevertheless, the adjectives do name the results of a resistance to what Gordon terms the equally "complicated working of race, class, and gender, the names we give to the ensemble of social relations that create inequalities, situated interpretive codes, particular kinds of subjects . . ."[75] Thus, in spite of the risks of essentialization, there is warrant and need for the constructs of Asian-American theology, black theology, and so on.

Theology's interpretive resistance to acknowledging the importance of context to thought becomes all the more marked when and if long-excluded voices begin to speak of the "Western," "colonial," or "white" contexts of Theology's traditional thinkers and knowledge,[76] or of, say,

---

75. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 4.

76. James H. Cone, "White Theology Revisited, 1998" in his *Risks of Faith: The Emergence of Black Liberation Theology, 1968–1998* (Boston: Beacon, 2000), 130–38.

their gendered or sexual being.[77] The usual and frequent response of Theology, in more progressive quarters, is silence, or perhaps a polite marginalizing acceptance. But when voice is found to protect the usual concerns of the decontextualized, elevated knowledge in Theology, the "subaltern knowledges" of new contexts are often dismissed as "ideological" or "reductionist." The reductionist charge usually holds that this talk of contexts "reduces" thought to the realms of society and body, and, second, "reduces" thought about the transcendent, about the Other, to world contexts of body and society, and so strips the Other of its defining transcendental character. The reasoning here is viciously circular— "circular" because the insistence usually boils down to claiming that one needs the Other to have a transcendent Other, and "vicious" because the ongoing criticism of the contextual turn, which accompanies a protection of the transcendent Other, continues to silence and exclude the already silenced and long excluded.

The resistance to contextualizing Theology's discourse, then, is another way to mask what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has termed "the geopolitically differentiated subject" of European discourse.[78] The subject that matters—both as "subject matter" deserving the most nuanced treatment and also as subjects most to be cherished and granted entitlements of power and wealth—is the subject of the European imperio-colonial project and its descendents. We have already noted the way Spivak carefully traces a dynamic of "foreclosure" in Kant's theorization of the subject in his *Critique of Judgment*. Here, in Theology, the construction of the transcendent Other is bound up with a process of foreclosing others whose place is deemed inappropriate, or subordinate to, the reigning discourse of Theology, as it has been pursued in most of the West's philosophy and Theology. Similar foreclosures are operative in Hegel and in Marx, even if in Hegel "foreclosure" often seems too gentle a term for his "deeply offensive" dismissals and "radical racist separation" that he advises for African subjects, who are so lacking in history and spirit that he need not speak of them when giving his accounts of world history.[79]

---

77. Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender, and Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

78. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 27, 31, and throughout.

79. George W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (New York: Dover, 1956), 93, 99. The quotes are from Spivak, *Critique of Postcolonial Reason,* 43 and 94,

Yet, I suggest *foreclosure*, as Spivak draws the term from Lacanian and Freudian discourse, is an excellent term for naming an act of studied nonchalance. It occurs when the ego of philosophy or Theology "rejects [*verwift*] the incompatible idea *together with the affect* and behaves as if the idea had never occurred to the ego at all."[80]

It needs to be acknowledged that in Theology, recent decades have seen the discipline of guild Theology displaying various turns to the contextualization of its language. Not surprisingly, this is done most by thinkers coming from foreclosed and oppressed communities. Especially those who understand their reflection as an embodiment of liberating struggle have cognitively embraced diverse contextualities, among them Eleazar Fernandez in his *Reimagining the Human: Theological Anthropology in the Face of Systematic Evil*, in which he begins with the variable of class identity and then relates it to others (such as gender, race, nation, and more).[81] James Cone's work is renowned for focusing on his own life story and on the struggle of black empowerment in the United States in theological reflection.[82] He is less known for the equally impressive way he articulates connections between that struggle and those working out of consciousnesses shaped by gender and sexuality, class and nation.[83] Similarly, Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez, after beginning his theological reflection from his context as a priest among the poor in Latin America (in particular, the Rimac district of Lima), then rendered his contextual starting point more complexly by examining issues of race, gender, and environment.[84] Women of all backgrounds, as in the formative work of Kwok Pui-lan's *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*,[85] have

---

respectively. On her criticism of Marx, and particularly of his construct, "the Asiatic mode of production," see Spivak, 67–111.

