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Twilight of the God-Idols: 
Race, Religion, and the Life and Death of Whiteness in Contemporary America

By

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ABSTRACT

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White people die. Such a brash statement not only refers to an obvious physical death faced by humans across race, but is metaphoric commentary on literal shifting racial demographics in an increasingly diverse 21st Century U.S. society. This project suggests that certain concepts, such as whiteness or the category of god, what I refer to as “god-idols,” make acceptance of this real or imagined “death” difficult, as it is their function to ignore, deny or fight directly against recognition of human limit and uncertainty experienced through a confrontation with physical and social expressions of death.

Though not limited to white Christians, historically, many white U.S. Christians have been unable and unwilling to accept a loss of social control and certainty—a loss that appears on the horizon. Responding to the fears of some and the hopes of others that such a “death” becomes reality, I make use of the trope of death as theme and ontological grounding so as to theorize a death-dealing system of adherence to these “god-idols,” followed by suggestions about how to respond to such a social arrangement. I offer the start of a program of response, calling for white Christians and white people more generally to fully exercise their limited human freedom through a radical embrace of their responsibility to learn to live in an uncertain social world where interdependence and equitable relationships are required in ever-complicated ways.
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Since a very early age, many have fostered in me a passion for critically engaging a wide variety of social, theological and philosophical topics, giving me the space to ask probing questions and the tools and inspiration sustaining my inquiries and interest in such questions.

I met some of these people at Kings Highway Christian Church in Shreveport, Louisiana, where I experienced some of the best and worst that humans muster in community. Of the best, Charles Ravenna, Jane Baudoin, Flo Camack, Dave Farmer, and Valerie Rockett continue to support me even in their deaths. These names mark, in my mind, the very best of white Christian commitment, in that those commitments were firstly to people, even if they thought otherwise themselves. I would not be here without them, and so I bear witness to them here. Of the worst, my work will likely always explore the weight of intellectual and ideological formations on social realities. Though I will never celebrate pain or tragedy as redemptive, I have tried here to give voice to some of the more pernicious aspects of what it means to grow up a white Christian, learning how to love from the same people who teach how to hate and fear difference.

Though I could not possibly name everyone who has made a powerful, wonderful impact on me during my education, the following individuals stand out as having had an impact on the ideas presented within this dissertation, and/or on my ability to articulate them: Rodney Thomas, Rev. Shauna St. Clair, Rev. Rachel Gene May, Sha’Tika Brown, Linda Ceriello, Karen Rosenthal, Dr. April DeConick, Dr. Jeffrey Kripal, David Kline, Benji Rolsky, Dr. Blaine Hamilton, Dr. Daniel White Hodge; Aundrea Matthews, Rachel Vlachos, Sravana Varma, Darrius Hills, Terri Laws, Jessica Davenport, and Cleve Tinsley; Dr. Grant Adamson, Dr. Enoch Gbadegesin, Eliot Berger, Nathaniel Homewood, Dr. Derek Hicks, Dr. Margarita Simon-
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I attended my first American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting in 2007 as a master’s student. It was there that I met someone who inspired and supported my decision to embark on a Ph.D. She was the most inspirational, energetic, brilliant and beautiful person I have ever met. It is even fair to say that had we not met, I might not have continued down the uncertain path of a scholar of religion. I wanted nothing more than to spend as much time as possible with her. The significance of that first meeting, and all that has transpired between that meeting and now, is such that to think too much on its varied dimensions would risk deconstructing many of the propositions laid out in this project. The greatest uncertainty of all, perhaps, is reckoning with the possibility of learning how to live life with the certainty experienced from a soul mate. I could not have imagined that the person I met then would see as much in me. Her inspiration I now experience daily, her brilliance constantly keeping me in check and uncertain of my ideas. This project, was, is, and remains a project, thanks to Dr. Monica R. Miller. I love you. I thank you. I smile at the thought that this is a beginning to a story that really has no end, no death. Is twilight even twilight if experienced with another? I’ll leave that question for another project. Seven.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .................................................................................................................................................. iii

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ........................................................................................................................ iv

TABLE OF CONTENTS .......................................................................................................................... vii

DEDICATION PAGE ................................................................................................................................ xi

EPIGRAPHS ............................................................................................................................................... xii

INTRODUCTION ...................................................................................................................................... 1

Recognition of Twilight .......................................................................................................................... 5
Structure of the Argument and Chapter Layout .................................................................................... 7
Blurring Theoretical and Methodological Distinctions ........................................................................ 11

PART I: Learning to Die ...................................................................................................................... 13

CHAPTER ONE
In the Shadows of Whiteness: An Existential and Functional Account
of the Birth, Death and Twilight of a God-Idol ..................................................................................... 14

Black Offerings ...................................................................................................................................... 16
  White ‘Rituals of Reference’ .................................................................................................................. 17
  First Visions of Whiteness .................................................................................................................... 18
  The Pervasiveness of Whiteness ........................................................................................................... 20
The Function of the God-Idol .............................................................................................................. 25
  Exaggerations of God-Idols ................................................................................................................... 29
  The Existential Function of God-Idols .................................................................................................. 31
  The Social Function of God-Idols .......................................................................................................... 33
Misrecognized Lynch Ropes ................................................................................................................. 35
The Birth of Whiteness as a God-Idol ................................................................................................... 37
  Functionalism Theorizes the Functionalist Theorist .......................................................................... 39
  Negative Rites of Whiteness ................................................................................................................. 43
  Positive Rites of Whiteness ................................................................................................................... 47
  Imitative, Commemorative, and Representative Rites of Whiteness ................................................. 50
  Piacular Rites of Whiteness .................................................................................................................. 53
The Death of Whiteness as a God-Idol .................................................................................................. 55
# Contents

*The Death of Whiteness* ........................................................................................................... 56

*The Death of Whiteness* ........................................................................................................... 70

The Twilight of Whiteness as a God-Idol .................................................................................. 73

---

## Chapter Two

**The ‘White Man’s God Complex’: Most Americans, the (White) Power of Paradox, and Believing in the Twilight of Theism** .......................................................... 81

Most Americans ....................................................................................................................... 86

The (White) Power of Paradox ............................................................................................... 102

The White Man’s God Complex as a System ........................................................................... 107

*Theism as a Sub-System* ........................................................................................................ 109

*Autopoiesis of the System* ...................................................................................................... 113

Autopoietic Functions within the White Man’s God Complex .............................................. 117

The Paradox of Second Order Distinction and the Necessity of Sacrifice ......................... 121

“Crossing” the Paradox of Distinction and Believing in the Twilight of Theism .................. 126

Sighting Whiteness within the Twilight of Theism .................................................................. 130

---

## Chapter Three

**Battling White Lies: Imago Superlata and the Twilight of the God-Idols** .......................... 135

White Lies ................................................................................................................................ 137

Imago Superlata and Fighting Ethical Battles ......................................................................... 141

*From Normative Ethics to the ‘Ethical Domain’* ................................................................... 142

*Situating Theology and Anthropology within the ‘Ethical Domain’* ................................. 145

‘To Free Ourselves’ from Kayerts and Carlier ........................................................................ 150

Dissolving the Distinction between Theology and Anthropology ......................................... 158

Cultural Emptiness and the Construction of Identity/Other .................................................. 162

The Principle Exaggeration of the Imago Superlata ................................................................ 166

Projecting Identities onto Material, Limited Bodies .............................................................. 170

Agential and Valuative Exaggerations: A Schematic for Analysis ......................................... 174

Sacrifice, Capital, and the Sacrifice of Power ......................................................................... 181

Theology as a Human Science ................................................................................................. 184

Twilight of the God-Ids ....................................................................................................... 190

---

## Part II: Learning to Die for Others

---

## Chapter Four

**Embracing the Hell of Death: Learning to ‘Number Our Days’ with a Limited Religious Outlook** ............................................................................................................. 194

Numbering Our Days with a Limited Religious Outlook ....................................................... 196

A Poetics of the Imago Superlata .............................................................................................. 199

*Swerving into Hell* ................................................................................................................ 201

*Even Satan Dies* .................................................................................................................... 205
Numbering the Days of Our Twilight ........................................................................................................207
  Vignette One: Uncertainty in the Face of Death .........................................................................................208
The Uncertainty of Escaping the Hell of God ..............................................................................................210
Gods, Devils, and Uncertain Humans ..........................................................................................................219
Not All Hells Are Created Equal: Contextualizing an Uncertain Humanism ............................................222
Focusing a Limited Religious Outlook ........................................................................................................226
Beginning to Narrate a Limited Religious Outlook .......................................................................................233
  Homo Narrans: Storytelling without Exaggerating .....................................................................................234
  Vignette Two: The Orthodoxy of Death ....................................................................................................235
How to ‘Number Our Days’: Narrating the Embrace of Death ....................................................................238
Narrating the Death of God-Idols ..................................................................................................................245

CHAPTER FIVE
Rejecting the ‘Gift of Death’: Embracing Social Responsibility in Twilight Times through a Pedagogic of Death .........................................................................................................................248

Taking Salvation Personally ..........................................................................................................................249
Personal Salvation as the ‘Gift of Death’ ......................................................................................................252
Sketching a Pedagogic of Death ....................................................................................................................255
  Life, Death, and a Twilight so Long Endured ............................................................................................258
  Senescence and Social Power .....................................................................................................................263
White Hearts are Lonely Hunters ...................................................................................................................266
  The Loneliness of God-Idol Adherence .......................................................................................................267
  John Singer as God-Idol ............................................................................................................................269
  Twilight of a God-Idol ..................................................................................................................................272
  Responding to Twilight .............................................................................................................................275
The Gift of Death and Death of the Social Other ............................................................................................277
  The Wholly Other as Social Other .............................................................................................................278
  The Gift of Death as an Economy of Sacrifice ..........................................................................................281
  To Accept the Gift of Death is to Accept the Death of Social Others .......................................................282
The Effect of Rejecting the Gift of Death .......................................................................................................287
Exposing the ‘Object’ of Death ......................................................................................................................292
Salvation in Twilight .......................................................................................................................................296

CHAPTER SIX
Requiem for Whiteness: Mourning, Freedom in Uncertainty, and the Final Embrace of Twilight ............................................................299

NOTICE OF DEATH .........................................................................................................................................302
INVOCATION ................................................................................................................................................307
  Strange White Fruit Hanging from a Dead God-Idol Tree .........................................................................307
  Uncertain Mourning ..................................................................................................................................312
  Uncertain Mourning and the ‘Sadness that Has No Name’ .......................................................................318
EUOLOGY .......................................................................................................................................................325
  Some Assemblage Required .....................................................................................................................326
  Looking Backwards to Measure the Future Danger of Whiteness ..........................................................331
HOMILY .........................................................................................................................336
  Freedom within the Limits of Exaggerated Privilege ...........................................337
  The Twilight of Laurel Falls ...............................................................................341
  The Transformative Power of Embracing Twilight ...............................................347
BENEDICTION ...........................................................................................................350
  Letting Go of Universal Applicability .................................................................351
  Letting Go of Certainty in the Death of Whiteness .............................................354
  Letting Go of the Certainty of an Argument .......................................................356
Elegy for Whiteness ....................................................................................................359

CONCLUSION
A Warning ..................................................................................................................360

BIBLIOGRAPHY .........................................................................................................362
To

Rev. Barbara H. Driscoll
A nation’s religion is its life, and as such white Christianity is a miserable failure.
- W.E.B. DuBois

So to answer your question, without further delay: no, I never learned-to-live. Absolutely not! Learning to live ought to mean learning to die - to acknowledge, to accept, an absolute mortality—without positive outcome, or resurrection, or redemption, for oneself or for anyone else. That has been the old philosophical injunction since Plato: to be a philosopher is to learn how to die. I believe in this truth without giving myself over to it. Less and less in fact. I have not learned to accept death. We are all survivors on deferral (and regarding deferral, from the geopolitical viewpoint in Specters of Marx, the emphasis is especially—in a world that is more inegalitarian than ever—on the billions of living beings—human and otherwise—who are denied not only basic “human rights,” which go back two hundred years old and are continually being amplified, but are denied even the right to live a decent life). But I remain impervious to learning when it comes to knowing-how-to-die, I have yet to learn anything about this particular subject.
- Jacques Derrida

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Introduction

I entered graduate school motivated by a desire to come to terms with the exigencies of religion, theology and whiteness in ways that would take seriously both the criticisms of black and womanist scholarship, and the particular existential concerns of contemporary white Christians in the United States. I had a simple, if methodologically “bad,” though socially and epistemologically pregnant research question guiding my initial intellectual interests:

Why have so many white Christians in the United States been racist? Or posed differently, borrowing the words of sociologist W.E.B. DuBois, why has white Christianity been such a “miserable failure”?3 And, how would success or failure even be determined? This dissertation attempts to answer and respond to such questions. I submit an attempt to learn how to let go of certain ideas and patterns of social meaning-making that have given some of us a false sense of security and a very real political power, neither of which have been deserved and both are now in question more and more. This project laments the realization that some of the ideas and practices held most dear and sacred by white Christians and many white people in the United States have come at a great cost to the humanity of self and those othered by a social arrangement grounded in denial, lies, and empty promises of security.

I argue that for white Christians, the concept of god and the concept of whiteness emerge as two expressions of the same denial of human limitation and subsequent demand for social and personal certainty—creating a presumed distance between groups and ideas based on denial of an uncertain human reality. By whiteness, I refer to a racialized expression of a fundamental inability to accept limitation and uncertainty. I refer to such a reality as a condition of radical

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3 DuBois, *Darkwater.*
contingency, a situation of forced reliance on others, while I refer to the distances crafted to deny such a situation as exaggerations of radical contingency. For instance, social ethicist and religious studies scholar James Perkinson notes that “one of the very meanings of whiteness as supremacy has been an attempt to escape the terrors of contingency [that is, radical contingency] by, in effect, forcing other populations to know that particular experience of creatureliness intimately.”⁴ What Perkinson suggests is that out of a denial or unwillingness to face squarely the uncertainties and limitations posed by human life, the idea of whiteness has functioned to localize those fears more acutely on certain populations offering a sense of distance between those “terrors” and the community employing the idea of whiteness. What is typically understood as the sacred/profane distinction lies at the heart of these social and existential distances posed between various groups. In a similar way that “white” and “colored” drinking fountains reinforced a social binary of black and white, traditional theism offers a cosmic projection of a similar system, not necessarily based on white skin, but based on the same presumption of difference meant to secure certainty and ignore, fight or deny human limitations such as our inability to overcome death, our lack of full social knowing, and our considerations of what we “ought” to do or appreciate.

These distances stem from a religious orientation I refer to as the *imago superlata*, in the image of exaggerations of a person or group’s proximity to death, limitation and uncertainty based on presumptions about that person or group’s abilities and value. This system produces social consequences and masks those consequences by maintaining a belief in some idea of certainty and value, be it whiteness, god, or another social centering concept. Beliefs about different (greater or lesser) abilities and values amongst different groups end up inevitably

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mapped onto social reality while the distance one places between this belief and human reality hides this process of social mapping. This demand for certainty produces social consequences like racism and sexism, while the greater the presumed distance between human uncertainty and the beliefs used to address such uncertainty conceals the impact of such beliefs on that uncertain social world. In other words, this denial system is most effective when it denies its role as such a denial system.

In effort to uncover and make visible this denial system, I have developed the concept of a god-idol as a way to capture the functional nuances of ideas like whiteness, theism, patriarchy, and others. In doing so, not only have I sought to answer the question of the relation between white Christianity and racism, but begin to respond to it. A turn towards embrace of limitation, uncertainty and death are how I begin here to offer strategies that might aid white Americans and white Christians more specifically to address the legacy of their cultural inheritance—a legacy from which they still benefit.

Much of this dissertation is about letting go of the power to distinguish: between white and black, between theist and atheist, between life and death, between theology and social theory, between certainty and uncertainty, between freedom and responsibility, and most pressingly, the distinction between god and idol. Gods, I want to suggest, are ideological constructions that rely on presumed social difference, and they never fully achieve what they mean to accomplish for their adherents—provide the foundation to know, to be certain, and to live without fear. Thus, gods (Western ones, at least) always already have the character of idols. And “idols,” like the idea of whiteness⁵, are always much more powerful than the moniker “idol”

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⁵ One of the first to note the relationship between racism and white Christianity in the United States is George D. Kelsey. His work inspires much of this project, as he refers to racism as a form of idolatry. Many of his suggestions are as pertinent today as they were when he published
gives credence. Functionally speaking, there are no “idols” or “gods,” only god-idols. I refer to “god-idols” in attempt to hold in tension the limited possibilities of gods and the unlimited consequences of idolatry—gods and idols are the same thing; distinguishing between the two simply reinforces what Pierre Bourdieu refers to as a “principle of structuration,” the “(hidden) imposition” of “a system of practices and representations whose structure, objectively founded on a principle of political division, presents itself as the natural-supernatural structure of the cosmos.”

The power of these god-idols is not found in any otherworldly or creator ‘god’, but in this principle of structuration that undergirds human relations and allows for the transformation of a desire for certainty into the material attempt to secure it in society. “God-idol” is meant to focus attention to the structure of the relation, so that the relation between benefactor and victim might more adequately come into focus.

I have and continue to worship these god-idols, from within the twilight they cast over U. S. society, as the functional effectiveness of some god-idols—be it the Christian theistic “God” or the ideological construction of whiteness as a “god”—is increasingly called into question. These ideas and topics will be discussed over the course of this dissertation, but I want to begin with the story of what inspired the major thematic elements of this project.

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7 The Bourdieu scholar might ask if I am suggesting that whiteness as god-idol might operate as a homology to habitus. Whiteness, as its discussion unfolds in this project, is always a structuring device of one’s habitus, but is never a one-to-one parallel. Yet, perhaps whiteness as god-idol (and all god-idols) are structured by and structure the overarching concept of habitus described by Bourdieu through the logic of practice.
Recognition of Twilight

Entering graduate school, I began a concentration within an African American religious studies program that would offer me the tools to unpack these and many other research interests. The time spent in this program has proven invaluable in a variety of ways. But it was an encounter with a white professor of Modern European history who brought into stark relief the significance of my initial question, and how I might answer it.

During a course on theory and method in the study of religion, a discussion erupted between two groups of students: those who had seemingly internalized the importance of contextual studies (e.g. African American, African, Feminist, etc. discourses) to such an extent that there was no question that context shapes discourse or epistemology. And a group who lamented that context, personal stories and narratives were now “more important than fact.” As student after student entered into the debate, their energy was held in contrast to the dismal emotional response from the professor. As one student would argue for the virtues of Afrocentrism, or the brilliance of Judith Butler, another would quickly retort that much Afrocentric thought has been discounted as fallacious, and that Butler may be smart, but she’s too far “out there.” As yet another student would speak on the need for feminist correctives to sexist scholarship, another student would point out the supposed biological differences between men and women.

While the debate raged on, I couldn’t help but notice the professor’s pale face, looking more like my own than those of most of the students I agreed with during the discussion. He was sad and a look of tired complacency focused attention to eyes that were fighting back tears. As the discussion subsided, the professor finally spoke: “I’m sad. I’m heartbroken. Because the
culture I’ve worked my whole life to learn and understand is dying. It may already be dead. I feel like a caretaker, a mortician for something that has died.”

At that moment, I realized that if something about the West, or about the certainty of thought, ethics and aesthetics sought in Modernity, had unraveled, had “died”—even if only in the minds of those who cherish such things most—then my task as a student of the humanities and student of religious studies was to learn about this death, ultimately, learning how to accept the limits and uncertainty that such a fate perforce recognition from all its victims. But what had “died?”

Whiteness?

I realized that my dissertation would involve helping white people “die” by helping them come to terms with the feelings associated with the death of whiteness, whether it was actually alive or dead. I realized I was largely in agreement with the diagnosis offered by my professor, but in stark disagreement as to if it was a good or bad thing. I celebrated this death, while he lamented it—leaving out the question of whether this death has even occurred or not, or what a death of whiteness would even mean. Inspired by this event, and in hopes of cultivating a hermeneutic designed to appreciate and anticipate the death of whiteness as a positive, I use the death of whiteness as a model for discussion needing to be held amongst white people and white Christians about how to embrace their shifting social significance, their impending “death,” in a way that attempts to not reinforce or recreate a god-idol like whiteness meant to deny uncertainty for some by imposing it onto others.

In order to hold in focus the uncertainty of whether whiteness is dead or alive—by this, to be clear, I mean the functional utility of the god-idol of whiteness to create various kinds of distances between a person or group’s distance and proximity to physical death—I turn to
twilight. Borrowed from and heavily inspired by Friedrich Nietzsche’s proclamation that “God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him,”¹⁸ I look to the dangerous Nietzsche’s pronouncement as a homology for understanding whiteness today and historically. Is whiteness dead? Alive? Have white people (or black people) heard the gravediggers burying whiteness? What dangers will be faced if whiteness does die? Would it be replaced with something more insidious or more life affirming? These questions are unanswerable, but serve to demonstrate the hermeneutical fluidity and empirical uncertainty of twilight. White people, white Christians, are just now learning to live in this twilight, and I hope that this project will be a small cartography for white life within this twilight of the god-idols.

Structure of the Argument and Chapter Layout

This dissertation is divided into two Parts and six Chapters, each with specific theses. Part I, holding the first three chapters, is titled “Learning to Die.” Learning to die means learning about radical contingency, an experience of necessary human interdependence based on the inescapability of human mortality. Learning to die means learning how the situation of radical contingency, a situation shaped by an impending death, often produces death dealing circumstances for others. Learning to die means learning about the relationship between a person’s or group’s responses to their existential circumstances and the death dealing social consequences of those responses for others. Part I offers an extended schematic, a tendential theorization of the life, death, and ultimately, the twilight of the god-idols that work so hard to ignore, deny or fight against the ability of so many in the U.S. to know how to die, let go, and embrace uncertainty. In short, Part I offers a series of hermeneutical schematics and snapshots

designed to answer my initial research question of how white Christianity and racism have so easily worked hand-in-hand.

In the first chapter, I argue that the hermeneutical “birth” of whiteness as a god-idol can be found in the practice of lynching. Tapping into functional and existential assessments of idols as much as totems, I offer lynching as a conceptual placeholder for understanding the historic and contemporary utility of appeals (known or unknown) to this idea of whiteness. The data for this first chapter includes all white people in the U.S. historically and today, and is meant to ground the topic in some of the social costs associated with an inability to accept human uncertainty.

In the second chapter, I argue that white people often rely on more god-idols than simply whiteness. I further demarcate my principle data set as a white theistic petit bourgeois from which a social ideal emerges and is maintained. I then seek to explain how, why and to what degree theism, defined as belief in the functional utility of belief, functions as a god-idol working in tandem with whiteness or other god-idols. In particular, I look at what The Last Poets have referred to as the “white man’s god-complex,” considering systems theory and existential theological thought to unpack the historic and contemporary significance of theism for white Christians, troubling its contemporary social purchase while seeking to demonstrate the dangers it poses as a god-idol.

In the third chapter, I situate whiteness and theism within a larger process of identity formation and worship I refer to as the imago superlata, in the image of exaggeration. Appealing to thinkers like Jean-Francois Bayart and Mary Douglas as a corrective to the troubling dimensions of Jean-Paul Sartre’s existential thinking, I suggest that humans exaggerate the worth and abilities of other humans so that senses of identities are formed and procured. Turning my
argument towards its theoretical foundations, I seek to begin responding to such an arrangement by looking at the “identities” of theology and anthropology (as disciplines and as popular assessment mechanisms of “gods” and “humans”), arguing that through attention to the “ethical domain” as outlined by anthropologist James Faubion, I am able to offer a schematic useful for citing whiteness, theism, or any other god-idol operative within this imago superlata as well as the impact of these god-idols on the social world. The chapter seeks to begin a difficult process of charting the social consequences of god-idol adherence, as well as unpacking the connective fiber between what is believed at social, collective and existential, personal levels.

Assuming that the overall apparatus provided in Part I aid white people and Christians in understanding the impact of their ideas on the social world and vice versa, Part II offers another series of hermeneutical snapshots designed to inchoately respond to this thing I’ve called the imago superlata. Part II is titled “Learning to Die for Others.” Adequately learning to die requires learning to die for others. Learning to die for others means learning to embrace the limits of the imago superlata and religious ideation and practice more generally. Learning to die for others means embracing a limited perspective on social possibilities, a letting go of personal exaggerations of worth and ability, and a final acceptance of uncertainty as a more equitable interpretive strategy for contemporary white life in the U.S. This life will be lived, to the extent such a life is possible at all, as a life born from finally having learned to die by learning to die for others.

Chapter Four begins the process of outlining a response to the imago superlata that might be undertaken by white Christians—a response predicated on uncertainty and the embrace of limitation. It begins here by offering a poetics of the imago superlata, an explication of how the

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orientation reinforces itself in perpetuity thanks to the anxiety produced from trying to overcome it. I suggest a turn to narrative and literature as a means of coming to terms with death and mortality, understood ultimately as a loss of power or the perception of power. I argue for the development of a limited religious outlook, limiting the expectations of religion as much as inculcating a renewed focus on human limitations and the importance of responding to such limits through community and cultural inheritance.

Chapter Five confronts Jacques Derrida’s concept of the “gift of death,” suggesting that such a gift must be rejected as it always relies on the death of others—precisely because it is a gift given so that the “other” might be constituted as other, and subsequently sacrificed for the greater good of society. Turning to Ludwig Feuerbach’s early focus on death and responses to it, I suggest that learning to die for others ultimately means learning to let go of the demand for “others.” As a means of charting white Christian willingness to learn to die for others in this capacity, I suggest that the only adequate recourse white Christians have at their disposal is sacrificing—not this physical life—but the promise of eternal life and of salvation. Willingness to give up such a false promise, promised as the gift of death, is one way to ensure that the perspectives and practices of white Christians are not unduly worshipping god-idols. Continuing to make use of narrative, in this chapter I turn specifically to American novelist Carson McCullers’ life and her 1943 *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* as a way to capture the life, death, and necessitated “letting go” of god-idols if we are to learn to die for others.

Finally, in the last chapter, I attempt what is admittedly a thought experiment. I attempt to “hold” a requiem for whiteness, engaging the fear of death as an entry point into unearthing and making visible the entrenched reliance on whiteness of so many white Americans. Turning to writers James Baldwin, Lillian Smith and as far back in time as Herman Melville, I seek to
demonstrate that in the wake of whiteness’ decreasing significance, and the (open) question of its functional death, it is finally visible in the wake of its purported death; that is, its functional death might produce a rhetorical “birth” where white people might more effectively wrestle with an idea just now becoming visible. This concluding chapter then involves one final attempt to spot a dying whiteness within twilight, so that it might finally and for good, die—the prospects of which remain uncertain.

**Blurring Theoretical and Methodological Distinctions**

I set out to discuss white U.S. Christians, specifically, and so I have tried to do this as best as possible. But it also seems to me that “Christian” or “theist” more generally is a cultural inheritance that much like the intersectional or assemblage theories of race, class, gender, sexuality, etc., there is really no way for any white in the U.S. to escape the social impact of theism or the cultural inheritance of Christianity, even if certain social actors reject the terms of such arrangements individually. Similarly, there is little possibility a white person in the U.S. might escape the privileges of whiteness worshipped and functionally deployed in the U.S. What results is a constant creative tension I hope is productive, in that just as I argue against the creation of distinctions in analytic and ethical registers, the same could be said of the “distinction” between whiteness and Christianity. In fact, the blurring of the lines here echoes my own vacillating commitments, regarding whether or not I can rightly be called “Christian.” One thing is fairly clear, the weight of whiteness is heavy, just as the cultural impact of theism, especially as I define it as belief in the functional utility of belief, powerfully guides social and even intellectual life options. In fact, the reader might note how the dissertation begins with a discussion of white (people), turning more specific to theism and then Christianity, only to move
back out again to conclude with white (people). On the internal vacillation as much as the trajectory, I only hope the tension is productive.

In other instances, my movement between critical social theory and poststructural theory, not to mention between the fields of theology, anthropology and literature, may be frustrating to readers accustomed to traditional manipulations and explorations of data within an individual disciplinary housing. In one sense, I do not mean to suggest that Friedrich Nietzsche, Emile Durkheim, and Jean-Paul Sartre would agree with my characterizations of their projects, or that Niklas Luhmann or Jacques Derrida are up to the same or even similar tasks. In another sense, I cannot help but read them all as part of a long tradition of white thinkers motivated by epistemological, ethical and skeptical demands for certainty arising from an inability to face squarely not only physical death and limitation, but the social responsibilities demanded by human dignity in light of physical death. I hope that my treatment of these figures in particular demonstrates my appreciation for the clarity their arguments afford for understanding whiteness, while I am working to refute the various demands for certainty and security each of them espoused in their own way. As noted in the dissertation’s epigraph, even the deconstructionist Derrida could not learn to die, leaving him unable to accept such an inevitable fate. “I have not learned to accept death,” he says—no, “I remain impervious to learning when it comes to knowing-how-to-die. I have yet to learn anything about this particular subject.”¹⁰ I don’t hope or presume that this project could do what Derrida could not, but I do hope it might at least help to explain why learning to die—for white people in particular, but for all of us, maybe—is so terribly difficult.

¹⁰ Derrida, “I Am At War with Myself.”
Part I:

Learning to Die
Chapter One

In The Shadows of Whiteness:

An Existential and Functional Account of the Birth, Death and Twilight of a God-Idol

There are no more ancient idols in existence….Also none more hollow….That does not prevent their being the most believed in; and they are not, especially in the most eminent case, called idols.

-Friedrich Nietzsche

What does it mean to “believe” in an idol? How are idols produced? This chapter begins the process of constructing a white theology of limitation by theorizing whiteness as a first example of a god-idol, a centering idea produced and reinforced through various rituals which functioned to secure (for its adherents) a sense of personal and collective certainty and stability. Making use of hermeneutical and functional analyses, this chapter offers a way to interpret, to make sense of, the role and effects of whiteness in contemporary U.S. society. I examine certain racialized social activities and beliefs in the United States as “religious” in that these ritualistic practices structure and are structured by a demand for certainty and stability seemingly procured through identity formation and process. “Religious” ideas, practices and artifacts are those things which emerge from this demand for certainty, organized by these structured and structuring distinctions. Whiteness, though not the only god-idol to be discussed, offers a starting point for understanding the process of god-idol construction.

This chapter, understood as a deconstructive exploration of the paradoxes, aporias and perpetual confusions that emerge out of the long history of racialized oppression in the United States, defines whiteness as a particular racialized expression of an inability to accept human

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limitation and uncertainty. Religion is the field through which social order is sought, created and reinforced through maintenance of god-idols—centering, ultimately empty concepts employed to address demands for personal and collective certainty and security by attempts to ritualistically create it in the material world—transmuting ideas into social reality.

From the outset, let me be clear. This chapter discusses the lies many humans use to make sense of their very real social circumstances rooted ultimately in physical death. As such, this chapter begins with a discussion of very real deaths and the less-than-real concepts used to address and produce such death. Whiteness does not materially exist, save for its conceptual expression as this racialized inability to accept limit. Conversely, neither does blackness “exist” other than as an awareness of the impossibility of ever completely accepting human limitation and uncertainty. Yet, this does not stop these empty identity markers from operating within the social environment as some of the “most believed in” of idols. This chapter looks to one of these idols, whiteness, and attempts to make sense of the process whereby an imaginary idea, a lie, can bring about a truth—a ground of being, an ultimate concern—as severe and enduring as the history of racialized oppression in the United States.

In this chapter, my thesis is that this whiteness is best understood as a god-idol produced from specific racialized beliefs and practices, and that such god-idols are themselves most adequately analyzed and understood through the twilight, the doubtful clarity², exposed through their de/construction. By “twilight,” I mean these god-idols are simultaneously effective and yet, break down upon close analytic scrutiny and in their functional effectiveness. I first philosophically situate and chart the function of such a god-idol through existential and social theory. I then discuss the birth of whiteness as a god-idol by examining various rituals and

² i.e. uncertain certainty, impossible possibility, paradox, aporia.
beliefs as they inform and are informed by ideas about whiteness—a belief that paradoxically endures and yet breaks down today as in the past. I then problematize the perseverance of ‘whiteness’ as a popular and academic analytic frame of reference (through my talk of its death), and ultimately, its permanent twilight—metonymically evidenced in my own dissertation giving new life to whiteness as I call for its death.

**Black Offerings**

The journey towards this twilight begins with a stark racialized clarity cast by dead black bodies. African American humanist theologian and scholar of African American religion Anthony Pinn argues that the practice of lynching constitutes a “ritual of reference—a means of maintaining the ‘truth’ of a particular system and the relationship of those within that system.”

Appealing to historian of religion Charles Long’s hermeneutical thesis of the first and second creation narratives of the religions of the oppressed, Pinn argues that such rituals substantiated and reinforced the “formation of the negro.” In the post-bellum period, lynching came to operate as a reinforcement mechanism, structuring and structured by the social positions developed during enslavement and needing reinforcement and reinscription in the post-reconstruction period. Pinn notes the significance of lynching for black identity formation: “However one conceives of lynching’s place within the context of a changing U.S. society—whether as wanton expression of rage and violence or quasilegal efforts to punish criminals—it is certain that mob violence became a major mechanism of American life and a way of fixing black identity.”

Much has been made of this black identity formation through works as wide ranging as W.E.B. DuBois *The Souls of Black Folk* to the fiction of Richard Wright and Zora Neale

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4 Pinn, 68.
Hurston, and through the academic, theological texts offered by James Cone, Dwight Hopkins, Victor Anderson, Anthony Pinn and many more. Less has been discussed of white identity, or something that might be called “whiteness.” Yet, such profound social events as lynchings and the participation in lynch mobs had, likely, as powerful an impact on the actions and identities of the white participants, the lynchers and beneficiaries of the practice. Quoting Frantz Fanon, Pinn argues that lynching helped ensure “the white man sealed in his whiteness, the black man in his blackness.” This chapter picks up what Pinn only inchoately discusses: the formation of whiteness as created by and creating a false sense of group and individual security, stability, certainty, value and ability—the creation of whiteness as a god-idol.

White ‘Rituals of Reference’

For this project, I argue for a heuristic reading of the birth of whiteness as a god-idol beginning with this “ritual” practice of lynching. Rather than serving as a statement about material reality or historical facts, this chapter begins with lynching as it helps to ground and interpret the ways racialized rituals function in society. Lynching as a ritual is grounded in physical death, and death is the starting point for any discussion of god-idols. It is therefore necessary to have death in mind even before discussing god-idols in the abstract, as the most

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6 Pinn, 67.

7 Here, I recognize that scholars have offered other genealogical snapshots of what might be called whiteness, locating it in Modernity (Cornel West) or an even older theological anxiety emerging amongst the early Christians (J. Kameron Carter). But it is worth repeating that my efforts are hermeneutical and neither historical nor historicizing in the sense of mapping out actual facts or details. My discussion offers a way to interpret the effects and role of whiteness in U.S. society. Readers wanting a more didactic, grounded historical account of whiteness should look elsewhere. To attempt such grounded history would be to negate my overarching concerns that we simply cannot fully know.
fundamental incubator of god-idols rest in the physical death that all humans must eventually face. The life, then, of god-idols emerges from death through an unwillingness to fully embrace that death, which ironically reinforces the deaths of others while never preventing the first death from being overcome. Lynching contextualizes the discussion in terms of whose deaths occur, when they are necessary, and ultimately, why such rituals appear in the social world at all.

I refer to these lynchings as rituals in that they are understood as sacrificial offerings towards personal and collective security and certainty. They function through what religious studies scholar Bruce Lincoln refers to as a logic of “formative negation,” wherein a life “is given up for the benefit of some other group, god or principle that is understood to be ‘higher’ or more deserving.” The sacrificial victim operates as a site of formation for the group. In the negation of the sacrificed, the sacrificers achieve a type of identity-based reinforcement. Through lynching, black bodies were, in various ways, ritualistically sacrificed for a group of white people which would “ensure not only white dominance but the larger social and moral order”—a moral and social order structured by an invisible principle of whiteness deemed of central and supreme value, a god-idol of whiteness. Such rituals provide a visual expression of an invisible idea.

First Visions of Whiteness

A brief case study is helpful to contextualize the chapter, “seeing” whiteness, and helps to situate my definition of lynching as the extra-legal practice of vigilante punishment of an offender of social rules and codes, typically through (though not limited to) the literal and/or

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symbolic use of a rope. On October 13, 1938, 19-year-old W.C. Williams hung from a tree near Ruston, Louisiana, his mutilated, dead, black body casting an ominous shadow across the faces of his white murderers. For two days prior to his murder, Williams was sought for questioning about another murder, of a white man, and the beating of the white man’s mistress. After hiding out for days, Williams finally surrendered to a small, gun-toting, emotionally-charged group of young white men. Soon, a brief confrontation ensued between Lincoln Parish Sheriff Bryan Thigpin who sought to maintain “law and order” and the ever-growing mob of white captors. With the mob threatening to shoot Williams on the spot, Thigpin struck a deal with the mob for them to “walk Williams through the woods to a side road, where they promised to meet the sheriff and surrender their prisoner.” Soon after the mob left with their ‘prisoner,’ Thigpin heard shots. Knowing what had happened, the capitulating sheriff drove back into town “believing there was ‘nothing further [he] could do.’” Another ‘Negro’ murdered—the permanence of the physical death reinforcing the fixity of black and white identity, alike.

What Thigpin heard was part of a cacophony of religious sounds to emerge from the sacred space created out of horror and terror—a space at once set apart and distinct from the larger surroundings, but of immense and immediate importance to how those larger surroundings are understood. What he “heard” helped to create a “vision” in his mind, of differential worth and value based on race. Elements of this particular ritual included continuous torture of

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10 Ruston is about sixty miles from the small, southern city where I grew up, Shreveport, Louisiana.
11 For a well-known image of W.C. Williams’ lynching, see: http://www.corbisimages.com/stock-photo/rights-managed/BE049380/lynching-victim-hangs-above-white-crowd
13 Fairclough, 30.
14 Ibid.
Williams’ body with a “red hot poker,” repeated shots fired into Williams’ hanging body, and some accounts indicate that the blood seen dripping down Williams’ naked leg suggest he had been castrated. Further, a fire had been set underneath him, only to be extinguished by some ‘sensible’ whites who reasoned that a burned body would make it impossible to compare Williams’ fingerprints to those at the scene of the initial crime. It is interesting that these same sensible folk didn’t think it prudent to take Williams’ fingerprints while he was still alive. But then, the vision of whiteness might not be possible were it not for the sacrifice. Just how prominent were such events?

The Pervasiveness of Whiteness

The lynching of W.C. Williams was a public spectacle, with around three hundred participants in the mob murder. Williams’ murder was the sixth reported lynching in the United States in that year. In 1938, seven lynchings occurred in the United States: four in neighboring Mississippi, and one (each) in Georgia, Florida, and Louisiana. From 1882-1968, nearly 5000 lynchings occurred in the U.S., the overwhelming majority occurred in Southern states and were directed against African Americans. Though it bears stating that not all lynchings in the U.S. were directed at African Americans, the majority were. Moreover, lynchers were rarely tried or

15 http://withoutsanctuary.org/main.html
17 The New York Times, October 14, 1938, 12.
18 “Can the States Stop Lynching?” The Crisis, January 1939.
19 By the time of Williams’ lynching, the practice had become so common that year after year brought growing energy for the establishment of national anti-lynching legislation from Congress. In fact, hundreds of anti-lynching bills were introduced to congress over these same years, and every time, Southern senators trumpeted ‘States’ rights’ as a rationale for voting against the legislation. [To this day, no anti-lynching bill was ever passed in the U.S. Congress]. Spearheaded by the NAACP and other organizations, there was outrage amongst many that lynch mobs were rarely prosecuted for their actions.
20 http://www.yale.edu/ynhti/curriculum/units/1979/2/79.02.04.x.html
convicted of their crimes. The year Williams was murdered, none of the states where lynchings occurred sought prosecution for either the assailants or the law enforcement officials who were usually complicit in the murders, and such was the norm.\footnote{21} For a white citizenry who often conceived of black bodies as a problem, such lynchings operated to contain and restrain white and black modes of being and operation within society through violence and terror. These lynchings functioned to tell whites and blacks how to behave, helped to outline who was white or black, and ensured that racialized transgressions would not be tolerated and would be punished.

In all its absurdity, some of the more vicious and gut-wrenching aspects of many lynchings were the tokens and souvenirs collected from black bodies. Hair was taken and skin was flayed, many whites taking home these trinkets as reminders of the black sacrificial offering having temporarily secured a sense of fixity and order for the mob. Similar in functional effect as more traditionally-recognized religious artifacts, such as bibles or baptismal water, these “mementos of black bodies took on a transcendent quality” for their recipients.\footnote{22} “Transfigured into powerful [religious] symbols,” Pinn argues that such ritualistic activities had the ironic effect of “turning the former objects of history into shapers of history.”\footnote{23} Moreover, lynchings took on the character of religious event in that many citizens would travel long distances to take part in the spectacle offered by the murder, attending to a pilgrimage of sorts so that racialized identities might be secured.

These events, and these tokens of history, worked to ontologize (i.e. to make real) the status of white and black in a mutually exclusive—yet symbiotic—fashion, even where lynchings had not been experienced directly. Theologian James Cone situates the effects of

\footnote{21}“Can the States Stop Lynching?” \textit{The Crisis}, January 1939. \footnote{22}Pinn, 70. \footnote{23}Ibid., 71.
lynching on black identity formation with the autobiographical account of Richard Wright: “‘I had never in my life been abused by whites, but I had already become conditioned to their existence as though I had been the victim of a thousand lynchings.’” Wright’s words not only connect black and white identity to each other, but situate the practice of lynching as instrumental to such ideological formation across space and time. Whiteness and blackness emerge together in tension—born from the material, historical ritual practice of lynching, but extending beyond specific events to shape the ideas that orient white and black identity.

Such formation began at an early age for white children, as with the young Wright. Kristina DuRocher’s recent *Raising Racists* (2011), a study of the racist socialization of white children in the Jim Crow south, quotes one white father who brought his young son to a lynching. While viewing the brutal castration and burning of an African American named Jesse Washington who was lynched in Waco, Texas in 1916, the father remarked that “‘My son can’t learn too young the proper way to treat a nigger.’” At once, the young boy learned the value of blackness, as well as its inverse, whiteness. Simultaneously, black bodies were overcome and rendered docile, while white participants interpolated the dead black body as an acute realization of social stability and the certainty that could be procured through white skin. Williams’ dead body allowed the white perpetrators and onlookers a “temporary restoration of order” offered by the lynching as it reinforced racial codes as rigid and secure. In short, it offered the white participants a moment to existentially exhale, secure in the certainty afforded from an idea undergirded by skin color.

26 Ibid., 124.
Pinn’s work on lynching does well to show how lynching was understood by white and black participants and victims. For the whites, lynchings were “a fight against chaos” and were “premised upon religious sensibilities…Lynchers—many of whom were not only church members but church leaders—felt their actions had religious justification and that the process of lynching contained the ethos of church ritual and the religious re-creation of cosmic order. In short, maintenance of the social order was undertaken as a religious quest, the securing of the created order as God intended it.”\(^{27}\) I seek to push Pinn’s work further by exposing these adherents’ quest to find and create the social order “as God intended it” as, rather, a process of creating “God” (i.e. god-idols) through ritualized attempts to achieve social stability and certainty. Lynchings did not occur because of a divine ordinance to maintain social stability, regardless of the mob’s theistic rationalizations. Rather, the attempt at social stability (the lynching) reinforced and produced the concept of whiteness as nothing less than a functional god for the white perpetrators and beneficiaries of the practice, a function today called increasingly into question. This is the formation of the god-idol of whiteness, situated within its existential and social functions for society.

This formation necessitates an extended discussion of the relationship between ideas and artifacts, beliefs and practices. Holding in tension Pinn’s concern that lynching be understood as religious while appealing to the social-structural theory of Pierre Bourdieu\(^{28}\), my argument is that lynching as ritual constitutes an effort to simultaneously address existential and social issues through the creation and reinforcement of ideological structures geared towards social unity,

\(^{27}\) Pinn, 72, 77.
order and stability. Stated more simply, ideas and beliefs shape material, historical circumstances through the structures they impose on social possibilities; these ideas are also shaped by those possibilities. Combining Pinn’s and Bourdieu’s efforts help to balance the paradoxically malleable yet rigid characteristics of these centering, structuring and structured ideas, these god-idols.

This created god-idol of whiteness is one such structured and structuring idea. Lynchings reinforced and sought a sense of social stability that was questioned when African Americans transgressed socially-circumscribed, racialized ways of being and acting. The result of addressing these transgressions through lynching produced whiteness as coterminous with the shared ideals of social order, stability, ability and value. For many, this whiteness functioned as a central, grounding feature of white existence, where ‘white existence’ refers to the sum total of human life as experienced by those so labeled ‘white.’ But such whiteness never did, and certainly does not today, equate to what it means to be white—even as whiteness historically takes shape as a god-idol for the sake of responding to white existence. While Bourdieu’s normative Marxist underpinnings leaves religion the purview of the traditionally-defined parameters Pinn’s theory appropriately pushes past, synthesizing features of Pinn and Bourdieu’s theories proves helpful. Bourdieu’s work reinforces Pinn’s claim that lynching involved the maintenance of social order, while Pinn’s work corrects for Bourdieu’s narrow understanding of what constitutes the religious. By infusing the cultural definition of religion offered by Pinn with the structural suspicion offered by Bourdieu, lynchings can be understood as rituals which create whiteness as a misrecognized idol, dead and yet living, born out of death, and casting a permanent twilight over society.
The Function of the God-Idol

With the conversation now contextualized towards a death-dealing social demand for sacrifice, more focused attention needs to be given to my concept of a god-idol—as it holds in tension and structures the relationship between individual, physical death and a group demand that some of these deaths be distributed for the sake of the society. This section lays theoretical groundwork for the entire dissertation by extensively describing and orienting god-idols around their existential and social functions, an analytic distinction I make here, as a feature of my larger argument is to trouble this very binary.

God-idols function to procure and perpetuate a demand for universal cohesion and stability in light of a human situation of radical contingency—the condition of human limitation and freedom that necessitates humans interacting with other humans in response to their limits. Such a demand for cohesion and certainty is only ever adequately—albeit paradoxically—addressed through various denials of uncertainty and chaos. This universal cohesion and stability refers to the ability of these god-idols to offer adherents the perception that life has intrinsic

29 God-idols are ideas that bridge personal, existential concerns with collective, social concerns. God-idols are the ideas born from existential denial that structure epistemological and social relations but are in fact structured by those same relations—the motivation for Sheriff Thigpin’s capitulation. God-idols are individually and collectively constructed ideas that take on the character of being more than the sum total of the logic of their construction—the mob mentality of Williams’ murderers. They are the inexpressible behind the unthinkable. They are constitutive of the a priori human cognitive need for presumed a priori concepts—the demand of the spectators to witness the finality of a dead body. God-idols are the conceptual bridges that do everything from cross the intellectual chasms of human reason, to secure an escape from the emotional weight of death by exerting a will-to-power over death through bringing it about for someone else. They are the presumptions of and about being that address being by suggesting that being is more than fleeting, contingent, and limited—the cutting of hair and flesh for trinkets to take home. They are ontological markers that hide the meaningless of human existence with claims to the contrary—the awareness of white life in the face of black death. God-idols are the always already contingent ideas that respond to human radical contingency by ignoring, denying or fighting directly against such radical contingency—the walking dead of Ruston, LA (and elsewhere) who have not yet heard of their death.
meaning, that the social world is as it should be, and that the bricolage offered by human reality fits together in a manner that makes sense. At times acknowledged while at other times unquestioned and unstated, these god-idols address the messiness of human reality by helping adherents pretend human life is neater and tidier than the available data suggests. Stated differently, god-idols are the lies many humans present (to themselves and others) as truth in response to any number of concerns emerging from social life, including but not limited to race, class, gender, sexuality and the like. They operate through and function as inevitable denials of reality where the “real” and what is possible is only adequately framed in terms of limit, uncertainty and what is not possible. These denials of limit and impossibility, of radical contingency, I define as idolatry. But why are these denials necessary?

Humans are in a peculiar predicament in that their contingency is only realized through its negation. Philosopher Jean Paul Sartre famously contended that existence precedes essence, meaning that personal concerns and interests are evaluated based on material experiences common to all humans, such as death, work, hunger and the inevitability of interacting with other humans (in the same predicament). In Sartrean terms, every being necessitates non-being, meaning that what it means to be human is to simultaneously desire to not be human (to not be the thing wanting to be) precisely because to exist is to exist in the shadow of not existing. Humans attempt to be more than they are, attempting the impossible through science, war, art, etc. Humans deny their limitations and in that denial, arrive back at what they are—still limited

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and yet capable. And it is in this attempt to be that which is not, where humans achieve a sense of that which they are.

Radical contingency, that being in/as non-being, is always the counterpoint to and the product of a prospect of “nothingness.” Thought about in light of Williams’ murder, the production of the nothingness (i.e. his physical death) to which Williams was subjected reinforces the being of those destroying the being of Williams. It is often in the process of death and destructing—what might be characterize as the exerting of power over another—that one’s being is validated. Contingency, to this end, is radical, in that it is addressed and activated through necessary interactions with others. Though not all responses occur through lynching, this dissertation takes the position that these interactions, these responses to radical contingency, are always violent in that they involve physical, ideological, and/or discursive instances of (at least attempting to) exerting power over another person, group or idea (held by a person or group). At stake and up for change are the beneficiaries and victims of such violent, inevitable idolatrous responses to radical contingency.

Throughout this dissertation, I refer to this portrait of the human condition as the existential paradox of radical contingency, suggesting that the abstract, ideal notion of human freedom is ultimately bound by responsibility to others. In order to make sense of their being, humans must necessarily act, responding to the situations emerging from the radical contingency of others. Thus, radical contingency is not an ethical posture, but a statement about the necessary

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33 Further, radical contingency refers to my position that humans are only free as such freedom is expressed for others. “Exaggerated” radical contingency is to exaggerate this freedom as a freedom detached from social responsibility. The consequences of such exaggerations always come at the expense of others, as the exercise of this false freedom forsakes the individuals’ radically contingent dependence on others. What’s most “radical” about contingency is its expression that contingency actually manifests in an abstraction that negates the contingency through embrace of social actors. See Sartre, Being and Nothingness, London and New York: Routledge, 2003, 105.
relation between being and ethics. To exist is to seemingly find oneself in relation to others for
whom one’s own existence is defined and oriented. There are simply no other means of
definition or identity formation. In this light, the idea of self-definition is oxymoronic in that
definition and awareness of being is only possible through interaction with others social actors
engaged in similar circumstances. In the wake of the inability to find innate life meaning (i.e.
human ability and value) on one’s own terms and in isolation, it must be produced from the
available contingent components—interaction with others.

Due to such bleak options, this radical contingency produces the desire to ignore, deny or
fight directly against such a reality.\textsuperscript{34} In light of this condition of human contingency, Sartre
indicates that this need to deny is inevitable.\textsuperscript{35} Navigating this radically contingent reality thus
requires idolatry. The demand for these god-idols, and the particular god-idol created through the
practice of lynching, emerges from various idolatrous responses to this human limitation and
uncertainty—this radical contingency. Idolatry is the process whereby existence is responded to
through beliefs and practices which suggest that life has innate meaning. Idolatry is the belief
that human uncertainty, limitation and contingency can be overcome, that human reality can be
other than it is. Such idolatry is paradoxical in that the structure of the denial appears to be as
much a product of the human situation as is the fact that no \textit{a priori} essence exists. “Truth”
‘exists’ in the lies humans create through these denials—through idolatry.

\textsuperscript{34} My own combination of existential and poststructural sensibilities lead me to note that though
Sartre’s sweeping generalities about the human ‘situation’ are problematic in a variety of ways, I
find no problem applying Sartre’s insights given the particular social context of my data. That is,
though Sartre’s existentialism may not be universally applicable (even as he suggests it is), it is
appropriate for expressing the existential concerns arising from a white, male perspective. The
same is true of my usage of Durkheim later in this chapter.

\textsuperscript{35} With technical language, Sartre defines contingency as “In the For-itself this equals facticity,
the brute fact of being \textit{this} For-itself in the world. The contingency of freedom is the fact that
freedom is not able not to exist.” Jean-Paul Sartre, \textit{Being and Nothingness}, 651.
Exaggerations of God-Idols

Idolatry, however, carries the seed of its own limitation as it is made of the stuff of human limitation and contingency. In other words, it cannot function as essence. That is, idols always breakdown and fail because they are never really the gods they purport to be. This means that even “gods” are radically contingent, in that the lies they tell humans requires humans to tell lies to one another. Another idolatrous lie is required so that the idol appears as a god. All “gods” are idols and all idols operate as gods that never function as well or for as long as is demanded by adherents.

As a means of preventing the idols from being exposed as idols, idolatry ends up sustained through various other lies I here refer to as exaggerations of radical contingency (ERC). ERC amounts to lies about humans told or enacted that reinforce the ability of god-idols to sustain themselves. In short, they are lies about humans meant to reinforce the ‘gods’ humans worship. These exaggerations are lies that mask the lie of human idolatry. More specifically, they are lies told about certain individuals or groups of humans that create a situation wherein another group (telling the lie) validates itself or its “god” as superior to another. Philosophically speaking, ERC refers to attempts to place distance between freedom and responsibility through various insider/outsider arrangements which skew the abilities and values of both insider and outsider groups in positive and negative expressions.\(^{36}\) Whereas human radical contingency exposes a necessary relation between being and ethics, exaggerations of radical contingency hide or abuse this necessary relation, presuming a disconnect between different individuals and groups’ attempts to address what is possible and valuable.

\(^{36}\) Discussed in most detail in Chapter Three, exaggerations of radical contingency play out in two ways: positively and negatively. This simply means that benefactors and victims are both “exaggerated,” and that the idea of ERC is not limited to those on the underside of social forces.
To situate this concept in terms of racism and whiteness, lynching is justified through various agreed upon exaggerations of radical contingency, such as the concept of a black body as socially valueless or as not fully human. At the same time, lynching, through its operation within the social environment, reinforces and helps to construct a devalued and dehumanized portrait of a real, radically contingent person, the victim. Structuring and structured by these ERCs, lynching materially reinforced this devalued portrait through corporeal discipline, intensifying and exposing the physical, bodily limitations of the victim, thereby exaggerating the radical contingency of the person, exaggerating the already real existential connection between that person and death by bringing it about prematurely. This very real physical death, however, continues to ideologically exaggerate the radical contingency of other African Americans through fear shaping perceptions of choice and ability—as again reminded by Richard Wright’s claim that his identity had been so shaped by these practices that he may as well have been lynched a thousand times over. Thus, ERCs play out in both material and ideological ways.

This process of exaggeration involves misrecognition, as well, in that in the constructing of black identity, white identity is as equally crafted and yet hidden and misrecognized as only substantively affecting black identity. For those whites who agree to the decreased value of the black body, such a focus on the dehumanized black body diverts attention away from the ‘proper’ object motivating the construction of the category, white bodies and their idolatrous demand for certainty. That is, the spectacle of lynching amounts in this instance to a diversion tactic, the severity serving a function of misrecognizing the identitarian effects of the event on white participants. The lynching of W.C. Williams, more than simply reinforcing the lynchers’ agreed upon premise that his life was valueless and unable to be preserved (one type of ERC),

37 Perkinson, 127-8.
reinforces the inverse as well—white bodies characterized by immanent absolute value and ability (another type of ERC). Where lynching and other racialized rituals are concerned, a relationship exists between the exaggeration of the radical contingency of African Americans and the existential concerns motivating the white perpetrators.

These exaggerations of radical contingency, through ritual activities such as lynching (but not limited to it), misdirect attention towards the victim of ERC and away from the construction of whiteness as a god-idol marked by supreme value and ability—remaining as elusive to spot as a theistic god and becoming as “real” as a perceived theistic god through misrecognition of the process unfolding through the exaggerations. Like the inability to immediately “see” how an object such as a book is agreed upon as a book, whiteness created through these exaggerations of radical contingency cannot be “seen,” and this misrecognition contributes to the creation of the god-idol and its ability to function both existentially and socially.

The Existential Function of God-Idols

The principle function of a god-idol is existential, working to deny personal and individual awareness of radical contingency. That is to say, exaggerations of radical contingency produce god-ids that allow individuals to presume their personal concerns are disconnected from the concerns of other people. God-ids aid in this endeavor through their suggestion that in spite of death and human limitation, life has meaning and that such meaning is secure. For instance, in her well-known memoir of life as a white girl in the racist, sexist South, Lillian Smith recounts one of these exaggerations as taught to little white children: “Your skin is your glory and the source of your strength and pride. It is white. And, as you have heard, whiteness is a symbol of purity and excellence. Remember this: Your white skin proves that you are better
than all other people on this earth.”  

Smith’s words are, in a sense, the ‘voice’ of the South and much of the nation as a whole and such a voice exposes the existential function of these exaggerations of radical contingency. This function produces what Sartre refers to as an “inverted liberty,” a fear of the freedom to be responsible for others.  

Applying the insights of existential psychologist Otto Rank, cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker’s comments help to situate the consequences of this existential denial, arguing that “all the evil that men have wreaked upon themselves and upon their world since the beginnings of time right up until tomorrow” comes as he “denies his true condition,” a denial producing the “inverted liberty” described by Sartre and more recently couched in terms of race by James Perkinson. Perkinson underscores that “whiteness emerges in the colonial encounter as just such an operation of superiority, an attempt to use darker bodies as a denial structure, a medium between rocky soil and ready food, between hard labor and coveted leisure, between death and the living that inevitably lives toward such an end in the grave.” In a racist United States, this denial has meant a bloating of white worth and value not in line with human reality. Such existential exaggerations are made possible through belief in the supremacy of one race of people over another, the belief in god or gods who purportedly respond to life’s suffering and confusion (discussed in Chapter Two), and through any idea that denies the contingency and limits of human value or ability. Whiteness comes about in effort to fill an innate existential void, a radically contingent human reality where meaning is made rather than found. Existential exaggerations function to ‘fill’ that void.

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These existential concerns traverse what Bourdieu refers to as the “relatively autonomous religious field,” bridging the existential and the abstract with the material world of society. I refer to god “-idols” because the otherworldly, cosmic story of gods and the thisworldly story of human idolaters are equally important to the “field” of religion, wherein material realities and discursive power arrangements are navigated and importantly, often structure and maintain their power through manipulations of the other component, (i.e. personal vs. social, this-worldly vs. otherworldly). Within this field, one person or group’s “god” is in competition with another, meaning one’s “god” is registered as a false “idol” to many outsiders. Use of “god” and “idol” is to foreground that these ideas are born from radical contingency—meaning they are never as real as they purport. Moreover, my use of “idol” offers a means to talk of central ideas and concepts that holds in tension the discursive power of the concepts with the malleability and contingent nature of the categories, themselves. By marking such ontological markers with the “idol” ascription, I recognize such ideas as inadequate for addressing that which is their existential function, the existential denial of radical contingency. “Inverted liberty” is never fully achieved, which is simply to say “gods” never work well-enough to kill off competing “idols,” and human radical contingency is inescapable.

The Social Function of God-Idols

These god-idols achieve a social function as well, moving beyond individuals to the groups and collectivities made up by radically contingent individual humans. By “social,” I refer to tangible, material people in society, people in human collectivities. The existential function is an individual idea/ideal that transmutes through a logic of practice into material reality. That is,

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43 I hope to unpack the relationship between each of these components fully over the course of these chapters.
people believe certain ideas with such certitude that they move through the world as if the ideas are unquestionable. The social world is built by such movement, while it also helps to create the ideas. Ideas shape material reality and are shaped by this reality. For instance, if the existential function of whiteness presumes white people should have more money than African Americans, then the social function of whiteness is this ideal playing out through quantifiable statistics. Social exaggerations of radical contingency reinforce an ‘appropriate’ distance between individual and group concerns, and to ensure that this process is misrecognized.

Lynchings emerge as social exaggerations arising from existential exaggerations. The social and existential function together, in tandem. This point is important, in that social and existential functions are analytically broken down, but amount to one shared function of staving off an awareness of human limitation and uncertainty by manipulating the ideological and material degree to which social others face such limitation and uncertainty head on. The agreement to murder W.C. Williams was not aporetic to the aims and ambitions of proper society so conceived at the time, but operated as a foundational moment reinforcing a sense of social certainty through the destruction of a black body deemed a problem for the society. Agreement to the devaluation and dehumanization of black bodies produced the ideas allowing for the lynching to take place (this is the existential function), while the lynching reinforced the produced ideas (this is the social function). In the process, society comes to be constituted in part by vicious arbitrary appraisals of value and worth that only then produce government and other institutions. A higher law, based on the god-idol of whiteness, trumped the legal system and motivated the mobs who would administer the lynch law: a “law” based on a demand for certainty and stability. In this light, the lynchers are not the well-intentioned whites who were often described as doing the dirty work of “defying the law so as to ascertain it” for the sake of
“the fundamental assertion of self-governing men, upon whom our whole social fabric is based.”\textsuperscript{44} Rather, lynchers were but the priests and scribes of a sacred religious practice reinforcing and producing, structured by and structuring, a hidden, yet powerful god-idol of whiteness.

**Misrecognized Lynch Ropes**

How might a god-idol be seen? What is the ‘look’ of a god-idol? To answer this, a conceptual metaphor is helpful and is captured by the lynching spectacle. Imagine a rope holding together the individual and the collective (in the abstract), the existential and the social. Williams’ black body marks the existential while the tree is society. ERCs are the mechanisms that determine the constitution of the rope (its length, thickness, color, etc.). ERCs are the individual strings that braid together to produce the rope. God-idols are the ropes produced from these exaggerations of radical contingency. These ropes, god-idols, respond to radical contingency. But what shape, tensile strength, and other characteristics these ropes take are malleable and shapeable, meaning that these exaggerations can take a variety of forms. Also in flux are the existential and social realities held together by these god-idols, the histories and people that such god-idols hold in tension. God-idols are the fibers at once bonding and yet keeping at a safe distance individual and collective concerns, beliefs, and practices. ERCs are the manipulations of this connection, the factors which form the god-idol in the image of these exaggerations: *imago superlata*.

For a more technical explication of the function of ERCs and their relation to god-idols, Bourdieu is helpful in outlining the durability of these “ropes” and their functions through his

concepts of *Absolutization of the Relative* and *Legitimation of the Arbitrary*.\(^{45}\) These ideas suggest that the arbitrary and relative—the contingency of ideas and social realities—are offered as natural and eternal through a process of consecration that is, in turn, ascribed a sacred value.\(^{46}\) Such structuring simultaneously appeals to the process to legitimate it and the social relations it reinforces. Worth noting in its entirety:

*Religion* [read: god-idol creation and manipulation] *exercises an effect of consecration in two ways*: (1) *It consecrates by converting into limits of law, through its sanctifying sanctions, the economic and political limits and barriers of fact and, in particular, by contributing to the symbolic manipulation of aspirations, which tends to ensure the adjustment of actual hopes to objective possibilities.* (2) *It inculcates a system of consecrated practices and representations whose structure (structured) reproduces, in a transfigured and therefore misrecognizable form, the structure of economic and social relations in force in a determinate social formation. Religion can produce the objectivity that it produces (in structuring structure) only by producing the misrecognition of the limits of the knowledge that makes it possible.*\(^{47}\)

Misrecognition of limits gets to the heart of this project as this misrecognition is part and parcel to the religious expression I explore more fully in Chapter Three as imago superlata. For now, however, what is important is Bourdieu’s position on the relation between religious ideas and their function of absolutization and legitimation. These god-idols do the work to absolutize and legitimate such relative and arbitrary markers as skin color, gender, sexuality and human worth or ability.

Necessary for an understanding of the concept of the god-idol is recognition that concepts like ‘god’ and ‘whiteness’ originate and take their power from misrecognition of human reality—idolatrous misrecognition of radical contingency. Whiteness is born out of the recognition that humans are not alone, what is in fact a *misrecognition* of reality and a

\(^{45}\) Bourdieu, 14.
\(^{46}\) Ibid.
\(^{47}\) Ibid.
presumption that human life has innate value.\textsuperscript{48} Worth repeating here, I ascribe ‘-idol’ to such concepts to expose such misrecognition as it occurs in these “symbolic manipulations.” The ‘idol’ in ‘god-idol’ allows for an understanding of these ideas as bound by (and to) social relations and offers a means of definition that does not perpetuate the misrecognition. Yet, these structures described by Bourdieu are very durable and not simple to overcome. As such, ‘god’ remains an important constituent descriptor of god-idols as these centering concepts often work to “adjust actual hopes to objective possibilities” in such a way that the question of is something a “god” or an “idol” becomes moot and beside the point. More analytically useful than emphasizing these god-idols as either “god” or “idols” is holding in tension the artificial, malleable construction of these god-idols (the existential) while recognizing the intense power, durability, and weight of such misrecognized metaphysical ropes (the social).

Moving now to much more concrete terrain, I will show that this rope analogy is not simply theoretical. It plays out in more material ways through the practice of lynching. In the practice of hanging African Americans from trees with ropes, whiteness became a god-idol created and reinforced, legitimating and making absolute the belief that social certainty could be achieved and infinite possibility secured.

\textbf{The Birth of Whiteness as a God-Idol}

In this section, I argue that this god-idol of whiteness can be hermeneutically situated as having been ‘born’ in the practice of lynching and sustained through various other ritualistic practices.

\textsuperscript{48} Worth noting, my perspective means that a concept of ‘whiteness,’ denied even by those held most assuredly under its power, might wield a power to exert its influence in ways more profound and socially significant than even the idea of ‘god.’ Though both constitute ideas that correspond to nothing, the denial of whiteness (amongst many whites in the U.S.) seemingly legitimates the power of the idea in more severe ways than the legitimation offered by the visible and acknowledged idea of ‘god.’
activities structured by and structuring beliefs and ideas. I am not arguing that whiteness first emerges through this practice. I am arguing that lynching marks a moment when this whiteness comes to take on the role of god-idol. I begin with lynching, as opposed to enslavement or the auction block\(^{49}\) (as alternative starting points), because from a functional perspective, slavery amounted to a social death that precluded the enslaved from participating in society.\(^{50}\) To this extent, though whiteness (as an idea) predates lynching, it was reconstituted and weaponized as a god-idol through lynching as a means of addressing newly free women and men who were now functionally part of the society.

This is not to suggest that whiteness was not operative prior to the practice of lynching or emancipation but that enslavement (during the period of enslavement) did the work that whiteness would be called on to accomplish as a god-idol in the wake of abolition. Of course, race was a means of social oppression prior to emancipation, but the lynching of black Americans directly connects white skin to the demand for certainty and stability. Prior to emancipation, the connection was arbitrary and involved outliers like African indentured servants and other free blacks. During the postbellum period, the connection becomes causal, wherein white skin and black skin come to represent a free/slave dichotomy previously sustained under the system of enslavement. My argument is that based on shifting rhetorics and grammars regarding social interests and expectations, the postbellum period brought about a need to protect white existence in a way not needed when slave and free were defined according to legal mandates and theological justifications. The birth of whiteness as a god-idol is indicative of the emerging, prescient emphasis on race to bring about the social stability once afforded through

\(^{49}\) The auction block is another ritual of reference discussed by Pinn. See Pinn, *Terror and Triumph*, 48-51.
enslavement. Race, class, gender and sexuality were (and are) always operative as structuring complexes orienting what was possible and not possible. Through the practice of lynching, race—in particular, whiteness and blackness—came to do some of the heavy(iest) lifting for the functional maintenance of society.

Worth reminding, my argument involves a deconstructive hermeneutical attempt to make sense of whiteness for the contemporary moment, not an effort to literally historicize its emergence. My suggestion that rituals like lynching give ‘birth’ to whiteness as god-idol is heuristic. Lynching as ritual practice offers a means of thinking about how something like whiteness comes to function within a society as a rope holding at a distance individual and collective concerns. My project is a means of conceptualizing the god-idols that demand such empirical certainty grounded in ritual activity. To suggest anything more conclusive would be to perpetuate whiteness, to act white, in a way that would cut against my overall argument which focuses on uncertainty, instability and limitation. Such limitations include what we can know or say about lynching, racialization and their effects on society. As such, this section is not conclusive, but is meant to expose whiteness as ‘born’ out of the need to reach conclusions (i.e. the inability to accept uncertainty)—in this case, a conclusion about human value and ability framed in racial terms. With this in mind, the god-idol of whiteness is born from and gives birth to, structures and is structured by, performative rituals that play out in a variety of violent way.

