THE GROUNDLESS MIDDLE: RECONSTRUCTING THE SELF IN THE COLONIAL

ABYSS

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Division of Religion

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An Yountae

Drew University

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ABSTRCT

The Groundless Middle: Reconstructing the Self in the Colonial Abyss

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A Ph.D. Dissertation by An Yountae

This dissertation proposes a constructive philosophical and theological reading of the boundaries between religious and ethico-political discourse in relation to the collective experience of suffering, socio-political trauma, and colonial violence. By employing the theological and philosophical figure of the "abyss," the dissertation traverses diverse dimensions and contexts in which the self suffers the finitude of being. In conversation with a broad body of theological and philosophical literature, from medieval mysticism to Hegel, from the continental philosophy of religion to Latin American/Caribbean decolonial thought, I seek to extend the register of the theological trope of the "abyss" to a wider socio-political meaning. Theologically, the abyss denotes the blurring of the boundaries between creaturely finitude and divine potency as reflected in the writings of certain Neoplatonic thinkers and medieval mystics. These mystics' radical vision of God and self releases an intriguing theological resonance with modern and contemporary philosophical inquiries into the place of relation to the "Other." In Hegel the abyss becomes an explicit ethical parameter albeit underdeveloped. My reading demonstrates that the trace of abyss in Hegel nevertheless structures his dialectical system. The abyss signals the moment or movement of "passage" from the negative to the positive, through which the shattered self transforms its eroded ground into the condition of a new possibility.

In conversation with the postcolonial voices emerging from the global South, I situate the movement of passage in the "middle passage" and interrogate the meaning of abyss, political subjectivity, and spirituality in relation to historical trauma. If I read the abyss as an all-pervading ontological groundlessness of being involving an insurmountable material and political devastation, it is to the end of articulating in a single term both the theological or spiritual quandary and political reality. A conversation between Edouard Glissant's oceanic counter-poetics and contemporary theopoetics (particularly in Catherine Keller's *tehom*ic version) exposes the abyss as the very "womb abyss" out of which shared experiences of loss and suffering give rise to the collective vision of the future and becoming with/in God.

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Chapter 1 - Introduction: Situating the Self in the Colonial Abyss

> *Afuera hay sol.*
> *No es más que un sol*
> *pero los hombres lo miran*
> *y después cantan.*
>
> *Yo no sé del sol*
> *Yo sé de la melodía del ángel*
> *y el sermón caliente*
> *del último viento.*
> *Sé gritar hasta el alba*
> *cuando la muerte se posa desnuda en mi sombra.*
>
> *Yo lloro debajo de mi nombre.*
> *Yo agito pañuelos en la noche y barcos sedientes de realidad*
> *bailan conmigo.*
> *Yo oculto clavos*
> *para escarnecer a mis sueños enfermos.*
>
> *Afuera hay sol.*
> *Yo me visto de cenizas.*
>
> Alejandra Pizarnik, *La Jaula*[1]

With her gloomy poetic imagination, the Argentinian poet Alejandra Pizarnik delves into the depth of meaninglessness, the source of inspiration that marks her entire writing career. Her obsession with the lack of meaning, also represented as the void, absence, and death, points to the poetic space of the abyss that privileges darkness and silence over the

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[1] "It's sunny outside/It's only a sun/Yet men look at it and sing/I don't know about the sun/I know about the melody of angels and the heated sermon of the last wind/I know how to scream until dawn when death settles naked on my shadow/I cry beneath my name/I wave handkerchiefs in the night and boats thirsty for reality dance with me/ I hide my nails to mock my sickly dream/It's sunny outside/I dress in ashes. See, Frank Graziano, *Alejandra Pizarnik: A Profile*, translated by Maria Rosa Fort, Frank Graziano and Suzanne Jill Levine (Colorado: Logbridge-Rhodes, 1987).

"sun" or "word."[2] The abyssal night of darkness, however, does not seem capable of redeeming Pizarnik's despairing existential cry, for after her encounter with the void, she confesses, "I cry beneath my name" (*yo lloro debajo de mi nombre*). Despite the sun outside, her melancholic tone culminates, "I dress in ashes" (*afuera hay sol, yo me visto de cenizas*). These ashes, perhaps, encode immense historical experience when considering the fact that she was born in 1936 to Jewish parents who had immigrated to Argentina in flight from the Nazi holocaust. In her abyssal poetic world, Pizarnik discloses the void, in a certain sense, as a site of revelation. However, it is not a revelation that leads to the reconstruction of ground and meaning. Rather, the poet's revelation gravitates around nothingness and emptiness, vacillating between silence and absence.[3]

The utterly negative character of the abyss depicted in Pizarnik's poems is indicative, on the one hand, of the existential chasm encountered at the horizon of finite human existence. On the other hand, however, such a view fails to capture another important aspect of her abyss: it is a space replete with potential. The complex polysemy of the abyss lies in its ambiguous nature, which disrupts the gap between the opposites. Historically, since its first inception in the neoplatonic tradition, the abyss points, primarily, to the gap between the creation and the radically transcendent God. However, at the same time, the abyss also denotes an inner crack within the self, that is, the irrevocable gap splitting the self. For instance, as David Coe tells us, Augustine identified the human soul with the abyss, particularly the "freedom to choose his own concerns, and to his openness to

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[2] Both the sun and the word are metaphors that occur concurrently in the works of Pizarnik. Contrary to the night and the void, both sun and word are viewed as the deceptive or futile attempts that try to fill in the void of meaning, the darkness of the night.

[3] "Si Alguien puede… comprender a Artaud, soy yo. Todo su combate con su silencio, con su abismo absoluto, con su vacío, con su cuerpo enajenado, ¿como no asocio con el mío? (If there is anyone who can… understand Artaud, that's me. All his struggles with his silence, his absolute abyss, his void, and with his alienated body. "How would I not associate it with mine?). See, Alejandra Pizarnik, *Diarios* (Buenos Aires: Lumen, 2003), 159.

the possibilities before him."[4] Furthermore, this gap is not only pertinent to the human soul or self. Rather, the abyss also indicates the inner fissure within Godself, that is the very hiddenness of God from Godself as Luther would say, or the groundlessness (*unground*) inscribed in God before God emerges as Godself (Bohme and Schelling).

On the other hand, the trope of the abyss has long been holding its popularity within the philosophical and literary traditions. This is because the figure of the abyss creates mystical repercussions in a wide range of contexts in which the finitude of human existence is experienced. The trope of the abyss employed by the works of novelists and philosophers, for instance, creates audible lines of resonance with the theological trope of the abyss.

The philosophical query about the abyss shares a similar concern or ground with theology. In both cases, the abyss is indicative of the uncertain --if not finite-- structure of being, the precariousness of the human epistemological and ontological foundation. What sparks my curiosity, then, is when this trope is employed to describe the concrete socio-political situation of human existence that is "the lived experience" of the body. Latin American feminist liberation theologian Ivone Gebara uses the trope of the abyss to describe the vulnerable matrix of our existence, where, the systematic, everyday evil and good are "inextricably present and commingled in our own bodies."[5] Holocaust survivor and Nobel laureate Elie Wiesel also uses the trope of the abyss when narrating the horrifying experience of being deported to the concentration camp: "We were still trembling, and with every screech of the wheels, we felt the abyss opening beneath us. Unable to still our anguish, we tried to reassure each other."[6]

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[4] David K. Coe, *Angst and the Abyss: The Hermeneutics of Nothingness* (Chico: Scholars Press, 1985), 31.

[5] Ivone Gebara, *Out of the Depths: Women's Experience of Evil and Salvation* (Minneapolis: Augusburg Fortress Press, 2002), 58.

[6] Elie Wiesel, *Night*, translated by Marion Wiesel (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006), 25.

One wonders, here, about the intriguing connection between the mystical experience and the experience of suffering born at this juncture. The common ground that these two different experiences share in the space of groundlessness, the abyss is, perhaps, the failure of language to name the overwhelming nature of this indeterminacy. However, in another context, the abyss also becomes the womb of creative potential as it bears witness to the resilient spirit that strives to speak the unspeakable. What lies at the intersection between the desperate attempt to name the unnamable name of God and the desperate attempt to give expression to the petrifying experience of agony born in the context of traumatic suffering and violence?

This dissertation seeks to re-evaluate the questions of selfhood from the standpoint of extreme violence and oppression by examining the works of Latin American/Caribbean decolonial thinkers. Specifically, I reflect upon the experience of subjects whose textures of being are imprinted with the indelible trauma of colonial history. Despite the bursting emergence of academic discourses addressing the worldwide phenomenon of globalization and transnationalism, these discussions present an ambiguous view toward the political effects and consequences of the capitalist globalization as their voice of critique is often conflated with the celebration of this universally sweeping force. Moreover, these contemporary discussions of globalization miss, if not overlook, the crucial connection that builds the link between modernity and the current regime of globalization, namely, coloniality. As I will further discuss the importance of coloniality for the current project by engaging Latin American decolonial philosophers Enrique Dussel and Walter Mignolo's ideas later, suffice it to point out for now one of the many shortcomings that the failure to address coloniality generates: the production of counter-globalization theories grounded in the experience of the privileged transnational subjects. The critique of coloniality helps us to open up our theoretical horizon to the often unnoticed reality of many people who live in the

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extended socio-historical web of coloniality in the age of globalization. My own experience

of displacement at the early age and growing up in a foreign land (Argentina) not only as a

racialized being but also as an undocumented immigrant in a working class family informs,

perhaps, my own personal perspective in approaching the topic.[7]

Rethinking the place of the self upon the matrix of coloniality allows me to explore

the possibility of reconstructing the fragmented sense of the self after traumatic ruin. Over

against the metaphysics that views the self as internally undifferentiated and unchanging, my

methodological principle is framed by a tradition that views the self as internally incoherent,

fractured, contradictory, and always in the process of becoming, By situating the self in the

politicized space of neocolonial globalization, I seek to identify the self as embodied, that is,

the self as a racialized and gendered category constitutive of the global order of

epistemological/ontological hierarchy. I examine the process through which the self emerges

from the dialectical tension lurking in the abyss. The emergence of the self entails what I call

the movement of "passage," from the negative to the positive, from the finite to the infinite,

from death to life.

In order to address these questions, I relocate the movement of passage – as suggested

by the metaphysical accounts of both the mystical tradition and the continental tradition of

philosophy -- in the spatiotemporality of the "middle passage" and question the meaning of

the abyss, political subjectivity, and spirituality in relation to collective historical trauma. The

central question guiding the dissertation will be: how to gather the self after the history of

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[7] My own personal social location is by no means representative of the reality of people living at the edge of globalization. After all, the "illegal" period of my family's immigration status lasted only for a few years as we managed to get the green card for "legal" residency. Neither is the case that my family has ever gone through "extreme poverty." Rather, I situate myself here with the hope to show where the geographic trans-spatiality of my arguments originates from.

suffering, transportation, discontinuity, slavery, and death? In other words, how is selfhood possible for a colonized subject whose very horizon of existence is breached by the ongoing effects of "coloniality?" What happens when the abyss is not merely a metaphysical figure, but a socio/hisotrico/political one which emerges from the horizon of coloniality? How do the theological and the political concerns evolve when we relocate the account of the self to the colonial abyss?

      The existential chasm of the colonized subject finds a surprising affinity, I observe, with the long tradition of theological and philosophical inquiry into the finitude of the self and its relation to the divine. In order to further scrutinize the colonial chasm or gap, I employ the philosophical and theological trope of the "abyss" as it creates a strange yet important resonance and contrast with the "ontological quandary" of the colonized, which is the central theme of the current project. The notion of the abyss interweaves the three different disciplinary threads comprising this dissertation: *theologically*, it denotes the blurring boundary between creaturely finitude and divine potency; *philosophically*, the abyss points to the incompleteness of the self (before "the other"); *politically,* it bears a wider politico-historical meaning emerging from the history of suffering, the reality of coloniality, and the fragmented sense of collective identity. My goal is to press through beyond the narrowly-defined trope of the abyss, as it is constrained to metaphysical and existential terms. In conversation with Enrique Dussel, Aimé Césaire, Franz Fanon, and Edouard Glissant, the authors of the *Négritude* movement, Latin American liberation philosophy, and Caribbean philosophy, I argue that the notion of the abyss warrants a wider ethico-political application in the global context of (post/neo)coloniality. I read the abyss as an all-pervading ontological groundlessness of being that involves an insurmountable material and political devastation, thereby re-inventing a new idiom for articulating the spiritual/existential quandary and political reality marked with violence and suffering in the same term.

The Abyss: Creaturely Finitude and Divine Potency

In the light of the goal stated above, the beginning of the current project lies in the theological and philosophical roots of the figure of the abyss. In both the neoplatonic tradition and medieval mysticism, the abyss points to the theological crossroad in which finitude and infinity, the creaturely and the divine, or vulnerability and potency, intersect each other. The opening of this abyssal gap in Western intellectual history can be perhaps attributed to Plato. The irony of Plato's philosophy is that his works lay out the foundation of two competing philosophical traditions. On the one hand, Plato is commonly charged for grounding the foundational structure of the major trajectory of Western metaphysics. Plato's theory of forms assumes the main responsibility for the dominance of a form of idealism based on metaphysical dualism. Such a system, according to Heidegger's charge, sets the foundation for ontotheology.[8] At the same time, the non-systematic, if not inconsistent nature of Plato's thought reflected in works such as *Parmenides*, *Republic*, and *Timaeus* reveals the genesis of important philosophical ideas that contradict his own theory of forms – or at least the dominant interpretations of it. His construction of the One in *Parmenides* (142a), for instance, presents a clear rejection of the label of ontotheology as he "suggests as strongly as possible that the Good is not an entity."[9] The Good is, Plato writes in *Republic*, "beyond being. (epekeina tes ousias)"[10] According to *Parmenides* and *Timaeus*, the One is not compatible with the categories of being.[11] In this way, Plato plants the seed of negative theology. He employs the method of negation in order to describe the One, thus converting

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[8] Mark Ralkowski, *Heidegger's Platonism* (New York: Continuum, 2009), 93.

[9] Ibid., 94.

[10] Stanley Rosen, *Plato's Republic: A Study* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 262.

[11] William Franke, *On What Cannot be Said: Apophatic Discourses in Philosophy, Religion, Literature, and the Arts. Vo l 1: Classic Formulations*. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 39.

the One into the source of abyssal contradiction, being itself radically transcendent yet immanent, being One without *being* at all.[12]

It is then Plotinus who develops the underdeveloped traces of unknowing and negativity lurking in Plato into a full-fledged philosophical system also known as neoplatonism. By inheriting and emphasizing the main topics of Platonic philosophy, Plotinus develops a more radicalized cosmology in which the boundary between being, transcendence, and immanence is consistently blurred. More concretely, Plotinus' One is that which is not identical with being, is beyond everything, and yet, the ground of everything at the same time.[13] The One embodies contradiction in itself as its absolute transcendence *capacitates* its immanence in all.

Ontotheology fails at this juncture since the very notion of being – including the supreme being, namely, the One (God) – does not find expression in ontological/theological terms. Rather, being is only understood within a fuzzy cosmological picture, under a participatory and somewhat relational frame where the distinction between the knower and the known, subject and object becomes elusive.[14] More importantly, the absolutely transcendent and radically immanent nature of the One makes all languages and images about God futile. In this sense, Plotinus can be seen as the progenitor of negative theology.

It is, however, not until Pseudo-Dionysius and the later generation of medieval mystics that negative or apophatic theology was fully developed into a theological methodology and tradition. The abyss, in this neoplatonic genealogy of negative theology, figures the elusive site, the blurry boundary where immanence and transcendence intersect; it indicates the uncertain chasm conditioning the distance/relation between the finite and the

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[12] Ibid.

[13] John W. Cooper, *Panentheism, the Other God of the Philosophers: From Plato to the Present* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 39-40.

[14] Baine Harris. *The significance of Neoplatonism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1976), 7, 28.

infinite, the negative and the positive, creation and God. Moreover, the abyss does not only designate a "site" beyond being. It signifies not only the distance or relation between the two opposites, but the internal chasm, the split within the structure of being: split between the finite horizon of his/her existence and the fleeting registers of transcendence. Thus, the internal crack within the very structure of being opened by Plato and further developed by his successors unearths the undercurrent of a counter-metaphysical account of the divine running beneath the surface of the dominant Western metaphysical tradition.

The abyss, perhaps, embodies such opening that might point to a different form of thinking about being and God from that of the dominant Western metaphysics in which God, as an all transcendent essence/being and unmoved *causa sui* prefigures the ground of our "being." The neoplatonists' and mystics' search for God through the *via negativa* takes a different route, one which proposes the reconfiguration of the metaphysical terms of ontology, namely, essence, being, and logic. For the negative theologians, it is through relation, becoming, and surrendering logic and speech into the apophatic practice of unsaying and unknowing that we come to the possibility of articulating the divine. Furthermore, for the mystics, the theological work of articulating God and being is not an endeavor limited to the epistemological sphere of "knowing, and "grasping." Rather, such an endeavor entails one's participation in it through the embodied practices of prayer, self-emptying, and ultimately, achieving union with the divine.[15] The abyss perhaps is the matrix on which this process of search for the depth of God and of the (human) soul takes place. As an undefined reserve of both negation and potential, the abyss represents the journey of negation conditioned by

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[15] Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 8.

indeterminacy and uncertainty, in which both God and the self come "uncreated" in their mystical union (Eckhart).[16]

The subsequent advancement of the mystical tradition marks an important turn with Jacob Bohme, who translated the abyss into groundlessness (*Grund*) in its dipolar tension with the primal ground (*Urgrund*).[17] As Bohme's endeavor is adopted by Schelling and further developed by his university roommate Hegel, the abyss paves the way for the transition from mysticism to dialectic in the post-enlightenment philosophical scene of Europe. In this process, the poetic depth of mysticism associated with the abyss is absorbed or "sublated" by the "rational" system of the dialectic.

If up to Schelling or even Hegel, the trope of the abyss straddles theology and philosophy, without a clear distinction between the two, it is after Hegel that the abyss is divorced from the notion of God and becomes the symbol of the irremediable chasm within the structure of the self.[18] The Hegelian dialectic offers an account of selfhood which permits a crucial intersection with the constructive direction in which this dissertation is unfolding. By drawing upon Bohme-Schelling's idea of the *Ungrund* as *Grund*, Hegel develops his dialectic through which the self undergoes complete dissolution, and out of which, paradoxically, it comes to glimpse the vision of its possible reconstruction.

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[16] Bernard McGuinn, *Meister Eckhart: Teacher and Preacher* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1986.), 172.

[17] "The Deity is the eternal Liberty without all Nature, viz. the eternal Abyss; but thus it brings itself into Byss for its own Manifestation, eternal Wisdom, and Deeds of Wonder." See, Jakob Bohme, *Works of Jacob Behmen: The Teutonic Philosopher Part 4* (London: Kessinger Publishing, 2003), 117.

[18] For instance, Hyppolite, one of the two main interpreters of Hegel in early twentieth century France, reads the Hegelian self as "never coinciding with itself" as it loses itself in its encounter with the Other. Similarly, Judith Butler claims that the Hegelian subject only knows itself through mediation. See, Jean Hyppolite, *Genesis and Structure of Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974);   Judith Butler, *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth-Century France* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987); See also, Slavoj Zizek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989); Slavoj Zizek, Clayton Crockett, and Creston Davis, *Hegel and the Infinite: Religion, Politics, and Dialectic* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

Nevertheless, as Hegel is often read as the thinker of totalitarian progress, as a proponent of a closed absolute, the vital role that negativity plays in his thought is downplayed, if not simply misunderstood by many. I argue that in Hegel's system, the negative is neither a mere temporary rupture on the way to a completed synthesis, nor an expansionist negation of "the other." Rather, according to Jean Hyppolite, Jean-Luc Nancy, Judith Butler and Slavoj Zizek's reading (among many others), the negative in Hegel represents a constant failure of subjectivity, the incompleteness of the self. In their reading, it is the work of the negative that drives, paradoxically, the self towards the reconstruction of itself despite innumerable failures.[19] Two contemporary readers of Hegel, in particular, Butler and Zizek, will provide the guidance for reading Hegelian dialectic in relation to the self, the abyss, and ethics/politics.

On the one hand, Butler engages Hegel from a feminist deconstructionist perspective and inscribes the notion of "loss" in the place of the abyss. This fissure in the texture of the self is followed by a desire for recognition before the encounter with the other. On the other hand, Zizek's materialist reading uncovers the notion of the abyss implicit in Hegel's thought by identifying the abyss as the core of negativity. Hegelian dialectic acquires a new perspective and a strong political angle with Zizek who reads it as the arduous journey and struggle, that is, what he calls the "critical engagement" of the restless spirit/self, who seeks to negate the disrupting power of negation.[20]

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[19] Butler, *Subjects of Desire*, 22. See also, Katrin Pahl, *The Way of Despair*, in Slavoj Zizek, Clayton Crockett, and Creston Davis, *Hegel and the Infinite*, 142.
[20] Zizek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 199.

Theorizing Coloniality: Cosmopolitanism, Postcolonial Theory, and Latin American Decolonial Thought

The crucial significance for the present project of tracing the trajectory of the abyss lies in examining the possibility --and the possible resignification-- of the passage. While both the medieval and the continental thinkers agree on its possibility, their reaction to the question of *how* such passage happens differ dramatically. These differences condition the responses that emerge from the particular context or community of interpretation. This is, perhaps, why Hegel's highly speculative account of the abyss presupposes a magically resilient subject which is able to gather itself despite uncountable failures. For Zizek's materialist reading, the passage through the abyss is the crucial element that gives birth to the political subject, while for Butler, the abyss is indicative of the loss constituting the self, which in turn, reveals one's ties to the unknown others to be the condition of her survivability.[21]

The answer to these questions – that is, *how* the movement of passage takes place -- shows greater differences and deeper complications when we extend this ethico-philosophical question to a different geopolitical location, particularly, those sites marked by colonial difference. While I turn to Latin American Decolonial theorists' elaboration of colonial difference and their discussion of coloniality/modernity later, it is important to note the link between the theological construction of the abyss and the geopolitical difference that shapes the political contours of such theological thought.

The key argument that I am advancing throughout this project is that the trope of the abyss warrants a wider ethico-political/theological application in the global context of (post/neo)colonialism. If for Zizek, the "traumatic abyss" that gives rise to the self points to the "void" lying beneath matter, I read the abyss as a symptom of the loss of historical and

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[21] Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 15.

politico-economic ground within the (colonial) context of oppression. One might perhaps question the significance of emphasizing colonial difference, that is, contextualizing the abyss or reading the abyss in the politicized space of globalization. Why should the Western theological and philosophical notion be re-read and re-thought through the lens of colonialism and globalization? What is the possible link between the history and the legacy of colonialism and the current world-order framed by capitalist globalization? What is the relation between the socio-political articulation of this universalizing phenomenon (globalization) and the ethico-theological idea of God, the self, and the other?