80. Spivak, *Critique of Postcolonial Reason,* 4, citing Jean Laplance and J.-B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-Analysis,* trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Norton, 1974), 166–69.

81. Eleazar S. Fernandez, *Reimagining the Human: Theological Anthropology in Response to Systemic Evil* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2004).

82. James Cone, *The God of the Oppressed,* rev. ed. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1997).

83. James H. Cone, *For My People: Black Theology and the Black Church* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1988).

84. See the new introduction to the fifteenth anniversary edition of Gustavo Gutiérrez's *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation,* rev. ed. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1988), xxi–xxv.

85. Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005).

been crucial in keeping guild Theology cognizant of contexts—and again, not just contexts of gendered or sexed bodies, but also those stereotyped, subordinated, and repressed by race and class as well.[86] These writers cited here are mainly the theologians who have inaugurated early challenges to Theology's occlusion of subordinate communities' contributions. Since then, many others have complexified further the identities and interests of theological writers and their knowledge, working in Asian American, U.S. Hispanic and Latino/a, and African American contexts, and in indigenous Christian settings.[87]

Theology is often quick to cite all this as progress. As Miguel De La Torre has pointed out, however, most professors who wish to teach Theology in the United States from a perspective other than white male European traditions are forced to transform the subject of their courses into an adjective—as in "Black Theology" or "Asian Theology." Such courses he notes—and my experience would confirm this—are usually only offered as electives. Required courses in the "introduction of Theology" rarely teach a parity of import between European white male theologies and others. If "others" are listed among required readings, they are often fewer in number, presented as "recent alternatives," and rarely made the subject of rigorous examination. The primary cognitive action and theological forms taught are the heavily doctrinalized traditions of the European "malestream" West. As De La Torre also observes wryly, the courses that lean in this way, however, are rarely, if ever, named "Eurocentric Male Theologies."[88] De La Torre's criticisms of the European male citadel in Theology are amply extended and reinforced by others in liberation theology, as well as in postcolonial or decolonial theologies that see in the foregrounding of this geopolitically differentiated subject not only a

---

86. For key early texts in theology by women addressing contexts of sexism, patriarchy, and "kyriarchy," as well as more recent formulations, see Susan Frank Parsons, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). For exemplary reflection on complex feminist reflections on contextualized bodies, see Laurel C. Schneider, "What Race is Your Sex?," in *Disrupting White Supremacy from Within: White People on What We Need to Do,* ed. Jennifer Harvey, Karin A. Case, and Robin Haeley Gorsline (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2004), 123–41; and Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

87. For one critical display of the diversity of the present theological period, see Finnish scholar Veli-Mati Karkkainen's *Doctrine of God: A Global Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004).

88. Miguel A. De La Torre, ed., *Handbook of U.S. Theologies of Liberation* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2004), 1–2.

foreclosing of "others," usually of non-Euro-American voices and per-
spectives, but also a hiding from critique that comes from many thinkers
in the world South whose wealth and power are curtailed by global pow-
ers of the North.[89] It should be noted, too, to push De La Torre's points
further, that a certain hegemonic masculinism in Theology—among white
and nonwhite scholars—can function to neglect or "minoritize" the theo-
logical work carried on by all women, especially women of color.