**Functionalism Theorizes the Functionalist Theorist**

Such performative violence takes shape through a demand for turning ideas into empirical artifacts. According to Emile Durkheim, ritual is where beliefs are validated and materialized. For Durkheim, the relationship between ritual and belief amounts to a chicken or
egg debate, with beliefs “in principle” shaping practice, but practice also shapes belief.\textsuperscript{51} Worth noting, in terms of epistemology, I do not ascribe to Durkheim’s circular theory of social solidarity as rooted in the sacred and the sacred emerging from solidarity. Rather, I understand Durkheim’s functionalism as helpful in theorizing the religious sensibilities of white people. The functional need to connect every epistemological ‘dot’ is, ostensibly, an expression of the inability to accept uncertainty and contingency. In other words, Durkheim is useful here not because he is correct in his socially-grounded sui generis theory, but because his theorization of totemic religion can be read as a theorization of god-idols in practice, seeking order, stability and security through perpetuation of a sacred object. For our purposes, the sacred object was and is whiteness. And this whiteness is constructed and reinforced through various rituals. In light of Bourdieu’s concerns to take into account the durability of the structuring and structured religious activities, suffice it to say that with respect to whiteness, to talk of rituals is also to evoke the ideological cosmologies and identities produced by and producing these rituals.

Part of this process occurs through the ideological projection of these ritualistic practices onto a cosmic screen crafted through manipulation of material environments. In short, these rituals amount to cosmological constructions, overarching portraits of human life in communities which explain the who, what, when, where and why of persons, places and things deemed sacred (things set apart) or profane (things that disrupt the thing set apart). Through ritual practice, the system of ascription (i.e. labeling of sacred and profane) offers a cohesive, seemingly complete

\textsuperscript{51} Specifically, Durkheim notes that “In principle, the cult is derived from the beliefs, yet it reacts upon them; the myth is frequently modeled after the rite in order to account for it, especially when its sense is no longer apparent. On the other hand, there are beliefs which are clearly manifested only through the rites which express them.” See Emile Durkheim, \textit{The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life}. Dover Publications, 2008, 101.
cosmological picture from which members of a community orient their lives.\textsuperscript{52} Whiteness, even in its presumed absence and misrecognition, offers just such grounding for these cosmological constructions and points of orientation historically.

Durkheim famously notes of the connection between belief and practice that rituals work to “impose [beliefs] upon us \textit{in fact}.”\textsuperscript{53} Durkheim translator and scholar Karen Fields, arguing that both witchcraft and racecraft are similarly undergirded by maintenance of invisible ontologies, suggests of race that “practices presuppose a system of belief, they confirm it as well.”\textsuperscript{54} As a result, ritual not only perpetuates and validates belief (the existential function), but also functions to reorder such beliefs (the social function). Such ordering via lynching occurred through ritualistic violence. This violence has helped to absolutize the relative and arbitrary significance of skin color while legitimating that process of absolutization. Such rites go on to shape cosmologies of participants, as well as the outward and inward identity markers employed by those within the society. This is certainly the case in the United States.

Durkheim explains that ideas born from rituals are used not only for cosmological constructions, but also as a means for group identification, calling this the use of identifying emblems.\textsuperscript{55} Outward identity markers signal the group of origin of any individual. Tattoos and body modification are classic examples of these outward markers. Within Durkheim’s work, in an Australian Aboriginal setting where a clan has the same eyes, hair and skin color, body modification may be necessary to make certain distinctions. Moving past Durkheim’s interest in small-scale societies and contextualizing his theory to the United States, a similar identifying

\textsuperscript{52} Durkheim, 141.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 14.
\textsuperscript{55} Durkheim, 113.
function is operative. Fields helps explain the significance of race as an outward identity marker for those in U.S. society, noting that “in racecraft, physical features function as a visible index of an invisible essence.” In the U.S., physical, biological differences serve as these outward emblems. Though not exhaustive of all possible rituals, through the rituals discussed below, racialization of bodies transmute these bodies into their own outward identity marker wherein physical features like hands or skin color take on a “hyperphysical significance,” serving as “props” reinforcing a presumption about invisible ontologies that shape group identities. Racialized and gendered bodies operate as modern ideological emblems outwardly signaling to others where a person belongs, what they are worth and what they are able to accomplish. These outward emblems become the ideological labels with which the sacred and profane are created, defined and maintained. In effort to ensure order and stability, bodies must simultaneously belong to a group and adhere to the stipulations of that group identity and activity—stipulations worked out and reinforced through ritual.

Rituals work to promote inward identity construction, also, in the sense that a person comes to define herself or himself through group allegiance and ritual practice. To contextualize this to the U.S., James Cone’s presentation of blackness operates in this manner where an invisible ontology of blackness is presumed to exist while physical features like skin color operate as a prop proving that the invisible ontology is real. For Cone, to be black is simultaneously to be oppressed and to have one’s identity fundamentally shaped through the

56 Fields, 299.
57 Since the U.S. example does not substitute social markers and attributes with animals and plants, instead choosing to represent the ideal type by the figure of the group in need of the totem, for the sake of space I am ignoring Durkheim’s discussion of totemic symbolic representation in actual animals and plants.
58 Fields, 296.
59 Ibid., 297.
60 Durkheim, 119.
fight against that oppression.⁶¹ Black skin ritualistically functions as an outward identity marker where “physical features” expose an “invisible essence.”⁶² From this, those who have been oppressed because of this outward identity marker are inwardly shaped in response to that oppression. This example helps to show that blackness can also be thought of as a god-idol, though this chapter is interested in the significance of its counterpoint, whiteness. In the process of being labeled and fixed in physical and discursive ways, this history fixes personal, subjective identity as well. In other words, thanks to the use of race as an outward identity marker, a white or black person can always be more than ‘white’ or ‘black,’ but never less than it. Such ontological blackness reinforces an essential quality to blackness based on the weight of the structuring and structured significance of historical ritualistic practices. Per Pinn’s earlier comments suggesting that lynchings effectively “seal” perpetrators and victims in their whiteness and blackness, respectively, the rituals shape not only how others treat an individual or group, but how individuals and groups define and understand themselves and their value and ability. Durkheim outlines four primary types of rituals: negative, positive, imitative, and piacular.⁶³ I will now examine each of these in light of the construction of whiteness in the United States.

**Negative Rites of Whiteness**

Signs which read “Whites Only” and “Colored” dotted the commercial landscape of huge swaths of U.S. businesses for decades and constitute an example of the first type of ritual delineated by Durkheim. These rites involve interdictions and operate in various ways. The

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⁶¹ James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*. 20 Anv. Orbis Books, 1990, 101. In fact, Cone’s presentation of blackness as freedom sees him suggest that for African Americans, the only possible ‘sin’ is to not allow the oppressive use of outward identity markers to shape the inward.

⁶² Fields, 299.

⁶³ Durkheim, 299-414.
establishment and placement of a segregation sign involves processes that reinforce beliefs about what whites and blacks are to do and be. Moreover, once placed, these signs operate interdictively for those who read them and are exposed to their meaning. Such negative rituals make use of ideas about group identity to determine and proscribe what not to do, or be. In terms of how this operates in U.S. history concerning the birth of whiteness, various interdictions function in this ritualistic capacity and amount to segregation practices (broadly understood), including specific Jim and Jane Crow laws, and the “one-drop rule” and anti-miscegenation legislation.

Of these negative rituals, Durkheim is clear that these rituals do not offer proscriptions on how to act so much as they “confine themselves to forbidding certain ways of acting.” Whites and blacks are not told what to do, but what not to do—do not transgress the racialized borders created through these ritual interdictions. For Durkheim, the significance of these interdictions “is to separate two sacred things of different species from each other” or sacred things from profane things. This interdiction to separate has its place in U.S. history. One example of this is the “one drop rule,” what sociologists refer to as “hypodescent” whereby white sacrality is deemed so susceptible to tainting that even one drop of black blood will make profane that which was once sacred. For specific example, U.S. senator Allen J. Ellender from Houma, Louisiana, the same state in which the Williams lynching took place, famously filibustered for twenty-seven hours against an anti-lynching bill in 1938—the same year of Williams lynching. In this and other speeches, he would exaggerate the radical contingency of white and black, extolling the importance of white purity and black profanity with quotes like “Any ‘Negro’ of notable ability

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64 Durkheim, 301.
65 Ibid., 299-300, 302.
owes success to white blood” and “Negro blood has degraded and ultimately destroyed every white civilization where allowed to mongrelize.” Such statements were common on the Senate floor of the United States. Biologically, there is no such thing as either white or black blood, and yet, this rule has influenced many laws in the United States. Thinking of this rule in terms of the sacred/profane binary, if the “sacred” white blood comes in contact with even the smallest amount of “profane” black blood, it is marred, “blackened” and deemed profane. Through these and other instances of racialized interdictions like segregation laws, whiteness as god-idol is reinforced through the ideological claims, and the dehumanization of African Americans exonerates the practice of lynching as somehow palatable. Whiteness comes to be understood as a rubric, order and certainty in pristine fashion, and blackness that which would tarnish the certain, sacred whiteness.

In terms specific to the function of such negative interdicts in the construction of whiteness, journalist and senior advisor at the Nicolas Berggruen Institute Scott Malcomson notes that the one-drop rule “made the physical metaphysical” in that skin color took on significance larger than what physically existed. Malcomson’s comments help express the implication of these racist practices in the construction of the god-idol of whiteness, in that they simultaneously hid the true ‘essence’ of white people (i.e. no essence at all) and in the process of denying such radical contingency, it produced the specter of whiteness as the god-idol capable of functioning as existential and social point of orientation. Following Bourdieu, such processes allow the groups (in this case, white and black) to be misrecognized as natural and absolute when

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67 Fairclough, 168.
they are actually a product of these ritual practices. At once, negative practices reinforce through negation and misrecognition, what not to do, how not to be, and through such negations produce whiteness without direct attention to that production. In the negation, there is a presumption that the categories already exist and so these interdictions are deemed necessary to stay within proper boundaries. The negative practices actually create the boundaries through the ritual, effectively isolating whiteness and blackness as distinct, real and essential through the interdiction.

Other specific negative interdictions include anti-miscegenation laws serving as a corollary to the “one drop rule,” Jim and Jane Crow laws and segregation signs such as “colored” and “white” drinking fountains, and a whole host of other negative practices involving “racial etiquette.” Future work will await a fuller treatment of the many implications of these negative rites, but for the purpose of this project, the significant feature of these negative rites involves the construction of racialized codes of conduct and existence (e.g. black men not talking to white women, not yielding their position on sidewalks, talking “out of turn”, etc.). Breach of such ideological norms created literal social ruptures as such transgressions called into question the ability of the functional system to reinforce and produce the god-idol of whiteness structuring and structured by the practice. Stated bluntly, the fact that women and men could have sex across racial boundaries without the cosmology being thrown asunder meant, ironically, even greater need to punish the transgressions lest the system be exposed for what it was, a façade, a system of lies, ERCs, reinforcing the idolatrous denial of radical contingency. Transgressions exposed the artificial boundaries created to evade human limits and uncertainty. Because of this, transgressions were met with punishment, often in the form of lynching. Punishment for sexual

mixing of races often meant death for the African American involved.\textsuperscript{71} But practices such as lynching were more significant than their disciplinary effects, as the practice actually functions as the central point of origin and reinforcement for whiteness as this god-idol.

\textit{Positive Rites of Whiteness}

What Durkheim refers to as positive rites carry the weight of whiteness in the form of what Pinn sardonically labels as “rope neckties.”\textsuperscript{72} If god-idols are the ropes tying together existential and social realities with the functional denials of radical contingency, then the lynch rope is a poignant hermeneutical tool for understanding whiteness functioning as a god-idol. Positive rites, in one of their manifestations, see to it that the weight of whiteness is paid with black bodies hanging from ropes. Positive rites include “regulatory and organizational” ceremonies and activities for navigating the social order.\textsuperscript{73} That is, these are rituals ultimately based on the preservation of the social system\textsuperscript{74}, often played out as sacrifices that ensure “the prosperity of the species.”\textsuperscript{75} In the U.S., historically, lynching constitutes this type of ritual.

Lynched black bodies became a means of reinforcing, testing and augmenting the social order, serving the function of structuring the social environment through violence. Such practices constituted and reconstituted the god-idol of whiteness through the subjugation of black bodies that carried the weight of possibility of transgressing a belief in sacred whiteness organizing the social environment. In fact, many lynchings were motivated by racialized and sexualized perceptions of transgression. One (of many) examples is that of Edward Coy, who in 1892 was

\textsuperscript{71} Charles Frank Robinson II, \textit{Dangerous Liaisons: Sex And Love in the Segregated South}. University of Arkansas Press, 2006, 77.
\textsuperscript{72} Pinn, 52.
\textsuperscript{73} Durkheim, 326.
\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., 351.
\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., 327-9.
held in a prison cell in Texarkana, Arkansas (not far from Ruston, Louisiana) charged with the rape of a white woman. With evidence mounting that Coy’s relationship had been consensual, a mob grew so angry they removed him from his cell, before any trial, tied him to a tree, flayed his skin, and poured oil over his body before setting him ablaze.\textsuperscript{76} Having had sex with, or having offended the Victorian sensibilities of white women, or having transgressed other artificial yet powerful negative rituals, lynching was the inverse and complementary practice of reinforcing the negative interdictions. In other words, lynching serves positive as well as negative ritualistic function. Well-known anti-lynching crusader Ida B. Wells-Barnett’s pamphlet \textit{Southern Horrors} (1892) explains that these lynchings were not, in fact, simply motivated by vigilante concerns to punish rapists, as it notes “They know the men of the section of the country who refuse this are not so desirous of punishing rapists as they pretend. The utterances of the leading white men show that with them it is not the crime but the class.”\textsuperscript{77} It was more complicated than telling social actors what not to do. Rather, through a confluence of raced, gendered and classed concerns and decisions, lynchings reinforced an overarching white ideal, which gave way to popular slogans like “This is a white man’s country and the white man must rule.”\textsuperscript{78} Such ‘bloody oblations’\textsuperscript{79} (to use Durkheim’s own characterization of this type of ritual) and sacrificial offerings constituted a sanctuary of violence and terror in ironic juxtaposition to the image of white people as civil, quiet, and reasonable. These sanctuaries operated as a sacralized reference point for a ritual reinforcing the dehumanization of black bodies and the subsequent exaggerations of radical contingency of white and black, alike. Such “positive”

\textsuperscript{76} Robinson, 77.
\textsuperscript{77} Ida B Wells-Barnett, “The Black and the White of It.” In \textit{Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases}. 1892.
\textsuperscript{78} Wells-Barnett, “The New Cry.” In \textit{Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases}.1892.
\textsuperscript{79} Durkheim, 351.
practices constitute the backbone, the most functionally useful ritual of reference, organizing racialized life in late 19th and 20th Century U.S. society.

But why did lynchings take on this referential quality? Social anthropologist Mary Douglas addresses Durkheim’s theory of social solidarity as framed by “emotional effervescence, the idea that rituals rouse violent, ecstatic feelings, like crowd hysteria, which convince the worshipper of the reality of a power greater than and beyond the self” and produce “the emotion of outrage, the idea of sacred contagion and consequent dangers to the community unleashed by breach of cherished norms.” Contextualized to the United States, such effects offer a means of making sense of the production of whiteness. Douglas famously crafts the grid-group theory as criteria for evaluating the actual variety of functional mechanisms existing in societies across time and space, arriving at the position that the body is the locus, rationale and canvas for symbolization. She replaces the emotional effervescence Durkheim suggests is the functional ritual mechanism for producing social solidarity with the body, and offers the grid-group model as a means of assessing the proportional relationship between bodily control and social control.

Lynching marks a moment when Durkheim and Douglas’ analyses coalesce in black bodies. At once, the emotional effervescence of the lynch mob reinforces the certainty of the act of lynching, absolutizing and legitimating the practice by short-circuiting any ability to reflect on the practice. While the forced subjugation of the black body—hanging from a tree—marks the site at which the social, material function of ritual translates individual concerns into group concerns. Examining lynching through the prism of Douglas, historian Kristina DuRocher notes

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81 Douglas, xxxvii.
that within the Jim Crow South, lynching served as a ritual producing this group solidarity.\textsuperscript{82} Lynching, understood as a positive ritual, served this dual function of situating emotional effervescence at the site of a body, a black body, aiding in misrecognition of the functional effects of the practice, as well as exposing that dead black body as the mechanism giving birth to whiteness as an inability to accept difference and social ruptures. This coalescence produced, gave birth to, the god-idol of whiteness.

\textit{Imitative, Commemorative and Representative Rites of Whiteness}

Neither today nor 100 years ago were lynchings a daily occurrence (though they certainly were frequent). From Durkheim’s theory, sacrificial rituals did not have to take place all the time for their functional effects to continue. More rudimentary rituals could stand in as reminder of the sacrificial offering. Imitative, commemorative and representational rites do this work. With each, the effects of previous ritualistic action are symbolically reproduced in new ways. Durkheim notes that rites exist which “assure the fecundity of the totemic species” [in this case, whiteness], rites which “serve the same end, whether they accompany the preceding ones or replace them.”\textsuperscript{83} That is, what Durkheim characterizes as these imitative, commemorative and representative rites amount to different—though, equally important—structuring and structured practices reinforcing the functional effects of the sacrificial ritual, or symbolically recreating its effects in perpetuity. These rituals do not replace lynching, but allow the effects of lynching to continue into the future even though the lynchings no longer occur as frequently or at all. They point back to, and remind of, what is learned in the sacrifice. Though subtle differences emerge between them, Durkheim suggests that all of these rites are “variations of the essential rite

\textsuperscript{82} DuRocher, Chapter 5.
\textsuperscript{83} Durkheim, 351.
whereby social groups reaffirm themselves periodically." Though other racialized rituals of reference may exist, per my hermeneutical concerns, such an “essential rite” offers a way of conceptualizing the practice of lynching.

Such seemingly mundane racist practices carry the weight of those lynched in history. For instance, one of the first racist jokes I ever learned (and consequentially, ingrained in my mind) is as follows: Q: Why do niggers always have sex on their mind? A: Because their pubic hair is on their head. Such jokes are the stuff of schoolyard fodder in many parts of the United States to this day. And though obviously ethically problematic and politically incorrect, they carry a functional efficacy as well. With this joke alone, blackness is denigrated, a ‘nigger’ is presumed to reference a particular type of person, a person dehumanized and profaned physically through lynching. Historically, lynching served to reinforce this dehumanized status, while employing the term “nigger” reinforces the same status in a less physically violent way. African Americans are hypersexualized and the commentary on hair reinforces a learned aesthetic appreciation and disdain for white and black hair textures, respectively. Such hypersexual exaggerations have an historical precedent, wherein black sexuality was not only exaggerated but the exaggeration was often used to exonerate the moral indiscretions of whites, such as one southern white man’s claim “I don’t call [miscegenation] seduction by white men, for what really happens is the Negro women seduce the white man.” Such jokes function to reinforce aspects of the god-idol of whiteness produced during lynchings (and other possible rituals of reference such as white male rape of black women), perpetuating these ERCs in an evasive fashion, offering the joke teller the ability to claim humor or ignorance.

84 Ibid., 387.
Other commemorative rites include nomenclature associated with arbitrary aspects of life (e.g. ‘nigger birds’, ‘nigger rich,’ ‘niggertown,’ etc.), which further conflate black people as problematic and endangering and disconnected from white people. Theologian George Kelsey’s early work on race and Christianity discusses this practice, offering an explanation and another example. Kelsey notes “racial terms, in the racist world of thought, come to symbolize values and expectations in general. If things do not measure up to expectations, they are “nigger” or “niggerish”…such “as a bad bridge, which is called a ‘nigger bridge.’”

Here, these ‘arbitrary’ comments appeal to various ERCs to legitimate the perspective that black people and life is of less value and ability than its inverse, white people and life.

Other examples of such imitative, commemorative and representational rites include defamation of property (e.g. church burnings), cross burnings, and lynchings in effigy, many of these practices having taken place within the last decade. One such church burning occurred in 2009 in retaliation for Barack Obama’s historic election victory. An affidavit for the case reads that the defendants “were angry about the election of Barack Obama and discussed burning the black church” for some sort of racialized retribution. Of cross burnings, the Southern Poverty Law Center’s Intelligence Project found that over 200 occurred in the United States from 1994-1998 alone. The hanging of nooses and lynchings in effigy have also occurred in recent

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86 Ibid., 39.
years. These activities reinforce the originary positive ritual of lynching and other forms of direct bodily terror such as rape, preserving a cosmology created and sustained by negative and positive rituals working in tandem. From this, imitative, commemorative and representational rituals become the means through which the god-idol of whiteness endures. And in fact, the seemingly mundane rituals (e.g. not as vicious as public castration) constitute a plausible deniability for those held sway by the god-idol of whiteness. That is, when questioned, the rituals are rationalized as either mere jokes, geographic descriptors like “niggertown” are explained away as “the only thing we knew to call the place,”\(^\text{92}\) and church burnings and nooses are offered as political statements that have nothing to do with racial hatred.\(^\text{93}\)

Though these rites may or may not always ring of the same explicit ethical bankruptcy of segregation laws or the bodily terror of lynching, such rituals help to absolutize the relative idea of whiteness as sacred and legitimate its ultimately arbitrary constitution. These rituals return attention to the memory and functional effects of lynching, effects situated over and against black death. And so whiteness as god-idol, emerges out of death. To focus on death, to remember these black offerings, takes me to the final type of rituals discussed by Durkheim, the piacular.

**Piacular Rites of Whiteness**

What is to be made of the emergence, the birth of whiteness, as springing from black bodily death? What comes of a society when it recognizes that all of the death it imposed does not prevent its own death or the death of those held sway by its power? The final rites Durkheim

discusses are piacular rites, understood as rites that respond to the sorrow associated with death (in an acute, physical sense and in a cosmic human finitude sense). Mourning is one example of these rites, instances of both ritualistic mourning (self-immolation and forced bereavement for the deceased) and collective emotional effervescences born of the trauma experienced by a community in response to loss.\textsuperscript{94} Piacular rites involve atonement, an attempt to set right what has (or will) come to an end.

In the context of my characterization of these ritual practices, piacular rites of whiteness might include instances that expose the damage done by whiteness as a means of responding to some sort of loss, a loss discussed below. Specific examples include the already cited Lillian Smith book \textit{Killers of the Dream} (1949), wherein a white southern woman tries to expose whiteness in the harm it has done and attempt to come to terms with that personal and collective legacy. Other literary works also serve this role, such as Carson McCullers’ \textit{The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter} (1940) and its portrayal of the difficulty of black and white relations in the face of the existential and social weight of racialized life in the U.S. These works are but two examples of white responses to the god-idol of whiteness. Future work is needed to make full sense of these expiatory practices. Until that time, it is best to understand my entire project as rooted in recognition that contemporary race relations in the U.S. constitute an extended case study into the ‘piaculum’ of whiteness—an awareness and exposure of its impending end and a subsequent demand for atonement, a renegotiation of the social order in its broadest sense. A ‘piaculum’ contains “every misfortune, everything of evil omen, everything that inspires sentiments of sorrow or fear.”\textsuperscript{95} To the extent this project is an effort to ‘help whiteness die’ in a metaphoric sense, it looks to an idea that “inspires sorrow or fear.” But whether it is a piaculum remains

\textsuperscript{94} Durkheim, 390.
\textsuperscript{95} Ibid., 389.
uncertain, and is a topic I will return to in the final chapter. In the following section, I discuss the connection between whiteness and death and ask if a focus on death and mourning offers any insight into whiteness as operating across various domains of power today.

The Death of Whiteness as a God-Idol

God-idols are ‘real’ to the extent the society or individual within society reinforces them with the rituals and beliefs necessary for their structure and their structuring. The story I have told thus far isolates whiteness as one of these god-idols. But does whiteness still function in these existential and social ways for the white demographic that gives birth to and benefits from the god-idol? The contemporary moment is very different and yet very similar to the overtly racist society marked powerfully by the de juro segregation and rampant vigilante justice that gave birth to whiteness as a god-idol. What are religious studies scholars to make of whiteness when historicized towards its seeming waning significance? Is there a way to hold in balance continuing racist activity while recognizing that on the whole, white people today are less motivated in such explicitly racist ways? Or are things the same? In the remainder of this chapter, I argue that contemporary studies at the intersection of race and religion could historicize whiteness—that is, update whiteness to meet contemporary social issues—through three heuristic lenses: the death of whiteness as the death of whiteness’ ability to serve the function(s) of god-idol, the death of whiteness as the physical deaths that continue based on the legacy left from employing whiteness as god-idol, and ultimately, the twilight of the god-idol of whiteness.
The Death of Whiteness

The first of these heuristic frames is the death of whiteness as a god-idol, a functional death, and can be seen in the existential and social (dis)functions felt more and more by white people today, as in something about their social position as white leaves them to feel encroached upon, uncertain and limited. In effect, as the god-idol of whiteness “dies,” it is made visible to it benefactors ironically through its growing limited effectiveness.

By (dis)function, within this heuristic, whiteness comes to force recognition of radical contingency in a manner contrary to the function whiteness served historically to ignore, deny or fight against radical contingency. Though whiteness has not actually died ideologically or discursively, its ability to function for white people appears to have shifted significantly enough to begin questioning its longevity and deployment as a god-idol. Here, I am simply attempting to argue that the contemporary moment (in all its complexity) requires an interpretation of whiteness that does not give it more credit than it deserves; thinking about its functional ‘death’ aids in such a new interpretation. White people can certainly still be racist, and many are, but my argument here is that such racism is no longer as existentially or socially useful as it once was historically. In this section, I work to document these claims through example. Failure to take the shifting functional utility of whiteness into account gives history too much credit and assumes historical experiences are unidimensional and fall along a narrow, oppressor/oppressed white/black binary.

Though racism is alive and well in U.S. society, whiteness’ increasing inability to function as a denial of radical contingency might signal its death. Contemporary white life is not guided principally by a concern over whiteness. For many whites, white skin is no longer a significant proxy for ignoring, fighting against or denying radical contingency. Radical
contingency is still fought against by these white people, and with other yet-to-be-discussed god-idols, but in fewer and fewer instances does this demographic appeal to race and skin color directly to serve this function. Moreover, as discussed below, recognition of white skin evokes a growing sense of uncertainty. Yet, history does still carry some weight, as even talk of the death of whiteness as god-idol begins with a black offering.

According to many commentators, one of the last U.S. lynchings occurred in 1981. 19-year-old Michael Donald was sought out by three Klu-Klux-Klan members and was murdered in Mobile, Alabama in 1981. He was murdered specifically because he was black. The murderers recounted at a subsequent trial that they had “put the rope around his neck and put our boots up against his face—and just pulled tight on that rope until he had no breath left in him.” Donald was chosen at random as the three murderers were literally looking to kill the first African American they saw. The murder was in retaliation to a recent mistrial having set free a different African American man (not Donald) who had been charged with murdering a white police officer. The racist murderers were arrested, tried and convicted of various charges and the ringleader, Klan member Henry Hays, was sentenced to death and executed in 1997.

Not only have lynching numbers decreased exponentially in the last decades, the subsequent execution of the principle lyncher is evidence to the fact that in certain respects,

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96 Important to make clear, Donald’s murder might be understood as one of the last literal lynchings, as he was hung from a tree, but not the last “lynching” of black bodies. Other examples of similar racialized bodily terror would include the murder of James Byrd, Jr. in Jasper, Texas in 1998, and countless other instances.
lynchings and other racialized murders are now punished either through hate crime legislation or traditional local, state or federal juridical means. When a ritual is no longer validated by the bulk of those within a group, its functional effectiveness must be called into question in that its efforts would no longer produce the social solidarity that denies radical contingency. So in certain respects, the god-idol of whiteness produced from such ritualistic practices in history might be thought of as dead in the sense that though whiteness may still operate as a discursive idea or ideal, its benefactors no longer validate the central sacrificial ritual which produced it—meaning that whiteness may no longer be the justification for or means of denying, fighting or ignoring radical contingency…even as these same benefactors continue to benefit from the rituals of a bygone era.

Moving past this point of social solidarity, today, lynchings and other hate-based crimes (like the murder of James Byrd, Jr. in Jasper, TX in 1998) often no longer carry the justification of having transgressed a social sanction or interdictive rite. That Donald was murdered without having transgressed a racialized interdiction calls into question its ritual operation. Can this particular murder be framed in terms of a ritual of reference? Or, is it a commemorative ritual meant to hark back to the social system previously produced through societal worship of the god-idol of whiteness?

Unlike many lynchings historically, Donald’s murderers were not using extralegal means to preserve a legal system. Rather, the transgression was their own, in that they had become alienated from the society as a whole. They perceived themselves the new outsiders of a changing society. Their crime, a similarly violent yet grotesque inversion of the violence doled out by Bigger Thomas in Richard Wright’s Native Son as retaliation for the alienation of African Americans historically. Only this time, those alienated were the hateful whites still under the
sway of whiteness as a god-idol but angry over their worship of a god-idol that no longer functioned as it promised. In distinction to the bulk of lynchings historically which carried the intent to punish a transgression, the murder of Donald does not seemingly recalibrate the legal system in the manner used to justify lynching previously.

In many instances historically, this issue of transgression determined the community’s acceptance of or disdain for a racialized murder.\textsuperscript{100} Without this communal sanction, it becomes more difficult to characterize whiteness as a god-idol—even as its effects still linger to shape notions of white and black identity. Donald’s murder fits within a legal system that now has expanded to include individuals and activities across race so that not only are the lynchers punished, one was even executed. Historicizing whiteness helps to foreground that the decreasing ritual activity of lynching (as punishment for transgression) has been largely abandoned and when it appears, the perpetrators (the vigilantes) are alienated from the very group they seek to benefit—an alienation also inspiring the crime. This suggests a functional death for whiteness as god-idol, in that the central mechanism constructing whiteness, the ritual of lynching, is no longer appealed to for these functional ends. Its ritual effects are not functionally positive, but commemorative, imitating a past era still longed for (but lost) by many whites. Worth noting, this does not mean that whiteness may not extoll an influence through these commemorative rituals. It simply suggests that the sum total of this influence is no longer significant enough to characterize whiteness as a god-idol centering the concerns of the white population who created it (historically) and benefitted from it historically and today.

Historicizing whiteness foregrounds that in some respects, the existential referents produced from lynching have shifted significantly. For the killers of Donald, an inversion takes

\footnote{DuRocher, 127.}
place, wherein the exoneration of an African American in a court of law sent the white killers into an identity tailspin. Ironically, the court of law became its own ritual of reference in contradistinction to the ritual of lynching that for so long plugged the racist “holes” of the criminal justice system. For these white criminals, for the legal system to ‘benefit’ African Americans through equal protection under the law, caused recognition (for the criminals) that the social system created by the god-idol of whiteness had fundamentally changed. This appears to have alienated the individuals who had made a practice of alienating African Americans from the system for so long. Perhaps, this alienation experienced by the worshippers of whiteness produced in them an existential angst and awareness of their own radical contingency that their god-idol of whiteness had not prepared them to confront. In retaliation, a commemoration ritual was in order. Only, this time the commemoration took on the quality of the initial ritual of reference, a lynching, and the commemoration was punished by the very community it sought to reassure.

For Donald’s killers, the perceived referent emerging from the justice system working on behalf of African Americans reinforced their belief that now whites were no longer part of the society. The white society that lynching serve to secure was no longer able to address the needs of these priests of a now dead god-idol. Whiteness seemingly had died. In retaliation and for possible sake of applying an existential salve to their awareness of their own radical contingency, a vicious murder was undertaken as a commemorative sacrifice to the now dead god-idol of whiteness. In a paradoxical sense, and to be unpacked over the course of this entire project, the awareness that whiteness has died perforces recognition that whiteness is still alive and well as that death reinforces the historic rituals of reference.
Such a referential quality is different today than it was historically because the norms with which white people operate have also shifted. In short, for most people, white skin’s ability to deny radical contingency is no longer understood as worthy of these black offerings and murderous sacrifices. That is, white people are no longer willing to accept that whiteness is worth sacrificial murder. Lynchings, if and when they occur in the contemporary period, are investigated, prosecuted and condemned by those (many white) in many stations of society where it was once acceptable to turn a complicit eye or participate outright in the ritual of reference. Lynchings, when occurring today, may still localize whiteness and blackness as their shared referents for the perpetrators and victims of the crime, but this racialized referent no longer trumps the demand for legal justice—meaning whiteness may still be alive but its status as god-idol is questionable because it appears to no longer serve as the last word or trump card for the society. It is no longer of supreme importance, even if racial justice is still not afforded for African Americans.

Donald’s murder helps to frame ongoing challenges regarding the relationship between whiteness and white people in both the popular imagination and within scholarship. Some might suggest that the growing numbers of hate groups in the U.S. is indicative of a resurgent appeal to the god-idol of whiteness. This may be historically understandable—this chapter recognizes as much, to be sure—but it does not meet with the demands of scholars of religion to understand race and whiteness as it operates today; it does not allow for a hermeneutic that would simultaneously hold in tension past and present racial atrocities and injustices with the contemporary importance of whiteness as understood by the bulk of white people today. My perspective on this topic takes into account these growing numbers of hate groups including but extending beyond the KKK. It is my position that such increases do not equate to an increased
influence of whiteness operating as a god-idol in society, but are a result of its waning influence and the subsequent existential (dis)function required for many racist whites as a consequence. This shift is worth recognizing as it seems to suggest a functional rupture between whiteness and its status as a god-idol.

As worship of the god-idol of whiteness has diminished, statistics bear out that racial hatred groups have grown in numbers—in particular, over the last two decades. On their hate watch list, the Southern Poverty Law Center indicates that “Since 2000, the number of hate groups has increased by 67 percent.” This may suggest to readers that my argument for the death of whiteness is either wrong or misguided as it ignores this increase in hate groups. Yet, the SPLC immediately follows this statistic up with a rationale for the increase: “This surge has been fueled by anger and fear over the nation’s ailing economy, an influx of non-white immigrants, and the diminishing white majority, as symbolized by the election of the nation’s first African American president.”

What many readers may initially read as an increase in race-based politics and influence from the god-idol of whiteness can actually be recognized as the loud fringe cries of those not happy with what admittedly few but important positive racial changes have taken place in the country. For those left worshipping the god-idol of whiteness, they should be furious and more keen to exact hate through violence, as they have already perceived a dead or dying whiteness that they are now trying to bring to life or keep alive. Whether dead or alive, what is fairly clear (to them) is that whiteness is on its functional death bed. Rather than these groups indicating a resurgent whiteness, the rationale for their anger is what marks the functional death of whiteness, in that their perception of lost control over the economy, decreasing numbers of whites, increasing non-white immigrants and other developments cause

these fringe groups to grow as they make room for those who feel themselves alienated from the changing society. As a consequence of this perceived alienation, these fringe groups grow and emerge more loudly and in greater numbers than when the overall society held more allegiance to whiteness as a god-idol. However, in distinction from a similar growth of the KKK during Reconstruction, these contemporary groups tend to be splintered with no collective, critical mass, unable to shape the larger society in their ideological direction. Analogically speaking, a dying whiteness screams more loudly than a healthy whiteness, meaning that these groups are not a signal of strength but of a growing awareness that they carry less and less weight in shaping society in *imago superlata*, in the image of exaggeration, the image of whiteness. Rather than a statement about the strength of whiteness, they call into question its functional effectiveness and indicate that the larger, once ‘white’ society now alienates those who worship whiteness as much as it has (and continues to) alienate many African Americans.

Because of the continued weight of history, my argument here would benefit from a proxy. As an example outside of race and alluding to Chapter Two, it is helpful to move from talk of an economy of whiteness to an economy of Christian religious affiliation. In the United States over the last fifty years, church membership has decreased across the board. Concurrent with this decrease, there has been a growing fundamentalism and evangelicalism to the point that Christianity in popular discourse is often conflated with a fundamentalist tone and theology. Some might argue that this growth indicates a resurgent Christianity. But it is equally possible to argue that this fundamentalism is a type of religious blowback to the waning functional

significance of Christianity in society.\textsuperscript{103} Currently, fundamentalist groups may be speaking more loudly than mainline Christian communities, but those voices are not necessarily representative of the sentiments of the overall population of Christians. Suggesting otherwise is simply a logical fallacy wherein the part is taken as the whole, and the group is judged against the worst within the group, a classic prejudiced position.

Moving from the proxy of fundamentalism to the closer proxy of race, another example of this logical fallacy involves moments when racist negative stereotypes shape perceptions of the entire black community, as in moments when all black women are presumed to be mammies or jezebels.\textsuperscript{104} Just as it is problematic that many have employed a cultural imagination to correlate these stereotypes to the actual identities of black women, it is equally logically problematic when the opposite is undertaken—as in a conflation of members of hate groups as indicative of the sentiments of the larger society. Going from these proxies back to whiteness, to take the part for the whole in this instance and correlate the growth or sentiments of quantitatively fringe hate groups to the sentiments of the bulk of white people is to stereotype all white people as holding a kind of transhistorical positionality regarding whiteness without adequate evidence. The problem occurs when an overarching white population is presumed to be represented by a contemporary fringe group. In certain respects, the logical fallacy amounts to an interpretive disagreement based on generational shifts and perspectival differences based on race, age and other social factors. Connecting a violent fringe group to a general population is easier for someone who lived through something like segregation. But for a generation of scholars the product of school bussing and hip hop (as two of many historical differences), such a connection

is less tenable as it does not take into account the shifts that have taken place in society over time. My argument emerges from the latter perspective. An historicized whiteness does not bring with it adequate evidence to suggest that whiteness operates as a god-idol in a way it once did. This does not at all mean racism is not still a problem, nor does it mean that whiteness is not also still a problem or operative god-idol for many, and nor does it even mean that most or many whites do not currently know overtly “racist” whites.105 It simply, but importantly, means that whiteness is not now doing the work it once did. And that is a good thing. Assuming such connections and motivations between general white populations and hate groups gives too much weight to history, presenting it as fixed and rigid in a way that betrays very significant changes in U.S. history over the last century. This does not mean that white individuals or groups are no longer racist. My argument is that such racism is no longer significant enough to characterize whiteness as a centering concept for the bulk of white people—even if many of them remain “racist.”

Other factors also contribute to the existential (dis)function of whiteness and further situate the consequences of conflating whiteness and white people today. Historically, whiteness functioned to enable whites to ignore or deny radical contingency. Today, increasing instances exist wherein whiteness more and more exposes whites to their radical contingency. For instance, in a study of the analytic implications of the concept of whiteness as employed by antiracist activist scholars, anthropologist John Hartigan uses racialized political tensions in Detroit, Michigan to show that for many whites in the area, whiteness appears to do as much to increase anxiety as it does to ameliorate it because of a presumption (by nonwhites) that whites

are motivated by whiteness and that such a motivation is effective in denying radical contingency.\textsuperscript{106} When these historically understandable presumptions about racist whites meet up with the acute demographics of a specific location like Detroit (which is predominately African American), whites more and more often experience both real and/or perceived alienation from certain political processes.\textsuperscript{107} Because of this complexity, Hartigan ultimately concludes that more antiracists should “ground their insights about whiteness in an ethnographic orientation towards their subjects” rather than presume an operative whiteness where there may be none.\textsuperscript{108} This discussion of the functional death of whiteness attempts such grounding. With social scientist Alastair Bonnett, Hartigan argues against scholarship that acts as if a “myth of whiteness”\textsuperscript{109} continues to undergird white political motivations. Hartigan argues that much antiracist scholarship “does not recognize that today, whites are mired in fundamentally racial predicaments: trying to regain control of their identifying features, disoriented by the disjuncture between a projected social identity (as whites) and personal experience, feeling the inadequate fit of stereotyped depictions.”\textsuperscript{110} Following Hartigan, I argue that whiteness today is existentially (dis)functional, in the sense it often exposes whites to their own radical contingency. This inability to ignore the existential, this “death,” results from to a combination of legal efforts, shifting demographics and postmodern sensibilities that question the nature of the philosophical, political and racialized subject. Quite simply, the existential (dis)function of the god-idol of whiteness means that in the increasingly complex U.S. social context, appeals to whiteness often

\textsuperscript{106} Worth noting, whether or not these whites are or are not ‘racist’ is beside my point. My point is simply that whiteness is cast back on these whites in a way that short-circuits the functional utility of whiteness.


\textsuperscript{108} Ibid., 241.

\textsuperscript{109} Ibid., 238

\textsuperscript{110} Ibid., 240-241.
add to a cacophony of social chaos, exposing the radical contingency of whites even as they still benefit from white skin in other ways.

The second component of the death of whiteness is its social (dis)function. Here, I am suggesting that various shifting demographics as exemplified by Detroit, punishment and contempt for lynching and decreasing occurrences, fewer representational, commemorative and imitative rites (increasing political correctness), and growing disdain by many for all of these rites when they do emerge, may signal the fundamental dissolution of the ‘white’ society itself as it has been constituted historically by this god-idol of whiteness. And this dissolutionment is precisely what causes these fringe groups to grow and become more vocal. This does not mean whiteness has ceased to operate. Rather, the functional death of whiteness indicates a rupture between whiteness (as god-idol) and the white demographic that once created it, in that the contemporary period and an ever-increasing racial complexity suggests that whiteness no longer functions as a god-idol ignoring and evading radical contingency effectively. And in fact, it should be an open question if such effectiveness ever marked society as ‘white.’

Socially, the U.S. is at a racial tipping point. According to U.S. census bureau reports, by 2050, those who identify as white will no longer be the statistical majority.111 This may be welcome news to some, but based on past racism resulting from fears of social uncertainty and stability, these very real impending demographic shifts could intensify racial tension and violence if whites do not learn to embrace their decreasing numbers and the possibility of decreasing political power. The largely-white Tea Party movement offers an example of anxiety playing out in the social arena as comments and election bumper stickers such as “take back America” and “Don’t Re-NIG” speak to a longing for a past sense of social stability, a stability

that resulted largely from overt dehumanization and discrimination of African Americans and all women. Though politically and ethically problematic in numerous ways, this movement also signals and foregrounds white radical contingency and an attempt to deny it yet again. How analysts and scholars register such activities amounts, again, to an interpretive decision based largely on generational, racial and other differences. Simultaneously, even as the Tea Party movement represents a collective effort to reproduce such a ‘white’ society, it helps to diagnose the growing inability of whiteness to function as a means of denying the radical contingency of those who created the god-idol. In spite of this symptom of the functional death of whiteness, the Tea Party marks a moment to remain vigilant that such a god-idol is not resurrected.

Other examples of this social (dis)function include instances such as the recent Trayvon Martin/George Zimmerman case, and the public discussions of race and whiteness to emerge from it. Public discussions of Zimmerman’s race call into question the very constitution of whiteness in the popular imagination as still an ideal-typical concept, and yet no longer exclusively “owned” by the white population to have created it. It also notes an expansion (across races) of the population seeking to construct and ‘worship’ this god-idol beyond those so labeled ‘white.’

Who, today, determines the connection between whiteness and white people? Perhaps, whiteness has died of its ability to serve a single community as a god-idol. Echoing the concerns of Hartigan, ownership over whiteness (as a category) seems to not always fall on white people to determine. This calls into question the functional usefulness of whiteness for the white people who created it as increasing racialized complexity decreases the ability of white people to appeal to whiteness to bolster a false sense of security and certainty. This is not to say that such

ritualistic acts when they occur do not continue to reinforce certain ideological underpinnings within the society in which the violent acts occur. That is, a future racialized murder may still reinforce whiteness but it is not clear if such murders would serve as effective a function as occurred historically with lynchings. Nevertheless, there is simply a growing fluidity and malleability of the concepts produced from such violent practices. Perhaps, whiteness as god-idol ‘dies’ when whites lose control of defining the concept and no longer have the ability to appeal to it (directly) for social stability and unity.

Taken together, these contemporary existential and social (dis)functions require a new way of approaching whiteness that takes into account its waning traditional functions for white people as well as the continued effects of the god-idol on everyone. Though whiteness has not died ideologically or discursively, its functional use by white people is not what it once was and these shifts should be recognized. As such, whiteness (as god-idol) might be framed as ‘dead’ to the extent it is neither contemporarily agreed upon by its beneficiaries and victims, to the extent its rituals are problematized and punished, and to the extent that it increasingly and ironically exposes whites to their own radical contingency.

And yet, the commemorative and representational rituals of whiteness persevere, even if the practice of lynching seems a (not too) distant memory. How might contemporary analyses take into account the shifts having taken place since the Civil Rights Movement while remaining aware that though whiteness’ functions may be dead or dying, its death dealing effects still linger? In the next section, I turn back to the physical deaths caused by whiteness.
The Death of Whiteness

From my functionalist position, my talk of the death of whiteness may seem to some to ignore certain ongoing sociopolitical realities. Such is not the case. The preceding section is meant to foreground that whiteness increasingly fails to do its functional job for its original creators. To some readers, it might seem as if the death of whiteness evokes a sense of colorblindness, an idea (rightly) held in disregard by many engaged in scholarship on the subject of race.\(^{113}\) Such talk of the death of whiteness is in no way a claim about a post-racial society or a colorblind society. It is meant to situate ongoing and future ritualized racist practices as socially futile. Though some readers may have a problem with the following suggestion, from a utilitarian standpoint, many would (and have) argued that the sacrifices paid by lynch victims in history were warranted and justified because of the perception that the ritual functioned to sustain the social order.\(^ {114}\) My discussion of the death of whiteness is meant to address those who might be so callously inclined to believe that violence is necessary and justified for social stability. Written with these utilitarian, callously-motivated people in mind, my comments regarding the functional death of whiteness offer an unfortunate, necessary reminder that whiteness no longer offers what it once did for white people in the United States and so, perhaps it is time to address the ongoing very real deaths that continue today as a result of the god-idol of whiteness. Deaths that are no longer ‘necessary’ because whiteness no longer does the functional work it once did.

In the contemporary moment, race and racism continue to produce a perilous environment for African Americans and many marginalized communities in the United States.

Ongoing racial disparities exist today that are the result of the functional effects of the god-idol of whiteness. According to law professor attorney and author Michelle Alexander, between 1972 and today, the numbers of those incarcerated in the United States skyrocketed from around 350,000 to more than 2 million today.\(^{115}\) Moreover, the overwhelming majority of those in prison are non-white. Specifically, as of 2010, 2.2 million African Americans are behind bars, followed by 960,000 Latinos, followed by 380,000 Caucasians.\(^{116}\) Set in context, 2010 U.S. census numbers indicate that black persons make up 13.1\% of the population, Hispanics 16.7\%, and non-Hispanic whites a staggering 63.4\%.\(^{117}\) Such skewed prison statistics are telling. Alexander goes onto argue that “…mass incarceration in the United States had, in fact, emerged as a stunningly comprehensive and well-disguised system of racialized social control that functions in a manner strikingly similar to Jim Crow.”\(^{118}\) In other words, the contemporary prison industrial complex has functional parallels to the ritual function of U.S. segregation laws. Whiteness may not be ‘dead,’ after all. Those convicted of crimes are not only ghettoized and set apart from the larger society, but they also lose rights such as voting, the ability to hold adequate jobs, etc. Such efforts, Alexander notes, “do not require racial hostility or overt bigotry to thrive,”\(^{119}\) and yet, they persevere.

The functional death of the god-idol of whiteness does not mean the dead god-idol holds no sway on the shape of society in (and at) its wake. This dead god-idol is left to cast a continued internalizing presence on the social environment. Created god-ids have a strong, material impact on society long after they have died, and this impact extends to the god-idol’s former

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\(^{115}\) Alexander, 8.

\(^{116}\) http://www.prisonpolicy.org/graphs/raceinc.html

\(^{117}\) U.S. Census Bureau website. http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/00000.html

\(^{118}\) Alexander, 4.

\(^{119}\) Ibid., 14.
creators, beneficiaries and victims. The previous discussion of the functional death of *whiteness* is not a playful way to push against current scholarship on whiteness, but is meant to situate these contemporary ritualistic practices (such as mass incarceration) as functionally useless in that whiteness is beginning to exact its toll on everyone. Such is the legacy left by the dead god-idol.

Social scientist Loic Wacquant casts the severity of this “new Jim Crow” even more pointedly, arguing that not only have these incarcerations disproportionately affected African Americans, but that the prison industrial system has so heavily shaped black neighborhoods in the United States that qualitatively, mass incarceration is equally impacting African American possibilities in and outside of prisons, as both prisons and urban ghettos ultimately amount to complementary means of “‘purging ‘undesirables’ from the body politic’…an attempt to quarantine a polluting group from the urban body.’”120 Again, this effectively amounts to a functioning ritualistic practice akin to segregation. Here, it would appear that though whiteness no longer achieves the stability it once did, new rituals are emerging that reinforce the god-idol.

And so the end of this god-idol’s function in society as existential and social redress is not a statement about the continuance of whiteness’ impact in the contemporary moment. Rather, the *death* of the god-idol of whiteness offers a way to think through the legacy left behind from a now ‘deceased’ god-idol, dead in the minds of many and yet alive to new possibilities for perpetuating racism in the present. What has ‘died’ is not whiteness, but whiteness as god-idol—whiteness as the centering concept employed to deny, fight or ignore radical contingency. As chapter two will demonstrate, other centering ideas and ideals have worked alongside of

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whiteness historically and stand ready to pick up the slack left by this death of whiteness as this
god-idol.

This project is motivated by an effort to think through these shifting and morphing racialized realities so as to more adequately analyze and mitigate these social effects, to make sense of the god-idol of whiteness that no longer functions for white people as efficiently, but continues to extoll suffering and misery (albeit to varying quantity and severity) on all members of the society, whites included. I now turn to the analytic uses and usefulness of the concept of ‘whiteness’ as it has emerged in scholarship at this intersection of race and religion. I put forward two examples to conclude the chapter.

The Twilight of Whiteness as a God-Idol

This chapter and project is not an hermeneutical exercise to sight and cite a real *sui generis* category that corresponds to material reality. Whiteness, as an idea, is not alive or dead; as a god-idol, the frame of death offers the means of holding in balance the social costs of adherence to such an idea with the functional ineffectiveness of the idea as a god-idol. That is, these lynchings never achieved their goal of procuring certainty. This project seeks to make sense of the very real consequences of ignoring the human situation of radical contingency, of living and engaging the lie of whiteness. God-idols do not exist, but they carry such weight as to consume the actions and ideas of those beholden to the imaginary. Such is the ‘twilight’ of the god-idol of whiteness, a statement and recognition of the always already virtual realities produced and producing, structured by and structuring historical human experience. According to Nietzsche, “The *lie* of the ideal has so far been the curse on reality; on account of it, mankind itself has become mendacious and false down to its most fundamental instincts—to the point of worshipping the opposite values of those which alone would guarantee its health, its future,
lofty right to its future.”¹²¹ The lie of the ideal and idea of whiteness has “so far been the curse on” the social realities in the United States. But can a lie be corrected without perpetuating the lie? Can such a dead (and deadly) lie as whiteness be responded to without giving it new life?

Such an ideal of whiteness—a god-idol—presents itself as bound in a twilight. Not fully alive, never fully dead, whiteness continuously informs the social and existential realities of those in the United States through legacy effects and misrecognition. Two scholars to have brilliantly engaged the significance of white life and whiteness for religious studies and religion are ethicists James Perkinson and Jennifer Harvey. How, though, can something that does not exist be discussed analytically? More importantly, can scholars engage such ideas without reinforcing the power of the social and discursive constructions? Both Perkinson and Harvey have offered useful starting points for discussions of whiteness and yet, both treatments have come at a cost. That cost is paid as their works simultaneously reinforce whiteness as an ontological reality even as they work against the social impact of such claims towards ideological certainty as it plays out in the United States historically.

With little doubt, the scholar to have the broadest influence on the burgeoning discussion of whiteness in religious studies is James Perkinson. His White Theology (2004) offers a theology of responsibility that hinges on the notion that whiteness operates historically as a surrogate soteriology, a “surrogate form of salvation, a mythic presumption of wholeness” that has masked human contingency.¹²² Whiteness has functioned as a way of masking the more messy side of life by “forcing others to know that particular form of creatureliness more

¹²² Perkinson, White Theology, 117.
Perkinson’s point is that whiteness intensifies the limitation and finitude experienced by non-whites in an attempt to shield whites from having to deal with their own innate finitude. This occurs as whiteness operates as “a form of ‘absolute.’ In practice—a god.”

Though Perkinson’s text offers a helpful blueprint for thinking through many of these issues, and my own work is indebted to his in numerous ways, his argument succeeds at the expense of theorizing whiteness as a negative absolute, presupposing whiteness as real (even if socially constructed). Perkinson simply inverts the moral valences traditionally attached to the concept. Perkinson wants to keep the analytic and social usefulness of this god, using its absolutizing and legitimating effects to fight against the consequences of those effects. “Whiteness” becomes no less powerful—it simply becomes a demonic force to be fought against—but no less a god.

Perkinson acknowledges whiteness as socially constructed but chooses to treat it as an ontological reality for its ability to “throw down a kind of ‘reverse ontological’ gauntlet at the feet of white people that must not be dismissed until whiteness itself ceases to function socially as a practical ontology and the actual circumstances between racialized groups have been changed.” Yet, it will not cease to function if given this absolute and legitimate weight, even if framed as a problem. Killing off the discursive and analytic usefulness of this “god” offers a

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123 Ibid., 129.
124 Perkinson’s argument has a clear and demonstrable influence on my project, and though the term “exaggerated radical contingency” is my own, it is the name I provide for the process inchoately described in Perkinson’s work, picked up from Charles Long and a number of existentialist thinkers before.
125 Perkinson, 192.
126 Ibid., 37.
more useful analytic starting point because the “actual circumstances between racialized groups”
are no longer predicated on this “practical ontology,” even if they once were.

As Hartigan reminds, claims towards ontological whiteness often presuppose some
motivation on the part of whites and are therefore, simply analytically suspect. For better or
worse, the burden of proof of racism rests with the accuser and often, adequate data showing
motivation is hard to come by—even as data regarding current imprisonment rates suggest
something is wrong. What, exactly, is wrong is more difficult to isolate. This ontological
whiteness, the god-idol of whiteness, serves, then, as a catch all, a “god-of-the-gaps” connecting
social discrepancies with a presumed intent on the part of whites. A negatively-charged god-idol
of whiteness is reinforced as scholars like Perkinson respond to the legacy effects of the living,
dead god-idol of whiteness. Ironically, the anti-racist scholar ends up one of the last maintaining
the discursive power of the god-idol of whiteness.

In *Whiteness and Morality* (2007), Jennifer Harvey argues that whiteness places whites
committed to anti-racist work in a particular moral crisis, wherein they must disrupt their
whiteness (the ground of their existence) in order to realize their full humanity.\textsuperscript{127} Whiteness has
resulted in a social situation where the concept of “white humanity” is a paradox.\textsuperscript{128} For white
justice workers to fully “be” in solidarity with marginalized communities in the fight for justice,
these whites must give up their whiteness. Harvey’s challenge is for whites to embrace this
paradox as a starting point for an ethics of accountability. Since the history of whiteness rests on
material atrocities and the dehumanization of non-whites resulted from these historical atrocities
like theft of land, property and enslavement, then such an ethical system begins with reparations

\textsuperscript{127} Jennifer Harvey, *Whiteness and Morality: Pursuing Racial Justice Through Reparations and

\textsuperscript{128} Ibid., 93.
in the form of economic resources offered by whites to their victims. For Harvey, “reparations are an imperative for justice,” a moral imperative if white people are to disrupt their whiteness and “become fully human.” If “white humanity” is to be realized, it will begin with these material concessions. Importantly, she concedes that this will only likely occur in incremental decisions and the likelihood of it happening at all, or to the degree necessary, is small.

Harvey’s text is helpful as if foregrounds that oppression principally occurs at a material level. This issue of oppression is largely an issue of resources, and since these injustices have largely occurred within an economic field, then only through recasting the landscape of that field will justice come about. Despite these benefits, there are a few problems with Harvey’s text. First, though she rightly suggests that racism produces white existential concerns producing a “moral crisis of ‘being white,’” the connection is actually much more intimate. More than the result, racialized thinking and racism are the outgrowth of human existential concerns having been responded to through construction of a god-idol. As is the case with Perkinson, Harvey makes use of the term ‘whiteness’ in ways that actually help to reinforce the crisis of moral particularity that she describes, such as her explicit suggestion that “whiteness is an immoral reality,” her statement that “white people are the problem” which reifies white existence and whiteness as synonyms, and her conflation of whiteness with material abundance and privilege. I am sympathetic to her concerns and the ethical implications of such arguments, but question the analytic effectiveness of such positions as it presumes all whites benefit equally from white skin and implies that ‘whiteness’ can be jettisoned via a proxy of material artifacts. These positions connect the god-idol of whiteness to white skin in ways that mimic the historic use of the

129 Harvey, 142.
130 Ibid., 7.
131 Ibid., 180.
132 Ibid., 3.
concept, to be sure, but in light of the many factors informing race and racism today, the
statements reinforce the god-idol as real, making the physical metaphysical in the manner
discussed earlier in this chapter—even if the intent is to fight against it.

Whiteness is not something to be owned or adopted as much as it is an empty idea, an
empty concept to be filled with the stuff of politics and history—a god-idol, having no intrinsic
value or ability. Failure to register the emptiness works to legitimate and absolutize its arbitrary
and relative ideological construction, leading to the very moral crisis described so brilliantly by
Harvey. As with Perkinson’s position, though the historical rationale for such a position may be
understandable, such analytic usage nevertheless perpetuates the power of such imaginary
concepts to exist in the minds of many, even as Harvey’s and Perkinson’s motivations run
contrary to this effect. While Perkinson and Harvey do well at times to recognize certain
pernicious social manifestations of what I label as the god-idol of whiteness, no sooner than
these problems are documented do the authors reinforce the legitimating and absolutizing power
of the concept in their work.

To borrow from Claude Levi-Strauss, god-idols, such as ‘whiteness,’ are floating
signifiers, representing “an undetermined quantity of signification, in itself void of meaning and
thus able to receive any meaning.” These signifiers float and in their functional, ethereal
meandering gain such discursive power to shape the social environment that the only analytic
recourse for engaging them—concepts like ‘whiteness’ and ‘god’ (discussed in the next
chapter)—is to simultaneously hold in tension such emptiness with the discursive power
arrangements produced by deployment of such empty concepts in the construction of existential

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133 Claude Levi-Strauss, Qtd. in Jeffrey Mehlman, “The ‘Floating Signifier’: From Levi-Strauss
pp. 10–37, 23.
and social formation. Whiteness, then, is a god-idol, wherein ‘god’ and ‘idol’ work together to always foreground the “fictive truth” of whiteness, the emptiness of the idea and the very real historical weight of such floating signifiers employed historically and analytically. Never fully born, yet never actually dead, whiteness exists in this twilight.

This brings me to back to Nietzsche’s comments about “ancient, hollow idols” whose falsity “does not prevent them from being the most believed in.” Such idolatry is inevitable as it is a product of the limited capacity of language and society to address the existential needs arising from the human situation. To this extent, all arguments, mine included, operate according to ontological thought and action. Idolatry is not fully avoidable, neither in overarching political arrangements nor the analytic work that breaks down and makes sense of such social realities. Whiteness, in its birth and death, remains elusive, problematic—yet powerful. Analysts, and those in society, are left to do their work within the shadow cast from the god-idol as it hangs—like its black victims, in the impossible possibilities produced from the limitations of human ability and value, and the stories told in response to such limitations.

The ‘twilight’ of whiteness is the twilight produced by adherence to floating signifiers, in an idolatrous quest to ignore, deny or fight against radical contingency. Breaking from Perkinson and Harvey, I want to suggest that this contemporary twilight cast by whiteness as god-idol (historically) requires analytic movement away from ‘whiteness’ and to a focus on ‘white existence’ as complicated and no longer oriented principally or initially in terms of oppressing others or unilaterally benefiting from such oppression. These are certainly features of white existence, but they do not make up the total ethnographic experience. White people are more

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135 Nietzsche, 32.
than this empty whiteness, more than the sum total of the strange fruit that continually hangs from history books. To employ whiteness as a descriptor of a white demographic fails to account for this complexity as it reinforces whiteness as a real invisible ontology justifying racialized discourse. Using ‘white existence’ allows for continued engagement of white historical realities and communities without reifying whiteness as this ontological reality, offering a more useful means through which to engage contemporary racial discourse from the twilight produced by the shadow cast by the dead, yet living, whiteness.

In both the social and academic domains, whiteness never did more—and never will do more—than obscure reality, always ignoring, denying or fighting directly against awareness of human limit, uncertainty and radical contingency. In the face of what historian of religion Charles Long refers to as the “opacity of reality,”¹³⁶ whiteness has operated as a specter, exposing a false sense of certainty that is increasingly called into question in 21st century U.S. life. “There are no more ancient idols in existence,” reminds Nietzsche, his words exposing former gods as false idols and forcing recognition of the open uncertainty offered by awareness of radical contingency. Whiteness has served the function of god-idol for white people historically. But for many whites in the U.S. historically, other god-idols have functioned in tandem with whiteness. The next chapter picks up where this story leaves off, in twilight, where human value and ability are sought and imagined, and it interrogates the theistic concept of god as another of these god-idols.

¹³⁶ Long, 207.
Chapter Two

The ‘White Man’s God Complex’:

Most Americans, the (White) Power of Paradox, and Believing in the Twilight of Theism

Who’s gonna die next?, ‘cause the white man’s got a god complex.

- The Last Poets¹

Part I of this dissertation, Learning to Die, argues that white people have ignored, denied or directly fought against death and human limitation and that such efforts have (and do) impose early and disproportionate death and limits onto others, such as African Americans. Chapter One began this argument by outlining the idea of whiteness as a god-idol, a product of these ideological denials enacted in material reality through ritual sacrifice. Lynching was offered as an example of the type of sacrifice demanded by whiteness.

But whiteness is only one feature of what I characterize as a larger, incredibly durable religious disposition. Lynchings are only one type of sacrifice and more god-idols exist than whiteness, such as theism, belief in the idea of god. Furthermore, there remains the question of why such sacrifices are required and for what ends. In this chapter, my thesis is that this belief in the idea of god, or theism—working with the god-idol of whiteness—has come to produce and sustain what The Last Poets colloquially (and helpfully) refer to as the “White Man’s God Complex.” This complex is defined as the posturing of oneself and one’s society as god so as to ignore, fight or deny human radical contingency. The white man’s god complex functions as a system, where multiple god-idols (groupings of exaggerations of radical contingency) come together in a way that casts society as god, and death/limitation as false idol. God-idols are the

¹ The Last Poets, “White Man’s God Complex,” This is Madness, 1971.
demigods, the half-gods that operate to secure society as god. In the securing of society as god, they’re able to maintain an enduring power over and control of others.

God, I understand in a Tillichian sense, as one’s “ultimate concern,” and the history of theism operative amongst U.S. whites indicates that the white ultimate concern has and remains society. Stated differently, most whites remain only concerned with themselves, and this solipsism is deadly for those outside the white man’s god complex. This solipsism, and its dangers for others, characterizes the “god complex.” Theologian Paul Tillich undergirds my understanding of the idea of god and the anxiety of meaninglessness felt by many white theists historically and today.

Durkheimian functionalism offers a theoretical assessment of society as ultimate concern by his talk of society as god and god as society. From within the white man’s god complex:

Society is not an empirical fact, definite and observable; it is a fancy, a dream with which men have lightened their sufferings, but in which they have never really lived. It is merely an idea which comes to express our more or less obscure aspirations towards the good, the beautiful and the ideal. Now these aspirations have their roots in us; they come from the very depths of our being…thus it would seem that the ideal society presupposes religion.

To this extent, one thing this chapter seeks to suggest is that within this complex, the sheer variety of beliefs in god point to the notion that most images of god are images of society in an ideal form. Whether evangelical and concerned with the justice of god, or liberal protestant and characterizing god as love, or a nationalist who connects god to race, land and material resource, the variety of god(s) that make up the various beliefs of those who adhere to the white man’s god complex point to society functioning as the “one true god” within this complex. Thus,

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3 Ibid.
5 Ibid., 420.
god becomes that which centers a community’s concerns, beliefs and actions. It is, in this regard, a sort of functioning center, a thread that ties and binds social life as it exists and social life as a community thinks it should exist. By idol, I refer to that which is deemed false, untrue or antithetical to a community’s ultimate concern. Within the white man’s god complex, death and human radical contingency is understood as an idol, a false reality. God-idols are the bridges holding together society as god and death as idol.

White people are willing to kill to guard against such limits and ensure the survival of a society, which has as its principle goal the reduction of complexity, physical danger and risk. Society is a collection of individuals who come together (through and using communication) to ward off natural and other social dangers and risks arising from growing complexity. Societies function to guard against physical death and limitation. Though white people are not alone in guilt regarding this tendency, my focus here is on understanding this willingness as expressed in the white man’s god complex.

The lyrics from The Last Poets foreshadow and remind, however, that this god complex comes at a social cost. Each stanza from the spoken word poem ends in a couplet that warns of an impending death blamed on the “white man’s god complex.” This chapter tries to answer the question of why The Last Poets would place such blame on the “white man.” Simply stated, white people respond to their limits by imposing them on others. Where race is concerned in the United States, the imposition of these limits have come in a variety of forms, such as

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7 In light of my existential leanings, I would suggest society is best functionally and religiously understood as I’ve defined it here.

7 The Last Poets.
enslavement, Jim and Jane Crow laws, and a current assault on black life through the prison industrial complex. The list of these death dealing social limits extends beyond these well-known forms of racial oppression.

These limits, this “radical contingency,” consist of what we can know, the choices we make based on what we know, our limited time alive and our interactions with others. Within the white man’s god complex, such limits are responded to when “the white man plays out the god complex as a control freak who has been socialized to believe that he must dominate and be the lord of the world, supervising the planet.” 8 The exaggerated claims white U.S. citizens make and beliefs they hold about gods and humans, claims which deny human limitations by imposing such limits onto others, have social consequences. These consequences, these sacrifices, lead religious studies scholar Theodore Trost to directly refer to the white man’s god complex as “a system of violence, an order of power over African Americans.” 9 Within my own argument, this system of violence occurs through the exaggeration of radical contingency. Such exaggerations embellish human value or ability as perceived by many and as manifest in society through sacrifice. Whiteness and theism work together within this white man’s god complex so that society might be created in the image of exaggerations of human ability and value, imago superlata. This imago superlata is outlined extensively in the next chapter. Before that, it is necessary to make clear both who has practiced and sustained this white man’s god complex and how this complex has been sustained.

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To address these issues, this chapter first situates my dissertation’s primary data set as “white,” often “male” and “theistic.” I then focus attention on defining theism as belief in the idea of “god,” where I underscore the contextual and shifting nature of theism in the United States. The fact that the meaning and usefulness of the idea of god shifts over time and space, from my vantage point, suggests “god” for white theists is best understood as an ideological placeholder for society. This would also suggest that theism, then, is not belief in god, but is belief in the idea of god. That is, theism is belief in the functional utility of belief. I then apply the social systems theory of Niklas Luhmann to unpack certain significant features of white theism operating within (and as) the white man’s god complex. These features include the effects of belief in belief, and the requirement of second order observations for understanding and protecting society as god. That is, believing in belief (instead of “god”) makes the idea of god appear to correspond to reality. Such functions, it becomes aware, require sacrifices, rooted in the ultimate sacrifice—physical life. Sighting these functions requires taking a “god’s eye view” of the system, of the white man’s god complex, which reinforces belief as able to impact the social world. In light of these findings, I conclude by arriving at yet another instance of twilight, this time, the twilight of theism, where it grows apparent that sacrifice is inescapable. The choice of whether to disrupt the white man’s god complex or sustain it requires choosing between the sacrifice of another and the sacrifice of oneself.

As with the previous chapter, my interest isn’t theological or metaphysical, but is to anthropologically isolate and make sense of what has been labeled a “god complex,” the “white man’s god complex,” an attempt to know and control all information and values, an effort in omnipotence and omniscience that seeks to secure society as god by responding to uncertainty

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11 The Last Poets.
and limitation by imposing such uncertainty and limits onto others. Responding to the complex, then, will require transforming oneself into the sacrificed. Paradoxically, this process begins by asking who demands these sacrifices. Who, exactly, is guilty of the white man’s god complex?

“Most Americans”

In effort to make very clear both who I am talking about and what I am talking about, it is important to situate my dissertation’s primary demographic and data set. Here, I ground my discussion of white people by noting the variety amongst them, then note of the social sameness afforded by white skin, then move to situate “white theists” as a more or less cohesive group for analysis. Though demographic trends are shifting in the United States, historically and today, the bulk of those operating according to such a god-complex are disproportionately white\(^1\), disproportionately theists and disproportionately Christian.\(^2\) I use “white theist” to indicate a group of people who have ostensibly practiced and/or benefitted from (at least) two complementary means of securing the false sense of certainty and subjectivity offered by god-ids. Worth noting, for the sake of space, this chapter does not address “Men” or “masculinity” though it is very much a part of the white man’s god complex. Such a focus on men amounts to another god-idol at work in the complex. Now, I focus on white and theist to show the relation between two god-idols, and to include white women, who have also benefitted and adhered to this god complex.

When I make claims about ‘whiteness,’ its effects or its constitution, I am not talking about ‘white people,’ or theists, nor am I talking about the primary characteristic with which to


\(^2\) [http://religions.pewforum.org/reports](http://religions.pewforum.org/reports)
define any particular group of people.\textsuperscript{14} Whiteness is a god-idol, a discursive idea—a conglomerate of exaggerations of radical contingency—that works to shape society in the image of those exaggerations. ‘White existence’ and ‘white people’ refer to the community of those phenotypically and sensorially labeled ‘white’ or ‘Caucasian’ by virtue of a number of different (initially) arbitrary physiological and social factors. ‘Whiteness’ derives its name from ‘white people,’ but whiteness (as an idea) is worshipped by many people across race, space and time. White people are not the sum total of the worship of the god-idol of whiteness, though they are never fully removed from it, this includes me.