The clear link between European coloniality/modernity and the unstoppable expansion of globalization points to the need to examine the history of imperialism and colonial violence when articulating European/Western ideas in the global context. Certainly, the restructuring of the world order in the past three decades under the name of globalization gave rise to numerous theories and discourses that attempt to address the abrupt shift that such phenomenon created in our conception of national boundaries, sovereignty, identity, culture, labor, and capital. Among many others that interrogate the terms of cultural-difference, global justice, and cultural identity in the age of globalization, the idea of cosmopolitanism has advanced important theoretical foundations for a critical reading of globalization.[22]

Rooted in the Greek term *kosmopolites* (citizens of the world), cosmopolitanism is the idea that all human beings, regardless of their political and geographical association, are citizens of the single community – with equal rights and status. While the discussions of the major ideas of cosmopolitanism have always lurked at the center of Western social/political philosophy, the first full-fledged form of cosmopolitanism is attributed to the Stoics, who

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[22] For an important recent theological advancement of cosmopolitan theology, see Namsoon Kang, *Cosmopolitan Theology: Reconstructing Planetary Hospitality, Neighbor-Love, and Solidarity in an Uneven World* (Saint Louis: Chalice Press, 2013).

believed that goodness can be achieved by serving other human beings through political

engagement. What provides the basis for this human community, for the Stoics, is "reason" in

every human being.[23] This service, according to the Stoics, cannot be limited to one's own

state, for being human has a universal significance that transcends the geopolitical affiliation

of one's being. In Marcus Aurelius' words, "it makes no difference whether a person lives

here or there, provided that, wherever he lives, he lives as a citizen of the world" (X.15)."[24]

It was then Kant who laid the foundation of the cosmopolitan ideas that shaped the

modern and contemporary discussions of cosmopolitanism. In *Toward Perpetual Peace*, Kant

lays out the ground principles for a moral cosmopolitanism based on the notion of

"hospitality." He writes, "Hospitality means the right of a stranger not to be treated as an

enemy when he arrives in the land of another."[25] Kant's claim is based in the somewhat

urgent geopolitical and judicial concern of his time which posited challenge to the traditional

understanding of sovereign states and citizenship: "The people of the earth have entered in

varying degrees into a universal community, and it is developed to the point where a violation

of laws in one part of the world is felt everywhere."[26]

Nevertheless, while the Kantian model of cosmopolitanism has served as the

backbone of the predominant discourses of moral and political cosmopolitanism, it goes often

unnoticed, as David Harvey points out, that Kant's cosmopolitan vision is paralleled by his

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[23] Martha Nussbaum, *Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), Ch 9.

[24] Martha Nussbaum, "Kant and Stoic Cosmopolitanism," *The Journal of Political Philoophy*, Vol 5, Number 1, 1997:7.

[25] Seyla Benhabib, *The Rights of Others: Aliens, Residents, and Citizens* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 27.

[26] David Harvey, *Cosmopolitanism and the Geographies of Freedom* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 17.

self-contradicting understanding of geography/anthropology, which is informed by prejudicial knowledge about race, class, gender, and nation.[27] In *Geographie*, Kant writes,

> In hot countries men mature more quickly in every respect but they do not attain the perfection of the temperate zones. Humanity achieves its greatest perfection within the White race. The yellow Indians have somewhat less talent. The Negros are much inferior and some of the peoples of the Americas are well below them.[28]

Harvey, therefore, expresses his suspicion of Kantian cosmopolitanism as Kant's universal ethic presents a direct conflict with his anthropology and geography. He asks, "how do we apply a universal ethic to a world in which some people are considered immature or inferior and others are thought indolent, smelly, or just plain untrustworthy?"[29] It is then not strange, Harvey comments, that we see in contemporary international politics a certain political power (The U.S., for example) presenting "itself as the bearer of universal principles of justice, democracy, liberty, freedom, and goodness while in practice operating in an intensely discriminatory way against others" whom are perceived as morally inferior and as lacking the same qualifications.[30]

The problem that Harvey finds in cosmopolitanism is that it is some times not clear whether cosmopolitanism is a critical engagement with the current global order or a mere reflection of it. Without critically engaging the current order, Harvey contends, the

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[27] Ibid, 25.
[28] Ibid., 26.
[29] Ibid., 33.
[30] Ibid., 37.

"seemingly radical critiques (as in the field of human rights) covertly support further neoliberalization and enhanced class domination."[31]

Similarly, Walter Mignolo also raises some critical questions on the mainstream discourse of cosmopolitanism based in Kantian vision. Mignolo's critical stance parallels Harvey's approach as he too reads Kant's cosmopolitan vision against his racist anthropology and Eurocentric geography. What is innovative about Mignolo's historico-literary approach is that he sees the connection between the contemporary currents of cosmopolitan ideal and the classical imperialistic vision of *Orbis Christianus* (the Christian cosmos). If the historical origin of *Orbis Christianus* dates back to the ancient times of the Roman empire, its cosmopolitan vision is revivified in the sixteenth century as Europe encounters its "truly" cosmopolitan horizon: the new world. Thus begins the debate at the university of Salamanca in which legal theologians were trying to give an answer to the questions: "to what extent Indians in the New World were Human, and to what extent, as a consequence, they had property rights."[32] Mignolo turns to Francisco de Vitoria, the Spanish legal theologian, who was influential in shaping international law in the sixteenth century Europe, whose humanist stance on *ius gentium* (rights of the people or rights of nations) held that "nations, that is, communities of people, were bound by natural law and therefore had the rights of the people."[33] Therefore, de Vitoria concluded, there was no difference "between the Spaniards

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[31] Ibid., 81, 84. Harvey targets his criticism against Ulrich Beck and David Held, whose works on cosmopolitanism have had deep impact on the shaping of the discussions of judicial and political cosmopolitanism that puts heavy focus on international human rights. The problem of their version of cosmopolitanism, for Harvey, is that their definition of human rights is too individualistic while at the same time their theories lack a critical engagement with the ways how neoliberal capitalism and imperialism shapes the supposedly cosmopolitan practices.
[32] Walter Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 271.
[33] Ibid., 277.

and the Indians in regard to *ium gentium*."[34] However, the problem arose when de Vitoria

had to provide a logical reason to authorize the Spaniards' appropriation of the Indian lands.

De Vitoria's solution was to acknowledge the humanness of the Indians, but by "suggesting

that they 'lacked' something."[35] It is in this way that de Vitoria, Mignolo observes, inscribes

colonial difference in the cosmopolitan vision of the sixteenth century Europe.[36]

      This is how, Mignolo contends, the Kantian cosmopolitan ideal draws a trajectory of

continuity that stretches from the *Orbis Romanus Christianus* via the Spanish cosmopolitan

debate, all the way to the contemporary cosmopolitan account called globalization. In other

words, Mignolo's account resonates with Harvey's in that their uneasiness with certain

contemporary versions of cosmopolitanism is that globalism/globalization and

cosmopolitanism might be two faces of the same coin. However, Mignolo is not rejecting the

cosmopolitan ideas all together. The critical approach to cosmopolitanism is not indicative of

its ineffectuality. Rather, I argue along with Harvey and Mignolo, critical cosmopolitanism

needs to be grounded in the critique of the fundamental structure of modernity/coloniality and

the destructive force of capitalist globalization.

      Postcolonial theory played a critical role in interrogating and re-considering the

colonial legacy and the socio-cultural impact of the Western, capitalism-driven phenomenon

of globalization after the "decolonial wave" which took place across the globe following the

world wars. Postcolonial criticism questions the Eurocentric regime of knowledge built upon

the social/historical/ontological texture of coloniality from which the subject of knowledge is

constructed. In line with poststructuralist thought, postcolonial criticism harnessed critical

theoretical tools for reading the underside of the West-led globalism framing the socio-

cultural order of the post-modern age. At a theoretical level, the significance of postcolonial

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[34] Ibid.
[35] Ibid.
[36] Ibid., 279.

theory lies in the fact that it extended the philosophical criticism of the totalitarian

metaphysics to the realm of both historical, and socio-cultural dimension. At a more

contextual or politico-historical level, its contribution lies in its effort to reconfigure the

asymmetrical power dynamics between what has been so far perceived as the subject of

power/knowledge and its others.

For the purpose of the critical analysis that this project pursues, reading the self's

place (along with the place of the other) in the colonial abyss is, therefore, an endeavor that

takes the character of a critical cosmopolitan project, conceived upon the horizon of

postcolonial vision. This means, critical cosmopolitanism in the age of capitalist globalization

can not be articulated apart from the critique of coloniality undergirding and conditioning the

very phenomenon of globalization, which creates an irremediable structure of inequality that

precludes the cosmopolitan platform for the reinvention of citizens of the world with equal

rights. However, despite the significant impact and the crucial contribution that postcolonial

theory made to the (counter)global project of counter-hegemonic/modern criticism,

postcolonial theory's political aim and effectiveness has been a constant point of scholarly

debate. Among many of its critical readers, a cluster of Latin American/Caribbean thinkers –

who use the terms decoloniality or decolonial thinking over postcolonialism -- have been

developing a coherent body of literature that offers another constructive version of counter-

colonial/modern discourse.

It is important that I offer here a brief summary of some of the key points of their

critique. First, Latin American/Caribbean decolonial thinkers point out the Eurocentric nature

of postcolonial theory by arguing how postcolonial criticism has been theorized mainly by

third world intellectuals writing from the first world metropolises, and how these theorists

were indifferent to the critiques emerging from the so called "peripheries."[37] While

postcolonial theory, predominantly led by Asian theorists, relies heavily on French

poststructuralism, Latin American/Caribbean decolonial thought grounds itself in the long-

tradition of counter-colonial thought which started from the very time of the first colonial

encounter.[38] This point also leads to the second point of differentiation, which is that

postcolonial criticism's perception of colonialism is limited to the nineteenth century

European imperialism. Consequently, it tends to restrict the resource of anti-colonial thinking

to the early twentieth century postcolonial literature. Contrastingly, Latin

American/Caribbean decolonial thinkers extend the history of colonialism to the so called

"discovery" of the America which goes back to the fifteenth and sixteenth century. By this,

they not only link the expansion of modern capitalism with the history of colonialism but also

show how Europe's invention and the domination of its "Other" made the universalization of

Eurocentric logic, that is, European modernity, possible. In other words, it is not the case that

colonialism is the result of modernity as it has been argued by postcolonial criticism. Rather,

modernity, as it is contested by decolonial thought, is the starting point of coloniality; and

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[37] Walter Mignolo draws the distinction between the moment of the "elaboration" of the postcolonial criticism and its "introduction" to the First world academy. In Addressing Arif Dirlik's critique that the postcolonial begins with Third world intellectual's arrival in the First world academy, Mignolo makes it clear that the history of theorizing of the postcolonial cricism is much longer than their arrival in the First world academy. Mignolo argues that while postcolonial criticism has been introduced, if not commodified in the First world academy, it has always coexisted with colonialism itself. See Walter Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subalternity, and Border Thinking*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).

[38] There is certainly some generalizations presupposed in this claim made by the decolonial thinkers. Some of the foundational figures of decolonial thought, for instance, draw on European thinkers (Fanon and Dussel), while some postcolonial thinkers, such as Gayatri Spivak include the non-European/western thought in their ideas. Spivak is also an adamant critique of the migrant intellectual elites.

coloniality is the very constitutive element of modernity so that one cannot be articulated without the other.[39]

The third and last point targets postcolonial theory's inability, if not lack of interest, to address the issue of neocolonialism. As its main attention on literary theories tends to focus on the issue of the production of otherness (representation) and the psychoanalytic dynamics of race/gender, postcolonial theory has not always been very successful in detecting the effects of the new historical phase of neocolonialism, which has succeeded colonialism. Challenging neocolonialism, a system with its continuing paradigm of Eurocentric logic and with an even more intensified system of capitalist expansion, requires perhaps more than the deconstruction of binaries many postcolonial critics have been preoccupied with. On the contrary, Latin American/Caribbean decolonial thought takes the connection between race and economy/labor at the heart of their critical analysis. As the works of its founding figures such as Enrique Dussel and Anibal Quijano have demonstrated, Latin American decolonial thought attempts to link the cultural/philosophical analysis of race relations and coloniality with the historical/economic analysis of capitalist expansion accompanied by labor exploitation.

The differentiation of Latin American theory's particularity, according to Enrique Dussel, Mabel Moranifa, and Carlos Jauregui's introduction to *Coloniality at Large*, lies not in a claim of exceptionalism, but in "an attempt to elaborate on colonial difference."[40] Here, the notion of "colonial difference" is a key term in Latin American decolonial thinking which points to the irreducible difference of the colonial configuration marked by the spatial articulation of power. In other words, colonial difference, as defined by Walter Mignolo, is

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[39] Arturo Escobar, *Mas Allá del Tercer Mundo: Globalización y Diferencia*. (Bogotá: Instituto Colombiano de Antropología e Historia, 2005), 71.
[40] Enrique Dussel, Mabel Moranifa, and Carlos Jauregui. *Coloniality at Large: Latin America and the Postcolonial Debate*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 6.

the consequence of the "coloniality of power" (Anibal Quijano) born out of the collusive tie

between modernity and coloniality (Enrique Dussel).[41]

It follows that on the one hand, the primary focus of colonial difference as outlined by

Latin American philosophers has been power asymmetry between Europe and its other as it

affects epistemological, geopolitical, and economic difference between the two locations.

Both Quijano and Mignolo's works have played key role in shaping the geopolitical and

socio-historical design of colonial difference. Particularly important is Quijano's

groundbreaking contribution as he shows how race was invented as the tool of domination by

colonial ideology. Quijano's main contention is that race was used as a category of social

classification in order to justify the colonial relationship in which the system of forced labor

was legitimized.[42] It is on the basis of this colonial difference, the racist distribution of social

identities – with its main axes being, first, the racial difference between the conqueror and the

conquered; second, the control of labor on the basis of both the capital and the difference in

race – that labor distribution provided the basis for the consolidation of the structure of

exploitation, which became the key generating power of the colonial capitalism.[43]

Another facet of colonial difference can be articulated in ontological and existential

terms. Enrique Dussel, for instance, views America as the other of Europe whose exploited

labor and resources provided the material ground for the cultural hegemony or the

universalization of European modernity. Dussel adopts the notion of the other from

Emmanuel Levinas and connects it with the concrete socio-political context of Latin

America. In his influential critique of metaphysics, Levinas points out the totalitarian

tendency of metaphysics which appropriates and reduces the other into the same.   For

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[41] Eduardo Mendieta, *Latin American Philosophy: Currents, Issues, Debates*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 85.
[42] Dussel, *Coloniality at Large*, 9.
[43] Ibid., 81-82.

Levinas, "the other is neither initially nor ultimately what we grasp or what we thematize."[44]

Rather, the other signifies the exteriority, an "alterity" and a "radical heterogeneity," an

"absolutely other [which] is the Other."[45]   It is then Dussel who interprets the Levinasian

other as the poor, the "wretched one who suffers traumatically in her corporeality the

oppression and exclusion from the benefits of the totality."[46] Therefore, Dussel clarifies,

Latin America does not fit into the very frame of modernity be that a pre-, anti-, or, post-

modern. Latin America, *is* the exteriority of European modernity.[47]

Dussel claims that exteriority originates from an "other" place than European and

American modernity. These cultures, excluded and negated by European modernity, but

developed and survived, are "trans-modern" as they are beyond European modernity. The

notion of colonial difference is further complexified and probed with an added layer of

ontological coloniality by the Caribbean existential thinkers. These writers articulate a

decolonial vision out of the traces of trauma imprinted on the deepest existential texture of

(colonized) being whose ontological horizon is conditioned by the threat of what Frantz

Fanon calls the "omnipresent death."[48]

It is not my intention, however, to suggest Latin American decolonial thought's

superiority over the more Asian postcolonial theory. Rather, I see these methods as

complementing each other. In other words, the theological journey that I take in this

dissertation is born out of my interest in probing the philosophical, ethical, and political

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[44] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishing, 1991), 172.
[45] Ibid., 36, 39.
[46] Enrique Dussel, *The Underside of Modernity: Apel, Ricoeur, Rorty, Taylor, and the Philosophy of Liberation*. Translated and edited by Eduardo Mendieta. (Atlantic Highlands: Humanity Press, 1996), 3.
[47] Following Levinas' critique of the totalitarian metaphysics, Dussel places the critique of the totalitarian regime of Euroopean modernity as the central project of Liberation philosophy. The affirmation of the other, the exteriority of the totalitarian system is the basis and the ground from which Liberation philosophy begins. See, Dussel, *Underside*, 7.
[48] Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove, 1965), 128.

significance of the abyss from the standpoint of coloniality. Cosmopolitanism, postcolonial criticism, and Latin American decolonial thought will serve as the guiding theoretical tools that facilitate this journey.

In effect, this dissertation attempts to achieve a multi-disciplinary dialogue that is largely missing in the crucial junctures in which different theological and philosophical threads emerge and intersect with each other. Indeed, despite its strong impact in the overall field of the humanities, postcolonial/decolonial theory has seldom been taken as a serious conversation partner by the philosophical discourse of religion. In the field of theology, on the other hand, postcolonial theory started to have relatively significant repercussion since the end of last century. However, the Latin American (Pan-American) brand of decolonial thinking remains as a discourse almost completely foreign to contemporary theology.[49] When looking at the current debates of constructive theology in particularly, an in-depth analysis of the conditions and the political effects of the ongoing "coloniality" at a global level is, to a substantial degree, missing.[50] By exploring the diversely shaped forms of political theologies arising from the colonial context, I aim at bringing the experience of the ongoing reality of colonialism to the forefront of theological and philosophical reasoning.

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[49] One of the recent publications from the Drew TTC series marks an exceptional turn in the field by creating a channel of a constructive dialogue among Latina/Latin American philosophy, decolonial thinking, and theology. See, Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz and Eduardo Mendieta, eds. *Decolonizing Epistemologies: Latina/o Theology and Philosophy*. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012).

[50] While a significant number of voices in political theology address the issues related to coloniality and neocolonialism in a variety of terms such as "empire," "globalization," and "cosmopolitanism," most of them lack interest in carrying on a comprehensive analysis that ties the racial/historical perspective with the political/economic/epistemological dimension of coloniality.

Taking on Theology from the Ruins

If political theology articulates a form of thought geared towards addressing cultural and political questions in their relation to religion, its scope has been mostly limited to discourses emerging from the continental philosophy of religion. Despite the growing interest in the phenomena of globalization and cosmopolitanism within the ongoing debates of political theology, a substantive analysis of the relation between politics and the all-pervading conditions of (neo)colonialism is largely absent.

I propose therefore a form of political theology which thinks through the idea of divinity and politics from an ethical angle rooted in the experience of suffering, socio-historical trauma, and colonial violence. In order to do this, I ground my critical analysis of coloniality in the writings of the post-*negritude* movement, particularly in Glissant's work. If the Hegelian journey of dialectical becoming is characterized by the enigmatic resilience of the subject who reconstructs itself despite constant failures, Glissant presents an account of becoming that opens a significant line of contrast. The question that Glissant presents, then, is what happens when the self (or self-consciousness for Hegel) is born in and conditioned by coloniality? How does the trajectory of becoming differ when the abyss from which the self emerges is not just a theological and mystical indeterminacy but a colonial groundlessness?

For Glissant, the reconstruction of the self seems to be a project inscribed with impossibility when reflecting from the standpoint of the colonial context. The notion of the abyss and a language similar to that of mysticism characterize Glissant's writings; in its excessiveness the colonial abyss resembles the theological abyss of mysticism. Marked with the horrifying memory of death, the shock of transportation, slavery, and dehumanization, the history of Martinique and the Caribbean people still fails to find expression in language. At the deadlock between the memory of the unspeakable trauma and the still-absurd present,

between "a past order that is rejected," and an "absurd present,"[51] Glissant turns to the power of "poetics." His notion of "counterpoetics" or "forced poetics" conceives poetics as a strategy of survival and resistance, a way of naming and remembering the unbearable memory of historical trauma, which comprises the abyss of the present Caribbean reality. By welcoming the haunting memory of terror and affirming the impaired present, Glissant ventures to construct a collective sense of identity out of the abyssal trauma of fragmentation.

In my constructive chapters (Ch 4 and Ch 5), I will show how this reading of the self and of the abyss in relation both to God and to historical loss raises vital questions for theological reflection. I propose a theological reading of the abyss in which spiritual and political experiences converge so that the shared experience of suffering gives rise to a collective sense of self. Furthermore, by reading Glissant's counterpoetics together with what is sometimes now called theopoetics, a poetics of/about God, I explore the potential that poetics bear for evoking and possibly materializing such convergences. Contrary to the ontotheological dialectics of theo-*logic*, theopoetics surrenders the *logic* of *logos* to the unrepresentable presence of the divine surrounding the embodied experience of the mundane life. I suggest extending theopoetics' profound spiritual potential into a wider horizon of history and politics so that the unnamable experience of the transcendent God and the unbearable memory of pain and suffering can be articulated together. Of particular importance will be the comparative reading between Glissant and Catherine Keller since Glissant's view on the past and the future of Caribbean identity finds deep resonance with Catherine Keller's constructive theological vision. Common to both authors is the metaphor of the depth of the ocean as it denotes the abyss, which, for both authors, signifies a middle space of becoming: a womb that gives life to a new beginning/becoming which, at the same

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[51] Edouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourses: Selected Essays*. Translated by J. Michael Dash. (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1989), 131

time, is a horizon haunted by the innumerable number of deaths (Glissant) or "missed possibilities" (Keller). In resonance with Keller's *tehom*ic theology, I reconceive the abyssal depth of the ocean or the abyssal middle passage (Glissant) as the "groundless ground"[52] for the reconstruction of the self and of the self's relational becoming with/in God.

This loop of relational becoming is neither a mere result of a constructive interpretation nor a cross-disciplinary invention foreign to the ancient theology/philosophical tradition. Rather, as I have briefly summarized above, there is a long tradition of intellectual history that testifies to such a rich polysemy of the abyss. By tracing its theological trajectory of development within the Western tradition, we might, perhaps, see a new theological horizon emerge: a matrix of possibility in which the experience of limit and loss opens the door to the future.

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[52] Following both Glissant and Keller who suggest a non-static web of relation as the *ground* for becoming, as opposed to a fixed ground (of being), I propose *groundlessness* as the *ground* for the reconstruction and becoming of the self.

Chapter 2 – Tracing the Abyss: *Via Negativa*

The trope of the abyss arouses both the images and the sentiments of mysticism. The mystical underpinning linked to the abyss is not, however, exclusively derivative from philosophical and religious writings. Rather, the figure of the abyss creates its mystical repercussions in a wide variety of literatures that scrutinize human experience of finitude. The mystical language of the abyss is appropriated by many writers who seek a way of translating the sense of finitude caused by the material and political conditions of human existence. However, the gap between the philosophical or religious query and the ethical query emerging from the political context might seem to be irremediable, particularly, when the tie binding these two distant contexts is woven of the mystical language. What is the point of intersection between the mystical experience conditioning the theological pursuit of God (or the metaphysical inquiry into the One) and the experience of agony born in the contexts of suffering and violence?   In what ways does the abyss accommodate the failure of language, thought, or the categories of being in articulating the untranslatable nature of the "all-transcending absolute" experienced in the two seemingly distant contexts, namely, the mystical   (absolute One) and the historical/political (absolute suffering)?