One way to sum up this third feature of Theology's imperio-colonial
sense, this hermeneutical resistance to the contextual turn, is to say that
the Euro-American male subject-position often fails to meet the intel-
lectual responsibility of what Pierre Bourdieu has termed "reflexivity,"
rendered most clearly in his *Pascalian Meditations*:

> To practice reflexivity means questioning the privilege of a knowing
> 'subject'. . . . It means endeavoring to account for the empirical 'sub-
> ject' of scientific practice in the terms of the objectivity constructed
> by the scientific 'subject'—in particular by situating him [or her] at a
> determinate point in social space-time . . .[90]

Bourdieu remarks further what this reflexivity means for the study of
homo academicus:

> Nor can one be satisfied with seeking the conditions of possibility
> and the limits of objective knowledge in the 'subject,' as the classical
> (Kantian) philosophy of knowledge recommends. . . . One has to
> look into the object constructed by science (the social space or the
> field) to find *the social conditions of possibility of the 'subject' and
> of his work of constructing the object* . . . and so to bring to light the
> social limits of his act of objectification.[91]

There is precious little space in the academic institutions of guild Theol-
ogy to practice this kind of exposure. And so, the imperio-colonial sense
includes the following fourth feature.

---

89. This has been an emphasis of various liberation theologians and especially by post-
colonial and decolonial critics in theology. As one example, see R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Postco-
lonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

90. Pierre Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford: Stanford
University Press, 1997), 119.

91. Ibid., 120. Italic added.

In a fourth feature, Theology is involved in *maintaining the subject-position and subjectivities of Euro-American, predominantly white and male, discourse and thinking*. I do *not* mean that there is an abundance of administrators and theologians in Theology and its institutions who intend to maintain this, although there are some. What I do mean is that there is a failure, along with the failure of reflexivity, to make the structural changes necessary to foreground the bodies and lives of long-occluded and foreclosed peoples in positions of classroom and institutional control in Theology. To be sure, there is much talk—almost as a kind of mantra, invoking "diversity" and "otherness." Rarely, however, is there the sustained commitment to make changes that would actually empower those whose lineages are traceable to the undersides of imperio-colonial history. Rarely found, for example, are commitments by institutions to set specific goals for the future faculty's racial/ethnic or gender make-up, to create functioning parity of opportunity and power among racial/ethnic groups, between men and women.[92] The maintenance of privileged subject-positions, then, is not so much a matter of persons' intentions and beliefs, but more as sociologist Howard Winant defines the working of racism: a "routinized outcome of practices that create or reproduce hierarchical social structure."[93] This routinizing of outcome often is sustained by essentializing stereotypes, fears, and discrimination that long have circulated in colonizing cultures and that long have been imposed upon colonized others, as men or as women, almost always as marked by the construct of race, and for the purpose of exploiting their lands, resources, and bodies for empowerment of the colonizing power.[94]

The distribution of faculty positions in major Christian theological institutions of the United States gives some evidence of the slowness of change, if change there be at all, in the way Euro-American and white

---

92. One exception about which I know is Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts, whose case is summarized in "Case: Preparing the Ground," in the Association of Theological Schools 2002 Folio *Diversity in Theological Education,* www.ats.edu/Resources/Documents/DiversityFolio.pdf, accessed September 14, 2010.

93. Howard Winant, *The New Politics of Race: Globalism, Difference, Justice* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 126.

94. On race as the "ultimate version of the difference axiom" in colonialism, see Jürgen Oesterhammel, *Colonization: A Theoretical Overview* (Princeton: Markus Wiener, 2002). On gender and sexuality at play with race in imperio-coloniality, see Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Imperial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

subject-positions have been maintained in the institutions of Theology. Among all member schools in the Association of Theological Schools (ATS), faculty of color make up some 15 to 17 percent of all faculty.[95] The figure can often be lower, if one looks at only U.S. institutions, and certainly is lower at select major institutions.[96] In U.S. theological institutions as a whole, of all tenured professors in ATS schools (where the power of a faculty resides, usually), a full 84 percent of them are white, 15 percent being African American, Asian American, or U.S. Hispanic/Latino/a. Only 25 percent, one quarter, of all tenured faculty members are women. Among just the full professors, the highest-ranked and most credentialed group, 87 percent of them are white, with African Americans, Asian Americans, and U.S. Hispanics-Latinos/as together making up 12 percent. Only 21 percent of all full professors in the U.S. ATS schools are women.[97]