My use of “white people” refers to the overarching statistical demographic in the United States who, by virtue of certain physiological markers and the meaning of those markers in relation to these god-idols operating in the social world, check off “Caucasian” or “White Hispanic” on census reports.\textsuperscript{15} The meaning and significance of those physiological markers shift over time. Accordingly, so do definitions of white people. For this project, I rely initially on self-ascription on Census reports to ground my definition of white people. I find this sufficient

\textsuperscript{14} This distinguishes my project from scholars like James Perkinson and Jennifer Harvey, whose work situates whiteness as the primary point of orientation for those they may deem ‘white.’ Whiteness has been used in much scholarship to define white people. Many people analytically conflate this god-idol with those who gave rise to it and benefit from it. This conflation makes some political sense, as the signifier ‘whiteness’ is derived from the use of white skin by white people to do the work of exaggerating radical contingency. This move is not exactly wrong, historically, but today is anachronistic as the complexities of race require greater specificity. But this very significant social and political connection does not justify analytic conflation of real people with the god-idol. Incidentally, this conflation functions as an inverse adherence to the god-idol, but discussing such a connection would detract from my principle concern to sight white Christians. See Chapter One for a bit more on this analytic conflation.

\textsuperscript{15} Though self-selection is surely not the only criteria determining who counts as white, it is the only reliable, empirically-grounded means of discussing “white” people without appealing heavily to qualitative or subjective analysis. These people \textit{Are} afforded substantial privilege from their skin color, and this privilege is discussed later, but as an initial data set, initially defining them against their privilege relegates the definition to the mere subjective opinion of the analyst. Though I arrive later at such a position, I want to first empirically ground this group in real numbers.
because relying on the idea of “whiteness” and its privileges afforded to many white people has
the tendency of reinforcing whiteness as something necessarily connected to white people, which
it is not. Whiteness as a god-idol is an idea, and any can hold such an idea, even if particular
groups benefit disproportionately from such an idea. According to the 2010 Census Bureau
numbers, “white people” includes non-Hispanic whites making up roughly 65 percent of the U.S.
population.16 Taking into account Hispanic whites, that percentage jumps to just fewer than 80
percent.17 These “white people” make up well over half of all active voters, although the 2012
national elections saw the number of these voters decrease from 2008.18 Approximately 46.5
percent of these “white people” hold some sort of job.19 6.1 percent of these white people are
considered “working poor.” Working poor indicates that they “are persons who spent at least 27
weeks in the labor force (i.e., working or looking for work) but their incomes still fall below the
official poverty level.”20

In contrast to these “white people,” in 2011, 13.3 percent of African Americans and 12.9
percent of Hispanics were counted in this same group of working poor.21 Though these black and
brown percentages explain how poverty disproportionately effects black and brown
communities, they also help to explain that there are nearly 7,000,000 working poor white
people. Whites make up the overwhelming majority of poor people in the United States.22 A
similar point may be made with respect to poverty more generally, with nearly 12 percent of
white people falling at or below the poverty line, while African Americans face a poverty rate of

16 http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/2012/tables/12s0012.pdf
17 Ibid.
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid.
22 Ibid.
nearly 26 percent.\textsuperscript{23} The vast majority of welfare recipients are white people. On the complete opposite end of the socioeconomic spectrum, of the 1 percent of the wealthiest people in the United States, nearly 95 percent are white people.\textsuperscript{24}

These white people also accounted for over seven million arrests nationwide in 2009, with African Americans accounting for over three million arrests.\textsuperscript{25} Staggeringly, of all of these arrests, where whites represent over half of total arrests (they also account for nearly 100,000 more violent crime arrests than blacks\textsuperscript{26}), whites represent only 11 percent of the total incarcerated population, compared with approximately 27 percent Hispanic inmates and 62 percent African American.\textsuperscript{27} These arrest and incarceration statistics indicate that white people are arrested at a rate roughly 2:1 from black and brown people, but face prison at a rate of 1:10.

These quantitative statistics explain two crucial qualitative characteristics of white people, a) that there is extreme diversity amongst this group, and that despite this diversity, b) whites share considerable social privilege, a privilege that connects them as a cohesive (albeit porous) group.\textsuperscript{28} Therefore, when I describe white people, I want to present this demographic in its complexity and variety.\textsuperscript{29} I’ve included these figures to note that no ideal-typical portrait of “white people” can be gleaned from actual, empirically-determined statistics. By “ideal-typical,” I borrow social theorist James Faubion’s use of the term, where it refers to a theoretic guidepost,

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{23} \url{http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/publications/Appendix_Tables1-24.pdf}
\item \textsuperscript{24} \url{http://www.dukechronicle.com/articles/2011/12/01/wealth-top-1-percent-varies-race}
\item \textsuperscript{25} \url{http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/2012/tables/12s0325.pdf}
\item \textsuperscript{26} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{28} The actual demographic of white people is far removed from the single image of an affluent, white male with a wife and 2.5 children who never see trouble, the prototype of “whiteness” if you will. Though affluent white people obviously exist, statistics bear out that white people are much more economically diverse than that.
\item \textsuperscript{29} It is important to keep in mind that this added complexity does not translate to exoneration for the oppression of non-whites.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
a stereotype, if you will, used to reinforce certain social theories as effectively “closed” or
correct in every moment.\textsuperscript{30} For instance, The Last Poet’s use of the term “white man” presumes a
type of shared experience amongst these whites. This is an “ideal-typical” portrait. Where
empirical facts are concerned, there is no such thing as an ideal-typical image of white people, or
white men. However, and in deference to the usefulness of The Last Poet’s ideal-typical
description, subjective assessment affords the ideal-typical framing of white people. Whites
across socioeconomic class do benefit from some of the effects of racism, be it interpersonal,
structural or otherwise. If an ideal-typical image is possible at all, it might likely include the
advantage wrought from white skin, what some label white privilege.\textsuperscript{31} This privilege cuts
against the variety of the group, but does not alone justify a dismissal of the social variance
amongst the group.

Another connective fiber holding together many of these white people are religious
commitments, in particular, the traditions to which they adhere and the belief in god or a higher
power of some sort. Within the United Sates, 2012 Pew Research data shows that 78.4 percent of
the entire U.S. population considers itself Christian (of one sort or another).\textsuperscript{32} More than this
claimed ideological or church affiliation, 92 percent of Americans “believe in God or the idea of
a universal spirit.”\textsuperscript{33} Nearly 70 percent are certain of this god’s existence, even though what this
god looks like takes a great number of shapes in the United States. Beliefs held by whites are as

\textsuperscript{31} Many scholars continue to employ the language of privilege, though I err on the side of Lewis
Gordon who has argued that these so called white “privileges” are better characterized as rights,
so that the effects of them (i.e. adequate jobs, housing, food, etc.) are registered as human rights,
making the fight for them a matter of parity rather than vying for privileges not guaranteed in the
first place. See Lewis Gordon’s chapter “Critical Reflections on Three Popular Tropes in the
\textsuperscript{32} \url{http://religions.pewforum.org/reports}
\textsuperscript{33} \url{http://religions.pewforum.org/reports#}
diverse as these white people. Worth noting, of the 90 percent of believers, six out of ten understand themselves to have some sort of “personal relationship” with god, or that god can be conceived of anthropomorphically.\(^3^4\) Despite the suggested rising numbers of non-believers, nearly half of all Americans feel that rising atheism is problematic for America. No doubt, the bulk of those holding the view that atheism or non-belief is problematic are believers in “god.” I regard this believing group’s fear of non-believers as an indication that their ultimate concern seems to be a smooth, effectively functioning society in “America.”\(^3^5\) Even the framing of such questionnaires relegate religious belief to an undercurrent of a more important ideological marker: U.S. Citizenship. Effectively, this means that a white person does not have to be a traditional “theist” to worship the god of society through the god complex. Nevertheless, the bulk of those within the complex ascribe to traditional belief in god. This is an important point, as my definition of theism (unpacked below) does not require belief in god. Any ultimate concern will suffice, even belief in belief. Nevertheless, theism as traditionally defined plays a huge role in the lives of many of these white people, and offers a wealth of information useful for exploring the white man’s god complex.

Though Caucasians make up a sizeable and disproportionate percentage of non-theists and atheists, as well, the raw numbers are such that the majority of Americans believe in god or a higher power, the largest single racial group in the United States is Caucasian, meaning that a sizable and influential percentage of the overall American population are white theists.

\(^3^4\) [http://religions.pewforum.org/reports#](http://religions.pewforum.org/reports#)
\(^3^5\) [http://www.pewforum.org/2013/07/02/growth-of-the-nonreligious-many-say-trend-is-bad-for-american-society/](http://www.pewforum.org/2013/07/02/growth-of-the-nonreligious-many-say-trend-is-bad-for-american-society/)
This belief in god connects them.\textsuperscript{36} So does their racial privilege, the social, cultural and economic advantages afforded by preferring white people and by dehumanizing non-white people. In fact, if I might invert the argument regarding double or triple jeopardy, suggested to occur amongst African American women as a result of the oppression felt because of sexism, racism, and poverty\textsuperscript{37}, white theists are \textit{doubly advantaged} because of their whiteness and their theism, and where economic advantage is found, \textit{triply advantaged}.\textsuperscript{38} But as this chapter bears out, these markers are not simply arbitrary means of social advantage. God-idols do the work to procure these advantages. They function to secure this privilege. And this function is yet another connective feature binding these white theists as a cohesive unit within this project.\textsuperscript{39}

Theism connects them at the level of my analysis, yes, but it is also used to connect them with one another. It offers an ideological foundation, grounded in an ultimate concern for society, from which Civil Religion\textsuperscript{40} and institutional religious practices emerge with immense variety. Despite such variety of belief and practice, belief in belief connects them. Though white theists range in wealth, education, social options, and religious commitment, theism as the belief

\textsuperscript{36} Here, I am not concerned to be sensitive to the variety of stated beliefs in god. I am interested to describe all of these beliefs rooted in a more fundamental structural and functional position that situates society as god, and death as a false idol.


\textsuperscript{38} Here, I do not mean to ignore other forms of oppression or advantage, such as economic, gendered, sexual preference, and the like, but simply to foreground that theism and belief in the idea of god affords a particular type of privilege that interconnects and works with racial advantage and other forms of privilege or oppression. Even with this caveat about economic oppression, my point is to argue that theism cuts across economic diversity to posit an interpretive sameness. It is different than actual economic advantage or privilege. It replaces or fills in for whites who are economically disadvantaged.

\textsuperscript{39} This cohesiveness does not necessarily correspond to these white theists’ own impression of themselves, but operates as an analytic bracket for my project.

in the idea of god or belief in the utility of belief grounds many of their understandings of themselves and others.

Appealing to Pierre Bourdieu, I want to label this theistically-grounded group as a white theistic petit bourgeois\textsuperscript{41}, meaning that their theism—their belief in the idea of god (however constituted, even as belief in belief)—produces a centering ideal from which white theistic variety radiates outward. This is the god-idol of theism. For these white theists, variety is responded to by ideologically agreeing across a vast array of stated beliefs. I do not mean to suggest that there are no limits to this agreement, but that even those limits are fundamentally based on social differences.\textsuperscript{42} Belief in the idea of god brings this variety together, and it is recast as a concern for the society centered on this white theistic petit bourgeois. Believing in their belief in god, white Baptists find commonality with Methodists, Methodists with Pentecostals and Catholics, etc., etc. For instance, when meeting new people, white theists are often interested to ask the newcomer “What church do you attend?”\textsuperscript{43} The presumption is that a white theist can learn a lot about a stranger if they know where, and if at all, the stranger attends church. As equally important as any specific answer is that an answer is offered at all. The question posed has \textit{everything} to do with belonging and sameness, specifically with respect to sect or denomination, and generally in terms of a larger theistic (and usually “white”) way of life. Further, activities like dinner-time prayer, church attendance on Easter, and a host of activities (born of disparate theological positions) work to reinforce a white normativity constituted through the various god-idols working within the god complex. That is, presumptions about ideological normativity are not “determined” through these questions so much as they are

\textsuperscript{42} I follow Bourdieu who follows Marx on this point.
\textsuperscript{43} Personal auto-ethnographic experience.
produced in the asking. The concern over what is said in churches, for many of these white
theists, is less important than whether church was attended or not. Worth reminding, the question
of “What church do you attend?” asks if one has participated in a U.S. social activity that Dr.
Martin Luther King, Jr. described as “the most segregated time in America”\textsuperscript{44} The question of
theistic orientation, in the U.S., is always racialized even if unspoken, the god-idols working in
tandem to determine various sorts of affinity or social acceptability. The questioning says more
about the questioner than it does the questioned, in terms of the white theist’s values and
commitments. Couched in light of theism, these questions outline insiders from outsiders. Belief
in the idea of god is central to these efforts. Theism unites, and unites through distinction. A
concern over theism, belief in the idea of god (however conceived) operates as a unifying idea
through the distinctions it imposes and presupposes. Questions about “god” or “church” have
more to do with humans—they are questions about human group allegiance.\textsuperscript{45}

Marking a functionally similar, though seemingly disconnected sociological trend
regarding taste-making amongst a particular social class in France, Pierre Bourdieu offers some
analytic guidance. Speaking of sanctioned aristocratic and academic distinctions of the French
petit bourgeois, Bourdieu’s comments are applicable to white U.S. theists. He writes:

The official differences produced by academic classifications tend to produce (or
reinforce) real differences by inducing in the classified individuals a collectively
recognized and supported belief in the differences, thus producing behaviours that are
intended to bring real being into line with official being.\textsuperscript{46}

As argued by Bourdieu, “official being” suggests that the petit bourgeois do not find home in any
specific stratified class, they teeter on the anxious edge between the proletariat and the

\textsuperscript{44} Lewis V. Baldwin, \textit{There Is a Balm in Gilead: The Cultural Roots of Martin Luther King, Jr.}
\textsuperscript{46} Bourdieu, \textit{Distinction}, 25.
bourgeois. They are homeless and classless, in the sense that their economic variety suggests they do not belong to any socio-economic demographic. Moreover, where white theists are concerned, there is the sense that they do not have the luxury of “belonging” to any cohesive ethnic group, and theological or denominational affiliation works to fill this void. Whites certainly are a racial group, but because of their variety, they often feel themselves “homeless” in this sense. The irony, of course, is that they feel this homelessness while at home in a largely white society. Irony aside, many contemporary white theists often feel this homelessness directly or find a sense of belonging in the notion that their home has been taken over (i.e. they have lost/are losing their country). Much Tea Party rhetoric is indicative of this sentiment. A recently received email forward, appealing to auto-ethnographic data, helps to present this idea, where talk of god gives way to direct presentation of the white theist’s ultimate concern, the intent to bring actual society into line with their ideal image of society by “produce[ing] behaviors that bring real being in line with official being”:

47 Though registered by many as an “extreme” voice, Glenn Beck helps to characterize my point about homelessness. See, for instance, http://www.teaparty.org/we-will-no-longer-accept-the-lies-glenn-becks-powerful-speech-at-washington-d-c-rally-25595/

48 Bourdieu, 25.
In this screen capture of the forwarded email\textsuperscript{49}, and by virtue of its inclusion as a mass email forward, I want to suggest the first paragraph describes the sentiments of “many Americans,” “dismayed” at the “indifference” of President Obama. While in the second paragraph, these

\textsuperscript{49} Personal email received. Image and caption are part of an ongoing marketing campaign to sell prints of the image, and as they are freely available on the internet and the artist’s website and facebook page, I have included them here under Fair Use 17 U.S. Code § 107. See https://www.facebook.com/pages/Jon-McNaughton/157211518652 and jonmcnaughton.com.
sentiments are connected to a quasi-historic example of Nero’s persecution of Christians indicating that those who feel this dismay (today) seem to understand themselves as persecuted, and that persecution the result of a religious orientation. From the sentiments exposed here, the anxiety casts them thrutching in a variety of directions in effort to find points of social sameness that might operate as a type of capital. In the United States, theism is a type of social and cultural capital as it operates to address such uncertainty and limitation by artificially producing sameness and order. Distinct beliefs in the idea of god transmute into a shared belief in society as god, as ultimate concern. I turn to this topic in the following section.

Before that discussion, the import of this photo passed around through email forwarding suggests it represents the sentiments of many of these white theists, meaning that the image above speaks not only specifically to a particular interpretive posture on the part of one person, but passed along through email, repeatedly, suggests the expressed sentiments are shared by the “many Americans” discussed in the paragraphs underneath the image. In short, though it is impossible to know the exact numbers of people who share the sentiments expressed in the email, there is enough of a critical mass of individuals for whom it appeals that the content of the email offer a way to understand some of the motivations of these self-ascribed “many Americans.” Other features of this class-less class of white theists includes “an ethos of restriction through pretension, the voluntaristic rigour of the ‘called’ but not yet ‘chosen,’ who base their pretension to embody one day what ‘ought to be’ on a permanent invocation of ‘ought.’” The god-idol of theism, for the white, U.S. theist, is this ‘ought,’ belief in the idea of god as a means of reinforcing a largely white society as god. In the McNaughton image, titled

50 Bourdieu, 339. The quote continues: “However, as soon as the analysis is refined, it is seen that this system of dispositions takes on as many modalities as there are ways of attaining, staying in or passing through a middle position in the social structure, and that this position itself may be steady, rising or declining.”
“The Demise of America,” the white Christian society is deemed lost while the black president plays a fiddle. The attached few lines underneath the image then draws a parallel between Nero’s persecution of Christians while Rome burned, and a suggestion that President Obama is somehow persecuting the Christians in the United States. Here, where incomplete history, racialized social animosity and religion collide in the image, white theistic sentiments are exposed—not as accurate or grounded, but as shaping their sense of connection rooted in a belief in the idea of god as a belief in the idea of a white society. If it is the sense of many of these white theists that their society is in “demise,” then it stands to reason that one way they might respond to the feeling of encroaching demise would be to embrace it more fully, metaphorically “learning to die,” in the sense of learning to accept this (perceived) loss of power and certainty rather than fight against it.

In short, the quantity and diversity of social anxiety and experience amongst white theists requires the postulation and adherence to a sameness offered by different ideas about god—a sameness that localizes in society. That is, sameness is sought and limitation responded to not by god (i.e. society)—their god is in “demise,” after all—but by belief in the idea of god (theism) as a means of securing society as god, the white man’s god complex.

In certain respects, my argument is similar to Noel Ignatiev’s conclusion that whiteness was embraced by Irish immigrants in effort to align themselves with older English residents and to distinguish themselves from blacks. Theism similarly functions in the way Ignatiev describes of whiteness. This sameness comes about by the imposition of difference as a corrective for difference’s casualties. It is not enough that the painting include a burning congress, but it also includes an image of a black president, unconcerned—even happy—about the conflagration. His

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inclusion signals to the white theist that the problem is not theirs, finding unity in their exoneration and their vilification of Obama as distinct from them. In this effort, the painting reinforces (in the twentieth century) what Ignatiev explored of the nineteenth, the use of black stereotypes in the reinforcement of an ideal-typical white society.\textsuperscript{52}

At this point, I hope it is clear that my definition of theism extends beyond a concern over otherworldliness, or cosmic forces. But complicating my argument is that theism—as understood and defined by white theists (as I’ve characterized them), is part and parcel to reinforcing society as ultimate concern. White theists employ “theological” language, adhering and appealing to “god” to undergird their actual operative god as society. The following is a brief, anecdotal example of this theological appeal as it works to reinforce the sense of society as god amongst this white theistic petit bourgeois:

For most Americans, the blessings of God have been the basis of our liberty, prosperity, and survival as a unique country.

For most Americans, prayer is real, and we subordinate ourselves to a God on whom we call for wisdom, guidance, and salvation.

For most Americans, the prospect of a ruthlessly secular society that would forbid public reference to God and systematically remove all religious symbols from the public square is horrifying.\textsuperscript{53}

Allowing for minor theological tweaks to Newt Gingrich’s theo-political aphorisms, and applying Pierre Bourdieu’s conception of the petit bourgeois to Gingrich’s characterization of “most Americans,” white theists are the “most Americans” described by Gingrich. Gingrich’s words not only suggest this theistic connection among whites, but describe theism and whiteness working together within the white man’s god complex. The comment that “we subordinate

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid.

ourselves to a God” and Gingrich’s vehement disdain for secularism expose and foreshadow the social function and significance offered by this belief in the idea of god in the United States. His comments seem to suggest that whoever holds sway over belief in the idea of god, or of theism, does not simply find themselves on the right side of Pascal’s wager\textsuperscript{54}, but find themselves the recipient of social privileges that come about from the sacrifices required by adherence to theism.

This white man’s god complex is not limited to evangelical or fundamental theists, nor is it only operative amongst white theists who might fit the popular image of an “extremist” or a “racist.” In historical context, Gary Dorrien’s extensive history of liberal theology paints this white theistic need through different imagery, as he argues that liberal theology develops as a means of balancing an expanding modern, rational quest for knowledge with an ongoing preoccupation with finding ways to keep the idea of god relevant while on this quest.\textsuperscript{55} Dorrien’s statement about liberal theology’s progenitors seeking god’s preservation undergirds theism’s use in this same capacity, but amongst many within a white theistic constituency that tended to appreciate education, the arts, progressive culture, and the like. Here, my point is simply to note that though the contemporary instances used here suggest I am relegating all white theists to one political and theological position, the white man’s god complex has affected far more than contemporary conservatives worried over the loss of their country. I also don’t mean to suggest that Dorrien is interested (or would even agree with) the ideas I present here. Rather, his brilliant analysis of liberal theologians does well to demonstrate that the ultimate concerns of classically

\textsuperscript{54} Pascal’s Wager refers to the metaphysical wager posed by believing or not in god’s existence. All things equal, to not believe and god exist sets one’s afterlife up for hardship; to believe does no harm in this world, so why not. Pascal was wrong on this point. Belief has immense consequences for this world.

liberal white (and even Black) Christian leaders in the United States is the effective functioning of an ideological system thought to undergird social cohesiveness. Dorrien notes that liberal theology is largely “defined by its openness to the verdicts of modern intellectual inquiry…its conception of Christianity as an ethical way of life; its advocacy of moral concepts of atonement or reconciliations; and its commitments to make Christianity credible and socially relevant to contemporary people.” The liberal or conservative demand to keep or protect “god” overlap and are blurred. Ostensibly, “god” for most (white) Americans, “theology” or “Christianity” for white Christians specifically, was and always has been a proxy for social concern. Dorrien’s analysis shows equal anxiety on the part of many white liberal theistic leaders in terms of the ideas of god and religion cohabitating. But such synergy is judged—always—according to social reality, marking the social world as of supreme value and ability, not any particular theistic tradition. Contemporary conservative positions posit a loss of both religion and society, directly. My position is that many white Christians falling on either side of a political continuum, when they talk about “god,” they are actually talking about and wrestling with, ultimately, a shared god complex employing theism (as a god-idol) as a means of securing society as god so that human limitations can be ignored or denied.

This preoccupation with “God” has a powerful radiating effect of securing certain distinctions and realities for these “most Americans.” As this chapter will conclude, this security comes at a cost. In fact, this idea of god, played out amongst these “most Americans” has assured they follow an “ethic of noblesse oblige” (an ethic based on artificial social impositions) that often reinforce their anxieties as they work to curb them. Sending along the email of “The Demise of America” is a physical expression of theism’s social function. That is, continuing to

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believe in a god’s preferential option for America does more to reinforce the anxiety the social notions of American Exceptionalism, for one example, seeks to assuage than it does to actually produce contentment or social belonging. The idea of god (1) allows these “most Americans” to pretend they have life better than their actual circumstances allow, while it (2) also works to prevent these “most Americans” from arriving at the life they already perceive themselves to hold. The white man’s god complex ensures white theists live their lives as a lie. This is *imago superlata*, made in the image of an exaggeration, and theism works to ensure this exaggerated lifestyle. Moving now to a more focused discussion of why belief in the idea of god operates in this fashion, perception and the power of belief are shown as key to these attitudes of “most Americans.”

**The (White) Power of Paradox**

One person with a belief is a social power equal to 99 who have only interests.  
- John Stuart Mill  
(Quoted by Forrester, A commenter on Stormfront, A white supremacy website)

In this section, I seek to further demonstrate that theism has more to do with belief in the social and existential utility of belief than with god, and can be defined in this light. Such a shift indicates that it offers a particular type of social weight and power based on the inherent paradox of the idea of god. Theism is not belief in god. Theism is belief in the *idea of* god, believing in the power of belief. I first explain how I arrive at such a definition by underscoring the historiographic and contextual constitution of “theism.” Noted above, the shifting conceptions of “god” in different times and places in the West—not what those shifts are, but the fact that they

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58 [http://www.stormfront.org/forum/](http://www.stormfront.org/forum/)
happen at all—suggest that, however god is conceived, most conceptions will reinforce the notion that society is god. As society changes in look, form and need, so too, will images of “god,” always a parallel to various images of the social world, but the preoccupation with society as actual ultimate concern remains a constant.

While engaging in some online “fieldwork” for this project, my efforts have taken me to a number of explicitly racist online hotspots. One of these is Stormfront\(^59\), a white supremacist website that has been around since 1995. Taken directly from the site, they define themselves as “We are a community of racial realists and idealists. We are White Nationalists who support \textit{true} diversity and a homeland for \textbf{all} peoples. Thousands of organizations promote the interests, values and heritage of non-White minorities. We promote ours. We are the voice of the new, embattled White minority!”\(^60\) Immediately, any explicit discussion of “god” or “religion” is absent, and yet, their claims regarding “nationalism and homeland” echo the white theistic disposition discussed above. What, then, could this suggest about theism? Started as a bulletin board and clearing house for the organizing of racist people and ideas, they deem their prejudice justified by an awareness of the anxiety that society is no longer theirs, such that they perceive themselves a “minority.” (Parenthetically, this founding date means that before Amazon.com and Google, before AOL and the proliferation of pornography and the society's ubiquitous acceptance of the internet, white supremacy made quick use of the innovative technology we now rely on daily).\(^61\) While examining this site, I came across one prolific commenter on the website named Forrester, whose signature line within his comments included the following

\(^{59}\) [http://www.stormfront.org/forum/](http://www.stormfront.org/forum/)

\(^{60}\) Ibid.

\(^{61}\) [http://www.splcenter.org/get-informed/intelligence-files/groups/stormfront](http://www.splcenter.org/get-informed/intelligence-files/groups/stormfront)
quotation from John Stuart Mill: “One person with a belief is a social power equal to 99 who have only interests.”

Why does such a statement about belief matter to a white nationalist? Seeking background, I followed Mill’s comment arriving at his position on religion and society. Mill notes that,

Yet so natural to mankind is intolerance in whatever they really care about, that religious freedom has hardly anywhere been practically realized...In the minds of almost all religious persons, even in the most tolerant countries, the duty of toleration is admitted with tacit reserves. Wherever the sentiment of the majority is still genuine and intense, it is found to have abated little of its claim to be obeyed.

Mill’s own words come about as musings of a man troubled by an ineffective and hypocritical social arrangement. Mill finds religion to promote intolerance, though he clearly has a problem with such intolerance. In light of his chosen internet activities, it appears Forrester also notes the possibilities that “belief” might promote intolerance. Having thought long about the significance of Forrester’s appreciation of Mill’s idea—such was the poignancy that Forrester attach it as the intellectual foundation for his comments on Stormfront’s website—I have become aware that ideas do not have to meet with material reality to have dastardly consequences for the social world. That seems Mill’s implied point, as well, as he demonstrates the disconnect between the notion of religious tolerance and the actual practice of religious intolerance. Belief in the idea of tolerance allows for the actual expression of intolerance, precisely because the rhetoric undergirding the beliefs and practices suggest otherwise. Theism, to this effect, functions effectively when it acts as if it is doing something other than what it is actually doing, reinforcing society as god made in the image of a white man. A belief, alone, is enough to do much damage, even if practically speaking, no white man can really be thought of as “god.” Functionally

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62 [http://www.stormfront.org/forum/t584083/](http://www.stormfront.org/forum/t584083/)
speaking, there is little reason to distinguish the belief from the social reality, as one brings about the other. The only group who need believe an idea for it to affect society is the group at society’s center, even if that group might deny its location at the center. And yet, with the idea of god, an idea at the center of the white man’s god complex, this idea is never far removed from the social world.

Theism is not what it seems. It changes over time. And based on that awareness, I situate theism not as belief in god, but belief in the idea of god, or belief in the power of belief. Stated differently, there is no such thing as belief in god, there is only a functional society. There are only beliefs in the functional utility of adherence to the idea of god. For example, where this project is concerned, I believe in the idea of god as a person or group’s “ultimate concern,” and that belief offers me a second-order viewpoint allowing me to analyze a group of people who have believed in the idea of god as useful for them. Applying a Feuerbachian twist to this, then, I believe in the utility of the idea of god as ultimate concern so that I might register theism as belief in the idea of god, as opposed to belief in god. Believing in the idea of god gives the effect of producing a perception of oneself as god or god-like. This is a central feature of the white man’s god complex. One might define this as an ontologizing process, when an idea takes on the character of existing by virtue of the choice to presume said existence.

Well known ethicist and philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre helps to explain this subtle, but important distinction. And it is this distinction that Forrester seems to have registered and is seeking to exploit. Delivering the Bampton Lectures at Columbia University in 1966 (along with Paul Ricoeur), MacIntyre noted that “theistic belief” is something new in history and that it is
paradoxical. Simply put, belief is a choice made and in that choosing, it signals the options inherent in that choice. As argued by MacIntyre, prior to Pascal’s wager, god was presupposed to such an extent it hardly gave rise to detractors. With the (relative) modern period and the Enlightenment, both theism and atheism emerge at the same time. This move relegates the belief, not the object of belief, as the unquestioned and most taken-for-granted concept. As such, belief takes god’s place as god, as history unfolds over the last centuries. This has produced a series of theistic crises, from which theology (as a field) emerges and from which a word like “theism” now evokes as many different definitions as imaginable, and most importantly, a stated belief in the idea of god requires a dismissal and an intolerance of its counterpoint, atheism.

Aside from this historical trajectory, however, is the suggestion that such shifts in definitions and adherence to them are contextual. In thinking through the significance of certain figures I employ throughout this dissertation, MacIntyre makes the suggestion that Paul Tillich’s “decipherment [of theism] was reasonably similar to Feuerbach’s,” in that both assessments of god and theism hinged on psychological projection, but Tillich saw no need to characterize his position as atheistic. Basing their divergent perspectives on cultural changes, MacIntyre

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65 Also, by page 28, MacIntyre arrives at one of his theses: Theism, as understood by those at any given moment, changes with the times. Hence, Tillich is deemed a "theist" in 1950, while Feuerbach is considered an atheist in the previous century, when they both rely on the same relegation of the god idea to psychology. As do I. Perhaps, then, my argument looks to contemporary race relations to define theism/atheism as much as it does the opposite, look to theism and theology as a means of addressing and changing contemporary race relations.
66 Interestingly, MacIntyre discusses Durkheim’s functional limits in the United States, though I do not agree with his findings. Ostensibly, MacIntyre argues that totems are visible, and as such, their parallel to the idea of “god” is limited, as theism defies all appearances. MacIntyre concludes: “The gods of the heathen are partially visible; the God of Abraham is wholly invisible.” See MacIntyre and Ricoeur, 19-21.
67 Ibid., 27-8.
68 Ibid., 28.
concludes that one time and place’s atheism is another’s theism. In terms of society, MacIntyre’s position sums up my own: “When religion is only thus able to retain its hold on society, religious belief tends to become not so much belief in God as belief in belief.”69 With this operative definition of theism in place, as belief in belief or belief in the idea of god, Forrester’s quoting of Mill implies that a connection exists between the power of belief and the white man’s god complex. I turn to these connections next.

**The White Man’s God Complex as a System**

In this section, understanding god as society, and having defined theism as belief in the idea of god, I argue that the white man’s god complex might be understood in terms of a system, a self-creating and self-perpetuating “complex” constituted by adherence to a variety of god-ids. I also argue that theism, working as a powerful god-idol within this system, can be thought of as a subsystem. Characterizing it as such a subsystem helps to explain the self-reinforcing constitution of theism and casts light on why the white man’s god complex seems to require death and sacrifice. I then conclude with two sections situating the ethical responsibilities associated with responding to the white man’s god complex seen in light of my characterization of it as a system.

I bring into this project certain ideas of social theorist Niklas Luhmann, whose work is helpful in that it metonymically theorizes the white man’s god complex in abstract terms. That is, Luhmann’s preoccupation with understanding society as a system represents a distillation of the mindset and disposition amongst white theists from which the “white man’s god complex”

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69 MacIntyre and Ricoeur, 21.
derives its name. \(^{70}\) Luhmann’s theory combines elements of Auguste Comte’s idea of functional differentiation with a heavy influence from cybernetics research that promoted the idea of a closed feedback loop. At its core, social systems theory attempts to provide a type of unified field theory for society, in that it seeks to account for the smallest of social events across space and time, while also accounting for the most complex. \(^{71}\) At its base, it is an effort to address growing complexity by having that complexity teach the system how, when and where to expand so that it remains intact. To wit, it is a stab at a theory of everything. Grandiose in its ambition, if not quixotic to its core. The parallels between systems theory and the quixotic flare of the white man’s god complex to embark on the impossible are unmistakable.

Society can be thought of as a system, a closed feedback loop that defines itself through the communication provided by the feedback obtained from the same society. That is, society self-perpetuates and self-defines itself. This social system, in effort to address the needs of humans in various sizes of community, slowly differentiates its functions as society grows. Every interaction or moment of feedback increases the sum total of “complexity” existing within each system. As a result, systems theory argues that societies expand in light of this added complexity, defining further subsystems in the process and reinforcing the existing systems as

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\(^{71}\) Here, my allusion is to a unified field theory searched for in physics, sought since at least Einstein’s general theory of relativity effectively addressed the physical states of the large. A unified field theory would combine the general properties of Einstein’s theory with the immensely small physical properties of quantum mechanics. Where society is concerns, better still, theology and god, Luhmann seeks to ultimately address the god (the immensely large/Einstein’s theory) with death (the immensely small, quantum mechanics) where society is the systematicity developed in response to the tension posed between the two poles, god and death, metaphysics and the physical world, ideology and materiality.
well. As the white man’s god complex is a psychical representation of society as god, understanding systems theory helps to explain the god complex in practice. And central to that practice is the reduction of complexity.

As the system expands, complexity increases. Stated differently, as society grows and differentiates activities in specialized form, it grows more complex. Yet, the system, like the god complex, has the “reduction of complexity” as its aim. The focus on complexity is pronounced, and one way to short-hand describe systems theory is that it offers a theory of what we can know, how knowing always reminds of what we do not (yet) know, and how we respond to that reminder in more and more expansive ways, considering that with every decision, “There must always be something excluded”…and “that [exclusion] is the result of system formation.”

In theoretical terms, this greater reliance plays out through the development of more and more subsystems that address growing and expanding needs of humans as a result of the formation of the society. This expansion of subsystems amounts to the functional differentiation of society.

_Theism as a Sub-System_

Recently translated into English in 2013, Luhmann’s volume _A Systems Theory of Religion_ finds Luhmann, among other things, theorizing religion as a system, in the sense of a biological or eco-system. Within this text, he theorizes the idea of god as an ideological

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73 Ibid., Luhmann, Interview.
74 Ibid.
75 Ibid. Luhmann’s comments emerge from tried and true functionalist anthropological and sociological positions that suggest society develops as human dangers push people into closer proximity and into greater reliance on each other.
“contingency formula” that transforms uncertainty, limitation and radical contingency into the foundation for denials of this uncertainty. His discourse makes use of the term “god” in this capacity, wherein it secures and seeks to guard against disrupting the society, the system. As such, his use of god is akin to my term god-idol, and his talk of society or “system” characterizes my functional definition of god as society.

Luhmann notes that the “initial problem” to address when looking at the function of religion is that of “negotiating meaning,” where meaning is achieved by choosing what to include within the system. Meaning is made through the insulation of society as communicable, i.e. as closed and (therefore) real. Meaning ends up paradoxical because it sacrifices information so that manageable information can be understood as “meaning.” God-idols are required for overcoming this paradox of decision. Theism makes this closure possible, functioning as a communication of the incommunicable, a theological sleight-of-hand wherein belief in the idea of god is presumed enough to make it so. Meaning-making and understanding, for Luhmann’s grounding in communication as the distinction making apparatus and connective tissue of all

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77 That is, not only are the god-idols the ideas which undergird communication, they hinge on the presumption and presentation of themselves as communicable. Hence, racial discourse often occurs as two people talking past each other; a white person assuming their god-complex will register to non-white as communicable, when it often does not and does more to foreground the appearance of the god-complex active for the white person.
78 In certain respects, Luhmann’s theory is in accord with Anthony Pinn’s position on and definition of religion as a “quest for complex subjectivity,” but it might be noted that they depart on the point of verstehen, or understanding. Luhmann wants to “understand” complexity by making it simple; Pinn wants to interpret the complex in a way that exposes the complexity hidden by social expressions of Luhmann’s position on religion. To this point, Pinn arrives at his standpoint starting with William James and experience, Luhmann through systems theory and its structural and functional underpinnings and implications, innovatively registered through the psychical domain. They appear in accord that religion is a negotiation of meaning, but have very different vantage points for how to analytically or existentially handle that meaning.
systems, is the Occamist\textsuperscript{79} cross from which religious functions hang. This, in my existential language, amount to projecting exaggerations of radical contingency onto a cosmic screen, another way of sighting the theistic god-idol in practice.

With reference to white U.S. Christians, the god-idol of theism functions as a communication of the incommunicable, in that there is no existentially honest way to make a claim like “God bless America.” Required in the stead of this honesty regarding the paradox, then, is a lie, or what historian of religion Charles Long has referred to as a “fictive truth.” In theorizing religions of both oppressed and oppressor, Long argues that “The oppressed must deal with both the fictive truth of their status as expressed by the oppressors [those under sway of the white man’s god complex], that is, their second creation, and the discovery of their own autonomy and truth—their first creation.”\textsuperscript{80} God-idols take shape from these “fictive truths,” exaggerations of radical contingency\textsuperscript{81} based on things like black inferiority, white superiority, American exceptionalism, or claims that tragedies are the result of “god’s will.”\textsuperscript{82} Where white theists are concerned, talk of god’s will is a reinforcement of white theistic will, couched in a second-order observation meant to make simple what is complex.\textsuperscript{83} Through this simplicity,

\textsuperscript{79} Faubion, \textit{An Anthropology of Ethics}, 57-60.
\textsuperscript{81} Rather than reuse Long’s notion of the “fictive truth,” I have created the idea of exaggerations of radical contingency, rather than reuse Long’s notion of the “fictive truth,” to situate the ideas as rooted in existential anxiety, and to express that they are more “real” than the “fictive” disclaimer provided by Long seemingly gives credence.
\textsuperscript{82} \url{http://www.religiondispatches.org/dispatches/antheabutler/7195/}
\textsuperscript{83} Religion is about the business of responding to the complexity of too much or not enough meaning by presupposing that the ‘too much’ or ‘not enough’ of meaning offers a foundation for moving forward, for existing in complexity and yet responding to it through various distinctions and ideological compartmentalizations. That is, religion qua religion is the process of calling the unknown known, of labeling complexity as simplicity. Of Pinn’s work, however, and this point will play out in later chapters more extensively, black religion hinges around the same paradox but attempts to present in complexity what has been deemed simple by the system’s distinction.
orientation is achieved, noting the same orientation described by Long as “ultimate orientation” from which he defines religion. For Long, religion amounts to the process whereby “one comes to terms with the ultimate significance of one’s place in the world.” Reading Long through a functionalist lens, where race and god meet in the United States, this orientation amounts to determining if one is to be a beneficiary of the sacrifices demanded of the god of society, or whether one will be sacrificed. Worth noting here and to be developed extensively in later chapters, placed in light of functionalism, theism offers a means of orientation towards society as either “god” or “idol.” Theism, as god-idol, has operated as a means of securing society as god. On this point, I agree with Long. But where Long responded with a relatively vague description of ontological “opacity,” I suggest is more aptly considered as limitation, radical contingency and physical death. The “ultimate orientation” of oneself to their radical contingency will require reorientation of god as death.

The deployment and implementation of “god” amongst these white theists occurs through a basic psychological *imago dei* reversal, as noted so long ago by Feuerbach. If “god” is a homology for “meaning,” remembering that meaning is in flux and contingent on agreement and yet other communications, then theism is crafted through a similar agreement to respond to the unknown or meaninglessness by presuming it not to be the case. “God”—however characterized theologically—is actually a representative for society, and god-idols, the mechanisms that reinforce the “fictive truths” that make god over in the *imago superlata*, this image of exaggerations of radical contingency.

From this point, and in terms of the idea of god, Luhmann’s words speak to the nature of god-idol construction for the particular group of white U.S. Christians the topic of my focus.  

85 Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*. 
In the United States, for white theists, “the observer God had offered a security of orientation that was nearly unequalled. If that idea of him is given up, ‘orientation’ becomes a problem (and a buzzword too).” Theism works to provide this orientation and is responsible for many of the exaggerations of reality keeping the god complex sustained and protected. This securing of orientation is the take away from a functionalist assessment of theism as god-idol, that of staving off the recognition that at the end of the day, our white, theistic “worldviews rest on pudding.”

*Autopoiesis of the System*

How does this negotiation of meaning occur? Negotiating meaning requires “transferring indeterminability into determinability” and “Infinite burdens of information into finite ones.” Applying Luhmann’s position to the terms of my argument, god-idols “transfer” radical contingency into exaggerated radical contingency by taking the sum total of human interaction and imposing limits upon it. That is, the experience of radical contingency arises out of a feeling of limit in the face of absolute possibility, and is offset by imagining successful navigation of that possibility by imposing limits onto self and others. These latter limits refer to exaggerations of radical contingency, and the former (existential limits) such as death, incommunicability, uncertainty foreground radical contingency. God-idols are the transference devices used to respond to limits by imposing other limits that produce the sense that one has no limits. Systems theory can only presume to encompass all of society if it brackets out information. White men, in their god complex, can only reinforce that complex by bracketing out other voices and other data. Where theism is concerned, belief in *the idea* of god is registered by believers as belief in

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86 Luhmann, 130.
88 Luhmann, 107
god, by “substituting the ‘how’ (religion or society works) for a ‘who or what.’”\textsuperscript{89} This is the paradox. Suggesting that theism is a god-idol is meant to expose this paradox, reinforcing the “how” such a white man’s god complex ends up so blind to its own function. The aim of the god-idol is simple: to presuppose a solution to complexity that proffers cohesion and wards off competing possible solutions.\textsuperscript{90}

This solution to complexity is achieved through the idea of autopoiesis. Autopoiesis refers to self-production, or self-(re)production. Autopoietic systems are systems that “reproduce themselves from within themselves.”\textsuperscript{91} One feature of the white man’s god complex is that it affords no external data an audience, and this complex’s defenders are legion. The belief in the idea of god works to ensure an autopoietic process, operating as the hinge or door opening the possibility for any real socio-political results to develop. That is, if the white man’s god complex is understood as a psychical system, then that systems’ demand for the complex remaining “closed” signals an entry-point into its dismantling. God-idols ensure that the white man’s god complex remains ‘closed,’ unable to see itself in operation.

In grounded philosophical terms, this “closure” plays out epistemologically, ethically, aesthetically, in terms of time, quantity, space and other categories. Ostensibly, they are the categories outlined by Kant; the god-idol, an expression of the transcendental subject shown in its shortcomings.\textsuperscript{92} Stated with a basic philosophical bend, my entire project’s argument is that

\textsuperscript{89} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{90} Luhmann, 107.
\textsuperscript{92} Roger Scruton, A Short History of Modern Philosophy: From Descartes to Wittgenstein. 2nd ed. Routledge, 2001, 142-3. Here, my suggestion is not direct, but I mean to use Kant’s concept of the “transcendental unity of apperception” as an example of the categorical work done by god-idols. Worth noting, per my argument, Kant was right that the idea of god not translate into god’s existence. Kant was shortsighted, however, in relegating morality to religion and presuming that
Kantian rationality (that is, using a transcendental subject) is necessary, but every usage requires the very real, material shedding of blood. God-idols are the concepts that fill in such a transcendental subject, concepts made possible by social manipulations of one’s proximity to death, limitation and uncertainty. On this point, the consequences and costs of reason, knowledge, certitude of thought or deed, is human blood.

Belief in the idea of god must act as if it is belief in god, so that new data and options are guarded against. It amounts to a choice of orientation. Stated in a different but important light for my project, humans remain outside the system through a process of distinction. An observer can remain within society, leaving it open, and unable to attend to each event. Or, one can take this second-order, god’s eye view position, bracketing the data in such a way that the system appears closed, that the observer can act omniscient. Many traditional ethnographies are example of this, wherein a “society” or “culture” is effectively closed and presented within the pages of a monograph as if fixed in time and space. The white man’s god complex functions in this anthropological fashion, and this example is born out through the subjective turn in anthropology ushered in largely by scholars at Rice University. Such “god’s eye” second-order positioning came to characterize much of the Enlightenment project, as guided by Cartesian rationalism, where “clear and distinct” ideas juxtaposed observer from observed. Distinction between first- and second-order observations, then, bears out as the sine qua non of understanding human

the space left between the concept of god and the concept of the existence of god would not cause calamity.

responses to the world in which they live. To understand society, one must act as if distinct from it. And as Luhmann remarks of religion, belief in the idea of god plays an integral role in this distinction making process.

Due to the immense complexity of modern society, uncertainty produces a paradox of distinction of paramount order, where knowing constantly reminds of unknowability.\textsuperscript{96} Though it might appear this material a tangent to my talk of theism, functionally speaking, society is the only “god” functioning at all, precisely because it suggests otherwise through a second-order abstraction occurring within theism as practiced. As a corollary to the notion that theology is a second-order enterprise\textsuperscript{97}, theism is as much a second-order effort to describe society in its ideal definition and expression as a cohesive, whole system. Belief in god, as MacIntyre suggested went by the wayside with Pascal, is a first order observation. Belief in the idea of god, however, is as much a second-order enterprise as is theology as a discipline, as noted by theologian Gordon Kaufman\textsuperscript{98} and many other thinkers. Belief in the idea of god, theism, like theology, addresses unknowability through a kind of distinction that presumes a “clear and distinct” idea is enough to bracket out other data. For society to function as god, allowing some of those in it to act like god, those actors must act as if distinct from it—thus, society functioning as god \textit{requires} a god complex.

\textsuperscript{96} Niklas Luhmann and Stephan Fuchs, Tautology and Paradox in the Self-Descriptions of Modern Society. Sociological Theory, Volume 6, Issue 1, (Spring 1988, 21-37).


\textsuperscript{98} Gordon Kaufman, \textit{In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology}. Harvard University Press, 1995, 478. Here, Professor Kaufman easily breaks down his earlier argument from \textit{An Essay on Theological Method} and he explains a bit about why the first/second order issue matters.
Autopoietic Functions within the White Man’s God Complex

There are two principle autopoietic functions within the White Man’s God Complex. That is to say, there are two central things achieved or required within the white man’s god complex so that it can reproduce itself. The first is to subsume all beliefs in the idea of god into one “theism” (as I have done in this chapter) so as to position those differences as a sameness marking society as god. The second is, like whiteness, the continued functional need for human sacrifice as a corrective to the limits of belief in the idea of god. Simply stated, if “god” existed in the scope suggested by many adhering to the complex, there would be no reason for social expressions of power over any group. These functions, then, point ultimately to the paradox that society is meant to protect against death and limitation, but does so through god-idols that justify the death and limitations of those on the borders or outside society.

For Bourdieu, distinctions originate in structure, which is imposed onto (and by) society in a more or less unilateral sense shaping individual and group logics of practice and habitus, etc. This structural foundation makes Bourdieu’s theory rigid, and requires that the social effects of the existential demand for certainty (e.g. attaining money, power, long life, or poverty, early death, etc.) be realized in the social environment. Luhmann’s theory, though equally focused on distinctions, begins this distinction with a psychical distinction, an idea, that autopoietically defines and redefines systems and subsystems. From this psychical starting point, material actualization of certainty or ability need not occur for the god-idol to be produced and reproduced, nor for said god-idol to exert considerable influence on the system or society. Whereas Bourdieu is helpful in examining whiteness as a god-idol born out of material
expressions of a demand for certainty—that is, white skin as a visible “totem” or sign of an invisible essence, Luhmann’s psychical starting point helps to theorize the “invisibility” of the idea of god, as noted by MacIntyre, and the variety of “god” in which adherents claim belief. Deconstructing this variety as psychological projection is necessary, as appealing to the actual experiences or thoughts of these maintaining the white man’s god complex will not offer anything more than a) diffusive appeals to that variety and b) a constant defense of the god believed in by the white theist, even towards violence and sacrifice.

The principle defense against attacks against the white man’s god complex or the vision of society as god to which it appeals comes in the form of sacrifice. Theism affords a façade of “reality,” “truth,” and the “ultimate orientation” theorized by Long and underscored by Luhmann. But such orientation never brings with it a total certainty, truth has never been agreed upon. Only the perception of it has been agreed upon, as by Descartes, Kant and others. Out of this anxiety, other orientations or refutations of the white man’s god complex must be actively fought against. Take, for instance, George Zimmerman’s murder of Trayvon Martin, wherein Zimmerman posits himself as clear and distinct from Martin, outside of the bounds of society, so as to protect that society. Zimmerman, through his actions, takes a second-order, god’s eye view position, bracketing the data in such a way that the system appears closed, allowing Zimmerman to presuppose a certainty afforded by a qualified omniscience. In making appeals to “god,” the “believers” actually situate themselves as “gods.” The white man’s god complex functions in this

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100 MacIntyre, 19-21.

101 William James, The Will to Believe: And Other Essays in Popular Philosophy. Longmans, Green, and Company, 1921, 15.
fashion, translating the incommunicable (i.e. god as an entity) into communicable (i.e. god in flesh). Trouble is, this sleight of hand tactic has incredible social consequences.

Biologist and noted scientific theorist Humberto R. Maturana developed the idea of autopoiesis from which Luhmann’s theory rests. Maturana has this to say on the matter of violence:

Just because certain people think that they are in the possession of truth, the situation frequently arises that everything unfamiliar and extraordinary will appear as an unacceptable and insupportable threat. The possible consequence of such an attitude is that people feel justified to use violence because they claim to have privileged access to reality or the truth, or to fight for a great ideal. This attitude, so they believe, justifies their behavior and sets them apart from common criminals.  

Recently, in response to the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the murder of Trayvon Martin, historian Anthea Butler openly criticized the American god as “a white racist god with a problem, carrying a gun and stalking young black men.” In response to her writing, a barrage of online attacks followed, calling Butler “nigger,” “cunt,” “fat cow,” and a “special kind of fucking idiot.” There were so many attacks Professor Butler even started an entire website devoted to cataloging the anger and viciousness of many in the wake of her comments about the white man’s god. The attack on Anthea Butler is one such effort to dismiss information that might change the nature of the system, of society. Such vehement ad hominem assault against Butler provide example that the society protects itself through belief in the idea of god, and the exclusionary framework it brings with it. To protect the white man’s god complex, and the god-idols that constitute it, they will go to great lengths, name call and even kill, in order to flee from accepting complexity, uncertainty, or physical death.

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104 [http://nosecretsonthenet.tumblr.com/page/2](http://nosecretsonthenet.tumblr.com/page/2)
Already, I’ve discussed such a rationale with respect to both whiteness and theism, but theism brings with it an interesting feature. The god-idol of theism (with this flexibility) allows for sacrifices to be executed away from the United States so that the white theistic petit bourgeois remains the center. Appeals to god or economics are made during war and colonial expansion, justifying the use of force so as to protect the interests of the society. The parallels between justifications over lynching and justifications over American foreign war campaigns have certain parallels. For instance, white men in America justified the dropping of atomic bombs on Japan in WWII on the grounds that it would shorten the war, ultimately saving more (American) lives as if the bombing victims were sacrificial offerings. Where lynching was concerned, its justification often came in the form of protecting a false sense of white womanhood that required guarding against its tainting from African American men. These seemingly disconnected sacrificial offerings were happening in American history at the same time, events seldom held in tension, and when held, usually have occurred through visual art.\(^{105}\)

The sacrifice is always required, but not necessarily in proximity to the social center of white theistic petit bourgeois.\(^{106}\) Translated, no longer does the white man’s god complex require the lynching of African Americans in proximity to the spaces where white theists live. This doesn’t mean such sacrifices (and murders) do not continue, but simply that theism as god-idol allows that they not occur in the same spaces where whiteness required such sacrifices. Theism

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\(^{106}\) This is not to indicate that such localized sacrifices as lynchings do not occur in the geographic places and times where theistic sacrifices are doled out for the sake of the white man’s god complex. On this point, no doubt, aspects of the white man’s god complex extend to other communities and groups. My comments here simply situate the differential function of theistic sacrifices as they emerge from adherence to the god-idol of theism and are perpetuated by the white theistic petit bourgeois.
affords the continued existence of structural racialized oppression in the United States through even such seemingly disconnected domains as foreign relations and domestic racial relations.

Sacrifices are still required for theism, but not with the same situational “totemic” requirements as whiteness. The sacrifices move outward from the social center of white society to the margins. For instance, a war on terror (spoken of in terms of U.S. national interest) undergirded by an ideological war between Islam and Judeo-Christianity leaves the domestic racial stratification and white theistic petit bourgeois center intact through the sacrifices of soldiers, enemy combatants and innocent bystanders who live and work at the metaphoric borders of American imperial expansion. Understanding that expansion as the expansion of white theistic society, theism must be discussed because sacrifices continue even as whiteness appears in twilight. In fact, sacrifice appears as inescapable.

**The Paradox of Second Order Distinction and the Necessity of Sacrifice**

The white man’s god complex emerges as a model and representative of personality, situating adherents in the image of their image of god (i.e. ERC). Understandably enough, white theists’ images of god, historically, look a lot like the white theists whose demand for cohesion and the answering of questions is so great that the questioning—the observer—is turned into the answer. I don’t mean to suggest that adherents always carried a physiognomic image of god or Jesus. Edward Blum and Paul Harvey’s *The Color of Christ* effectively argues that such racial binary suggestions amount to a “myth rendering material, social, and cultural power

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107 Luhmann ends up a necessary addition as he helps to theorize how these god-idols continue to function within their own twilight—that is, god-idols continue to operate powerfully even if they do not appear to bring about the materialized, social expression of the exaggerations of radical contingency. In fact, their power seemingly hinges on this twilight.
meaningless.” On this point, I agree. Here, I am noting something more fundamental. The shared characteristics involve existential concerns, such as knowledge, hopes, aspirations, safety, possibility and love. Even still, such existential redress is never fully offered by god-idols, as this paradoxical, second-order abstraction is never fully attainable. In consequence to the practice, sacrifice corrects for this limitation.

Luhmann, and his systems theory, in effect, offer a mirror from which a second-order observation of the white man’s god complex appears as possible, but break down in its appearing. This mirror takes shape partly through Luhmann’s (famous) disdain for moralizing. In regards to overall systems and subsystems within the group, Luhmann notes that distinctions based on morals “cannot be pressed into a moral scheme, so that real moralizing is only an auxiliary technique, which is at the same time a feverish immune response of the society for problems they cannot solve otherwise. And as physicians know, fever is not undangerous.”

Luhmann’s demand to preserve the closed-system of his theory, his valorization of system-qua-system and order, stability and certainty, require that the binaries characterizing each system and subsystem be preserved at the expense of moralized binaries destroying or risking the systematicity and order. Anthropologist and social theorist James Faubion reiterates Luhmann’s sentiments regarding morality, noting Luhmann’s disdain for morality and moralism. Faubion breaks down systems theory with an eye on morality’s problems for Luhmann:

The modern or functionally differentiated social system depends for its ongoing autopoiesis on the capacity of its subsystems to ‘recognize themselves’ in terms of the binary codes that are specific to each of them. The recognition and maintenance of those codes is a necessary condition of the effective functioning of the subsystems jointly and severally. It is incompatible with ‘the moral integration of society’ because, as Luhmann emphatically puts it, it ‘excludes the identification of the code values of the function

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109 Luhmann, Youtube Interview.
systems with the positive/negative values’ that typically constitute the apparatus of justification or ‘program’ of the moral code.\textsuperscript{110}

Faubion underscores that systems theory’s disdain for morality is a result of it being more concerned with certainty and \textit{verstehen} than human beings. Indeed, systems theory removes “humans” from its analysis, altogether, relegating what we typically understand as “humans” to raw communication of information. Luhmann’s words about fever are a testament to his position that he cares more for his own intellectual certitude than he does for those who might be hurt through his efforts. Effectively, high theory is here a proxy and metonym for the function of belief in the idea of god within the white man’s god complex. But why such a concern over moralizing? What, exactly, is this ultimate function of the white man’s god complex?

In colloquial terms, one must fake in order to make it. That is, humans respond to uncertainty by presuming the sense of certainty they seek is enough to provide it, transforming the lack of certainty into a sense of certainty. Theism provides a bridge across this paradox, a bridge “built” with black bodies historically, concealing the logic of this existential paradox wherein a believed in sense of certainty materializes in the social environment. An actor, social agent, person, subject, theist or other religious adherent (choose your identity marker, the “idol” of idols for the anthropologist, according to anthropologist and social theorist James Faubion\textsuperscript{111}) must constitute themselves as such by deciding a course of arbitrary, radically contingent options.\textsuperscript{112} God-idols become the mechanism through which the logic of the paradox of

\textsuperscript{110} Faubion, 108-9.
\textsuperscript{111} James Faubion, \textit{An Anthropology of Ethics} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).
\textsuperscript{112} Luhmann, at times, even characterizes this move as a response to the inadequacies posed by Talcott Parson’s theory of “double contingency,” which refers to the contingent nature of communication. Intelligibility, order, certainty between the sender and receiver is made possible not only by the actual communication, but by the influence of the receiver/sender’s reception on the communication. Luhmann takes aim at the shaky foundation provided by Parson’s theory,
distinction is constituted and through which that logic is concealed. That is, god-idols provide the sense that a second order observation has been obtained, and they hide their own involvement in providing that sense of a second order observation. God-idols like theism distinguish group from group, affecting the sense of the god’s eye view, and hide the fact that they distinguish in that way through both fear and the use of actual violence.

Theism, as operative within the white man’s god complex, then, is about the business of inclusion and exclusion as the means for transforming what Luhmann refers to as “the indeterminable into the determinable.”\(^{113}\) The indeterminability of god, then, becomes the belief in theism or atheism.\(^{114}\) Theism, then, is an attempt to deny, overcome or fight against the limits of human intelligibility by faking what can be known in such a way that it becomes the actual narrative adopted and definition employed for the system as it radiates from its center. The quintessential gap posed by indeterminability and uncertainty, spanned by theism functioning as a contingency formula (i.e. as a god-idol), is the gap between biological life and biological death. The uncertainty does not arise from death, but from an existential awareness that the thing positioned to protect against death—society—will ultimately fail. From this awareness, “society” holds its citizens hostage through an anxiety which reinforces the problem. Society comes to be constituted as the one, true god, and death takes on the character of an idol, to be feared, dismissed as inauthentic, and destroyed. Society paradoxically staves off death (temporarily) for some by requiring it of others more expeditiously. This is the exaggeration of radical contingency in practice. Given one of my most basic sociological propositions that society emerges as an aide in offsetting death, two existential possibilities emerge. One either travels in

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\(^{114}\) MacIntyre, 28.
the direction of society, leaning on it and trusting in it as the white theist believes in the idea of belief, “Loving the Lord, your god, with all your heart, all your strength and all your mind,” or one must focus on death, and begin to believe in the impossibility of belief. The ultimate function of the white man’s god complex is to ensure that white men remain as far away from death as possible, which makes the following ominous words from Luhmann useful for determining what can be done about this complex:

If one wishes to proceed in the other direction, using the negative side of the distinction as a symbol for the distinction, one would come close to a symbolism of death, negating all distinctions [a la Ricoeur, Derrida, Becker, Camus and others]. This reflection shows that the (interest-laden) figure of life after death integrates two logical impossibilities in a single paradox, indicating the unity of every distinction either from its negative or positive side—that is, either as death or God.  

Between death and society (god) are the god-idols, ready to span the unknowable for a group of people who work very hard to ignore existential limits by socially inscribing limits on others and themselves. Embracing death, Learning to Die, for those held sway by the white man’s god complex, will thus mean the death of belief in the idea of god. Stated differently and unpacked in Part II of the dissertation, adequate response to the white man’s god-complex requires learning to approach Society as Idol, and Death as God, inverting the trajectories and functions of the god-idols at work within the white man’s god complex.

The white man’s god complex seems ill-prepared to march towards such an existential conclusion. To wit, the system (per its own terms) does not allow for its own death. Its death is overcome as society is deemed eternal, even as its individual constituents die themselves. So how would one begin to disrupt the white man’s god complex? How does one “kill” something that cannot die? How does one respond to a system, whose ancillary function is to protect against

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115 Mark 12:30  
responding to that system? The answer begins by taking a tautological look at the central feature of many of these white theists’ religious tradition, the scene at Golgotha—of a social outsider sacrificed to preserve society, whose body and cross foreshadow the twilight of theism and the ethical chasm now required of those who have adhered to the white man’s god complex.

“Crossing” the Paradox of Distinction and Believing in the Twilight of Theism

Theism functions within this god complex as belief in the idea of this god producing and sustaining society. Here, I now move to the ethical implications of the contingency formula in practice. Belief in the idea of god, or belief in belief, if its collateral damage is to be avoided or offset, requires an embrace of whiteness as a marker of the impossibility of belief. That is, I must situate myself within and guilty of whiteness but with recognition of the damage it does. This vantage point, then, provides an ironic “god’s eye view” of theism as having masked the consequences and functions of whiteness and all other possible god-idols.

These sacrifices are demanded for those who do not adhere to the white man’s god complex. Theism requires sacrifice from those on the margins or outside the society not beholden to the god-idols. Who dies, and what differences are posed between opposing societies or groups is of little consequence here, as the white theistic petit bourgeois vision of normativity determines offerings. Only yet other power over can disrupt the god complex through traditional sociological means. The exclusion of the other is the sacrificial moment, though it often occurs as material, embodied sacrifice of physical life. To this end, the body count of sacrificial offerings made to the god-idols of whiteness and theism is immense, and includes not only African Americans, but Native Americans, immigrant Chinese during WWII, all women, and many, many others across the globe thanks to an effort to not only use these sacrifices to insulate and define U.S. borders, but to work diligently so that these sacrifices occur near those borders.
For instance, public intellectual Cornel West was recently asked about Barack Obama’s relative silence on the acquittal of George Zimmerman, the half-white, half-Hispanic man who killed unarmed African American teenager Trayvon Martin in 2012, and Obama’s statement that “Trayvon Martin could have been [him] 35 years ago.”\footnote{http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/07/22/cornel-west-barack-obama_n_3635614.html Accessed July 29, 2013.} Professor West answered by characterizing Barack Obama as a “global George Zimmerman” in response to the drone strikes that continue to kill innocent people in the name of self-defense—\footnote{Ibid.} 221 at the time of West’s first suggestion.\footnote{Ibid.} These killings mark Obama as defender-in-chief of this white man’s god complex. The irony, of course, is that he’s not afforded full access to its perks. West’s simple retort was that Barack Obama’s foreign policy killed so many innocent people that the President is a global George Zimmerman because he tries to rationalize the killing of innocent children in the name of self-defense.\footnote{Ibid.} West’s comment speaks to the process of social protection and insulation made possible by these god-ids functioning in practice. It also reminds, by virtue of Obama’s identity as half-black, that adherents to theism extend beyond white Christians, though all the white presidents before Obama made similar “rationalizations.”

To the extent many white U.S. theists (as Christians) appeal to a biblical passage like John 3:16 that claims “So god so loved the world that he gave his only son so that whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life,” this sacrificed “only son” constitutes the victims of a system that has required their sacrificial offerings in a futile attempt to escape their own death through worship of society. In terms of both the New Testament as with Systems Theory, these victims are required due to the precept that the believer’s life is worth more than that of Jesus’ own life. Such is the god’s perspective, constructed in the image of the perspective
of the believer. The passage is effectively, a tautological analysis of society, combining a traditional definition of society as recognized amongst many social theorists historically, as well as an ethical statement about the sacrifices required by society so conceived.

Through this tautological lens, Jesus Christ is understood as a real victim of the functional maintenance of society, only the sacrifice is not necessarily localized in space or time like lynchings for whiteness—which corresponds to the point about sacrifice able to occur at the margins. These margins include space and time. Just as African Americans were lynched to preserve a white society, or innocent children are killed (collaterally) to “protect and defend” the United States, so Jesus Christ was lynched in effort to preserve a social order. If the ritual effects of lynching produce whiteness as a functional god-idol, the ritual commemorations of Jesus Christ’s life and death reinforce theism as a similar functional god-idol, reinforcing certain dimensions of a skewed understanding of social reality.

Theism and whiteness are two god-idols rooted in the same god complex. I want to suggest that the historical invisibility of whiteness (that is, the god-idol is not discussed openly or its worship recognized by adherents) is made possible by theism. The clear admission and discussion of a panoply of theistic expressions of “god” amongst this group of white theists suggests that theism hides whiteness, as if hiding contingency, suggesting to me (from my attempted second-order location) that the connection between whiteness and theism is intimate, to say the least. Stated differently, theism leaves people blind to their own uncertainty and limitations. Theism bastardizes the significance of the story of Jesus’ death into a hopeful narrative, rather than as a warning about the perils of society and its required sacrifices to function effectively. Theism blinds adherents to the fact that it and all other god-idols (and the society they work to create) do not ever fully deny or defend against physical death. Logically
parallel to MacIntyre’s point that theism and atheism emerge together, god-idols bring with their
collection the constant awareness of death. The ethical question arises, then, who will die for
the sake of a god, in whose belief reminds “My god, my god, why has thou forsaken me?” In
ethical response to this existential axiom about god having forsaken humans, owning my
whiteness requires denying theism, denying belief in the idea of god.

These words spoken by Christ during his crucifixion help to produce the cross/lynch tree
as a tautological myth for recognizing the connection and radical contingency posed by the
relationship between the metaphysical world and the social world. What I mean is that the weight
of such moments (for victims and perpetrators, alike)—the ‘sacredness’ of the moment—has
everything to do with what it suggests about the relationship between gods and society, and who
counts as worthy of that society. Moreover, many theologians and scholars of religion argue that
the crucifixion amounted to an attempt to preserve the social order in a way that did not cause
undue harm or concern to either the insular Jewish community of the time or to the larger Roman
state. In systems theory, Jesus is a threat of uncertainty packaged within an abundance of
complexity. He was too complex for the system to risk allowing his voice to continue to be
heard. He was, in this way, threatening; his death a protective measure for the society. Jesus, as
prophet, was a threat, an outsider in terms of his ideological commitments. Understanding the
white man’s god complex as a psychical or ideological “complex,” Jesus’ death offers the same
warning as posed by the Last Poets: “who’s gonna die next, ‘cause the white man’s god a god
complex.”

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120 Matthew 27:46
and Early Christianity*. Routledge, 2013, 157. Countless other examples of this argument exist
within contemporary liberal theological writings.
122 The Last Poets.
**Sighting Whiteness within the Twilight of Theism**

My analytic construction of ‘white theist’ is my attempt at a second order observation. It is my attempt to “be god” in the form of a distant observer as I employ the god-idols through observation. Noting this, I must therefore understand even my stated demographic is disconnected from material people. This leaves me and my argument open to critique and open for myself to be included within the demographics’ ranks. Failure to do so presents both an ethical and logical problem for my project, as it disconnects me from the censure that my social location requires (of my own admission) and it “closes” my analysis, reinforcing the white man’s god complex even as I seek to trouble it.

Forcefully inserting me into this data is an effort to guard against the allochronic discourse (i.e. manipulating space and time so as to construct an ethnographic data set as closed) of second order anthropological observations, which in light of Luhmann’s systems theory is one expression of the god-complex held amongst white theists. In other words, so that my argument does not reinforce (to the extent it is possible to not reinforce such things) whiteness or theism, I seek to expose them both through the explicit inclusion of my own voice in the argument. Following Johannes Fabian on this point, the “authorial ‘I’ offers the “constitutive organ of ethnographic intersubjectivity”\(^{123}\) and guards against the temporal hijacking and mythmaking that results from the god-complex playing out in intellectual enterprise. In short, the god-complex is expressed in the traditional anthropological constitution of the other as fixed in space and time, distinct from the ethnographer or analyst, such that “the Other’s empirical presence

turns into his theoretical absence.” Such a process gives explanation to how Jesus’ death might be appropriated antithetically from its tautological significance. Where my project is concerned, traditional, allochronic presentation of my chosen data (of white Christians) would suggest that I remain distinct from them. Such a distinction, however, reinforces the effectiveness of the god-complex by hiding my position as beneficiary to the practice. Will I worship from within the white man’s god complex, or register the wealth of sacrifices that have undergirded the complex, and respond to their voices? Only by recognizing myself within the data is it possible to offset this “conjuring trick” of the imago superlata, the presentation of an “ought” as an “is” through the careful, calculating constitution of a first-order experience as a second-order observation.