As explained in the previous chapter, part of what the current project seeks to achieve is to explore the abyssal gap that lies between these two poles, namely, the mystical and the historical/political. More concretely, in light of the central focus of the current project, which is to explore the possibilities of "beginning" and reconstructing the self after the colonial trauma, I intend to theorize the history and the reality of suffering, to reflect on the wounds and the remains, that is, the very site where the history of a collective consciousness has been traumatically ruptured by the colonial violence. Theorizing trauma is a project that has not been paid the proper attention it deserves in contemporary political theology. In many cases,

liberationist or radical forms of thinking have failed to consider the wounds of trauma and suffering as the resource for a radical political imagination. Subsequently, theorizing trauma tends to be disregarded as a project restricted to psychoanalysis, as non-political, privatizing, and even reactionary.

On a similar, yet different note, there seems to be a conspicuous dichotomy between the mystical and the political. According to this division, the mystical rarely intersects with the political as it usually amounts to the apolitical and privatized obsession with the self and God. Taking the writings of the neoplatonic mystics in particular, one might indeed find many of the mystics' writings, to a certain degree, to be self-absorbed, as carrying limited potential for a transformative political vision. However, I insist that a significant range of mystical texts bear traces of radical forms of thought for rethinking the political. In particular, neoplatonic mysticism develops in the form of its negative theology the seeds of a new and innovative ground of cosmology that in surprising ways opposes the dominant, Platonic form of metaphysics that has been shaping the main tradition of Western philosophy/theology. Specifically, I submit that negative theology's understanding of the self, that is the insistence on the dispossession of the self, the negation of speech and representation, and the openness to uncertainty or exteriority, bears important implications for the project of political theology that I seek to develop.

Therefore, by engaging the writings of the mystical thinkers, this chapter draws a parallel and creates resonance with chapter four in which I read the abyss as an experience of finitude conditioned by the political and historical predicament. While the connection between these two different contexts will become more explicit in chapter four, the apophatic way articulated by mystical thinkers will set the ground for the further exploration of this surprising connection. For now, suffice it to name a few points that the mystical thought suggests for the general direction of this dissertation. First, by looking at the implications of

"finitude" in mysticism, I intend to examine the thin line that divides finitude and plenitude, or vulnerability and potency, against the one-sided understanding of finitude as a negative symptom destitute of any positive significance. My reading of the mystics will lift up creaturely finitude as the gateway into the "beyond" of finitude itself. Consequently, this point will set the ground for my project of looking into the wounds and theorizing trauma in order to turn them into the very site or womb that gives birth to a new political vision.

Second, the apophatic move that the mystics take when confronted with the impasse of the unspeakable experience signals the overthrowing of all the given names and representations, including one's own sense of self and, by implication, sociopolitical reality. This might further point to the potential embedded in the unexplored connection between apophatic theology and political theology, while on the other hand, the work of naming the unnamable would amount to what Derrida calls the "impossible." The "impossible," however, is by no means indicative of the renunciation of hope. Rather, it points to the tireless work of striving for the *possibility* of the impossible. This last point will be a recurring theme in the following chapters as I read the abyss articulated in the ethico-philosophical context (post-Kantian continental philosophy) and in the political context (Latin American/Caribbean thinking). That is, one of the central aims of this dissertation is to demonstrate through my constructive reading of the three different contexts (the mystical, the philosophical, and the political) of the abyss, the complex tension between the possible and impossible, naming and the unnamable, hope and despair, or future (beginning) and trauma. Third and last, the dispossession of self in mystical thought, entails the self's submission to his/her limits, to the realm of the unknown and uncertainty. It implies openness to exteriority, to the "other," that is, *relation*.

In effect, reading the mystical and the political together will not only help us to rediscover the political potential of the mystical and the mystical dimension of the political,

but the need to further politicize the mystical and to further mystify the political. The abyss, in this sense, is the very gap between these two poles (the mystical and the political) that reveals both the limits of each of these two poles when they are articulated separately, and, conversely, the potential that opens up when the boundary between the two is collapsed.

Stepping into the Abyss

The most remarkable development of the conception of the abyss took place within the long unfolding of medieval mysticism. The abyss becomes an important metaphor in the works of the mystics whose main preoccupation lies in finding an analogy, a way of articulating the ineffable character of the divine mystery. One of the main procedures that mark the trajectory of theological/philosophical development in neoplatonism is negative theology. The tradition of negative or apophatic theology parallels the course of the conceptualization of abyss since its first inception in neoplatonism. First developed by the early Church Fathers and the neoplatonists in late antiquity, negative theology becomes a full-fledged theological methodology in the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius and the medieval mystics such as Meister Eckhart, Hadewijch, Margarite Porete, Nicholas of Cusa, and John of the Cross.

The radically transcendent nature of the God of negative theology finds home in the language of "bottomlessness" as both of these notions point to the multi-faceted paradox and the overwhelming mystery of divinity. As already mentioned in the previous chapter, the abyss denotes the converging point or the blurred demarcation between finitude and infinity, between the negative and the positive. Similarly, the path of *via negativa* is also paved with seemingly contradictory qualities in such a way that *unknowing* is the only way that leads one to true knowledge and that all creation is contained in the transcendent One who is *beyond* all. The method of negation testifies to the fact that truth can be glimpsed only through an

epistemological humbleness and one's surrender to finitude. No sense of a solid foundation can be sustained in the *via negativa* as all forms of knowledge, including the very assured sense of the self, is radically dissolved in the journey of negation. The knowledge of both God and of the self can only be reached beyond the oppositions and boundaries as the overwhelming nature of the divine mystery cuts across the apparent sets of incompossibilities. For the mystical thinkers, what lies at the heart of the journey of *via negativa*, which is filled with denials and abandonment of all established categories of knowledge, is the abyss, the unfathomable depth of the Godhead.

However, throughout the history of the Western religious tradition the abyss no only refers to the depthlessness of God, but also to the human soul. According to Grace Jantzen, Augustine formulates, on the ground of Psalm 42.7, the idea of "reciprocity of the unfathomable abyss of the divine nature and the abyss of the human heart."[53] Thus, for Augustine, the abyss also refers to the heart of human beings. As David Coe comments, the abyss in Augustine is related to the inward dimension of the soul, that is, the unsearchable depth of the human soul, which is filled with innumerable thresholds that point to both the limits (finitude) and new possibilities at the same time. Interesting here is Augustine's association of the abyss with freedom; for the conventional perception of freedom in contemporary usages draws, almost exclusively, on a boundless sense of liberty, without any restriction or any sense of negativity in it.[54] For the medieval mystic Meister Eckhart too, the

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[53] Grace Jantzen, "Eros and the Abyss: Reading Medieval Mystics in Postmodernity." *Literature and Theology* 17.3 (2003): 252.

[54] As I will explore more in the next chapter, Augustine's view of the abyss and freedom finds an interesting resonance in the works of modern and contemporary thinkers such as Kierkegaard, Hannah Arendt, and particularly, Slavoj Žižek, whose reading of Hegelian dialectic through abyss will be an important component of the next chapter.

abyss relates both God and the human soul. Eckhart calls the abyss the ground that both God and human soul share, and that in their mystical union, they are both uncreated.[55]

As such, the main focus of this chapter is to examine how the deeply complex character of the abyss is conceptualized with the development of negative theology. The relation of apophatic tradition to the abyss is important not only because apophaticism is responsible for the dynamic ramification of the notion of the abyss within the field of religious and philosophical discourses. Rather, the marriage of apophaticism and the abyss in mystical thought finds its irreplaceable significance in its metaphysical implication. The abyss, as reflected in the neoplatonic mystics' writings, seeds the possibility of deconstructing the very idea of substance, self, and even God. Just as the radical transcendence of the One results in its paradoxical immanence in all, the impossibility of articulating the transcendent Godhead turns in a radical reconfiguration of all previously established knowledge, including the conception of being and God. This is why Jacques Derrida affirms that his famous project of deconstruction resembles negative theology,[56] and further remarks that the essential traits of negative theology are "passing to the limit, then crossing a frontier, including that of a community, thus of a sociopolitical, institutional, ecclesial reason or *raison d'etre*."[57]

Considering the particular trajectory of this dissertation, negative theology provides the foundation and the elementary traits of the abyss, which I attempt to explore in the following chapters. These traits will become more apparent as my reading of the abyss evolves and branches out into multiple directions, particularly by examining its relation to

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[55] Sigridur Gudmarsdottir, *Abyss of God: Flesh, Love, and Language in Paul Tillich*, Ph.D. Dissertation, Drew University, 2007, 64.

[56] Derrida points out the similarity that lies between deconstruction and Negative theology. Nonetheless, he claims in the same passage that however these two notions resemble each other, his project is "different" from negative theology. Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 6.

[57] Jacques Derrida, *On the Name,* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 36.

God, the Other, and the context of oppression (suffering). I demonstrate how these traits of the abyss are commonly played out in the three different contexts or readings and to argue how the different effects produced in each context can complement or expand the conventionally defined notion of the abyss. To be more specific, the distinctive characteristics of the abyss that I am highlighting are, first, the unspeakable dimension of the experience (the encounter with the divine) which fails to find mediation in common language. At the impasse of unspeakability, the mystics turn not to mere silence but to apophasis.

As I will explore more in the following chapters, apophasis opened up at the limit of metaphysics offers a new way of knowing and thinking about being. Apophatic theology signals not only an alternative to onto-theology as many of its postmodern readers would suggest, but also the inadequacy of language for describing the abyssal depth of both the self and God. At the failure of predication, apophasis offers a twofold movement: it signals the resignation of the categories of being (including the self) while at the same time it indicates the self's indomitable desire to name the unnamable, to speak the unspeakable. Hope arises somewhere in between these two movements as they offer an easy transition to the second trait of the abyss that I identify in this chapter, namely the paradoxical relation between finitude and mystery, or wonder.

Second, the abyss does not point to either one of the two sides (e.g., finitude or transcendence), but both of the seemingly contradictory sides at one and the same time. By engaging the key texts of negative theology, we will be investigating the process of which the self's submission to his/her limit, the finitude of being, is followed by the opening of wonder. In other words, I want to highlight the fact that for the medieval mystics, divine mystery or what Eckhart calls the "mystic union" can not be glimpsed without the self's humble surrender to creaturely finitude. Third and last, the submission to finitude results in the dissolution of the self. Furthermore, it is not only the self who is dissolved in the abyss, but

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God. The lack of ground (groundlessness) for the assertion of the self opens another mode of knowing and being which is based in *relation*. Therefore, embracing human finitude in the abyss not only implicates the opening of wonder, but also relation. I hope to demonstrate how these characteristics of the abyss are articulated in the writings of apophatic theologians, particularly, in Plotinus, Pseudo-Dionysius, and Meister Eckhart.

Radical Transcendence of the One: The Neoplatonic Inception

If the major contribution in the conceptualization of the abyss came from the tradition of negative theology, it is in the work of the neoplatonic thinkers where we find the traces of the first inception of negative theology. Certainly, it would be indispensable to discuss Plato first before examining the writings of neoplatonic thinkers. This is not simply because neoplatonism is philosophically rooted in Plato, but also because Plato's writings already bear some traces of negative theology. Even though Plato never develops it in his system, one could argue that negative theology would be an obvious and necessary consequence for Plato when considering his formulation of the "God as the perfect Being."[58] Plato's notion of the all-transcendent God provides the ground for Plotinus' further radicalization of the transcendence of the One, which is the very starting point of negative theology.

The basic framework of Plato's philosophy lies in his dyadic analysis. He presents the world as composed of the material world of temporality on the one hand, and the ideal world of order and rationality on the other hand. Whereas the former is chaotic, contingent, imperfect, and visible, the latter is perfect, necessary, and changeless.[59] The latter is also called Forms or Ideal Forms by Plato in his Socratic dialogues and refers to the highest reality which exists beyond any defective reality that lies in the realm of temporal/material order.

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[58] John W. Cooper, *Panentheism, the Other God of the Philosophers: From Plato to the Present* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 31.
[59] Cooper, *Panentheism,* 33.

The sensible world of becoming has been fashioned on an eternal Idea, and "is made on the image of that other, but is only a likeness."[60] Despite this dualistic cosmology, however, Plato complicates the essence of the One especially in its relation to the universe by framing his cosmology within the structure of sheer transcendence.

The logical consequence that Plato derives from his notion of sheer transcendence is the (in)compatibility of the One with the categories of being. In one of his late dialogues, *Parmenides*, Plato attempts to articulate this dilemma in detail, and it is in *Parmenides* that we find the most explicit and systematic hints of negative theology. Certainly, there are various other places in Plato's work where he hints at the possibility of negative theology. In *Republic* 509b, for instance, Plato famously claims that the Good is not being, but transcends the category of being. As William Franke rightly points out, the notion of "a Good beyond being, and therefore equally beyond speech and reason (Logos)" undergirds the trajectory of apophatic tradition.[61] Similarly, in *Timaeus 28c*, Plato discusses the impossibility of knowing and talking about God: "The maker and father of this universe it is a hard task to find, and having found him it would be impossible to declare him to all mankind."[62] The aporia of the One beyond categories of being is further developed in *Parmenides* where Plato presents the "paradoxical logic of the One that cannot *be* and still be *one*."[63] Starting from the two theses that "the One is *One*" and that "the One *is*," Plato sets out to show the impossibility or "incompatibility between being one and being."[64]

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of *Parmenides* is Plato's use of negative terms to describe the ultimate reality. Except in *Symposium* where he employs negative terms to

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[60] Plato, *Plato's Cosmology: The Timaeus of Plato*. Translated by Francis Macdonald Cornford. (New York: Humanities Press, 1952), 23.
[61] William Franke, *On What Cannot be Said: Apophatic Discourses in Philosophy, Religion, Literature, and the Arts*. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 37.
[62] Plato, *Timaeus,* 22.
[63] Franke, *On What Cannot be Said,* 39.
[64] Ibid.

describe the mystery of inconceivable beauty, *Parmenides* is the only text where Plato uses the negative method in order to articulate the One.[65] In the section entitled *First Hypothesis*, Plato demonstrates, by the method of negation, how different attributes of being are not compatible with the One because the One is *One*. The strongest apopohatic statement comes towards the end of the dialogue, after he deprives the One of all its main attributes: "Therefore the one in no sense *is*. It can not, then, 'be' even to the extent of 'being' one, for then it would be a thing that is and has being." [66] Therefore, Plato adds, "it appears that the one neither is one nor is at all."[67] Plato concludes the first section of the dialogue by pointing to the ultimate mystery of the One that lies at the realm of the unknowable and unspeakable, for "it can not *have* a name or be spoken of, nor can there by any knowledge or perception or opinion *of* it."[68]

The concrete trajectory of the development of negative theology begins with Plotinus who is regarded to be the founder of neoplatonism. Plotinus is considered to have worked out, in John Cooper's words, "the unresolved issues of Platonic philosophy" and developed a unified cosmology in which everything is hierarchically emanated from the One.[69] The basic structure of Plotinus' philosophy is explicitly Platonic. He inherits the major common themes of Platonic tradition such as the immortality of the soul, the immateriality of reality, beauty and good, and affirms them in his major philosophical work, the *Enneads*.[70] Following Plato, Plotinus emphasizes the role of the One, which is also referred to as the Good or the Ideal Form. Plotinus advances the radical notion of the all-transcending one, which remains underdeveloped and somewhat nebulous in Plato. The radical and unique aspect of the

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[65]   See, Deirdre Carabine, *The Unknown God: Negative Theology in the Platonic Tradition--Plato to Eurigena* (Gran Rapids: Eerdman, 1995), 24-26.
[66] Franke, *On What Cannot be Said,* 45.
[67] Ibid.
[68] Ibid.
[69] Cooper, *Panentheism*, 39.
[70] Baine Harris. *The significance of Neoplatonism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1976), 3.

Plotinian view lies in the fact that the One no longer contains a distinction within itself because of its absolutely transcendent nature. Rather, as the prototype of all Forms, the One "is the other than all things that come[s] after it, existing by itself, not mixed with the things which drive from him.[71] However, at the same time, as the transcendent One is also the cause of everything, the One is also "virtually everything else."[72] The strict binary of transcendence and immanence is blurred since Plotinus, as Baine Harris remarks, "does not set the knower off from his objects. Rather, he makes the intelligible universe within the subject the object of knowledge."[73] More specifically, the inexpressible transcendence of the One collapses the boundary between transcendence and immanence, subject and object, inside and outside as the One is both "beyond" and the "ground" of everything.

In Plotinus' view, the One, as the source of all universe, emanates into another, less perfect level of being without necessarily affecting its perfect and unchanging nature. More interestingly, everything that derives from the One, in Plotinian cosmology, seeks to return to it. He therefore adds a relational attribute to the God of Greek metaphysics "in which divine perfection meant indifference to the world.[74]" The three cosmological principles inherited from Plato that Plotinus further develops are categorized as the One (Good), the Intellect, and the Soul. First, there is the One, which transcends all, and exists outside of all things. The One is by no means definable or namable. The crucial moment in the history of apophatic theology begins here, where "Plotinus actually bequeaths this term to the tradition," as Franke observes.[75] For Plotinus, the fact that the One is ungraspable and unspeakable does not mean that "we are void of it."[76] Rather, "we hold it not so as to state it, but so as to be

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[71] Plotinus, *Enneads* 6.9.6. in Cooper, *Panentheism*, 40.
[72] Cooper, *Panentheism*, 40.
[73] Harris, *Neoplatonism*, 7.
[74] Franke, *On What Cannot be Said,* 50.
[75] Ibid., 51.
[76] Ibid., 61

able to speak about it."[77] Eloquently defined by Plotinus, apophatic theology presupposes an epistemological humbleness in which the solipsistic sense of a knower and a solid sense of meaning yield way to uncertainty.

Second, the Intellect is derived from the One. It is through the Intellect that we know the One as it represents, similar to Plato's Ideal world, the image of the One.[78] The Intellectual Principle is the all-embracing archetype, the ideal archetype. In Philippus Pistorious' words, it is the "teleological goal of the universe," the universe as it should be, or "the plan according to which the development of the universe takes place."[79] The final component that enables the realization of the Divine Idea in the material realm is the Soul. The Soul expresses all the Forms by incarnating itself in the cosmos. It materializes particular entities in their pluralities, yet grounding them in unity. Just as the Intellect seeks to approximate the One, the Soul strives back toward the One. In this way, Plato's blurry cosmology is rewritten by Plotinus in a much clearer and more hierarchical cosmology.

This complex cosmology, which straddles multiple contradictory terms, along with the attempt to mediate the immutable notion of the Platonic One with the becoming world of matter, leads Plotinus to an abyssal space of apophasis. In *Enneads V.iii*, Plotinus presents a concrete apophatic account of the transcendence of the One. The all-transcending One has no name and is unsayable since "whatever you say would limit it" (V.iii.13).[80] The ungraspability of the One indicates the failure of language, but it does not signify the impossibility of our experience of the One all together. At the juncture where knowledge and language fail, Plotinus resorts to apophasis, to the poetic language that signals the mysterious

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[77] Ibid.

[78] Philipus Villiers Pistorious, *Plotinus and Neoplatonism: An Introductory Study* (Cambridge: Bowes & Bowes, 1952), 2.

[79] Ibid., 30.

[80] Plotinus, *The Essence of Plotinus.* Translated by Stephen Mackenna, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1934), 162.

space of negation and silence: "if we do not grasp it by knowledge, that does not mean that we do not seize it at all. We can state what it is not while we are silent as to what it is" (V.iii.a4).[81]

Seen this way, apophasis entails a humble embrace of human finitude in which the self surrenders to the limits of his/her knowing or reason. The One, however, is not completely inaccessible to the creation. The strict dualism between finitude and infinity, between transcendence and immanence, loses its meaning in the abyssal space of negation as the submission to finitude gives birth to wonder, the opening of the divine mystery or what Plotonian scholars would call the "mystical union."[82] This is the second trait of the abyss, which insists that finitude does not indicate the ultimate limit of being. Against the temptation of denial or resignation before the finitude of being, apophaticism invites us to embrace this finitude by surrendering ourselves to it.

Analogically, the all transcending nature and the ungraspable mystery of the One articulated by negative theology bears a remarkable similarity with trauma. Just as the neoplatonic One is ineffable and unknowable, trauma, in contemporary clinical and psychoanalytic understanding, is characterized by indescribability and urepresentability. As I already stated earlier, the connection between God and trauma will become clearer in the following chapter as it will enable me to expand the theological-philosophical question of the abyss into the political questions of finitude experienced in the situations of violence and suffering.

Despite the absence of language to describe it, the crucial step involved in overcoming trauma entails *naming* the traumatic event, that is, acknowledging one's engulfment in the overwhelming force of trauma. In other words, the beginning point of

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[81] Ibid.

[82] Robert Arp. "Plotinus, Mysticism, and Mediation." *Religious Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 2 Jun., 2004:145-163.

addressing trauma is the act of embracing one's finitude experienced in her encounter with the unspeakable event.

Embracing finitude also implies acknowledging the impossibility of being a complete self. As it will become more explicit in Meister Eckhart's writings, the abyss exposed at the heart of neoplatonic apophaticism points to the absence of the ground for a solid and coherent self. For Plotinus, therefore, the ecstatic encounter with the divine or the "mystic union," implies one's acknowledgement of her limit, for something greater than herself takes control over her: "those who are divinely possessed and inspired have at least knowledge that they hold some greater thing within them though they cannot tell what it is; from the movements that stir them and the utterances that come from them they perceive the power, not themselves, that moves them."[83]

Thus, Plotinus turns the limits of human existence into the threshold of transcendence. However, the dissolution of the self or the collapse of the boundary between the self and the other also indicates the beginning of "relation," which takes my reading to the third characteristic of the abyss. To be clear, Plotinus does not develop the theme of relation nor does he employ the language of relation. Nevertheless, I argue that one of Plotinus's important contributions to the trajectory of Western intellectual history is the creation of a space for relation in the Platonic system. Plotinus' effort to mediate the relation between the immutable One and the living universe resulted in the innovation of a panentheist cosmology, which views God and the world as mutually enfolding each other. However, the potential for the advancement of a relational angle is already embedded in Plotinus' notion of the One. As Baine Harris remarks in discussing the nature of the One in relation to unity, the Plotinian One is itself the unity (rather than *having* unity) and it bequeaths being to its "participants."[84]

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[83] Plotinus, *The Essence of Plotinus*, 162.
[84] Harris. *The significance of Neoplatonism*, 28.