In short, while there has over the last decade been greater production of thinking out of often foreclosed communities, in the form of different kinds of contextual theologies, and even though there has been some rise in the percent of racial/ethnic representation on faculties (from 4 percent to 12.7 percent between 1980 and 2001[98]), this has not yet marked a shift in power within guild Theology, which remains centered largely around the discourses structured by and for Euro-American white and male subjectivities and subject-positions. Even if the numbers at times show increases in racial/ethnic faculty, that numerical growth by itself is not an indicator of the mitigation of white power in those settings, unless the regime of instruction also changes (in curriculum, text usage, classroom, and campus ethos), with faculty of color, both women and men,

---

95. Daniel O. Aleshire, "Gifts Differing: The Educational Value of Race and Ethnicity," in *Race and Ethnicity*, special issue of *Theological Education* 45, no. 1 (2009): 1–18, at 12.

96. At Princeton Theological Seminary, of all faculty (at assistant, associate, and full professor ranks), 88 percent are white, with racial/ethnic members (African American and Asian American, no U.S. Hispanics-Latinos/as) being 12 percent.

97. I am deriving these percentages of women and racial/ethnic groups at ATS schools, and those that follow, by using my calculator on data gathered by the ATS in its "2009/2010 Annual Data Tables," at http://www.ats.edu/Resources/Publications/Documents/AnnualDataTables/2009-10AnnualDataTables.pdf, accessed September 14, 2010.

98. "Full-time Racial/Ethnic Faculty in ATS Member Schools," in *Diversity in Theological Education* (see n. 85, above).

significantly present in the upper ranks and with authority to teach basic introductory courses.

In sum, the imperio-colonial sense of theology circulates in a discursive formation that has these four features. First, it has its condition in its orienting projection of a transcendent Other, an outside, a realm beyond. Then, second, it constructs, maintains and nurtures others in an "elevated knowledge" (based on "faith" or perceived "signals of transcendence") that is thought to point to that transcendent Other, adapting the sense of Theology's statements and claims to this Other to whom it refers. Third, it often resists, in its hermeneutical *habitus,* a disciplined turn to contexts, either to affirm them as necessary sources for foreclosed and repressed thinkers themselves, or enabling and limiting the social conditions of their own entitled thinking. And then, all too often this yields a preferential maintenance of the bodies, subjectivities, and subject-positions of Euro-American faculty and administrators in the positions of greater power in Theological institutions.

Conclusion: The Theological as Theology's Hydra

"The theological" of this book thus haunts the discourse of guild Theology as usually practiced. It unsettles and haunts not only by the presence of oft-excluded persons in Theology, but also by posing a challenge to largely decontextualized reflection in Theology. Neglect concerning import of context and mediation in Theology, and of its references to the transcendent is, to my knowledge, widespread in U.S. theological education especially. Because the theological traces and theorizes ways that persons and groups who are traditionally rendered subordinate under the concentrated weight of the world are able, nevertheless, to haunt, unsettle, and perhaps dissolve the structures of those systems of knowledge and power, the theological also haunts the Theology whose effects often participate in the world's weight as concentrated.

In this sense, the theological, as well as the struggles of those whose work and resistance it traces, poses as Hydra with respect to Theology. I deploy the image of the Hydra here intentionally. It provides one way to contextualize the dis-ease of the academy today with the spectral wandering labor of sense, Theology's resistance to continual contextualizing that is intrinsic to the body of sense. The Hydra, in Greek myth, was a

many-headed venomous serpent whose heads would grow back whenever cut off; also, when cut into sections, each could regrow into a whole new creature. It is a fitting image for the resilience of the theological in its engagement with Theology.