I have not attained a second order analysis, what Luhmann describes as self-revelatory transcendence. I have not escaped white people or the complex of which I have explored throughout this chapter. Yet, the academic is not immune to a god complex. In constructing the category of “white theist,” I have reinforced my belief in the idea of god as society. In other words, I stand guilty of that complex I seek to expose and offset. My project, thus, marks a paradox. In effect, in constructing the category of ‘white theist,’ I can either, a) mark it as materially real and achieve self-revelatory transcendence by virtue of a straw man. This is rationalism, no doubt, the same rationalism Cornel West notes that President Obama employs to “rationalize” the killings of innocent children. Were I not to remind again that I locate myself firmly within the petit bourgeois white Christian center, I would deconstruct my argument by

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124 Fabian, xli. Fabian even refers to this practice as a type of bad faith, which foreshadows my argument in Chapter Three.

125 Fabian, xli. Here, I note that not only is theology better understood as anthropology, but by paraphrasing Fabian, I note that anthropology is very much involved in theology and myth-making second order endeavors.
presuming myself able to hold a “god’s eye view” aiding in the autopoiesis of the white man’s god complex.

Or, b) I can mark my construction of ‘white theist’ as an ideological projection and humbly note that I am still firmly within sway of the white man’s god complex. Such are the two options as systems theory would hold. But there is a third option, a choice to hold in tension both options, producing yet again a “twilight” effect, to stay within the paradox. Where analysis is concerned (and such analysis is never removed from ethical considerations), I have crafted the term “god-idol” for precisely this purpose. Believing in the idea of god transforms existential uncertainty into the foundation for the appearance of certainty. Yet, such belief comes at the cost of sacrifice, and brings with it the reminder that it is little more than a choice. God-idols, then, are the proper name I give to theism so as to foreground the certainty and uncertainty constituent of it as a paradox. Whiteness, theism, and all god-idols, unduly rely upon a dualism and bifurcation sedimented in uncertainty for the production of certainty that can then work to maintain society and social order, as such. Each of the original signs “god” and “idol” metaphorically are held together by the “-” the cross, binding certainty and uncertainty in tautological tension. Stuck between positionalities of “god” or “idol,” I choose intellectual and ethical idolatry in the form of the term “god-idol,” indicative of the confusion and uncertainty and limitations as well as the possibilities exposed at Golgotha, between death and resurrection. Responding to the white man’s god complex requires this tension posed by the cross and marked by the sign “-” between “god” and “idol.” In effect, the god-idols responsible for so many sacrifices are now the crosses that I must bear. My use of the term “god-idol,” is a constant reminder of the responsibility I bear for the sacrifices faced by others as a consequence of the beliefs I have maintained.
Scholars like bell hooks have suggested that it is socially and politically possible for white people to shift locations, to “see the way whiteness functions to terrorize without themselves feeling locked into denial or guilt.” But hooks comments seem to fail to consider that the task of sighting whiteness requires the second order observation methods learned from the white man’s god complex. There is no escape from the guilt or shame of the white man’s god complex, even if the attempt addresses hooks’ concern over denial. The attempt requires ‘the master’s tools’ and recognition of whose tools and from where they emerge must always be kept in sight during their use. This situates me, the observer of a white man’s god complex, in the tension-filled twilight experienced by those who attempt to break free from a system, be it a social or psychical system.

As an adherent of the white man’s god complex, I want certainty—for the world, and for this project. So the question of this project emerges: How can we, white Christians and whites inheriting the benefits and privileges of this system, escape the system? To escape would be to perpetuate the demand and damage done by claims toward certainty. It would be to offer others up in sacrifice to the system. To remain within it leaves me vulnerable and the system intact. It leaves me open to being sacrificed myself or sacrificing others. And yet, self-sacrifice is futile to ask of anyone. Philosophically speaking, whiteness and theism are expressions of an inability to accept human limitation an uncertainty, the inability to accept self-sacrifice (broadly and metaphorically understood); Blackness, then, ends up not the ability to accept such limitation and uncertainty, but recognition and awareness of the impossibility of every fully accepting that limit; the inability to accept having to sacrifice oneself for the sake of another. In other words, by rejecting whiteness, and exposing theism as a denial system, I experience a small sense of what

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126 bell hooks, quoted in Perkinson, White Theology, 133.
blackness must “feel like,” but blackness is not itself enough to correct for whiteness. And in fact, more severely, in effort to dismantle the white man’s god complex, I might interpret those who have been the victims of such sacrifice to be calling me to my own self-sacrifice.

It would appear that this lesson in Learning to Die, then, is accepting the inevitability of one’s physical death and social death, and the possibility of one’s death coming for the sake of another. As Part II unfolds, I address possibilities for moving forward in light of this paradox. This project is about me and the many others like me in the United States, a theist and a white person who has benefited from this god complex and who wants to understand how my life—a life lived as a lie, lived in the truth of the death of others—might work to offset the damage done by this lie, my life as a white man with a god complex. After two chapters exploring the functional interworkings of these things I’ve called god-idols, these denial mechanisms, what I have found is that whiteness and theism are not unique and are only two of many such god-idols, functioning side by side within the white man’s god-complex. Even now, such a complex finds me wanting to believe in the power of belief even as I arrive at the conclusion that such beliefs produce too many consequences for others. At this point, I can only reorient myself towards a belief in the impossibility of belief, believing in the twilight of theism.
Chapter Three

Battling White Lies:

Imago Superlata and the Twilight of the God-Idols

They believed their words. Everybody shows a respectful deference to certain sounds that he and his fellows can make. But about feelings people really know nothing. We talk with indignation or enthusiasm; we talk about oppression, cruelty, crime, devotion, self-sacrifice, virtue, and we know nothing real beyond the words. Nobody knows what suffering or sacrifice mean—except, perhaps the victims of the mysterious purpose of these illusions.

-Joseph Conrad¹

Today nothing threatens the ‘stability of the social order’ more than the illusion of cultural identity. It needs, as never before, to be contested by a modern philosophical ethos that unravels the roles of the contingent and the universal, now that political parties in Europe and elsewhere have seized the initiative in what they call the ‘battle for identity.’

-Jean-François Bayart²

In the previous chapters, I charted two of the more significant god-idols worshipped by my principle data set of white Christians. I suggest that in effect each god-idol taken together works to constitute the cohesion of this group as an identity, understood as an ideological marker of distinction that has material effects in space and time. God-idols are projections of identities, the interests that solidify and make identity possible, centering concepts that work to concretize a person or group’s sense of distinctiveness through various arbitrary, relative and ultimately, illusory distinctions. In this chapter, I take a step back seeking to theorize this god-idol process and offer an initial response to it. This chapter’s thesis is that for many white Christians, an emptiness of identity is responded to by crafting a false sense of identity through the implementing of various distinctions, undergirded by a sacred/profane distinction. I refer to this

orientation as Imago Superlata, in the image of exaggeration, identity-based and focused exaggerations. Much of the chapter attempts to schematize this orientation by looking to figures such as Jean-Paul Sartre, whose location to privilege makes him useful for understanding the imago superlata, while he also serves as a warning that escape from it is difficult. Nevertheless, in response to the social suffering brought about by this orientation, I respond to Sartre with social theorists Jean-Francois Bayart and Mary Douglas, arguing for a blurring and breakdown of “identity,” beginning with a methodological breakdown of the identities and distinctions guiding the fields of theology and anthropology.

Imago Superlata, and I use this term to evoke the notion of the Imago Dei, a refusal to accept that “we” are created in the image of a creator, seemingly relies on an arbitrary sacred/profane distinction, manipulations of “the contingent and the universal,” so that certain identities can be concretized and thus believed or realized, such as a white or black or gay identity. As such, I broaden my data in this chapter to also include those theologians and anthropologists who have studied or maintained such sacred/profane distinctions as they study the identities formed through such distinctions, such as Peter Berger, Thomas Altizer, and David Tracy, Marshall Sahlins, and others. Namely, I look to the fields of theology and anthropology. I am persuaded that particular formulations of these fields typically model and are undergirded by a distinction between sacred and profane which, socially and politically, reinforces identity as an often hidden “telos” for both disciplines, especially theology. Because both fields provide my own methodological training, the only way I can sufficiently use them without reinforcing the very binary distinction I seek to chart is by blurring their lines of demarcation to the point that theological method and data become nearly indistinguishable from anthropological method and

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3 Bayart, 252.
data, and by including myself within the data. I attempt this blurring through attention to the “ethical domain,”⁴ I seek to use anthropological methods to examine theology/theologians as data, and use theological methods to examine anthropology/anthropologists as data. In the process, I blur the distinction between “who” and “what” counts as data. This necessitates an open-ended, loose hermeneutical characterization of these fields, as more thorough attention to sub-fields of theology and anthropology (such as feminist theology or anthropological discourses extending beyond a preoccupation with humans) would detract from—though not refute—my larger argument and inadvertently privilege distinctions and classifications in a way that further reinforce the problem I’m seeking to expose.

In what follows, I outline the major features of the Imago Superlata, including its reliance on the sacred/profane, its relationship to suffering and bodies, its secondary exaggerations and its existential roots in the suffering of human bodies. Through such attention, I begin to think through how theology might respond to the “twilight of the god-idols”—the contemporary inability of god-idols and the exaggerated identity claims that produce them to make good on a false promise to address human limitations, a false promise I want to characterize as a white lie.

**White Lies**

Joseph Conrad’s *An Outpost of Progress* (1897) is about two white men left in the expanse of colonized Africa who go crazy and die as a consequence of no longer having the ability to register themselves over and against their colonial peers or the Africans they deemed savage. White people “believe their words.”⁵ They believe their illusions of grandeur, and as Conrad’s story exposes, the tragedies of not believing in such illusions are as problematic for white people

⁵ Conrad, 178.
as are their consequences to others. Conrad’s brief essay is a political statement about the impending end of colonialism, and the psychological and social anomic⁶ that might result when white colonizers eat the poisonous fruit (i.e. the inability to accept difference) grown from colonialism—what Malcolm X referred to as “chickens coming home to roost.”⁷

This poisonous fruit comes in the form of “believing” cultural identity as verifiable, as more than an illusion, leading ultimately to an inability to accept difference as difference forces recognition of the unverifiability of identity. Social theorist Jean-Francois Bayart, citing Michel de Certeau, suggests culture refers to an open tradition, constantly rupturing upon itself, following a dialectic of “permanence and change.”⁸ But within this Imago Superlata, there is reason to believe Conrad’s ironic protagonists, Kayerts and Carlier, have no cultural identity because they have no culture. As a result, their identities are constructed partially through the “borrowing” of other cultural “emblems.”⁹ But within this Imago Superlata, such borrowing brings with it the “suffering and sacrifice”¹⁰ noted by Conrad.

I want to argue that these “identities” are completed through exaggerations of radical contingency, ideological beliefs or practices that coalesce to produce god-idols that refute human limitations by imposing those limits onto others in the form of physical and social suffering and sacrifice. These exaggerations are white lies, subterfuge and falsified representations of human possibility—not exactly “wrong” to the extent they manipulate real human possibility, but false exaggerations and dismissals of the details involving the impact of these exaggerations on others.

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⁹ Ibid., 68.
¹⁰ Conrad, 178.
The exaggerations I have in mind are identity-based, the ideas people hold about their own and other groups’ values and abilities, in terms of both limitation and possibility. These exaggerations produce various us/them, insider/outsider arrangements, securing such us/them thinking through the illusory promise of identity. The most fundamental lie told, the quintessential “white lie”: That one’s own identity or actions are not inextricably linked to the identities and experiences of others, that a distinction exists between the expression of human freedom (as identity-formation) and ethical responsibility to others. By responsibility, I mean awareness that expressions of human freedom are made possible through dependence on other humans. Exaggerations of radical contingency, exaggerations of this relationship between freedom and responsibility reinforce the illusion of distance between human freedom and responsibility by offering the illusion of identity.

I label all such thinking as “sacred/profane” thinking because it follows from a social demand for solidarity and security truncating social responsibility to certain groups based on illusory identities, and I label all such traditional talk of the sacred or profane as exemplary of exaggerations of radical contingency (ERC) because they hinge on acting as if they are more than their impact on the social world. God-idols are produced by conglomerates of ERCs and rely on and make use of this principle sacred/profane distinction. This chapter tries to “sight” these invisible exaggerations from within the privileged exaggerations afforded to me, to “see” Imago Superlata in the image of itself as an exaggeration—a white lie.

Conrad seems to register this white lie in the form of colonialism. His essay does well to note the victims of such believed in illusions, and suggest that the illusions mask the initial victims and transform benefactors into victims, themselves. Conrad’s words above, and his entire story, suggest there are no outposts of “progress,” there is no progress where colonialism,
ideological exaggerations, or the god-idols they fashion are concerned, as belief in “progress” and society ultimately exact justice on the protagonists as they are left for dead, civilization arriving too late. Kayerts and Carlier understand their identities in light of progress, yet, Conrad seems to be telling his readers these illusions and beliefs are not what they appear to their benefactors. White lies, taken as truth, appear as only end in death for the believers.

Bayart’s ominous description of the “battle for identity”\textsuperscript{11} contextualizes Conrad’s sociological diagnosis for the contemporary moment, where the protagonists of Conrad’s story Kayerts and Carlier (and their deaths) have not taught others how to live in a less harmful way, but how to adapt so that their illusory beliefs remain intact, still believing the white lie yet aware of its danger. Today, the white liars appear to have learned from those who have sought to expose them as liars, registering themselves as victims and benefactors alike. These illusory identities continue to be worshipped now as they are manipulated in a ‘battle for identity,’ set afire by “the spectre of difference vanishing haunting the modern world.”\textsuperscript{12} The god-idols people worship have been registered as illusions by many benefactors and victims alike, but the Imago Superlata remains in place, as do the continuous casualties it imposes on human bodies as it works to respond to the limits of human bodies in what Bayart characterizes as this “battle for identity.”

If identities are illusory, and the things theology and anthropology tend to discuss rest on such illusions, then theologians and anthropologists are cast directly into this battle. And it is precisely this battle, the back and forth, the constant antagonisms, which reinforces the

\textsuperscript{11} Bayart, 252
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid, 7.
believability and viability of identities as they are materially absolutized and legitimated\textsuperscript{13} through the pain and suffering brought about by the antagonism. Society—god—is death dealing, and through such deaths produce and reinforce the “white lie” of a sacred/profane distinction used to ground “operational acts of identification”\textsuperscript{14} as more than that, as cohesive, demarcated identities.

\textbf{Imago Superlata and Fighting Ethical Battles}

The “battle for identity”\textsuperscript{15} described by Bayart is wages as much by white people as anyone else. But by virtue of history, the functional, dubious “effectiveness” of god-idols at procuring materialized expressions of the false claims made about human identities, and other factors, white people largely remain in position to wield disproportionate and varied capital and power within the social system. As a result, and like previous chapters, I seek to limit my comments to how this imago superlata functions for white people. Clarity as to how the system operates is easier to obtain\textsuperscript{16}; changing the system is more elusive, and yet is demanded empirically as identity is illusory, and morally, as these illusions create a social and cultural climate that skews the life options of those within such settings.

In light of having been thrust into such a “battle,” I argue that the only means of understanding or disrupting the Imago Superlata involves attention to the same field wherein white existentialist Jean Paul Sartre’s \textit{Being and Nothingness}\textsuperscript{17} concludes, and which grounds the

\textsuperscript{14} Bayart, 92-93.
\textsuperscript{15} Bayart, 252.
\textsuperscript{16} See Chapter Two’s discussion of Luhmann and systems theory for background on the theorization of society as a system and the difficulty of changing the functions of such a system.
\textsuperscript{17} Some might suggest that since Sartre renders freedom the new sacred, why not turn to Camus? I think Sartre remains so useful precisely because he makes this problematic move. My point is
admonition offered by Bayart that follows his diagnosis: ethics. I don’t suggest such a focus offers the means for a white, straight male like myself to fully escape the Imago Superlata, and this chapter concludes on a note about that inesapability. Attention to ethics, however, offers a methodological reflexivity and the possibility for renegotiating who bears the brunt of the Imago Superlata. Human life in relation to other humans produces suffering necessarily, but through attention to such relations, certain suffering might be mitigated even if other unknown and known forms of suffering emerge in its place. In answer to the question of what to do about suffering, the simple and popular answer is appropriate: we fight it.

*From Normative Ethics to the ‘Ethical Domain’*

God-idols are big white lies, akin to the cultural imaginaries described by Jean-Francois Bayart. They’re “big” in so far as the work they do is expansive and multivalent. They are characterized by alleged appeals to universal truths that bring with them meanings “convey[ed] in specific historical contexts.” Whether the lies told involve anthropological claims about humans or theological claims about gods or devils, all of them appear as various exaggerations (i.e. “lies”) of human or divine worth and ability, or a combination of both, which signals a necessary concern for the ethical dimensions of the Imago Superlata. These god-idols are imaginary cultural identity markers, concepts and categories that people and communities use to make sense of and navigate a reality and a history inherited by yet other people engaged in this “battle.” This reality and history varies by individual and community, characterized by peril and tragedy as well as joy and prosperity. Not all face the same amount of suffering, or kind of

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18 Bayart, 251.
suffering, but all know something of loss, emotional and physical pain, and suffering. The weight of one’s circumstances weigh heavily regardless of calamity or entitlement, even as that weight often feels different and presses down on the motivations and actions of each person in a multiplicity of ways.

Following Bayart, who finds reason to study such ideas even whilst registering them as imaginary, no one is excused by god-idols (or their recognition of them as such) “from making ethical judgments.” But ethics, historically, is fraught with problematic normative claims that valorize and co-opt assumptions about social homogeneity, meaning that traditional ethics historically exemplifies the Imago Superlata through normative moral judgments arising from one context and proscribed for those outside that context or identity. Guarding against this legacy, in this project, any normative claims extend only to those within the same category of constructed identity in which I find myself.

I also seek to ground my talk of ethics not as normative moral censure, but in terms of identity formation, focusing my attention on the relationship between one identity and the next. My talk of “lies” does not presume a truth exists, but tautologically notes that there is no “Truth.” Rather, I argue that many claims towards “identity” hinge on manipulations of the notion of “Truth,” such as teleological belief in “progress.” I’m not interested in maintaining such claims, but in outlining how, why and for whom such claims function.

My use of ethics here involves attention to the various dimensions involved in the social and self-policing and disciplining of bodies as charted by anthropologist James Faubion in his

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19 Bayart, 251.
Following Faubion who follows Michel Foucault, my attention here is to the “ethical domain” wherein ethical actors are constituted through their motivations in fashioning themselves as subjects, the evaluative criteria for living into that subjectivity, the training required to achieve such subject status, and the “telos,” or end point of an ethical actor’s striving towards a “subject position.”

I understand “identity” to be an outgrowth of this quest for subject positionality. This subject-focused framework is equally applicable to the field of theology as anthropology and most academic study of religion. I understand religion to be the arbitrary and relative beliefs and rituals humans use to make meaning—that is, social power and capital—where there is none intrinsically. Thus, religion is this process of identity formation contingent on illusory identities imposed on outsider groups projecting back a false identity on insider. Where language responds to limited human bodies constitutes the religious, when such language meets an embodied “quest for complex subjectivity” through various claims of and about relative and arbitrary identities.

Faubion’s schematic of the ethical domain offers a way to situate the dimensions of ethics without being fearful of the normative claims part and parcel to so much talk of religion and identity. Ethics is present even in its “absence” within ethnography and theology, alike, so attention to it remains important even if this attention means more work necessary in qualifying normative claims so they do not hijack analysis. For Bayart, attention to ethics requires a dose of liberalism:

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21 Faubion, 3-10.
22 Ibid., 3.
23 Ibid., 3-4.
24 Bourdieu, 14.
26 Faubion, 108-111
Let us judge knowing what we are about, not on the basis of scanty information; let us not allow the wool to be pulled over our eyes; let us take care to consider as productive events (evenementialiser) the matrices of symbolic action through which the imaginary figures of politics are constituted and condensed.\(^{27}\)

God-idols fall within these matrices, and Bayart’s words align with Pierre Bourdieu’s characterization of religion as a structuring and structured symbolic medium.\(^{28}\) Ethics becomes an understandable and consequential feature of registering these matrices of symbolic action as loaded with constructed human meaning, and structuring possibilities for deciphering such meaning. Indeed, the god-idols are ideas that provide humans with a sense of meaning—understood as a sense of social power and capital—meaning forged as other humans serve as fuel for that meaning-making kiln among adherents to the Imago Superlata. This question of meaning brings the discussion back to two principle intellectual arenas that have wrestled with the ways humans make meaning: theology and anthropology.

*Situating Theology and Anthropology within the ‘Ethical Domain’*

Here, I situate traditional theology and anthropology as data, in that they fall within this ethical domain through a preoccupation with identity, as identity structures *and is structured by* the perception of meaning.\(^{29}\) In this hermeneutical light (admittedly leaving out many exceptions to this generalization), I mean to foreground some of the ways these two methodologies might inform the other by treating them as data. As data, they tell us something about how they—as methods—might begin to treat *their own* data. Here is an initial example of theology and anthropology, as data, speaking back to theology and anthropology, as method.

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\(^{27}\) Bayart, 251.
\(^{28}\) Bourdieu, 2.
\(^{29}\) Ibid.
In 1895, African Methodist Episcopal Bishop Henry McNeal Turner suggested that “god is a negro.”30 Turner scholar Stephen Angell helps to couch the significance of Turner’s claim as a sociological statement, meant to do a specific kind of work: “Turner’s affirmation of a black God ought to be primarily understood as the strongest response he could fashion to the idolatry of whiteness that he saw all around him.”31 One way to understand this “idolatry” is by understanding it as a combination of racialized exaggerations of radical contingency working in tandem with a more fundamental exaggeration that presumes god as distinct from human/humanity. Failure to acknowledge the ethical domain housing theology and anthropology causes difficulty in registering Turner’s comment as “anthropological.” Privileging the ethical domain exposes the claim “god is a negro” as actually suggesting that “negroes” are fully human, and even possibly intimating that Turner may have been suggesting that the “negro” is “god.” The theological pronouncement is implicated in the need to make such an anthropological statement to begin with as his statement reinforces a human/divine distinction undergirding the racialized distinction from which Turner sought recourse.

These constructed ideas, at face value isolated “illusions believed”32 about god/gods, enter into the “relatively autonomous religious field”33 wherein political, social and existential needs meet and compete with yet other ideas that transmute in and across a sacred/profane line. Each idea relies on the tension posed by the other, and the structure imposed by the distinction. That is, because “god” carries a certain social and cultural capital—a “religious capital”34—the

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31 Angell, 261.
32 Conrad.
33 Bourdieu, 7.
34 Ibid., 9.
claim “god is a negro”\textsuperscript{35} offers a litmus test for recognition of black humanity and contributes to a growing ability to register that full worth. Pierre Bourdieu states it this way: “This simultaneously leads to the heart of the system of production of religious ideology, that is to the most specific (but not ultimate) principle of ideological alchemy by which the transfiguration of social relations into supernatural relations operates and is therefore inscribed in the nature of things and thereby justified.”\textsuperscript{36} Religious capital, thus, has the function of transferring a supernatural claim into a “natural” claim working to secure human subjectivity or maintain social power.\textsuperscript{37} Exaggerations of radical contingency hinge on the efficiency of this ideological alchemy.

This “ideological alchemy,” witnessed in Turner’s pronouncement by transforming theological discourse into anthropological data, makes a rather simple methodological and theoretical point, as if the theologian as data is speaking up telling the scholar of religion: “Wait, you’re doing it wrong!” To know god is to know human, and human, god. Aside from being a powerful anthropological statement that African Americans are fully human, Turner’s claim that “God is a negro”—if read with a deconstructive or Feuerbachian hermeneutic—also theologically pronounces “God is a human.” In terms of the meaning offered by/to each, they are equal, though socially unequal based on the “ideological alchemy” taking place thanks to the sacred/profane distinction. Methodologically considered, where white adherents to god-idols are concerned, an ethical demand arises to do theology as anthropology and only then is greater epistemological clarity even offered, much less the possibility of social or political shifts in

\textsuperscript{35} Turner, Qtd. in Angell, 261-2.
\textsuperscript{36} Bourdieu, 5.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid.
power. Understanding theological pronouncements as anthropological claims takes us further in understanding the Imago Superlata.

This anthropological focus, however, is not to say anthropology as a field has fared any better on the question of its involvement in the Imago Superlata. Worth expressing forcefully, the break here between theology and anthropology is not where they fall on “god” or the “sacred” as understood in terms of ontology, but is a break between human identity construction and the impositions placed on other humans, a failure to register that this “ideological alchemy” does not require “believing” in god; its enough to believe human identities distinct. This latter break, the one I’m interested in, is exposed by how each field has fallen on ontological claims about “god” or the “sacred.” This point is difficult, but vital, and is aided by remembering that in this chapter, theology and anthropology are my data. As data, both fields appear equally guilty of such ignorance by privileging either the “sacred” or “profane” dimensions of their own data.

Where anthropology is concerned, much has been made of the ethnographic imagination constructing the “primitive” or the “other.” The “subjectivist turn” has sought to address this imagination, and has been helpful in that reorientation. But theology still offers certain tools for the charting of social motivations and consequences of these anthropological constructions of “primitives” or “gods,” constructed through direct claims to identity or academic attempts to study such claims.

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For instance, how might the Sahlins/Obeyesekere debate\textsuperscript{41} over the rationality of indigenous peoples and the tension and power dynamics between indigenous and dominant ethnographic presentations of such rationality be read as theological data? Obeyesekere refutes the idea that Westerners were registered as “gods” by claiming that all cultural groups have the same rationality. Sahlins suggests Obeyesekere’s refutation is problematic as it reinforces a Eurocentric rationality as normative. Thinking back to the example of Conrad’s \textit{An Outpost of Progress}, nothing about the presentation of Kayerts and Carlier suggest they’d be taken for gods; presumably, neither would Captain Cook on the Hawaiian Islands have looked like a “god” as Obeyesekere makes clear. Again, the debate hinges on ideological alchemical manipulations which “derive their structure” from “the same principle of division.”\textsuperscript{42} In other words, both fields appear to make use of a division to sight identities.

Applying theological methodologies to anthropological conversations might expose the ideological/theological interests at work on both sides of such a debate in a way similar to the anthropological examination of Turner’s theological pronouncement. How does Turner’s turn to god for reinforcing black humanity reinforce the dominant culture’s ability to use the idea of “god” even more effectively than before. Can both Obeyesekere and Sahlins be “right?” Moreover, where Sahlins’ work informs the political dimensions of my own, what political stakes are involved in being proven empirically or ethically “right” when it comes at the expense of reinforcing the social inequalities making the stakes of such conversations important at all?

In short, we can learn a lot by anthropologically studying the beliefs people hold and the social values they expose and engender. If Obeyesekere and Turner are left to respond to

\textsuperscript{42} Bourdieu, 3.
dominant cultural identities by employing the tools of that dominant identity—e.g. “rationality” and “god,” respectively—is there any escape from the Imago Superlata? This speaks to the paradox of my own project and this chapter as well, in that within the Imago Superlata, groups marginalized in it respond to it through appropriation of its organizational techniques. But as a member of the dominant group within that framework, I’m left to either reinforce it by following non-dominant assertions, reinforcing the overall process, or I can argue against the process—as this chapter attempts—and risk marking all identities as equally illusory, again reinforcing my privilege. How might this paradox find response? Is there a way to escape the distinction between sacred/profane, theology/anthropology that makes this paradox possible?

‘To Free Ourselves’ from Kayerts and Carlier

Traditionally, the distinction between theology and anthropology seems to involve the sacred/profane distinction, wherein theology (and religious studies, to a large degree43) sifts meaning in and through the lens offered by the “sacred” against that of the “profane,” while anthropology postures as employing a profane or dis-interested (i.e. “social scientific”) lens in order to talk about people, and at times, their beliefs and practices often involving the “sacred.” Both, however, often creatively manipulate their own vantage points and in that manipulation frequently reinforce the beliefs of their data through the ideological alchemy made possible by the distinctions they use to define themselves and their data.

For a cursory example, I might unpack the shared sensibilities of, say, Clifford Geertz’ methodology of “thick description” and The Interpretation of Cultures44 and Karl Barth’s

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systematic *Church Dogmatics*, in that both efforts “denote an attempt at—and ambition for—rich, rigorous, and even *full* social knowing.” This is seen in Geertz attempt at robust examination of text, subtext and interpretive meaning of such relationships, and in Barth’s systematic efforts that, in my estimation, seeks to outline each possible avenue of human social interaction by way of a cosmic projection. “God” is not the only cosmic projection, but ecclesiology, missiology, eschatology and others arise out of projections as well. Though not all theologians and anthropologists follow precisely the precedent set by these two texts, I wonder just how far removed contemporary ethnography and contextual theology really are from these early discipline-defining ventures. Following anthropologist John Jackson’s claim that “identities rely on archives,” meaning that identities require storehouses of information for their formation—storehouses where meaning is ascribed so as to be used in the construction of identity, then ethnographic thick description and theological exercise (whether systematic or contextual/constructive) may well amount to the archives holding the “stuff” of the ethical domain, those ideas and practices that constitute identity. In other words, and vital for understanding my argument as well as why it matters, I am claiming that theology and anthropology—interested in the topic of identity—are intimately culpable in perpetuating the imago superlata. They are not alone in this guilt, but I must forcibly note the guilt associated with the disciplines and tools at my disposal and used within this project.

Attention to the ethical domain necessitates that the sacred/profane distinction, distinguishing the two disciplines, be dissolved in a political and ethical sense. However, such political efforts will not occur until the proper object of investigation is understood to be this

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47 Jackson, 11.
distinction. Where anthropology becomes its own data on this point, Claude Levi-Strauss aids in foregrounding this distinction when he argues that “the truth about man resides in the system of their differences and common properties.” 48 This may be true, but I want to suggest the same of “man’s” theorization of itself. Levi-Strauss is most accurate if we read him as his own data: “the truth about [the anthropologist] resides in the system of their differences and common properties.” And yet, even as Levi-Strauss critiques Jean-Paul Sartre on the ground that existentialism “merely exchanges one prison for another,” 49 (i.e. one god-idol for another) structuralism ultimately reinforced the inability to dismantle these distinctions by virtue of the intellectual security seemingly offered by structuralism and the distinctions upon which it rests.

Levi-Strauss’ structuralism remained too disinterested in the violence enacted through his own distinction between culture and nature. 50 That is, structuralism’s ability to theorize distinctions hinged on a distinction between nature and biology, and human cultural production arising out of a fight against such natural risks, dangers, limits and the like. Perhaps, post-structuralism emerges largely from an increased attention to the ethical dimensions of subject positionalities, exemplified in the very need for an anthropology of ethics as offered by James Faubion, who notably, is running with a baton passed to him by the incomplete work of Michel Foucault. 51 Part of what makes exaggerated radical contingency exaggerated is that it hides the social consequences of responses to human contingency, that is to say, the effects of the illusions described by both Joseph Conrad and Jean-Francois Bayart. These illusions are our most intensely believed ideas, such as structuralism, the scientific method, or god idols. God-ids and

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49 Ibid.
51 Faubion, 3.
identities hide their own social effects. Indeed, they are designed to do so as their function is to ignore, deny or fight directly against death and human limitations through division.

This taxonomic impulse is as much present amongst religious “practitioners” and anthropologists who theorize such practices, like Levi-Strauss and Sartre, as it is those who theorize such activity in more “interested” fashion through theology and religious studies. Indeed, there is no disinterested scholarship. One expression of the sacred/profane distinction involves the distinction between scholar and data. In the same way theologians and anthropologists study “god” or the “other,” they are telling us much about themselves, as such scholars are social subjects themselves, where Bourdieu notes that what is true of taste is true of “social subjects, classified by their classifications, [they] distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make.”  

Failure to dissolve the scholar/data distinction reinforces the blindness brought about by the Imago Superlata, as much as failure to dissolve methodological distinctions achieves the same thing. Responding to this blindness marks my turn to theologians and anthropologists as data not as a choice, but a necessity. Any uncertainty brought about by the loose, playful breakdown of these distinctions, I hope, is indicative of my project foregrounding the uncertainty hidden by the Imago Superlata.

Though emerging with very different aims and intellectual inheritances, but also with ties to the University of Chicago, theologians Thomas Altizer and David Tracy both are arguably remembered as shapers of contemporary theology and their works imply that the role of theology is to maintain its preoccupation with identity or with the idea of god. Though differences between their ideas are notable, I am suggesting that in functional terms, both of them reinforce the sacred as distinct from the profane. I note them here because they are two thinkers informing

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this project, and two scholars known for transforming theology into something new; yet, it seems their innovation is largely a renegotiation of terms and frameworks so that identity remain believable.

Thomas Altizer, though seemingly close to using his lens of the death of god to see the deaths caused by “god,” never seems to finish the task even as he proclaims that theology must be “reborn” by killing god, killing itself through dissolution. Altizer celebrates the death of god, understanding it from the freedom from community or tradition more than this “death” causes rigorous reflection over what to do with awareness of god’s death as it would relate to non-white, marginal groups. His writings are filled with moments where he feels secure that the death of god provides the freedom “from the alien power of all moral law,” liberation “from the threat of external moral judgment,” and “release of the burden of a transcendent source of guilt.” Such goals tug at my own sensibilities, but suggest this death marks a freedom from social responsibility rather than towards it; how such flight from responsibility plays out in a social setting where white men often feel themselves god is never interrogated. For Altizer, it appears the death of god is also the death of anyone else’s context and any identity save his own,

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56 By this token, I am also frustrated that Mark Taylor’s work, perhaps the heir apparent to Altizer where Death of God theology is concerned, also seems more concerned to pronounce the death of the subject than to engage critically with the multiplicity of subjective options arising from recognition that the only dead god they discuss is a god of certainty and possibility that whiteness and theism (even in these god-idol’s ‘deaths’) have helped to procure historically. For an example of Taylor’s work, see Taylor, Mark C. *Erring: A Postmodern A/theology*. University of Chicago Press, 1987.
even calling himself “the last theologian.” Such a claim does the functional work of precluding anyone else’s opinion, even if his point was to historicize the death of tradition. If the reader finds my suggestions mere *ad hominem*, the following example should demonstrate that the social stakes of these arguments run deep and personally for Altizer, as much as anyone else.

Altizer recounts in his memoir—with deathly seriousness—the time when Charles Long set an African curse upon Altizer at the 1989 American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting, a curse Altizer blames for ruining much of his life, including his marriage. According to Altizer, Long justified his curse on the grounds that Altizer “refused to offer the sustenance that Chuck [Charles Long] had once so needed.” That is, both colleagues at the University of Chicago, Long once went to Altizer for some sort of help in a time of crisis and Altizer did not provide help. Altizer assumes Long maintained a grudge from this slight, such that it required a curse years later.

Functionally speaking, is not the death of god little more than the securing of white men as god? But if Altizer is to be believed, then god can be harmed and killed, indeed, and scholars of African American religion are indeed engaged in the death of gods. It is telling that Altizer proclaimed the death of god rather than asked the question of whose god has died. Failure to begin asking such a question is its own curse.

In the case of the much more influential David Tracy, his effort at underscoring a fundamental theology holding together the field’s variety is admirable, and his theorization of religion as a series of limits to and limits of human expression loosely inform this project.

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59 Ibid., 46.
61 Tracy, 98-109.
Though recognizing that “the modern Christian theologian cannot ethically do other than challenge the traditional self-understanding of the theologian,” his reflexivity ends up more focused on preserving the theological task through pluralistic and fundamental claims than deconstructing the god-idols reinforced by theology historically. Ostensibly, his pluralism gives needed space to recognizing competing god-idols (marking his “modern Christian” qualification a bit confusing), but does little to chart the consequences of them.

Tracy’s focus on pluralism might have been the actual “death of god” in the form of the death of theology as a discipline, in that difference continuously calls into question claims to divinity as they foreground limitation. Here, difference (understood loosely as pluralism’s point of origin) begets difference, not unity, meaning it undercuts the possibility of a functional social god, as group cohesion attempts always come unraveled. It brings focus, then, to limitation and uncertainty. Hence, the fanciful story of Long’s curse on Altizer might bear a tautological truth more biting than any individual curse. This “truth” involves recognition that the “gods” worshiped across time and space gain their identities, abilities and utilities from a social world wherein sameness and difference collide. We truly learn about metaphysics—that is, what is really real—when difference ruptures what we think we know about ourselves and others. To these ends, theology (as a method) “dies” when theologians begin to privilege difference as opposed to orthodoxy, sameness or any other synonym for social ideological agreement and affinity. Yet, instead of this methodological death of theology occurring (as interestingly argued for precisely by Long in Significations⁶³), Tracy’s rejoinder to his findings helped to usher in a fundamental theology appealing even more explicitly to shared features of human experience—

⁶² Ibid., 7.
again, ignoring, denying or fighting against difference through acceptance of the veracity of different identities so long as they can be captured, categorized within a fundamental project—so long as Tracy continues to be arbiter of such differences. Both of these thinkers quickly give life back to the distinction-making apparatuses they initially seek to trouble, Altizer becoming “god” by killing god through marking Nietzsche’s proclamation as an historical event\textsuperscript{64}, and Tracy through a continued methodological appeal to theology.

If my argument remains unclear, the story from Altizer does a sort of interpersonalizing, racializing work grounding my point—in other words, Altizer’s argument for god’s death in tandem with bitterness at having been “cursed” by Long for having not aided Long in a time of need—serves as an analogy for race relations where whiteness and theism are operative categories (meaning, everywhere in the U.S.). Of course, the details of what actually happened are as elusive as any claims about “god,” but as an analogy, Altizer’s frustration speaks to and embodies a similar frustration likely felt by those for whom I have authored this dissertation. Just as Altizer privileges his own moral failing in the time of Long’s need, Altizer seems more concerned about the damage Long may have done to Altizer as a response. I suggest that many whites hold a similar sense of the recognition of adherence to a god-idol of whiteness historically, even as the affective responses to contemporary black frustration and even “rage” is what is privileged by these whites hermeneutically. To this extent, Altizer ends up a mirror held up to white Americans where their feelings attached to the god-idols of whiteness and theism collide and are called into question. The “curse,” in effect is the accursed state of recognizing that there are no more theological tricks to employ. What Altizer deems a curse is none other than his own increasing recognition of his own radical contingency—a position he, and

\textsuperscript{64} Altizer, \textit{Radical Theology}, 11.
seemingly countless other whites including myself—have trouble accepting without looking for an excuse. Indeed, the atheist Altizer seems here more keen to reify an otherworldly spiritual realm than submit than take full ownership of his actions. To this extent, otherworldly and thisworldly are both used, by both Long and Altizer (according to Altizer, at least) to address more basic postures towards difference, its embrace or its abandonment. For Altizer—and here he embodies white adherence to whiteness as well as theism—the curse is a black man calling into question white worth.

Altizer by analogy, and both Tracy and Altizer by methodology, these white theologians (their contexts matter) exemplify the Imago Superlata in the sense that a preoccupation with sacred identity or methodological identity—whether alive or dead—blinds them from the cries of the victims of god-idols, and further blinds them to their own victimization through this process. To these ends, though I mean no disrespect to the abilities of Altizer, Tracy or to my place in this field, but as data, Altizer and Tracy look a lot like Kayerts and Carlier. The “battle for identity” described by Bayart and seen in Conrad’s story is not a euphemism, but a tautology, a “distinction that does not distinguish.”

The anecdote of Long having cursed Altizer serves the same tautological ends—an expression of limits exposed as imposed differences fight back exposing real, embodied limitations and human failings.

**Dissolving the Distinction between Theology and Anthropology**

How am I able to cast these thinkers as my data, while critiquing their theoretical efforts in the same breath, without relying on bad faith, deconstructing my own argument in the process? Given my position that theology and anthropology are preoccupied with questions of

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identity, and my suggestion that identity is constructed in and through social and political “battle”—or at best, a kind of cultural theft—then both disciplines either address ethical interests of actors (requiring all scholars to turn themselves into their data along with their traditional data), or they reinforce the illusory identity of the group studied as well as their own. Attention to the data within the ethical domain, and the voices ignored by Kayerts and Carlier require I attempt a “distinction that does not distinguish” arguing for a dissolution of such methodological, sacred/profane distinctions.

Misrecognizing that both theology and anthropology rest within the ethical domain has produced a failure to provide attention to the relationship between what is studied by each and the question of who/what subjects and ideas live or die as “subjects” are constructed from the god-idols worshipped within the communities studied or explored. The failure is, ironically, a failure to see the anthropological dimensions of theology and the theological dimensions of anthropology. Using the methodological tools of each against the other as data exposes such a failure and helps to understand why it occurred.

Admittedly, not all theologians and anthropologists (or all white) scholars of religion look like Kayerts and Carlier, and my characterization here is not meant to be a strawman (to the extent such is avoidable at all). But all of us (white students of religion) do find ourselves within the system from which Kayerts and Carlier emerge and personify. Training or interest in ethics seems understandable. In fact, attention to the ethical domain blurs the distinction between each of these disciplines and social rhetorical strategies in ways that have not fully been recognized. The following example, paraphrased from theologian James Cone, expresses my outlook on both disciplines:

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66 Bayart, 68.
67 Luhmann and Fuchs, 34.
[Asked of Theology]

The ethical question ‘What am I to do?’ cannot be separated from its theological source, that is, what God has done and is doing to liberate the oppressed from slavery and injustice.\(^{68}\)

[Asked of Anthropology]

The ethical question “What am I to do?” cannot be separated from its [anthropological] source, that is, what [I/My Community] has/have done and is/are doing to liberate the oppressed from slavery and injustice.\(^{69}\)

I pose these questions as distinct, but my argument is that both questions are actually posed simultaneously, arising together in any instance where human or “divine” identity is described. Attention to the ethical domain foregrounds this simultaneity, and such attention is mandated by a white academic context anyway.

The dissolution of the theoretical and methodological distinction between anthropology and theology is also foregrounded by the typical data of religion, adherents. Recent debates waged in the wake of George Zimmerman’s acquittal about the role of “god” in the tragedy of Trayvon Martin’s death inchoately reinforce not only why ethics is important, but how it offers a roadmap for analysis. If Cone’s words situate the impact of an ethical lens in an abstract sense, then rhetorical data coming from popular culture offers a grounded example of the same thing I have in mind. Discussed already in Chapter Two, the *ad hominem* assault against religious studies scholar Anthea Butler, who argued that the American god is “a white racist god with a problem. More importantly, he’s carrying a gun and stalking young, black men”\(^{70}\) resulted in a brutal online assault against Butler, and in fact works as an instance where the data of religion

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\(^{69}\) Ibid., 180.

forces recognition that there is no distinction between scholar and adherent where religion is concerned. In Chapter Two, I mentioned some of the specific language used to assault Butler in response to the claim about god, such as her being labeled a “fat cow,” “cunt” and “nigger,” all various explicit assaults against her humanity. These verbal assaults experienced by Butler—and continuing even now at the time of this writing—expose the projected desires and goals of those who felt it necessary to defend themselves (and their god) against her. Such a defense of god actually is rooted in a personal slight, a personal assault on their “illusions believed” as a result of the Imago Superlata. That the chosen recourse of adherents to the Imago Superlata when their god is attacked is to attack the humanity of adherents to other gods, attacking features of human or divine worth or ability, speaks volumes about the limits of ideological alchemy. If “god” were more than an “illusion,” then there would be little need for censure. There is a reason Bourdieu calls it “alchemy,” because it takes the right ingredients of belief and social moment to produce meaning. Because of this censure, because of the normative claims it exposes and reinforces, such discussions foreground the damage of believed in illusions. Situating ethical interests first analytically indicates that anger at “god” being criticized exposes “god” as a psychological illusion. God’s identity can only be defended by claims made by and about human identities. Theological language, then, is ethnographic terrain. How might theology (as a method), then, move forward in auto-ethnographic fashion, able to respond to having heard itself speaking as data—which, of course, is another way of expressing Kayerts and Carlier having finally heard the voices of their victims by having registered themselves as victims.

Social anthropologist Mary Douglas, whose interest in issues of social power and control mark her writing as foreshadowing the need to breakdown these methodological distinctions,

71 http://nosecretsontenet.tumblr.com/
demands more of theologians than solipsistic naval gazing. In fact, she offers a statement about what theologians (and Christians, more generally) ought to do in light of recognizing that a claim like Durkheim’s—that “society is god”—says much about the “relation of self to society.” In other words, theology and anthropology are connected—and the connection is exposed ethically:

The theologians who should be providing for us more precise and original categories of thought are busy demolishing meaningless rituals and employing the theological tool chest to meet the demands of anti-ritualists.

As a method for producing such “precise and original categories of thought,” Douglas suggests theologians use the tools of social theory to…

Turn round on themselves and inspect their values, to reject some of them, and to resolve to cherish positional forms of control and communication wherever they are available. This would seem to be the only way to use our knowledge to free ourselves from the power of our own cosmology.

In the sections that remain in this chapter, I shift gears and try to respond to these admonitions.

Cultural Emptiness and the Construction of Identity/Other

Imago Superlata appears to arise out of an absence of culture to the extent “culture” is understood as the ideological and physical locations where traditions are retained and recast. Kayerts and Carlier seem not to have had their own culture, and their actions—colonialism, generally, perhaps—might arise from a cultural emptiness, akin to what bell hooks has noted using Sam Keen’s idea of “cultural anhedonia”—“the insensitivity to pleasure, the incapacity for experiencing happiness”—making cultural identification within the Imago Superlata an “illusion.” Western colonialism and “culture” seems to subsume other cultures as if to poach

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73 Ibid., 153.
74 Ibid., 167.
75 Ibid., 169-170.
76 Bayart, 65-67.
them for the gifts offered by their otherness. But if all cultures are subsumed within a Western culture marked by its operation as what Levi-Strauss calls a “coalition of cultures,” what relationship does Western culture have to these constituent “others,” who Joseph Conrad refers to as “the victims of the mysterious purpose of these illusions?” It appears that the actual “other” within the Imago Superlata is the dominant group with no cultural identity, and that out of this emptiness, the “other”—as typically understood, is created as the first “other” takes the identities of the new “others” pretending that no such theft has taken place.

This “coalition of cultures” is crafted, constructed, and made real through the construction of these victims as “the other.” Filling a perceived void of culture the result of poaching all cultures as one’s own, the “other”—“Blacks, Gays, the poor, Jews, Allah”—is constructed as ideas which are then mapped onto real people and communities. As explained by existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, “If the Jew did not exist, the anti-Semite would invent him.” Imago Superlata is the process whereby benefactors and victims arise conterminously with the creation of their “identities.” I follow Bayart that there are no “identities,” only “operational acts of identification.” These identities are formed through adherence to god-idols that span the distance between what is and what ought to be, often overlapping.

In my estimation, few have outlined this cultural emptiness better than Jean-Paul Sartre, while his efforts to address it leave many wanting more. I engage Sartre because I want to be sympathetic to white existential concerns—that is, intellectually honest that Kayerts and Carlier represent countless scholars, whose ideas exist and matter, including mine—while responding

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79 Conrad, 178.
81 Bayart, 92.
82 Ibid., 93.
thoughtfully to the perils brought about by those concerns. Sartre offers a line in the sand, of sorts, on this point of description vs. proscriptive response. For instance, Sartre’s problematic suggestion that the answer to racism is to stop being black\(^{83}\) ends up helpful in characterizing the limits of the Imago Superlata and remains a warning to this project. At the same time, his more thoughtful response to Anti-Semitism, discussed below, indicates that not all god-idols carry the same social weight, meaning one might have the race issue worked out but promote homophobia, or one might think they have the answers to the race question, but reinforce the problem in other areas.\(^{84}\) Ultimately, Sartre’s focus on paradox, manipulations of such paradox, and interest in the race question makes him useful here, a usefulness underscored by Levi-Strauss who argues that Sartre’s existential phenomenology “affords a first-class ethnographic document…essential to an understanding of the mythology of our own time.”\(^{85}\) Sartrean existentialism is emblematic of Conrad’s imagined moment when Kayerts and Carlier finally hear their “othered” victims because they briefly recognize themselves as victims, those without an identity.

Originally written in French and published as *Reflexions sur la Question Juive* (Reflections on the Jewish Question) in 1946, Sartre’s *Anti-Semite and Jew* offers a kind of grounded ethical addendum to his famous *Being and Nothingness* published three years earlier,

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\(^{84}\) Other thinkers, such as Albert Camus and Frantz Fanon, are not as helpful in theorizing the Imago Superlata (from within it)—as I am forced to do. To my mind, Camus’s Rebel isn’t rebellious, in that it borders too heavily, in my mind, on nihilistically, automatonically assuming nothing will change, and I don’t think all people perpetually engage in the Sisyphean task, equally, if at all. Some social actors own yachts, or make decisions affecting the life options of others. My project seeks to shift who is forced to roll the rock up the hill, what different groups would even mean by this “rock,” and who has access to yachts and decisions. I seek parity, not revolution. Of Frantz Fanon, his new humanism is new indeed, but is a call for something outside the Imago Superlata, of which my social context does not permit me to assume is possible.

but which did not appear in English until 1957. Sartre argues that anti-Semitism is a “comprehensive attitude” and “passion” that orients not only how anti-Semites see Jews, but how anti-Semites navigate the entire world. Anti-Semitism arises out of what Sartre describes as a “fear of being free;…” a fear of the human condition. From Sartre’s perspective, anti-Semitism is intellectually easy, lazy as well as death-dealing and marking a flight from human responsibility. Arguing that “hate is a faith” and that metaphysics (i.e. concerns over sacred/profane) are the privilege of the “Arian governing class,” the anti-Semite is guilty of this fear, this flight made possible by the anxiety produced from within a class-based society.

Inspiring my own constitution of the white theistic bourgeois discussed in the previous chapter, Sartre suggests that anti-Semitism is “a poor man’s snobbery,” used by the ‘white-collar proletariat’ to distinguish itself from the real proletariat. Though I disagree here with Sartre’s apparent elitism and his overreliance on freedom as sui generis—examples of god-idols in their own right—anti-Semitism is produced through these denials. In a desire for identity, where no culture is available to help constitute an identity other than the cultures of others, the void is filled by way of illusory beliefs about others producing equally illusory identities that have the

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86 The choice of the French title is significant, in that “The Jewish Question” was largely framed as such by the anti-Semitic, as in “What can we do about this problem?” Sartre’s title could perhaps be satirical, or may be a testament to his own unresolved anti-Semitism. Contextualizing the issue to the U.S., his title choice would be akin to me titling this dissertation “The White Man’s Burden,” localizing the problem of racism on the shoulders of the victims.
87 Jean-Paul Sartre, Anti-Semite and Jew, 17.
88 Ibid., 28.
89 Ibid., 43, 50, 53-4
90 Ibid., 19.
91 Ibid., 133.
92 Ibid., 149.
93 Sartre, Anti-Semite and Jew, 26.
94 Here, I want to underscore that Sartre’s ethical failings end up theoretical benefits, as his use is predicated on his proximity to social centers. I am working against the perspective he offers, part of it at least, but need him—like Luhmann and Durkheim in previous chapters—to be intellectually honest about the interpretive consequences of privilege.
power to shape material circumstances. Though Sartre’s reliance on freedom situates it as the sacred object in his project, reinforcing the Imago Superlata, that very problematic feature of his work offers model and blueprint to chart how many god-idols are produced, including homophobia, sexism, classism, etc. To this extent, such reliance on freedom lends Sartre’s writings to the ethnographic import suggested by Levi-Strauss, it both brilliantly outlines the Imago Superlata and offers a useful warning as I try to understand it from inside of it.

**The Principle Exaggeration of the Imago Superlata**

God-idols are expressions of something basic, something human; a demand for identity in the face of the illusion of cultural identity. Anti-Semitism and other god-idols within the Imago Superlata are identity-based quests for solidarity and ideological agreement. What does such a push for solidarity (or the belief in it) accomplish? Ironically, it allows for imaginary individual identities to be cultivated, but prevents actual social solidarity in Modern society. Imago Superlata takes an existential concern over the limitations of real, embodied bodies and imagines resolutions in a disembodied, illusory sacred, social realm. This bears unpacking.

The first and principle feature of the Imago Superlata is that it constitutes a social/existential paradox as a sacred/profane distinction. Radically-contingent cultural identity, the illusion of it as more stable than an illusion, is responded to by constructing society as functionally sacred, and this is the first exaggeration of radical contingency, its initial white lie. Society is an ideal-typical concept situating group homogeneity as “sacred.” “Society is god.” Within the Imago Superlata, the paradox of illusory, empty identity is responded to by creating distances between the two poles of the paradox, an awareness of self and awareness of other selves.

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95 Emile Durkheim, Qtd. in Mary Douglas, 173.
Among adherents to the Imago Superlata—and I remind that I remain within this system—the distinction suggested between sacred and profane is believed, allowing for society to function as god, and offering the grounds for further exaggerations. More white lies. This is usually couched in traditional “sacred” terms such as metaphysics and otherworldliness involving questions of knowledge and being, but emerges far below such traditionally theistic markers in that the sacred/profane distinction is any first distinction arising out of the “principle of structuration” described by Bourdieu. Because typical understandings of “sacred” and “profane” rely on this distinction, the distinction is the actual object of interest, where distinction (in the abstract) is homologous to identity (in the abstract). The effects of this first distinction, this structural propensity, is that the binary described by Durkheim has the function of hiding a person or group’s relationship and responsibility to another person or group. Applying a hermeneutic of reversal to Emile Durkheim’s work amongst totemic groups in Australia, I argue that Durkheim’s famous distinction of the sacred/profane actually indicates more about the way such distinctions operate within the religious orientation I’m describing, an orientation in which I consider him an adherent.

Durkheim argued that religious beliefs can be ordered into “sacred” and “profane” which “divides the world into two domains” and which the division can be presupposed as prior to humans in community. The first white lie is justified through another white lie, that the sacred is realer than its arbitrary, rhetorical and discursive construction. The “sacred” is the exaggeration undergirding all other exaggerations because it teaches how to exaggerate and reinforces the efficacy of exaggerations.

96 Bourdieu, 13.
97 Ibid., 12-13.
Durkheim also writes that “beliefs, myths, dogmas and legends” offer the means of charting sacred from profane. Durkheim also writes that “beliefs, myths, dogmas and legends” offer the means of charting sacred from profane.99 Culture orients the margins and borders between society (as god) and those on the margins between and away from sacred social solidarity and homogeneity. From his study of these features, Durkheim concludes that the sacred/profane binary has at least three characteristics. First, its construction is largely arbitrary. That is, the distinction between sacred and profane things amounts to an arbitrary, yet “absolute” division. Those things marking the division are also largely arbitrary in the sense that there is no intrinsic quality attached to any object marking it sacred or profane. Bourdieu’s suggestion that religion functions to “legitimate the arbitrary” should come to mind here.101 Second, the sacred and profane are marked by a radical heterogeneity that often produces a “veritable antagonism,” such that a “battle for identity” as suggested by Bayart is inevitable. From this absolute arbitrary distinction, and through the antagonism between the two poles, it functions to produce, reinforce and legitimate social homogeneity. It creates a sense of social belonging through the process of marking and division. Yet, this homogeneity is never fully achieved. The “outposts” of progress (i.e. outposts of society) always deconstruct this homogeneity through the deaths/sacrifices occurring on those margins, explained at length in the first two chapters with respect to whiteness and theism. In a perpetual process, social solidarity is sought through a plucking out/sacrificing/removal of people that would question this homogeneity, the process reinforced and justified on sacred/profane grounds. That is, justified through religious claims holding no intrinsic weight but the extrinsic weight offered by the very thing seeking

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99 Ibid.
100 Ibid., 38.
101 Bourdieu, 14.
102 Durkheim, 39.
103 Bayart, 249.
104 Conrad, 187.
homogeneity. Distinction, here the sacred/profane distinction, functions antagonistically
necessarily as a sleight of hand tactic. The antagonism produced gathers momentum to the extent
that radical contingency is caustic and frustrated, in that its response to itself, exaggerations of
radical contingency, rest on illusions requiring antagonism as only ad homonym-styled
justifications are available for validating things artificially constructed. In other words,
because society is both in need of homogeneity and serving as its own justification for that
homogeneity, precisely because of its intrinsic heterogeneity, it must remain perpetually
antagonistic, working towards sameness by killing difference.

This antagonistic heterogeneity (distinct, itself, from theism discussed in Chapter Two) is
the precondition of god-idols to be constructed, because it functions to produce the need for god-
idols to span the distance suggested of the sacred/profane distinction. The paradox is transmuted
into two opposing halves, and adherents seek to orient themselves according to only the “positive
half” of this radical contingency that is no longer registered as artificial, arbitrary, or relative.
The principle also creates this distance, as it is an illusory distance believed in so that acute
expressions of cultural identity might also be believed in. Whiteness or theism become
“absolute,” queerness becomes “biological” out of a need to absolutize and legitimate the god-

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105 My argument hinges on this point, in that my argument recreates the Imago Superlata as it
theorizes it. Such is the paradox of my project, that by partial virtue of benefits gleaned from my
privileged illusory identity—or Bayart’s—I’m left to tell the story of illusory identities to my
counterparts and everyone, reinforcing the privilege in a larger attempt to usurp and undermine
the privilege. This seems akin to the challenge faced by Sahlins, as well. Identity, though
illusory, is inescapable, leading to a paradox wherein the only response to identities—real or
imaginary—is a battle, an ad homonym assault one against the next. If identities are illusory, and
things theology and anthropology talk about rest on such illusions, then theologians and
anthropologists are cast directly into the battle. And it is precisely this battle, the back and forth,
which reinforces the believability and viability of identities as they are materially absolutized
and legitimated through the pain and suffering brought about by the antagonism. The sacred—
god—is death dealing, and through such deaths and attempted murder produce the “white lie” of
grounded, ontologically viable identities.
idols constructed through this distinction-making apparatus. This first “distance,” the constructed distance between social and existential positions vis-à-vis the sacred/profane binary, offers the foundation appealed to by constructed god-idols to justify other “us/them” distances, other exaggerations of radical contingency and other god-idols. But lies are always about something. The white lies of the Imago Superlata are about bodies.

**Projecting Identities onto Material, Limited Bodies**

Within the Imago Superlata, an existential problem of embodied limitation is responded to through projecting illusory identities onto other bodies. Though my turn to Sartre might cause some to suggest I reproduce a justification of this arrangement as I work against it, I am not seeking any such “unity” and am of the opinion that Sartre’s theorization in proximity to social centers and privilege are helpful for their hermeneutical offerings. What they help to make sense of is this constant and chronic attempt to resolve a paradox of radical contingency by exaggerating the possibilities of escaping it, only to arrive back at paradox through the sacrificial offering of individual or “social” bodies in the process. Here, I’m not seeking to solve this problem of social weight, only to understand it in relation to the ideas those in that arrangement hold and adhere.

What Durkheim calls this “veritable antagonism”\(^{106}\) emerges as ideological battles are waged between, within, and across “imagined communities”\(^{107}\) composed of enfleshed bodies. Here, I seek to show that all exaggerations of radical contingency take place on real, limited physical bodies. Yet, those constructions, ERCs—reinforced by a disembodied notion of society as god—remain disembodied thereby unable to address an embodied existential problem. As a

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\(^{106}\) Durkheim, 39.

result, these disembodied (i.e. illusory) group allegiances (societies, social collectivities) localize onto bodies of those perceived outside the group. In every instance, parts are sacrificed for maintaining illusory conceptions of the whole.

Physical, materially limited, radically contingent bodies respond to those limits by projecting an illusory social body onto real bodies, and judging the material body against the social body. Limited bodies are judged to belong or not based on an unlimited ideal in the form of “god,” whiteness, heteronormativity, etc. The ethical domain helps to show that social actors are embodied actors. Sacred and profane appear in physical form as bodies, limited bodies, radically contingent bodies. My argument is not that the sacred is the profane but that both sacred and profane are components and outgrowths of human complexity and embodied as much as disembodied limitations and uncertainties.

This embodied focus suggests that what a person says or does to their own body is proportional to what they say or do with/to other bodies. Further, adding a dimension to this relationship, ideological projections of bodily concerns are also proportional to other projected bodily concerns. Further still, ideological projections are also proportional to direct embodied statements, meaning a person can say something about “god” and it impact the bodies of adherent and non-adherent, alike. Hence, the ideological effects of belief produce material consequences for adherent and sacrificial victim because material bodies are used in the crafting of these illusory identities. Exaggerated claims and images of self and others—projected onto the

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108 In fact, Douglas makes this point even more forcefully: “The physical body can have universal meaning only as a system which responds to the social system, expressing it as a system. What it symbolizes naturally is the relation of parts of an organism to the whole. Natural symbols can express the relation of an individual to his society at that general systemic level. The two bodies are the self and society: sometimes they are so near as to be almost merged; sometimes they are far apart. The tension between them allows the elaboration of meaning.” See Douglas, *Natural Symbols*, 91.
bodies of self and other—come to produce the image one holds of their own and others’ identities. All identities, human or “divine,” are formed through this process.

The “Feuerbachian” cosmic screen is bodies—material bodies—of others. The projector: radically contingent humans; the projection: an exaggerated image of a limited physical body. This seems to be what Mary Douglas has in mind when arguing that bodies are canvases for symbolization. Where whiteness is concerned, Chapter One explored this process through the act of lynching, wherein the cosmos localizes onto hanging, mutilated dead, black bodies, constructing exaggerated images of blackness (as death) and whiteness (as safety from death) in the minds of white and black, alike. Lynchings mark instances where individuals are sacrificed physically, so that the social margins can be reorganized. Black bodies out of place, what Nirmal Puwar calls “space invaders,” bring the margins to the center, rupturing the sense of stability, and are eradicated, sacrificed, reordering that stability through the death of the offering. Trinkets and tokens cut from black flesh and children in attendance function to ensure the memory lives on of the costs associated with—as well as how to respond to—momentary recognition that sameness doesn’t really exist.

Complementing such vicious murders, but no less significant to the use of bodies as these screens, where Christianity is concerned in the United States, the segregation so part and parcel to U.S. Christian worship services suggests churches are veritable, metaphoric social centers where homogeneity is sought and determined. Where physical sameness is weak, ideological sameness increases. That is, racial diversity can be more easily achieved (in an Evangelical

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church, for instance) where a premium is placed on belief. Where physical sameness is strong, as is common of mainline liberal white denominations, greater ideological/theological diversity is afforded. Rather than belief shaping who is in attendance, the physical bodies in attendance shape belief. In both instances, however, difference is sacrificed in the promotion of social sameness, and bodies function as the mechanism, the “screen” upon which the façade of sameness is cast on a canvas of difference.

Ostensibly, these Feuerbachian projections, coming from and onto bodies, map out rhetorical and cultural distinctions between sacred and profane terrain and say something of the power and control exerted in effort to believe in identity; the viciousness of any given ritual determined by perception of the proximity of one illusory group to the next. That is, bodies are deemed sacred or profane through the adherence to a sacred/profane distinction transmitted through disciplinary mechanisms like discursive language and embodied feeling. Stated succinctly, “sacred” and “profane” localize onto material bodies, humans creating god-idols from their wrestling with their own bodies.

Because of this embodied, cosmic mapping—bodily canvases are limited, after all—a god-idol always brings with it both dimensions of the sacred/profane binary distinction localized on the bodies of adherents and outsiders. They are produced from individuals in groups and in response to and with the tools offered by the paradox of radical contingency. This suggests god-idols are limited because they are never stronger than the screen upon which their projection rests, limited bodies. This paradox of human response to limit and contingency cannot be less than the paradox. Exaggerations in the direction of more (e.g. the white man’s god complex) or less (e.g. nihilism) than the paradox reinforce the paradox. Necessary, then, is to find a way to pay attention, to expose the limits of god-idols by exposing embodied limits hidden by the Imago
Superlata and the “opacity” (of theology and reality\textsuperscript{112}) reinforcing this misrecognition. In short, because theology is made of the stuff of limited bodies, it is limited in seeing its own limitations, in seeing itself as an exaggeration—its paradoxical origins and preoccupation with limited human bodies responded to through illusory identities. The following schematic offers a lens to “see” these exaggerations in practice.

**Agential and Valuative Exaggerations: A Schematic for Analysis**

Here, I specifically seek to respond to Douglas’ call to offer “more precise and original categories of thought” by offering a tendential\textsuperscript{113}, partial framework for analyzing the ERCs that localize onto physical bodies, ultimately creating god-idols as they coalesce.

The Imago Superlata reacts against the human paradox of radical contingency, a position which registers human freedom as bound by its expression in another person. Illusory god-idols are crafted by the various exaggerations that skew this balanced relationship. The sacred/profane distinction, as the first exaggeration, works to suggest that such distance is achievable. It also works to ensure the inevitability of sacrifices in the production of that distance. But following behind this first distinction, two secondary exaggerations give shape to identities and god-idols:

1. **Agential exaggerations**, which exaggerate human/divine abilities. (2) **Valuative exaggerations**, which exaggerate divine/human worth. In bad faith, they presuppose value and ability without sufficient evidence as their building blocks, limited bodies, suggest otherwise.

More white lies. As a starting point for ongoing study, I want to offer the hypothesis that these are the two theological mechanisms that turn illusory human cultural and social identities into functional god-idols. This framework is not meant to be exhaustive, but open and the start of my


\textsuperscript{113} Faubion, 273.
efforts to chart the relationship between idea and action, individual and group, the small and the large.

Agential exaggerations allow for the anthropomorphic projection of the human desire for identity onto a cosmic, embodied screen where such desires are suspended until that time when they are realized. This temporal dimension might suggest god-idols function teleologically, wherein the promise of human ability or human value, if not found immediately, will be secured at some point. These agential exaggerations manipulate human abilities so as to outline group belonging, solidarity and protection. In complementary fashion, valuative exaggerations presuppose the worth of particular individuals and groups often through things like belief in a soul, the “sacred,” and/or the veracity of an achievable identity. That is, they mark and manipulate human value—who has it, who doesn’t, arbitrarily ranking value in effort to hide ability. Such white lies foreground a human arrogance, a bloated sense of worth and ability that does not correspond to the intrinsic possibilities offered by human finitude, bodily limitation and mortality. Two examples are in order.

Recently, well-known televangelist Pat Robertson said on The 700 Club that a trend among gay men involves wearing rings on their fingers able to cut skin, so that the gay men are able to transmit HIV/AIDS to others.\footnote{http://gawker.com/cbn-covers-up-pat-robertons-claim-that-gays-spread-hiv-1209996528} Of racialized exaggerations, I can offer my own personal, auto-ethnographic example. At age twenty-two, working as a lifeguard instructor during a camp that hosted mostly African American boys, white men would come up to talk about why so few of the black boys could swim. Repeatedly, I heard suggestions that “black people were less buoyant” and that “black bones were heavier,” with one decidedly certain white man adding that the strong bones were also “why ‘they’ were so good at sports.” Series of these
ERCs working together autopoietically produce/are produced by homophobic and racist (respectively) god-idols which inform the identities of those who adhere to them. Concomitantly, these ERCs victimize others (the signified) as those negatively impacted by such ERCs are forced to square with the social options cultivated from adherence to these illusory ERCs and their god-idols.

Agential exaggerations involve exaggerated statements about human/divine ability. They come in positive and negative varieties, as well as always bring a benefit and deficit moral valence indicative of the exaggeration as a response to the paradox of radical contingency and the flight from responsibility. In the case of the myth of the gay AIDS ring, the agency of gay men is elevated in effort to characterize them in this or that way, while adherents of homophobia (as a god-idol) find their own agency mitigated (a negative exaggeration) so that the homophobic god-idol might endure through the narrative that gays are dangerous. A trade-off is made in this moment, the adherents accepting their own limits so as to reinforce their ultimate victory over limits. Agential exaggerations are akin to theologian David Tracy’s characterization of religion as various “limits to” and “limits of” human existence.\(^{115}\) In this case, limits to an exaggeration of gay male agency (via pathology and technology) are offered so as to reinforce a god-idol of homophobia that responds to the empirical and ethical limits of reality. The positive or moral valence refers to who ethically or politically benefits from the exaggeration, and its normative grounding is determined by a person or group’s power within and proximity to the center of the society. In this case, homophobes (the signifier) are benefited socially and existentially while gay men (the signified) receive a social and existential deficit. The ERC works to reinforce

\(^{115}\) Tracy, *Blessed Rage For Order*, 104-5.
heterosexual relations as a marker of social homogeneity, and homosexual relations (to the extent action dictates group identity) are sacrificed for the sake of the society.

Belief in the inability of or difficulty for African Americans to float (as efficiently as whites, presumably) is another agential exaggeration. Here, African American limitations are exaggerated, situating the signified group “black people” in the negative, while an implicit story finds “white people’s” abilities exaggerated positively. In this case, unlike the first example, the moral valence follows the exaggeration, with the negative ERC about African Americans also producing a social and existential deficit for African Americans, while the ERC offers an identity-based benefit to the story-teller (the signifier) through ERCs related to black bodies.