The philosophical significance of Plotinus' notion of participation lies in the distinctive implication that the "participation in the divine" bears as it sets a clear difference from the Platonic term of merely "reflecting the divine."[85] Since the One is the source from which everything is generated and the goal toward which everything moves, the only way of being real is by sharing in the One, by participating in the "mystical union."[86]

With this complex web of philosophical connotations, speaking of the One in neoplatonic apophaticism bears a much wider meaning than just talking about the ultimate One. With apophatic theology, we learn that (un)speaking of God involves acknowledging our creaturely finitude and the vulnerability of incompleteness ingrained in the edifice of our being. As Dominic O'meara puts it, for Plotinus, speaking of the One implies speaking of the lack and contingency of our human limits before the One.

> Thus, in speaking of the One as first cause, we are in fact expressing our own affections, our sense of our own contingency and dependence which evokes a foundation of reality, *the first principle which we are not*… the expression of our contingency and our need is the expression of *something in us that relates to something else and of which we are obscurely aware*, precisely as an other than our own contingency.[87]

The dual failure of language and selfhood in the face of the overwhelming presence (absence) of the One signals the fundamental quandary that cuts through the writings of negative theologians. It is, however, through the works of Plotinus' successors that the

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[85] Cooper, *Panentheism*, 43.
[86] Even though such participation seeds the possibility of a relational framework it might not be yet a form of interrelation.
[87] Dominic O'meara. "Scepticism and Ineffability in Plotinus." *Phronesis*, Vol. 45, No 3 August 2000:248-250.

foundational ground of negative theology is established. Particularly, Pseudo-Dionysius is

regarded to be an indispensable resource in negative theology as he is considered to have

made the first systematic attempt to build an intentional account of negative theology.

Dionysius, whose real identity is appropriately unknown, was a neoplatonist from the late

fifth or early sixth century who transposed neoplatonism, particularly that of Plotinus and

Proclus, into the Christian tradition.

Darkness So Far Above Light

  In his attempt to develop a philosophical explanation of the nature of the One in its

relation to the world, Dionysius sets the model for "apophatic rhetoric," as Franke suggests,

characterized as "extremely provocative in its oxymorons, paradoxes, and neologisms."[88] He

inherits the major themes of neoplatonic philosophy from his predecessors and affirms the

idea of an "utterly transcendent One" who nevertheless encompasses and grounds the

creation. Consequently, the One contains contradictory qualities in its nature so that it

grounds everything while transcending them all; it remains within itself even when it

processes outward to create the universe; it is the boundary of all things while being itself the

unbounded infinity.[89]

  The theme of participation also occupies an important place in Dionysian thinking, as

the key principle that mediates transcendence and immanence or God and creation. God is

both transcendent and immanent in all as a unity and participation in the One becomes the

absolute condition of the emanation of multiple forms in the universe. Dionysius further

radicalizes the neoplatonic dialectic of transcendence and immanence, which claims God to

be the source of everything to the extent that the One is "virtually everything." The Dionysian

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[88] Franke, *On What Cannot be Said*, 161.

[89] John M. Dillon and Sarah Klitenic, *Dionysius the Areopagite and the Neoplatonist Tradition: Despoiling the Hellenes* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 23-24.

One is more than an all-encompassing ground. The One materializes the "all" in itself: "so everything, and every part of everything, participates in the One. By being the One, it is all things."[90]

Following Plotinus, Dionysus takes on the *via negativa* in order to articulate the all-transcendent One. No reason or language can ever find an appropriate articulation regarding the One: "the inscrutable one is out of the reach of every rational process. Nor can any words come up to the inexpressible Good." The absolute transcendence of the One lies beyond all human category: "Mind beyond mind, word beyond speech, it is gathered up by no discourse, by no intuition, by no name. It is and it is as no other being is."[91] After acknowledging the limits of reason and language that fails to contain the traces of God, Dionysius brings up the impasse, the dilemma of the theologian who nevertheless strives to talk about God without knowing how to: "how can we do this if the Transcendent surpasses discourse and all knowledge, if it abides beyond the reach of mind and of being… how can we enter upon this undertaking if the Godhead is superior to being and is unspeakable and unnamable?"[92] Following Plotinus' mystic union, Dionysius also suggests the possibility of encountering the divine wisdom, what he calls the "Light beyond all deity."[93] Such union, Dionysius tells us, is only possible through the halt of reason, "through the denial of all beings."[94] The finitude of *being*, Dionysius shows us, is directly connected to the finitude of *knowing*.

Plotinus' apophatic gesture of humbly embracing human finitude and acknowledging the power of "something greater than oneself" is advanced by Dionysius into a full blown system of apophatic epistemology as negation takes a more active and concrete expression in

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[90] Pseudo Dionysius, *The Complete Works*, Translated by Colm Luibheid (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1987), 128.
[91] Dionysius, *Complete Works,* 50.
[92] Ibid., 53.
[93] Ibid., 54.
[94] Ibid.

Dionysian theology to the extent that the highest knowledge of God, "comes through unknowing."[95] Thus, submission to finitude or cessation of the act of knowing and speaking becomes a deliberate gesture in Dionysius as he suggests that before the mystery of the One, we remove from ourselves all the previously established knowledge and understanding of the divine. Consequently, the self is also deconstructed at its encounter with his/her limits. Dionysius suggests that one can be uplifted to the ray of the divine shadow by an "absolute abandonment" of not only oneself, but everything.[96] Truth is unreachable without throwing the self into the space of the abyss, to the limits of reason and speech.

Dionysius' apophatic gesture culminates as he celebrates the complete surrender of the self in the face of the mystery of the hidden One. The central focus of his apophaticism is not the dialectical mediation of Truth. Rather, Dionysius' interest seems to lie in the sheer transcendence of the absolute Other and the concurrent failure of reason to grasp the mystery of the One. If Plotinus' philosophical agenda lies in mediating the One with the human experience, Dionysius' negative theology hints at a complete surrender of reason and a humble praise of the ineffable nature of the One: "with our minds made prudent and holy, we offer worship to that which lies hidden beyond thought and beyond being. With a wise silence we do honor to the inexpressible."[97] A decentering epistemological gesture grounds Dionysius' theological vision as he alludes to the fact that the main purpose of his negative method is not to understand, name or grasp that which lies beyond. His agenda is not to reveal the reality of the ungraspable truth or to describe the indescribable. Rather, his intention is "to sing a hymn of praise" to the wholly other.[98]

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[95] Ibid., 109.
[96] Dionysius, *The Complete Works*, 135.
[97] Ibid., 50.
[98] Ibid., 96.

Even though Dionysius pushes the apophatic method further than any of his other predecessors, his theological perspective is not necessarily any more pessimistic than his neoplatonic ancestors. Rather, one finds in Dionysius an evocation of a beautiful poetic language that exalts the irremediable ontological gap between God and the creation. Dionysius welcomes and even celebrates the failure of human language and reason in understanding the transcendent One. The abyssal impossibility of knowing and naming God is largely covered by or inverted into a sense of excess caused by the uncontainable and overwhelming nature of the divine. Similar to Plotinus, the limits of being and knowing bear, in Dionysius, an unmediated potential for transcendence. Certainly, darkness and shadow are privileged over light and clarity in Dionysius' writings so that the ecstatic moment of transcendence, followed by an absolute abandonment of both the self and the world, is characterized as being "uplifted to the ray of the divine *shadow*."[99] In the same vein, Dionysius claims that Moses' encounter with the divine revelation is not characterized by Moses' actual encounter with God. Rather, Dionysius clarifies, Moses "plunges into the truly mysterious darkness of unknowing."[100]

The striking aspect of the Dionysian darkness is that it is not posited as a passageway to light. Darkness is not conceived as a process or a steppingstone through which one finally comes to the firm ground of certainty. Rather, Dionysius places darkness above everything: "I pray we could come to this darkness so far above light."[101] The act of knowing coincides with the place of being in that Dionysius subscribes unknowing or "inactivity of all knowledge" to an ecstatic dissolution of the self, of "being neither oneself nor someone else."[102]

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[99] Ibid., 135.
[100] Ibid., 137.
[101] Ibid., 138.
[102] Ibid., 137.

The ontological finitude of both knowing and being is consistently upheld in Dionysius' writings. He turns the abyssal space of darkness into the horizon of the encounter with the divine, without inscribing a sense of teleology or re-inscribing an all-transcendent essence beyond being. According to Jean-Luc Marion's reading, Dionysius' apophatic theology signals a non-predicative discourse against the long tradition of onto-theology, which articulates God as a supreme being who provides the ground of all other beings.[103] Marion grounds his point in his reading of Dionysius' praise and prayer in *Divine Names* in which he finds an articulation of a "God without Being," beyond speech and thought.[104] On the other hand, Jacques Derrida presents his disagreement regarding Marion's reading of Dionysius by pointing out the danger of "hyper-essentialism" lurking in negative theology. Contrary to Marion who finds in negative theology a "break" from onto-theology, Derrida argues that the "hyper" terms in Dionysius' writings might, as Thomas Carlson comments, "aim at speaking of the divine 'properly,' instead of avoiding to speak of it."[105] In other words, Derrida sees in negative theology the danger of re-inscribing the hyper, all-transcendent essence beyond name, speech, and Being, instead of freeing God from the thinking of Being. Derrida further insists that the negation of negative theology does not signal an absence, but an overabundance.[106]

Derrida's reading of negative theology and Dionysius provides a fresh lens for reading the relation or (dis)continuity between the postmodern critique of onto-theology and negative theology. His analysis alerts against any hasty attempt to reinstate the pre-modern

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[103] Jean-Luc Marion, *Idol and Distance: Five Studies*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001); Thomas Carlson, *Indiscretion: Finitude and the Naming of God* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 217.

[104] Carlson, *Indiscretion*, 217.

[105] Carlson, *Indiscretion*, 215; Jacques Derrida, "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials," in *Derrida and Negative Theology*, ed. Harold Coward and Toby Forshay (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992), 77.

[106] Carlson, *Indiscretion*, 215.

(mono)theistic pursuit of a transcendent essence as an alternative to the dead-end of Western

metaphysics. However, while I do not disagree with Derrida's analysis of Dionysius' praise

and prayer in its basic ideas, I hold some reservations on his warning that praise is prone to

harbor a hyper-essentialism. Derrida might be right when he points out the predicative nature

of praise and the fact that praise might signal "determination" as "it says something about

someone."[107] Nevertheless, it is worth to consider Thomas Carlson's insightful suggestion

who indicates that there is a deep continuity or correlation between negative theology and

negative anthropology to the extent that the line between the two is indistinguishable.[108]

Keeping Carlson's suggestion in mind, I submit that Dionysius' praise needs to be

read from the standpoint of the self that is keeping in mind the performative effects that the

apophatic praise produces in the self. From the self's standpoint, praising the other in the

place of attempting to grasp it signifies surrender and resignation of the self. By shifting the

focus from "naming the wholly other" to the self, praise can be understood in the same line as

prayer. Both praise and prayer indicate the negative movement of self-effacement or self-

abandonment while keeping the wholly other an indestructible open-endedness, an endless

deconstruction of all established images. This is because for Dionysius, the very moment one

encounters the divine light one does not come to the grips with an "essence" or a true image

of it. Instead, one is immediately thrown into the darkness which eventually leads one to a

further denial of all things and self-emptying before the overwhelming Other. Consequently,

we could read the Dionysian prayer as pointing to the "beyond" of essence, instead of hyper-

essence. In the same way, Derrida's observation that the "negative" in negative theology is

closer to overabundance rather than absence must also be re-evaluated under Carlson's

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[107] Jacques Derrida, *How to Avoid Speaking*, 137.
[108] The tie between negative theology and negative anthropology is one of the central arguments that Carlson makes in *Indiscretion*. See, for example, Carlson, *Indiscretion*, 4, 7, 239, 260.

assertion that when read through the lens of desire, the dividing line between overabundance and lack/absence, is indistinguishable. As Carlson puts it, when "I" desire, "the intensity of excessive desire devastates me to the point of unknowing – beyond the simple alternative of presence and absence."[109]

I submit that the possible ethical consequence that we can derive from Dionysius' negative theology is an "ethical turn" to the other followed by a radical self-denial. In this turn, one gives up his/her agenda to grasp or to identify the other and passes to an apophatic praise: "unseeing and unknowing, that which lies beyond all vision and knowledge. For this would be really to see and know: praise the One through denying all things."[110] The three elemental traits of the abyss [and also recap] discussed above are all implicated in this picture, where the absolute transcendence of the other sweeps over the self by which the self is plunged into the finitude of being and knowing. Before the face of abyss, the self takes refuge in apophasis, the silence of unsaying and unknowing, the radical negation and denial of the self which consequently results in the dispossession of the self. Dionysius' writings epitomize the fundamental character of abyss, that is, the abyss as the passage from finitude to transcendence, and from transcendence to finitude yet again. My aim, throughout the rest of this chapter and the following chapters of this dissertation, is to examine the above-mentioned movements of passage in different thinkers, their texts and contexts. Reconstructing the self or the passage in the abyss will borrow insights from the ethical, political, and theological consequences that these different accounts of passage present.

The Ground of the Soul and Self-Abandonment

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[109] Carlson, *Indiscretion*, 168.
[110] Dionysius, *The Complete Works*, 138.

The notion of the abyss comes to the surface of the western theological tradition with Meister Eckhart. His frequent reference to the abyss makes the connection between apophatic theology and the abyss more explicit. A peculiar characteristic of Meister Eckhart's mystical theology is his distinction between Godhead and the revealed God. Godhead points to the deeper or wholly transcendent reality of God, which lies beyond the revealed triune God. It is then the unknown, all-transcending nature of God that opens the door for the trope of the abyss in Eckhart's theology. He follows Augustine who links the abyss not only with God, but also the human heart, thus making the abyss the shared space of the unsearchable depth of both God and of the human soul. As Franke comments, for Eckhart, "the ground of the soul" is, at the same time, "the abyss of deity."[111] The abyss refers to this depthless ground in which both God and the human soul are inscrutably lost, dissolved, and finally found in each other undone, entwined, and ultimately, in union.

Eckhart's understanding of the abyss is also undergirded by his idea of birth and breakthrough. His view on the relationship between God and creation is structured in a model similar to the neoplatonic emanation as he asserts that God flows into the whole creation. God's outflow coincides with God's inflow, which in effect blurs the boundary between God and creation, between God and the self. This inflow of soul in the depth of God, in which the soul's inflow and God's outflow are indistinguishable, is named by Eckhart as "breakthrough" (*Durchburch*): "but in the breaking-through, when I come to be free of will of myself and of God's will and of all his works and of God himself, then I am above all created things, and I am neither God, nor creature…."[112] Eckhart's breakthrough is only possible, as Sigridur Gundmarsdottir comments, through the groundlessness which is also the

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[111] Meister Eckhart, "German Sermon 10," in Bernard McGinn, *Meister Eckhart: Teacher and Preacher*. (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1986), 261.
[112] Meister Eckhart, *The Essential Sermons*, trans. Edmund Colledge and Bernard McGuinn (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1981), Sermon 230.

ground of God/soul in which both God and the soul are ceased or uncreated.[113] The ground of God/soul, therefore, uncovers the absolute groundlessness of God/soul. Negation, in Eckhart's thoughts, also leads to the dissolution of the self as I have already observed in the writings of other neoplatonic thinkers, so that the ground as an abyss, represents a site of rupture and dissipation in which previously known identities and realities are dissipated.

A crucial element in the soul's journey into the unsearchable depth of the ground(lessness) is what Eckhart calls "detachment" *(Abgeschiedenheit)*. Eckhart's understanding of detachment is remarkably innovative and radical as he breaks down the distinction between God and creation. Detachment, in its basic meaning, refers to the abandonment of the "self," that is the self as an autonomous and individual subject of knowing and being. It is impossible to understand God or even to grasp one's self without abandoning oneself to the extent of becoming nothing since God's nature is equivocal to human beings. As remarks Eckhart,

> Since it is God's nature that he is like no one, we must of necessity come to the
> point that we are nothing in order to be placed into the same being that he is
> himself. Therefore, when I come to the point that I form myself into nothing and
> form nothing into myself, and if I remove and throw out whatever is in me, then I
> can be placed into the bare being of God, and this is the bare being of the spirit.[114]

The encounter with the unmediated presence of God takes place, in Bernard McGinn's parlance, "silently in the ground of the soul." By a total abandonment of the self, McGinn adds, one "create[s] the inner void that draws God into one."[115] Strikingly, however,

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[113] Gundmarsdottir, *The Abyss of God*, 64.
[114] McGinn, *Meister Eckhart*, 329.
[115] Ibid., 290.

Eckhart associates the void or nothingness not only with the human self, but also with God. That there is no distinction between God and the human soul in the ground implies a radical act of opening to each other on both sides. One of perhaps the most radical ideas in Western theology is conceived at this juncture where Eckhart gets rid of the distinction among God, human beings, and nothingness – and as this move opens a loop of paradox since the abandonment of finite being leads to the collapse of finite being all together. As Charlotte Radler comments on this radically revolutionary conception of the divine, in the "ground of the soul" which is also the abyss of God where both God and the human soul converge, God is "realized as an absolute transcendent nothingness through detachment; the soul flows into this nothingness and becomes a perfect nothing just as God is nothing."[116] Nothingness is posited not only as part of a divine quality, but the goal towards which God moves. Subsequently, absolute self-negation leads to the abandonment of all images and words, which takes one to the creative space of plentitude, namely, *nothing*: "you are seeking nothing, and so you also find nothing."[117]

The Hegelian-Marxist philosopher Slavoj Zizek associates Eckhart's nothing with the abyss and explains that Eckhart's nothing is not a mere meaningless void. The interesting side in Zizek's interpretation is that, instead of viewing the Godhead as being "beyond" God, he follows Schelling and reads the abyss as "the abyss of godhead *prior* to God."[118] Zizek agrees with other Eckhartian scholars who view the abyss as the site where "the very difference between God and man is annihilated-obliterated."[119] He draws upon Reiner Schurmann who comments that for Eckhart, "God is opposed to non-God," instead of to the

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[116] Charlotte Radler, "Living from the Divine Ground: Meister Eckhart's Praxis of Detachment." *Spiritus*, Spring 2006, 33.
[117] McGinn, *Meister Eckhart*, 250.
[118] Slavoj Zizek and John Milbank, *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?* Edited by Creston Davis. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009), 33.
[119] Ibid.

"world" or to "man" [120] The break-down of the opposition that takes place in the abyss is, then, for Zizek, not the collapse of the boundary between two different kinds, "but between God as some(thing) and God as nothing."[121] Since the abyss is characterized by the mutual dynamic of self-dispossession and conversion between God and the human soul, it follows that God's act of self-creation, God's becoming-something happens only through human being's act of self-detachment. Zizek, however, presses this point perhaps too hard by claiming that "God is nothing outside man."[122] In Zizek's radical-materialist vision, the importance of Eckhart's mystical thought lies in the fact that human beings are the medium through which God actualizes Godself and that God lacks its ontological ground outside of human beings. Zizek further claims, that "it is man who gives birth to God," and therefore, that "I am the only site of God."[123]

Zizek's reading of Eckhart has a certain validity, inasmuch as Eckhart's account of the ground and breakthrough could certainly effectuate such an inference that Zizek is drawing. His perspective also provides a solid mystico-theological ground to the revolutionary politico-theological argument that he is drawing out of the Hegelian dialectic. He reads God's abyss as the otherness of God that lies prior to God, the nothingness inherent in God, which God needs to negate in order to become Godself. This dia-logic is materialized more explicitly in Jakob Bohme and Schelling to whom Zizek turns in order to build his materialist dialectic. However, despite the innovative breakdown of the human-divine dichotomy in his mystical thought, Eckhart's writings show that he retains, nonetheless, the essential theistic frame of the neoplatonic tradition. He maintains that the One remains the same even after it flows into creatures and that the Godhead's substance does not contain

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[120] Reiner Schurmann, *Wandering Joy: Meister Eckhart's Mystical Philosophy* (Great Barrington: Lindisfarne Books, 2001), 70.
[121] Zizek, *The Monstrosity of Christ*, 33.
[122] Ibid., 34.
[123] Ibid.

relation or an exteriority. This goes exactly against Zizek's statement that God has "a dark side," which is "an unfathomable otherness to himself."[124] Even in his/her most relational moment of flowing into the creation, God, adds Eckhart, remains static in its substance "because God's substance does not imply the idea of a relation."[125] The neoplatonic model of emanation upon which Eckhart grounds his theology bears a panentheist cosmology in which God contains the whole world within Godself, rather than having an "unfathomable otherness" to itself as Zizek argues.

In conclusion, Eckhart's mystical theology develops the trope of the abyss into the primary material of theology. For Eckhart, the abyss is the ambiguous space of paradox in which the ontological finitude of the human soul reflects the unsearchable depth of divinity. The ground as abyss denotes the end of the distinction between the divine and the creation. The self and God, creator and creation, subject and object no longer exist in strict binary terms within the abyss. The threshold of abyss, however, is marked with absolute negation and abandonment, or the death of the self. Yet, what Eckhart shows is that reality no longer ends with death, but rather begins there. The moment of the self's annihilation, the moment the self reaches nothingness coincides with God's self-detachment and God's act of becoming nothing. In the unfathomable ground, both God and the self are lost in each other and find themselves in each other, undone and uncreated, yet *incarnated* in each other. The once uncreated soul is now given a new birth, as Franke formulates, "in and as God," which renders God "nothing but generated Logos and living Spirit in us."[126] The traditional tension regarding God as the impossible object of knowing takes a new shape with Eckhart whose theological query shifts the question from *knowing* God, to *being* God.[127]

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[124] Ibid., 38.
[125] McGinn, *Meister Eckhart*, 67.
[126] Franke, *On What Cannot be Said,* 290.
[127] Ibid.

As I have sketched out in this chapter, the abyss symbolizes the seemingly irremediable gap between finitude and transcendence, creation and God as well as the internal split within the self, human and divine. However, at the same time, the abyss also indicates the passage or the crossing of this gap, the boundary between the two poles. As my reading demonstrates, the mystical writings of the three neoplatonic thinkers are characterized by the distinctive aspects of the abyss that I highlighted above. Apophasis, first of all, beckons to us at the gap between the self and language, speakable and unspeakable, or possible and impossible. Besides undermining onto-theology and revealing the failure of ontology, apophasis also creates the space for the reconsideration of the relation between reality and poetic imagination. Just as the unspeakable (either trauma or the divine) disrupts the boundary between imagination and reality, so does apophasis open a porous passageway within the crack between these two.