Theological and colonizing architects of Western expansionist projects, whether under the banners of Christian mission, civilization, or development, also took interest in this Greek mythic story. They reveled especially in the figure of Hercules whose task was to destroy the Hydra. In Greek narratives, Hercules's second labor was to slay the Hydra, which he achieved by sealing off the neck of each head, severing each with a lighted torch, and then using arrows dipped in the serpent's own poison to vanquish it. According to historians Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, the "Hydra" was the mythic term used by Western commercial and educated elites to symbolize the multitudinous and resilient forces of workers, which had to be tamed, shriveled, punished, and, perhaps also exterminated.[99] Intrinsic to Kant's "foreclosure" of non-European subjects as worthy of consideration was also his view that the nonwhite races will be eradicated, "stamped out" (*Alle racen warden ausgerottet warden*).[100] Francis Bacon often deployed the Hercules/Hydra myth, suggesting that architects of the global market perform their "labor of Hercules" against the enemies of civilization: "West Indians, Canaanites, pirates, land rovers, assassins, Amazons and Anabaptists."[101] Sir Walter Raleigh, Thomas Hobbes, William Shakespeare, and a host of others deployed the Hydra symbol in similar ways. Thomas Edwards, a seventeenth-century British writer, made a catalog of the many heads of heresy that constituted a "Hydra, ready to rise up in their place."[102] He also portrayed John Calvin as a "Christian Hercules" because he triumphed over the monstrous papists, Anabaptists, and libertines.[103] These are just a few of many examples in the history of this symbolism of the Hydra in the West that could

---

99. Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston: Beacon, 2000), 3–6, 331.

100. See Kant's *Reflexionen 1520,* as discussed by J. Kameron Carter in his *Race: A Theological Account* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 89–90.

101. Linebaugh and Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra*, 39.

102. For additional information on the Hydra/Hercules mythology, and its importance, see my discussion in *Religion, Politics, and the Christian Right*, 120–23.

103. Linebaugh and Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra*, 39.

be given.[104] It continues into the present, with "Hydra" being a symbol invoked to describe the West's grappling with the network today of pirates, terrorists, and other perceived insurgencies against the West. An article late in the administration of George W. Bush in 2007, for example, urged that new U.S. energies be mobilized for campaigns in Afghanistan. The article was entitled "Revitalizing U.S. Efforts in Afghanistan," with key sections on the mix of unruly agents described as "Hydra-headed Insurgency."[105]

Rather than tame the Hydra in the name of some Herculean exercise of sovereignty, the way of the theological is to trace the body of sense that is the weight of the world, particularly as those struggling amid its concentrated weight seek to weigh-in to create a world with a more just spacing. The theological foregrounds, traces, and thinks along the way of the Hydra and, in the midst of hermeneutical complexities, affirms even the uncertainty of outcome, theoretical and practical, that will accompany a wandering labor of sense through many contexts. The theological does not give up on all criteria of adjudication between the claims of different contexts, but it undertakes any such adjudications amid the shifting and delicate interlacing of bodies that sense traverses, in its wandering and laboring across contexts, historical, personal, social, economic, political. As a theological venture, this will take thought and practice not into a space of transcendence, but more, as Nancy theorizes, into a "transimmanence," a continual opening of existence to itself.[106] Again, that transimmanence is the critical space for clarifying the notion of "the theological" proposed for this work.

Being "in sense," valuing especially the proliferation of meaning(s) among those suffering the concentrated weight of the world, and their interpretive gestures and thinking, will mean foregrounding and exploring in disciplined ways their contextual worlds. Exemplary are the writings of Tat-Siong Benny Liew in Asian American biblical hermeneutics

---

104. For discussion of the image, see historian William Kidd, "Marianne: from Medusa to Messalina—Psycho-Sexual Imagery and Political Propaganda in France, 1789–1945," *Journal of European Studies* 34 (December 2004): 333–48.