The next secondary exaggeration involves responsibility, the awareness that expressions of human freedom are made possible through dependence on other humans. What one registers as their responsibility to another is a question of value, of worth. Valuative exaggerations cover this ground. For instance, “transvestites are an abomination”\[116\] is a valuative exaggeration marking a “trans” person as outside of society. It is a statement of worth, where the dehumanization of the signified within the ERC reinforces a false sense of worth held by the adherent to the ERC (the signifier), akin in certain respects to Erving Goffman’s discussion of some of the links between “virtual and actual” identities,”\[117\] in that assumptions about the false or “real” identity, by those who hold it or those who do not, are bound in an existential dance I’m here characterizing as exaggerations of radical contingency.

These valuative exaggerations also carry a valence, only it is an agential valence. To suggest that a trans person is outside of the group—in this case, the human group—prevents the

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\[116\] As with the ERC regarding same-sex marriage, examples of this adage abound. Here is one: [http://www.gotquestions.org/cross-dressing-transvestism.html](http://www.gotquestions.org/cross-dressing-transvestism.html)

“trans” person from exercising the agency and abilities offered within the ethical domain.

Limited bodies are still capable of a vast array of ideas and actions. The signification of queer bodies or African Americans as worth less than the signifier prevents even the abilities of those making the claims to situate their own existence as cohesive or complete, in that the exaggeration guards against full possibility within the social group. The speaker of such an ERC validates themselves as worthy of inclusion within humanity, also reinforcing that whatever their agency, it will be afforded in this grouping. At the same time, the person so labeled as an abomination is deemed unworthy and through that exaggeration, their agency is taken away as they are alienated from the group in such a way that they no longer have the ability to freely express their abilities.

Corresponding to the existential paradox of freedom in responsibility\(^{118}\), ERCs work to manipulate freedom away from responsibility so that it appears the paradox of radical contingency can be avoided by way of identity. Sartre situates the stakes of exaggeration in theological terms:

> Every human reality is a passion in that it projects losing itself so as to found being and by the same stroke to constitute the In-itself which escapes contingency by being its own foundation, the Enscausa sui, which religions call God. Thus the passion of man is the reverse of that of Christ, for man loses himself as man in order that God may be born. But the idea of God is contradictory and we lose ourselves in vain. Man is a useless passion.\(^{119}\)

Sartre’s position speaks to the inescapability and yet futility of these exaggerations of radical contingency as they create god-idols and yet, those god-idols remain “idolatrous” in that they never fully achieve their function. Here, I want to remind that I’m not celebrating Sartre’s position, but using it as ethnographic data, as Sartre helps to describe the imago superlata, as it relies on exaggerations. Agential exaggerations are the “not yet” of having recognized that such


\(^{119}\) Ibid., 636.
attempts to be more than human through truncating the choices and abilities of others never find fertile soil. Those worshipping such god-idols negate even their own value and ability in this process, in that exclusion of human possibilities from the social world literally and simply undercuts progress. To this end, there are no “outposts of progress” because the Imago Superlata does not allow for it thanks to these ERCs. It exaggerates false possibilities truncating real possibilities.

The Imago Superlata crafts identity out of a complex arrangement of these ERCs and they gain their power as god-idols through the number of adherents to such beliefs and the number of exaggerations that shape the life options and arrangements of those the subject of the exaggerations. Again, power comes from the limited bodies needing power. Labeling each a “god-idol” is meant to situate them as a response to the paradox of radical contingency and to offer a way of talking about such identity-based constructs as they interact with, and are impacted by, the social environment. Finally, these god-idols are never fully disconnected from one-another and operate intersectionally, in that they “do not function independently but, rather, act in tandem”\textsuperscript{120} Like religious traditions and on the ground social groups like those found in the U.S., god-idols are syncretic, moving as function and pragmatic concern shape the abilities and demands placed upon them, such that differently cast god-idols (patriarchy, whiteness, theism, etc.) employ difference to militate towards social sameness. Ironically, this guards against tautological recognition of social sameness only and always offered through radical contingency, our limited and limiting relationship to other limited, limiting bodies in space and time.

I offer the following diagram meant to help organize such exaggerations, and to assess the severity and social effects of them.

\textsuperscript{120} Carol Hardy-Fanta, \textit{Intersectionality and Politics: Recent Research on Gender, Race, and Political Representation in the United States}. Routledge, 2013, 175.
Two Types:

Agential Exaggerations (Freedom):
Valuative Exaggerations (Responsibility):

Four Manifestations:

1. Signifier\textsuperscript{121} Positive/Signified Negative
2. Signifier Positive/Signified Positive
3. Signifier Negative/Signified Positive
4. Signifier Negative/Signified Negative

Two Modifiers (whose identity benefits):

1. Moral Valence \(\rightarrow\) Abilities within the Group (points to linguistic, embodied code)
2. Agential Valence \(\rightarrow\) Sense of Belonging (points to morality—personal or positional)

With certain ERCs, either the signifier or signified is implicit and determined by both social norms and the operative god-idols worshipped by the parties involved in the exaggerations. Moreover, the two modifiers must be stipulated more carefully. Agential ERCs exaggerate abilities so as to determine who does or does not “belong” in a group, that is, their value. Valuative ERCs exaggerate worth to guard against the already existing, intrinsic abilities of those inside and outside of groups. They work in concert, my schematic offered here is heuristic and analytic, meant to offer a way of understanding what happens in these exaggerations, but the two types do not show up in isolation. Abilities are always judged, to this extent, just as worth is always predicated on presumptions about ability—at least within this imago superlata.

The sacred/profane distinction, as it constructs for adherents an empty, invisible god-idol and identity, offers the blueprint for these secondary and tertiary exaggerations. Each ERC

\textsuperscript{121} The language of signification is borrowed from Charles Long, but I find his work—brilliant as it is—reproduces the distinction between sacred and profane in ways my talk of exaggerations seeks to avoid, or at least, localize any such binaries onto bodies, themselves.
follows the initial pattern, where radical contingency is exaggerated with empty, illusory markers as varied as the human minds that create them and the limited bodies the screens of their projection. This is to remind that whiteness, or theism, as I understand them, are made from groupings of exaggerations of radical contingency. The sacred/profane divide/distinction, in its practical and theoretical distinctions, is the principle exaggeration making possible more specific exaggerations that produce god-idols.

**Sacrifice, Capital, and the Sacrifice of Power**

The consequences of these ERCs emerge in the form of sacrifice, a forsaking of physical bodies to physical and social death. Indeed, these exaggerations function to produce and justify such sacrifices as necessary and to determine who will be sacrificed. The first two chapters have extensively engaged such sacrifices as they structure and are structured by the god-idols of whiteness and theism. Here, I present brief note of the Imago Superlata’s demand for sacrificial offerings. Sartre’s comment about anti-Semitism helps to situate the Imago Superlata and sacrifice:

> It seems to all these featherbrains that by repeating with eager emulation the statement that the Jew is harmful to the country they are performing a rite of initiation which admits them to the fireside of social warmth and energy. In this sense anti-Semitism has kept something of the nature of human sacrifice.\textsuperscript{122}

The sacred/profane distinction, ostensibly, is this first distinction, the distinction getting the taxonomical ball rolling. But “imagined communities,”\textsuperscript{123} societies and social groups (dominant or marginal) must localize somewhere and they end up localizing in/on other bodies, necessitating “something of the nature of human sacrifice” described by Sartre. This

\textsuperscript{122} Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew*, 51.

\textsuperscript{123} Anderson, *Imagined Communities*. 
“something” seems to come in the form of individual and group alienation from society, or in the form of physical bodily sacrifice or in the form of forced ideological agreement. The point is to keep difference at the geographic and metaphoric margins of society, where antagonistic battles are fought. Due to this demand, it is impossible that the other not be artificially produced and subsequently sacrificed—as this production “secures” the unstable, illusory borders of identity.

The irony of forsaking bodies for identity is that god (as society) functions to produce the very thing it cannot accomplish, a genuinely cohesive social life devoid of social risks and physical dangers for the bodies that make up each community. Because of this inability, “social warmth and energy”\(^{124}\) ends up cultivated through ERCs that produce human sacrifice either directly or through in-group/out-group marginalization, producing a type of sacred “capital” which, when spent for the sake of identity-construction, has an externalizing effect on/in the construction and sacrifice of “others.” “Sacred” capital, or what Bourdieu calls “religious capital”\(^{125}\) is transferrable into economic, symbolic and political capital. Capital is thus procured by governing other bodies while pretending to be interested only in governing one’s own through illusory constructs in the form of invisible god-idols. Contemporary U.S. foreign policy, discourses over domestic safety, and the construction of the “terrorist”\(^{126}\) as an ideal (in my terms, a god-idol) exemplify this tendency.

Imago Superlata always exposes a prescient reminder of human suffering, limitation, and disorder because god-idols materialize through ideological constructions of their inverse, limitation. The problem has been as Conrad points out in the epigraph beginning this chapter that not many of the believers take time to listen to the victims of their belief long enough to register

\(^{124}\) Sartre, 51.

\(^{125}\) Bourdieu, 9.

that they, too, are victims (or could become victims). Imago Superlata is sustained by inattention and misrecognition of the ethical domain from which emerges all talk of humans, gods and sacrificial offerings. And actually, it appears the difficulty of listening might have something to do with the “production” of the groups who will serve as sacrificial offerings to the god-idols of Imago Superlata. In effect, society is a temporary flight from death occurring at the expense of those on the margins of that flight. Society is death-dealing as it requires the deaths of those on the margins of it so that it might appear to be that which it never is, homogenous. By death, I mean both physical and social varieties, but here underscore the nature of death as the (in)ability to wield power and capital. Sacrifice is not about killing the weak, but the strong; those who would disrupt the social order. Understood in light of the Imago Superlata, “god” is a murderer, who kills by promising eternal life and security for those who can or will capitulate to the false sense of social certainty provided by god-idols who kill the strong to protect the weak. God-idols, and the identities shaping and shaped by them, determine when one group lives and when another dies.

Though physical death is very real, and I don’t mean for my argument to suggest otherwise. Indeed, social life largely hinges on the fear or threat of physical death. But death needs to be understood within its social context—it is an end to power. On this point, as example, someone like Tupac Shakur remains socially alive to the extent the power of his memory continues to shape the power afforded those on the margins of society, those victimized by the Imago Superlata, to work against it. To be discussed much more fully in Part II, my argument necessitates a discussion of if death and suicide are ever possible, given these functional parameters. Death surely. Individual suicide is possible but is best understood not as physical death, but ultimately as a total embrace of the Imago Superlata, as physical suicide
within it is a result of succumbing to the weight of the Imago Superlata at having had one’s radical contingency exaggerated (to its end) by self or others. Effectively, this marks adherents as living dead, zombies whose demand for murder is sustained on the margins of the society they worship. Part II of the dissertation suggests that rather than suicide as a response to the Imago Superlata—one can’t kill what is already dead, after all—the only adequate response to the Imago Superlata by those within it, is death for the sake of those its victims, those on the margins, death of the insider for the sake of the outsider. Where responses to the Imago Superlata are concerned, death is mandated for its benefactors in the form of relinquishing capital and power. For theology, this begins through a methodological shift, giving up the power of the sacred/profane binary.

**Theology as a Human Science**

…I believe the ultimate goal of the human sciences is not to constitute, but to dissolve man.

- Claude Levi-Strauss

With this understanding of the Imago Superlata in place, from my perspective as a white male working within this system and impacted by the pantheon of god-idols created within it, the central ethical question posed in response to the Imago Superlata is this: If in fact we worship our own illusory identities created by flights from responsibility that always do damage to those in flight, then how might we actually achieve Douglas’ desire to “free ourselves from the power of our own cosmology”?

Groups can be seen, detected, made aware of their presence; individuals can be seen; death can be seen. That is, human gods and idols are visible, even if often, claims to the contrary are made by adherents. But how are beliefs, invisible claims (e.g. that “god” exists—as

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127 Levi-Strauss, 247
pantheism, otherworldliness, personality, etc.) that point back to god-idols able to be detected? In particular, how are the beliefs that undergird such god-idol construction (such as white supremacy, male dominance, and the like) to be made visible when adherents to such beliefs often readily deny their adherence?

Transforming theology into a “human science” might offer an initial solution. If within the Imago Superlata individuals worship themselves through worship of the god-idols spanning the illusory space between the social and existential, then we might be able to apply tools crafted in the study of societies towards greater understanding of these ideological structures and the relations between them.

Claude Levi-Strauss realized the stakes involved with exposing such invisibility, as his desire to “dissolve man”\textsuperscript{129} was an effort to expose the hidden structure behind “man” and is indicative of the costs required to expose invisible ideas. In this moment, that which is “sacrificed” is the identity marker, this illusory belief of men as an ideal. Structuralism then sought to dissolve this god-idol so that its “properties be better studied,”\textsuperscript{130} exposing, sighting, the structural distinction making such valorization of “man” possible. The visible and invisible meet in sacrifice.\textsuperscript{131} Thinking of Levi-Strauss’ comments from the vantage point of Sartre’s

\textsuperscript{129} Levi-Strauss, 247.
\textsuperscript{130} Ibid., 247.
\textsuperscript{131} The sacred/profane distinction is a white lie. Structuralism is also a white lie. There are no distinctions. But due to the lie, sacrifices are the moments where cosmic recognition of this lie is ordered while the lie is maintained by adherents of it. By cosmic recognition, I mean that certain forces or energies exist in the cosmos that find a way to coalesce. To offer what is one of the more “metaphysical” positions of this project, like gravity—really, gravity is a physical expression of what I mean—these energies seek a balance currently inaccessible to humans. Here, my position is a simple monist position. Because of the practice and belief in the illusion of dualism, sacrifices appear to function as a necessary cosmic response to the lie of any sacred and profane distinction. For the exaggeration of the distinction to be maintained, there must be an externalized point or object where the two come together. In this instant, a lynched black body is both expression of the profanity of finality and uncertainty, and is the sacred object worshiped
suggestion about “something of the nature of sacrifice,” I suggest that Levi-Strauss sought to sacrifice or “dissolve” man in the abstract, so as to constitute the tautological truth of structuralism. Yet, structuralism came to operate in this space that it exposed, acting as a god-idol precisely because the distance(s) it presupposed are actually as illusory as the perceived identities on either side of the structure(s). In Bourdieusian language, Levi-Strauss failed to dissolve the “principle of structuration” as he worked to “dissolve man.”

In response to the Imago Superlata, I want to “dissolve” human and god into the same category—sacrificing the veracity of identity as anything more than illusion—so as to foreground the ethical domain resting beneath the structural distinction exposed by Levi-Strauss.

I want to begin with the methodological identities that inform my work. I’m not seeking to “dissolve man” so as to arrive at the truth of structure, Levi-Strauss has accomplished as much. Neither am I seeking to recast “man” in the vein of Frantz Fanon’s demand for a new humanism. Rather, I mean to dissolve the sacred/profane structural distinction, understanding both “humans” and “gods” as illusory, so that such god-ids would not block or impede the necessity of ethical response to the social impositions required by certain forms of human identity formation. In short, I respond to Levi-Strauss’ admonition with the tools gleaned from Mary Douglas’ efforts to chart the proportional relationship between bodily control and social control. Stated as clearly as possible, because this proportional relationship exists between body and society, then it stands to reason that a relationship also exists between cultural perceptions of bodies and cultural perceptions of societies; that is, between illusory identities and demanded of adherents—so that those adherents can maintain the distinction between the sacred and profane so that their ancillary distinctions might also be upheld.

132 Sartre, Anti-Semite and Jew, 51.
133 Bourdieu, 13.
the god-idols they create. In other words, to talk of identity is to talk of god-idols, illusions believed in whose adherence controls many of the life options of humans within the ethical domain.

This perspectival shift offers the benefit of analyzing god-idols and the space between them as fictive but retaining the meanings made from them and their intersectionality as “true,” to the extent these meanings function to shape social and cultural life options of those within this “battle for identity.”\(^{136}\) Having learned from my hermeneutical treatment of theology and anthropology as data, I want to suggest that by hermeneutically treating each god-idol as a religious tradition or society—that is, treating an idea born from groups as a group methodologically—it is possible able to get a sense of the impact of various god-idols on our own identities and the identities of others. Through such a move, it might also be possible to chart scholars’/social actors’ own culpability in constructing such god-idols. That is, understanding theology as a human science might prime theologians to learn more about how to respond to whiteness, sexism, homophobia, etc. if those social ills are not simply treated as modifiers to insular, cohesive religious traditions, but are treated as “religions,” where god-idols are worshipped as meaning is made, identities formed over and against the constructed other.

Situating these god-idols as such, theology as a human science might then begin to see that these god-idols materialize through manipulation of elaborated and restricted codes\(^{137}\), “constraints of structure…such as rules, classifications, compartments”\(^{138}\) (i.e. social and cultural codings), reinforcing and reinforced by agential and valuative exaggerations. Accordingly, through focus on such codes, theologians might better understand the impact of these god-idols on the various

\(^{136}\) Bayart, 252.
\(^{137}\) Douglas, 25.
\(^{138}\) Ibid., xix.
established “traditions” and beliefs so many theologians remain preoccupied with in their real preoccupation with identity, with themselves. These codes are placed in tandem with personal and positional\textsuperscript{139} moral disciplining mechanisms, “constraints on the individual imposed by group memberships”\textsuperscript{140} (i.e. moral suasion), and reinforced by adherence to the sacred/profane distinction, the distinction between human freedom and ethical responsibility. Given these parameters offered by Douglas, not only does doing theology as a human science open up new avenues of understanding the relationships between what is believed about god-idols and believed/assumed about “humans,” but this complementary focus on affect will help theologians and adherents to the Imago Superlata understand the relative difficulty of “freeing ourselves from our own cosmology.”\textsuperscript{141}

Exaggerations of radical contingency localize onto real bodies in space and time, as insider language and rituals reinforce outsiders through exaggerations of value that shape the guilt, shame and sense of duty\textsuperscript{142} a person holds in any given social setting, including scholars. In a word, exaggerations of value and ability create god-idols which discipline bodies into accepting an illusory identity for themselves based on presumed existential need and social options. Willingness to address—or reshape—these dynamics is only possible after having given up the first illusion, the illusion that something “sacred” exists at all, that god is society, that society is god, or that distinctions—as god-idols and identities, alike—are necessary at all. Understanding the impact of shame and guilt might have something to say about the difficulty many theologians might have at thinking of their discipline—a poignantly, brilliant name describing just what it does—in this new light, as a human science.

\textsuperscript{139} Ibid., 29.  
\textsuperscript{140} Ibid., xix.  
\textsuperscript{141} Douglas, 169-170.  
\textsuperscript{142} Ibid., 64-71.
Theologian Anthony Pinn appears to have inchoately called for such a shift early in his career, stating “I believe that human liberation is more important than the maintenance of any religious symbol, sign, canon, or icon.” Pinn’s early work did well to describe the “what” of this necessity even if his rhetorical use of the term “liberation” caused some to miss his point. In other words, even “liberation” works as a god-idol for many, causing continued confusion regarding the significance of Pinn’s *Why Lord* (1994), an effort in company with Douglas. Both sought to free theology from its own preoccupation with itself, so that human freedom might reunite with responsibility, a reunion that might foreground the radical contingency I seek to expose in this project. This chapter has sought to answer the question of “why” so many continue to ignore these calls for something new, and interrogate “how” to move forward, generally, but more importantly, how white scholars of religion might take stock of their data, understanding themselves as part of that data, and cultivate new methodologies responsive to the paradox of finding oneself within a death-dealing social context, inside of a “battle for identity” that seemingly has no end in sight.

This is the “battle for identity” today as registered from within the twilight it has posed.

Online news outlet Gawker recently held a “Privilege Tournament,” where the bracket depicted above sought to chart the privileges afforded by various identities, identities I’ve sought in this

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145 Bayart, 252.
chapter to cast as illusory, and yet socially bound to and by the god-idols of Imago Superlata. Online viewers spent a number of days voting for their choice of least privileged. The dubious winners were the homeless. Today, as many arrive at recognition of the illusion of identity, constant calls of “reverse racism” and other instances suggest privilege is registered through an inversion of victims as benefactors. Further, the battle for identity, as it plays out in political theatre, leaves young Americans so jaded and sardonic that Gawker deems such a “tournament” appropriate, and its viewers are left to giggle and be entertained through a reinforcement of the existential and social toll brought about by a religious orientation creating these identities as competing and defined over and against others.

I want to situate this “battle for identity” and this image as representative of the twilight of the god-idols. This twilight is characterized by the proliferation of god-idols, their ability to be hijacked and manipulated to a degree that outsider and insider is increasingly in flux. Such twilight is also marked by growing recognition that these god-idols cannot achieve their functional mandate. They do not respond adequately (for anyone) to the paradox of radical contingency. All of these identities fall into the pantheon of god-idols, a twilight cast as much by their inability to function as by the sheer volume of options and the recognition that responding to one god-idol (e.g. whiteness) seemingly requires the construction of another.

How might one come to address the twilight of the god-idols as framed by this image representing the contemporary moment, knowing such an orientation fails to function but unable to escape it? If the “illusions believed”\(^\text{146}\) by Kayerts and Carlier led to their deaths, their physical deaths, yes, but more importantly, understanding death as their loss of power, and if the

\(^{146}\) Conrad, 178.
panoply of cultural identities and god-idols worshipped today find most within a tournament, a “battle for identity,” then what next?

The Imago Superlata is an exaggeration of life in the wake posed by death. How might white Christians, white people and white scholars battle against a white lie? Having learned to die by learning that death and sacrifice is a stock ingredient in the society and identity in which whites find themselves and exert considerable privilege, will they choose to live knowing that their lives and identities come at the cost of others, or will whites learn how to live more dangerously\textsuperscript{147}, with more uncertainty, by embracing a willingness to die so that others might live more fully? As this dissertation transitions into Part II, I seek to begin such a response by arguing that learning to live within the twilight of the god-idols requires learning to die for others.

Part II:

Learning to Die for Others
Chapter Four:

Embracing the Hell of Death:

Learning to ‘Number Our Days’ with a Limited Religious Outlook

For the poet is condemned to learn his profoundest yearnings through an awareness of other selves. The poem is within him, yet he experiences the shame and splendor of being found by poems—great poems—outside him. To lose freedom in this center is never to forgive, and to learn the dread of threatened autonomy forever.

-Harold Bloom¹

Lord, what is man, that Thou hast regard for him?
Or the son of man, that Thou takest account of him?

Man is like a breath,
His days are as a fleeting shadow.

In the morning he flourishes and grows up like grass,
In the evening he is cut down and withers.

So teach us to number our days,
That we may get us a heart of wisdom.

-Jewish burial poem, adapted from Psalms 144 and 90²

Transitioning from an imago superlata outlook to something more equitable, life-affirming and humble requires coming to terms with the “shame” and “dread” described above by literary theorist Harold Bloom as much as it requires learning to “number our days,” meaning learning to accept death in all its iterations, opening oneself to the wisdom that such an embrace might offer. This chapter tacks between poetry and narrative, erring ultimately on the uncertain

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loose ends provided by stories told in the face of death. Through such story-telling, the white petit bourgeois Christian might begin to “number our days.”

For many white Christians, much shame is attached to momentary recognition of having worshiped an exaggerated image of oneself. Thinking of tragic social injustices like racism as “poems,” shame and splendor collide in a demand to finally take responsibility for oneself and one’s cultural heritage. These “poetic” features of white Christian life often prevent the telling of a new narrative where the costs of social life are more equitably distributed. Stories transmit partial and at times inaccurate cultural memories, offering “cultural mirrors” able to “present collective knowledge” about a community. Now, and in the face of death—what Malcolm X began to understand as “the white man fast losing his power to oppress and exploit the dark world…the white man’s world was on the way down, it was on the way out”—narrative offers a means for the “white man” to cope with and accept that loss, rather than reinforce the imago superlata through continued fight against, ignorance of or denial of uncertainty and limitation. In this chapter, I argue that this community can teach itself to “number our days” by telling the stories of how our days are numbered. That is, acceptance of a loss of perceived or actual power and certainty in social centers is made possible through an instructional offered by physical mortality.

This chapter “loses the freedom” of thinking white American cultural heritage empty of tools for responding to the most perilous aspects of that heritage, and moves towards the responsibility demanded by the relinquishing of the idea of freedom from physical or social death. Such responsibility might be thought of as the courage to never forgive or exonerate lynching, Jane Crow, gender discrimination, homophobia, the list goes on…, but to move

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3 Myerhoff, *Number Our Days*, 32.
towards a response that offers a new way to live with the “shame” and “splendor” that comprise white Christian culture and lead many on social margins to believe that “the white man is the devil.”\(^5\) Such a new life would be lived understanding the dangers of society functioning as god. And it would come to live in the uncertainty posed by the god of death. In short, white Christians might learn how to produce and embrace their social death if they tell, and listen to, the stories connected to physical death, theirs and those caused by them, and the deaths of others. This focused attention is no panacea for social problems, but will likely evoke greater awareness that death is incumbent upon all people, and that in its unavoidability, it offers a justification for and a ground to begin to learn to live more equitably in community.\(^6\) Here is what I mean.

**Numbering Our Days with a Limited Religious Outlook**

In the previous chapter, I argued that god-idols (i.e. such as whiteness, or theism, or heteronormativity) emerge through a process of identity formation referred to as the imago superlata, a system of religious belief and worship of exaggerated images of self and others, such that society functions as god and one’s responsibility to others is ignored, fought against or denied. This denial is reinforced and made possible through a reliance on others as sacrificial offerings and victims. How might scholars’ efforts and their oft chosen data—“religious” people—not unduly reinforce the imago superlata? Better still, how can this religious process be fought against while stuck inside of it? Such a dilemma might find resolution through white Christian acceptance of and movement toward embrace of uncertainty and human limitations cultivated through what I call a *limited religious outlook*.

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\(^5\) Malcolm X, 183.

\(^6\) I do not mean to suggest that this interpretive shift would fix all the world’s problems, but that for the community of white Christians, focused attention to the inescapability of death is novel to this point in history. Talking *about* death, and learning how to die, to this extent, are very different things.
With an intense focus on the importance and power of narrating one’s cultural life and death, this chapter argues for a limited religious outlook and outlines some of the methods, norms, and source materials for such an outlook. Here, I want to make clear that I do not have in mind, nor am I influenced by, something like Stanley Hauerwas’s idea of narrative theology. I am not trying to use the tools of narrative or literary or poetic theory to unpack the many dimensions of Christian theology or any other form of theology, but to use certain tools of literary theory to offer the start of a religious outlook that privileges uncertainty and limitation.

Specifically, a limited religious outlook works to recalibrate human ability and worth skewed by the imago superlata. To the extent “religious” here continues to refer to practices and beliefs that seek to fashion identity through the imposition of exaggerated distinctions on others, this outlook seeks to limit such distinction-making. It forces confrontation between two versions of oneself or one’s community: the self undergirded by the imago superlata, and the self facing death.

A limited religious outlook has three important components: (1) It is religious to the extent the imago superlata and process of identity formation is never fully escapable. Neither is full social escape from god-idols possible. Hence, it remains a religious outlook recognizing the limits of escaping religion. As an outlook, an epistemological and existential “line in the sand,” it functions religiously. (2) It is an outlook, or vantage-point, an hermeneutical point-of-orientation that sees no principle distinction between a scholar’s data and a scholar’s personal commitments. It registers such artificial and arbitrary distinctions as exaggerations of human worth and value.

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Freed from the desired maintenance of such distinctions, “focus” is not wasted on preventing distinctions either, as all distinctions are admitted to break down upon close scrutiny (even—and especially—ones employed here rhetorically).

(3) Most importantly, it is limited. It is limited in what conclusions it can draw with certainty. It is limited in its capacity to work (or function) as efficiently as arrangements within the imago superlata. By this, I mean it does not have a smooth functioning society in mind, or society at all. It is reflexive and focused on not only individual limitations of selves, but limitations of possibilities for those selves to contribute or participate in society without doing harm to another self or group. Therefore, it foregrounds humility, insofar as this humility is a product of reflection that the benefits many experience at different time and places in the social world always come at the expense of humans. But with that caveat, it also foregrounds the limits of religion’s usefulness as an epistemological category, as an ethical mediator, and as a social institution that has ceased to function effectively (if it ever really did). A limited religious outlook is a limiting of the scope of religion’s functional use, and a limiting of appeal to that/those functions. Finally, it limits any expectations that too many will be able to limit their own religious outlook. It is a crash course in epistemological and ethical humility, not out of intellectual laziness, but based on the inability to fully embrace certainty, security or immortality. It is a partial blueprint for “numbering our days” as the physically dying benefactors of a dying and death-dealing social arrangement. And it limits its assumptions that such a blueprint—or narrative—will appeal to those most in need of the teaching.

For a white petit bourgeois Christian community who has long been death-dealing in its flight from a variety of human limits, narratives and stories told by the physically dead and dying might say something about how to embrace death. Inchoately started in the previous chapter
through a focus on the blurring of methodological and identity-based distinctions, a limited religious outlook learns from and leans on narrative and storytelling as a concession to existential limitation and epistemological/analytical limitation. That is, in the wake of so vast of limits, stories offer salve as we come to terms with those limits and fill in the epistemological gaps posed by academic accounts that tend to privilege didactic precision and analysis. Scholarship, like the Modern poetry the focus of Harold Bloom’s appraisal of Modern Poetry as well as that poetry, itself, is a microcosmic expression of the imago superlata, as it deals in precision, critical distinction and qualification. Scholars, to this end, are deathly afraid of uncertainty. The only limits the orientation I am offering embraces are those that underscore the necessity of accuracy and precision. Storytelling offers a methodological way forward, turning to literary and artistic cultural devices and imagery, humanist resources, and most importantly, stories colored by mortality. Such a narrative focus, as if to characterize the imago superlata as poetry and its alternative the unformed, unraveled edges of raw narrative, begins with a theory of poetry and discussion of what such a theory suggests about the anxiety of escaping the shame of stories yet to be told by their authors.⁸

A Poetics of the Imago Superlata

Modern poetry, as characterized by Harold Bloom, is born and dies through the anxiety of trying to be distinct from one’s forebear only to reinforce the predecessor’s value through attempts at uniqueness and distinction. Bloom’s words beginning this chapter tell of the anxiety of trying to be the best by trying to be the first, offers insights into the imago superlata and how

⁸ Many have told the story of white Cultural Christendom, in terms of its social impact on others through the constitution of another as other. But most who have told such stories have not been white. This chapter attempts, in limited fashion, to address why this has been the case and how more white people—white Christians, in particular, might begin to tell their own stories more effectively and more fully.
to respond to it by foreclosing the “poetry” of the imago superlata, and the dangers of anxiety unresolved through story and cultural heritage. In this section, I argue that Harold Bloom’s theory of the anxiety of influence on the origins and end of Modern poetry offers a useful initial theoretical entry point for understanding how anxiety functions to reinforce the imago superlata. Anxiety operates as theological source material in a limited religious outlook. In particular, I want to suggest that Bloom’s focus on Satan as exemplar of the “strong poet” suggests a need to think past “poetry,” after having learned from poetry. That is, to learn about escaping the limits of escaping death.

Bloom’s theory of poetry offers a poetics of social life and action. Social injustices like racism and homophobia arise out of an inability to embrace radical contingency, the jargon-laden term for human limitations framed around but extending beyond physical death. Who is thrust to the margins of society changes from one place and time to the next, but the fact of such margins remains relatively constant. I want to suggest Bloom offers insights into why these margins remain intact, even if taking new shape and face. Out of an anxiety attached to doing something different, those at the center of society are forced to reconstitute the margins through appeal to what has come before. Thinking one’s abilities as predicated on what has come before, causes things to remain more familiarly oppressive than new. The problem of changing society involves the perceived strength offered by society to exact/enact adequate change.

In Bloom’s theory, the young poet—anxious of his own identity—grows more anxious that the only tools at his disposal for poetic actualization require his predecessor. As a proxy for white Christian culture, Modern poetry helps to understand the imago superlata. God-idols come and go, their worship hinging on the anxiety of letting them go against the anxiety of adhering to them so that one’s sense of authority and ability (be it in the academy, finance, government, or
any other field) is made possible. For example, the poet is forced to weigh the anxiety of distancing one’s work from its predecessor against the anxiety of telling the world that he is better than one’s predecessor. Can he ever be great if he must rely on proving his greatness against the greatness of who has come before? Can the poet ever escape what has come before?

Today, the white petit bourgeois Christian social center is forced to weigh the anxiety of relinquishing racialized privilege against the anxiety of reinforcing it lest their authority not be obtained. Is it best to give up adherence to whiteness, or use it in ways advantageous to those victimized by it? Such is the anxiety of influence in racialized, sociological terms, distilling a poetics of the imago superlata. Such a poetics functions autopoietically, much like god-ids, in that they inhibit escape from normative social arrangements.

How can white people in the United States escape their complicity in reinforcing injustice? Is escape even possible? In this chapter, I respond to this anxiety through a focus on the narratives told by the dying. Through such focus, sources, norms and methods of a limited religious outlook are offered and the question of escaping an often shameful past begins through an embrace of such a past. Through such stories, told and written from a limited religious outlook, human ability and worth might be recalibrated to offset the exaggerations posed by the imago superlata. By this chapter’s end, I hope to argue successfully that overcoming this poetics—understood as an impossible escape from death—is actually and paradoxically only offered through its embrace.

*Swerving Into Hell*

Harold Bloom’s *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973) argues that Modern poetry, from those after Shakespeare up to the present, has been singularly guided by an Oedipally-arranged anxiety
complex. Bloom suggests that the ephebe, or young poet’s need to distinguish himself from his teacher or predecessor is the single most palpable feature of Modern poetry, giving birth to the very thing we understand today as Modern poetry. For the poet, a tension exists between priority and authority, being the greatest is taken to require being the first. He offers six ratios of poetic misprision (i.e. techniques of distinguishing ephebe from teacher), and these ratios produce distinctiveness—priority—but show a trace of one’s reliance on a predecessor for greatness. Such reliance calls into question who is really great if reliance is necessary. For Bloom, this anxiety has been the touch mark of Modern poetry’s brilliance, but also its downfall, as it stands to be “self-slain” in the face of a lack of innovation precisely because it could not escape its anxiety of innovation long enough to actually innovate.

The first and “central working concept” of these misprisions is that of the “swerve,” or “clinamen” a poetic device wherein the ephebe suggests that “the precursor poem went accurately up to a certain point, but then should have swerved, precisely in the direction that the new poem moves.” Bloom indicates that such “swerves” are misinterpretations, understood better as “simultaneously intentional and involuntary” “acts of creative correction.” I want to suggest that in terms of race historically, such “swerves” have marked ongoing civil rights efforts, but come at a larger cost of reinforcing the supposed necessity of a white petit bourgeois social center and society. Emancipation, passage of Voting Rights Acts and Civil Rights Acts, 

9 Bloom, 10.  
10 Ibid., 8-10.  
11 Ibid., 14-16.  
12 Ibid., 10.  
13 Ibid., 42.  
14 Ibid., 14.  
15 Ibid., 14.  
16 Ibid., 45.  
17 Ibid., 30.
and the contemporary fight for marriage equality offer instances of social “swerves,” wherein social poets confuse priority with authority, thinking the social world more hospitable than before. Unchanged, however, as it relates to a white petit bourgeois Christian social center, these historic “swerves” have actually worked to reinforce the imago superlata as they’ve seemingly confronted some of the god-idols created by it and reproduced others in their stead. Michelle Alexander’s brilliant study of mass incarceration’s contemporary assault on African American men as *The New Jim Crow* (2010) offers one of many imago superlata responses to positive social changes such as the Civil Rights Act.

Who are the social poets instrumental to such social swerves? A limited religious outlook understands the contemporary white petit bourgeois as Bloom regards Modern poets:

> The poet is our chosen man, and his consciousness of election comes as a curse; again, not ‘I am a fallen man,’ but ‘I am Man, and I am falling’—or rather, ‘I was God, I was Man (for to a poet they were the same), and I am falling, from myself.’ When this consciousness of self is raised to an absolute pitch, then the poet hits the floor of Hell, or rather, comes to the bottom of the abyss, and by his impact there creates Hell.

Thought of in social terms, Bloom’s suggestion about the creation of Hell foregrounds not suffering, but the establishment of the white Christian as a social “devil” as much as a social “god,” a poetic validation of the Yakub myth of Creation common to many American strands of Islam. For instance, Elijah Muhammad writes in *The Theology of Time* of Yakub’s creation of “white devils,” purportedly a race of blue-eyed “devils” that “does not have any nature of good in him and no mercy in his heart.”¹⁸ Important to note of this example is that I am not validating or exonerating such theological sentiments, but trying to demonstrate why such sentiments might have made their way into American Islamic discourse and what such ideas suggest sociologically.

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about white Christians. To make clear how I am making use of these tropes of devil and Satan, I follow Malcolm X’s usage and important qualification:

“Unless we call one white man, by name, a ‘devil,’ we are not speaking of any individual white man. We are speaking of the collective white man’s historical record. We are speaking of the collective white man’s cruelties, and evils, and greeds, that have seen him act like a devil toward the nonwhite man…”

The Modern poet, like white male Christians historically, have been forced to choose, from the floor of hell, whether to become as strong as Satan, or weak enough to worship “a god altogether other than the self, wholly external to the possible. This god is cultural history, the dead poets, the embarrassments of a tradition grown too wealthy to need anything more.” Notably, Satan is not created until the “consciousness of self is raised to an absolute pitch,” such that society comes to function as a god. And this poetic god is placed in tension with the “god of cultural history,” of “dead poets.” So it goes that the poet is left to compete between the worship of a society having been created in the image of Satan (precisely because it creates “satans”), or through an embrace of weakness in the face of dead poets. Thanks to poetic influence, through such “swerves,” the white Christian community has simultaneously understood itself to be progressing, while those victimized by the imago superlata have kept reason to regard white Christian men as devils.

*Even Satan Dies*

Bloom arranges these misprisions through constant reference to strong or weak poets, arguing that “strong poets” do not distinguish between priority and authority, meaning that greatness is organized for them around being first. The moral exemplar of strong poetry, for

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19 Malcolm X, 266.
20 Bloom, 21.
21 Ibid.
Bloom, is Satan from Milton’s “Paradise Lost.”\(^{22}\) Strong poets refuse to sublimate, “condemned to the unwisdom”\(^{23}\) of taking the first to arrive as the best. In fact, reviewer John Hollander suggests that because of its focus and Oedipal interests, the book offers an allegory helpful for understanding the anxiety America attaches to its “European father.”\(^{24}\) For his efforts, Bloom connects this anxiety to death, noting that ephebes begin “rebelling more strongly against the consciousness of death’s necessity than all other men and women do”\(^{25}\) leading ironically, to the death of Modern poetry, itself. For Modern poetry, perhaps for Modernity in general, the anxiety of escaping death both constitutes the central feature of Modern poetry/Modernity, and secures its death prematurely. Even autopoietic systems come to an end at some point.

The connection Bloom makes between the anxiety of influence and its death dealing effects for poetry looks schematically similar to the way god-idols such as whiteness hinge on manipulations of the proximity of a person or group to death, as already demonstrated in earlier chapters. For groups as individuals, death is not escaped but is transposed onto other individuals and whole groups. A fear of death ultimately brings death about in even more severe terms, in that the anxiety of influence as an anxiety about mortality never escapes its object of influence. Indeed, a social death outweighs a physical death in this and many respects. Thinking of the imago superlata through Bloom’s theory helps to situate that death, however conceived or denied, cannot be escaped. Escape efforts only reinforce death’s priority. Bloom notes:

For Satan is a pure or absolute consciousness of self compelled to have admitted its intimate alliance with opacity. The state of Satan is therefore a constant consciousness of dualism, of being trapped in the finite, not just in space (in the body) but in clock-time as

\(^{22}\) Bloom, 19.
\(^{23}\) Ibid., 10.
\(^{25}\) Bloom, 10.
well. To be pure spirit, yet to know in oneself the limit of opacity; to assert that one goes back before the Creation-Fall, yet be forced to yield to number, weight, and measure; this is the situation of the strong poet, the capable imagination, when he confronts the universe of poetry, the words that were and will be, the terrible splendor of cultural heritage.\textsuperscript{26}

The “terrible splendor of cultural heritage” is precisely the sort of hermeneutical frame left for adherents of the imago superlata to reckon, having long maintained an “intimate alliance with opacity” as a means of maintaining distance from uncertainty and limitation through dualistic registers. The time has come to embrace death or accept the permanence of hell, where white Christians function as Satans, unable to embrace the “terrible splendor of [their own] cultural heritage” and reinforcing that terror in the process. Such an embrace of cultural heritage is “terrible” because it involves finally coming to terms with oneself and one’s actions and limits as one dies. If, as suggested by philosopher Cornel West that “the paradox of Afro-American history is that Afro-Americans fully enter the modern world precisely when the postmodern period commences,”\textsuperscript{27} then the paradox of Anglo-American history might be that its history is finally coming to an end and because of the shape of that history, Anglo-Americans have not cultivated the tools required to either overcome or endure such an impending death. Bloom’s theory of poetic influence aids in making sense of such paradoxes. As concerning the imago superlata and white Christians, they are left to interpret themselves as dying satans—which in death is offered the wisdom behind how satans are formed. Such attention to the Yakub mith, in concert to Bloom’s work, offers a way to explore and situate an historically well-known but little understood (by white Christian) idea about some black perceptions of whites. More than that, it offers a way to thematically and hermeneutically capture the contemporary moment for many of these white Christians, these “white devils.” Perhaps, out of a greater ability to understand such

\textsuperscript{26} Bloom, 32.
judgments levied against them as sociological (instead of fundamental), it might be easier for this group to realize where they find themselves in light of previous attempts to address racism and the like:

‘I seem to have stopped falling; now I am fallen, consequently, I lie here in Hell,’ but he is thinking as he says this, ‘As I fell, I swerved, consequently I lie here in a Hell improved by my own making.’

Numbering the Days of Our Twilight

Learning to “number our days” involves embracing that our days are already numbered, producing a twilight or “hell” (per Bloom’s characterization) out of which no escape is possible. How a person responds to their time in twilight or this “hell” determines if they remain “satan.” Will the weight of something like whiteness ever allow for something greater than a swerve? In the wake of the need to respond to the imago superlata with a limited religious outlook, and the seeming relation between Bloom’s strong poet and a dualist outlook part and parcel to the imago superlata, then a limited religious outlook will bring with it the spectre and shadow of the weak poet, so that those beholden to the imago superlata—especially straight, white Christian men of privilege—might begin to fashion themselves as weak. A limited religious outlook will follow the path of the weak poet, giving priority to “dead poets” and “cultural heritage.”

Hermeneutically speaking, white Christians might realize that relinquishing resources or certainty or abilities through a limited religious outlook is not a matter of ceasing to be “god” or “god-like,” but is recognition that in the eyes of others, and because of one’s own insecurities, they have been the embodiment of evil. A limited religious outlook might now atone for having created Hell in perpetuity even while swerving from the Satans that have come before.

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28 Bloom, 45.
Escape from the “hell” created by the imago superlata is not fully possible—that is, we can’t easily escape religion or the god-idols created by religion, meaning that perhaps the easiest way to ensure an eternity in this “hell” is to think oneself able to escape it. As discussed below, this even involves the impossibility of fully escaping the god idea. Necessary, then, is finding a “new” means of engaging the god idea and religion. In the sections that follow, I offer a series of “swerves” in an effort to epistemologically shift gears, understanding such “swerves” as unable to provide escape from the white petit bourgeois Christian hell we have collectively written on social life. A growing awareness of such a history produces the sense of cultural twilight wherein many find themselves rulers of a hell they have created here on earth. Given this history, how might we number our days in hell?

Vignette One: Uncertainty in the Face of Death

In this brief section, I relay a vignette from one of anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff’s informants during her fieldwork engaging a dying population of Jews living in a retirement home in southern California in the mid-1970s. Though Myerhoff plays a central role later in this chapter, here her conversation with Shmuel is helpful for situating my first attempted “swerve.”

Shmuel didn’t know what to say, but he knew the topic was important. “‘Tell me, Shmuel,’ [Myerhoff] asked, ‘didn’t it confuse you, to love Judaism as you did, but see it condoning the sacrifice of an innocent victim for God’s wishes?’”

Shmuel replies, “‘Do you think that Judaism saves us from being men? Even as a boy, I saw Abraham’s fault and knew it was his responsibility, not God’s, to decide what was right.’”

Speaking to Barbara Myerhoff for the last time days before his death, Shmuel’s theodicy is an

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29 Myerhoff, *Number Our Days*, 54.
30 Ibid., 54.
anthropodicy, focused on human failings and complexity rather than divine responsibility. His ideas are thoroughly anthropocentric portraits of god, framed not around the utility of the god idea but the futility of the idea in the face of death.\textsuperscript{31} Shmuel does not to make the slippery slope fallacy so part and parcel to theodicy as an enterprise. Suffering is not causally related to “god” one way or another. Shmuel’s efforts don’t appear to be getting god off of a theodical hook, so much as underscoring that god is of no consequence one way or another to a dying man. Instead, Shmuel focuses on Judaism’s cultural and cosmic limitations, as if Myerhoff’s question had been asked in bad faith. It had.

Shmuel, in defining culture, says this:

It happens to be the Jewish way. I don’t mean it is the best way, but it happens to be our way. That’s all. It’s planted in our gardens. Does that mean that other gardens should be destroyed?...Culture is that garden. This is not a thing of nations. It is not about Goethe and Yeshivas. It is children playing. Culture is the simple grass through which the wind blows sweetly and each grass blade bends softly to the caress of the wind. It is like a mother who would pick up her child and kiss it, with her tenderness that she gave birth to it.\textsuperscript{32}

Relegating god’s worth below that of cultural heritage, Shmuel gracefully demonstrates that culture is an arbitrary human vestige with immense value. God, however conceived, comes from culture, akin to a flower or bush grown from the soil of the things people do and make and think. Shmuel’s characterization of culture helps in understanding the moments when he does address the question of god directly:

Do I believe in God, you asked me? What does any of this have to do with God? This I cannot say. Some people are afraid to be alone and face life without God. Hemingway killed himself because he was searching for something and couldn’t find it. The wise man searches but not to find. He searches because even though there is nothing to find, it is

\textsuperscript{31} Here, the Jewish context is not meant to echo supersessionist ideas, as I’m not interested in the particulars of the context, but in context in the abstract (although when time permits, I am eager to learn more of Judaism). To that extent, the Jewish context described here offers a portrait of human complexity rather than a locus for placing blame for that complexity.

\textsuperscript{32} Myerhoff, \textit{Number Our Days}, 60.
necessary to search. About God, I would say I am an agnostic. If there is a god, he is playing marbles with us... On this note about God, we finish now. You have all I can give you.33

Three days after these words were spoken, Shmuel died.34

The Uncertainty of Escaping the Hell of God

People die whether they believe in a god or not, even if what “death” means shifts according to time and space. In the end, this likely means there is credibility to the idea that death is actually humanity’s one, true god, and culture offers a means to cope with and learn such things. What then, does this mean, of escape attempts from “god” and the possibilities for carving out intellectual or social space where “god” is no longer operative. In this section, I address the question of escaping the idea of god through a discussion that puts in conversation Bloom, Pinn, and from the back and forth offers a humanist perspective focused on uncertainty, ultimately, in the ability or utility of ever fully escaping the “hell” posed by the idea of god.

Shmuel’s quick movement past the theodicy question, his turn to culture, and his ultimate final, uncertain, agnostic word on god, are of utmost importance in schematizing a limited religious outlook. His vignette offers an example of an uncertain humanism, and I want to explore this sense of humanism as a possible response to recognizing oneself residing—permanently—in a hell of one’s own making. Uncertain humanism focuses on balanced human worth and ability, an intense agnosticism (including but extending far beyond doctrine of god) to also include an ethical posture that even if there is a god, that god might not be worth relying on. This uncertain humanism is also underscored by uncertainty about the social efficacy of such a reliance on humanism, as a life orientation or ethical posture more generally.

33 Myerhoff, Number Our Days, 74.
34 Ibid., 75.
My understanding of humanism is best defined through motivation. Humanists, as I understand them, are more concerned about human well-being and healthy, equitable interaction than anything else.\(^{35}\) Uncertainty, as a modifier, is my contribution and qualifier, and is meant to promote the idea that agnosticism offers a helpful rejoinder to the certainty secured by any definitive statement about god-idols. It also emphasizes that humanism, however conceived, is of limited ability and worth\(^ {36}\) in responding to the imago superlata. An uncertain humanism remains agnostic on the question of god—or human—(they’re the same thing, keep in mind) being, ability, and value.

Shmuel’s agnostic position on god offers an entry-point into understanding a limited religious outlook doctrine on the idea of god. To be sure, there is great peril to theism as I have defined it as belief in the utility of belief. Here, I am not backtracking on that statement, but emphasizing that all “gods” are ideologically-constructed (i.e. god-idols). Based on cultural

\(^{35}\) Important to note, I’m intentionally not outlining Pinn’s more established and systematic brand of humanism, such as those developed in Anthony B. Pinn, *African American Humanist Principles: Living and Thinking Like the Children of Nimrod*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2004. I value this work, but for my interests here, the uncertainty of an newly developed humanist orientation—as offered in *Why Lord*?—is more helpful for my interests. This organic and open-ended definition of humanism is adapted from a brief, albeit memorable, passage from humanist theologian Anthony B. Pinn, when he remarked as a young ephebe that “human liberation is more important than the maintenance of any religious symbol, sign, canon, or icon.” In the wake of a corpus of books clarifying his muted concern for “liberation” with a realist assessment of such possibilities, in keeping with an expansive, culturally-mitigated understanding of religion and its signs, icons and the like, Pinn’s early words here capture brilliantly the uncertain humanism I have in mind, because these early words distill the ontological and ethical core of humanism down to this concern for humans. In light of a variety of definitions and evolutions in the crafting of African American Humanism as a religious option, Pinn’s early description works better here than later robust definitions as it evokes that of ethical decision and uncertainty, the two points at which I feel this uncertain humanism would best rely and focus. See Anthony B. Pinn, *Why Lord*?: *Suffering and Evil in Black Theology*. Continuum International Publishing Group, 1999, 11.

\(^{36}\) Here, I note worth and ability as it corresponds to these two exaggerations operative as the foundation of the imago superlata, as explored throughout the dissertation and outlined directly in Chapter Three.
options and contexts within the society, not all god-idols function with equal power, authority, or social effect. Theism is one such god-idol in need of intense censure. Other possibilities might not be so dangerous. Hermeneutically, “god” exists in the form of society and death. Not content with traditional theism or the functional atheism of Durkheim, a limited doctrine of god follows an agnostic position, unsure of any ontological reality one way or another, but sure that functionally-speaking, gods are very real and they are best held in check by understanding them as idols. Hence, “god-idol.” A limited religious outlook does not worry one way or another about acute and/or cultural belief in the idea of god, but about whether or not such god ideas promote an exaggerated sense of certainty, human value or ability. Such certainty can as easily come through a refutation of the god idea.

Bloom’s anxiety of influence and his talk of strong and weak poets offers the possibility to “misinterpret” and “swerve” away from my advisor, theologian Anthony Pinn. Early in his career (him an “ephebe” then; me, an “ephebe” now), Pinn sought to expose the compromise with suffering required by theodicy as it emerged or was ignored by black theology as an enterprise. Like Shmuel, Pinn only finds need to talk of such compromises as they force harm or misrecognition of the importance of specific communities.\footnote{Anthony B. Pinn, Why Lord?: Suffering and Evil in Black Theology. Continuum International Publishing Group, 1999, 10-11.} On this refutation of theodicy, and on the preeminent focus on black culture and community, using Bloom I want to suggest that if thought about in light of the usefulness of Pinn’s argument for the construction of what I am attempting here, a white response to white reliance on this imago superlata, Pinn “went
accurately up to a certain point, but then should have swerved, precisely in the direction”

offered here. As a means of moving black theology forward, the young ephebe Pinn “swerves” against many of his predecessors by arguing that the idea of god forces a compromise with human suffering that simply is untenable in light of the historical circumstances of African Americans. In place of god, he offers to the black theological poets his position of strong humanism. In a passage meant to both clarify his position lest his interlocutors take his argument as something other than what it was and rhetorically situate thinkers who have come before, Pinn writes:

Weak humanism entails an increased sense of self and one’s place in the human family. This position does not call God’s existence into question. Anxiety arises, for weak humanists, when reflecting on the realm of god’s activity in the world; not over the very existence of god…The goal is to prevent the oppressed from underestimating their humanity and oppressors from overestimating their humanity. For strong humanists, relatively sustained and oppressive world conditions bring into question the presence of any Being outside of the human realm…consequently, humanity has no one to turn to for assistance…Hence, strong humanism seeks to combat oppression through radical human commitment to life and corresponding activity.

Of the problems of theodicy, Pinn, Shmuel and I are in accord, in terms of it both forcing a compromise with suffering, and in terms of moving away from it as a direct intellectual

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38 Bloom, 14.
39 Here, I feel it is important to note that I am not critiquing Pinn through a kind of intellectual bad faith, in that it is obvious that Why Lord? is not concerned with white contextual issues. Rather, as Pinn’s concerns in much of Why Lord are parallel to my own here, then I am using him as a rhetorical model and interlocutor. Where a white context is my concern, then I could not in good faith actually suggest that Pinn makes this swerve. I leave that up to those with contexts not my own. Here, however, I mean to weave in and out of criticism and celebration in a literary way, “writing” an interpretive vision that might be useful for white Christians.
40 William R. Jones’ Is God a White Racist? (1973) is an early, first generation thinker who Pinn does not “swerve” away from so much as takes Jones’ philosophical argument and applies it to theology quite squarely and effectively.
41 Pinn, 10-11.
42 Pinn, 141.
43 Ibid.
interest. In what is admittedly a “swerve” of my own, I want to suggest that a limited religious outlook is not concerned with strong or weak varieties of humanist stances; it is more concerned that any chosen standpoint be shaky and uncertain. Semantic rejoinders that such a foundation in uncertainty offers a kind of certainty, in my estimation, run moot, as the point is not to be logically correct, but to elicit disruption of society functioning as god. The only foundation or certainty proffered in this chapter is the intuition of uncertainty posed by death, understanding that even in casting uncertain humanism as an option, I rely on a foundation provided by the bodies of others in setting the terms of what this perspective would look like. To embrace an uncertain humanism is to privilege a sense of uncertainty as a point of departure for humanist endeavors and interpretations of human social activity; white Christians are simply in no place to know, with certainty, anything definitively, as the costs of surety have been severe historically.44

Pinn underscores the anxiety shaping the weak humanist. Presumably, as weak humanists are “not [anxious] over the very existence of god,” it implies such anxiety true for the strong humanist. From my perspective, this “missing” statement about anxiety amongst the strong humanists is a concession, or a Derridean trace, indicating the strong humanist more indebted to “god’s” influence than they want to admit. A “weak humanist” would exist with or without Pinn’s suggestion that they hold no anxiety about the existence of god, but indeed, a strong humanist—per Pinn’s own terms—is only created by that anxiety. Bloom offers what can be read as a homology to Pinn’s work in Why, Lord?, when Bloom relays that Oscar Wilde’s

44 To the extent this argument runs as logically or ethically “weak” in the sense it is paradoxical, or I seem to want my cake and want to eat it, too, that is my point; a weak strand of thought, as in the “weak” humanism outlined by Pinn that wants to retain belief in god while focusing concerns on the human. Though not concerned with “god,” to be sure my argument is “weak” given Professor Pinn’s analysis offered in Why Lord?
character Lord Henry Wotton tells Dorian Gray “that all influence is immoral,”45 and later that disciples can be escaped46—meaning that one can seemingly overcome influence based purely on where one situates oneself in a discourse. And reliance on “discourse” indicates reliance on others, predecessors, be they poets or gods. Strength negates its strength through tacit or explicit suggestion that such strength comes from out of the blue.

In his more recent The End of God-Talk (2012), in a passage reminiscent Wilde’s suggestion that influence can be escaped, Pinn notes that “God is unnecessary, even for theologians.”47 And yet, noting its use as a symbol having run its course48, Pinn remains ironically indebted to the idea of god for the crafting of non-theistic humanism; god, as “non-theism,” appears in a truly apophatic form, literally in the sense of negation (as in not theism) as opposed to the traditional interpretation of “apophatic” as knowing god through a logic of negation. Rather than saying what god is not49, Pinn sets about describing what the “not god” is. I submit that we see this in Pinn’s turn to community as a centering idea, where he states that “African American nontheistic humanist theology seeks to be more than a theology of negation”...nontheistic humanism “must have a centering ‘something,’ a means by which to frame the nature and meaning of lived life.”50 My point is not to disagree with the logical need for such a centering concept, but to foreground the impossibility of escaping the demand for ideas I’ve sought to describe as “god-ids,” where community serves in this capacity for African American nontheistic humanism. Admittedly, this arrangement is healthier than something like

45 Bloom, 6.
46 Ibid. 6–7.
48 The End of God-Talk, 5.
50 Pinn, The End of God-Talk, 30, All of Chapter Two.
whiteness, but it still relies on stated need for a point of orientation and departure which my larger efforts in this project attempt to demonstrate always come at a social cost. Where white people and Christians are concerned, I’m attempting to disrupt such appeals to normativity because the costs faced by non-whites given such arrangements historically have been excruciating. Functionally speaking, normativity is god; this is what I mean in statements that society is god. Escape from normative appeal is impossible, but might be mitigated whenever the problem arises. Such mitigation would be a constant deconstructive task.

A Christology or Ecclesiology could likely be written without reference to god, at all. In corresponding fashion, a truly “nontheistic humanist theology” might not utter the word “god,” even as a rhetorical rejoinder. It would work vociferously to disrupt normative appeals and their subsequent demand for a sense of certainty or direction at all. To this extent, the word “god” simply wouldn’t be necessary if the anxiety of influence were not also present. This is not so much an intellectual critique of Pinn, as much as it is a momentary functional assessment that god’s status as socially-constructed or a symbol does not make that symbol any less influential. To this end, though I agree that god as an idea is unnecessary as a meaning making feature of human life, so too, I argue that “non-theist” is not a descriptor of those who have escaped the hell of god, but those who remain indebted to the idea by virtue of the impossibility of full escape from the concept. Escape from god in this capacity would be an attempt to avoid the anxiety of influence by arguing that one is not a poet and so should not be judged against poetry. In the same way that an African American does not have to believe their worth or abilities below white Americans for the African American to face the consequences of racism, functionally speaking, escaping the hell of god is an uncertainty, at best.
In what can only be described as poetic synergy, Pinn’s recent intellectual autobiography, *Writing God’s Obituary: How a Good Methodist became a Better Atheist* (2014) begins with an epigraph from Oscar Wilde:

The true mystery of the world is the visible, not the invisible.\(^{51}\)

Wilde and Pinn, poet and theologian, are some of the “strongest” remembered, in terms of ability, yes, but also in the critical perspective I suggest here. And Bloom’s thesis, and my argument here, are not refutations or critiques of such strength, but celebrations of the paradox of strength coming from having reinforced so strongly that poet or object so influential to Wilde and Pinn, respectively. Here, I’m not merely offering an apology for critique, but trying to forcefully demonstrate that this paradox is paramount to embracing the uncertain humanism I have in mind. In Wilde’s case, the “true mystery of the world” I would suggest, is not the visible, but the binary reliance of the visible on the invisible trace in perpetuity. Theologically speaking, the “true mystery” is not escaping or setting down the god-idea through strong humanism or nontheistic varieties the focus of Pinn’s early recent work\(^{52}\) respectively, but learning how to come to terms with living in a world where escape from the power of social and functional expressions of god is uncertain. And to connect my point to Milton, didn’t such strong assumptions and efforts to escape god lead to the creation of Satan and hell in the first place, by rebellion against god?

Bloom’s point, and mine here, are that the strongest of poets and humanists end up reinforcing the necessity of their predecessors through the over-determined certainty that the

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\(^{52}\) See, for instance, Anthony B. Pinn’s *The End of God-Talk*. Oxford University Press. 2012. Pinn’s humanism has always been more focused on uncertainty than most options, but still too certain that there is no god. The point is not whether god *is* or *is not*, but in using the uncertainty of the issue to produce particular results.
hells we create for ourselves and for others can be escaped. Admittedly, I am relying more on this strong/weak distinction than does Pinn, himself—and admitting to my own influence from him, Pinn’s later works often emphasize human limitation and the limited capacity we have as humans to think or do something better than what has come before. His notion of perpetual rebellion is just one (of many) moments the humanist Pinn seems to recognize the impossibility of “escape.” But the parallels between Bloom’s and Pinn’s talk of strong and weak are 

*poetically* useful. That is, they offer instances of greater understanding of hermeneutics generally, and specifically with respect to different interests, motivations, and social locations. Through what Bloom refers to as misprisions, the young ephebe (Pinn, his students, or any poet wanting to stand out) overdetermines one’s predecessor’s intentions or influence for the sake of taking priority, for being understood as “new.” Reflexively and importantly (for understanding my argument) here I overdetermine Pinn’s reliance on the god idea so that my work might be clarified as distinct from his, as I work to escape the hell of god, which for white Christians also involves escape attempts of the racialized hell we have created. Surely, in my own way, I am guilty of the same crime. To this end, the theo-poetical axiom written at the gates of hell has something to say about learning how to “number our days.” What is captured by Dante’s “Abandon all hope, ye who enter here” if not an astute warning that escape from the hells we create is not possible when explicitly attempted. The strongest of poets are the most hopeful in

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53 Pinn suggests that liberatory ethics are problematic because they are unrealistic. Using Camus and *The Myth of Sisyphus* as exemplifying the ethics of perpetual rebellion, Pinn calls for students of African American religion to start thinking of ethical systems as disconnected from any institutional allegiance and begin to think of them in more realistic fashion, as the product of the religious impulse meeting up with historical circumstance and as always limited in achievement, where spaces of meaning making are created and then always break down. Perpetual rebellion becomes an ethical system based on constant jettisoning of the significations of oneself faced by others in history or today, and a constant resignification that recognizes that we will always be pushing a rock up a hill in terms of human existence and how we seek meaning in light of that existence. See Pinn, *Terror and Triumph*, 2003.
an escape from hell. Understanding that the title of a book is a result of collaboration between authors, editors, and publishers, even still there is an irony attached to the title of Pinn’s *Writing God’s Obituary*. This irony, of course, is that “God” not “Pinn,” ends up in the title. The strength of a humanism, or poetic license, rests not always on the arrogance of a young ephebe, but as much on the wisdom of a seasoned poet or thinker to admit to the paradox and irony and move forward without flinching. Hence, the strongest of poets or humanists land, in the end, back in hell, but a hell they’ve made from their own ingenuity. Does escaping “hell” involve a growing confidence and certainty of an escape route (as offered by the ephebe Pinn in his suggestion that an atheistic strong humanism, though not finite, is epistemologically and ethically better than its weak alternative), or is it made possible by giving up the certainty of an escape? An uncertain humanist looks for an escape, but does not expect one. It is humanist, in that it privileges a concern for humans, but it is beyond the scope of a limited religious outlook or an uncertain humanism to be concerned with the destruction of the god idea. It is certainly my position that theism as an idea is fraught with problems (Chapter Two attests to that); however, my critique of theism is not about “god” as much as the functional use and reliance through *belief* in the social utility of belief. God, as an idea, is here to stay. Numbering our days in hell, thusly, involves an end to escape attempts and an embrace of others in hell as a means to endure.

**Gods, Devils and Uncertain Humans**

A limited religious outlook seeks to limit the parameters of such an idea (the god idea), but from a white normative context from which Bloom also writes, fighting against the god idea (with too much force or certainty) amounts to an equally “strong” poetic stance, marking such a concern an Oedipal complex and escape from the hells of our own making impossible. Functionally speaking, both atheism and theism are “real” to the extent that as ideas—as god
idols—they compete to shape identity and social options. As I described in Chapter Two, theism and atheism emerge together historically and both follow the parameters set in place by the imago superlata—meaning they are equally able to promote the sense of certainty I seek to trouble. Gods and devils arrive together in the form of a person. To this end, atheistic and nontheistic humanist varieties are of no greater use for a limited religious outlook if they begin with the certainty that god is not real. Agnosticism, unknowing or unknowability, is more helpful. Given Pinn’s construal of humanism’s options as a young theologian, and his more recent reliance on “god” as a symbol having lost its utility, and supposing “white” humanisms come in similar varieties, I want to suggest—me, an ephebe now, white and humanist—that the best positionality towards humanism is through this prism of uncertainty, maintained by a privileging of humility, unknowability, the impossibility of fully escaping social issues like racism, but a continued concerted effort to attempt precisely that—treating all fights as “windmills” but hoping through ongoing dialogue and critical engagement that such windmills might someday be written out of the social world. An over-determined atheism is of no greater good than an over-determined theism for a community of imago superlata adherents who have made a practice of vacillating between positions of god-worship or self-deification as it suits social interest. Both options emerge as Modern means of over-determining one’s own position, providing a façade of certainty in the face of limitation. Both must remain at the disposal for cultivating an uncertain, limited outlook on religion and the world more broadly. To so easily be construed as god or devil the word on humans—white ones, in particular—is uncertain.

55 Here, I mean to evoke the character Quixote’s awareness of Cervantes, the author, and the tension throughout the novel wherein Quixote writes his own destiny against the destiny written by Cervantes—metaphoric of “god” here.
A limited religious outlook embraces an *uncertain humanism*. Aware of the perils of weak humanism, but with the recognition of the need to embrace a weak poetic stance within a limited religious domain, the outlook I wish to put forth is one of uncertainty. Responding to the imago superlata is a humanist endeavor, to the extent social problems are firstly, human problems. To disrupt such a thing requires thinking more of humans than their projections, the artists before the art, and the storytellers ahead of the stories. But humanism’s usefulness is in no greater certainty than any other outlook, and marking humans as “most important” analytically or existentially is not the same thing as making humans as supremely good or able. Doing the latter would cast uncertain humanism squarely within the imago superlata, which my intent is to do otherwise. At best, humans are most important analytically because humans cause the most epistemological, ethical and social problems and uncertainties. And humans are most important existentially because we are dying humans.

**Not All Hells Are Created Equal: Contextualizing an Uncertain Humanism**

In the analogy provided by both Bloom’s talk of Milton, and the historic myth of the white man as devil/Satan, something “new” means finding oneself outside of hell. But how does one escape “hell,” or “windmills,” however conceived? Escape ends up interpretively possible by setting down the anxiety associated with a “swerve” or other misprision and picking up a focus and reliance not on poetic creativity but in telling the stories of one’s predecessors. Such stories are necessarily unique, finding priority because of parity, not in spite of it. In each chapter of Part II of this dissertation, I try to tell such stories. Before that, I want to describe what work the telling of stories is meant to achieve, that of grounding social context as the point and rationale for interpretive variance amongst social actors as much as analysts.
Pinn and I come at our work having lived different lives, with a variety of geographic, generational, racial and other factors marking our narratives as distinct. It may be poetic to read uncertain humanism as a “swerve” to distinguish me (the theological ephebe) from my theological forebear and closest influence. Yet, Bloom’s theory of poetry does little to explore the significance of context, and indeed Bloom—in all his brilliant analysis—seems too mesmerized by Modern poetry to see its social implications. My offering of uncertain humanism, then, might not only be a “swerve” in terms of the presentation of ideas, but a marker of the differing significance of an idea (god) based on one’s context and the story made by that context. Different narratives are of equal importance, but drastically different tone, texture, style and more. For instance, Pinn might respond to the above critique noting that he has never claimed to be the first African American humanist or non-theist, and that much of his work attests to that very point. Rather than “poet,” Pinn has also narrated the perspectives of many who have come before him. The following is not to be read as an apology to Pinn, but as a concession that one’s own story or context is seemingly best exposed by telling the stories of others within that context. Attention to context provides a different valence to understanding how to escape the hells of our own making. Rather than Pinn’s work simply reinforce his inability to escape god, in narrating the stories of those prior to him, he makes such an escape. That is, in embracing those in “hell,” he is able to escape it having set down the concern to escape. Indeed, in works such as *By These Hands: A Documentary History of African American Humanism* (2001), *Moral Evil and Redemptive Suffering: A History of Theodicy in African American Religious Thought* (2002), *Becoming America’s Problem Child: An Outline of Pauli Murray’s Religious Life and Theology* (2008), and other texts focused on the stories of others, Pinn’s been able to tell the stories of others coming to a greater ability to tell his own. A limited religious outlook works to
contextualize similar efforts for theologians who find themselves near social centers. That is, a limited religious outlook can speak volumes on what a particular social location means for interpretation and analysis, but can say relatively little—very limited—in terms of how that context is escaped or how what is learned from it can be of much use to those outside of it. Indeed, transmitting and translating that which is learned in one context to another context is very limited.

Important for interpreting the stories told within a white Christian context in a way that will allow for embrace of radical contingency is to correct for exaggerations of worth or ability by appealing to the staggering weight of the great counterfactual, death. In other words, whites at social centers cannot simply tell stories—those stories must be told and framed in terms of their own death and the deaths such stories have historically caused for others. It is for a white limited religious outlook to limit its proscriptive comments to those with similar stories, and to glean its sources heavily from those similar stories, understanding all stories, all gods and devils, submit—in the end—to death.