Second and most importantly, the creative tension between the unspeakable and mystic speech is followed by the self's surrender to darkness, to her finitude, to an embrace of the self's groundlessness. I argue that submitting to the threshold of one's finitude or losing the self is not an escapism or an evasion of one's ethical responsibility. Rather, it is an ethical response, a courageous act of diving into the vortical abyss where one discovers herself to be the very site in which the crossing of the irremediable gap or the ecstatic movement of becoming-divine takes place. This leads to the third and last movement, which involves the dissipation of the self on both human and divine sides. It gives birth to a new mode of being and knowing, which is based in *relation*. The passage from impossible to possible, from finitude (stasis) to transcendence (*ek*-stasis) takes place upon the matrix or the new horizon of life (womb) made of relation.

The radical materialist reading Zizek practices might seem to gesture towards a relational angle as he builds the link between the human and the divine in a dialectical way so

that God's self-actualization takes place only through the human person. For Zizek, this human person, like its divine counterpart, becomes "something" or as he consistently evokes, "the subject" by negating its *a priori* otherness, namely, nothingness. The problem lies not only in Zizek's misreading of Eckhart's neoplatonic view of God as I showed earlier, but also in the unambiguous difference that exists between the relational ontology implicated in Eckhart's panentheistic cosmology and the atheist theology lurking in Zizek's materialist reading. As he consistently argues elsewhere, for Zizek, the void, nothing, or the death of God *is* the very starting point of the genesis of the subject. God, or the Real, in Zizek's Lacanian term, is "nothing but an embodiment of a certain void, lack, radical negativity."[128] That the subject unmasks the illusion of the transcendent God and realizes that there lies nothing behind the Real is, however, a positive condition since this indicates that what is missing in the place of the illusionary Real *is* the subject him/herself. In other words, what really matters for Zizek is that the subject *becomes* him/herself as s/he encounters the void and negates this nothingness. As he writes, "behind the subject, there is nothing."[129]

It is, therefore, not the case that God's negation of nothingness and the human negation of nothingness share their trajectory of dialectical becoming. What Zizek fails to see is the collaborative nature of the divine-human relation in Eckhartian theology. The negation of otherness (nothing) and the subsequent becoming of the subject (something) does not entail a co-participatory process in Zizek's reading. Rather, the almost heroic account of political subject takes over the empty place of the (illusion of the) Other. Contrary to Zizek's reading, relation constitutes a critical element of the Eckhartian and the neoplatonic mysticism as it refers to the process in which one strives to become nothing (Eckhart), or to come to the darkness above light (Dionysius) where the self disappears and only an apophasis

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[128] Slavoj Zizek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), 192.
[129] Slavoj Zizek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009), 206.

of praise and prayer to the other remains. This way, the dialectical dynamic of the threefold

movements of the abyss are brought full circle. This dialectical movement will be developed

more fully in the next two chapters with a clearer focus on the ethico-political

dimensions/questions.

Chapter 3 – The Restless Negative: Otherness and the Way of Despair

But the life of spirit is not the life that shrinks
from death and keeps itself untouched by devastation,
but rather the life that endures it and maintains itself in it.
It wins its truth only when, in utter dismemberment,
it finds itself.

Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*

Dialectics is the self-consciousness of the
objective context of delusion; it does not mean to have
escaped from that context. Its objective goal is to
break out of the context from within.
The strength required from the break
grows in dialectics from the context of immanence.

Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*.

It is through the works of G.W.F. Hegel that the trope of the abyss acquires a new or

better, a wider meaning within the discourse of philosophical thinking. Most importantly,

Hegel frees the abyss from the theological constrain reflected in the works of the neoplatonic

mystics. Hegel places the abyss or groundlessness (*Ungrund*) at the very center for

structuring his dialectical worldview. As Jon Mills observes, the abyss is the central principle

of the *Phenomenology of Spirit,* remaining always in the shadow of the dialectical progress

without ever being abandoned.[130] As I demonstrated in the previous chapter, within the

tradition of neoplatonic mysticism – and all the way through Schelling and Hegel – the trope

of the abyss straddled theology and philosophy, without drawing a clear distinction between

the two. The abyss, after all, always remained as a theological question, as an inquiry into the

questions of the self and its finitude, but most importantly, of *God*. It is then following Hegel

that the abyss is divorced, at least in a particular sense, from the notion of God and drives the

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[130] Jon Mills, *The Unconscious Abyss: Hegel's Anticipation of Psychoanalysis* (Albany:
SUNY Press, 2002), 22.

question of the self, in particular of the irremediable incompleteness inherent within the structure of the self.

However, the questions of the self in Hegel are not derivatives of a philosophical obsession with a solipsistic self. Rather, questions of the self and subjectivity in Hegel are inseparable from the questions of "the other." As Hegel himself emphasizes in the *Phenomenology*, and as numerous commentators have affirmed, the foundational structure of the Hegelian dialectic rests on the notion of "mutual recognition." As Jean Hyppolite, one of the major French commentators on Hegel put it, "the simple meaning of the entire dialectic lies in that human desire occurs only when it bears on another desire and becomes the desire to be recognized and hence itself to recognize."[131] It is in this dialectical system of recognition that I read the abyss as that which signals both the gap between the self and the other, and the gap producing the internal split within the self, that is between the self and its consciousness.

To be clear, Hegel rarely uses the term abyss (*Ungrund*) in his works. Nevertheless, I follow Jon Mills who identifies the abyss as the central principle of Hegel's system. While, however, Mills reads *Schaft* (shaft, pit, mine) -- the often recurring term in Hegel's later works, particularly, the *Science of Logic* – as abyss, I read the traces of the abyss mainly in the *Phenomenology*.[132] Despite its limited number of appearances, the abyss points to the very kernel of the Hegelian dialectic that is, the dispossession of the self in its encounter with the shattering power of the negative. The few times it makes its appearance in the *Phenomenology*, it is used in order to refer to the unfathomable depth and shadow that

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[131] Jean Hyppolite, *Genesis and Structure of Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974), 167.

[132] In translating *Shaft* as abyss, Mills argues that Hegel's use of *Schaft* in describing the abundance of images deposited in the pit of the soul is very unusual. Thus, Mills sees Hegel as taking a much idiosyncratic, poetic liberty in his use of the term. Furthermore, Mills adds, *Schaft* and *Abgrund* overlap in their meaning in multiple instances, particularly when referring to the depth of the human soul. See, Mills, *The Unconscious Abyss*, Xiv.

relentlessly haunt the journey of the Hegelian subject, whose path is marked with constant encounters with "the other." As the unknown makes its appearance in the horizon of being, and as this other immediately reveals itself to be the site of the subject's truth, the subject loses itself, becoming inscrutable to itself as its personality is now "dependent on the contingent personality of another."[133] The abyss signals this state of sheer disruption, where self-identity, "having become divided against itself, all identity, all existence, is disrupted."[134] Such moment of utter despair and loss of the self is translated in the same passage by Hegel as the *abyss*. As he writes, "it stands on the very edge of this innermost abyss, of this bottomless depth, in which all stability and Substance have vanished."[135] The abyss therefore, is the site of the negative in Hegel, which signals the possibility of a new beginning.

However, the vital role that negativity plays in Hegel's thought is often misinterpreted, if not downplayed as Hegel is usually read as a thinker of totalitarian progress. Indeed, the general reception of Hegel during the past two centuries has been predominated by an image of Hegel as the thinker of totalitarian progress and a proponent of a closed absolute. Over against this underestimation of the negative in Hegel, I argue that in Hegel's system, the negative is neither a mere temporary rupture on the way to a completed synthesis, nor an expansionist negation of "the other." Rather, I concur with the so-called leftist readers of Hegel and identify the negative as a constant structure of tension between desire and satisfaction, absence and presence or finitude and transcendence. My reading therefore is mainly informed by the Marxism-inflected, existentialist reading of Hegel of the early twentieth century France, a tradition of thinking that played a paramount role in shaping the leftist interpretation of Hegel within the contemporary trajectory of continental

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[133] Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 313.
[134] Ibid., 315.
[135] Ibid.

philosophy. Accordingly, the negative represents the constant failure of subjectivity that is the subject's confrontation with the finitude of its knowing and being; or, to wit, the Hegelian negative renders finitude a constitutive structure of being.[136] However, paradoxically, it is the work of the negative that drives the subject towards the reconstruction of itself despite innumerable failures.[137]

The aim of this chapter is twofold. First, through my reading of Hegel, I intend to show how the theological notion of the abyss is played out in the process of the (self)consciousness' (Hegelian term for subject) becoming. It is my observation that the role the abyss plays in the Hegelian system is very similar to that of the neoplatonic mysticism: it points to the ambiguous boundary between the subject and object, the inside and outside, finitude and transcendence. The Hegelian subject is the one constantly oscillating between these two poles, the oppositions. It is then the crux of the Hegelian dialectic to hint at this movement of crossing or passage *as* the site or temporality in which the truth of the subject is *revealed*. Second, the abyss as the site of the negative signals the reversal of the negative into a new possibility, not only as a one-time event but a continuous and open-ended movement. I pay particular attention to this resilience or persistence, which carries important implications for the further politicization of the abyss. In the first part of the chapter, I examine the significance of Hegel's philosophy (dialectic) in both its ethico-philosophical and theo-political senses. If the ethico-philosophical element rests on the fact that the Hegelian

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[136] Jean Hyppolite, *Genesis and Structure of Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974), Judith Butler, *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth-Century France* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), Slavoj Zizek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), Slavoj Zizek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London: Verso, 1999), Catherine Malabou, *The Future of Hegel: Plasticity, Temporailty, and Dialectic* (London: Routledge, 2004), Katrin Pahl, *Tropes of Transport: Hegel and Emotion* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2012).

[137] Butler, *Subjects of Desire*, 22. See also, Katrin Pahl, *The Way of Despair* in Slavoj Zizek, Clayton Crockett, and Creston Davis, *Hegel and the Infinite*, 142.

dialectic incorporates exteriority or otherness into the structure of being (and knowing), the theo-political significance lies in the fact that Hegel's system renders God inconceivable outside of the political.

The second and the third parts of this chapter engage two contemporary readers of Hegel. Slavoj Zizek and Judith Butler provide guidance for reading Hegelian dialectic in relation to the self, the abyss, and ethics/politics. On the one hand, Zizek's materialist reading uncovers the notion of the abyss implicit in Hegel's thought by identifying the abyss as the core of negativity. Hegel's dialectic acquires a new perspective and a strong political edge with Zizek, whose Marxist/materialist reading renders the dialectic as the arduous journey and struggle or what he calls the "critical engagement" of the restless spirit/subject who seeks to negate the disrupting power of negation.[138] Quite differently, Butler engages Hegel from the feminist and deconstructionist perspective and inscribes the notion of "loss" in the place of the abyss. With loss as the constitutive element of its being, Butler's subject advances a gesture of political resistance based on the act of mourning, thus setting both the vulnerability and the ethical ties of our human existence as the parameters for the construction of a "political community of complex order."[139]

From Mysticism to Dialectic

While both dialectic and historical materialism are often attributed to Hegel, the basic frames of these ideas are rooted in the tradition of German idealism in which Hegel himself is grounded. In particular, the mystical theosophy of Jakob Boehme provides the backbone of the Hegelian dialectic system. Furthermore, the significance of Boehme's thought lies in that he serves as the key figure between the medieval mysticism and German idealism/continental

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[138] Zizek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 199.
[139] Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 19.

philosophy. One finds in Boehme's mystical vision, composed of image saturated languages, the convergence of mysticism and dialectic, or better, the passage between the gradual dissipation of the mystical thought and the birth of dialectic.[140] Similarly, the missing link between the proliferation of the abyss in the neoplatonic mysticism and the largely absent place of it (the abyss) in Hegel might be found in Boehme as Boehme develops the structure of a proto-dialectic upon the soil of mystical theosophy.[141] To be clear, when discussing the direct influence on Hegel's thought, the most commonly invoked thinker is Schelling. However, Schelling's thought is anchored in Boehme since the primal form of dialectic that Boehme develops plays a central role in Schelling's system.

The starting point of Boehme is the supposition that nothing can emerge from nothing. What lies at the heart of God for Boehme is the desire to reveal itself. The desire for self-manifestation or self-actualization is not one among many attributes of God. Rather, self-revelation is God's essence itself. The key notion that frames Boehme's thought is "*Ungrund*," *a prior* space, the eternal nothingness within God that, as Eric Trozzo defines it, "may be God or might be a non-divine darkness within the divine."[142] The *Ungrund* therefore signals an absolute indeterminacy, a "ground without a ground," as Alexandres Koyre has brilliantly coined.[143] This indeterminacy, however, derives from the polarities that constitute the essence of the divine. The divine contains opposition, the polarity of Byss (ground) and abyss (groundlessness) within itself. In other words, the emergence of the self-actualization of God, God's coming-to-be-itself happens only through a confrontation with

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[140] Glenn Magee provides a clear and historically comprehensive review of the Hegelian scholarship that focuses on the relation between Hegel and Bohme. See, Glenn Magee, *Hegel and the Hermetic Tradition* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), 38-50.

[141] Despite the significant impact of Bohme's theosophy on his thought, Hegel rejects the "sensual" approach of Bohme, which precludes the "free representation of the Idea." See, *Hegel and the Hermetic Tradition*, 49.

[142] Eric Trozzo, *Im-Possible Glory: The Cross and the Abyss*, Ph.D. Dissertation (Madison: Drew University, 2011),120.

[143] Mills, *The Unconscious Abyss*, 23.

opposition. The seeds of the radical idea in both Augustine (as I noted in the previous chapter) and Eckhart that the abyss signals not only the groundlessness of human mind, but also God, is reconceived and further radicalized by Boehme who grounds the divine in the groundlessness of indeterminacy, the non-being, the nothing and everything before being. To clarify, the negative elements with which Boehme characterizes the divine are significantly different from the negative of neoplatonic apophaticism. In neoplatonism, the negative is indicative of the insurmountable distance/gap between the divine and human soul while, on the other hand, the negative in Boehme amounts to the internal gap within the divine being itself or the subject itself.

With the abyss, Bohme renders God the result of a dynamic movement. From this, *Who* God is can not be separated from God's own act of self-positing through which the divine achieves itself by overcoming the opposition inherent to its internal structure. Even though the evolutionary process of God's becoming is central to Boehme, he pays an equally heavy attention to the epigenetic womb of this becoming, namely the *ungrund*. Perhaps, Bohme's formulation of the proto-dialectic might signal a teleological orientation geared towards the unfolding or becoming of God. However, he does not move with haste across the depth of the mystical negative. Rather, he theorizes the negative, the abyss in such a way that the haunting shadow of the *Ungrund* becomes an inseparable component of the teleological progress.[144] However, despite its intricate connection to God's self-actualization, the *Ungrund* is, paradoxically, unsearchable as it represents the uncertainty preceding "the divine will's arousing itself to self-awareness."[145] In this unfathomable *Ungrund*, says Boehme, "even God would therefore not be manifest to Himself."[146]

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[144] Trozzo, *Im-Possible Glory*, 128.
[145] Mills, *The Unconscious Abyss*, 25.
[146] Ibid., 26.

The most daring conception of Boehme's theosophy is born here as Boehme claims, "in his depth, God himself does not know what he is. For he knows not beginning, and also nothing like himself, and also no end."[147] God suffers his/her own indeterminacy in the abyss for God does not know what s/he is: God remains hidden or other to Godself. Just as the medieval mystics strived to name the unnamable essence of God, Boehme proceeds to give a form to the inconceivable *Ungrund* and the subsequent emergence of God out of it. However, unlike the mystics who take upon the way of negation (*via negativa*) into both the self and the other, Boehme's negation takes a constructive form in that negation is posited towards negation, to its otherness, as a form of "negation of negation." In other words, negativity in Boehme leads to positivity since the act of negation enables self-positing or self-actualization.

It is then, in the eternal nothingness of the *Ungrund* that the desire for self-actualization is born. The undifferentiated non-beingness of God now sets out to differentiate itself through its unquenchable desire or hunger to know itself,[148] and this is why as Robert Brown remarks, "the *Ungrund* also contains within its undifferentiated wholeness the possibilities of all things that are to be."[149] Boehme's *Ungrund*, therefore, is itself the desire, the desiring subject who seeks its full self-manifestation. The unfathomable negative contained in the *Ungrund* is at the same time the infinite potential or drive to unfold, actualize, and manifest itself.

Schelling develops the basic contour of Boehme's theosophy into a more advanced form of dialectic and transcendental idealism through which he mediates the distance between human beings and nature, God and the world by conceiving them as the self-

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147 Ibid.
148 Ibid., 28.
149 Robert Brown, *The Later Philosophy of Schelling: The Influence of Boehme on the Works of 1809-1815* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1977), 55.

manifestation of the absolute. However, the primary backdrop of Schelling's philosophy is Spinozism. He places everything in God and claims that there is nothing outside of God. However, Schelling goes beyond Spinoza by turning the almost deterministic or mechanistic view of the Spinozan God into a more dynamic and personal subject. If for Spinoza, God loses its subjectivity at the dispense of a pantheistic naturalism, hence almost becoming an object of articulation by reason or expression by nature, Schelling restores the agency of the absolute by combining Spinozism with neoplatonism, in particular, with Boehme's theosophy. The main attribute of God that Schelling inherited from Spinoza is that of infinity. God, for Schelling, is the ultimate ground of all being and reality. Since the infinite is constitutive of the finite, it follows that the finite cannot be separate from the infinite. Rather, the finite must to be contained within the infinite. Therefore, the same structure of opposition in the primal abyss of God seen in Boehme structures Schelling's thought as God is the agent of its self-unfolding in nature.

It follows that because of its essence as freedom, God must be a dynamic essence of infinite becoming. Schelling blends the strong mystical element of Boehme's theosophy with idealist rationalism. Not only is his discussion of byss and abyss slightly different from Boehme but also he gives a more rational philosophical explanation by claiming that God cannot be static; God needs to unfold itself in history because "if the full existence of God were already actual and perfectly fulfilled, then everything related to God would also already be completely determined."[150]

In this regard, the main attribute of God for Schelling is *freedom*, and God's ultimate purpose is its self-actualization in and through the world. This freedom, however, also

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[150] Cooper, *Panentheism*, 97.

signifies groundlessness, since for Schelling, like Boehme, "ground fails to ground."[151] In

other words, God's infinite nature is grounded, paradoxically, in its own groundlessness. As

he writes, "This unsearchable, inconceivable Will without Nature which is only one, having

nothing before it, nor after it, which in itself is but one, which is as nothing, and yet all

things; this is, and is called the only one God."[152] In this sense, groundlessness becomes the

very source of infinity for Schelling.

The dual nature of God that persists in Schelling's thought entails that God has, on the

one hand, the abyss, darkness, the non-ground, the non-being of God. On the other hand,

God's essence is the principle of being, reason and positivity. While the *ungrund* is the

primordial aspect of the deity for Schelling, God is the unity of the two polarities as Robert

Brown affirms.[153] The actuality of God is, then, this very synthesis of polarities.[154]

The significance of Schelling's idea of God is that it provides the basis for Hegel's

dialectic by redefining essence or God's being as God's act of self-unfolding/becoming. Non-

being or otherness becomes a constitutive element of essence or God without which God

cannot become Godself. As Zizek comments, Schelling shows us that the beginning of any

movement is predicated on a negation, a decision and confrontation with the opposite.[155]

God, as the synthesis of the opposites, the mediation between non-ground and ground,

irrational and the rational, unfolds Godself in and through nature and history. In conclusion,

while the influence of Bohme's idea of absolute as *Ungrund*, prior to all duality and existence

takes Schelling to affirm the ineluctable presence of otherness or non-being in the dialectical

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[151] Adrian Johnston, *Zizek's Ontology: A Transcendental Materialist Theory of Subjectivity* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2008), 92.

[152] "Of the Election of Grace or God's Will Toward Man," cited in Trozzo, *Im-Possible Glory*, 122.

[153] Brown, *Later Philosophy*, 54.

[154] Cooper, *Panentheism*, 100.

[155] Slavoj Zizek, *The Abyss of Freedom/Ages of the Word, F. W. J. von Schelling* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 93.

(or dipolar) unfolding of God, the pole of being and reason remain as the guiding force and principle of this movement. Reason does not yield way to the abyss, and dialectic becomes the movement of this reason, which is, God.[156]

Into the Passage of the Negative

Spirit is this power only by looking the negative in the face, and tarrying with it. This tarrying with the negative is the magical power that converts it into being.

Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*[157]

Jean Hyppolite emphasizes the central place of the negative in Hegel as he writes, "Hegel's philosophy is a philosophy of negation and of negativity."[158] Hyppolite's recurring emphasis on Hegel's negativity is reflected in the fact that the very first chapter of his commentary on Hegel in which he discusses the "meaning and the methods of the *Phenomenology*," carries a very accentuated focus and analysis of the negative in Hegel's dialectic. Similarly, Alxandre Kojeve, whose lecture exercised an unparalleled influence on the subsequent generation of continental philosophers including Hyppolite, conceives human being's nature in basis of negating action to the extent that the "I" is born in negating

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[156] For the place of reason (being) and non-being in Schelling, see, James Lindsay, "The Philosophy of Schelling," *The Philosophical Review*, Vol 19, No 3 (May, 1910): 259-275.
[157] Hegel, *Phenemonology*, 19.
[158] Jean Hyppolite, *Logic and Existence*, translated by Leonard Lawlor and Amit Sen (Albany: SUNY Press, 1997), 105.

action.[159] For Kojeve, Hegel locates the essence of being human in its negating action "which transforms given Being and, by transforming it, transforms itself."[160]

While Kojeve understands the axiom of the Hegelian dialectic in anthropocentric terms by translating the negative as "man's action for transformation," Hyppolite "extends the domain of negation" by relocating the negative in the wider trajectory of temporality by which human existences are swept over.[161] In Hyppolite's reading, the negative is the very motor that generates the movement of dialectic since the genesis of a new truth, the birth of new knowledge or/and being is inconceivable without the negation of immediate truth, the negation of the error so that "the death of what it held as its truth is the appearance of a new truth."[162] Meanwhile, as I mentioned already, the abyss is inseparable from the central axiom of Hegel's dialectic.

Certainly, it is difficult to point to a simple definition of the abyss. Within the long tradition of neoplatonism, the abyss symbolizes the unsearchable edifice of unknowability and indeterminacy at the heart of being. However, while it points to the space of indeterminacy itself within the neoplatonist tradition, the abyss also signals the very act of crossing or "passage" from determinacy to indeterminacy and then to a renewed form of determinacy again: an act of transformation and construction which entails both *de*-construction and *re*-construction. Similarly, I insist that negation or the work of the negative in Hegel can not be articulated apart from the abyss. To be clear, the negative should not be equated with abyss. Whereas the abyss, in my reading, refers to the space, the site or state (temporality) of indeterminacy, the negative is the very subject of its own movement since it indicates the *act* of negation.

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[159] Alexandre Kojeve, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the Phenomenology of Spirit* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), 4.
[160] Ibid., 38.
[161] Judith Butler, *Subjects of Desire*, 81.
[162] Hyppolite, *Genesis and Structure*, 14, 18.