105. Lisa Curtis and James Phillips, "Revitalizing U.S. Efforts in Afghanistan," The Heritage Foundation, Backgrounder Paper # 2076, October 15, 2007, http://www.heritage.org/Research/MiddleEast/bg2076.cfm, accessed September 14, 2010.

106. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Muses*, trans. Peggy Kamuf. French 1994 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 34–35.

in the United States,[107] Emilie Townes in ethics, who theorizes the con-
crete worlds of diverse African American women and others, or Naim
Ateek, writing out of the Christian struggle from Palestine.[108] These and
other explications and struggles to present singular contextualities (Asian
American, African American, and so on), especially because these have
long been rendered invisible or foreclosed, must become not only efforts
of the marginalized themselves, but also a struggle of all theological inter-
preters. Members of dominant groups in North America should begin
wrestling with greater emphasis on the constructed notion and force of
"whiteness" and their own participation in it.[109] All these individual and
group singularities are as important to "sense" as are the pluralities. In
fact, there is no simple choice here between the singularities and plurality
as two options. What is before us as interpreters, in Nancy's language, is
the "singular plural." Moreover, being *in* sense does not mean eschewing
comparisons and debates between the various contexts, between indi-
vidual writers and group dynamics, and entering into the play of critique
between them. But being "in sense" does mean giving up on the hope
that sovereignty, and an imperio-colonizing sense of transcendence of
meaning, rests within any one or few of them, or with any single group of
interpreters. It means resting, wandering, working in the always/already
closeness of the bodies of world, their "brushing up against . . . distanced
proximity."[110] With this language of Nancy's we are back to that world of
"extension," of spacings and distances that constitute freedom and life,
which is alternative to the world as "concentration."

The wandering labor of sense includes "an unappeasable and always
unsettled" quality. For creation of justice, and working toward it with
an unappeasabilty and unsettled quality, has what Nancy risks naming
a strange "sovereignty of meaning." Note, however, it is the unsettling
quality of the unappeasable meaning that is "sovereign," not a meaning
secured by a group referring to the transcendent. That unappeasable

---

107. Tat-Siong Benny Liew, *What Is Asian-American Biblical Hermeneutics? Reading the
New Testament* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2008).

108. Emilie Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (New York:
Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); and Naim Stifan Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice: A Palestinian
Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1989).

109. Exemplary here, still, is the work of theologian James Perkinson, *White Theology:
Outing Supremacy in Modernity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

110. Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural,* trans. Robert D. Richardson and Anne E.
O'Byrne (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000 [French 1996]), 98.

and unsettled quality is crucial to both truth and justice, as we shall see in subsequent chapters, a point often viewed as counterfactual to many working in imperio-colonial paradigms of scholarship today, those who see truth and justice as more threatened than aided by the unappeasable and unsettled intellectual traditions of our times.

In short, what we have before us, beckoning toward a sense of the theological, is not just the dissolution of imperio-colonizing sovereignty as an interpretive ideal for Theology, but also the birth of a sensate/sensing of what Hutchens helpfully terms "a multiply reticulated and irreducible singularity."[111] The thrust of our hermeneutical endeavor, then, for articulating the theological, is a mode of wandering. But this is not only a wandering in and for wandering itself. It is a wandering *through* sensate and sensed "reticulations, and especially as these bodies of sense are susceptible to the shift from extended to concentrated weight of the world. The challenge to theological interpretation, as indeed for all truly complex interpretive endeavors, is to grapple with this complexity, commit to the "wandering labor of sense," to circulate meaningfully the incomprehension and difficulty of thought presented by proliferating meaning across historical and present contextual singularities.

---

111. Hutchens, *Jean-Luc Nancy and the Future of Philosophy,* 43, following Nancy's early language in Jean-Luc Nancy, "Sharing Voices," in *Transforming the Hermeneutic Context: From Nietzsche to Nancy*, ed. G. Ormiston and A. Schrift (Albany: State University of New York Press), 211–59.