Given Pinn’s context, it seems clear that god as a symbol is dangerous and in need of abandonment as it has been used as “a mechanism for protecting signs and symbols because of the ontological burden they bear.”56 Such claims are not only a result of the anxiety of influence but an anxiety attached to the social damage done by the idea, an anxiety rooted in life and fear of the consequences of a society organized around insider/outsider social arrangements.

My concern is to try not to exchange one prison of certainty (i.e. theism) for another hell of certainty in the form of atheism or nontheism. In the case of an uncertain humanist outlook for white petit bourgeois Christians and theists, the concern is not to exchange one prison of certainty for another hell of certainty.

certainty (i.e. theism) for another hell of certainty in the form of atheism or nontheism. Uncertain humanism responds to the permanence of social hell by embracing those in “hell”\textsuperscript{57}—all of us, gods and devils, alike—more forcefully than any ideological posture cultivated as a response to this situation of social hell. In less caustic language, uncertain humanism explores each social context thoroughly through explorations of what others have done in those locations. It draws conclusions based on what others have done in and through social contexts and historical times and places. It understands experience as not always shared across social context. And it remains uncertain of where to fully draw the lines between social contexts, but follows a process of starting with one’s very specific context, and exploring the efforts and ideas of those seemingly closest to that initial starting point. For white Christians, through an uncertain humanism, work must be done to undo—again, an anxiety of future influence, not past influence—the social consequences of having created society as god in one’s white, normative image, and not knowing how to die or live in the shadow of certainty. Such processes begin with the uncertain foundations of social context and location.

Where “god” or certainty of perspective or field of vision is presumed, uncertain humanism “wants to believe,” like the poster hung behind Fox Mulder’s desk in \textit{The X Files}, but it knows it cannot believe any longer. Ethical atheism meets with cosmological agnosticism and humility, offering guidance in the domains of religion and metaphysics, as much as politics or education and scholarship. That is, white Christians who might follow an uncertain humanism choose not to \textit{believe in} god for the social danger it causes is too great to justify. Whether god in some otherworldly or transhistorical sense is actually real or not, remains an open question, as not knowing promotes the uncertainty embraced through this uncertain humanism. God-idols, for

\textsuperscript{57} Here, hell is the “heaven” of society; my point is that we respond to the dis-function of society by embracing those there with us.
the uncertain humanist, are a guilty pleasure, and always come at the expense of another. Uncertain humanism echoes Fanon’s cry for a new humanism,\textsuperscript{58} in this a humanism for those who have/are attempted/ing to take off their “white masks.”\textsuperscript{59} Swerving away from their predecessors, only to find their faces as white as their masks. God-idols, in this presentation, serve partially as masks. To the extent whiteness, as a god-idol, might be understood as a racialized expression of the inability to accept human limitations, uncertain humanism embraces blackness as the impossibility of fully accepting human limitations. Stated differently, whiteness turns its adherents into devils and the world into hell. Blackness might involve learning to live in hell without turning into a devil.

Though it attempts to refute all god-idols offering a façade of certainty or orientation to those already at society’s center, uncertain humanism is as equally concerned to turn towards the stuff of culture (e.g. literature, music, dress, various rituals of artistic production, etc.) in effort to move those from the center to the margins, and as a consolation for such movement, and in effort to shift focus from the center of hell where devils dwell to the borders and margins creating hell. How ought such a culture, or such a religious orientation, be situated hermeneutically after having contextualized the hell of the imago superlata? In what follows next, I offer yet another “swerve,” which works with an uncertain humanism in the development of a limited religious outlook.

\textsuperscript{58} Here, I recognize postmodern (e.g. Faucauldian) and transhumanist criticisms of humanism as ideology or political platform. Indeed, humanism can become any shade of socially dangerous and vicious to humans, animals and ecology as any other life orientation. Here, I hope that the privileging of “uncertainty” has done enough to suggest that what I have in mind seeks to guard against these troubling dimensions of humanism, though I remain uncertain if such danger is ever fully avoidable. Indeed, arguments that such avoidance is possible, from my perspective, belies the very valorization of human ability and worth I have sought to characterize as socially dangerous.

\textsuperscript{59} Frantz Fanon, \textit{Black Skin, White Masks}. Revised. Grove Press, 2008.
Focusing a Limited Religious Outlook

Here, I offer another swerve, an analogy, that I hope is helpful in distinguishing a limited religious outlook from the imago superlata. I suggest a means of focusing attention on those at the margins of “hell” and what those margins mean for those at the center learning how to “number our days.” The condition of radical contingency is the basic human condition. I’m not interested in debating what, exactly, that is, but radical contingency is merely the hermeneutical valence I attach to what it means to exist as a human in forced community. Hell, as described above, is not this basic condition, but an exaggeration of it by those who know not the influence of their anxiety attached to death. Image One (below) is the view of my self-made bookshelf and books from the standpoint of where I have written the bulk of this dissertation, my basement. In this example, this image represents radical contingency. It is the raw materials of life presented to us, figuratively, of course.

-Image One, (personal photo): Radical Contingency
“Religion,” as a strategy for identity formation relying on social and ideological distinctions and responding to and out of that radical contingency, can be thought of as a telescope. If Image One represents radical contingency, Image Two (below) demonstrates the vantage point offered by imago superlata religious formation. This is the perspective of “devils,” remembering my earlier discussion of analogies. Also, as a way to theoretically situate this usage of photographs, I turn to Susan Sontag, who suggests that photographs offer a way to flatten, transmit to many different contexts, the particular perils of one context. In her follow-up to 1977’s On Photography, Sontag’s final book before her death, 2003’s Regarding the Pain of Others explores the power of photography to connect various groups to situations of human suffering and pain. She notes that “in contrast to a written account—which, depending on its complexity of thought, reference, and vocabulary, is pitched at a larger or smaller readership—a photograph has only one language and is destined potentially for all.”60 Connecting Sontag’s point to my above reference to “devils,” here I’m interested to express to this particular context and to contexts of various sort, what a limited religious outlook “looks like” from this particular context of white Christians. Also like Sontag’s focus on the suffering of others, a limited religious outlook is meant to recast analytic focus towards the suffering of those at social margins and those who suffer.

-Image Two: Imago Superlata: Exaggerated Radical Contingency

Seen here focused on one of the shelves from the first image (right side, second shelf from top), like a telescope the Imago Superlata offers a larger—exaggerated—view of someone or something. Looking through its small lens, shutting out the world and producing *black* margins through a focus on something specific, the imago superlata magnifies and gives a sense of clarity to the viewer (i.e. the adherent). Adherents or “viewers” come to feel a sense of greater *certainty* about what is on the other side of the lens. An unidentifiable shelf of books has been transformed into a manageable number of books with specific titles, page lengths, cover images, topics, and the like. A vast array of radically contingent possibilities have been limited and the remaining possibilities appear as more necessary and useful than before. In short, the imago superlata blocks out most data through a principle distinction (e.g. the black margin) and tertiary distinctions then come into view. Part One of this dissertation has involved schematizing this process of identifying through distinction and bringing into focus the damage done by peering through a telescope of religion—indeed, damage done by simply using an arbitrary telescope in
the manner in which it is meant to function. The imago superlata, like a telescope viewed correctly, brings social-life into seemingly clear relief and focus at the expense of leaving out other possibilities and data.

Admitting that trying to set down the “telescope” of religion amounts to an attempt to escape “hell,” instead a limited religious outlook intentionally looks through the “wrong” end of the telescope. In doing so, the viewer grows more sensitive to the margins and borders created by the imago superlata. Those margins are not so much exposed (they are apparent in Image Two, also) as they are dilated while the focused image is constricted. To the extent identity is the object of any religious focus, a limited religious outlook finds one’s presumed identity as distinct and clear grow more uncertain and is replaced by a new identity based on decay, senescence, or dying. The center is enveloped by the margins. Like Modern poetry or theology, those whose identities have been predicated on their exaggerated proximity to death at the margins inform those at the center of an encroaching, ominous death.

<Image Three: A Limited Religious Outlook>
A reversed telescopic view “focusses” attention in at least three places. First, towards a growing awareness of the apparatus that once provided clarity and now prevents even a balanced portrait of things as such. Second, at the level of the margins—here seen as the literal borders of the telescope, but representing those at social margins—growing and moving closer and closer towards the object of focus. The telescope (as religion is made up of human social processes and ideas, is representative of social actors writ large. This outlook does not focus attention to those at the margins directly, but focuses attention to the difficulty of such focused attention. Hence, there is not a shift in focus from one location to another, but an increasing uncertainty and blurry effect promoting recognition of the difficulty. In Image Three, those margins are social while the margins of religion (as the actual device, the telescope) are privileged in their limitations. Third, at the level of a growing unfamiliarity and uncertainty about the object of their focus. Through a limited religious outlook, religion as an arbitrary “device” akin to a telescope, is made clear. What religion does, as a function, is privileged. As to that function, as indicated throughout this dissertation, religion I understand to be a structuring and structured “principle of division,” ordering and classifying the “natural and social world” through “antagonistic classes.” Such classes correspond to identity, broadly understood. The sense of one’s own identity is made possible by ignoring those at margins after having outlined the very parameters of those margins. That is, religion distinguishes so as to focus attention on the self or the community understood to rest at a social center. A limited religious outlook, then, seeks to foreground that/those processes while acknowledging that greater visual clarity is never actually afforded.

Moreover, a limited religious outlook “focusses” attention on the even more severe margins produced by the effects of a telescope. A photograph, as a snapshot of any place or

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activity, also serves in this capacity, the function and formation of photos, themselves, aiding in producing the analogy of a limited religious outlook. As such, the actual images I use here can serve almost as equally as the telescope photographed, as both the nature and function of “religion” is captured in the apparatuses of telescopes and photographs. Like Sontag suggests, photos transmit the specific to the universal⁶², working theologically to this extent, and here I mean to “focus” such attention in just that capacity.

Specifically, a limited religious outlook focuses on those forced to endure sacrifice and social suffering as a consequence of being on the social margins, furthest removed from a normative center, furthest removed from the god-idols reinforcing society as god. In the same way a backward telescope makes the viewer more acutely aware of the border of the actual telescope, a limited religious outlook foregrounds those social actors who make up the border framing god-idols—those who are sacrificed and in whose sacrifice focuses attention to the god-idol. The margins move so close to the center, that effectively, the limits of full social, or “religious,” knowing is exposed by the immense variety of combinations of colors and shapes. Clarity is lost as what was once left out of sight bombards the center of the image. These border figures not only focus attention to god-idols, but prevent the viewing of possibilities outside the telescope, outside the imago superlata. In other words, it is hard to see beyond the functional utility or justification of sacrifice.

The last level of recognition involves coming to terms with the loss of clarity and certainty provided by the reversed telescope. Here is where the thing photographed (for the analogy, at least) is more pertinent to my argument. That is, I’m talking again about a telescope

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⁶² Sontag, 18.
specifically, turned in reverse. A limited religious outlook begins to chart how to move and think in a world that is blurry, uncertain, and surrounded by blackness.

A social actor must decide through which end (of the telescope) to view the world: through an exaggeration of reality as clear and focused, or an exaggeration of the functional collateral damage done by such a telescopic positionality. Exaggerations of radical contingency are telescopic snapshots; false representations of clarity and certainty. Transitioning towards an embrace of radical contingency, and offsetting its exaggerations, require the discomfort of walking through the world with shaky footing and uncertainty—perspectives becomes limited, one’s placement in and among the reversed telescope becomes uncertain—acknowledgement of the margins and borders becomes unavoidable, and yet, those margins become difficult to ignore based on their growing numbers. A limited religious outlook prefers the focus on margins and uncertainty offered by a backward telescope. White Christians choose what to see, and what will be marginalized in the constitution of a field of vision. A limited religious outlook learns to see as if at a distance, in effort to make up for having lived with exaggerations—growing less concerned with the specifics of god-idols or their adherence and more interested in recognizing the panoply of options and possibilities that god-idols ignore.

Beginning to Narrate a Limited Religious Outlook

Reversing a telescope, figuratively of course, also focuses attention on the viewer—as in a mirror. A limited religious outlook, in learning more about what is not possible to say with certainty, finds that one’s own story and its impact on the world come into fuzzy, but obvious relief. But what does a person do with such attention? A limited religious outlook frees adherents of the imago superlata to turn the gaze on themselves without fear of reproach, interrogating their identity and finding that they can’t quite see themselves in the same way as before. One comes to
“see” that the visage of clarity offered by religion is determined by a series of self-imposed limitations and parameters. Reversing the telescopic vantage point of religiosity—of identity—where whites and those in places of privilege are concerned—transmutes social privilege into narrative permission.63 A limited religious outlook sets the stage for the performance of one’s own narrative without digression into solipsism but open to expressing the fear of uncertainty.

Not all aspects of a story will be good, and the stories to be told by adherents to the imago superlata are pockmarked with the shame and dread noted above by Bloom. But learning to “number our days” involves cultivating an understanding of the limits of religion and a subsequent decision to embrace those limits. This begins by telling the hard truths of the imago superlata which translate into the stories of culture. But to force home the difficulty of a limited religious outlook: Think, for a moment, of the struggle of asking someone, who thinks themselves holding a “working” telescope, to grow comfortable with its use in reverse.64 Functionally speaking, god-idols have worked to secure the feeling that one views the world through a telescope, focused and clarified and super-human as a result. The difficulty of convincing that a backward telescope narrates a greater “focus” on equity and justice involves, then, narrating the story of the functional deaths of some of these god-idols, as well as narrating the functional futility of all god-idols in overcoming the most fundamental of human limits, physical mortality.

63 This idea of “narrative permission” is inspired by a comment I once heard by NPR’s Michelle Norris. While discussing her social and artistic effort “The Race Card Project,” she simply noted that in asking someone to tell their own story, it served as a kind of permission. See http://theracecardproject.com/
64 It also matters who “holds” such a telescope at all, and I hope I’ve indicated as much in the preceding sections.
Homo Narrans: Storytelling without Exaggerating

Here I seek to undergird the significance of storytelling as means for coping with the uncertainty posed by a limited religious outlook and for describing what is seen of oneself in a mirror. In the previous chapter, I suggested that Westerners have no culture. This seems to be true in the social sense I suggested then, as much as it is not the whole truth from an historical standpoint. All people have a culture; whether it is celebrated, acknowledged or hidden is a different story. The turn to culture leads further to story.

In the Foreword to anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff’s Number Our Days (1979), her advisor Victor Turner situates Myerhoff’s insights through a popular idea at the time, that of Homo Narrans, or “humankind as story-teller, implying that culture in general—specific cultures, and the fabric of meaning that constitutes any single human existence—is the ‘story’ we tell about ourselves.” A limited religious outlook takes narrative and storytelling as a powerful method. What does a story responsive to the imago superlata look like? According to Myerhoff, “Always in these stories…the integrity of the person over time was their essential quest. In the process they created personal myths, not saying that it had all been worthwhile, neither that it had not.” Ontology, cultural meaning and story come together in this book as a triumph, of sorts, over binary rigid thinking that too often presupposes new to old, good to bad, white to black, etc. Myerhoff’s success is not as significant as the attempt, as it looks in the direction of

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67 Myerhoff, 37.
an elderly and dying community only to arrive at a means of moving forward in the wake of her own death.

Myerhoff’s life and death imply that such a “quest” occurs through the narrative we craft of our own lives. Myerhoff’s work constantly blurred the lines between ethnography, folklore and myth, and biography. Myerhoff’s “bad” ethnography offer a similar model and yet another “swerve”, where the tools of story-telling, fiction, non-fiction and autobiography, offer means of responding to the complexities of human life and community. In what follows for this dissertation, I intentionally blur the lines between such disciplinary boundaries as adherence to such borders amount to adherence to the imago superlata in the form of epistemological disciplining techniques. I’d rather respond creatively to such assumptions about borders rather than reify them, and this is made possible precisely as the turn to narrative has been made possible by blurring of theology and anthropology in the previous chapter. If distinctions allow for the focus produced by the margins of an imago superlata outlook, then a blurring of distinctions will allow for stories told from social centers to take into greater account the concerns of those on the margins.

Vignette Two: The Orthodoxy of Death

Barbara Myerhoff (1935-1985) was a white, Jewish anthropologist trained under anthropologist and social theorist Victor Turner, whose work would ultimately shape her life (and death). The following second vignette, taken from Myerhoff’s work which became her own life and death, offers a starting point for understanding that the hells we make are only ever “escaped” through embrace of those there with us. Myerhoff, having been diagnosed with terminal cancer and having embraced the beauty and structure of her cultural roots in a self-isolating, orthodox Jewish community, is asked a question:
Could you be one of these [orthodox] women?  

Myerhoff thinks carefully and notes that though she loves the rituals (as an ethnographer), the rituals come with restrictions, and she couldn’t follow those restrictions for more than an hour (as an adherent). Two weeks before her death, she recants on her earlier comments about restrictions. She notes that her earlier comments had not placed the restrictions in the context of a “god within.” She’d thought of such restrictions in terms of something external, something she would have to bow to, such as “the priesthood or [an external] god giving her rules.”  

Now frail and on the verge of death, she recognizes those religious and cultural restrictions as self-imposed and that self-imposition seems to give new life to their worth and value—more precisely, to the restrictions’ ability to recalibrate human worth and ability in the face of death. Facing physical death has meant a new awareness and appreciation for limitations, those internally-imbued, as honest assessments of physical and emotional human limits, indicative of the need for human community, yet aware of the dangers posed by community (if given the opportunity to be treated as if a community were more than a constellation of limited humans). Speaking of her illness, she notes “suddenly here are restrictions. I can’t walk the way I did. Eat. Breathe. The basic functions. Mother my children the way I did. Every day presents me with new [restrictions]. And every day, some days more than others, I have the choice as to whether I see those as restrictions or doorways to other possibilities.”  

A limited religious outlook finds such self-imposed cultural and arbitrary physical health restrictions as “doorways to other possibilities,” in that through such restrictions, physical death is made conceivable. More pointedly, through limitations, hell is hermeneutically “escaped” in

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68 Myerhoff, *In Her Own Time.*
69 Ibid.
70 Ibid.
an ethical sense, because the view of hell, itself, is restricted by having recast view towards those once on the margins of vision. A limited religious outlook is an outlook that seeks to reckon with human limitations and restrictions and ultimately death as an opening of new possibilities for human life flourishing. A limited religious outlook like this, with the help and support of culture, reverses the functional efficacy of the god idea. Having relinquished god-idols in the face of death, the death dealing god of society is transmuted into death as god. Death of god-idols comes in the form of submission to the god of death and uncertainty; acceptance of that which cannot be avoided.

This is the central argument of Part Two of this dissertation: that a death-dealing and death-denying society would do well to worship death as god. The final two chapters offer strategy for such worship. There is no triumph, no new birth in death; there is finality in a physical sense, even if there are “doorways to other possibilities.” Such doorways, however, require a new understanding of what had once been restrictions masquerading as possibilities, and what are now possibilities arriving in the focus of a restriction. For Myerhoff, death transformed her into an Orthodox woman; in a different, but equally “restricted” sense. But she did have the freedom, indeed the responsibility, to come to terms with what was happening in the final chapters of her life. She was learning that by limiting our expectations about religion’s usefulness, we are freed to take full advantage of the limits at the heart of any religious imagination.71

An uncertain humanism, in the practice of a limited religious outlook, comes to self-impose limits on self rather than fear them coming from something external. For instance, Myerhoff, like many white women in the 1970s had certain feminist sensibilities that the

patriarchal cultural framework of the Jewish communities she studied rubbed her the wrong way on a number of fronts. Hence, the question not “could you be Orthodox,” but “could you be an Orthodox woman?” Remarkably, and as if to cast home the full import of her turn to narrative culture and its limits that might recalibrate senses of self and other in the face of death, she agrees in the final weeks leading up to her death to receive a Jewish get. Having been divorced previously, and in the constant audience of Orthodox Jewish men and women who want her to make good on Jewish custom before her death, she agrees. She is intentional about embracing this cultural ritual even though it flies in the face of her many of the contemporary ideological perspectives that give her a sense of certainty and identity. In the face of the orthodoxy of death, Myerhoff ends up an Orthodox woman, after all.

**How to ‘Number Our Days’: Narrating the Embrace of Death**

Myerhoff’s acceptance of a “get” is an acute instance of embrace of one’s radical contingency. In fact, it is also reclamation of radical contingency through an uncertain adoption of a cultural vestige working to exaggerate the radical contingency of yet others in other instances. A limited religious outlook is not concerned with the keeping or jettisoning of rituals, whether big or small, but with vantage point and hermeneutical outlook. There are ideas and practices that ought be jettisoned, the ritual of lynching and the belief in the soul two examples of many, but a limited religious outlook is primarily concerned with the transformation of the means of exaggerating the radical contingency of others into the means through which a limited religious outlook recalibrates one’s radical contingency. Barbara Myerhoff offers both methodological and existential clarity as to how stories told in the face of death offer a means of moving against a death-dealing social world.
Full embrace of one’s own culture, the good and the bad, is important for a limited religious outlook, yet knows and guards against the continued embrace of the god-idols born from specific culture. Functionally speaking, the imago superlata offers a sleight-of-hand diversion wherein radical contingency is responded to through the notion that society is god—a mechanism promising a temporary flight from death and limitation. Such is certainly one way to deal with death. Indeed, it is a popular option. Yet, in contradistinction to the imago superlata, and in an admittedly structurally-framed nod to nature or disorder, etc., I want to argue that a limited religious outlook embraces radical contingency through culture. Working with the people of Fairfax while coming to terms with her own impending death, the wisdom of her work and life/death have coalesced into clarity:

They presented me with an organic life. A life that was all of a piece. It had a totality, because of the way the people knew each other, because of the deep intertwining of their lives at every moment, on every level, on every relationship, and because of this envelope of belief that enfolds them all, so that there almost can’t be a separate word for religion. It’s not a separate category or activity; its embedded in everything.\textsuperscript{72}

Here, even at times through the rhetoric of sacred and profane, there is no binary distinction at work. Such a limited religious outlook situates a real—limited, creative, possible, dying—culture at the center of any orientation. Myerhoff follows Geertz; I want to simply focus attention on such a position as a response to the functional problem of god-idols constituting society as god. In shorthand form, having learned from Myerhoff, within a limited religious outlook, death has become god, and a shift to culture makes this shift both possible and more tolerable. Stated differently, the blurring of distinctions in the life/death of Myerhoff suggests that the final “swerve” against hell involves breaking down the distinction between life and death through a focus on narrative and cultural affinity. This turn to culture is not a flight away from death, but a

\textsuperscript{72} Myerhoff, \textit{In Her Own Time}. 
flight towards activities and ideas and human connectedness that makes the life of death
tolerable. The embrace of radical contingency situates death as god, and culture the stuff we do
as we wait on the impending theophany that cuts across all difference.

Myerhoff’s work engaged questions of narrative, identity, belonging, community,
cultural affinity, death, and the elderly. Moreover, that work clearly blurs lines between
disciplinary boundaries and medium of presentation for her work. She was instrumental in
bringing videography and documentary film making into the anthropological norm, even
winning an Academy Award for a documentary (Number Our Days [1977]) framed around her
research at the Aliyah Senior Citizens Center in Southern California in the 1970s. The book by
the same name arrived two years after the film. In the monograph treatment of her fieldwork at
Aliyah Senior Citizens Center, she relays her anxiety about losing easy distinctions:

I spent a great deal of time agonizing about how to label what I was doing—was it
anthropology or a personal quest? I never fully resolved the question. I used many
conventional anthropological methods and asked many typical questions, but when I had
finished, I found my descriptions did not resemble most anthropological writings.73

In an embrace of radical contingency, an anxiety of awareness starts the process. Myerhoff
grows aware of the usefulness of self-imposed limits as she is forced to reckon with intensifying
physical limits. Her individual body serves as a microcosm for understanding the workings of the
larger community, and perhaps, even society in general. Myerhoff’s living death (and what she
chose to do with it) offers white, petit bourgeois Christians a canvas for symbolization and
cultural expression in the wake of the impending death of what has come before, or the imminent
physical deaths all people face. Myerhoff dovetails with Mary Douglas in this regard.

Myerhoff knew early that her work was not in keeping with “traditional” anthropology,
and expressing in ways similar to Bloom’s “swerve” and yet drastically different, she allows that

73 Myerhoff, Number Our Days.
anxiety to fuel her turn towards storytelling. Like Pinn’s theological expression of humanists to have come before him, Myerhoff turns to the stories of Jews who have lived/died before her. She learns how to number her own days with this storytelling. Rather than seek out to blur priority and authority, Myerhoff literally turns to telling the stories of others who have come before. This first methodological point is important because the embrace of radical contingency involves the relinquishment of order, authority and priority. Rather than blurring solipsistic lines of demarcation (priority and authority), she chooses to blur methodological lines in response to that very anxiety. It involves letting go, understanding both that it’s okay and normal to ask such questions of order, but it is equally possible—and preferable—to accept the blurred lines of narrative as definite lines of demarcation produce god-idols who make death difficult to accept. Perhaps, the first structural distinction out of which the sacred/profane takes its name is that posed between physical life and death.

These lines Myerhoff preferred to blur in her work and life would take more drastic turns when later in her life, while engaged in fieldwork in the Fairfax community of voluntarily isolated Jews in Southern California, she would be diagnosed with terminal cancer. Her time with that community saw her turn towards cultural resources in the wake of death, and this turn is important for understanding any limited religious outlook. But before this “last fieldwork” at Fairfax, the time she spent years prior in the Aliyah Seniors Center gave her wisdom for what was to come of her fieldwork/life.

Another of the significant insights from Myerhoff’s *Number Our Days* (1979) comes in the form of realizing that embrace of radical contingency does not mean embrace of the other, in the popular sense that racism will be erased through acceptance of diversity. Rather, the embrace

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of radical contingency is the embrace of one’s heritage, the good and bad that it brings and has brought. In philosophical terms, it is not enough to see the face of the other cry out; responding to the imago superlata perforce demands seeing yourself as the other and understood anew. Where white Christians are concerned, this embrace of the hell of death involves taking responsibility for the worst of one’s culture, such as the KKK, homophobes, etc. In hell, embrace of the other is embrace of devils. At best, a limited religious outlook uses the face of the other to see oneself as other—more demanding than the use of the other. For brief grounded example, hiring an African American as a Chief Diversity Officer at a dominant institution is using the face of the other; hiring a Caucasian in the same capacity is the more difficult, but more necessary, decision.

Working with one’s own society, and more specifically, those of one’s own ethnic and familial heritage, is perilous and much more difficult…Identifying with the “Other,”—Indians, Chicanos, if one is Anglo, blacks if one is white, males if one is female—is an act of imagination…Identifying with what one is now and will be someday is quite a different process.\footnote{Myerhoff, 18.}

Much has been made in contextual studies about turning to black sources and norms as a corrective to racism embedded in theology, anthropology or any other discourse. And my project certainly foots that bill. But such a turn is not enough—it is important, but not enough—unless it is accompanied by a turn back towards one’s own community. Myerhoff learned that the other is not nearly as dangerous or difficult to understand as the other in one’s self. In Myerhoff’s case, that community was a Jewish community. In the case of white petit bourgeois Christians, required is a turn back towards white churches and communities of origin, with the clarity of uncertainty offered by coming to terms with death, along with the confidence in knowing that those spaces have something to teach and learn about numbering our days. Such is required of a
limited religious outlook. As if Myerhoff is describing the Imago Superlata in practice, she contextualizes the anxiety that makes learning to die for others so difficult:

An insidious circularity has developed—ignorance, based in part on denial of our future, leading to fear and rejection of the elderly, engendering guilt that is often expressed as neglect or mistreatment, then more guilt, avoidance and ignorance; ageism is characterized by the same self-fulfilling processes that operate in racism. Our anxiety about the future is guaranteed by our own behavior, assuring that our worst unspoken, unspeakable fear will be realized: Our children will treat us as we treat our parents.”76

Paraphrased through Bloom, we regenerate hell on earth in the fear of death Myerhoff situates the anxiety of influence in the stark clarity of a problem, a social problem. If Myerhoff is to be taken seriously, we are left to realize that more than a swerve is necessary if we are to respond adequately to the social problems we face. To press home the significance of Myerhoff, against the limited efficacy of Bloom, the “hells” in which so many find themselves having only been strong enough to “swerve,” can be escaped through the embrace of the ultimate source of the anxiety described by Bloom: death. To this end, poetry is “saved” if its self-immolation is embraced allowing poetry to be born again, anew, outside the confines of the anxiety of influence guiding Modernity. In like manner, the white community the topic of this dissertation might finally “escape” the hell of its own making, and consequentially escape its status as a society of white devils, if it embraces the uncertainty offered by the certainty of its death. Recognition of such death, ironically, involves no longer trying to escape the fundamental “hell” posed by human being toward death.77 Understanding that the anxiety of influence is ruptured not by appeals to the Other, but by forcefully squaring with one’s own heritage, history and

76 Ibid., 19.
77 Here, I mean to reference (though only loosely) Martin Heidegger’s notion of being toward death. For more information, see Martin Heidegger, Being and Time. SUNY Press, 2010; and Magda King, A Guide to Heidegger’s Being and Time. SUNY Press, 2001.
culture, Myerhoff’s interest in the elderly is a fitting place to learn such wisdom. From the standpoint of a limited religious outlook, much of that anxiety stems from the anxiety of limitation and mortality. Anxiety is self-fulfilling; overcoming it requires first knowing it intimately and listening—as an ethnographer—to the stories it produces. Learning to tell one’s own story, as Myerhoff learned and teaches now, is always to tell the story of one’s death. It is to write one’s own eulogy, with the tools of cultural heritage. Such narrating begins the process of responding to the imago superlata. In telling one’s story, the face of death is exposed as their own. White masks—all masks—deny death and thereby deny life.

According to Myerhoff, stories matter because people are simultaneously “too busy to stop and shape a tale with grace and art [as a trained novelist, anthropologist or theologian], but too alive to imagination and verbal expression to be silent…and its roots were in the heart and bones and genes.”78 In narrative, physical death and social death collide into possibilities for new life in old traditions. Such stories provide the formerly dead and dying—that is, the dying—to be transformed with new life, as suggested by one of Myerhoff’s wisest informants:

But finally, this group brought out such beautiful memories, not always so beautiful, but still, all the pictures came up. It touched the layers of the kind that it was on those dead people already. It was laying on them like layers, separate layers of earth, and all of a sudden in this class I feel it coming up like lava. It just melted away the earth from all those people. It melted away, and they became alive. And then to me it looked like they were never dead.79

If freed from the anxiety of having to escape that heritage, through culture people appear in all their complexity and terrible beauty, appearing as if they were never dead.80

78 Myerhoff, Number Our Days, 37.
79 Rachel, an informant, qtd. in Myerhoff, Number Our Days, 39.
80 Ibid.
Narrating the Death of God-Idols

And here it was. It was, in a way mine all along. It was what I belonged to without knowing it. And I suppose that’s a treasure really, that they’ve given to me. If, if I can in my work, as an anthropologist, at the same time, make it clear to others who they are and what they feel and what they have…if I can take what they’ve shown me and pass that through me and out into the world, then my work is done.

Everyone dies. Physically, we all die at some point. Socially, too, communities are born, live and die in accord with their specific quantities of members as well as the degree of power wielded by those communities. Everyone’s days are numbered, so it were. But not everyone learns to number their days, and not all deaths are arrived at in the same way. A limited religious outlook encourages and cultivates an awareness and commitment to living/dying for the sake of others—that is, coming to final terms with one’s own radical contingency. As a scholar, my presentation of a limited religious outlook serves multiple ends: To elucidate the “not always so beautiful” memories of a white community learning how to die, my own community of origin, and I take it my responsibility as a scholar to “take what they’ve shown me and pass that through me and out into the world.” Only, my story must privilege the facet of their stories they have chosen to ignore, fight against or deny, death. Also, to ensure that white cultural resources are used as much and as often as possible to teach those at the center of a white petit bourgeois center how to “number our days.” Death, as a heuristic emerging from the only story shared by us all—that we all die—works to ensure my telling of white heritage remains humble and uncertain. Failure to guard against certainty is the easiest path/past leading devils to remain in hell.

Myerhoff offers a model for learning to die for others because she comes to understand the means of numbering one’s days is through embrace of one’s cultural heritage, the stories about us told by us and by others like us, through a hermeneutic register of self-imposed

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81 Myerhoff, *In Her Own Time.*
82 Ibid.
restrictions and limitations. Her death arriving from cancer, or her identity as Jewish, does not negate her serving as a model for a white petit bourgeois Christian community to come to terms with the possibility of an impending social death. Such a social death will only be fully realized if individuals are able to overcome their anxiety of death’s influence through acceptance of that influence. Whether for entire communities or individuals, Myerhoff offers a means of coping through a focus on cultural narratives. Though such narratives can cut in positive and negative ways, held in sight of radical contingency, they offer a resource to white Christians interested in finding ways for responding to the imago superlata. In death, Myerhoff found her community and came to an awareness of her responsibility to that community, a community she says was “what she belonged to all along without knowing it.” By listening to that community, and relaying the stories of that community as she heard and understood them, she offered herself and them the narrative permission to tell the good and bad stories of their lives, their hatred of others and their love for others.

This chapter has told the story of how we—those devils remaining in hell—might be taught to “number our days.” In what follows of this dissertation, I seek to follow Myerhoff’s hermeneutical example, not as if to cast her a martyr for responding to an unjust social system, but because in the face of physical death she found the courage to respond to cultural heritage—the good and the bad of it—in ways transformative for those and those around her. For “devils” like myself consigned by our own purported attempts to escape hell, to remain in hell, the hell of death requires the embrace of those within it. Through the stories that follow, those of the life and work of Carson McCullers and Lillian Smith, today’s adherents to the imago superlata might grow to understand the value of their cultural heritage, the importance of stories in the

83 Death is death; and death is always death-dealing unless embraced by the dying.
84 Myerhoff, In Her Own Time.
recalibration of human responsibility towards others, and the courage to begin living with
uncertainty, limitation and mortality in ways that are more life affirming than has been the norm
to this point. Situating death as god requires telling and arriving at the passion narratives each
person holds as a possibility for their death; that is, what is the risk or danger willing to be posed
to oneself as they come to more equitably focus attention on the risks and dangers faced by those
on social margins, historically? A limited religious outlook, in the hazy twilight of the god-idols,
finds reason to believe that a white community might hold within itself the seeds of a more
equitable social arrangement. This will involve letting go of something even more precious than
life or certainty: eternal life.
Chapter Five:

Rejecting the ‘Gift of Death’:

Embracing Social Responsibility in Twilight Times through a Pedagogic of Death

The gift of death would be this marriage of responsibility and faith.

-Jacques Derrida¹

The concept of the ‘soul,’ the ‘spirit,’ finally even ‘immortal soul,’ invented in order to despise the body, to make it sick, ‘holy’; to oppose with a ghastly levity everything that deserves to be taken seriously in life, the questions of nourishment, abode, spiritual diet, treatment of the sick, cleanliness, and weather.

-Friedrich Nietzsche²

What is the social responsibility of white Christians concerned that their religious beliefs or practices, those ideas and activities that structure and are structured by identity formation³, do not reinforce god-idols like whiteness or unduly reproduce the social consequences caused by adherence to those god-idols, to the extent such a concern can be addressed at all? Is there a “right” way to do or be religious? To the extent religion is social; there will likely always be morally positive and negative effects of religious beliefs and practices. But there might be tactics for cultivating certain religious beliefs and expressions that are less harmful, more socially responsible than popular options. This social responsibility would involve finding a way to celebrate social difference without ranking such differences in terms of capability or value; basically, this involves not positioning oneself above anyone else in importance or ability.

In the previous chapter, I began to articulate the sources, norms and methods for a limited religious outlook. Here, I extend one expressive practice of this outlook by appealing to

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theological, philosophical and literary sources as case study and resource to demonstrate that such social responsibility involves not only the surrender of theism (see Chapter Two), but also rejecting one of the principle effects of god-idol adherence, the belief in a personal conception of the soul and personal salvation. Through what I want to characterize as a “pedagogic of death” where death grounds normative claims, I seek to argue that if white Christians want a litmus test, of sorts, for determining if they are moving in the direction of the imago superlata or away from it, that test might be available through—and evidenced in—one’s willingness to reject the concept of personal salvation for the sake of social responsibility, what I have thematically referred to as learning to die for others.4

**Taking Salvation Personally**

Philosophically speaking, this personal salvation I have in mind holds fast to the certainty of life, and life everlasting in the sense of “heaven” as a reward for fidelity and belief, found in the form of continuance of life, personality and autonomy, or in the technological social ascendancy of achieving “heaven” on earth. This chapter discusses the relationship between this assured reward and its social costs. My argument does not seek to bolster a kind of white stewardship in the vein of the “white man’s burden” nor does it transfigure believers into Christ figures. Rather, I am interested in disrupting the rationale behind such self-aggrandizing narratives, while accepting the limited capacity for such disruption. One avenue of address appears in this particular concept of personal salvation. Neither do I mean to suggest all soteriologies are equally guilty of this personalized demand. I focus my attention here to those that do posture in a personalized fashion.

4 My suggestion should not be read as a covert appeal to “collective salvation” either. By social responsibility, I mean to suggest a program for interaction no longer based on the demand for salvation, or the presumption that salvation is possible.
The chapter refutes the belief in salvation as personal entry into the “kingdom of god,” understanding such entry as homologous to a presumed triumph over death. This includes traditional understandings of salvation framed in the future tense, as in “we await a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will change our lowly body to be like his glorious body” (Phil. 3:20-21) and especially the past tense as in “by grace you have been saved” (1 Corinthians 15:2). This includes both material-based expressions of this salvation (as promoted by many social gospellers and their contemporary heirs) as well as otherworldly expressions found in Pentecostal and many other traditions. While there are admittedly as many differences amongst these positions as commonalities, my contention is that whether this-worldly or otherworldly, if understood as an individual salvation alone or an individual salvation within a group arrangement (i.e. the social gospel), the seeking of—or belief in—personal salvation, both this-worldly and otherworldly arrangements inhibit white Christian social responsibility.

Accordingly, this chapter also rejects the individualized expression of a “soul.” I understand the “soul” as the thing “saved” by personal salvation, the name often given to individualized consciousness, the mind, the thing that talks to us in our head, that which seemingly escapes the

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5 I intentionally conflate the basic idea in life after death with the question (some) might have in terms of a reward or punishment. Salvation is the continuance of life, not the reward for a life lived faithfully.


7 See, for instance, Walter Rauschenbusch, Anthony Campolo, and Paul Rauschenbusch. *Christianity and the Social Crisis in the 21st Century: The Classic That Woke up the Church*. San Francisco, Calif.: Enfield: HarperSanFrancisco Publishers Group UK [distributor], 2008. Though remembered for his attention to social salvation, I understand even such utopian visions as guided principally by an inability to wrestle with social difference, and understand such projects as rooted in personal attempts to escape both death and its effects, making it problematic for white Christians. Indeed, as Gary Dorrien has made clear, this movement was filled with leaders whose vision of the Kingdom on Earth left truncated options for African Americans. See also, Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Idealism, Realism, and Modernity, 1900-1950*. 1st ed. Westminster John Knox Press, 2003.
boundaries of the material world. Personal conceptions of the soul serve as the perceptual chasm between the material world and the ideological world, preventing active concern for social actors across different social contexts.

This chapter speaks to and about the white Christians who employ this sense of soul and salvation. Examples are easy to find and include many Evangelical and prosperity-focused institutions, mainline Protestant denominations who recite the Nicene Creed\(^8\), and many others who have inherited the vestiges of such personalized beliefs but who might now identify as outside institutional religious communities. This arrangement could then include many “spiritual but not religious” types who still hold a personalized belief structure that includes an explicit or implicit desire for salvation. Though this line of reasoning may be applicable outside of white Christianity, my interest is in offering a hermeneutic for taking stock of the social implications of that particular community’s general sentiments regarding salvation. Indeed, I am refuting a major theological component of most Abrahamic religious traditions, but I limit my proscriptive comments to white Christians.\(^9\) In the next section, I summarize why these personal ideas are problematic.

**Personal Salvation as the ‘Gift of Death’**

White Christians concerned that their beliefs or practices not unduly reinforce the imago superlata—e.g. that their beliefs or practices do more to refute racism, sexism, homophobia and the like than to bolster such social injustices—would do well to reject what Jacques Derrida

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\(^8\) Though the statement of belief doesn’t, in many or most instances, correspond to daily lifestyle or commitment, I am here only noting the connection between the Nicene Creed and the style and arrangement of salvation under scrutiny here.

\(^9\) To those who would suggest I here set up a straw man, I encourage them to try and demonstrate that the stated arrangement is not one of the major strands of white Christian thought in the United States.
refers to as the “gift of death.” Accepting the “gift of death” requires the wedding of “responsibility and faith,” which can be thought of as assuming or assenting to the proposition that what “ought” to be will be by virtue of its demand, and can be understood as the theological promise of personal salvation. I turn to Derrida as he provides focused attention to the topic of death and salvation, and because his efforts synthesize a number of philosophical perspectives space prevents me from fully exploring. For instance, philosophers Emmanuel Levinas and Martin Heidegger deeply inform Derrida’s presentation of “the gift of death.” By taking up Derrida, I’m able to cover a number of philosophical thinkers and issues through proxy (Heidegger’s being-toward-death, for instance) without undue jargon or excurses that would send me too far from my central argument. I hope to demonstrate that social responsibility is arrived at through recognition that those on the social periphery are more similar to those at social centers than different, an embrace of difference without ranking such differences. Take for instance the example that is used by Derrida, Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice Isaac on Mount Moriah. As the biblical narrative unfolds, we come to realize that Abraham’s “faithfulness,” his

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11 Ibid., 8.
12 Of my position on Levinas, I agree with his claim that the face of the other reveals the call to responsibility. But I do not find Levinas helpful for addressing this asymmetrical arrangement, an asymmetry I situate as an expression of the “chasm” between the material and ideological “worlds.” For more on Levinas, see Emmanuel Levinas and Richard A. Cohen. *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*. 1st edition. Pittsburgh: Duquesne Univ Pr, 1985.
13 Of Heidegger, his eventual embrace of National Socialism hangs as a warning, a shadow, over this project, in that too much sympathetic treatment to those at social centers will always reinforce the construction and subjugation of the margins. In short, Heidegger’s intense individualism plays out through the justification of group atrocities. He is, in a sense, emblematic of the danger of taking the "medicine" I offer, but not following the directions. Those “directions” involve understanding my project as hermeneutical and not metaphysical, ontotheological, or ontological.
15 I look forward to future work that might spell out a fuller philosophical genealogy of my argument.
wedding of responsibility to faith (in this sense), is rewarded by God in the form of a substituted sacrifice so that Isaac might be saved. But is there still not a sacrifice required? Hence, there is something to such a wedding of faith to responsibility that necessitates attention to death. More specifically, as I hope to demonstrate, there is something to this “wedding” that demands the death of another so that the death of oneself or community might be avoided. The gift of death is the preservation of one’s own life for another. In discussing Abraham’s willingness, Derrida admits to his failure in this regard—that is, he too “receives” the gift of death—and thus offers the most succinct diagnosis for understanding both how this gift functions and the social consequences of receiving personal salvation as this “gift of death.”

Topically, it would at first glance appear that an “embrace” of the gift of death would be a kind of recognition of limits, boundaries and finitude. But as it has played out, the “gift” has transcended the object of that gift, meaning that those who accept this “gift” are left—even if they consciously or unconsciously are motivated by recognition of limits—artificially escaping and rejecting finitude and human limitation. For those who “receive” this gift, the soul, salvation and the afterlife (i.e. a certain sort of eschatological certainty) is made possible through a sacrificed wholly other god that is actually only a conceptual marker for social others. By wholly other, I mean the utterly unknowable, alterity of things, and follow Derrida as he outlines this gift as he sees it:

The other in its infinite alterity, one who regards without being seen but also whose infinite goodness gives in an experience that amounts to a gift of death [donner la mort].

This gift situates the social other as wholly other, giving the appearance that an economy of sacrifice has ended, that death has been overcome. But the gift actually only transposes that economy into a “transcendent” realm. This transcendent realm, I argue, is a conceptual marker

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for those illegible social actors on the periphery. Receiving this “gift of death” ensures the economy of sacrifice continues in perpetuity for those deemed social others – the perpetual others of such sacrifice. The gift of death, though it purports to reject the economy of sacrifice as it offers social insiders the promise of salvation, actually keeps the economy intact. In this framework, sacrificial offerings move from social centers, are projected onto the idea of god, and projected yet again onto those deemed to stand outside of social centers.

In effort to address this framework, this chapter seeks to answer and explore a question and warning posed by Paul Tillich as he understands death as non-being:

Why do we care about the time after our death but not the time before it?

The ‘American way of life’ is a blessing coming from the past, but it is also a curse, threatening the future.

This “‘American way of life’” is largely sustained by white Christians (and those who’ve bought into the false certainty of god-ids – consciously or unconsciously) as the perpetual recipients of “the gift of death,” the gift of the rejection of finality made possible as “every one being [is] sacrificed to every one else.” Such sacrifices can never be justified by those at social centers, and through the gift, “god” purports to take on the task of both justification and of ending the sacrifice. But “faith” in this divine justification falls flat, and sacrifices continue. This chapter attempts to curb, slow down, this ongoing “curse” on the “American way of life.”

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17 While I define death in terms of the loss of power, and Tillich in terms of non-being, his definition fits within mine, and thus, his framing of this question remains useful both thematically and as a sociological snapshot of the fear of lost power shaping theological assumptions and presumptions about possible alternatives.


19 Derrida, The Gift of Death, 70.

20 Ibid., 71.
To marry responsibility to faith, as Derrida suggests institutes the gift of death, is to abandon the limitations of human freedom posed by social responsibility and the possibility for social equity, an experience of possibility within limitation. This social responsibility is the demand that freedom be expressed in relation to other social actors, cultivating the responsibility to no longer constitute social actors/agents as wholly others. Rejection of this gift—the eternal life promised from god’s sacrifice—is thusly required for those who do not want their beliefs or practices to reinforce differences in ability and value across social groups. Only after rejection of the personal soul, “invented in order to despise the body, to make it sick,” disallowing its ability to “oppose everything that deserves to be taken seriously in life,” might it be possible for white Christians to hermeneutically register those on social margins as social actors with full social access to resource and power, and equal in worth and ability to those at social centers. Indeed, this would entail a rupture of the logic constituting the center as qualitatively distinct from the periphery. Such a rupture might be cultivated through embrace of the multivalent pedagogical utility found in the idea of death, discussed next.

**Sketching a Pedagogic of Death**

Rejection of the “gift of death” is not a rejection of death, as such. Quite the contrary. Rejecting this gift concealing death within an exchange economy involves a kind of pedagogical embrace of the object of that gift, death. I define death as an idealized expression of the loss of physical, psychical and social power—a constituent feature of life—indicative of a fundamental sameness that cuts across manufactured group difference. This is not to suggest death as a kind of embrace of meaninglessness or nihilism, but that the economy of death is a false economy to begin with. Rejecting the economy of death, to this end, is a rejection of the possibility of

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meaninglessness and nihilism. Further, it runs the risk of rejecting “meaning” itself, as it will no
longer accept a meaning made through the relegation of social others to positions of
meaninglessness.

With this working definition of death, I offer a pedagogic of death. Here, I have in mind
something different than Paul Ramsey’s “Death’s Pedagogic,” in that Ramsey is focused
principally on promoting a social openness to individual, physical death, such as euthanasia. My
pedagogic taps into the anxiety and fear posed by the idea of individual, physical death, but with
the aim directed not at the individual right (or ability) to physically die, but towards entire groups
in a social sense. I also have in mind something a bit more socially focused than Kenneth Vaux’s
“Pedagogy of Death” used to teach pastoral bedside manner with the dying. Rather, the
pedagogic of death employed throughout this chapter is directed towards white Christian social
responsibility, either in terms of actual or perceived power and resource. Through such a
pedagogic, the conceptual distance created by the imago superlata between freedom (i.e.
individual mind/ideas) and responsibility (i.e. material social reality) is brought together by
localizing exaggerations of this freedom or responsibility in the counterfactual sameness
provided by death. It achieves this by attacking personal salvation, transmuting that belief into an
existential test for white Christians: Continuing to “believe in” personal salvation suggests an
ideological inability to accept real or perceived losses of power and marks them as willing to kill
to prevent such losses. While accepting the finality of individual and group life opens the
possibility of renewed social responsibility.

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22 Vigen Guroian, *Life’s Living Toward Dying: A Theological and Medical-ethical Study*. Wm.
23 Kenneth L. Vaux, “The Pedagogy of Death.” *Religious Education* 85, no. 4 (September 1,
This chapter is the most abstract and philosophical of this project. It makes use of blurred methodological and categorical lines between physical, metaphoric and social deaths. It conflates the categories of god-idols, humans and literary characters. And it makes anachronistic parallels seemingly inattentive to historiographic shifts. For these reasons, I spend time carefully defining key terms, concepts, and how they relate to each other. Of the blurring of physical, metaphoric, and social expressions of death, some readers might think I leave “real” deaths out of the story, erring on the side of philosophy and literary examples rather than concrete sociological data. I could juxtapose average lifespans between those at social centers with those at social margins. For instance, figures from 2009 indicate that African American men die, on average, five or six years before their white male counterparts. But I am not interested in situating death as a means of social distinction (as these figures do), but in suggesting that physical death (as an idea) offers a pedagogical counter-narrative to the false promise that society somehow creates a defense from death so long as distinctions remain intact. With this in mind, my concerns are precisely to address the abstracted ideological disparities—the ideas that allow a sense of differential value and ability—that often produce the very social conditions we find in such statistics. To this end, I follow Derrida’s own motivations in writing *The Gift of Death*, examining the social consequences and function of philosophy and theology, in this regard, but I reject his personal conclusions. Where my conflation of literary and biblical god-idols and humans are concerned, I put into practice here my earlier claim that theology is anthropology requiring (for the theologian) an expanded use not simply of cultural resources, but a greater reliance on what such resources have to say about the limits of social arrangements guided by a logic of sacrifice. As to the sensitivity towards shifts in intellectual and social history, this project would not be

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necessary at all if an economy of sacrifice did not remain a constituent feature of social life in the West, a “permanent” feature for the “smooth functioning”\textsuperscript{25} of many societies emerging out of the Abrahamic traditions—societies that alienate precisely through rigorous categorical and social distinctions, the original distinction perhaps posed between life and death. I discuss this relationship in the next section.

\textit{Life, Death and a Twilight so Long Endured}

Here, I situate “death” not as the antithesis but as co-constitutive with life, indicative of a loss of assumed power within life, broadly construed. I also situate the pedagogic of death within “twilight,” the overarching hermeneutic holding my dissertation’s entire apparatus together. Twilight attempts to keep in view both the life in death and the death in life (at a philosophical level) with an understanding of the social world as the contemporary space where social actors assume, seek, find, and lose power.

Life defines death and death defines life, much like theism and atheism are not so much opposing alternatives, as they emerge together as perspectival and lexical strategies for navigating the world. For instance, the claim that whiteness as a god-idol is dead is as much a concession to the continued life of whiteness today. To speak of death as a kind of non-being, a mere counterfactual of being, reinforces the primacy of being, suggesting that whether conceived physically, metaphorically or socially, death and life are co-constitutive. Like death, then, a dying whiteness is also a \textit{living} whiteness. Clarity on this point is offered in the verb forms, dying, or living, indicating that these positions are not only parallel perspectives of the same processes, but they emerge along a continuum.

\textsuperscript{25} Derrida, \textit{The Gift of Death}, 86.
Acknowledging the relationship between life and death, what can be made of Michel de Montaigne’s, following Socrates and Cicero, famous suggestion that “to philosophize is to learn to die?”

Though Montaigne seems focused on the quality of individual life lived in the constant present awareness of physical death, how might I further explicate my definition and position in light of his theory? If Montaigne be taken literally, and if death amounts to a real or perceived loss of power, then philosophy would involve, at its best, teaching how to let go of power and resource, coming to terms with “impotence in the face of death,” and a growing awareness of possibilities afforded through embrace of death in/as life. Montaigne speaks to this pedagogical effect, noting that “he who should teach men to die would at the same time teach them to live.”

Montaigne, however, was of the mind that this life would end and another begin, and so his position is not completely my own. His efforts, however, foreground the usefulness of thinking on death’s pedagogical significance.

Similarly demonstrating this utility, and more closely in keeping with my position, Ludwig Feuerbach poetically (and humorously) demanded in 1830 that “Death” be awarded the Doctor of Philosophy degree:

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Highly learned and esteemed gentlemen,
May I hereby present before you Death
   In order that, in your lofty circle,
   You may raise him to the doctorate…

So then I implore you to receive
   Death into the academy,
   And, as soon as possible, to make
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27 I would also suggest that this “letting go” of power has as much to do with coming to realize that power is never actually “held,” but is a mirage or dream, insulated from and insulating human recognition and misrecognition of radical contingency.
29 Montaigne.
Feuerbach seems to be suggesting that philosophy—the academy, more generally, too—wields too much power and not enough humility. The poem offers a double entendre, noting death’s pedagogical use, but simultaneously pronouncing death as doctor of the field of philosophy, suggesting that philosophy might be healed of itself (its Hegelianism, to be specific) if it would just die. Learning to die for others, synonymous with the social responsibility I have in mind, involves disrupting this assumption of power and finding ways to teach how real or perceived power might be let go, relinquished. This is achieved by turning death into a pedagogic, thematically and heuristically useful as means of reflexive pedagogical redress.

Here, death does not function to replace god-idols in an ontological sense, as in an “ultimate” god-idol, but is situated as an interpretive pedagogic. Here is where I depart from many such as Montaigne, who finds in acceptance of death’s uncertain certainty (i.e. the uncertainty of how and when we die, and the certainty that we die) an intensification and greater recognition of life’s pleasures, and Heidegger’s solipsistic fetishizing of death. I am not “believing” that death is god, but I am suggesting that a community whose beliefs have been death dealing for others ought to treat death as if it were their god, idol, or better still, simply their teacher.

This pedagogical corrective takes place within a social environment interpreted to be in a state of twilight. Shifts in power require learning that one is dying, that one is living in the twilight of what they know, what philosopher Cornel West has referred to as a “Twilight Civilization,” not in the sense that whiteness has yet died, but that benefactors (of a less and less

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functionally effective god-idol such as whiteness) are seeing “corrupt and top-heavy nation-states eclipsed by imperial corporations as public life deteriorates due to class polarization, racial balkanization and especially a predatory market culture,” leading to “a pervasive cultural decay in American civilization.”

Not only have those historically deemed social others never been afforded full access to the privileges extended to those at social centers, but those very centers are now eroding, lending fear to those at social centers and dismay, perhaps, to the marginal as the opportunity for greater access is rendered seemingly impossible. Recognizing that what once was a “white” America is on the decline does not equate to saying that things are better for those most victimized by white America. It simply means that whiteness and white America are witnessing the arthritic fingers, acrid feet, fettered face and hands, the shallow breaths of a civilization facing the encroaching darkness of its twilight, but without an historic or hermeneutic precedent for accepting this social decay. These things, though never fully afforded (if at all) to African Americans, are on the decline for whites, as well. For instance, the gutting of the public school system; the shrinking of the middle-class, the loss of privacy. Social responsibility begins when “my gaze, precisely as regards me [ce qui me regarde], is no longer the measure of all things,” allowing exposure of the deaths that have been caused by this sort of solipsistic blindness while also exposing that the overall death-dealing system no longer functions effectively even for its former benefactors. Unable to live because they are unable to die, white Christians exist in perpetual twilight.

33 Here, I intentionally use loaded, racialized imagery such as “darkness” and “twilight,” because it is the encroaching of the “other,” in a variety of ways that is facilitating this sense of twilight. White people, in general, are indeed afraid of such a twilight, the loss of what was being a popular conversation across coffee tables. I use such racialized imagery not to perpetuate the connection between darkness and negativity, but as a diagnostic that is indeed a “darkness” that they ought fear, because failure to stop fearing blackness creates the twilight moment now.
This pedagogic takes seriously (i.e. laughs and cries) the flippant passage offered by Moliere’s character Mascarille: "On ne meurt qu’une fois, et c’est pour si longtemps!" [We die only once and for so long a time!] Mascarille notes the absurdity of life in death and death in life, an absurdity in that not only is life not fully lived because death is most often ignored, but that the paradox of this denial means “life” takes the shape of the thing feared, an eternal void of nothingness. Fear of nothingness, nonbeing or a loss of power, to this extent, produces its effects. “Death,” as Montaigne helpfully reminds, “is less to be feared than nothing,” and yet Montaigne, Heidegger and as we will see, even Derrida, fear this nothingness to the point of defending an economy of sacrifice so that it remained at a perceptual and perpetual distance from life.

To live is not to one day die, but to live is to be currently dying. The pedagogic of death, situated within and foregrounding this twilight, demonstrates to those who have received the “gift of death” that they have not escaped the finality of death and in fact, they have been dying all along. The assumption of power or resource safeguarded is only ever an assumption, per this philosophic reading. Learning to die for others in this twilight requires casting the comedian Moliere in a “tragicomic” light—twilight—“recognition of the sheer absurdity of the human condition.” Failure to recognize such absurdity, this twilight, West suggests “propels us toward suicide or madness unless we are buffered by ritual, cushioned by community or sustained by art.” The pedagogic of death is also meant to cultivate an awareness of this twilight for beginning to wrestle with what cultural resources remain for this community on the verge of “suicide or madness.” To recognize twilight is to recognize cultural decay, and to realize that

36 Montaigne, 56-64.
37 West. The Cornel West Reader, 89-90
38 Ibid.
nothing about this decay or decadence is new, but it has been a constituent feature of the society and civilization called home. Indeed, to exist—in this arrangement—is to exist in this “nothingness.” My presentation of these definitions and the pedagogic of death seek to focus attention towards this “decay” as a kind of social “death,” and the ubiquity of this “nothingness” an expression of the conditions making possible such decay. In the next section, I seek to ground these efforts through an analogy captured in the idea of social senescence.

**Senescence and Social Power**

This pedagogic of death (aimed at giving up privilege for an *other*, giving up the privilege to constitute social actors as *wholly other*) might help to promote a social responsibility facilitating a kind of social death, ultimately promoting a more equitable distribution of social power. But how can my abstract argument find purchase on the ground, in churches, white Christian homes, etc.? Attempting as much, I offer the idea of social senescence, an application of principles learned from attention to biological death, but directed towards the social world. In the biological sciences, senescence refers to a life process, a feature of life wherein life somehow “knows” to wrap things up, to die. The idea of senescence is easily captured by a falling leaf. How does the leaf know that it’s time is up? What tells the tree or the leaf that it ought to divert resources elsewhere so that the overall organism might remain alive? Senescence is this process

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39 My application of this term is informed by, but not exactly the same, as Orlando Patterson. Orlando Patterson has suggested that death involves the cessation of social, psychological influence and cultural authority, again, matters of power and resource. Of social death, Patterson goes on to describe intrusive and extrusive versions, that being deemed a permanent outsider and an insider who has ceased to belong, respectively. I am indebted to his usage, but mine wants to trouble the finality of “death” in a way Patterson does not. Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*. Harvard University Press, 1985, 1-5, 38-39.

by which living things know that death is required of life, as in the cyclical patterns of leaves falling from a tree in Autumn and returning in Spring.

The social responsibility I have in mind is captured by thinking of senescence in the very social world itself. Social senescence would involve the awareness of the need to relinquish certain social functions (i.e. god-idols, their effects in personal salvation, etc.) so that entire organisms might remain intact. One of the social organisms that I have in mind is the United States. This pedagogic of death is largely an effort to inculcate a sense of social senescence amongst white Christian who find themselves in need of coming to terms with material and/or imaginary losses of power, but have rarely come to terms with that need. Personal salvation, and the soul, have stood in the way of this social senescence, even causing it to be feared and avoided. My hope is that in casting white Christian social life as in decay and the current social arrangement an expression of the realization of nothingness it has feared, it might lead to greater willingness (among white Christians) to finally address the conditions making such an arrangement possible. In the few prior uses of this term I have found in my research, most have been anecdotal rather than systematic, and the earliest usage I found helps to define the idea, while also foregrounding that a particular group of people have been inclined to fear this social senescence.

In a 1910 tome titled *American Men of Science: A Biographical Directory, Volume 2*, one essay mentions not only social senescence (as a warning of things to come), but even racial senescence, as the “scientific” study the subject of the essay sought to chart out the shrinking numbers of American (i.e. white) male doctors in the field. In an ominous passage, woeful in tone by my reading, it notes:

*Racial senescence*, the lack of emotional stimuli and the accumulations of knowledge will probably set limits to the further advance of science…Still a *highly specialized*
The organism is likely to become unplastic and extinct, and apart from physical exhaustion of the stock there is likely to be a social senescence. This is closely related to the lack of emotional stimuli. Great men and great achievements are likely to be associated with national excitement, with wars, revolutions, the rivalry or consolidation of states, the rise of democracy and the like. Such stirring events will probably disappear from the world civilization of the future, and it may be impossible to devise artificial stimuli adequate to arouse men from a safe and stupid existence. But exactly because within a century the great achievements of science may belong to the past, where the great creations in poetry, art and religion may perhaps now only be found, it is our business to do the best we can to assure the race of an adequate endowment policy. (Emphases Added)\textsuperscript{41}

My appeal to death as a pedagogic is a means of producing an “emotional stimuli” so that these “men,” this “highly specialized organism” held sway by the Imago Superlata, might not fear this social senescence, but rather, embrace it by coming to realize that only fear of it will produce the effects dreaded. It is my hope such a pedagogic might produce a more robust “endowment policy” (a future social stability guided not by sacrifice) by setting down a concern for “men” or an individual “race” alone. The promotion of social senescence as a benefit, framed in this chapter as the social responsibility to learn to die for others, might transmute the fear witnessed in this passage into a willingness to embrace the material and imagined shifting dimensions of social power.

My aims, then, involve the promotion of the need for social senescence amongst my particular data set and I rely on “death” as the principle pedagogical trope making this possible within this contemporary ideological and social moment of twilight, wherein people and groups who have not yet relinquished power are coming to either accept that need or feel that such losses are imminent.\textsuperscript{42} I cannot be certain that this pedagogic will have the desired effects, but it is a start, a thought experiment, and cultural products—seen in this light posed by the twilight of

\textsuperscript{41} American Men of Science: A Biographical Directory. Bowker, 1910, 577.
\textsuperscript{42} For more information on those who feel this loss as occurring already, see Michael Kimmel, Angry White Men: American Masculinity and the End of an Era. New York: Nation Books, 2013.
life and death as one—offers resources that might aid in the rejection of an economy of sacrifice. I turn next to one of these resources.

**White Hearts are Lonely Hunters**

In this section, I return to literature and narrative to present an allegory that might aid white Christians in coming to terms with the loss of a personal soul and salvation and how it relates to the loss of god-ids, giving pause and focus to what these losses suggest about the production of social responsibility. Throughout this dissertation, I’ve blurred lines between god-ids, humans, material social realities and fiction. The following allegory holds in tension these seemingly disparate ideas and localizes them in the person of John Singer.

Originally titled “The Mute” and later published to much fanfare as *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* (1943), white, female, bisexual, Marxist, southern writer Carson McCullers’ novel gives testament to racist, sexist, gendered and economic distances posed between individuals and groups in the Southern U.S. in the early twentieth century. Its main character, ‘the Mute,’ John Singer, comes to be a storing house and spring board for the troubles faced by social actors across different social contexts. The mute simply wants to spend time with his mentally unstable friend, life-partner and possible lover. Yet, other characters in the novel project their own and others’ exaggerations of radical contingency onto him. Singer kills himself near the end of the novel, and an exploration of why, and how, this death takes place might provide insights about what social senescence would look like for white Christians.

The story, and Singer, offer four interrelated points. First, all of the characters foreground that social loneliness produced by god-idol adherence reinforces individual perceptions of

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different group values and abilities rather than flattening those presumed differences. Second, Singer serves as a god-idol for the other characters in the novel offering a way of “seeing” how a god-idol functions. Third, Singer demonstrates the twilight of god idols, offering a kind of embodied example of life in death and death in life of god-idols. Fourth, Singer’s death presents an ethical paradox for white Christians, perhaps responded to if Singer’s death is interpreted as a desire to kill the mechanism promoting qualitative group difference. These four points work together to promote social responsibility by providing an allegory for how to destroy the mechanisms that give god-idols power—mediated by a perception of power afforded these god-idols by social actors through belief.

The Loneliness of God-Idol Adherence

The novel is a story about the loneliness reinforced through the elevation of a person or an idea to the status of a deity. And all of the characters, including Singer, are guilty of this imago superlata religious expression. For a brief character summary, the novel tells the story of a variety of social actors, thrust together in a southern town, and left to struggle with how to live, grow, love and lose. There is Mick Kelly, a young white girl whose father is out of work and forced to make ends meet by opening their home to guests. The Kellys rent a room to the mute John Singer. Mick Kelly’s life choices are truncated by age, gender and economics and by an obligation to work for her family. Her desires to be a musician are put on hold indefinitely. She is also sexually ambiguous and presented as an early meditation on queer identity in the deep South. There is Biff Brannon, white owner of The New York Café, where Singer eats daily. This café serves as a kind of “chapel,” where ideological projection, prayers and the like are transmitted to Singer. There is Jake Blount, the white semi-vagrant carnival worker who seemingly has the world’s problems figured out save for his inability to get anyone to take him
seriously. There is Dr. Benedict Copeland, the African American doctor who also has the world’s problems seemingly figured out, but whose anger about his own social position blinds him to those who might listen. Blount, blinded by drunkenness, and Copeland blinded by anger at “the insolence of all the white race,” are frustrated because their solutions to issues like racism go unheeded by those around them. And then there is Spiros Antonapoulos, Singer’s best friend who once lived with Singer but now resides in an asylum after a mental episode. Antonapoulos serves as a kind of ultimate concern for Singer, their unity the only sense of love or security ever realized by Singer. Their disunity proves too much for Singer.

All of these characters are thoroughly “normal,” almost unremarkable, but represent various identities and social contexts living in relative proximity to one another. They each come to befriend John Singer and make undue use of his inability to speak. He becomes a means for validating their own positions and frustrations, while his concerns remain largely unacknowledged and unresolved. Though Singer writes and communicates through written notes and gestures, the other characters rely mostly on assumption, presumption and belief in their communications with Singer. It might be said they wed their “responsibility” to faith at the alter of Singer’s company.

Years after the publication of the novel, McCullers described John Singer this way, suggesting that “His friends were able to impute to him all the qualities which they would wish for him to have”…based on their “own desires…In his [Singer’s] eternal silence there is something compelling. Each one of these persons makes the mute the repository for his most personal feelings and ideas.” For instance, both Blount and Copeland relay to Singer—on different occasions—their perspectives on the usefulness of Marxism as a responsible strategy

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45 McCullers, *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, 85.
for correcting the world’s ills. Seeing Singer’s nods and stares as validation, they end up only validating their assumptions that they have the prescriptions for all the world’s ills—if they could only force themselves to take the medicine. These characters aren’t meant to foreground hypocrisy so much as uncertainty, sadness, limitation, and the utter absurdity and seeming impossibility of different groups ever seeing themselves as more or less than different. Their social interactions, coming from a place of loneliness, reinforce the sense of solitude.

The irony, of course, is that their engagement with Singer is precisely motivated by the feeling of loneliness, isolation and estrangement that his company merely reinforces. For his part, Singer is as guilty of this as throughout the novel, he longs for a return to his beloved Antonapoulos. On this first point, it appears that god-idols reinforce a loneliness of which they are purported to address, but likely responsible for themselves. In the next section, I explore the prospects of Singer as such a god-idol.

John Singer as God-Idol

I want to suggest that John Singer functions in the capacity of a god-idol for each of the characters in the novel. In short, Singer holds in his person—his ontology, if you will—first and second order observation of the self and its god-idol projection. Each character brings their assumptions to Singer’s ear, only for those assumptions to be justified and defended—rather than pushed or changed—based on the silence offered by Singer. They all are doing different versions of the same thing—trying to make sense of their place in the world—but Singer’s inability to communicate back sees to it that nothing bridges the distances between different people. In the person of Singer, these seemingly different people are brought into close proximity with each other, but functioning as a god-idol, Singer also prevents these characters from making use of this proximity. In talking to Singer, their loneliness is seemingly assuaged only to be reinforced.
They are never in conversation with difference in a way that would cause difference to be seen as a kind of sameness, flattening assumptions about ability and value. Stated in existential terms, each character’s anxiety prevents their ability to see every other’s anxiety influencing everyone’s actions. Assumed social difference is reinforced, even as geographic and ideological differences are overcome. Jake Blount expresses this reification of differential ability through an epistemological judgment framed around traditional Christian themes:

My first belief was Jesus…My mind was on Jesus all day long…Then one night I took a hammer and laid my hand on the table. I was angry and I drove the nail all the way through…It was like being born a second time. Just us who know can understand what it means.