If the abyss is underdeveloped by Hegel himself, the central role that negativity plays in Hegel's system is then further downplayed by his commentators. One reason why the place of the negative in Hegel is overlooked could be attributed to the fact that Hegel has been often read as a thinker of totalitarian reconciliation, of the teleological movement towards the incorporation of difference into unity. The root of such readings needs to be attributed to the long-standing tradition of "right-wing Hegelians" who, against Marx's interpretation, were reading Hegel as the thinker of dialectical "unity" rather than dialectical "antagonism." As the influential reading of Jean Wahl demonstrates, the result of such reading resulted in erasing, if not neutralizing, the place of the negative in Hegel: "so that what is negative in him [Hegel] is something absolutely positive… we can say that the unhappy consciousness is but the darkened image of the happy consciousness."[163] This tendency has been prevailing in Hegelian scholarship over the long trajectory of its development in the philosophical and religious studies. The predominance of such reading is best reflected in Karl Popper's famous denunciation, who accuses Hegel of advocating a straightforward totalitarianism.[164] It is, however, not only the opponents of Hegel or the right-wing Hegelians who read Hegel through the lens of teleology. Faithful adherents of the existentialist reading of Hegel also tend to read Hegel as a thinker who espouses a movement of progression towards an absolute goal, from darkness to light, as is the case with Robert Solomon who points to "growth" and "education" as the central metaphor of Hegel.[165]

Second, such a reception of the Hegelian negative further implies that in cases when the negative is taken seriously, its significance is largely reduced to its deconstructive side only. However, for Hegel, the disruptive power of the negative *is* the very motor that gives

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[163] Jean Wahl, *Le Malheur de la conscience dans la philosophie de Hegel* (paris, 1929), 29, cited in Hyppolite, *Genesis and Structure*, xxx.

[164] Karl Popper, *Open Society and Its Enemies, Vol 2: Hegel, Marx, and the Aftermat*h (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), Chapter 12.

[165] Robert Solomon, *In the Spirit of Hegel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 277.

birth to desire and drives it forward: the desire for recognition; the desire to overcome

(negate) the negative and come to its self-definition as a subject. Loss and lack caused by the

devastatingly deconstructive effects of the negative produce, in return, an indomitable spirit,

which despite its innumerable failures, rises up and recollects its shattered self in order to

begin again.

Therefore, we may here identify negation as the central principle of the Hegelian

dialectic as described in *Phenomenology*. The negative, or the entire structure and scope of

Hegel's dialectic in *Phenomenology* concerns the problem regarding the gap and the unity

between Truth and the subject or between epistemology (knowing) and ontology (being) in

their relation to Truth. From this, I concur with Kojeve's compelling statement that negativity

is "a constant deferral of the phenomenological truth, the given."[166] This is not, however, a

mere phenomenological distance between the subject and the object, but an active "event" or

"encounter" with negation, in which consciousness, as it is well dramatized by Hyppolite,

loses its truth by abandoning its first, illusory belief in the given, immediate truth.[167]

Consciousness' initial encounter with exteriority, its limits, is not merely a cognitive issue

involving the questions of "knowing," but an existential anguish entailing the whole of one's

being and existence.[168] The loss of truth does not merely refer to the loss of the object of

knowledge. Rather, loss of one's truth equals for Hegel the loss of the self whose path is

consequently paved with doubt or regarded famously as "the way of despair."[169] Loss,

therefore, constitutes one of the primary and essential characteristics of negativity. Loss

becomes in Hegel the key, constitutive element of the subject, which subsequently opens up

the abyss at the heart of being.

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[166] Alexandre Kojeve, *Introduction*, 201.
[167] Hyppolite, *Genesis and Structure*, 14.
[168] Ibid., 12-13, 18.
[169] Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 49.

The Abyss of the Other: Finitude, Loss (dissolution), and Recognition

The moment of the fall is also the moment of salvation.

Jean Hyppolite

The subject's immersion into groundlessness caused by the loss of self takes place in the consciousness' encounter with "the other." This means in other words that "the other" for Hegel is directly indicative of *loss*. The inevitable encounter with the other reveals the failure of the illusion of the Cartesian subjectivity. This is because dialectic points to the fact that consciousness can relate to truth or meaning only through the mediation of the other. However, the abyssal gap of negation does not only refer to the disparity in the subject-object relationship, but the internal gap, the split within the self. Therefore, consciousness realizes, as Robert Williams writes, that even "the self's relation to itself is mediated by its relation to the other."[170] The given, immediate truth present in the knowing subject dissipates as s/he loses herself/himself in the object or as "the man who contemplates is absorbed by what he contemplates."[171] The contingent possibility of the "emergence" of the subject now depends on the outside, the other, who "must approach and call for it to turn in upon itself."[172] On the other hand, what this implies for the (re)construction of subject is that the very constitution of *subject* can only take place by the negation of the given.

The Hegelian subject's encounter with the other invokes a dynamic riddled with multiple ambiguities and ambivalences as it hints at numerous bifurcating points regarding

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[170] Robert Williams, *Recognition: Fichte and Hegel on the Other* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992), 150.
[171] Kojeve, *Introduction*, 3.
[172] Hyppolite, *Genesis and Structure*, 124.

the place of the other within the structure of the self and vice versa. The trajectory of the dialectical journey is guided by the principle of reversal or paradox in such a way that the opposite, the exterior, and the non-real are indispensable in comprehending and grasping the reality. It is then not odd that loss, dissolution, finitude, and contradiction are crucially essential components of the affirmation or emergence of the subject: the "I" finds itself in the other and the other finds itself in the I. Finitude reveals itself to be the passage way to infinity and vice versa. From this, "the other" in Hegel can be understood as the threshold of abyss which serves both as the limit of being in which all stability and sense of substance dissipates *and* the soil for a new beginning through which a new subject and reality might emerge.

This is perhaps why numerous commentators of Hegel contend that one of the central meanings of the dialectic comes into play as *recognition*. One observes through *Phenomenology* the development of a dialectical movement "from the abstract to the concrete,"[173] in which, at the same time, the prior movement of the principle of recognition or intersubjectivity from the "I" to "the other," and from "the other" back into the "I" is reproduced.   Therefore, writes Hegel, "what the object immediately was in itself… proves to be in truth, not this at all; instead, this *in-itself* turns out to be a mode in which the object is only *for an other*."[174] This highly original and innovative trope of recognition and inter-subjectivity is further radicalized as he claims, in a more accentuated tone that "it is clear that being-*in-itself* and being-*for-an-other* are one and the same."[175]

It is important to note, however, the danger couched in the idea of mutual recognition and intersubjectivity which might lead to the temptation of simplifying it into a finalizing synthesis or a teleological achievement. Williams' remark regarding this point is illuminating: "Hegel denies immediate access to other. There is immediate confrontation with

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[173] Ibid., 64.
[174] Hegel, *Phenemenology*, 104 [second emphasis mine].
[175] Ibid.

the other, but not an immediate knowledge of the other."[176] To this, I would add, following

Williams, that not only is the immediate knowledge of the other denied by Hegel, but also an

immediate reconciliation with or discovery of the self.[177] The Hegelian subject is, therefore,

marked with double contradiction and failure: its initial encounter with the other signifies loss

and dispossession of the self.

The dynamic drama of the self-consciousness' journey characterized by its self-

positing, its encounter with the other, followed by the dissolution of the self and the

recognition of itself in the other, is best illustrated in the famous section of "Lordship and

Bondage," which is also known as the "master-slave dialectic." The master-slave dialectic

illustrates the relation between the subject and its object, or rather, between the two subjects

marked with a strong tension instigated by the dual desire to affirm one's self while at the

same time negating the other. The relation between the master and the slave exemplifies very

well the basic dynamics running through the dialectical methodology in which the self-

consciousness is faced by another self-consciousness, since, as Hegel writes, "the 'other' is

also self-consciousness; one individual is confronted by another individual."[178] This moment

of encounter is characterized, first, by the loss of the self, the loss of self-certainty as "the

knowing subject loses himself in the object that is known."[179] The subject is dissolved in its

encounter with both the outside world and "the other" as they reflect the inscrutable

externality inherent in the structure of its being. As Judith Butler remarks, instead of

consuming the other, self-consciousness "is instead consumed by the other."[180]

Butler's reading of Hegel, in particular her analysis of "Lordship and Bondage"

provides an insightful perspective for reading Hegel in line with the notions of loss, self-

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[176] Williams, *Recognition*, 146.
[177] Ibid.
[178] Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 113.
[179] Kojeve, *Introduction*, 3.
[180] Butler, *Subjects of Desire*, 48

dissolution, and desire. Since I will engage Butler's work in more detail later, suffice it to say for now that her reading underscores the centrality of loss, dissolution or undoing of the self in Hegel. Indeed, Hegel himself privileges the importance of dissolution (*Auflösung*) by calling it " the most astonishing and mightiest of powers, or rather the absolute power" of *Understanding*.[181] The infinite potency and power of the negative is inscribed in its work of the dissolution of substance or/and any reference of the world and being. This means, in reverse, that any act of positivity, namely positing of the self and creating of the world entails, or rather, must first go through the passage of radical negation including the dissolution of the self.

On this note, Jean-Luc Nancy writes that the Hegelian subject is "essentially, what (or the one who) dissolves all substance."[182] What Nancy sees in Hegel is a movement that breaks from the Cartesian subjectivity and opens to an ontology of "relation," a new subject whose essence consists of the movement of relation and becoming. This is, however, not a becoming that leads from one point to another. Rather, it refers to the *passage* itself, which in itself is the very principle or condition of being while at the same time it demarcates the disavowal of a determinate and immutable substance.

Nancy's reading of *Phenomenology* sheds lights on the trope of the abyss in the Hegelian dialectic. In describing the function and the effects of "the passage," Nancy writes, "one finds its truth in the other" within this passage, and at the same time, one "touches upon and unsettles its ground."[183] It is interesting to note that Nancy refers to "finding its truth in the other" and "unsettling its ground" in one and the same line without making distinction between the two. Recognition and unsettling of the ground are articulated as parts of one and the same process. Furthermore, the absence of the separating line between the two is not only

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[181] Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 18.
[182] Nancy, *Hegel*, 5.
[183] Ibid., 14.

indicative of the semantic indiscretion but also temporal homogeneity. This means that against the common expectation that the "unsettling of the ground" is followed by "finding of the truth," the temporal arrangement of the two processes is not laid out in a linear way. By removing the temporal distinction between deconstruction and reconstruction or between alienation and reconciliation, Nancy alludes to the fact that the Hegelian passage into the journey of its becoming is itself the very depth, the unfathomable groundlessness. In other words, it is not the case that the abyss leads one to recognition and self-definition. Rather, perhaps recognition and becoming are the very unsettling and the destabilizing work of the abyss. Therefore, Nancy writes, "this ground founds only to the extent that it sinks in itself."[184] Ground destabilizes the ground while, paradoxically, groundless founds the ground.

It is not my intention, however, to argue that the abyss or otherness (non-being) occupies the primary place in Hegel's system. Clearly, Hegel seems to grant ontological priority to being and reason over irrationality and non-being. Reason, for Hegel, is the name for synthesis, that is, Absolute Knowing. As Robert Solomon indicates, reason is the "demand for unity," which is "the aim of the universe to unity itself."[185] Morris Cohen and Hyppolite too affirm this view, held by the majority of Hegelian scholarship. One cannot deny, contends Cohen that "reconciliation terminates in a reality which is completely rational."[186] Likewise, Hyppolite points out that reason is the name for the dialectical synthesis: "Reason is the supreme unification of consciousness and self-consciousness, of knowledge of an object and knowledge of self."[187] This means, despite the shadowing presence of the abyss and the crucial role it plays in Hegel's system, the abyss or non-being

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[184] Nancy, *Hegel*, 15.
[185] Solomon, *In the Spirit*, 180.
[186] Morris Cohen, "Hegel's Rationalism," *Philosophical Review*, Vol 41, No 3, 1932:285.
[187] Hyppolite, 221.

does not assume a central place in his dialectic. My intention, then, is not to propose a shift of perspective. Rather, my point is that, despite the priority Hegel grants to being and reason, there is a need to recognize the overlooked traces of the abyss imprinted in the progressively unfolding trajectory of the dialectic. On this note, it is worth to note that Hegel's reason does not designate a static signification of substance metaphysics. As Christopher Lauer notes, for Hegel, reason is "not the unity of the concept that has brought all its otherness into itself. Rather, it is a relation to its other…."[188] This implies that reason cannot come to know itself without otherness: "reason can comprehend its necessity only through an encounter with its contingency."[189]

The Hegelian passage does not indicate a mere temporal process leading to a magical uplifting, suture, and reconciliation. Instead of reading the dialectic as a narrative of teleological progression, I concur with Hyppolite who understands synthesis or the end as a momentary achievement.[190] It is Kojeve who provides perhaps the most illuminating insight on this point as he regards "the dialectical synthesis as one opinion as many others," instead of viewing it as a finalizing, once-and-for-all event of closure. In other words, synthesis does not lead to a final closure. Rather, Kojeve claims, "it arouses new antithesis," [191] and "the final synthesis is also the initial thesis."[192] To this, Hegel adds that the movement of becoming, from substance to subject, the self-positing of substance as subject has "its end also as its beginning."[193]

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[188] Christopher Lauer, *The Suspension of Logic in Hegel and Schelling* (New York: Continuum, 2010), 108.
[189] Ibid., 111.
[190] Butler, *Subjects of Desire*, 81.
[191] Kojeve, *Introduction*,180.
[192] Ibid., 194. However, Judith Butler notes, following the consensus in Hegelian scholarship, that Kojeve is still not free from the teleological reading as he equates the movement of spirit with human action (ontology). In Kojeve, teleology remains as a potential feature of an individual life. See, Butler, *Subjects of Desire*, 81.
[193] Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 10.

Such an idea of a constant struggle, alienation, and momentary reconciliation without a closure might initially cause perplexity and raise questions regarding the ethical, political, and theological implications of the dialectic. If, as Hyppolite argues, Hegel's system points indeed to a cycle or circularity of "a conflict perpetually overcome and perpetually renewed,"[194] where can we locate the moments, in particular, of theological signification in such a system? What are the registers of ethico-political possibility in a philosophical system that seems to perpetuate the negative as the structure of being and foreclose all possibilities of positivity?

Infinite Restlessness: Theo-Political Implications

When considering the reciprocal and open-ended nature of Hegel's system, it is not surprising to see that Hegel's philosophy opens up the questions of ethics regarding the other, or more concretely, the place of the other in its relation to the self. While the neoplatonic abyss refers to the ineffable distance between the self and divinity, in Hegel it is the evanescent presence of the other that signifies the groundlessness of being. The other presents itself in an oppositional conflict with consciousness as it realizes that it cannot gain the certainty of itself (that is to become a self-consciousness) without the mediation by the other. Mediation, however, involves a painful renunciation of the subject's old world. In Williams' words, it is a tragic self-recognition that "comes with the demise of the self."[195] The presence of the other signifies the epistemological and ontological finitude of the self who needs to confront the death of its world and the death of its own self in the face of the ungraspable other:

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[194] Hyppolite, *Genesis and Structure*, 31.
[195] Williams, *Recognition*, 204.

The simple meaning of dialectic: mutual recognition… The other is a self and I see

myself in the other. Two things: that I have gotten lost. I am for-an-other, and an

other is for-me. And that I have lost the other, for I do not see the other as essence but

see myself in the other.[196]

As Hyppolite summarizes brilliantly, the irreversible distance between the self and the

other reveals, paradoxically, the ineluctable structure of intersubjectivity connecting the self

and the other, the subject and the other. Hegel's dialectic indicates the opening of an

indestructible alterity, the ungraspable exteriority structuring the subject from *within.*

However, on the other hand, recognition of the self in the other cannot take place without a

subsequent act of negation. In order to find itself and find its self-certainty, the subject needs

to *negate* negation. This means that renunciation or dissipation of the self is neither a

perpetual dislocation nor a passive resignation of the self as a (political) subject. Rather, the

shattered subject realizes that his/her finitude, "his insufficiency is at the same time his

strength."[197] S/he proceeds over towards "the negation of negation" by "enduring,"

"lingering over," and "tarrying with" the negative.[198] However, this process is often

misunderstood as the negation of the other, a negation of the singularity of the other with the

end of incorporating its difference into sameness. This reading is rooted in the master-slave

dialectic, a narrative of antagonistic relation and constant struggle for recognition, which,

however central to Hegel's entire system, according to Williams, is only the beginning of

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[196] Hyppolite, *Genesis and Structure*,167.
[197] Kojeve, *Introduction*, 49.
[198] Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 17, 19.

dialectic. Hegel's discussion, adds Williams, "proceeds from mutual exclusion and refusal, to mutual reciprocal recognition."[199]

I submit that the negation of negation is not negating the other, for this negation entails the dissolution of the self, the acceptance of its total loss, the death of the self, and the emergence of a new subject whose reality includes the non-real, the opposite, the other. Rather, negation indicates rejecting the perpetuation of the reality of loss and death, the rejection of defeat as a permanent state of being by transforming it into a new possibility. I argue that it is this "disquiet" of the self, the "restlessness" of the negative that the long, circulatory and even repetitive line of the Hegelian dialectic is signaling at its heart. It suggests that the subject no longer designates a fixed notion that is an immutable substance. Rather, the subject points to the infinite spirit of restlessness that transforms its limits into the condition of a new meaning, a new reality. The dualistic separation between the finite and the infinite loses its meaning since finitude is the very condition of infinity: "the true nature of the finite is to be infinite… the determinate has *no other essence than this absolute disquiet* not to be what it is."[200]

The critical significance of the negative in Hegel is that it invokes the power of transformation not by resorting to a transcendent synthesis, but by presenting the structure of an immanent alterity/exteriority which deconstructs and transforms the structure from *within*. The subject's encounter or exposition to its finitude opens the door to the discovery of its infinite self. The negative in this sense refers to the spirit of persistence, a tireless resilience "without renunciation or evasion, its praxis, and the conatus of its being."[201] It is in this way that Hegel provides a transition from the static notion of "substance" to the notion of "spirit" (subject) as a "whole" of the process of dialectical movement.

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[199] Williams, *Recognition*, 170.
[200] Hegel, Jena *Logic*, p. 31 cited in Hyppolite, *Genesis and Structure*, 151.
[201] Nancy, *Hegel*, 31.

Hegel regards the moment of dialectical synthesis as divine. The appearance of Spirit as subject is treated in the form of the historical manifestation of Spirit in art, religion, and philosophy. This process, in which Spirit discovers itself by way of externalization or self-manifestation, produces the "singular subject" whose life and existence embodies or reveals the universal, namely the "Absolute Being." It is important to observe here that the political struggle to *become* the subject hints at the theological moment of God's self-revelation/manifestation. Its divine quality rests on the fact that the Hegelian subject "neither seeks itself nor finds itself." Rather, as Nancy puts it, "*it effectuates itself*."[202] The world *is* what it creates; while "the subject is what it does."[203] Similarly, Slavoj Zizek resonates with Nancy when he writes, "the only thing infinite about this subject is an interminable pursuit of the infinite."[204] The universal is manifested and actualized only in the concrete enactment of singular existence. One could say that one of the paramount philosophical contributions of Hegel is that his system attempts to bring unity between knowing and being, being and becoming, becoming and ethics.

The Subject as Failure

The theo-political significance of Hegelian philosophy is further clarified by the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Zizek, who, in his effort to build a "revolutionary" form of philosophical thinking, constructs his own version of materialist dialectic upon the edifice of the Hegelian system. By reading Hegel in tune with the group of thinkers such as Kant, Schelling, Marx, and Lacan, Zizek refines the underdeveloped radical edges of the Hegelian dialectic.

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[202] Ibid., 5.
[203] Ibid.
[204] Adrian Johnston, *Zizek's Ontology*, 19.

One of the central foci of Zizek's thought lies around the notion of the subject. The subject is perhaps the starting point as well as the returning point of Zizek. Following Hegel's account of failed subject illustrated in *Phenomenology*, Zizek defines the subject as failure and self-contradiction. The rationale behind this is anchored in the Kantian antinomy, that is, the dilemma of the subject as an experience of finitude can be attributed to the questions of (the limits of) knowing or epistemology postulated by Kant. Kant's famous division of the noumena and phenomena highlights the inaccessibility of "the Thing itself" (noumena) by the phenomenological reason thus opening the gap between noumena, the "real," and its phenomena, that, is the form it is presented to our experience.

More importantly, however, the impasse of the subject rests on the fact that epistemological finitude amounts to ontological finitude, that, "the limitations of our knowledge is simultaneously the limitation of the very objects of our knowledge."[205] The very fact that there exists an irremediable gap between noumena and phenomena is evidently indicative of the incomplete condition of being: the gap within the ontological structure means that there is an inherent gap within the ontological edifice. With this move, Zizek transitions from Kant to Hegel by conceiving Hegel as someone who transferred the epistemological project onto ontology.[206] In this sense, Zizek resonates with the "non-metaphysical/traditional reading" of Hegel and claims that Hegel's project is not to overcome the Kantian division. Rather, Hegel is expanding Kant's project, or better, radicalizing the Kantian division by "dropping the need for its overcoming."[207]

The critical insight that Zizek provides for us in the transition from Kant to Hegel is that there *is* nothing beyond phenomenality. Although Zizek derives this insight primarily

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[205] Slavoj Zizek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London: Verso, 1999), 55.

[206] Johnston, *Zizek's Ontology*, 128-130.

[207] Slavoj Zizek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009), 27.

from Hegel, he deduces the idea from Kant as well. For Zizek, Kant can be also viewed as the one who, precisely because of his abyssal divide between noumena and phenomena, "re-conceives the noumenal as nonetheless a phenomenon *for-us*.[208] Zizek, this way, radicalizes Kant as someone who views limits of knowing and being as the constitutive structure of being. This means, in other words, that the limit of human existence is the very positive condition of reality.[209]

However, embracing finitude or accepting the material appearance as "real" and abandoning the illusion of the noumenal realm beyond appearance is constantly obstructed by the "transcendental illusion," the fantasy of the "big Other," to use Lacan's language, inscribed in the texture of the symbolic order. It is Lacan's thesis that participation in the symbolic order that is submission to the system of language and speech is derivative of "lack" and the subsequent "desire" to fill the emptiness. In other words, this means that the participation in the symbolic order indicates the desire for recognition. According to Zizek, what both Kant's transcendental illusion and Lacan's fantasy point to in common is the fundamental illusion of true signification, that is, what Lacan also calls the Real. Regarding this point, Lacan's argument is that no participant, no element of the symbolic order refers to the "Real." Rather, linguistic signifier is a substitutive desire that always refers to another signifier and never to the signified. Nevertheless, Zizek points out, fantasy is an unavoidable element that sustains and gives consistency to reality. In his words, "as soon as we renounce fiction and illusion, we lose reality itself."[210] On the other hand, another deceitful effect that fantasy produces is to conceal the absence of the subject by replacing this void with the transcendental illusion of the big Other.