Singer agreed with him.47

This self-aggrandizing, and at times redemptive suffering model of ideological comportment is reinforced through audience with god-idols. In “agreeing” with an us/them arrangement, Singer (i.e. god-idols) gets in the way of adherents knowing the “other” as anything but other. They stand in as wholly other—represented here by Singer’s silence—but are made from the stuff of social others, social actors without voice.

The novel’s narrator further underscores this connection between Singer and god-idols when describing Mick Kelly’s thoughts on God:

Everybody in the past few years knew there wasn’t any real God. When she thought of what she used to imagine was God she could only see Mister Singer with a long, white sheet around him. God was silent…48

Again, silence is the focus in this arrangement. McCullers wants to privilege the relation between humans and these metaphysical categories as one of silence. Her efforts offer a model for white Christians to learn from in that god-idols remain silent in their twilight.

47 McCullers, The Heart is a Lonely Hunter, 151.
48 Ibid., 119-20.
Characterizing her creation of Singer as “written in the simple style of a parable,” her efforts were precisely to offer such a parable or allegory focused on how beliefs interact or support social differences like race, sexuality and poverty through this silence. Worth quoting at length is a passage from one of the book’s early Prefaces:

The broad principle theme of this book is...man’s revolt against his own inner isolation and his urge to express himself as fully as possible. Surrounding this general idea there are several counter themes and some of these may be stated briefly as follows: (1) There is a deep need in man to express himself by creating some unifying principle or God. A personal God created by a man is a reflection of himself and in substance this God is most often inferior to his creator. (2) In a disorganized society these individual Gods or principles are likely to be chimerical and fantastic. (3) Each man must express himself in his own way—but this is often denied to him by a tasteful, short-sighted society. (4) Human beings are innately cooperative, but an unnatural social tradition makes them behave in ways that are not in accord with their deepest nature. (5) Some men are heroes by nature in that they will give all that is in them without regard to the effort or to the personal returns.

Singer functions in the capacity of this “unifying principle or God,” but the attempted unity is exposed as seemingly impossible. Singer’s inability to speak, like the inability of any god-idol to respond to its adherents, is both the means of its power, and a “reflection of” the inability to overcome or fully respond to the paradox of this twilight. Singer does not speak back but is spoken to—by people who justify their own inconsistencies and limitations through the idea of god or in this case, Singer. He serves as a false bridge between different people who need to be building dialogical bridges, as well as economic, civic, and political bridges. For instance, the black doctor, Copeland, and the white Drunk, Blount, hate each other. They will not and do not talk to each other, save in a few instances when their anger does not actually promote equitable communication. Throughout the novel, it is clear that if they would only talk to each other through genuine dialogue—instead of talking at Singer—they’d find themselves more alike than different, a shared existential inability to make sense of this thing called life.

49 McCullers, Illuminations, 4.
Note how McCullers’ stated motivations point back to a critique of the society she deems “unnatural.” McCullers focuses on society as a culprit in these proceedings, it being “disorganized” and “short-sighted.” Such a society, according to McCullers, prevents humans from full creative expression. She even notes that an “unnatural social tradition” prevents them from cooperating as they would “innately.” Lastly, McCullers may fall victim to that very “unnatural social tradition,” as she implies some “men” are heroes. She seems to have in mind those who sacrifice themselves for some sort of greater good, a Christological heroism, a problematic redemptive suffering model of salvation through sacrifice, which is an expression of the gift of death. Singer, then, offers an allegory for understanding that god-idols ultimately reinforce group differences. But Singer is a tragic hero, forcing recognition with death and how death is understood in its relation to society. In the next section, I situate this connection between god-idols, their limitations, and society through the prism of twilight.

*Twilight of a God-Idol*

Here, I want to suggest that twilight is not a mollification of loneliness, but an exaggeration of it, meaning that such a hermeneutic is not to be embraced as a panacea, but is a warning, that loneliness and the social tragedies arising from god-idol adherence will likely worsen as these god-idols “die” as they remain silent. Singer’s life and death helps to make sense of this point.

Singer’s life speaks in a way to recognition that whatever people or ideas are held most center—in the South at least—have a bad habit of keeping people distinct and removed from their responsibility to each other, keeping them lonely. This includes belief in a personal soul. And initially, this feeling of loneliness intensifies. Foreshadowing Singer’s death, Blount feels intense loneliness when he cannot find Singer: “Of all the places he had been this was the
loneliest town of all. Or it would be without Singer. Only he and Singer understood the truth. He knew and could not get the don’t knows to see.”

Again, we see a relationship between silence and ingroup/outgroup dynamics. The ingroup is made possible by the silence that blocks dialogue with the ideologically constituted outgroup. Metaphorically speaking, one can only imagine the frustration a god-idol might feel in recognizing that its silence functions in this paradoxical fashion.

A letter written by Singer evokes McCullers’ possible thoughts on what a god-idol might have to say of these practices:

The others all have something they hate. And they all have something they love more than eating or sleeping or wine or friendly company. This is why they are always so busy.

One implication of this passage seems to be that if only people could learn to love that which they hate, they would find themselves with time to enjoy life. To think back to Mascarilles and Montaigne, learning to love what is hated might be another way of saying learning to truly live by learning to live in/as death. The issue of love emerges later in this chapter, and worth noting now is simply the idea that a paucity of love (i.e. disconnectedness) contributes to a feeling of loneliness and isolation amongst those who ironically find themselves in close geographic and temporal proximity to each other, but feel themselves inaccessible.

For white Christians who might be thought of as these “lonely hunters,” what can be learned from such an allegory remembering that the weight of this silence was too much for Singer to bear? He kills himself. Learning of his best friend Antonapoulos’s death in the asylum, and presumably exhausted from having been the silent voice certifying everyone else’s sense of certainty, Singer “returned to his room with swollen eyes and an aching head. After resting he

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50 McCullers, The Heart is a Lonely Hunter, 285.
51 Ibid., 215.
drank a glass of iced coffee and smoked a cigarette. Then when he had washed the ashtray and the glass he brought out a pistol from his pocket and put a bullet in his chest.”

Singer’s death suggests McCullers has in mind to express the absence of “god,” promoting awareness that the social actors representing different social groups are alone (metaphysically speaking). Their god is dead. The story’s narrator helps to situate the situation Blount and by analogy, white Christians, find themselves in now—twilight—hearing of their god-idol’s death: “The emptiness in him hurt. He wanted to look neither backward nor forward…He had given Singer everything and then the man had killed himself. So he was left out on a limb. And now it was up to him to get out of it by himself and make a new start again.”

Their “god-idol” was dead by its own hand. But Singer also represents an adherent to an economy of sacrifice, so his death might be understood as an expression of one person’s decision to kill the mechanism reinforcing the inability of difference to see itself as sameness.

Could we see Singer as an example of a white hunter who finally decides to kill his soul so that others might live, or does his death mark the willingness to die if selfish desires cannot be maintained? One of these desires is the personal soul, and he seems to have “died” due to a lack of meaningful connection, a lack made possible as god-idols stood in his way. Suppose god did once exist and the crucifixion signals the death of that god in a way similar to Singer’s death suggests the death of god-idols by their own “hands.” Death of the personal soul, though intensifying loneliness initially, might allow for this twilight to offer the possibility of a “new start” for a community in deep need of such an opportunity.

53 Ibid., 345.
Responding to Twilight

What does the person of Singer do with the god-idol of Singer?

Singer was dead…Now he could not be seen or touched or spoken to, and the room where they had spent so many hours had been rented to a girl who worked as a typist. He could go there no longer. He was alone.\(^{54}\)

In this final section on Singer, I want to suggest that Singer leaves white Christians with a paradox, to be resolved only by them, determined based on how the story of Singer’s death is interpreted. In twilight, death is unavoidable; the question involves if this death will be meted out literally on a social plane or metaphysically. If admitting that in the figure of Singer, soul and god-idol collide, does Singer commit suicide or does he represent the theological possibility of killing one’s personal soul, in a kind of metaphysical suicide? Asked differently, does Singer embrace or reject the gift of death? For now, I leave it as an open question.

Yet, I am interested in how the death of god—seen as the continuance of a story instead of the end of a story—exemplified in Singer as the continuance of the economy of sacrifice in the social world, might have some allegorical benefit for those with a growing awareness that they ought no longer rely on that economy. Indeed, the “gift of death” seemed to promise that such an economy had ended. Singer aids in understanding the economy remains intact because as he represents a god-idol as a person, his death marks the death of social others at the moment when god-idols die. From such awareness, white Christians interested in disrupting the imago superlata find themselves in a kind of forced protest atheist stance, if they do not mean for their god to be racist.

In terms of possible moral censure, it is interesting to think that “god” kills godself out of frustration with god’s own limited ability to bring people together. The social consequences of

having not learned to die, not learned to live with others equitably, are such that “gods” would rather throw in the towel. In this assessment, the death of god-idols is self-imposed, prompted in this example by their own increasing social (dis)function, they find it time their adherents become a kind of theological grownup.\footnote{Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Qtd. in Altizer, Thomas J. J., and William Hamilton. \textit{Radical Theology and the Death of God}. Softcover Ed edition. Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1966, 115.} As social needs and the makeup of such a society shifts, then the god-idols and the mechanisms needed to produce and secure those god-idols come into greater competition with alternatives. Or, stated differently, an increasing lack of options for securing any modicum of certainty or proof in the qualitative distinction between those at social centers and those at the margins.

The death of John Singer—the entire novel, really—offers a sort of open-ended blueprint for coming to terms with the death of theism, whiteness, homophobia and other god-idols, as well as their effects such as personal salvation. These deaths bring with them a loss of certainty but might also promote a kind of clarity that the certainty has come at the cost of projecting one’s own desires and concerns onto a deaf mute. But it also provides a point of reference for more focused attention on how, and in what capacities, death is offered up as a “gift” to society and reinforced as an economy even when it is transposed onto a god-idol.

Connecting this point back to the example of John Singer, his death doesn’t actually make the lives of the other characters “better”—perhaps better is impossible—it merely exposes (to the reader) the mechanism through which those characters had unduly relied, and his absence simply foregrounds the loneliness felt by the characters. The question of moving forward, of cultivating social responsibility, then, might involve where we situate the model offered by Singer in terms of more traditional allegories. Rather than read Singer as a Christ-figure, killing himself so that others might receive personal salvation packaged as the gift of death, perhaps
white Christians would do better to see him in the position of Abraham, albeit choosing a different ending than the one chosen by Abraham in Genesis. Through this shift in orientation, developed below, Singer might offer more resources for a group of white Christians who can no longer celebrate the “gift” of Jesus’ death if they are to be concerned with social responsibility within this twilight.

The Gift of Death and Death of the Social Other

Perhaps John Singer is better understood as Abraham than as Christ, in that his death can be interpreted as killing the mechanism holding together the idea of society and preventing an equitable social arrangement where different social actors are afforded full privilege to that society. Abraham’s son, Isaac, serves then as a means for capturing the personal soul as a functional mechanism. An alternative sacrifice is seemingly provided so that the “soul” can be maintained and kept intact. In Singer we find expressed Abraham, Isaac and god. Perhaps white Christians would do well to recognize themselves in the person of Singer, but trying to determine the appropriate course of action, as “Isaac”—their personal soul and sense of salvation—is tied to an altar and the god-idol who once promised an end to this economy is silent. Perhaps, society is a functional god demanding sacrifice today precisely because the god who broke into history has been hung on a cross.

Throughout this dissertation, my concept of the “god-idol” has meant to foreground the “certain” and “uncertain” effects of believed in ideas. Of those beliefs inculcating a sense of certainty for the believer, “god” has an historical precedent as a sign or marker. “Idol,” on the other hand, has as equal a precedent in terms of casting light on the certain uncertainty posed by such appeals to god. God and Idol collide in Genesis 22, the story of God’s command to
Abraham that he sacrifices his son Isaac. With total dedication, Abraham takes himself to the brink of such sacrifice, only for the “Angel of the Lord” to intervene:

Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.  

Wanting to define this project neither as (fully) constructive nor (fully) apophatic in its aim, I am forced to square with the difficult, aporetic ambitions of Jacques Derrida and his extended exploration of what this Abrahamic narrative suggests about why death has been treated as a gift for so long. Stated differently, neither deconstruction nor constructive theological enterprises have brought social suffering to an end. Derrida’s later writings seem to express such frustration, and offer uncertain clarity as to why it is so difficult to learn to die for others.

_The Wholly Other as Social Other_

What shape is taken by such a divinity arising from a limited religious outlook where god cannot be seen because god is dead? As I hope to demonstrate, that shape of god in absence comes in the form of nonbeing framed around death. Death, in the most abstract sense, including abstract physical and social expressions, is the embrace of uncertainty. To this extent, death can be treated as a divine object. And yet, death has been registered as the antithesis of divinity through the “gift of death which is this marriage of responsibility and faith.” In order to better unpack this relationship, this “marriage” as Derrida refers to it, I work here to answer a question: Does responsibility refer to the maintenance of faith, or to the jettisoning of faith? How do we answer this question, and proceed from it? Understanding how this “gift” functions to hide the object of death is central to accepting social responsibility.

57 Derrida, _The Gift of Death_, 8.
Cultivating social responsibility involves first recognizing the apophatic connection between social actors and the idea of god. In one dense chapter, Derrida argues that *Tout autre est tout autre* (“Every other (one) is every (bit) other.”) By this, Derrida renders this tautology as a socially grounded expression of Barth’s *wholly other*, meaning for Derrida that “Every other (one) is God.” The social other serves in the capacity of a divine object of wholly other understanding, or in other words, alterity and unknowability as much as awe in the face of that otherness and alterity. Every social other is an expression of the wholly other; and the wholly other is expressed in the social other. But there is slippage between understanding the wholly other as death *qua* death, or because of the proximity of the social other to death (alterity), the social other is taken for the wholly other. Derrida plays with this slippage but chooses, as I will demonstrate, to maintain the farce that social others and the wholly other are coterminous.

Every being is an expression of nonbeing. John Singer’s suicide exemplifies this at both first and second order observational levels; the person of Singer is a divinity precisely because the parable offered by McCullers holds in tension being and nonbeing. Derrida helps to unpack the philosophical significance of Singer:

> Every negative sentence would already be haunted by God or by the name of God, the distinction between God and God’s name opening up the very space of this enigma. If there is a work of negativity in discourse and predication, it will produce divinity...Not only would atheism not be the truth of negative theology; rather, God would be the truth of all negativity.  

Derrida concludes that this “negativity,” the “distinction between God [the social other] and God’s name [the wholly other] is the location of an enigma, the continued expression of god

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58 Ibid., 82.
found and received as death, the “truth of all negativity.” In response to those who would take his words as trivial play, Derrida argues that within that paradox is exposed the gift of death, where blending responsibility to faith transposes death onto the wholly other alone, and humans are “introduced” to the concept of salvation from death through this process:

For the game between these two unique “every other’s” [humans and god], like the same “every other,” opens the space or introduces the hope of salvation, the economy of “saving oneself.”

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This “space” I have in earlier chapters sought to characterize as the distance posed between one community or individual and another community or individual through the projection of the god idea as other than an expression of social distance between those communities. That is, for salvation to be possible, the distance posed between god (i.e. death) and social others allows for “the hope of salvation.” The “marriage” of faith to responsibility is another example of this bridge spanning group social difference, built by the death of others through an economy of sacrifice undergirded by and allowing for “the hope of salvation.” The body of others—substituting the wholly other for Isaac—comes to serve as the canvas on which this “space” or distance between freedom and responsibility is constituted and enacted for (and by) sacrifice. I am describing the same space wherein bodies serve as the “canvas for symbolization.”

63 False freedom is found through the nuptials between responsibility and faith. Thusly, the gift of death provides the freedom to kill for the promise of eternal life.

The Gift of Death as an Economy of Sacrifice

What is the relationship between responsibility, faith and economy? Traditionally, responsibility has been registered in a Kantian sense, as duty, an obligation fulfilled, expressed in Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice Isaac. Abraham understood himself duty-bound to kill the very person most representative of the social hearth. God, as the story goes, intervenes, as Abraham’s willingness was enough to appease god. But the willingness, out of a sense of duty conflated with responsibility, Derrida suggests “sets in train the search for salvation through sacrifice.” In short, framed in terms of physicality and embodied sacrifice, the Abrahamic duty seemingly promises the transformation of the economy of sacrifice into the sacrifice of such an economy.

Derrida suggests that out of Abraham’s fulfillment of this “responsibility,” god “reinscribes sacrifice within an economy” maintained by god/gods. God, according to Derrida, “decides to give back, to give back life [Isaac]…once he is assured that a gift outside of any economy, the gift of death—and of the death of that which is priceless—has been accomplished without any hope of exchange, reward, circulation, or communication.” According to Derrida, such absolute responsibility is achieved through an “absolute renunciation” of all possible awards or rewards from god. Responsibility is seemingly achieved by renouncing any need or demand for achievement. This suggests that if the social consequences of belief in god-idols are to be mitigated through a renewed focus on responsibility (social or otherwise), then that renewal will require an exploration of how salvation is enacted as an economy, and a coming to terms

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64 Derrida, The Gift of Death, 114.
65 Ibid., 93.
66 Ibid., 95.
67 Ibid., 95-6.
68 Ibid., 96.
with that economy so that it might be offset. But Derrida doesn’t seem to register the full social implications of this theological promise of an end to sacrifice. Stated differently, perhaps he errs on the side of logical rather than ethical un/certainty. I turn next to these consequences.

*To Accept the Gift of Death Is to Accept the Death of Social Others*

Derrida is of the mind that the story of Abraham offers a moment of clarity for reconstituting a sense of responsibility as only achieved upon relinquishing any demands for achievement. Responsibility, in its Judeo-Christian expression, is *to do* and to do so blindly, wedding faith and responsibility. But risking Derridian experts casting my reading of Derrida as flawed, I want to suggest that Derrida does not give enough attention to the material consequences of the abstract theo-philosophical points he raises for those social actors left out of the narrative. Capturing the significance of the Abrahamic tale with his paraphrased comment: “you can count on the economy of heaven if you sacrifice the earthly economy,” I agree that the function of theological projection and appeal is to ensure that those in social centers no longer have to look to those centers to find sacrificial offerings. The gift of death has been so long endured precisely because if functions relatively effectively at making those in social centers think they have been promised eternal life, that they have learned to die by learning to accept the promise of eternal life. But this promise comes at the expense of social others.

Believing Derrida when—near the end of his life—he admits that he has not learned to live because he has never really learned to die, I want to suggest that his failure was in not giving enough attention to those sacrificed to the Abrahamic story, those immediately connected to Abraham. Derrida is keen to only register his social responsibility over and against himself,

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even as he acknowledges he—and Abraham/Isaac/God—are not completely alone. Stated differently, Derrida spends considerable time justifying the utility of secrecy—Abraham kept his attempted murder a secret—instead of exploring the full social impact for social others of this secret kept. I mean this literally, in terms of the text *The Gift of Death* but metaphorically, in terms of Derrida’s own ideological commitments as his biological life came to a close. Truly learning to die for others, perhaps a better way of understanding what it might mean to learn to die at all, will involve not simply waxing on the men who made it to Mount Moriah or Golgotha, but those who are not present in the story, those on the margins. Though in a couple instances of *The Gift of Death* Derrida momentarily asks how Sarah, Hagar and Ishmael might change the events of these sacrifices, he never really overcomes his own assumptions about their wholly otherness to think through their concerns and include them as substantive contributors to his project. Here, if it is not clear, I am registering *The Gift of Death*, the theological text, as allegorical of its topic, a metonymic for understanding the gift of death functioning to ensure the social others are only ever understood as wholly other—that is, inaccessible.

I want to suggest that, rather than understand god as taking on the economy of sacrifice so that humans no longer have to sacrifice themselves, if we take seriously the suggestion that the social other and the wholly other have been conflated through the gift of death, then any theological suggestion of god bearing the sacrificial burden is more aptly understood as social others bearing that burden. Privileging their continued sacrifices so that those at social centers no longer have to sacrifice themselves suggests that rather than physical or social sacrifice of those at social centers being necessitated as response to these conditions, the actual end to the economy

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of sacrifice is only obtained through the sacrifice of the mechanism making any of this possible, god-idols, and their effect and motivation, personal salvation and the soul.

Personal conceptions of the soul are akin to being “beyond the law,” which Derrida suggests is the constituent feature of grace, and amounts to what Derrida reminds was Nietzsche’s assessment of Christianity as its “stroke of genius.” The stroke of genius, of Christianity, in this reading, is the externalization of sacrifice into the theological/metaphysical realm rather than sacrifice continuing as a material social practice. The economy of sacrifice is sustained precisely because it is purportedly no longer required by the new law. Its continued function is kept as a secret. The new is but the old, uninterrupted. Effectively, this kills “god,” leaving god as wholly other, wholly other to the social arrangement. In other words, through the economy of sacrifice transmuted through ideological and mythical projection, the wholly other is properly constituted as social other. Given this arrangement, the social other is god because the social other is killed. Salvation is sought and promised through the sacrifice of “god” concealing the actual sacrifices of social actors. Abraham was willing to kill his own so that the social fabric be mended. Christians, here speaking of U.S. white Christians though the analysis might be extended to certain other groups, follow the “new law” of sacrificing those outside the social center rather than those within it. The “new law” is not actually new, but is a theological manipulation of who is inside or outside of the law, with “inside the law” understood as the benefactor to the economy of sacrifice, “outside of the law” representative of those sacrificed, and “beyond the law” the position of executioners, i.e. Abraham.

Derrida seems to have never learned to die because he never learned to live with others; to live without the law. Stated differently, he never stopped seeing a difference between himself

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71 Ibid., 82.
and other social actors. That is, he never came to know social others because the constitution of
the wholly other, undergirded by a metaphysical claim about or sense of the soul, prevented the
distance from closing between himself and those deemed social others. Derrida’s focus on the
“gift of death,” as transposed from human to divine, doesn’t actually accomplish the end of the
economy. What it does is ensure that Abraham (and Isaac) remain at the social center, while
Isaac’s mother and Abraham’s “Other” family are located in expanding concentric circles away
from that social center, away from “Mount Moriah.”

Derrida even situates Mount Moriah as a metaphor for society, which tradition has it “is
the place where Solomon decided to build the House of the Lord in Jerusalem…also the place of
the grand Mosque of Jerusalem, the place called the Dome of the Rock…a holy place…and a
disputed place…fought over by all the monotheisms.”72 This fighting, and the geophysical
localization of this first gift of death, suggests that “this land of Moriah … is our habitat every
second of every day.”73 In other words, this place and the story associated with it constitute the
originary story of the gift of death as the economy of sacrifice, transposed outward to the “other”
as god (of monotheisms) comes to be understood as wholly other, outside being, outside the
social. Succeeding where Derrida failed might be made possible by exposing the “secret” of this
economy, a secret exposed in (and as) the death of the personal soul. Yet, achieving this would
mean nothing less than a shift away from a society of estrangement to something different—so
different it would mean the death of this economy, promised by god but never delivered because
we’ve remained ignorant that this death is our responsibility.

This allegorical tale points to the place and time, the axis mundi, when totems were
dislodged from material places and times, coming to be confused with the transcendent, when

72 Derrida, The Gift of Death, 70.
73 Ibid., 70.
history began as society became the functional “god.” Therefore, this gift of death has everything to do with exaggerations of human value, differentially ranked, according to geographic and theological location, and to this extent, history arises as a soteriology as Abraham is “given” salvation having trusted in god. The closer to god, to “Mount Moriah,” the closer to the *axis mundi*, the greater the perceived importance and ability. Abraham’s willingness to kill Isaac, of course, represents the pinnacle of human possibility within this arrangement. Rejecting this gift of death, then, involves nothing less than a rejection of some of the most fundamentally held beliefs arising from this arrangement, beginning with the desire for salvation and the willingness to kill for it.

This initial theological sleight of hand—that is, the constitution of the wholly other as the social other—requires a theological tactic or response. This response comes in the form not of physical or social sacrifice, or even in the demand to sacrifice “god,” but in hermeneutically treating death as god, and an embrace of love as the truth of social unity. Such recognition requires a rejection of belief in an afterlife, personal salvation, and personal conception of the soul, used to determine who is inside, outside, above or beyond the law.

I want to suggest that relinquishing any commitments to personal salvation or the soul might allow for the bridge between the social other and divine other to be partially severed, with other expressions of letting go (such as the death of god-idols) also working towards that end. This “bridge” to be severed has been ushered into history as an economy of sacrifice, witnessed tautologically through the stories of Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac and God’s sacrifice of God’s son, Christ, and too many other instances to name, as well as if the ecological ERC of animal sacrifice is taken into account. Someone, or something, pays the price of a “responsible” faith. In rejecting the gift of death, old and new “laws” are indistinguishable, and this secret of the “law”
is understood as the economy of sacrifice. More must be said of how rejection of the apparatus of the law is made possible through the finality found in a god of death.

**The Effect of Rejecting the Gift of Death**

In effort to conclude this chapter, and to provide a brief precedent for my rejection of the gift of death, I turn back to a lesser read book from a young Ludwig Feuerbach, in order to reinforce my argument that a personal conception of the soul and of salvation are the fruits of the economy of sacrifice. To reject such “fruit” is no sacrifice, as they are effects to causes, but carry the weight of the very first cause, the flight from and denial of death. Rejecting the soul responds to the perils of sacrifice witnessed in the production, disciplining and sacrifice of social others, but does not actually reproduce the economy of sacrifice. In a word, letting go of personal conceptions of the soul or salvation divorces faith from responsibility. It “kills” the gift of death by squaring with death at last. It also guards against the appropriation of death as redemptive. And it connects this rejection to its ultimate aim, a sense of social responsibility based on love as human unity. This is not a promise to end the reign of god-idols, but offers those wanting to reject such a religious orientation the means to know that they are no longer sustaining a theological position that justifies or requires an economy of sacrifice.

Feuerbach’s lesser acknowledged *Thoughts on Death and Immortality* (1830) stands as a brash, unpolished polemic against the idea of personal immortality, arguing instead “for recognition of the inexhaustible quality of the only life we have.”\(^7^4\) As Feuerbach eloquently states his concern, “Those peculiar beings and strange subjects who think that they live only after

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life…as they posit a future life, they negate the actual life.”  

Feuerbach’s efforts are in refutation of an Hegelian and Christian “theoretical selfishness,” out of which has presented a skewed assessment of reality, as such. For Feuerbach, as for me, there is little difference between Hegelianism and Christianity’s Modern development, given the synthesis of salvation and history. Feuerbach suggests that “For if there is life after death, there cannot be life before death; one excludes the other; the present life cancels the future life, the future life cancels the present life.” This advocates that ideas such as personal immortality produce negative social effects. Similar in certain respects but still distinct from Montaigne’s focus on the finality of life as a kind of personal experience intensifier—metaphorically, a kind of all-natural sweetener to the coffee cup of life—Feuerbach has in mind that personal salvation prevents the “present life” from being lived in an arrangement based on love, an understanding of unity premised on an embrace of the fundamental sameness of human personhood not as a quality of distinction but of connectedness to all persons. His argument is simple: that a personal conception of the soul, guided by a Cartesian dualism wed to an Hegelian casting of god as history, makes it fundamentally impossible for Christians to do the one thing demanded of them above all else, to love unconditionally, to achieve unity amidst difference.

Feuerbach’s rationale for such a position involves this concept of love, which he understands as “the unity of personhood and essence,” meaning that distinctions, though bound up in any formula of love, are what must be properly contextualized as instruments for unity if the Christian demand to love is to be realized. Consequentially, he offers a solution for

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75 Ibid., 133.
76 Ibid., xxii.
77 Ibid., 133.
78 Ibid., 29.
responding to this selfishness and inability to love by foregrounding death as a way of refuting a personal conception of the soul, replacing it with a pantheistic cosmology.

Corresponding to Feuerbach to the extent both understand love as action-oriented, but in more grounded (non-cosmological) terms, social theorist bell hooks offers a similar justification for moving beyond the gift of death as she writes about love as a practice of freedom, not in an individual sense as offered by the Cogito, but a freedom to unify and work towards new social life options. Writing in response to what she refers to as an ideology and culture of domination, her words seem applicable to refuting the logic of economy behind the gift of death. She suggests that the world can be responded to in ways that do not reify the current structure of it through the cultivation of “a love ethic that can transform our lives by offering us a different set of values to live by.”

hooks writes that fear is the primary force upholding structures of domination. It promotes the desire for separation, the desire not to be known. When we are taught that safety lies always with sameness, then difference, of any kind, will appear as a threat. When we choose to love we choose to move against fear—against alienation and separation. The choice to love is a choice to connect—to find ourselves in the other.

I am not interested in Feuerbach’s cosmological claims. My brief reference to hooks is meant to modify and correct for Feuerbach’s cosmological shortsightedness, as well as to guard against my argument reinforcing the imago superlata to be overcome by only looking to white, male voices. Through the privileging of socially different voices, my argument attempts to be an instance of finding “ourselves in the other.” That is to say, as a white person close in proximity to a number of social centers and normative positionalities, this chapter’s constructive element

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81 Ibid., 93.
(that is, it’s appeal to the universal) must be balanced and at times guided by voices from those at
(or speaking on behalf of) those at social margins.

With hooks keeping my analysis in a kind of check, I want to suggest that Feuerbach
might be read as a social theorist. My position that theology is anthropology cuts in both
directions, as the uncertainty of full social knowing suggests that theology covers the ground of
the unknown and unknowable social world. Indeed, I inherit this position from Feuerbach:

This world is the world of the Gods.82

Feuerbach is useful as a social theorist here because he distinguishes between gods and humans
based on limitation; gods are unlimited, humans limited83, but he always reminds that these gods
are but human projections. His writings, then, offer extended materials for exploring the effects
of how, and to what degree, limitations are acknowledged by social actors. Personal salvation,
promising a triumph over death, suggests then that those who hold such a position feel
themselves to be gods, unlimited ultimately and supposedly proven so through a believed in
triumph over death. That god-status seems to be an effect of receiving the gift of death. I want to
extend Feuerbach’s proposed rejection of personal immortality as a strategy for exorcizing the
independent, subjective personhood and sense of the soul from the scope of white theological
possibility. Doing so ensures—albeit with an existential force more akin to an axe than a
scalpel—that whatever the ultimate concerns held by white Christians, they might no longer
support an economy of sacrifice or the god-idols that rely on such sacrifices. Noting that death is
both the “ultimate act of communication”84 and the ultimate manifestation of limitation85,
Feuerbach brings my argument back to its rationale for a pedagogic of death:

83 Ibid., 63.
84 Feuerbach, Thoughts on Death, 121.
For death can be conquered only before death. But this can be accomplished only by the total and complete surrender of the self, only by the acknowledgment of universal will, the will of God, only by the appropriation of his will and the knowledge and perception of the essential truth of death that must be connected to this appropriation.  

Unlike Derrida’s gift of death, which retains the will of the self through the sacrifice of godself, here Feuerbach offers an alternative to the economy of sacrifice suggesting that by relinquishing a sense of self, the will of god—unity—can be achieved. Reading Feuerbach as a social theorist suggests that when white Christians proffer a “complete surrender of the self,” then the will of god (i.e. the will of the social other) might be done. Unity would mean inclusion at the social center, an end to social otherness as wholly otherness.

Whereas the gift of death, as Derrida suggests, allows Abraham to fulfill a kind of duty, it is an irresponsible social duty, relying not only on the constitution and maintenance of the social other as wholly other, but on the sacrifices of those social others. In not sacrificing Isaac, Abraham sacrificed humanity through the false promise that humanity would be “saved.” In not sacrificing “god” in this arrangement, Abraham turned this myth into history. Personal salvation achieves no responsibility at all, because it addresses such responsibility by killing those at social margins who remind of this responsibility. In terms of continental philosophy, Emmanuel Levinas may be right in suggesting that the face of the other tells those at social centers “Do not kill me,” but this telling alone does not ensure that the affective disposition of those at a social center guided by an economy of sacrifice will be able to do anything other than kill the other. Wedding this faith to responsibility is to selfishly escape responsibility.

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85 Ibid., 162.
86 Ibid., 126.
Singer, as a model for white Christians, can be read in two ways: Killer of Isaac or killer of the soul. Responsibility would involve choosing to kill neither social others or those at social centers, instead choosing to “kill” the mechanism holding them as distinct. The death of personal immortality is not simply a litmus test or an ersatz good substituting the physical deaths of white Christians, but it is the actual means of refuting the economy of sacrifice, killing it instead of people.

In my estimation, Feuerbach’s refutation of personal immortality helps to set in place social conditions that might promote the responsibility demanded by the face of the other, but it remains paradoxical, in that achieving this responsibility requires the dissolution of the “other” as wholly other. For instance, it pushes against any language that seeks to distinguish between heaven and earth, forcing recognition of the hells and heavens experienced on earth daily by those within or outside of social centers. Refuting personal salvation offers a means of embracing social responsibility as this paradox, but choosing to die with, if not for, those social others formerly registered as wholly other. Killing the soul—not the social other—is what might ultimately kill the idea of the wholly other as social other. Violence, killing, is paradoxically required, just as Derrida makes clear, but in choosing to embrace death as a pedagogic, it opens white Christians to the possibility of killing something other than those socially othered. In “killing” the soul, we finally respond to this gift by choosing not to kill actual people. This closure to the sacrificial economy begins with exposure of death as an object that unites us all.

**Exposing the ‘Object’ of Death**

Here, I wrap up my argument by ironically deconstructing Derrida with Feuerbach. Derrida concludes *The Gift of Death* by quoting an incredibly dense passage from Charles
Baudelaire’s *The Pagan School* (1852). Baudelaire notes “the danger is so great that I excuse the suppression of the object.” Admittedly, Derrida always the erudite, this dense passage is difficult to fully comprehend. Overall, it seems to suggest that both science and philosophy have (to that point in history) been left wanting, unable to balance the concerns of each other, leading to “homicidal and suicidal literature.” Fear of such “literature” might have been what piqued Derrida’s interest in death and theology in the latter years of his life, as well as his deconstructive task throughout his corpus. Baudelaire’s critique is reminiscent of Nietzsche’s aims in *The Gay Science* of correcting for the stultifying certainties falsely promised by Romanticism and Positivism. But for Baudelaire, this “danger” seems to involve the homicidal and suicidal tendencies of religious hypocrites. But what is the object suppressed?

Derrida, in a passage forgiving the suppression of this object, and one of the rare instances he stops deconstructing and starts constructing, suggests that in order to prevent the “negation or destruction” of the gift of death—by this, he means that it be exposed as theological trickery—then another suppression is necessary: “the gift suppresses the object (of the gift)…keeping in the gift only the giving, the act of giving, and intention to give, not the given [Death], which in the end doesn’t count.” For Derrida, the exchange matters, and the exchange must continue. The object suppressed is death. Death, as the object of the gift, is lost to the exchange of sacrifice; the object is suppressed and social others are taken for the wholly other. For example, if we think of this arrangement as a literal exchange of a gift—a wrapped present given to an/other, Derrida is suggesting that the giving of the gift is more important than what is

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89 Ibid., 112.
91 Feuerbach, *Thoughts on Death*, 113.
inside the box. The asymmetry between the gift giver and receiver is unable to be balanced—that is, assumed differences in each’s ability and value are taken for granted—because the object of the gift is left inside the box, unable to flatten this arrangement through mutual concern, adoration, respect or otherwise concern for the object of the gift. Feuerbach, speaking also of death as an object, offers an alternative focus. Feuerbach is interested in the present, the actual gift inside the box, not the social exchange.

Focused on the death of the personal self, he indicates that any sort of dismissal, disavowal, or “suppression” (to remind of Baudelaire’s language) of this object is harmful. Indeed, suppression of this object and privileging the “gift” may say something about the longstanding desire to learn to die, the focus of so many philosophers and theologians for so long. “But the nothingness,” writes Feuerbach, “the death of the self at the moment of isolation, at the moment when it wishes to exist without the object [in other words, when it wishes to “suppress” the object], is the revelation of love, is the revelation that you can exist only with and in the object.”

92 Where love is concerned, or for my purposes, social responsibility, there can be no suppression of the object of death. The gift of death pivots on the giving, but in accepting this gift, the recipient is left without access to the very object needing to be faced, death. Feuerbach pulls no punches:

Only when the human once again recognizes that there exists not merely an *appearance of death*, but an actual and real death, a death that completely terminates the life of the individual, only when he returns to the awareness of his finitude will he gain the courage to begin a new life…

93 Here, Feuerbach gives principle attention to the “actual and real death” always faced in and as life. Death, this “actual and real” death, Feuerbach suggests aids in the formation of attention.

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92 Ibid., 126.
93 Feuerbach, *Thoughts on Death*, 17.
And to what is that attention directed, that of a “logic of limitation”\(^\text{94}\) wherein an infinite creator subjects that creator to space and time, indicating an intrinsic, pantheistic, or even monist suggestion that god is expressed in the finite capacity of organic, mortal bodies.

Effectively, Feuerbach’s refutation of a personal sense of the soul can be imagined as Abraham instead having realized that the only thing needing to be sacrificed is the mechanism of theological projection supporting any notion of an afterlife and guiding the inability to see different social groups as equal in value and ability. That is, Feuerbach is seeking to “sacrifice” the economy of sacrifice so that actual sacrifices might end; his efforts expose the economy as the veneer of salvation masking a “gift” of death distributed—given—to those socially othered. God’s salvation of Isaac privileges exchange, as death is “suppressed.” The “gift” goes unwrapped. This is precisely why John Singer offers a kind of Abrahamic narrative, albeit with a different ending. Singer “opens” the gift, revealing its secret, through his own death because his absence (a metaphor not for physical or social death, but the “death” of the personal soul) shifts attention away from the gift economy to the object of death, finitude and limitation. The other characters in the novel remain lonely and uncertain, but their ability to appeal to valuative and agential differences amongst social groups is diminished. In counterpoising Abraham to Christ to Singer, or in offering alternative imaginings of their actions and choices, I don’t mean to place judgment on any particular tradition, but to privilege the possibility that such imagined alternatives might aid in the refutation of the economy of sacrifice, an economy which constitutes social actors as either gods or sacrificial offerings to those gods. This is not necessarily the only solution, but perhaps it does offer a socially and ethically focused suggestion

\(^{94}\text{Ibid., xxvii.}\)
that might ensure that the system of sacrificial exchange undergirded by a certain conception of the afterlife and the soul is ended.

Salvation in Twilight

In a section of The Gift of Death left underdeveloped in terms of the (possible) impact of the topic on his overall argument, Derrida relates the Abrahamic tale to the heart, suggesting the narrative is “a meditation or sermon on the heart, on what the heart is and more precisely what it should be should it return to its correct place…in its correct site [emplacement], that is the very thing that gives us food for thought concerning economy.”95 White “hearts” seem to be lonely hunters because they seek to find the “correct place” through a lonely practice, as that of “hunters”—killing those who would give life and color to the world or the vision of that world as they seek salvation. Even in seeking an alternative to their loneliness, they remain killers now, told to kill the mechanism making possible this murderous loneliness: personal salvation.

For these reasons, McCullers’ character John Singer offers a contemporary tale that might augment both the Abrahamic and Christological economies of sacrifice, as it provides a cultural narrative that might help those “lonely hunters” at social centers come to terms with the death of any conception of the soul or an afterlife, a death that would mean learning how to live without hunting other humans. “Culture,” some scholars of death suggest, “is the primary vehicle through which…the pangs of death are lessened,”96 but it is also the place where “fear of life’s end is learned from and perpetuated.”97 My continued turn to cultural resources such as McCullers and next Lillian Smith, attempts to provide an unraveling of this fear, dread, anxiety and absurdity of life in death and death in life. But no promises can be made that a new path will

95 Derrida, The Gift of Death, 97.
96 Clifton D. Bryant, Handbook of Death and Dying. SAGE, 2003, 12.
97 Bryant, 118.
be possible that does not, at some level, reinforce the logic of sacrifice producing and sustaining god-idols. So how does this actually play out in white Christian communities?

Where McCullers’ own life is concerned, Singer’s death is a sort of mandate that she expects more of herself and more from those around her, but she was under no assumption that the cultivation of such social responsibility would be contagious or that it would not be negated by yet other unexamined ideas and practices. In the final chapter, I engage the life of one of McCullers’ contemporaries, Lillian Smith, and the tragic occasion of one of their interactions. Both of them largely rejected the constitution of social others as wholly other—as unknowable save for their alterity. So do I.

White Christians seem to be in the position that they cannot be sure their traditional religious beliefs or practices do not reinforce the imago superlata’s casting of social others as wholly other. Because of this, they might do well to renegotiate the terms of some of their most cherished ideals, the personal conception of the soul one of these. Whether this requires abandoning an entire tradition remains to be seen, but perhaps, the process might begin by choosing one Sunday morning to stay in bed, find a copy of McCullers’ book (or another), and begin to “worship” something different, cultivating social responsibility through reflexive engagement with cultural resources that might call into question, critique, or cast new light on the limits of contemporary white Christian expression and its ongoing reliance on and celebration of an economy of sacrifice. Isn’t this what the characters in McCullers’ novel failed to do? Resources for this responsibility are countless available, and finding them might just offer a more socially responsible way to spend the limited, finite time we have together. Having killed the idea of a personal salvation, and embraced a growing social responsibility, white Christian

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98 This idea could as easily be characterized as learning to not “worship” anything, learning to live without the need to worship.
killers might begin to “hunt” not people but for concrete resources, tactics and dialogues for equitable, limited existence in an increasingly diverse, exceedingly radically contingent social world. Then it might be said that white Christians have begun to live because they have begun to die for others.
Chapter Six:  
Requiem for Whiteness:  
Mourning, Freedom in Uncertainty, and the Final Embrace of Twilight

The world is white no longer, and it will never be white again.  
-James Baldwin

We are the strange fruit of that way of life. We who are white.  
-Lillian Smith

One of the greatest writers of the Twentieth Century, James Baldwin, helps to situate this final chapter’s argument when he writes in *Notes of a Native Son* (1955) that “the world is white no longer, and it will never be white again.” Baldwin was under no illusion that such a statement corresponded to an empirical political reality. In other words, Baldwin says the world is white no longer, not because such a world is already palpable, but rather, because he understands the complexity involved in the co-constitutive nature of the production and maintenance of whiteness and its reliance on blackness, globally. Baldwin wrote these words while in residence in a small town in Switzerland, but they were meant for an American audience. With the U.S. context in mind, what such a statement meant was that U.S. whites can no longer and never again call Baldwin a “stranger;” they were no longer able to “make an abstraction of the Negro.” On this point, he writes,

The time has come to realize that the interracial drama acted out on the American continent has not only created a new black man, it has created a new white man, too. No

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3 Schwarz and Kaplan, 11-12.
4 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
road whatever will lead Americans back to the simplicity of this European village where white men still have the luxury of looking on me as a stranger. I am not, really, a stranger any longer for any American alive.\footnote{Baldwin, \textit{Notes}, 159-175}

For Baldwin, talk of “strangers” and the end of the white world spoke to “the historical perception that the world was on the point of a momentous transformation and that the end of the old racial order, if not present, was at least in sight.”\footnote{Schwarz and Kaplan, 12.} Pressing this further, whites could (and likely might) remain fearful of Baldwin or those who look or act like Baldwin, but they can no longer escape that fear, precisely because their chosen path to address that fear historically has unraveled. In so many words, whiteness has “othered” itself. For the purposes of this dissertation, in light of the above passage, perhaps one could argue, white Americans here arrive at their own alterity in and through such recognition – when and where the recognition of the stranger causes some dissonance within the imagination of the white subject who now must come to grips with their own “strangeness” in relation to the other. Thought of, too, in light of a presumed success from the previous chapter—that white Christians might relinquish claims to salvation—then this final chapter address white people more generally.\footnote{For background on how I define these white people, along with their relationship to theism or Christianity more generally, see Chapter One and Chapter Two. Here, white people continues to mean a white petit bourgeois ideal, from which white people radiate outward as “most Americans.”} There is never a moment that white Christian inheritance does not influence options, but here, my data is not any particular sociological group at all, but a focused assessment of whiteness looking back at its benefactors, as a mirror, wherein benefactors see themselves for the first time (in a sense)—as other.

This final chapter offers one hermeneutical strategy for coming to terms with this white otherness (not to be confused with racialized marginality, but rather, ‘otherness’ as in the

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\footnote{Baldwin, \textit{Notes}, 159-175} \footnote{Schwarz and Kaplan, 12.} \footnote{For background on how I define these white people, along with their relationship to theism or Christianity more generally, see Chapter One and Chapter Two. Here, white people continues to mean a white petit bourgeois ideal, from which white people radiate outward as “most Americans.”}
precarity of finding oneself a newish strange predicament, where perceived unity and coherence is both realized and threatened) through the suggestion that whiteness (in terms of its assumption of singularity and homogeneity) has died. As such, now, we whites sit at its funeral, and the uncertainty faced as we come to terms about how to live without whiteness, without this flawed innocence and certainty it has traditionally afforded and provided such a demographic.

Following Baldwin’s words and the social situations to which they point, I want to suggest that white people may sit now at the requiem for whiteness. Specifically, I argue that by hermeneutically treating whiteness as if it has died, reliance on it (by whites) becomes and will become over time more apparent. Situating whiteness as “dead” in its ability to guard against personal and social uncertainty marks a moment whites might learn to live with a growing degree of uncertainty. Just as Baldwin notes, a “new white man” has been created as white men no longer are able to register black others as “stranger.” In this chapter, I reverse the typical gaze of stranger and other, by suggesting a thought-experiment of conceiving of whiteness as dead, so that whites might be able to recognize themselves as the stranger, for they are just now learning to live within the social arrangements and historical circumstances they created, without the same explicit or implicit means of social othering at their disposal. In other words, they have othered themselves from their very means of othering. Whiteness has died.

I do not mean that whiteness as an idea has died—for ideas can never fully “die.” Rather, I mean that the functional utility of whiteness can no longer work effectively enough to produce a modicum or sense of innocence or certainty. It is my hope that this chapter will help whites work towards an embrace of the uncertainty now posed by registering themselves as other. My argument here is not that the “old racial order” is no more, but that bringing about such an end might more adequately be achieved (if at all) by having white people come to terms with a loss
that is already feared by many whites. I want to suggest by treating the central concept of that “old racial order,” whiteness, as if it has died, then Baldwin’s prophetic voice might find greater social purchase. Ironically perhaps, thinking whiteness dead has implications for the white ability to see whiteness in practice. This chapter is a final thought experiment into the utility for white Americans of treating whiteness as if it has died. I don’t mean this as a statement of sociological or historical fact or diagnosis, but rather, here, the death of whiteness arises, hermeneutically, from the ideas’ existential unraveling, its waning ability to construct and sustain racialized difference.

NOTICE OF DEATH

Traditionally, a requiem is a mass held for the recently deceased, that their souls be remembered in their passage from this life to the next. In this final chapter, I offer a requiem for a god-idol, a funeral, of sorts, for coming to terms with the death of whiteness. By this “death,” I mean the end of the ability to fight, ignore or otherwise deny experiences of human limitation and uncertainty through racialized means, producing an uncertainty of thought, action and social possibility. Such a death forces recognition of necessary human interdependence beyond the ideological boundaries of those who did (or do) adhere to whiteness. Thought of as a funeral “to come” at some point in the future, this requiem pronounces whiteness—as interpreted amongst many whites—as dead, lost, missing, inaccessible, increasingly functionally inept, offering final words of guidance to better enable those who might struggle to accept the pending death of whiteness. By writing this requiem, I hope to offer strategies useful to people still needing to learn to live without it.

Where white people stand now in the face of an uncertain world, where whiteness might no longer promise a façade of certainty, these benefactors have reason to mourn this loss. I
define loss as the recognition of being deprived or denied something of particular individual and/or collective value. Privileges procured by whiteness, though unwarranted and often unacknowledged, are no less loved or valued even if they are unjustified. Where whites, benefactors and adherents of whiteness are concerned, the death of whiteness requires mourning. This chapter attempts to begin this process of lamentation, but in a way that does not celebrate the life of whiteness. I attempt this by heuristically suggesting to those whites and all who benefit from the effects of whiteness, those who might find themselves “at” this “requiem,” that they might understand themselves through white lesbian novelist Lillian Smith’s reappropriation of the concept of “strange fruit”\textsuperscript{10}—where whites hang, within the twilight of the old and new, onto a dead or dying “way of life” made possible by a whiteness increasingly witnessed (by its benefactors) precisely because the loss of it (whether real or imaginary) is registered with greater clarity.\textsuperscript{11} White Americans, by and large, don’t know what to make of whiteness (for how can they when it’s remained largely “invisible” and “uncited” – that is, the normative privilege of whiteness allows it to not be named, they know it is no longer appropriate to appeal to it, but also know that it remains there to be used in times of duress). My argument is that only by constantly calling into question the efficacy of such use will whites learn to live with that uncertainty.

Here, in this last chapter, I am speaking most directly to the affective sensibilities of white people, rather than suggesting that “strange white fruit” be used as a proxy in the same

\textsuperscript{10} As noted later in this chapter, but worth noting here, this proposed alternative hermeneutical rendering of white Christians as “strange fruit” is not to suggest or compete with the historical reality of black bodies as “strange fruit,” but is meant to cast whiteness as “other” by way of the very “othering” devices it has made use of historically.

\textsuperscript{11} I have in mind a kind of contemporary expression of Plato’s Allegory of the Cave. Think, instead, of a community who has lived its entire life with air conditioning, but without the recognition that air conditioning is an artificial construction of social and material reality. Only when air conditioning stops working, stops functioning, does it begin to become apparent that life has been lived with an unknown privilege.
manner as (black) “strange fruit.” So for instance, when talking about visibility and invisibility, or death or life (whiteness’ life, that is) I am not citing an empirical domain. This is not a sociological statement or analysis. Rather, I use this term to offer a final interpretive strategy to whites – moving back and forth between life and death so as to evoke the uncertainty the dissertation seeks to cultivate. This chapter has been written with a dizzying fluidity meant to represent this uncertainty—again, as if at a funeral, not wanting to believe in the death to such an extent there is denial, moments of recognition of loss, confusion and tacit fear. It is for this reason the entire chapter ends with the short poem indicating that white people really don’t know what to do now that whiteness has died/is dying/might die a consequence of the stranger within ourselves. Awareness of the death of whiteness is not the death of the idea, or the end to the pain experienced by non-whites because of this idea. It is, for whites at least, recognition of the paradox they find themselves in—and feel themselves in—today. I have been one of these believers, this strange white fruit, and the tone and proscriptive comments of this chapter note how I, as much as other whites, are just now beginning to see ourselves in this capacity, with others hearing for the first time, of the need to understand ourselves in this capacity. White innocence is seemingly lost; admitting to uncertainty appears the order of the day. We have lost a principle ideological mechanism providing our certainty, a loss of something we didn’t all even realize was so seemingly valuable.

I cannot by proxy of my privilege, speak from the subject position of “blackness” but I do however strongly feel that I’ve included a chorus of black voices in this project to call this whiteness out for what it is. That said, my audience for this dissertation, are these white Christians and white people more generally who have not “seen” whiteness, even if they have seen the effects of whiteness, and in this sense, here I am trying to offer a way to give an account
of whiteness without ultimately relying upon the backs of black bodies to do that heavylifting for me/us (white people). This chapter, to this extent, is a kind of rewriting of the first chapter of this dissertation, but here the strange fruit are finally—if inchoately and caustically—understood to be the perpetrators of such violence historically, the white (Christians) who are just now seeing whiteness come into view. I am revisiting in some ways whiteness’ inability to do that work for ourselves/themselves while also calling for an ethic of responsibility to do this work without relying on the “other.” For us/them (whites), it has not and will not be “visible” until it dies.

What does it mean to have believed in invisible things that become visible just as they seemingly die? Of course, black bodies have “seen” whiteness as visible for quite a long time. The viciousness of lynching discussed in Chapter One exposed (to many African Americans) an ideology of adherence to whiteness maintained by white perpetrators. But methodologically, how do we whites, strange white fruit, handle “invisible things?” I bring this project to a close with a methodological reminder that the death of a god-idol is not about the literal end of god-idols, but the reconstitution of god-idols in a new way. I cannot call it into death without calling it into life so that it might be seen, made legible. Legibility here means exposing that which has hidden for too long under the material veneer of its constituent other—blackness. What I have attempted in this project is to call that which has been invisible into materiality, so that it can die, and so that a new social arrangement or arrangements be made possible, to the extent they are possible at all. This new arrangement would involve acceptance of intense uncertainty, a freedom enacted through social responsibility as opposed to a freedom from social responsibility—made possible not through an imposition of uncertainty and limits on others, but by facing squarely the limits and uncertainty of oneself and one’s own community in a way that attempts to not scale and rank bodies.
As with any funeral, time is spent here reflecting on what might have been, what conversations and words could have been spoken, and what might occur now upon acceptance of this loss. Specifically, though running the risk (an always already risk) or reifying new and more dangerous and pernicious god-idols in the wake of those no longer functioning, I intend to demonstrate that acceptance of the loss of whiteness opens the possibilities for a freedom in limitation to unfold through three principle areas of discussion: (a) These possibilities require adequately and equitably mourning the loss of any conceivable means of affective or social certainty; (b) New social possibilities require coming to terms with the uncertain relationships between this loss of whiteness and other god-idols. This would involve a continued attempt to find analytic and interpretive means for living within the discomfort of social and epistemological uncertainty; and (c), New social arrangements require facing the many dimensions of uncertainty that await finally letting go of a god-idol. Letting go brings with it the freedom to mourn the loss of god-idols, the freedom to acknowledge the relationship between different god-idols as increasingly complex, and the freedom to begin to live as social actors in an uncertain, radically contingent world. Thus, I conclude with a series of snapshots of uncertainty, as in the letting go of or unraveling of a rope (as in a lynch rope), ending this dissertation by beginning to sight some of the unanswered/unanswerable questions that trouble even my own (or a reader’s certainty in) the argument presented in (and as) this dissertation. Lastly, in an effort to make full use of this chapter’s theme of a requiem, I have broken the chapter into four sections, as in the program of a funeral: invocation, eulogy, homily, and benediction. Worth noting, this funeral motif is also not a response to a sociological reality but an effort to bring about such a reality. In some instances, such as the “eulogy” section, I focus most attention not on literally eulogizing whiteness but rather on understanding its continued life
(even as functionally dead) as it relates to other possible god-idols. To the extent a eulogy describes certain important relationships held by the decedent, then this eulogy for whiteness focuses on the relationships between whiteness and other god-idols. This final chapter, then, is for those who are sitting at a requiem for a loved one but who have yet to come to full terms with the implications of that loss, and for those who have accepted the loss but are not sure what to do now.

INVOCATION

How are those whites who find themselves at this requiem to interpret themselves or the task that lay before them now? In these first three sections, I argue that we whites might understand ourselves as “strange [white] fruit” to the extent we have ignored, denied or fought against our full humanity as radically contingent. This invocation begins by beginning to situate ourselves as the constituent building blocks providing our own ability to see “whiteness” in social practice and custom. Specifically, this ability hinges on registering this god-idol as functionally dead. I then discuss the possibilities for mourning now in front of us, working to outline a program for mourning that does not celebrate the life of whiteness but learns from its tragic, complicated history.

Strange White Fruit Hanging from a Dead God-Idol Tree

This dissertation ends as it began, with strange fruit. But I began my exploration of whiteness as a god-idol by hermeneutically situating its “birth” in the practice of lynching, sighting whiteness by relying on those very bodies dehumanized by the idea in practice. The motivations for lynchings have far more to do with the perpetrators of vigilantism than they do with their victims, and that extends to discussion of those events. Lynching was (and is) the
result of a community so scared of uncertainty they kill to protect themselves against its recognition. Here, I seek to confront that uncertainty by retaining the image of strange fruit (for its historical reminder and existential imagery) by focusing attention towards white bodies, strange white fruit. The imago superlata, the system of religious adherence to violence-inducing ideological exaggerations of human worth and ability, is sustained by an ironic solipsism guiding adherents and benefactors, ironic because it safeguards itself by acting as if it is concerned with others. To turn this solipsism against itself, I suggest that lynching created its “strangest” fruit in its white benefactors, producing a community so scared of the uncertainty of human existence they chose to dehumanize themselves through the dehumanization of others.12

Here, we sit at the funeral of a god-idol for whom we have murdered others, one of the first times we are able to see this dead god-idol and our reliance on it, feeling a small sense of the loss this god-idol has imposed on others for so long. The loss of whiteness, then, opens the possibility to become fully human—that is, not attempting to transcend limitation and uncertainty, but embrace it as the new particular foundation for human social interaction. This does not mean that other more dangerous god-idols might not emerge. Perhaps they will. This dangerous possibility is precisely the impetus for my argument and dissertation—that, due to the real and perceived threat of the loss of these god-idols, white Americans would do well to accept their loss by learning to die for others, what we might now come to understand as dying with others. It is my contention that such learning guards against, though does not fully promise an end to, the worship of such god-idols as whiteness.

12 My argument does not intend to “other” those whites victimized by lynching historically, or to shortchange such stories for the sake of easily packaging these ideas. Though exceptions are certainly a fixture of any argument, hanging above or buried beneath its claims, I contend that white people were the principle benefactors of the historical practice of lynching, in terms of both who was literally killed and in terms of what functional work those lynchings sought to do in the social world.
To press the strange fruit metaphor in a seldom-traveled direction, I turn to Lillian Smith who spent much of her career exposing the oppressive and repressive dehumanizing forces shaping social life within a segregated U.S. south, and a racist and sexist nation more generally. Her words and writings are often in the style of a lament, a sadness evocative of the frustration of having learned “that the human relations I valued most were held cheap by the world I lived in.”\(^\text{13}\) To this extent, Smith was not simply an anti-racist, anti-sexist activist, but a writer who wrote about such things for the audience of perpetrators and benefactors, with the somber affective disposition of someone wrestling with their continued love for a community unaware of “the consequences of this stubborn refusal to give up” a way of life that “is dead”\(^\text{14}\) and in such refusal, remains death dealing. More than simply “held cheap,” white human social relations historically have relied on dastardly means of refuting the uncertainty posed in the wake of certain physical death and forced reliance on others in light of that death.

Smith’s first novel *Strange Fruit* (1944) hinged on the premise that the typical notion of strange fruit, made famous by Billie Holiday, “black bodies hanging in the summer breeze,”\(^\text{15}\) was sustained and made possible/probable because of a dearth of white cultural awareness and acumen; that is, the result of intense oppression at a social level and repression at a psychical level. As discussed in the first chapter, murder sustained these forces. For Smith, these extreme lengths of defending the sense of certainty suggested that white people were the actual “strange fruit” of that way of life,\(^\text{16}\) due to the relative interpretive normalcy of lynching (meaning the practice wasn’t regarded as “strange” by most whites), while also due to the incredible strangeness of white reflexivity—its inability to “see” itself. The strangest of fruit is the fruit that

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\(^\text{14}\) Smith, *Killers*, 233-4.
\(^\text{15}\) Billie Holiday, *Strange Fruit*, n.d.
\(^\text{16}\) Lillian Smith, *Miss Lil’s Camp*. 
refuses to understand itself as “fruit,” using “fruit” here as a euphemism for the human situation of radical contingency. We whites are this strange fruit.

As argued in Chapter One, god-idols function in the capacity of the “ropes” from which such “fruit” hangs, exaggerations of human ability and value the braids of these “ropes,” keeping our existential fears and anxieties seemingly “off the ground,” our feet dangling above the social world and our ability to interpret our proper value and ability within that world. In other words, god-idols presuppose and give possibility to the assumption of a distance between individual, personal existential concerns and social realities. By this arrangement, we—this strange white fruit—hang, unable to embrace radically contingent freedom because we have yet to let go of dead god-idols.

Importantly, I do not mean to suggest a shared experience between black and white where lynching is concerned historically, or to “poach” from the storehouse of black suffering for the sake of white existential concern. Rather, this strange white fruit’s inability to let go of the god-idols to which they cling is one of the central impetuses for the historical practice of lynching—meaning, that until we, the perpetrators, are able to see ourselves in this capacity—as strange fruit—then the murderous literal lynchings of non-whites will only continue in the various forms demonstrated in this project (Trayvon Martin, Islan Nettles, etc., etc., etc.).

Pressing the heuristic of strange fruit further, this chapter offers an example of what social senescence—that is, the awareness and process of knowing when to die, the awareness of when to “let go of god-idols”—looks like in practice, in that “letting go” involves an awareness that one is “fruit”—that one is radically contingent—and then acceptance that it is time to fall from the tree, to die, a kind of death of self and recognition of this “new white man” noted by Baldwin, whose strangeness is made visible by Lillian Smith. God-idols are only as powerful as
the number and vocality of their adherents, and as such, as adherents learn to die (i.e. learn to
embrace uncertainty and limitation), then the god-idols themselves “die.” Hence, there is a
connection between someone like James Baldwin’s trust that he never will be registered as a
“stranger” again (i.e. his alterity will never ensure white ignorance of their own alterity) and the
idea that the white world is ending, or in my words, that whiteness is dead or dying.

Lillian Smith was aware most of her life of the interrelatedness of human social actors,
exemplified in the example of Baldwin, as well as the extended examples Smith provides.
Further, she spent great energy attempting to teach white culture how to let go, how to accept the
need of its death. And she did this under what biographer Rose Gladney has referred to as a
death sentence, as Smith battled cancer from 1953 until her death on September 28, 1966.
Writing from within this “death sentence,” Smith would use “her past to speak and write about
the future—the future of the South, of the world, of humanity itself.”17 This chapter pays homage
to these efforts by Smith, looking to her as a moral exemplar of the freedom of letting go,
emphasizing the limits involved with the practice of letting go in this capacity, and playing with
the concepts of life and death and past and future in order to offer this requiem for whiteness.
There is no way of determining if her cancer added a layer of complexity or awareness to
Smith’s ability to write about and “see” whiteness in practice. It at least offers a sobering
reminder that white people ultimately face a similar physical fate of death, and that in the face of
that death, it is still possible (and perhaps even probable) that insights are afforded about learning
to live as fruit fallen/having let go of appeals to false idols like whiteness. Loss of anything so

Regional Council, Volume 10, Number 4, July-August 1988., 1996, from The Carson McCullers
collection, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin.
Document available online at:
http://beck.library.emory.edu/southernchanges/article.php?id=sc10-4_009
valuable as a god-idol, change in any stripe, is uncertain. Like any death of a loved one or the
death of a benefactor, the loss of a god-idol or its material resources must be mourned and
accepted in the fear cast by an uncertain life in and around death. This process of mourning
begins here, in recognition and lament that we see ourselves finally as strange white fruit.

In the next section, and throughout the sections that follow, I privilege the uncertain
dimensions of accepting this loss. Specifically, I turn next to the uncertain possibilities for
mourning a god-idol that seemingly has no virtues to be mourned, but that has been loved
without being seen hidden behind the very visible consequences of its operation (i.e. privileges),
and must be lamented in its loss.

Uncertain Mourning

Mourning is dangerous, especially for a community that has historically sought to
assuage the uncertainty and sadness of loss through various, often violent, forms of denial.
Often—and especially in totemic\(^{18}\) arrangements as is the case of whiteness—loss seemingly
demands atonement. I turn now to discuss why mourning whiteness is necessary and how it
might be possible to mourn a dead or dying whiteness so that it indeed, stays “dead,” to the
extent this “death” is possible at all.

Lynching is one example of the extremes to which communities will go in response to
perceptions of loss. But it is also necessary to mourn whiteness, in that the grief of its loss is
psychologically and socially real insofar as it is felt and it has a bearing on social options, and to
the extent that the practice of mourning, if understood as a collective exercise, holds the
possibility of telling others that this thing called whiteness has died, that we no longer have

access to it. Again, as I am intentionally trying to present these ideas in a way sensitive to the existential concerns of whites—and also marketable to them—I think mourning is a necessity.

Even atrocities, catastrophes of history, must be mourned by those that have benefitted from them; the mourning of the contemporary loss of white innocence, then, also requires the mourning of a history’s worth of denials. Failure to mourn leaves unresolved tensions and an inability to fully accept the death. Here, I discuss this necessity and its dangers, suggesting they might be avoided if an uncertain mourning is cultivated based on the recognition that we are this strange fruit. Here, I am trying to suggest it is okay to mourn the loss of whiteness by offering a program for mourning that does not cause so much guilt (for mourning this loss) that the issue is repressed and the whiteness is reborn in a new form. An uncertain mourning—the uncertainty of having guilt even about the practice of mourning something like whiteness—is what prevents the mourning from centering the mourner as a moral cause in a normative sense. And here, too, it might be noted, this issue of mourning is not simply a means of increasing the receptiveness of white U.S. citizens to my argument, but the practice of mourning, of bereavement, is part and parcel to learning to die, in that it promotes greater existential closeness to the topics of death, loss, uncertainty, and insecurity, what Judith Butler has referred to as *The Precarious Life*.

The following from Butler on the question of mourning is as important for whites regarding whiteness, as any other group’s perceived loss:

> When we lose certain people, or when we are dispossessed from a place, or a community, we may simply feel that we are undergoing something temporary, that mourning will be over and some restoration of prior order will be achieved. But maybe when we undergo what we do, something about who we are is revealed, something that delineates the ties we have to others, that shows us these ties constitute what we are, ties or bonds that compose us. It is not as if an ‘I’ exists independently over here and then simply loses a ‘you’ over there, especially if the attachment to ‘you’ is part of what composes who ‘I’
am. If I lose you, under these conditions, then I not only mourn the loss, but I become inscrutable to myself. Who ‘am’ I, without you?19

Who are whites without whiteness, without innocence or certainty? Butler notes the connection between mourning and acceptance of finality as well as the connection of that finality to the sense of self experienced by the mourner. Do (or will) white Americans not need to ask “who ‘am’ I, without you?” to whiteness, to the idea undergirding the sense of security and certainty—even often anonymously—in the wake of its perceived death? Failure to do this difficult work would further create distance between those selves who have so often employed this god-idol, and their recognition of their own radical contingency, their recognition that who they “are” has always been actually answered without the ontological aid of whiteness (it is an “idol,” after all). Now, the “death” of whiteness marks a moment to see oneself in one’s full uncertainty and limitation. Only through the practice of mourning will even those who have outlined precarity for others for so long come to recognize their own precarious life.

For these reasons, this requiem for whiteness necessarily involves mourning and works to simultaneously wrestle with such affective responses while forcefully infusing them with an awareness of radical contingency—that is, the social world reminding that existential loss is never faced alone. In other words, even funerals rely on a variety of social actors. It is important that legitimation of a death occurs in the constitution of a crowd. This means that not only is mourning possible and necessary, but it is important that a means of mourning be provided so as to increase the numbers of those who will attend the requiem for whiteness. What this mourning looks like, the shape it takes, will determine if loss is truly embraced, or if the letting go of

certainty and security becomes yet a new means for the securing of such certainty. Next, I explore the criteria and “look” of such mourning.

Earlier in this project, I sought to describe whiteness (and other god-idols) as operating according to a totemic social system, a system wherein insider and outsider group allegiance is determined through the arbitrary ascription of objects with meaning, and the further arbitrary ascription of those objects as corresponding to specific group identities. I suggested that contemporary race relations in the U.S., as understood and responded to by many anti-racist activist whites, often follows a piacular logic guided by an assumption that death or loss has come as a result of the white community and consequentially, an atonement of sorts is required of that community that might make right what has been made wrong. In other words, that racism can be responded to if racists punish themselves. In fact, I argued that this entire dissertation might follow this expiatory logic. The practice of mourning, following Durkheim, I suggested is one example of these rites, wherein things like forced silence, immolation, and the like are imposed (by the larger society, or its representative leaders) on either insider or outsider group members. Such practices have, as their aim, the reconstitution of group cohesiveness in the wake of social ruptures caused by things like death. Piacular mourning seems to be what Bulter discusses in noting that temporary mourning might provide “restoration of prior [social] order.”

Initially, piacular rites seem to offer a means of mourning that is not celebratory in the positive moral sense, but are “sad” occasions where “everything that inspires sentiments of sorrow or fear” are marked in order to cultivate some sort of response or reaction to them. They offer the means of commemorating whiteness’ death and visibility without celebrating it as an

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20 Durkheim, 390.
21 Butler, 22.
22 Durkheim, 389.
object, these rites remain problematic because of their demand for atonement. Thusly, piacular rites can be understood as rituals of mourning wherein objects are noted as having met a "calamity" or objects are treated as deplorable.\textsuperscript{23} Given the long history of negative impact on the social environment from the concept of whiteness, it might seem as though such a piaculum is in order. However, although piacular rites are not celebratory, as a means for mourning whiteness, they remain problematic.

Piacular atonement has as its goal the healing of a community, efforts to bring a sense of social certainty back into view. The problem of this piacular arrangement of mourning, according to Durkheim, is that it follows the logic of atonement wherein "death demands the shedding of blood,"\textsuperscript{24} most often the shedding of outsider blood. But as my effort here is to embrace the feeling of social uncertainty, and as I do not wish to reinforce a sacrificial logic, piacular mourning is dangerous.

Piacular rites end up not a means of an impossible atonement, but do more to simply recreate and reify the "moral state of the group."\textsuperscript{25} That is to say, were my project to follow a piacular logic, it would undoubtedly respond to the deaths caused by insider/outsider arrangements by reinforcing those at the social center as dominant. Piacular mourning, following philosopher Eric Schliesser’s work, amounts to a continued casting and interpretation of those who mourn as a "moral cause,"\textsuperscript{26} a position that gives too much credit to benefactors of the imago superlata. Perhaps, this tendency is avoided by remembering that it remains an open

\textsuperscript{23} Durkheim, 389.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 394.
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 403.
question as to whether whiteness is in fact “dead,” while it also is worth noting that whiteness is not a “person” as is the typical cause of piacular mourning. Another scholar, political sociologist Mark Worrell, in an article demonstrating the strategic, self-loathing sensibilities of political Buchananism, quotes an important passage from Durkheim on this point: Piacular rites situate mourning as “a matter of duty…because those collective demonstrations…restore to the group the energy that the events threaten to take away…”27 If following a piacular logic, mourning would reinforce the centrality and energy (i.e. power) held and seemingly lost by the group. Consequentially, letting go, embracing limitation, must guard against such a restoration. If whiteness were mourned through a piacular logic, then whiteness would be reborn anew as a continued inability to accept limitation and uncertainty.

I want to suggest that my project attempts to rupture this piacular logic rather than reinforce it. Letting go, embracing limitation and uncertainty, is not retributive punishment, but acceptance that there is no atonement possible. There is no justice for the dead, to this extent, only a new hope for justice for the living dead, those who have yet to understand that life and death are only illusorily correlated in a binary arrangement.28 There is, then, a danger inherent in mourning whiteness, a danger I have sought to mitigate firstly by casting we, those who mourn, as strange white fruit, left only with the prospects of uncertain mourning—that is, the mourning of certainty, itself. In the next section, I attempt to outline what this uncertain mourning might look like in practice.

Uncertain Mourning and the ‘Sadness that has No Name’

Here, in the context of strange white fruit and the uncertain mourning such a hermeneutic offers, I seek to describe this uncertain means of mourning whiteness that does not rescue certainty by seeking atonement, but relies on fragile, uncertain memories to mourn, arriving at a “sadness that has no name,” an uncertain silence born from the sadness of realizing that the thing lost, missed, grieved, offers only broken, half-thought memories. In the previous section, I note some of the problems of piacular mourning. Here, I seek to further unpack the idea of uncertain mourning as a kind of mourning that taps into the existential feelings of loss so that acceptance of uncertainty is made more possible. By existential feelings of loss, I mean the affective responses seemingly dislodged from the social and felt through interpersonal emotional registers. To unpack these ideas, I once again rely on Lillian Smith.

On November 17, 1953, novelist Carson McCullers went to visit Lillian Smith in Clayton, Georgia. The two were both white southern writers, both established literary figures who sought to expose—in various ways—the negative, repressive impact of ideas on social life. The November visit was cut short when McCullers’ sister called to inform McCullers that her husband, Reeves McCullers, had killed himself the day before in Paris, France. Though Smith and McCullers were never able to build the relationship they seemed to desire, Smith and McCullers had an interest in one another and provided support at various stages in each other’s career. The death of Reeves McCullers was one opportunity for support.

In January of 1954, while writing within the shadow of her own cancer diagnosis, Smith sent a letter to McCullers, the contents of which help to demonstrate uncertain mourning. Lillian

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30 Gladney, “A Letter from Lillian Smith.”
Smith’s letter to Carson McCullers, only portions of it discussed here, provides a map for mourning that laments the loss without attempting to resituate its effect of casting the mourner as a moral cause. The following letter, through metaphor, remains uncertain and tragic, sure of the pain of loss, but seemingly cognizant that blithe sentimental expressions of celebration are not in order. Evoked in the letter are confusion, uncertainty and sadness. The letter casts mourning as the loss of power, and memory the storehouse for (recognition of) such power. In particular, Smith’s roadmap for lament relies on two central concepts, that of memory and unnamable sadness. Smith first writes of:

The kind of day when my tongue says "beautiful" and my heart mourns. Always those winds blow harder on my memory than on the mountain and I am driven back to an empty house and empty rooms that greedily spread over my whole life, sometimes; refusing to budge. Just taking over as if they have a right to stay. What happened on windy days long ago, I have no faint idea; but when such a day comes, I have to go back, like a ghost, to my childhood and wander it. Without map; without destination.\(^3\)

Smith here notes the overwhelming power of memory, a power seemingly afforded in large part because memories are so fleeting, memories of “houses” and “rooms” left “empty” from “days long ago.” If a piacular form of mourning looks forward in time and sees/seeks blood, an uncertain model of mourning looks backward, realizing that individual recollections might say something about the time or “way of life” as it was experienced by the mourners.

I look to Smith’s letter with theorist Maurice Halbwachs’ suggestions that memories are incomplete, that individual “minds reconstruct memories under the weight of a society,” and that such a society “obligates people…to give [memories] a prestige that reality did not possess.”\(^4\) Smith’s words seem to refute such atoning social obligations. In the letter, memories connect to the weight of a past social world and individual memories offer a proxy for understanding.

\(^3\) Ibid.
collective or communal experience. But Smith’s presentation of these particular memories seem to fight against the demand for cohesiveness and “prestige.” For Halbwachs, memories aren’t part of an effort at certainty; however, they can be caught up in such an effort. Here, I’m seeking to ensure they do not promote certainty, and Smith, “without map; without destination,” is uncertain. Furthermore, if Halbwachs’ suggestion that a child dislodged from her original society and transplanted into another would have an increasing paucity of memories (from home) in the wake of that rupture, then perhaps Smith’s reference to childhood evokes a recognition of different social options (i.e. segregation vs. integration) and the damage done to a person’s memories as a result of such dehumanizing social practices. There are no tidy answers here, no certain recollections, only vague ghost-like spectering wanderings that do more to trouble certainty than to provide it in the time it is desired most severely.

Smith’s ruminations on memory suggest a tenuous, but pervasive connection to heritage, family, and community, as much as a recognition of various, uncertain social options enacted (or not) in time, more akin to “wind” than the strength of a “rope” that might be provided by appeals to god-idols. If piacular atonement could be said to hold onto god-idols to the extent it reinforces a sacrificial offering and logic of sacrifice where blood must be shed, uncertain mourning lets go, hoping “winds” will carry social actors in new, uncertain directions. Memories, whether cultural memories or interpersonal (as such lines are blurry) are uncertain, often unavailable, and yet vital, of most importance, but impossible to trust fully. Within this context, our memories are as uncertain as our social context and the impact of those contexts on our ideas.

Smith continues her letter:

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33 Ibid., 51.
34 Ibid., 37-8.
So, I write you from Clayton but really from a lonely corner somewhere in the past, to say hello and thank you and wish you well. It would be nice to talk. I have never talked to you. Always we begin and there are—interruptions. Small ones, most of them; and the one big one which I pray you have somehow made your peace with. A hard six weeks you have had. I know this. I know there have been terrors and regrets, and sudden revelations, and grief, and a sadness that has no name. Always, if we could name the sadness, if we could find the word, we feel the sadness would lift. It is like stumbling across an old grave stone with no name and no date. Sorrow is like that. One cannot name it. If one only could...name it and find a little date in time for it. Then we could drop a small flower, a tear, and compose our life around it.\textsuperscript{36}

Reeves’ death was for McCullers a material expression of loss. The loss of a lover, a soul mate, is one of the most difficult moments in life\textsuperscript{37}, producing for many what Smith notes as an inexpressible sadness, a “sadness that has no name.”\textsuperscript{38} This loss and its sadness offers a metaphor for the loss of god-idols and the false sense of security and certainty that they offer. Will white people weep when they hear “madmen” crying out that whiteness is dead?\textsuperscript{39} And would silence or apathy at that suggestion imply that whites fail to realize that whiteness is dead, or realize its death, but find no reason to weep? Though Reeves is not a god-idol in the same sense as I discuss in Chapter Five of the character John Singer from McCullers The Heart is a Lonely Hunter, the loss of Reeves to suicide was devastating for McCullers, and it required mourning, just as a kind of mourning is necessitated for whiteness so that the grief it has imposed on others might be recognized by those who feel its loss now. The connection between Singer and Reeves on the point of suicide is also representative of the tenuous arrangement of god-idols, themselves, discussed in more detail in the previous chapter. Notably, Smith’s letter to

\textsuperscript{36} Smith, Qtd. In Gladney.
\textsuperscript{37} On the Holmes-Rahe Stress Test Inventory, Death of a Spouse, Divorce, Marital Separation, and Death of a Loved One rank as four of the top five most stressful life events. McCullers had experienced all four with Reeves. See http://cehs.unl.edu/ecse/960/strestst.html for more on this scale.
\textsuperscript{38} Smith, Qtd. In Gladney.
\textsuperscript{39} Here, I use an allusion to Nietzsche’s proclamation.
McCullers suggests an embrace of the destabilizing effects of loss, a loss eerily nearly prophetically enacted years earlier in the form of McCullers’ character Singer, who also committed suicide. Given such weighty circumstances, much can be learned from Smith’s letter. It encourages sadness, not finding ways to name (and overcome) this loss, but to endure it through the profundity it poses.

Some might suggest, for instance, that my framing this within a funeral-like setting might help the social actors involved make more out of less, to celebrate something instead of register it as troublesome. Often, funerals bring out the “best” in those who are mourned, as Halbwach reminds collective memories often do. Wanting to guard against this requiem as a celebration, my turn to Smith’s somber account of memory forces recognition of the complexity of a life, the “good” and “bad.” Reeves and Carson McCullers’ relationship was—as many public romances—famously tumultuous, divorced and yet remaining connected, they seemingly gave to one another the best and worst each had to offer. Smith’s noting of “terrors, regrets and sudden revelations” seems to imply her own awareness of just how complicated Reeves and Carson’s relationship had been. Loss ruptures, causes uncertainty, doubt, and the forced recognition that often, those who are mourned did as much to teach how to hate as how to love.

With this complication in mind, Smith’s suggestions for McCullers’ bereavement offers possible insights into what the mourning of god-idols will look like, what “empty rooms” of memories of whiteness might feel like, recognizing both the sadness of the loss of the relationship as well as the sadness of recognizing the costs once attached to preserving the relationship in life. Following Smith’s suggestion in Killers of the Dream that “personal memoir” in one sense is, in another “every Southerner’s memoir,”40 I offer myself as one auto-

40 Smith, Killers of the Dream, 21.
ethnographic example of this recognition in terms of both whiteness and theism. I have been afforded intense privileges from reliance on whiteness, too numerous to name, and more often than not I have remained silent in moments when I recognized that those privileges came at the expense of others. The death of whiteness marks a sadness that such privileges might no longer be afforded and a moment to recognize my complicity in allowing the costs of that relationship to play out in harmful ways for others. In like manner, the educational opportunities making possible this dissertation began through mainline white Christian church-based relationships and scholarships, such that were it not for theism’s social import and impact, I would not have had the possibility to pursue advanced degrees. Quite literally, were it not for the importance many white Christians place on the belief in the idea of god and the power of whiteness to determine who has privileged access to social possibilities, my educational opportunities might not have been possible. Mourning the deaths of these god-idols involves recognizing the possible loss of such privileges (e.g. higher education scholarships and other social options made possible in reward for adherence to god-idols) as much as it also requires facing squarely the costs of such privileges.

Sorrow, if it is anything, comes at realizing that many of the people and ideas most beloved are the very places where learning to exaggerate the radical contingency of others takes place. Smith recalls in *Killers of the Dream* “The mother who taught me what I know of tenderness and love and compassion taught me also the bleak rituals of keeping Negroes in their ‘place.’ The father who rebuked me for an air of superiority toward schoolmates from the mill and rounded out his rebuke by gravely reminding me that “all men are brothers,” trained me in the steel-rigid decorums I must demand of every colored male.”41 In my case, as one of countless

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41 Smith, *Killers of the Dream*, 27.
examples, the grandfather I loved and whose heart gave out too soon joked that “if I’d only receive a heart transplant, then I’d be okay…even if I woke up with a hankering for watermelon because my new heart came from a ‘nigger,’” the implication that the heart had come from an African American who had died violently and prematurely. The sorrow of learning to love and hate in the same place seems impossible to name, perhaps out of shame at having been the benefactor of such tragic social arrangements. And Smith does not offer suggestions for naming, but a reminder to McCullers that she understands and grieves with her. Loss exposes the conditions that have provided a sense of certainty and social solipsism, forcing recognition of the uncertainty that has been hidden through both love and hate. As Smith’s letter demonstrates, all that can be done (while grieving) is to expose the loss as an awareness of namelessness, and fill in the holes of memory with grief.

Where white existential responses to the loss of whiteness are concerned—there is no atonement. There is sadness, grief, lament and sorrow. Learning to die for others does not involve some sort of piacular balancing of the ledger books marking who lives and dies. A balanced awareness of radical contingency is not found through the totemic “demand for blood.” Learning to die for others means learning that even sacrificial death for others will not correct for past and current social injustices. Rather, it involves living with the legacy and memory of loss in the contemporary uncertain moment—posed by continued reliance on those who may or may not have accepted the death of whiteness. For the deaths of god-idols as much as for physical, material people, this sorrow that cannot be named takes shape through the forced reliance on others (i.e. radical contingency), as in the case of Smith’s letter to McCullers, the example of my grandfather’s reliance on another person’s donated heart (even as he continued to

42 Durkheim, 394.
other that person during such an embodied, serious form of reliance), or as symbolically modeled when family friends or church members bring over platters of food to the families of the recently deceased. Uncertain mourning involves learning to live with an open wound, and within the awkwardness of living and acting with other wounded people, embracing the sorrow of loss that has no name.

With this description of uncertain mourning in place, and the letter from Smith serving as the central feature orienting this invocation at the requiem for whiteness, I turn now to a kind of social eulogy for whiteness, describing its life lived in relation to other god-idols, and how we might approach that life in the wake of its death.

EULOGY
Due to this forced reliance on others who might not yet have heard of the death of whiteness but who might fear the danger of such a loss, and out of the panoply of god-idols born through social actors and interaction (those god-idols not yet visible but alive), uncertain mourning does not ensure that god-idols stay “dead,” or that other god-idols are not waiting to take up the task of concealing uncertainty. Indeed, mourning is but one expression of a freedom in uncertainty. In the next three sections, I offer a kind of eulogy for whiteness, further rhetorically treating it as “dead” precisely so as to guard against it returning to “life.” To this extent, I am not so much writing an actual eulogy as I am offering a final series of analytic frames that might be employed for writing whiteness’ eulogy—that is, for keeping it “dead.” I am offering here a means for analyzing the characteristics of whiteness as it interacts with other god-idols and the social world. Fighting against and understanding the reliance of one god-idol on others is an integral component promoting the freedom to let go. So as this requiem moves forward, I present a rendering of the relation of one dead god-idol to another as part of a confluence of assemblages,
indicating that this funeral is not a time to celebrate an easy victory over the imago superlata, but requires ongoing analytic efforts to stay vigilant in the face of an easy slippage back into a false sense of certainty.

Some Assemblage Required

In Chapter Three, I sought to characterize god-idols as bound up within a battle for identity that takes place on the bodies of social actors. I looked to Jean Francois Bayart to demonstrate how the concepts of god-idols interact with “operational acts of identification”\(^ {43}\) that come together to constitute the things referred to as “identities.” I also looked to Mary Douglas to show that such concepts find purchase and impact on the social world as they are projected onto real, material bodies.\(^ {44}\) What I did not discuss fully there—for wanting to privilege the embodied impact of god-idols on identity formation, was the relationship between different god-idols working together in certain instances. Here, I turn to Jasbir Puar’s notion of assemblage in order to cover this ground. In particular, in this section, I first note the analytic difference between discussion of identity and my attempted focus here on assemblages of god-idols, then briefly note the theoretical specifics of my analysis, and turn to the example from Lillian Smith in order to unpack how this framework aids in analysis.

While many intersectional theorists have noted double and triple jeopardy faced in terms of actual social identities posed, here, I’m focused on offering an apparatus for holding in tension the sameness and differences of god-idols, not identities. Again, I might note the hermeneutical underpinnings of my project. Where whites are concerned, they have much available material to read about, say, the triple jeopardy faced by the “identities” of black poor women working in

tandem (that is, “blackness,” “poverty,” and “gender”). Indeed, identity remains an incredibly popular topic of discussion amongst scholars across fields. But following James Faubion’s suggestion that such a focus on identity “did not fully take off and it remains to be seen what will happen with it,” I am working to focus attention on the inverse, ideological arrangements bearing down on certain social actors producing such double, triple or quadruple identity-based jeopardy.

Seeking to trouble intersectional models of identity as relying on a presumption of subjectivity as well as an insular assessment of each identity-marker working with but remaining distinct from, the others, Puar’s notion of assemblage is helpful in that it “is more attuned to interwoven forces that merge and dissipate time, space and body against linearity, coherency and permanency.” An assemblage dislodges “identity” from the bodies of subjects to more readily expose the impact of affective movements on those bodies. Intersectionality arguments tend to imply stasis within a matrix of identities—surety—where assemblage privileges fluidity, movement and uncertainty of identity. I turn to Jasbir Puar’s notion of assemblage to demonstrate the intensely complex, co-constitutive arrangement of god-idols as they shape material outcomes for bodies in space and time, in that the privileging of affective fluidity (instead of cohesive identities) helps to trouble god-idols’ function of manipulating and reifying artificial distinctions so as to procure senses of certainty. Specifically, I want to suggest that god-idol(s) + adherent = assemblage. Whiteness never functions in isolation from other god-idols or removed from the embodied realities of adherents as well as non-adherent outsiders. Together, in

a myriad of possibilities, they constitute an assemblage in any given social setting localized on
the bodies of social actors.\textsuperscript{48}

In simpler terms, and as example, a god-idol of whiteness is as likely to be sexualized and
gendered (as is witnessed in the sexualization of lynching) as much as heteronormativity
influences the posterity and shape of whiteness eulogized here. People and groups are held sway
by a pantheon of god-idols, of which whiteness and theism are two of many taking hold of white
people. But they are not alone, nor do they work in isolation. Again for instance, sexism may be
rampant in one community where racism is not, but such effects of god-idols are never fully
distinct and neither are the god-idols, themselves. Understanding these god-idols in accordance
to an assemblage will offer greater abilities—down the road—to chart where different god-idols
carry different weight, importantly, so that the impact and interaction of different god-idols in
any given social setting might be more adequately ascertained. Accordingly, homophobia might

\textsuperscript{48} In technical language, and following Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, early progenitors of
the assemblage theory espoused by Puar, “latitude and longitude are the two elements of a
cartography” (Deleuze and Guattari 260-61) wherein assemblages are mapped given the
multiplicity of arrangements. God-idols serve as the “latitudinal” (i.e. affective, ideological)
component of an assemblage, including as many or as few god-idols held sway by any given
adherent, while the actual body—here, still following Mary Douglas’ suggestion that the body is
the canvas for symbolization (Douglas, xxxvii), serves as the longitudinal component.
Wedding Douglas to Deleuze and Puar’s notion of assemblage is not a moment of theoretical
miscegenation so much as an effort to take seriously Douglas’ contention that a proportional
relationship exists between bodily control and social control, while acknowledging that such a
suggestion must be dislodged from the binary rigidity of the grid/group, in terms of its tacit
suggestion that identity is rigid even if falling along a continuum. In other words, I am not
attempting to have my theoretical “cake and eat it, too,” but I’m attempting to find a way to
demonstrate that more than a personal or positional continuum exist within the panoply of
“operational acts of identification” (Bayart, 92) that shape god-idol construction. Perhaps my
argument is in the direction of Douglas’ call for a three-dimensional rehashing of the grid/group
(Douglas, xxix), such an added dimension made possible by a turn to assemblage theory at the
cost of the precision part and parcel to Douglas’ effectiveness. See Gilles Deleuze and Felix
Guattari, \textit{A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia}. Translated by Brian Massumi.
be deployed in different geographies for competing interests, as Puar’s work suggests is the relationship between homonationalism and the constitution of the “terrorist.” ⁴⁹ Such a perspective seems sensitive to Puar’s suggestion that “There is no entity, no identity, no queer subject or subject to queer, rather queerness coming forth at us from all directions, screaming its defiance, suggesting a move from intersectionality to assemblage, an affective conglomeration that recognizes other contingencies of belonging (molding, fusing, viscosity, bouncing) that might not fall so easily into what is sometimes denoted as reactive community formations—identity politics.” ⁵⁰ While trying to remain sensitive to the embodied rationales behind such “identity politics,” but to begin thinking beyond the analytic confines of rigid presentations of “identity,” I turn back to Lillian Smith as an early example of someone who exposed shared relationships between race, sexuality and religion.

Smith’s work Killers of the Dream is an early instance of taking seriously the co-constitutive forces (i.e. god-idol assemblages) shaping social options and identities as if a cosmic cookie cutter. For instance, Smith argues in the 1940s that repressive personal forces translate into equally confusing, overlapping oppressive forces in both the practice of lynching and beyond it. She suggests in Killers of the Dream that “basic lessons were woven” of “such dissonant strands as these; sometimes the threads tangled into a terrifying mess” noting some of these strands “have to do with what we call color and race…and politics…and money and how it is made…and religion…and sex and the body image…and love…and dreams of the Good and the killers of dreams.” ⁵¹ Smith’s words demonstrate an early awareness of the co-constitutivity of

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⁴⁹ Puar, xxvii.
⁵⁰ Ibid., 211.
⁵¹ Smith, Killers of the Dream, 27.
these issues—these god-idols as I’ve called them, her analysis not conflating identity with the ideologies shaping identity.

Smith notes that “sex and hate, cohabitating in the darkness of minds too long, pour out their progeny of cruelty on anything [i.e. physical bodies] that can serve as a symbol of an unnamed relationship that in his heart each man wants to befoul. That, sometimes, the lynchers do cut off genitals of the lynched and divide them into bits to be distributed to participants as souvenirs is no more than a coda to this composition of hate and guilt and sex and fear, created by our way of life.”52 Here, Smith discusses these material realities in terms specific not only to the murdering of black bodies, but the sexualized dismemberment of the black body. The simple psychoanalysis and loose talk of “heart” offers a salient early instance of a white writer interested to demonstrate to white people—Christians in particular—the assemblage of ideas shaping material realities at an affective level, similar to the contemporary sophisticated (erudite) argument offered by Puar. Smith made sure to frame these issues around life and death, the proximity of life to death and death to life, and the impact of the anxiety of death on the shape of social life, even noting the paradox of the “dominant free” whites who were “so bound by anxiety that it could not be released [artistically, culturally, etc.].”53 Instead, this anxiety played out on bodies, most often violently. As a result of these unreleased anxieties, this “Sacred way of life [emphasis hers] put us on our knees in idol worship.”54

My project has not been an iconoclastic, heretical effort to be merely provocative by simultaneously conflating traditional notions of race, god and belief, but to demonstrate such a co-constitutive ideological assemblage has already been present for many whites as exemplified

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52 Ibid., 163-3.
53 Ibid., 212.
54 Ibid., 220.
by practices such as lynching, homophobia and more, undergirded by theistic sensibilities, making their (at times) ‘well-intentioned’ beliefs and practices idolatry to begin with. In casting the god-idol of whiteness as dead, I’ve principally sought to argue that white preachers, theologians, and laity cannot continue to “mask evils” like racism, sexism, homophobia and the like as justified (as overt or as collateral) because it is theologically grounded or that the solution to these issues is “to go to church on Sunday,” as Smith reminds is a popular rejoinder offered as to how to face these issues. These idolatrous assemblages were and are the “killers of the dream” of an equitable society, that which “cheapens human relations.”55 This project has sought to “kill” these killers’ ideological weaponry—the god-idols, by an extended treatise involving learning to die for others. We sit now, then, at the requiem for one of these god-idols. I have here sought to underscore how this god-idol interacts with other god-idols producing the “sacred way of life” that has left we white Americans as strange white fruit.

Much more work will be necessary to dismantle such things more fully, to the extent the dismantling is possible at all, but it begins in understanding that these ideological weapons are never isolated, but work together in ever increasingly complex ways. In the next section, I offer a way to approach such complexity, such uncertainty of interpretive possibilities and security.

Looking Backwards to Measure the Future Danger of Whiteness

Thus far, I have tried to demonstrate that god-idols come together as an assemblage, in that each god-idol is actually a component of an ideological assemblage shaping social options and identities as it externalizes options and assumptions about identity onto the social world. Throughout this project, I have discussed many god-idols while analytically focusing on some above others, the result of intellectual curiosity as much as the two receiving most focus are

55 Ibid., 29.
those who have (seemingly) most strongly shaped my own social context to this point. Whiteness and theism have taken the focus in lieu of other god-idols like heteronormitivity, greed, patriarchy, and the like. Admittedly, this skewed analytic treatment has occurred partly because I have to manage space and time. But it has also been the consequence of examining my own social location and determining that these two god-idols seemingly hold a particular form of danger as a consequence of the degree to which they are imbued with power from their adherents. Where sexism is concerned, I look forward to future work exploring where the social options and contexts made possible by certain god-idols dictates the degree to which I am even able to make a generalized claim about “white people” or ought to limit my comments to white men? The latter seems the obvious answer, but to be fair to my experiences and data, I have learned much about how to worship whiteness and theism from white women, leaving me uncertain as to the efficacy of a further qualification.

Though looking forward to this future work, here I want to defend this skewed analytic treatment by suggesting the utility of treating each god-idol analytically as an individual “component”—that is, a piece of an assemblage—while never losing sight of say, the relationship between homophobia and racism, or classism and sexism, etc. As occurs in assemblage theory, multiplicity and uncertainty mark actual assemblages as much as this uncertainty also shapes efforts to understand these assemblages. Willing to risk a bit of analytic uncertainty of how other god-idols function, I have privileged whiteness principally. Now, remembering these sections are part of a “eulogy,” it may be asked that if all god-idols are part of assemblages, then why eulogize whiteness in isolation? Why mark it as “dead” without similar suggestions about the other god-idols going into an assemblage?
It is my contention that whiteness, dead or alive, continues to extol a particular perniciousness as a component of any assemblage, as such assemblages are employed by whites who continue to benefit from the weight of the idea. Indeed, Puar also suggests that assemblages work in and through a securing of the “ascendancy of whiteness” ideologically, but opening up the possible adherents to whiteness to extend beyond race or ethnicity.\textsuperscript{56} This suggests whiteness still requires “measurement” in a kind of analytic isolation, knowing full well that measurement is heuristic and uncertain.

I conclude this eulogy for whiteness by looking at its specific perniciousness as it relates to other possible god-idols, by turning to an uncertain literary memory of one of the earliest treatments of whiteness unequaled (in my opinion) in balancing the severity of the dangers the concept imposes on others, the co-constitutive ideological operation of whiteness with other god-idols, and the actual close proximity of whiteness to death:

This elusive quality it is, which causes the thought of whiteness, when divorced from more kindly associations, and coupled with any object terrible in itself, to heighten that terror to the furthest bounds. Witness the white bear of the poles, and the white shark of the tropics; what but their smooth, flaky whiteness makes them the transcendent horrors they are? That ghastly whiteness it is which imparts such an abhorrent mildness…\textsuperscript{57}

Is not this still a brilliant way to capture the particular perniciousness of whiteness as it coalesces with other god-idols, each “masking” the other in “abhorrent mildness,” a racialized sexism or a homophobic whiteness as two examples of this “mildness” in practice. Appealing to naturalistic taxonomies of polar bears and great white sharks as metaphoric of social issues at the time, here novelist Herman Melville does not reinforce a simple inverted form of colorism\textsuperscript{58}, but offers one

\textsuperscript{56} Puar, 24-32.
\textsuperscript{57} Herman Melville, \textit{Moby Dick}. New American Library, 1892, 180.
\textsuperscript{58} For a brief definition of colorism, see Fabricio Balcazar, Yolanda Suarez-Balcazar, and Tina Taylor-Ritzler. \textit{Race, Culture and Disability: Rehabilitation Science and Practice}. Jones & Bartlett Learning, 2010.
of the first instances of an assemblage theory where whiteness is measured within its assemblage for its particular perniciousness in tandem to its relation to other god-idols left abstract within the metaphor. Melville, who Cornel West suggests is one of very few white American writers to “grasp crucial aspects of the black condition” within a twilight civilization ⁵⁹, is wont to point out the particularity of whiteness (as normative) marking its increased social perniciousness and danger. He is not accidentally describing whiteness as a sociological concept, but the whale was (even at the time of his writing) an allegory for coming to terms with ideas such as whiteness, the question of enslavement, and the topic of race relations in the United States. Though admittedly the mid-nineteenth century is contextually distinct from today, in terms of the perniciousness of the idea of whiteness—alive or dead—the context remains cohesive and Melville’s words continue to ring true. In a note of clarification about whiteness’ relation to other of what I refer to as god-idols, he elaborates these interstices, retaining the specificity of each component so that the dangers of one are exposed:

With reference to the polar bear, it may possibly be urged by him who would fain go still deeper into this matter, that it is not the whiteness, separately regarded, which heightens the intolerable hideousness of that brute; for, analysed, that heightened hideousness, it might be said, only arises from the circumstance, that the irresponsible ferociousness of the creature stands invested in the fleece of the celestial innocence and love; and hence, by bringing together two such opposite emotions in our minds, the Polar bear frightens us with so unnatural a contrast. But even assuming all this to be true; yet, were it not for the whiteness, you would not have that intensified terror. ⁶⁰

Whiteness, even in the midst of assemblaged theories of difference and identity, still retains its unique terror precisely because it is that which for so long has remained innocuously masked as a paragon of virtue, grace, civility, and beauty. ⁶¹ And yet, as my project has meant to

⁶⁰ Melville, 180.
demonstrate, such maskings have concealed the true character of whiteness as the racialized expression of a fundamental inability to accept limitation and uncertainty. To bring the discussion back to James Baldwin’s suggestion about the end of the white world, he writes that “when, beneath the [white] mask, a human being begins to make himself felt one cannot escape a certain awful wonder as to what kind of human being it is.” Again, who will we whites be now as whiteness seemingly loses its life—drowned/drowning amidst a sea of uncertainty posed by social difference ever encroaching on it, requiring us to pull back this mask. What will we find? Melville offers a clue. Indeed, Melville even notes of the great white shark that the French call this shark “Requin,” taken from “‘requiem eternam’ (eternal rest)” as an “allusion to the white, silent stillness of death” this white shark imposes—a stillness it has seemingly, and finally, imposed on itself: death.

Let me conclude this section by making clear that I am not suggesting that white identity is more important or significant than another, or that whiteness as a god-idol is in every instance more vicious or powerful than any other god-idol. Again, I am not talking here about identities, but an assemblage of god-idols that shape options for identity, by outlining the parameters of social options made possible by adherence to these god-idols by other social actors, as well as the options assumed possible thanks to one person or group’s own adherence. To look at god-idols for their different affective effects is not to rank identities, but to provide space for determining the degree to which different god-idols (working as an assemblage) impact and shape possible arrangements of identities. Whiteness takes precedent for Melville (as is also the case in my project) precisely because it is the mechanism that often most severely allows me—and many other whites and white Christians—to treat their identities as more important in value

63 Melville, 180.
and ability than another. This is not to suggest a ranking of social histories in a positive sense—as in different identities are differentially oppressed—but to suggest that different god-idols do different amounts of work for different groups in terms of both oppression and privilege. As such, I have principally been interested in the work done by the god-idol of whiteness within the overall apparatus outlined in this project. In other words, here as in this entire project, I am privileging god-idols that differentially work to presume an asymmetrical distance between and across assumed identities. For many, if not most white Christians, this requires continued attention to whiteness, specifically, understanding full well that it cannot be fully dislodged from heteronormativity, patriarchy, theism or any of the god-idols that serve as the scissors cutting out “operational acts of identification” that are then arranged as “identities.”

In the next sections, I turn back to Smith and her work at Laurel Falls camp for girls, as a means of offering a homily, looking forward to possibilities of white acceptance of uncertainty, a process likely to begin within the very spaces providing and provided by privilege.

HOMILY

What are whites to do, how are they to act, in this time of twilight, when sitting at the funeral of a god-idol whose danger remains alive in its particularity? The next few sections offer a homily for twilight and uncertainty directed at those in need of a model for embracing uncertainty. Here, I offer a guide for action and activity. Actions, moving forward, might involve learning to live in the uncertainty posed by dead god-idols, “living dangerously” to quote Nietzsche in his *Gay Science*, but rather than, as Nietzsche suggests, a danger born from abandoning a concern for others, here living in the danger of uncertainty would involve recognition of radical social

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64 Bayart, 92.
connectedness, radical contingency. The death of whiteness as a racialized expression of the fundamental inability to accept limitation and uncertainty offers a freedom found through embrace of limitation, uncertainty and a social maturity recognizing that innocence sought will never be found because the former means of having sought it prevent now—forever—that possibility. Accepting this death of whiteness, then, offers the possibility for learning to live anew within this freedom offered by radical contingency. I turn next to offer an example of this sort of freedom.

*Freedom within the Limits of Exaggerated Privilege*

In this section, I once again look to Smith, this time more substantively in terms of her life and work at the Laurel Falls camp for girls as an example whites might follow as they learn to live in the twilight that disrupts the efficacy of exaggerations. Stated differently, I begin to euphemistically “live dangerously” by offering a model for embracing oneself as “strange fruit” in the sense Smith described of white people and learning to let go of the ideological ropes from which we hang.

Such an embrace of uncertainty, ironically, might first rely on some of the very structures structured by these exaggerations, using the “master’s tools” in this first instance. More specifically, whites might begin to use the spaces made possible by affluence and privilege—here, I have literal church buildings and other properties owned by ecclesial bodies in mind—as the locations where they might learn to live without exaggerations or fight against a heritage of exaggerations. And perhaps, as Smith’s comments about cultural roots and heritage will demonstrate, these might be the ideal locations for such work to begin.

Laurel Falls was a high-end [white] girl’s summer camp in Clayton, Georgia. Given the ages of the campers, the setting would prove an occasion to deconstruct many of the assumptions
these young girls had learned at home, and reconstruct positions on the world that were more life affirming and cognizant of the perniciousness of segregation, racism, sexism and more.

“Miss Lil’”, as she was known by many at the camp, Lillian Smith was originally from Jasper, Florida, daughter to a successful white business owner who lost his fortune in 1915. In effort to make a new start, Lillian’s father moved the family to Clayton, Georgia. Lil’s parents opened Laurel Falls camp in 1920 in Clayton, catering to wealthy white girls. Herself the product of a similar affluence, Smith grew up globally well-traveled for a white southern woman of the age, with siblings traveling the globe and she herself with the means to travel, and study. Taking up a teaching position for a time in China, she began to see the oppressive circumstances of colonialism, and soon, that awareness would offer critical insights about the United States. Lil’s travels to China and elsewhere helped to open her up to the interdependent asymmetries of social life in the southern U.S. She recounted: “I began to understand the warped, distorted frame we had put around every Negro child from birth is around every white child, also.”66 This “distorted frame” would inform her suggestion that white people were “strange fruit.” Smith’s worldliness brought to bear a social attention to the identities connected through these “distorted frames.”

These distorted frames, I have cast as exaggerations of radical contingency in this project, efforts to skew human relations in the direction from or near death and limitation. At an early age, and long before a critical mass of whites were noting the relationships between such exaggerations, Smith realized that such exaggerations stunted the moral, epistemological and aesthetic growth of whites as well. Given the opportunity in 1925 to return to Laurel Falls to take over the camp, Smith packed her bags to return home to the strangest of fruit. She transformed this personal opportunity into the catalyst for “on the ground” work in disrupting these exaggerations.

66 Niedland and Pasha.
Campers participated in typical summer camp activities like tennis, swimming, horseback riding, and the like, but to quote one former camper, “we had these other deep adventures of thinking and feeling”\textsuperscript{67} that sought to engage campers with the wider world beyond the camp, the South, and affluence. Of these “deep adventures,” another camper muses that she “often wondered how many of the parents really knew a lot of the intellectual activity that was happening at camp.”\textsuperscript{68} In both small groups and larger campwide lectures and discussions, Miss Lil’ would often remind that the topics of these conversations would likely “not be popular to say among your friends [back at home].”\textsuperscript{69} These conversations often included frank discussion about sex and sexuality, race, segregation, lynching, gender dynamics, and a host of other topics unpopular given the cultural climate of the South at the time.\textsuperscript{70}

The camp also served as a vehicle for solitude and inspiration for Smith’s literary efforts.\textit{Strange Fruit} (1944), her novel about an interracial love affair between a black woman and white man in the south\textsuperscript{71}, was written at Laurel Falls. Selling over three million copies, this novel was turned into a Broadway show and put Smith on the literary map. \textit{Strange Fruit} transmuted the traditional usage of that phrase as marking the lynching of African Americans into exposure of the repressed sexualized tensions undergirding and interwoven with race relations. Repressed whites were cast as the strange fruit of segregation, an early effort to situate the problems of lynching and white fear of miscegenation as “white” problems, caused by whites (instead of blacks) and to be solved by whites (instead of blacks). Smith recalls: “To me the phrase “strange fruit” had nothing to do with lynching. I had used it before in an essay, in which I had talked

\textsuperscript{67} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{68} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{69} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{70} O’Dell, 83-4.
\textsuperscript{71} Lillian Smith,\textit{ Strange Fruit: A Novel of Interracial Love}. Reynal & Hitchcock Publ, NY, 1944.
about what segregation had done to white culture. And I had said: we are the strange fruit of that way of life. We who are white.”

Taking the popular usage as a critique of whiteness, it became a foundation for working against the ideological assumptions guiding the embodied social practice of lynching.

Though the actual impact of the camp on these young girls and the relationships they would form in their lives is as uncertain to measure as any other variable, what does seem to have happened at Laurel Falls was a growing awareness that a white social context did, in fact, exist, and that it was made possible by social and economic privileges secured through repression and violence. Given the ethical and moral codes espoused by those within this context, almost exclusively white and Christian, over and against the intense repression and violence, Laurel Falls became a space for white young women to understand themselves as “strange fruit,” the strangest of all fruit in that they hung from ideological constructs that prevented themselves from knowing themselves in their uncertainty, or as Smith put it, “Being armored in arrogance he finds it hard to genuflect to an unproved God, and impossible to relate to Him. How Strange! For we all cling to meanings we cannot prove…”

The costs of this repression had been extraordinary, and Smith wanted nothing more than to begin to respond to it through the channels available to her. Interestingly, working to make this “strange fruit” visible relied on further repression where other god-idols weighed as heavily—if not more so—than that of whiteness, in shaping social possibilities. In the next section, I explore the continued flights from uncertainty that occurred even in Smith’s fight to expose racialized uncertainty.

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72 Niedland and Pasha.
73 Smith, Killers of the Dream, 236.
The Twilight of Laurel Falls

Throughout this project, twilight has referred to the impossibility of ever fully eradicating the imago superlata, even in moments of direct refutation of it. Fully eradicating these exaggerations of radical contingency is uncertain. Given this uncertain outcome, the benefits of whites fighting to kill whiteness and accept its functional ineffectiveness are practical: the concept dehumanizes its benefactors as much as its victims (everyone is victimized by it, though to varying degrees) and the god-idol is no longer a guarantee of feeling secure or certain. To this extent, the question of “why bother” involves both simple practical dimensions and a general ethical concern that, when given the choice, it is morally appropriate for white Americans to live life in a fashion more equitable than a previous arrangement.

To suggest eradication is fully possible would, of course, amount to an exaggeration of ability, an agential exaggeration. A few examples from Laurel Falls helps to demonstrate the paradoxes of fighting against such a system, and helps this homily underscore that the embrace of uncertainty is not a social panacea, or a clever way of finding social certainty by calling it another name. Rather, it is a constant recognition of human limitations continuously exaggerated even when we seek to mitigate those exaggerations.

In 2006, thanks to support from The Documentary Institute at the University of Florida, Suzanne Niedland and Anberin Pasha produced and directed a short film about Smith’s work and life at Laurel Falls, titled Miss Lil’s Camp. The documentary brings together four women, three white former campers, and one African American former worker at the camp, to reminisce and celebrate the camp setting and the impact “Miss Lil” had on those around her. A story unfolds about a fight against repression made possible by reinforcing repression in other instances.
In terms of interpersonal relationality, the camp had as large an impact on Smith as she had on it and its campers. Lil’ met another counselor, Paula Snelling, who had worked at the camp when Lil’s father ran the camp, and the two became lifelong lovers and partners, also eventually serving as co-directors of the camp. Given their location in the U.S. South and the risks to the camp at the prospect of being exposed as lesbians, the two were forced to remain silent and closeted regarding the most powerful and personal aspects of their relationship.74

One camper remembers “Lillian Smith was about freedom and choice.” And yet, she had to “be totally discreet about what her own choices had been. She never shared those with campers.”75 Paula and Lil lived closeted, unable or willing to fight openly against homophobia, seemingly more willing to channel that energy in the direction of topics and issues where their white privilege would afford greater impact, such as with the issue of racial discrimination. Fighting repression on one front seemingly reinforced repression in other areas.

Both Paula and Lil “were interested in ideas, in literature, and in psychology”76 according to Smith biographer Rose Gladney, and their activism was meted out through these intellectual interests. They served together in an editorial capacity for the journals Pseudopodia, North Georgia Review and South Today. These journals, and their larger efforts, were shaped largely by a conscious effort to publish both black and white writers. They often hosted parties with highly integrated (and often prominent) guest lists. Smith counted as friends Mary McLeod Bethune, Paul Robeson, Martin Luther King, Jr., Eleanor Roosevelt and many others.77

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74 Niedland and Pasha.
75 Ibid.
76 Ibid.
77 Ibid.
also remembered as a personal literary mentor to writer and activist Pauli Murray.\textsuperscript{78} Many of her relationships with prominent African Americans were forged intentionally at these gatherings, devoted mostly to bringing women of various backgrounds together. In one invitation sent to Murray, Smith stated of her intent: “I want you as friends to come together and begin personal relationships that may give us all deep pleasure…There are many white women who should know you.”\textsuperscript{79} Willing to risk awkwardness for the sake of earnestness, such invitations and gatherings were common-place, and Smith grew to count a number of prominent African Americans as friends through such measures. Many of these friends and public figures would be discussed in the camp setting, causing campers “to look up to” these artistic and social visionaries—all the while, homosexuality remained hidden while racism and sexism were attacked.

In the literary arena, \textit{Strange Fruit} (1944) would offer Smith a way to address both within the truncated options of twilight.\textsuperscript{80} \textit{Strange Fruit}’s attack on the sexualization of race and the racialization of sex, and the cultural depravity for whites based on these ideological miscegenations was met with derision as much as fanfare\textsuperscript{81}, the book was banned in many places, including Boston, MA, and even the U.S. Postal Service refused to ship the book for a time.\textsuperscript{82} \textit{Strange Fruit}, Smith recounts, “was the bomb that shattered a conspiracy of silence…we were under what I had always called a bail of cotton. The cotton had been stuffed into our mouths so that we couldn’t talk and so that we couldn’t hear others. That began to lift, and once

\textsuperscript{79} Smith, qtd. In Olson, 65-7.
\textsuperscript{80} Smith, \textit{Strange Fruit}.
\textsuperscript{82} Margaret Rose Gladney, Qtd. In Smith, Lillian, \textit{One Hour}. The University of North Carolina Press, 1994, viii.
the conspiracy of silence is broken, then we began to ask questions.83 Here, worth noting, as with the strange fruit inversion, Smith reappropriates traditional associations of cotton with blacks—working within (and with) the social context she found herself a part—to demonstrate the white responsibility for those associations. The book brought with it hate mail, and even an unsolved fire was set at Laurel Falls. The grassroots-style energy begun at Laurel Falls erupted into a growing awareness that no longer could whites conceal their own existential, social and political interests in segregation. The curtain had been drawn back on repressive exaggerations of radical contingency. Not resolved, but exposed! Resolution, rehabilitation would take place more slowly and always at the expense of other compromises. Laurel Falls campers and programming provided that opportunity, so long as conversations about sexuality remained vague, and the practical interests in such discussions remained concealed.

Smith made a point to have frank discussions about race, religion and white social life, and some of these discussions had consequences beyond the borders of the camp. One former camper recounts that Smith was once asked pointedly about lynching, and her response was simply to make it clear that “lynchings did happen, and that they were wrong because it was wrong to treat another human being as an inferior.”84 Another camper recalls that Laurel Falls is where she learned that “you have to see the way things are [in the world] and see the ramifications of the way things are.”85 In many “Sunday services,” others remember that Miss Lil would teach the campers to begin to “make a conscious effort not only to reach out, but to pull the curtain away from those things that we were denying,”86 such as segregation and lynching. Still another former camper recounts that on one occasion, something learned at Laurel

83 Niedland and Pasha.
84 Ibid.
85 Ibid.
86 Ibid.
Falls caused tension in her household. Coming home to scold her father on his treatment of African Americans, she was not allowed to go back to Laurel Falls. Another camper remembers her father suggesting that “Now, what Miss Lil says at camp is fine for camp, but that’s not the way we act around here.”\(^8^7\) As Smith tried to demonstrate to the campers, silence was more deadly than confrontation and exposure of social injustices. But even such efforts also reinforced problematic social arrangements at the camp, itself.

Willie Mae Sanford, African American and former staff member at Laurel Falls, remembers the camp was taking place in a “sad time,” when “white people didn’t have nothing to do with us [African Americans].”\(^8^8\) She even remembers that white children would call her (as an adult) a nigger. “Lil was different,” Sanford remembers, noting “Lil would treat everyone the same.” And yet, Sanford was never treated as a white staff member, even if she were treated humanely by Smith. The camp, even as it worked against segregation, reinforced the practice by relying on black servers and only allowing white campers. This segregated arrangement is pronounced even in the reunion witnessed in the documentary. In one scene where the white women begin singing the songs of Laurel Falls, the black woman smiles in silence, her silence giving voice to the segregated arrangement at the time that prevented her full inclusion in the activities. In other words, Sanford was never allowed or did not want to learn the words to the song. Answer to which of these possibilities occurred is not provided in the film. Interestingly, the legacy of these conditions bleeds into the contemporary moment, as the African American woman is once again othered as the white ladies recite the refrain sung nightly at the council fire of Laurel Falls:

\(^8^7\) Ibid.
\(^8^8\) Ibid.
In the stillness of the twilight,
in our mountainous abode,
let us pledge our allegiance to her Laurel Falls code. 

Does twilight have a coding? Or is it the rationale behind social codes? Though I do not mean to conclude this section by implying a shared assumption that the lyrics here suggest Smith or the campers were working with the same definition of twilight I’ve made use of so extensively throughout this dissertation. The term, showing up here in the lyrics to the camp’s nightly refrain—at a camp that transformed privilege into a moment to expose exaggerations of radical contingency and cultivate alternative ways of living more equitably while reinforcing other continued exaggerations in the process—may simply be an uncanny coincidence. But it works as a descriptive reminder of twilight, as well, where we strange white fruit remain even uncertain if an embrace of uncertainty will adequately address social realities like racism. This demonstrates that the twilight I have so described is not an historiographic marker, but a heuristic white Americans might use to come to greater awareness of the ontological dimensions of social life, where uncertainty of thought and action offer as much the fear of extolling great harm to others as it offers the moment to embrace its uncertainty in “allegiance” to a freedom lived within limitation, within the twilight of god-idols like whiteness.

Recognition of twilight, for the campers as much as for Smith, began in the social locations provided by the very privilege recognition of twilight seeks to disrupt. And such recognition is not without problems in terms of it reinforcing certain problems as it fights others. But it does offer a start. In the next section, I conclude this homily by noting where twilight takes strange white fruit.

89 Ibid.
The question of where twilight will take strange white fruit is answered by asking what does twilight sound like? What does it look or feel like? In a word, heritage. Here, and to conclude this homily, I suggest that white cultural inheritance had such an impact—albeit painful—on Smith that she chose to live within it, within the pain, most of her life. Like twilight, maybe even because of it, heritage and social inheritance cannot be fully escaped. Perhaps such an escape attempt would be problematic any way. Where whiteness’ death is concerned, wouldn’t escape amount to a flight from uncertainty rather than an embrace of it? Isn’t the most dangerous unknown that which we find within ourselves and our communities, perhaps finding it even here, now, at this requiem for whiteness? Asking no longer “who am I without whiteness” but “who will I choose to be” as I leave this funeral. Baldwin again serves as racialized foil and wise sage framing Smith’s utility here. Elsewhere in Notes of a Native Son, Baldwin suggests that “a what”—as in ‘what am I?’—“can get by with skill but a who demands resources.”

Understanding the “what” of “what are we as white?” to have something to do with this twilight, the “who” will be answered in terms of where we find resources. I suggest strongly that Smith is one such resource where whites now might begin to answer the question of who we are (or want to be) by looking backwards towards who we have been.

The summer of 1948 was the last for the camp, in part because of Lillian Smith’s poor health and desire to focus more attention to her writing. But despite the closing of the camp, Smith remained based in Georgia. Unlike other southern writers like her friend Carson McCullers, Smith chose to stay in the South for her continued writing. She notes “Many times, I felt that if I went to New York to live or Paris to live, that all of it would begin to fade. And it

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hurt, but I wanted it to hurt. Because I think a writer stops writing when the wound heals.”91 Rather than follow the paths of, say, James Baldwin, Richard Wright or her white contemporary McCullers (Wright and McCullers were friends, McCullers even staying in Wright’s Paris home92), Smith wanted to feel the pain of segregation and continued repression, as it seemingly connected her literary efforts more closely to the authenticity of her argument. It also might have been understood by Smith that black and white flight from the U.S. to Paris involved different motivations and different social conditions fled and found in the U.S. and abroad, respectively.

Smith’s geographic stasis might also be read as a kind of embrace of the letting go of privilege, the conscious decision to embrace existential uncertainty precisely by critically examining the most familiar, most intimately known social relations and realities. Smith stated that Georgia “is where my roots are. I want my mind to cover the whole earth. But I want my mythic roots to stay there, the roots in the imagination to be on home ground.”93 Rather than read her choice to stay at home as a fear of difference and otherness preventing a desire to travel, Smith makes clear that her choice was in the direction of embracing the otherness of a white identity, of this strange white fruit cast finally in its alterity and strangeness. Baldwin and other blacks fled to Europe to escape U.S. whiteness; for whites, the only real “escape” from whiteness is found in its death made possible through full embrace of the legacy the idea leaves for we whites to reckon.

Smith’s writings had so impacted the literary world that she certainly had the means to leave, to live in a place where blacks and lesbians were treated more equitably by whites, but to do so seemed to Smith to risk her words and efforts from finding continued diagnostic purchase.

91 Niedland and Pasha.
93 Niedland and Pasha.
with the audiences and issues she worked so hard to speak to and to expose. I want to suggest she here serves not so much as a literal geographic model whites must follow, but through heritage, Smith demonstrates the impossibility of escaping twilight. I’m using Smith’s geographic example as literal, yes, but also metaphoric of ideological movement, in that whiteness (as this inability to accept limitation) can only be killed, if its benefactors do not run from this deathly thing, but learn to live with its legacy, live without appealing to it as a god-idol by keeping it close in memory. Whites do not, to this end, need so much as to learn to embrace the uncertain face of those they’ve deemed social others, but embrace the uncertain recognition that whites are other, even to themselves—strange white fruit.

She ended up paying a price by staying in the South. As her public image waned, her literary efforts were met with being remembered well as a “race” writer, but never regarded as a writer whose greatness transcended parochial, topical issues. And yet, so much of her writings suggest that these critiques are to misunderstand her point: that the personal or parochial is what connects us all to the grandiose and transcendent. The personal would remain “paramount” for Smith, serving as the means of “breaking down the barriers of ignorance and suspicion that had divided the races for centuries.” Remembered in the literary world as this topical figure, for many others who knew her—the girls at Laurel Falls as much as many more who saw her brilliance in exposing social denials as courageous and ahead of her time—“she is someone who lives in the memories so powerfully of so many people.” Buried at Laurel Falls, Smith’s epitaph reads:

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\text{Death can kill a man: that is all it can do to him; It cannot end his life. Because of memory….} \]

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94 Olson, 66.
95 Niedland and Pasha.
96 Ibid.
The epitaph, as it blurs life and death with memory, offers wisdom for understanding whiteness in twilight times. The death of whiteness will not necessarily “end his life.” Indeed, “because of memory,” whiteness might live on in weakened functional power, or it might finally give reason for whites—those “at” this “requiem”—to begin to help recast social arrangements in new, more equitable ways. What we do with memory, how we face death, will mark the life or death of whiteness and determine just how ominously the shadow of twilight will hang in the twenty-first century over uncertain social possibilities. Uncertain of the future of whiteness, this uncertainty looms as my final word on this discussion, this dissertation, this funeral. How uncertainty is faced, embraced, fled or obtained will shape the future impact of past memories of strange fruit realizing now they’re hanging from the ropes of dead god-idols.

As a way of drawing this project to an uncertain conclusion, I turn now to conclude with a benediction, framed in terms of a series of critical rejoinders to the more “certain” dimensions and claims made and employed in this project.

**BENEDICTION**

To conclude this chapter, I offer a benediction in the form of a blessing of uncertainty. Benediction, in this instance, is not an otherworldly appeal, but a final public admittance that human limitation marks the horizon of my field of vision, particularly with respect to the constitution of this particular intellectual project, and more generally, as I live life as a strange white fruit learning just now how to let go of god-idols. I begin here, treating each of the following vignettes as metaphoric of the ideological ropes from which we whites continue to hang. I let go and begin to embrace the freedom of uncertainty and my radically contingent reliance on others.
Letting Go of Universal Applicability

Who holds this limited religious outlook on the freedom of uncertainty found in the death of whiteness? Though I hope that this dissertation will be of use to many, a limited religious outlook is certain of the importance and impact of social context on what can be known or judged. I am certain that a focus on social context, understood as the myriad resources, ideas, artifacts and motivations structured and structuring group allegiance and affinity, has a certain impact on an awareness of fundamental uncertainty. I am seemingly certain of this uncertainty exposed by group difference and have worked to limit all of my prescriptive judgments to the white theistic petit bourgeois community serving as my data, not as a simple straw man, but precisely to force confrontation with such a context for those who hold it. To the extent the overall apparatus I have spelled out is registered by some as universally applicable, I remind that I am offering white Americans insights about how to make sense of themselves, nothing more.

I have tried to limit appeals to the universal or situate them in terms of the universality of physical death, though this final chapter has discussed the functional “death” of a god-idol. To the extent readers might suggest I, like Levi-Strauss suggests of Sartre, “exchange one prison [of universality] for another,”97 I hope that my prison, constructed not with a disregard for human suffering but in response to it, is at least a bit less harmful to all social actors than the prisons of the imago superlata that I’ve sought to trouble in this dissertation (whiteness, theism, etc.).98 If “the savage mind totalizes,”99 then I remain “savage” to the extent I have sought to manipulate

98 I look forward to more work and conversation on the means of ethical evaluation I mention here.
99 Levi-Strauss, 245.
such totalizing tendencies in ways less socially harmful than positions based on human possibility and the power of distinctions.¹⁰⁰

On this note, Smith offers one more example for this requiem for how not to respond to the social problems of particularity through universal appeals. Her final novel, One Hour, published in 1959, tells the story of a little girl who accuses a church-goer of attempted molestation. The accusation is false in the scheme of things, but the accusation is enough to send a church community and a marriage into a tailspin. As most critics have suggested, the novel is derivative, its characters do not give much reason to pull the reader into their concerns, and the attempted profundity of the novel simply never finds purchase.¹⁰¹

Frustrated that she was largely celebrated as a “race” novelist, Smith’s aims in One Hour were to prove her literary merit beyond the particularities of the South, or race or gender discrimination. She herself even wrote: “I think One Hour may be the first American novel that has dealt directly and on so many levels with the problem of the human being caught in his many traps” such as “science, art, God, freedom,” etc.¹⁰² Though the racialized and gendered contexts of the characters color the backdrop of the plot, the focus is on universal applicability—the many shared “traps” humans face.

I want to suggest that the critical failure of this work (that is, its lukewarm public reception, it being ignored by many of her contemporary writers) might be thought of as the result of Smith’s assumption that the “traps” she faced, or that white Americans faced, were

¹⁰⁰ I make no claims that I (or anyone) is ever able to fully assess when, and how, one social setting is “less-harmful” than another, or in determining for whom such lessening occurs. I can, and remain confident in, suggesting that the contemporary arrangement of social life in the United States can be improved upon, for all social actors. I hope this dissertation is a small step or arrow cast in a direction that might help bring about such an improvement.
¹⁰² Lillian Smith, One Hour. The University of North Carolina Press, 1994, xi.
somehow the same “traps” faced by everyone, such that almost no attention to contextual variance is provided in the novel. Details and scenes in the novel go underdeveloped, the “deep” portions of the novel remain flat precisely because this novel about the costs of human existence fails to privilege social asymmetries and intense contextual variety within this shared existence.

To the extent to which Smith failed to realize that the only universally applicable premise she could offer is the intense particularity of social context, erring on the side of the bulk of white artists, philosophers, theologians and the like who too often take the part for the whole, this final note about Smith’s last work offers a warning as this requiem comes to an end. I am fairly certain that there are very few instances of human existence that can be taken as certain or as universal. Physical death experienced eventually by all social actors is one of these. I am certain that physical death is a human experience shared by all, albeit exaggerated in severity for some by their constitution as “other.” To paraphrase Michel de Montaigne one final moment: “Long life, and short [and the social contexts leading to different life spans and qualities of life] are by death made all one; for there is no long, nor short, to things that are no more.”

Though the ways people die are as varied as the length and quality of any life lived, the experience of physical death (that it happens to everyone) connects us all. Black, white, rich, poor, etc., are held together, shown as same instead of different through death as it has historically been treated in much of philosophy. And I have made use of death throughout for this reason. But even death—especially the death of god-idols—remains a proposition fraught with uncertainty.

Through a privileging of uncertainties posed by social context, and recognition of a certain sort of relation to all social contexts based on death, white freedom in uncertainty will then involve balancing a white social context in similar proximity to the distance between death

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103 Michel de Montaigne, “That to Study Philosophy is to Learn to Die.”
and all other social contexts. Again, I have set out to answer the question of why white Christianity and racism have worked so well together, and then offer an answer to how to trouble that problematic relationship. The answer is this embrace of uncertainty, and this embrace begins by sighting and questioning the efficacy and ability for continued use of these god-idols.

*Letting Go of Certainty in the Death of Whiteness*

It would be fair of readers to ask of whiteness: Has the tomb of whiteness really been filled, or does it remain empty? Or a more dangerous proposition still, did the metaphoric tomb (of the white Christian Jesus) once receive this lifeless whiteness and has that whiteness been resurrected? In other words, does my rhetorical strategy (borrowed from James Baldwin) of speaking whiteness into death (exemplified in this final chapter) really promote the uncertainty required to “kill” whiteness once and for all? These questions are heuristic as posed here, but are very significant and grounded questions for those who face exaggerations of radical contingency with a severity and frequency I do not. In answer to these questions, my position has been that the best possible strategy for demonstrating the death-dealing effects of a death-denying white community to that community was to call into question the ability to deny death any longer, so that it might be accepted rather than denied. That is, I have worked to demonstrate that learning to die for others means learning that one is dying already. But just as Baldwin’s pronouncement that the white world has come to an end was clearly ahead of (or outside of) historical circumstance, what will come of my similar pronouncements taking place at the requiem for whiteness? In other words, Baldwin’s words did not produce an end to racism or a “white world,” and I am under no pretense that my words will have even a semblance of the impact of Baldwin’s. But my effort amounts to a rhetorical strategy for seeing an eventual and literal end to

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104 Schwarz and Kaplan, 11-12.
whiteness’ ability to shape social life. Ideas cannot be destroyed. But the power we invest in
them can be ruptured or altered. It can also remain intact through new instances of an old racism.

Ongoing events like the rise of extremist groups in the United States\textsuperscript{105} call into question
the actual sociological death of the impact of whiteness and other god-idols on the social
cartography of the contemporary world. Moreover, brilliant studies such as Eduardo Bonilla-
Silva’s \textit{Racism Without Racists} (2009) makes it clear that commemorative totemic rituals are
constantly enacted helping to keep whiteness alive. Bonilla-Silva suggests that adherents to an
ideology telegraph their adherence as if “wearing a piece of clothing,” “presenting yourself to the
world” through a “certain style.”\textsuperscript{106} Two examples of these rites include rhetorical statements
like “I am not racist, but…”\textsuperscript{107} and the seemingly increasing popularity of terms like “thug”
which stand in for the more traditional “nigger.”\textsuperscript{108} These seemingly simple instances, though all
too common, amount to a style telegraphing the worship of the god-idol of whiteness, dead or
alive. Countless rituals like these, in addition to other arguments that racism is alive and well
even if in new forms\textsuperscript{109}, over and against vigilantism and continued racialized, gendered, and
economic disparities in the United States makes me certain that whiteness, for many, remains
alive and well. Many white Americans remain “strange fruit” to the extent they consciously or

\textsuperscript{105} See the Southern Poverty Law Center website for more information about the rise of hate
groups in the United States. \url{http://www.spcenter.org/what-we-do/hate-and-extremism}
\textsuperscript{106} Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, \textit{Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of
53.
\textsuperscript{107} Bonilla-Silva, 53.
\textsuperscript{108} \url{http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/01/22/richard-sherman-thug-n-word-press-
conference_n_4646871.html}
\textsuperscript{109} Another academic treatment of contemporary racism that calls into question the “death” of
whiteness is Imani Perry’s argument about “post-intentional” racism, marking contemporary
racism as not about recognition and awareness of racism in a moralistic sense. See Imani Perry,
\textit{More Beautiful and More Terrible: The Embrace and Transcendence of Racial Inequality in the
unconsciously hold fast to these god-idols, telegraphed by the “style” they cultivate amongst adherents, even as social tides may shift that call into question the life of these god-idols. I am uncertain if the freedom found in uncertainty will cause the remaining strange fruit to let go, but I am certain that efforts must continue that will constantly call into question the functional power of this god-idol. These efforts will include rhetorical and philosophical dismantlings of power, such as Baldwin and Smith both employed throughout their writings that do very real damage to whiteness’ ability to exaggerate the radical contingency of social actors with the same power it wielded historically.

*Letting Go of the Certainty of an Argument*

The concepts of certainty and uncertainty inform this dissertation throughout its pages, so much so that readers might find I collapse into a kind of certainty provided by the very notion of uncertainty. Stated in terms of the god-idols engaged, readers might find I reinforce and recast whiteness in “certain” terms, which would mean I am repeating the functional process I seek to trouble. Indeed, the blurring of so many distinctions throughout this project, as well my constitution of my principle data set of white Christians and white petit bourgeois Americans, are, of course, their own brand of distinction making.

On this logical point, I may be found guilty and Part I of the project addresses this conundrum, the frustration of never fully overcoming the twilight of the god-idols. I am uncertain as to whether or not certainty is ever fully afforded in any intellectual or social field. I am certain that all claims to certainty require a kind of faith, an ascent to a proposition of one kind or another; that is, we cross induction chasms through appeals to the many god-idols the topic of this dissertation. For instance, even famed philosopher David Hume’s critique of
induction\textsuperscript{110}—that is, his critique of the fallacy of assuming a relation between cause and effect—was made partially possible (in my estimation) by a social context where different people were ranked as worthy and able enough to be included within or outside of that context. Hume’s racism\textsuperscript{111} indicates that he too assented to the faith-based proposition of his context’s superiority over other contexts. To this extent, the preceding sections on Smith’s Laurel Falls err on the side of story-telling, leaving the multitude of possible implications for my argument not fully developed, because given the uncertain dimensions and compromises with the imago superlata necessitated by argument and analysis, I am left with story, heritage, “memories” of “empty rooms”\textsuperscript{112} that remain “empty” as only now dead god-idiols can—and did—and do—fill them.

In Part II, I have been more focused to offer actual suggestions (e.g. a limited religious outlook, the relinquishing of personal conceptions of the soul, the embrace of uncertainty) that might be useful for white Americans in this “fight,” that they might come to know themselves and the social impact of those “selves” in a way that might offset some of the more pernicious aspects of a white (and largely Christian) social context shaping and shaped by god-idiols. Doing so seems to involve an embrace of the uncertainty posed by death, threats to power and social group difference. This embrace is perhaps made possible through the privileging of limitation, within the uncertainty posed by social context, and may help to produce a socially responsible freedom in limitation made possible through letting go of assumptions, presumptions about certainty, and a limited outlook on human social possibilities. To the extent this project argues

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{112} McCullers, Reprinted in Gladney, “A Letter from Lillian Smith.”
\end{thebibliography}
for the embrace of uncertainty and limitation as a response to the dangers of assumptions about human possibility, value and certainty in such claims, it has accomplished its uncertain task.

For final instance, the back and forth about whiteness as dead (or not), and the back and forth between physical and metaphoric definitions of death, is not a matter of intellectual laziness or sloppiness on my part, but is indicative of the uncertainty I am discussing. To end with certainty (as if whiteness can die, will die, must die, and will never resurrect again) would be unchecked privilege guided by a Christian logic of resurrection or liberation – to foreclose and seriously deny the active and ongoing process that allowing privilege and domination to die, so requires. The dialectical tension between certainty and uncertainty that the dissertation ends with is as much a reflexive awareness of the constant work we, white folk, must do to guard against arriving at a position of a certitude of white liberative arrival as much as it is an effect, sometimes conscious, other times, not so much – for me, as I have tried to show throughout, certainty enacted by whites, has, for too long, been certain death for others and to the other.

Thus, this dissertation is philosophically aporetic, a paradox. In response to this paradox, the concept of death cutting across various domains and intellectual fields—death of people, death of ideas, death of theological possibilities—is where I localize all of my “certain” claims, holding in tension the arbitrary constitution of my data and ideas about them with the fundamental human situation of mortality. In other words, I have sought to reach a largely deaf and blind audience with the most pressing means of formation of attention available: the certainty of physical death and the limits and uncertainties exposed by flights away from these ends. Doing so seeks to guard against suggestions that my talk of “uncertainty” is but inductive certainty in a new form, or what might be misunderstood as a kind of postracial claim or appeal, while also addressing what, based on my research, is the principle constitutive feature of my data
set, the large-scale inability to accept the finality of physical and social white life and the social and existential uncertainties posed by this certain claim—that we, “the strange [white] fruit of that way of life,”¹¹³ and the god-idsols we worship—will one day die. Indeed, as Baldwin notes, “the world is white no longer” but how white Americans will answer the question of who they will be now remains to be narrated. What this death means for the strange white fruit of that way of life will be answered as either a story of freedom in uncertainty and limitation or renewed social, ideological and physical forms of bondage. We stand now at the requiem for whiteness, preparing to leave, uncertain of all but the end of innocence, unsure if or how this end will mark a new beginning.

**Elegy for Whiteness**

SOMEWHERE—in desolate wind-swept space—  
In Twilight-land—in No-man’s-land—  
Two hurrying Shapes met face to face,  
And bade each other stand.

“And who are you?” cried one a-gape,  
Shuddering in the gloaming light.  
“I know not,” said the second Shape,  
“I only died last night!”

-Thomas Bailey Aldrich, “Identity” (1900)¹¹⁴

¹¹³ Lillian Smith, In Niedland and Pasha.
Conclusion:

A Warning

When religious expressions fail to address the existential needs of adherents, and when the god-idols created die rather than teach how to die, then embrace of uncertainty offers the moment for creative response. Learning to die for others is learning to live amongst the dead, living with a loss that if embraced fully, should be mourned and grieved (as any physical death might be treated). The final chapter speaks to this need. But this treatise on the death of whiteness must end with a warning. Assuming the death of whiteness opens new possibilities, but some of those possibilities could cause untold harm and destruction. Death, as an event or heuristic, is not a panacea, neither is uncertainty anything other than what it literally means. I do not know. We do not know what a particular white (Christian) community will do, the steps they will take, as they hear of whiteness’ death.

Friedrich Nietzsche’s “Madman” once ran to the market place and announced: “Do we hear nothing as yet of the noise of the gravediggers who are burying God? Do we smell nothing as yet of the divine decomposition? Gods, too, decompose. God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him.”¹ The madman from Nietzsche’s famous story will go (onto) say that he has come too early, as “his time is not yet” to inform men² simultaneously of the death of god and the possibility such a death offers for men to achieve the “greatest deed of history,” becoming gods themselves.³

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² Here, I purposefully keep the non-inclusive language used by Nietzsche’s Madman, as a way of pointing out the androcentric, masculine intent of Nietzsche’s project, and consequentially, his influence on my project.
For many White Americans, whiteness was once this god and its death offers time to theorize the life and death of the god-ids created in the United States, bringing new clarity to The Madman’s words. But this project has been as much a concession that the Madman’s diagnostic was correct and that the time has come to tell his story, as it is a warning against the Ubermensch response and will to power Nietzsche’s Zarathustra would later offer as replacement and an explanation of why Nietzsche was led down such an individualized, exaggerated path.⁴ The madman’s challenge remains incumbent upon us, but the greatest deed is not to become gods unchecked by social reality, but to realize the consequences of having attempted to be gods—now deceased—and to learn how to live in the permanent twilight of these god-ids.

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