What interests Zizek the most in this picture provided by Lacan is the fact that

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[208] Zizek, *Ticklish*, 25-27.
[209] Ibid., 158.
[210] Zizek, *Tarrying*, 88.

"the Real is therefore simultaneously both the hard, impenetrable kernel resisting symbolization and a pure chimerical entity which has in itself no ontological consistency."[211] In other words, Lacan's poststructuralist insight resonates with Zizek's radical materialist reading of Kant and Hegel in that Lacan embraces the impossibility of the noumena (Real), which means that he embraces finitude as the horizon of our experience. Zizek radicalizes this point further and claims that the Real, in this sense, "is nothing but this impossibility of its inscription;" it is in itself a nothing, the embodiment of void, negativity or emptiness.[212] It is in this vein that Zizek finds ontological finitude a positive condition of being for it is at the exposure to its limit that the self finally turns away from fantasy and takes the step toward the genesis of the subject. The Lacanian account of the subject Zizek draws upon finds its parallel in Hegelian dialectic in which the birth of the subject is the result of the self's break from the void of the death of God.

The Void: Groundlessness and the Death of God

As I discussed earlier, Zizek's reading of Schelling provides an important base for solidifying the theo-political significance of the dialectic – a crucial conduit which facilitates the transition to Hegel. Zizek's engagement with the theosophical depth of Schelling's thought provides a vitally important texture for weaving the theological and the political as Schelling presents a cosmology framed by the dialectical opposition and the becoming of God in nature/history.

Schelling does not presuppose subject as an *apriori*, a given. Rather, Zizek reads in Schelling a long and painful process of struggle for subjecthood, a tenacious account of self-

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[211] Slavoj Zizek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), 190.
[212] Ibid., 192.

actualization. To borrow Adrian Johnston's words, Schelling "attempts to sketch the (transcendental) subject's (ontogenetic) pre/proto history."[213]

To situate Schelling in the bigger picture of German idealism, while for Kant reason is the ultimate ground of reality itself, for Schelling, reason "never begins in itself; its activity is never founded in itself…"[214] There is then an "archaic *Grund* beneath reason, giving rise to it and yet excluded from it," which is a groundless pre-ontological drive in constant whirling motion or conflict within itself.[215] Thus, Zizek claims that Schelling's *Grund* does not presume a solid, consistent ontological foundation. Rather it "corrodes the consistence of the ontological edifice of existence from within."[216] This means that *Grund* is pre-ontological: it is hampered, fragmented, and inherently self-contradicted. Ground, in Schelling's thought, fails to ground, which indicates "that *Grund* is *Ungrund*, an abyssal groundlessness."[217] Beneath the seemingly calm and smooth surface of reality lies a perturbing vortex of drives (*Trieb*), a mass of conflicting darkness and chaos that Zizek calls, following Schelling, "horrible."[218]

All of this insinuates, when looking from the perspective of temporality, that there exists a temporality preceding beginning, that there is a "true beginning" lying anterior to beginning. What is then this true beginning like? According to Schelling, this movement is an act of negation prompted by the perturbing, contradicting vortex of the (*Un*)*grund*. It is a movement of negation which turns toward the exit from the inconsistent mass of the ground(lessness). The importance of this movement for Zizek's theory of revolutionary materialism is specified as he explains that the Schellingian negation is brought about by

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[213] Johnston, *Zizek's Ontology*, 70.
[214] Slavoj Zizek, *Indivisible Remainder: On Schelling and Related Matters* (London: Verso, 1996), 74.
[215] Johnston, *Zizek's Ontology*, 75.
[216] Slavoj Zizek, *The Abyss of Freedom*, 76.
[217] Ibid., 92.
[218] Johnston, *Zizek's Ontology*,　80.

what Schelling calls the "cision", *die Scheidung* (parting, divorce, separation).[219] The reason

why Schelling's negation grasps Zizek's attention is because it is born out of "decision," the

elementary political gesture that enables the self to mark an authentic beginning towards

becoming a political "subject" by way of breaking out of the vicious cycle of the rotary

motion. Zizek writes,

> In short, *at the beginning proper stands a resolution, an act of decision which, by*
>
> *differentiating between past and present, resolves the preceding unbearable tension*
>
> *of the rotary motion of drives*: the true Beginning is the passage from the "closed"
>
> rotary motion to "open" progress, from drive to desire—or, in Lacanian terms, from
>
> the Real to the Symbolic.[220]

As Adrian Johnston puts it, this beginning alludes to a decision that *creates* the

universe, rather than being *in* the universe.[221] Consequently, Johnston clarifies that "true

beginning" is not the vortex itself, but the "cancellation/negation of it "through the gesture of

the *Ent-Scheidung*."[222] However, the reason why making the resolute step of *decision* is a

task inscribed with difficulty is because encountering face-to-face with the material

substratum beneath the reality is abyssal, hence traumatic. This is why, Zizek explains,

Schelling calls freedom "abyssal" because it is traumatic to accept the fact that there lies

nothing beneath matter (or beyond phenomana) but our *free will*. Encountering this ultimate

freedom beneath the horizon of reality is abyssal and horrifying since one realizes that his/her

ontological finitude is not the threshold for the passage to the Real, to the ultimate "Thing"

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[219] F. W. J. von Schelling, *The Ages of the World*, translated by Jason Wirth (Albany: SUNY Press, 2000), 22-23.
[220] Salvoj Zizek, *The Indivisible Remainder: An Essay on Schelling and Related Matters* (London: Verso, 1996), 13.
[221] Johnston, *Zizek's Ontology*, 95.
[222] Ibid., 96.

lying beyond phenomena. Rather, one realizes that what awaits him/her is his/her ultimate freedom to create the universe.

Zizek then expands Schelling's vortex further by bringing in Lacan's insight and argues that the vortex is a fantasy, "a lure destined to distract us from the true traumatic cut, that of the abyssal cut of *Ent-Scheidung*."[223] In other words, and to reiterate, what is terrifying for Zizek is not that there is a perturbing materiality beneath the symbolic reality. Rather, this palpitating mass of roiling matter is "a misleading, defensive distraction, in relation to the truly terrifying 'abyss of freedom,' the faceless void of (in)human autonomy…"[224] Zizek defines Fantasy as the defense mechanism, the screen that conceals the abyss of the desire for the impossible Other, which is the Real that cannot be symbolized; the Real which is not a transcendental entity beyond the phenomena, but a nothing, a void.[225] Instead, what is missing in this void is not the Thing or an ultimate Substance, but the *subject*.

On the other hand, Zizek opens up the space for the advancement of a theo-political thinking by highlighting (the death of) God in his radical materialist reading of Hegel. He transfers Lacan's notion of "the big Other as Fantasy" into the theological language and uses it to read Hegel's notion of the "death of God," that is, God as revealing itself to be a Fantasy. Here, again, the same rationale that I discussed above applies: Fantasy helps the self to avoid the abyss of the traumatic encounter with the death/absence of God.In other words, the genesis of the subject is triggered by the self's encounter or realization of the void, namely the *death of God*.

The Hegelian transition from the *in-itself* to *for-itself* is born at this juncture as the self breaks from the vicious cycle of Fantasy by traversing through the abyss of the vortex, thus

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[223] Slavoj Zizek, *The Fragile Absolute: Or why is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting for* (London: Verso, 2000), 73.
[224] Johnston, *Zizek's Ontology*, 106.
[225] Zizek, *Sublime*, 195.

becoming a self-conscious subject. Zizek emphasizes the terrifying fear that Hegel's abyss arouses by explaining that the political move of decision/scision or the act of actualization entails a jump into the unknown…[a] passage [that] takes the risk of dealing with something that eludes my grasp."[226] Zizek locates in Hegel the painful, almost violent rupture entailed in the epigenesis of the subject. The birth of the subject is only conceivable upon the traumatic, bone-shattering pain of death: death of both God and of the self. This is why he writes that Hegel's abyss (night) is, "unlike the mystic void, a violent tearing apart, dismemberment."[227] Here, Zizek's Kierkegaardian distinction between "Socratic reminiscence" and "Christian repetition is insightful. According to Zizek, Socratic reminiscence subscribes to idea of Truth as something that inherently dwells in oneself. On the other hand, Christian repetition understands Truth as an event, as something violently rupturing from Outside "through a traumatic encounter that shatters the very foundations" of being.[228]

To recapitulate, the subject's journey of self-discovery begins with the void of the death of God and subject is the name for the process and the struggle to fill the void, to "negate negation." Consequently, this process dissolves the division between the theological and the political since the subject realizes that what was missing in the void is not God, but the subject him/herself. In a theological language, one could argue that Zizek's thesis implies that the process of the subject's self-discovery carries a divine quality just as God who died on the cross is incarnated in Spirit only in the community of believers (subjects) who "act."[229] The dialectic synthesis is, therefore, not a formula that can be fixated to a finalized, static

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[226] Slavoj Zizek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 31.
[227] Zizek, *Ticklish Subject*, 31.
[228] Ibid., 212.
[229] Slavoj Zizek and John Milbank, *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?* Edited by Creston Davis (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009), 61.

form. In this way, Zizek maintains his faithful adherence to the Hegelian thesis that the Universal becomes Universal only in the particular. However, the particular as subject is nothing but an empty content, what Zizek calls (after Frederic Jameson) the "vanishing mediator." What is then left after the subject's act of traversal is not a static substance as/or subject, but "his own act of passage,"[230] while inscribed in Substance is "an irreducible lack which forever prevents it from achieving full self-identity."[231]

Little Time for Grief: Zizek's Abyss and Trauma

It is important to remark that the abyss, along with void, nothing, and trauma is one of the central metaphors in Zizek's Hegelian dialectic. As I sketched out above, the abyss connotes the traumatic effect implicated in the subject's encounter with the void. For Zizek, the abyss is the violent rupture that signifies both the dissolution of the subject and the birth of a new subject. However, despite his emphasis on the abyss, I would like to argue that the Zizekian abyss fails to catch the rich complexity of the term in its original, mystic sense as it has been elaborated within the tradition of neoplatonism. Despite his heavy emphasis on the singularity and the power of the negative, the subtle, yet persisting optimism couched in the Zizekian dialectic does give us a glance of the unfathomable depth created by the pain and the shattering effects of the "traumatic abyss." How does the crushed subject gather its fragmented self and rise up again amidst endless series of traumatic encounters with the void? Can one celebrate the shattering power of trauma and void when considering the ongoing events of mass-murder, violence, and socio-historical trauma in the global world today? It is along these lines that I find Dominick LaCapra's critique of Zizek relevant as he problematizes Zizek's juxtaposition of the historical loss/trauma (the concentration camp)

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[230] Johnston, *Zizek's Ontology*, 139.
[231] Zizek, Tarrying, 26.

and structural trauma or metaphysical absence (the Lacanian Real). LaCapra insists that "loss" needs to be distinguished from "absence" as conflating these two might result in a misleading ethico-political attitude to the context-specific historical loss. Likewise, historical trauma deserves a different reading practice than structural trauma as the physico-material magnitude that these traumatic events produce are beyond devastation.[232]

Theologically, Zizek's account does not adequately explore the gap between the death of God and the resurrection or incarnation of the divine in history. God is murdered too prematurely, almost too easily, and what takes over the place of God is the disguised optimism of a revolutionary political subjectivity. As a consequence, the dizzying, ambiguous, and overwhelming depth of the abyss – lying between finitude and infinity, between immanence and transcendence – is largely absent in Zizek's account of materialist dialectic. I would argue that one of the many things that contribute to the problem, that is Zizek's lack of a serious engagement with the abyss can be attributed to the fact that he often uses "void" and "abyss" interchangeably, thereby conflating the meaning of these two different terms. Zizek does this by substituting the void with the abyss in some instances in which he is referring to the void as the site previously covered by Fantasy, which now reveals itself to be nothing more than the "subject" itself.[233] In another instance, when discussing Butler's reading of "stubborn attachment," -- a process of excessive attachment to a particular object which, according to Freud, leads the formation of the self   – Zizek writes that the particular object of attachment "acts as a stand-in for the void of Nothingness (or for the

[232] Dominick LaCapra, "Trauma, Absence, Loss," *Critical Inquiry*, Vol 25, No 4 Summer, 1999: 700-701, 727.
[233] "The point of these paradoxes is that what we call "subjectivization" (recognizing oneself in interpellation, assuming an imposed symbolic mandate) is a kind of defense mechanism against an abyss, a gap, which 'is' the subject." See, *Tarrying*, 171.

abyss of the impossible Thing)."[234] The problem, however, gets exacerbated as in a few instances, Zizek calls the abyss "the limit" and "the void" of absolute negativity.[235]

As I have examined in the previous chapter, the abyss, in its neoplatonic sense, refers neither to a simple limit and finitude, nor to the mere intersection of lack and plenitude or finitude and divine potency, but to the "passage" from one to the other, which is nonetheless unlocatable and unspeakable.[236] When reflecting on the central importance of the (parallax/dialectic) "passage" in Zizek's thinking, it is ironic that he does not explore the meaning of "passage" implicated in the abyss. This leads him to translate finitudes as void, rather than abyss. This identification is then followed by a celebratory realization – or a least a solid affirmation – of the void (finitude or death of God) as the void signals the starting point for the inauguration of a new subject. Admittedly, a great extent of Zizek's work is invested in elaborating and dramatizing the painful process of "discovery" and "encounter" with the Real (death of God) and the recognition that the ontological finitude signals a positive ground of possibility. Nevertheless, we are provided with no clues as to *how* the self who goes through the "shattering trauma" of the encounter with the Real manages to re-assemble itself and proceed toward the struggle of self-determination resiliently. If the void facilitates for Zizek an easy transition or jump from the ontological limit to the death of God and back into a newly conceived subject, I submit that the "unexplored abyss" in his thought would have provided a more adequate framework for describing the long, ambiguous, and painful process of passage from one stage to the other.

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[234] Zizek, *Ticklish*, 107.

[235] Zizek, *Tarrying*, 27, 116.

[236] And perhaps this is why as I argued in Chapter 2, Zizek claims with full certainty that the Eckhartian God is "nothing outside man." However, to repeat my point in Chapter 2, Eckhart retains the essential theistic frame of the neoplatonic tradition even after he breaks down the God-human dichotomy. See, Zizek, *Monstrosity of Christ*, 33-34; Meister Eckhart, *Meister Eckhart: Teacher and Preacher*. Edited by Bernard McGinn. (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1986), 67.

Zizek's abyss, in short, leaves much to be desired, especially when we consider that for Hegel the abyss signals the devastating state of sheer disruption in which self-identity is "divided against itself, all identity, all existence, is disrupted."[237] Indeed, Zizek acknowledges that Hegel's night (abyss) involves a violent rupture, an experience of "tearing apart" and "dismemberment." In order to emphasize the disruptive effect of Hegel's night, Zizek postulates the mystic abyss as a contrasting notion. Here, again we can see how Zizek conflates the abyss with void by misidentifying the mystic abyss with void. He writes,

"It would therefore be too hasty to identify this 'night of the world' with the Void of the mystic experience: it designates, rather, its exact opposite, that is, the primordial Big Bang, the violent self-contrast by means of which the balance and inner peace of the Void of which mystics speak are perturbed, thrown out of joint."[238]

It would certainly be unnecessary to point out that "void" is a misnomer for the mystic abyss. It might be however useful to remember that the mystic abyss -- which, again, Zizek is misnaming here as the Void – does not, in most cases, point to a given state of balance and peace. Rather, the sense of unity and harmony is the result of a long and painful process of a desperate search for God in the midst of impossibility. It indicates the eroded ground of one's being and his/her world including the very original ground that is God. In other words, the ultimate state of unity with the divine that the mystics speak about entails a self-lacerating process of dispossession, displacement, and self-effacement.

Certainly, Hegel himself leaves the trope of the abyss underdeveloped. As Judith Butler comments, following Kierkegaard, the infinitely self-replenishing subject of Hegelian

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[237] Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 315.
[238] Zizek, *Ticklish*, 31.

dialectic does not seem wholly engulfed by the negative: "no matter how ma0ny times his world dissolves, he remains infinitely capable of reassembling another world."[239] Along the same line, I observe that the subject of Zizekian dialectic leaves us with the same ambiguity as to his almost magical power of resilience. Therefore, Butler's insightful question as to how often "suffering simply erode[s] whatever ground there is," instead of prompting "the reconstruction of a world on yet firmer ground," is crucially relevant for not only Hegel but Zizek as well. By equating the abyss with void, a rather simple nothingness, Zizek passes through the traumatic passage of the negative perhaps with too much haste, leaving just "little time for grief."[240]

However, despite the subtle, yet persisting sense of optimism harbored in Hegel's th0ought, one notices that the overwhelming shadow of agonizing despair and grief overspills into the account of the Hegelian subject, particularly in Hegel's discussion of the Unhappy Consciousness. The Unhappy Consciousness perhaps represents very well the abyss lurking in the traumatic passage that Zizek attempts to avoid inadvertently. It refers to the consciousness of the self in its inner disparity and self-contradiction. It points to what Zizek calls the "traumatic encounter" or coming to awareness of the irreconcilable split between the self and the other, infinite and finite or the universal and the particular. In a word, the Unhappy Consciousness represents the principle of self-contradiction that conditions the Hegelian subject. Even though it signals the beginning of the passage or transition from loss to self-discovery, from surrender and dissolution to the reconstruction of the subject, it is yet a state of a relentless oscillation between these two moments. It is at this moment that we come across the grieving tone of the philosopher who reflects on the true meaning and the

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[239] Butler, *Subjects of Desire*, 22.
[240] Ibid.

magnitude of "total loss," that is the loss of substance and of the self; the loss of the (old) world; the loss of the Absolute that is the death of God.

> Trust in the eternal laws of the gods have vanished, and the Oracles, which pronounced on particular questions, are dumb. The statues are now only stones from which the living soul has flown, just as the hymns are words from which belief has gone. The tables of the gods provide no spiritual food and drink, and in his games and festivals man no longer recovers the joyful consciousness of his unity with the divine.[241]

The abyss or passage from a naïve consciousness to a self-consciousness, from the *in-itself* to *for-itself* is a "way of despair," a path marked with surrender, loss, and death. What Hegel's Unhappy Consciousness signifies then is that consciousness or subject is structured by some sort of grief, a "grief which expresses itself in the hard saying that God is dead."[242] Such experience of pain and longing enables the inauguration or emergence of Spirit that is the "particular" materializing the Universal. The point that Zizek misses or underestimates is that despite Hegel's insistence on the indomitable subject and the restless spirit, he acknowledges the weight of grief and suffering shadowing the path of his dialectical journey. Nonetheless, to reiterate Butler's comment, Hegel's subject is never fully swept over by the negative, "never devastated beyond repair."[243] The narrative moves on quickly to Spirit and onto the next/last chapter: Absolute Knowing.

It is then, I suggest, an in-depth engagement with the neoplatonic abyss that will perhaps help us re-read the Zizekian-Hegelian abyss. As such, the rich poetic texture of the

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[241] Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 455.
[242] Ibid.
[243] Butler, *Subjects of Desire*, 22.

early mystical abyss was absorbed by the proto-dialectical system of Bohme and Schelling, and further "sublated" by the "rational" system of the Hegelian dialectic. Nevertheless, the oceanic depth of the mystical tradition and the poetic texture that are "remembered" (*erinnert*) and "preserved" (*erhalten*) in sublation (*Aufhebung*) persists in the abyssal crack between the poetic and dialectic, theology and politics, and between creaturely finitude and divine potency.

Subjects of Desire

Might Judith Butler's reading of Hegel help us read into the dense and rich texture of the abyss which is left unexplored in both Hegel and Zizek's works? The significance of Butler's work for this chapter is, first, despite her significant difference from Zizek, Butler shares an important common ground with Zizek which is that Butler, like Zizek, views the subject of the Hegelian dialectic as a failure, marked with an indelible sense of lack. Furthermore, not only are both thinkers heavily invested in psychoanalysis but a theory of ethics and, ultimately, political mobilization. Second, the somewhat vague image of the abyss, which nevertheless persists in the Hegelian dialectic and misleadingly (under)developed by Zizek gains a more concrete shape in Butler's work. To be clear, Butler does not invoke the term (abyss) in her writings. However, her feminist reading with a focus on desire, lack, body, and a particularly strong emphasis on "the other," inscribes a dialectical dynamic structured by a sense of an "impossible gap" that could not be better described than "abyssal." In a way, Butler's work might help us address the questions that Zizek's abyss left unanswered or unexplored.

While Butler also does not draw on neoplatonic sources, her intense engagement with the dense stitches comprising the path of dialectic, interwoven with the pain, despair, desire, and the overall drama of suffering provides a deep perspective on the unfathomable depth

shadowing the trajectory of the Hegelian dialectic. Third and last, Butler's reading of Hegel through desire, recognition, and otherness becomes, via Nietszche, Freud, and Foucault, the backbone of her critical engagement with melancholia and the "politics of mourning."

Butler views the subject as structurally conditioned by loss and melancholia. The fact that loss constitutes the ontological texture of the self means that the self carries an insurmountable otherness ingrained within the structure of itself. In this way, I argue that Butler re-inscribes an ineluctable gap, an abyss-like edifice of opacity in the fabric of both the self and its process of becoming subject. Butler averts, in a way, the tendency of reading the Hegelian dialectic as a narrative of progress and an ever-unfolding subjectivity by reading into the full depth of despair and suffering implicated in the abyss of loss and of "the other" that shadows the dialectic of becoming. Butler gives a specific shape to the somewhat abstract trope of the abyss by creating a direct link with both the socio-psychic and the historical shape of "the other" constituting the ground of our social existence.

The starting point from which Butler reads Hegel is "desire." She views desire as the basic and persisting principle sustaining the subject of *Phenomenology*. However, historically, desire has been foreclosed from the main trajectory of Western tradition as "the other" of philosophy. Butler reads desire in Hegel as the "fundamental striving" and "the incessant effort to overcome external difference" by becoming a self-conscious, whole subject.[244] Following Hyppolite, Butler associates desire with negativity. Their resemblance rests on the fact that they are both marked with a persisting "lack." Butler adds that desire is the mode of externalizing the inner contradictions/differences through which consciousness turns "its own negativity into an explicit object of reflection, something to be labored upon and worked through."[245] Therefore, she suggests a rhetorical reading of the *Phenomenology*.

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[244] Butler, *Subjects of Desire*, 6.
[245] Ibid., 9.

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She reads the insidious unfolding of the dialectic as the drama of desire, deception, and despair. If, however, the gradual manifestation of the Absolute reveals itself to be only partial and deceptive, and if the magically resilient subject of dialectic lacks the ground of a historical possibility, what is the significance and relevance of the dialectical circularity? Butler answers her own question by claiming that the deceptive cycle is a "progressive cycle" which reveals the "substance," namely the complex and broader reality of the Absolute as "an all-encompassing web of interrelations, [and] the dynamism of life itself."[246] More importantly, what makes this cycle progressive is not the promise of a more complete reality/knowledge, but the fact that the ingrained "insufficiency of any given relationship to the Absolute is the basis of its interdependence on other relationships, so that the history of deception is, finally, the unity of internal relations which is the Absolute."[247]

The Abyss of the Other

Butler presents the basic formula of the dialectic in a rather simple term by identifying consciousness with partiality (lack) and self-consciousness with mediation or self-reflection. In other words, if consciousness indicates invariably the ungraspable negativity, self-consciousness is the result of an attempt to think or mediate the inner difference constituting the object. It also means that the Hegelian subject can know itself only through *mediation*. Butler reasserts Kant's point through the Hegelian lens by pointing out that therefore, "object" cannot be separated from "object-as-explained-to-us." This way, mediation or explanation becomes part of the object's actuality.[248] I would argue that an irremediable rift emerges at this juncture – a rift that I would identify as abyss, if not abyssal – in which an unforeseeable and insurmountable otherness appears to be prefiguring the structure of being

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[246] Ibid., 23.
[247] Ibid.
[248] Ibid., 27.

in Butler's thought. For, it appears that the only way the Hegelian subject can come to self-consciousness is by the way of self-reflection, and self-consciousness entails consciousness' becoming "other" to itself. A more simple way of putting it would be to say that the self discovers the other or the world in itself and that consequently, it discovers itself in the other. The fact that there is always an inherent otherness imprinted in the texture of the self points to the paradoxical way that desire works, so that "in desiring something else, we lose ourselves, and in desiring ourselves, we lose the world."[249] Thus, desire is always in contradiction, frustrated and dissatisfied by the mutually exclusive paradox. Nonetheless, it is this very desire that drives the self to a relentless effort to overcome such disparity. If the neoplatonic abyss bears signs of dual – if not multiple – signification by pointing to the restless oscillation or passage between the finite and the infinite or between the impossible and the possible, the ineluctable trace of "the other" in Butler's thought evokes the abyss-like scheme of an inscrutable opacity framing her entire thought. Therefore, for Butler, otherness inaugurates the self-consciousness, occasioning "its articulation as desire," but at the same time, "it is also the source of suffering for this emergent subject."[250]

The place of the other in the journey of self-consciousness or rather, the dialectical relation between the self-consciousness and the other is explored in detail in the section of her early *Subjects of Desire* where Butler examines Hegel's discussion of "Lordship and Bondage." The rather vague notion of "the other" which, in its initial stage referred to the external world in general is now, she shows, concretized as another consciousness with reflexivity that is another self-consciousness. This is because, explains Butler, in order for the self-realization of the self-consciousness in/through "the other" to result in self-discovery (of the self-consciousness), this otherness needs to be "an object that mirrors the reflexive

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[249] Ibid., 34.
[250] Ibid.

structure of desire itself."[251] In other word, the reason why self-consciousness can be realized

in otherness and yet be absolute *for-itself* is because this otherness reveals itself to be

"another subject with a structurally identical set of aims."[252] Indeed, as various

commentators of Hegel that I have engaged already would concede, mutual recognition is the

key to understanding the master-slave dialectic, if not the entire system of the Hegelian

dialectic. For Butler too, mutual recognition is the underlying aim of the journeying self-

consciousness and therefore, it is the only way that the insatiable desire can achieve

satisfaction.[253]

      However, "discovering" the other should not be understood as an appearance of a

reality from nothing. Rather, it is the emergence of a reality that was previously obscure,

implicit, yet not without reality. In other words, otherness or the "other" self-consciousness

that the Hegelian subject confronts is not a sheer exteriority irrupting from the outside.

Rather, it is the discovery, the affirmation of the inner difference constituted by an

ungraspable alterity/exteriority. Therefore, self-realization through the other amounts to the

consciousness' journey of discovering the trace of alterity inherently structuring itself, and at

the same time, discovering itself in alterity. It means that the process of self-discovery or self-

realization inevitably entails dealing with this trace or rather, structure of opacity, the abyss

of otherness prefiguring the subject.

      It is, therefore, not a surprise that the journey is characterized by despair rather than

optimism, for the similarity of the other is not indicative of "the possibility of reflexivity,"

but *self-loss*. The subject who was seeking reflexivity in the other, finds itself fully absorbed

by this other: "it no longer seeks to consume the other… *but is instead consumed by the*

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[251] Ibid., 40.
[252] Ibid., 46.
[253] Ibid.

Other."[254] Traditionally, the leftist readers of the master-slave dialectic – whose readings of Hegel are primarily inspired by Marx's reading of the Hegelian dialectic – centered their reading on the paradox around labor and subjection. Represented by Kojeve, this view confers labor an educative role from which the revolutionary consciousness and struggle of the slave begins, while rendering the master the role of a tragic, fixated figure whose subjecthood fails to be recognized by the other. On the other hand, Butler's reading, centered on the paradoxes of subjection through body, desire, and freedom aims to demonstrate how the almost erotic exchanges of the implicit, suppressed, and contradictory desire (as well as their denials) reveal the (self)contradictory and vulnerable nature of self-consciousness. Nonetheless, the full extent of the implication for ethics and its significance for the consequential political vision is not developed in her early work on Hegel in *Subjects of Desire*. Yet, one central point seems to become already clear: otherness and its fundamental bond with the subject.

Loss: Mourning and Melancholia

Certainly, the subject as the bearer of vulnerability and precariousness is a recurring, or better, central theme haunting Butler's philosophical works. With her initial reading of Hegel, particularly Hegel's master-slave dialectic, she imprints an irremediable sense of breach into the basic contour of her philosophical thinking. Butler's ethical inquiry grows as this abyssal gap results directly in a rift, an ungraspable otherness and loss structuring the self. Such sense of inner split is well articulated in her exchange with Catherine Malabou.

> Of course, the problem is that the "other" whom I face is in some sense me, and in
> some sense not "me" – and this means that the redoubling of myself that happens in

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[254] Ibid., 47-48.

this initial encounter is one that establishes some "other" who is not me. So I

encounter myself at a spatial distance from myself, redoubled; I encounter, at the

same time, and in the same figure, the limit to what I can call "myself"… So what I

have to live with is not just the fact that I have become two, but that I can be found at

a distance from myself, and that what I find at that distance is also – and at once – not

myself.[255]

The complex question of otherness is further complexified as Butler turns to Freud

and Foucault in order to examine the process of subject formation. Central to Butler's claim

is the view that agency or subject is not only born but also sustained by "subjection" to the

web of power and discourse that precedes our will and temporality. Her view is profoundly

influenced by both Althusser and Foucault who understand subject as the product of the

power enacted in and through the socio-political institutions and dominant ideologies. From

this, Butler concludes that the subject comes into existence as the result of subordination to

power, an act of "passionate attachment" to subjection.

The fact that an inscrutable difference or alterity constitutes an essential part of the

self is indicative of the incomplete nature or vulnerability of the self, which could also be

translated as a certain sense of loss. However, on the other hand, another important element

that Butler incorporates into the texture of the self is loss caused by prohibition. She concur

with both Nietzsche and Freud's point that prohibition "turns 'the drive' back on itself,

fabricating an internal sphere, the condition for self-inspection and reflexivity."[256]

Eventually, prohibition leads to subjection, while, on the other hand, it implies that such

foreclosed desire constitutes "the subject through a certain kind of preemptive loss," as Freud

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[255] Catherine Malabou and Judith Butler, "You Be My Body for Me: Body, Shape, and Plasticity in Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit," in *A Companion to Hegel*, edited by Stephen Houlgate and Michael Baur (Malden: Blackwell, 2011), 625.
[256] Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 22.

has remarked.[257]   She draws on the example of gender/sexual identification by arguing that heterosexuality is produced by enforcement of gender norms, that is, by the prohibition of homosexuality. This means, in other words, that the prohibition and the resulting denial of desire or attachment to the same gender produces a melancholia that constitutes the (heterosexual) subject.

Melancholia, as defined by Freud, is the result of an unresolved grief. Melancholia becomes the structure of the self as the demand for loss (loss of certain sexual attachments) and the further demand to disavow those losses comprise the social network of power in which the subject is produced. Butler writes in the wake of the many unrecognized and unmourned losses/deaths produced by HIV in the LGBT community and consequently, we find in Butler a contextualized notion of loss, grief, and melancholia. Nevertheless, the main line of her thinking situates loss and grief in the broader context of psychoanalysis that is the psychic formation of the subject articulated in the philosophical and the psychoanalytic perspective.[258] Loss, in the broader scheme of her philosophical ideas, refers to the crack opened up between the subject and "the world of others," that is, the web of "social terms that are never fully one's own," yet from which s/he emerges.[259]

The abyss-like character of the subject's psychic prefiguration takes a concrete form when Butler points to the paradox of the subject's genesis. Accordingly, agency is not the ability that facilitates one's denial of the social condition constituting the self.   Rather, agency is initiated "by the fact that I am constituted by a social world I never chose."[260] One finds here the Hegelian "passage" or what Zizek calls the "parallax shift," which in a way

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[257] Ibid., 23.
[258] Dominick LaCapra makes the same criticism that he made to Zizek against Butler. LaCapra argues that Butler's notion of loss conflates the concrete historical loss with psychic formation. See, LaCapra, "Trauma, Absence, Loss," 714-718.
[259] Butler, *Psychic Life*, 28.
[260] Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 15.

also invokes the key characteristics of the neoplatonic abyss: the passage between the finite and the infinite or between the negative and the positive. Butler invokes this passage – a passage in which the negative signifies the condition of possibility – by arguing that the fact "that my agency is riven with paradox does not mean it is impossible. It means only that paradox is the condition of its possibility."[261] In this sense, the negative, namely, loss, grief, opacity, and vulnerability signal a positive condition, "the condition of our existence and survivability"[262] as they point to the precarious nature of our existence while, at the same time, revealing "the way that we are from the start already given over, beyond ourselves, implicated in lives that are not our own."[263] The fact that the other, or innumerable others entangled in one's social existence constitutes the fabric of one's being signifies that Butler's philosophical inquiry is, inevitably, some sort of an ethical inquiry. It is my observation that the other bears the traces of the abyss in Butler, in the form of an unknown site of alterity intrinsic to the structure of being. The ethical significance and the political possibility created by what I call "the abyss of the other" in Butler is further developed with her advancement of "the politics of mourning." Here, she connects the abiding theme of loss and melancholia with mourning through a revisited reading of Freud.

In Freud's classical formulation of 1917's essay *Mourning and Melancholia*, mourning is defined as a necessary and healthy process of withdrawing the libidinal projection directed to the lost one.[264] A successful mourning will lead the mourner into finding a new object in which the mourner can project her/his libido, newly again. Butler reflects on the act of mourning as the "opaque self" suffers from loss and the vulnerability of

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[261] Ibid.
[262] Ibid.
[263] Ibid., 22.
[264] Peter Sacks, *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats* (Baltimore: John's Hopkins University Press, 1987), 6.

being a part of socially constituted body, exposed to attachment and the inscrutable trace of the other.[265] Her conception of vulnerability points to a complex web of social relationships lying anterior and beyond the self, which in turn, reveals the incoherence of being a self: a self who is deprived of its agency, a sense of direction and the ability to foresee who s/he is becoming or even to tell, who s/he is.

However, at the same time, as Butler's early reading of Hegel indicates, loss does not only entail loss of the self, but of others. Vulnerability or precarity of the self signifies both the loss of the self's coherence *and* the loss of others who constitute the relationality that enables the self's existence, for there is no way that the "I" will fully know who they are nor is the "I" able to pay back the price that the others paid. Therefore, argues Butler, the self needs to be accountable to the invisible and already passed temporality that constitute who *we* are. Butler recalibrates loss into the ethical accountability to the concrete others of history from which we emerge. If we take them for granted, Butler warns us, "then our very living depends upon a denial of their historicity, a disavowal of the price we pay."[266] However, one may wonder, what is the possible political option that Butler suggests when loss and grief leads us nothing but to mourning? What forms of ethical thinking and accountability to others can we derive from mourning, which is an act of withdrawing one's libido from the lost object and moving on? To this question about the ethics of mourning, Freud himself provides a more refined answer in his later work.

In 1923's *The Ego and the Id*, Freud revisits his own early position and calls melancholia an inevitable component in the ego's self-formation.[267] Freud argues that the lost object is not completely detached from the mourner but introjected, and thus incorporated

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[265] Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, (London: Verso, 2004), 20.
[266] Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 121.
[267] Patricia Rae, ed., *Modernism and Mourning,* (Cranbury: Associated University Press, 2007), 16.

as a part of the ego. It is here where Butler's mourning begins, too. She rejects the classical Freudian formula by questioning its alleged goal: "I am not sure I know when mourning is successful, or when one has fully mourned another human being."[268] Rather, mourning reveals the unfathomable depth of our ethical ties to the unknown others. As we go through mourning, perhaps we come to terms with our finitude and vulnerability and the possible transformation that awaits us. Butler writes,

> I'm certain, though, that it does not mean that one has forgotten the person, or that something else comes along to take his or her place… I think instead that one mourns that one accepts the fact that the loss one undergoes will be one that changes you, changes you possibly forever, and that mourning has to do with agreeing to undergo a transformation the full result of which you cannot know in advance.[269]

Loss reveals our vulnerability, and vulnerability, in turn, signals transformation. Then mourning is perhaps the painful process of accepting the volatile nature of one's existence. Grief and mourning in this sense are not privatizing and depoliticizing. Rather, they are key to theorizing our dependence and ethical responsibility to one another. They signal the possibility of a "political community of complex order,"[270] in which we "make grief itself into a resource for politics." This is, however, not a passive inaction or resignation, but, as Butler reminds us, "a slow process by which we develop a point of identification with suffering itself."[271] Mourning, in this sense, acquires a new political meaning. It signifies a political refusal to conform both to the normative offering of solution as a letting go of a completed past and the hasty dissociation from suffering and collective wound/trauma. To

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[268] Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 18.
[269] Ibid.
[270] Ibid., 19.
[271] Butler, *Precarious Life*, 30.

reiterate, Butler's ethico-political concerns are rooted in the specific experience of the political context of the LGBT community where certain forms of bodies and desires are unrecognized and this repudiation reproduces an inability to mourn certain forms of losses. It follows that the normative account provided by contemporary democracy produces certain forms of lives that are "ungrievable."

These questions around the link between the unrecognized (or ungrievable) lives and mourning as the political refusal of unrecognizability leads Butler to identify the problem of (un)recognition in Hegel. She points out how the linkage between desire and recognition within the Hegelian tradition misses a crucial problem, namely, the failure of recognition or "unrecognition." The central place that recognition occupies in Hegelian thought and the following assertion that all desire is a desire for recognition, fails to grasp the reality of many lives that are not recognized by the prevailing social norm.[272] The problem of recognition in Hegel had been also taken up by Frantz Fanon several decades before Butler. Fanon reads Hegel's master-slave dialectic from the standpoint of the colonial context, from the site of political struggle in which the Hegelian logic of mutual recognition is expressed in a conflict between the white colonizer (master) and the black slave. The colonial context makes the Hegelian trope of mutual recognition a romanticized idealism as the master finds the slave laughable instead of seeking recognition from him.[273] Rather, the white master simply imposes labor on the black slave. All he expects from the slave is labor and servitude. Meanwhile, unlike the Hegelian slave who finds meaning and self-consciousness in work, Fanon's black slave finds no liberation in work.[274] The black slave does not succeed in

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[272] Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 2-3.
[273] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*. Translated by Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1968), 201.
[274] Charlles Villet, "Hegel and Fanon on the Question of Mutual Recognition: A Comparative Analysis," *The Journal of Pan African Studies*, Vol 4, No 7, November 2011:43.

objectifying the master, a vital step that leads to subjectivity in Hegelian dialectic, because he wants to be *like* the master. Instead of considering his own subjectivity first, the slave always has in mind the subjectivity of the master. In other words, if the Hegelian slave turns away from the master and turns towards the object, thus objectifying the master, the Fanonian slave turns towards the master by abandoning the object.[275]   Therefore, in all these critiques of Hegel, the existential impasse belongs to the black slave - rather than the master - who desires to be recognized as a subject and yet is never granted with such recognition by the master.

Both Fanon and Butler complicate the notion of the other by hinting at the failure of recognition. The otherness at stake therefore is not just about its ungraspability. Rather, there is another side to it: the unrecognized or repudiated other. Butler opens the door for thinking the abyss of the other not only in terms of its "inscrutability" but also in the context of suffering, as the "suffering other." While Butler's notion of the other is not directly derivative of the neoplatonic tradition, the abyssal character of the other in her thought bears a significant trace of resemblance to the abyss of neoplatonic mysticism, yet with a clearer ethical edge. Perhaps, the unexplored abyss of the Zizekian-Hegelianism might gaze back upon the hasty subject of the dialectical materialism through Butler. Her reading helps us see our ties to the countless others of history that perhaps the impatient subject of the Zizekian dialectic fails to acknowledge. She provides the philosophical ground for thinking ethics in such a way that we frame the present and the future in conjunction to the missed possibilities and lost temporalities, the ineluctable trace of the other that eludes the grasp of the subject-in-the-becoming. An element of the "unknown" structures Butler's politics of mourning or politics of recognition whose humble, yet persistent political gesture of recognition and mourning aims at an ethics of becoming in relation to the other: "To ask for recognition… is

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[275] Ibid.

to solicit a becoming, to instigate a transformation, to petition the future always in relation to the Other.[276]

Certainly, Zizek's critical assessment of the politics of recognition deserves our attention here. He quotes Butler's repudiation of the prevailing conception which views queer politics as a "merely cultural" movement that opposes the economic struggle. He then endorses Butler's claim by stating that queer politics of recognition is valuable as long as it posits a threat to capitalism. However, he warns us at the same time against the potential collusion between cultural politics and the present condition of global capitalism by saying that "in the post-political arena, capital is able to neutralize queer demands, to absorb them as a specific way of life."[277] Zizek's observation resonates with the critique of the traditional leftists who maintain a critical distance from the various forms of cultural politics proliferating under the current dominance of postmodern philosophies. These cultural politics find expression in the form of "critical theory" and they occupy a central place in analyzing the constructions of gender and race categories. The fact that many such ideas of subversive politics fail to posit a threat to the proliferation of global capitalism is a painful sign that these critical theories are perhaps somehow meeting the partial needs and demands of the all-pervading power of capital. It is in this context that we see the importance and the relevance of Zizek's work.

In a similar way, Zizek directs his critical assessment to Butler's reading of the master-slave dialectic by concluding that the political effect of Butler's reading results in a passive reconfiguration of the hegemonic order rather than a revolutionary displacement of the entire system. In her reading of Hegel's Unhappy Consciousness, Butler examines the doubling effect of the body produced in the process of suppression or/and renunciation of the

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[276] Butler, *Precarious Self*, 44.
[277] Zizek, *Ticklish Subject*, 225.

body. The Lord attempts to negate the precariousness of the body conditioning his existence by suppressing the body and transferring it to the bondsman. As Butler reads, the Lord's imperative to the bondsman is then, "you be my body for me but do not let me know that the body you are is my body."[278] The reason why this dynamic is interesting is because the bondsman somehow effectuates his agency by subjecting himself to this imperative and through mimicking the Lord's body. The main question that arises then is whether the bondsman's agency is fully constrained by the negation or the imperative from which it is generated or not. The dilemma, for Butler, lies in the fact that "the agency of the subject appears to be an effect of its subordination."[279]

The possibility that Butler suggests is that "the attachment required by a regulatory regime" might "prove to be both its constitutive failure and the potential site of resistance."[280] She finds the clue in the paradoxical reversal of power dynamic produced in the act of renunciation. The paradox lies in that the act of renouncing the body ends up in "doing" or "performing" of body since the act of denial that is the act of showing itself as a "nothing," ends up in a "performing" of nothing, a "doing" of nothing.[281] Therefore, in other words, what Butler reads in Hegel's master-slave dialectic is the fact that the very denial or suppression of body ends up inadvertently preserving the body. Similarly, Butler argues that just as for Freud, prohibition reproduces and intensifies the prohibited desire, every effort and act of renunciation preserves and reasserts the suppressed desire, body, or agency. Then, one can say that the power producing the subject does not remain unaltered after it is appropriated by the subject. Rather, "A significant and potentially enabling reversal occurs when power

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[278] Butler, *The Psychic Life*, 35.
[279] Ibid., 12.
[280] Ibid., 62.
[281] Ibid., 49.

shifts from its status as a condition of agency to the subject's own agency."[282] Butler derives, in this way, the potential for the undoing of subjection in the structure of the very same subjection to which the subject is "passionately attached."

In short, the political aim that Butler hints at is reconfiguring "the contours of the conditions of life" by the subject whose performative repetition and appropriation of the norm displaces, paradoxically, the power structure.[283] The major point of disagreement with Zizek is then that Butler's "performative reconfiguration" is "a subversive displacement which remains *within* the hegemonic field."[284]   For Zizek, the political efficiency of such political strategies needs to be put into question as they fail to cut through the "fantasmic core." Rather, they might sustain it just as Butler's "passionate attachment" runs the risk of being conflated to subjection to the symbolic (hegemonic) order.[285] In other words, the risk Zizek finds in Butler's performativity is that its "passive" political gesture might as well end up dissolving in the all-too-powerful structure of the hegemonic power rather than subverting it. Contrastingly, the Lacanian insight points to the "more radical act" of reconfiguring "the entire field which redefines the very conditions of socially sustained performativity."[286] Zizek concludes by calling Butler's move "too optimistic" on the one hand, as she overestimates the power of "the marginal gestures of performative displacement." On the other hand, Zizek remarks, Butler is too pessimistic in that she does not advance "the radical gesture of the thorough restructuring of the hegemonic symbolic order in its totality."[287]

Zizek's critique of performative reconfiguration points its finger to the very important question of political efficiency, and more importantly, of political effect of Butler's account

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[282] Ibid., 12.
[283] Ibid., 28-29.
[284] Ibid., 264.
[285] Ibid., 266-267.
[286] Ibid., 264.
[287] Ibid.

of subject and subjection. Perhaps, we could extend his warning to the broader field of cultural politics which tends to seek the possibility of subversion within the given system of signification without the "long and painful" process of self-discovery and transformation; [288] at the same time many such theories do not seem to show a willingness to tackle the all-pervading system of exploitation and violence, namely, capitalism. As such, the dialectical abyss that Zizek places at the center of his thought indicates the event of the violent "rupturing" which, as a result, tears the texture of being apart. Time and again, he emphasizes the painful and traumatic dimension of this process, which consists in traversing the abyss and re-discovering the (missing) subject. Nevertheless, as I have already argued, even as traumatic and dark his notion of negativity sounds, one finds in Zizek an optimistic vision of political subjectivity as he offers a naively resilient and successful account of negation, of a finally renewed and re-discovered subject.

To reiterate the question I posited earlier, how does the devastated subject manage to collect its shattered self and proceed forward after countless failures and traumatic encounters with the void? Perhaps we can follow Kierkegaard and Butler's warning and consider the wider ethico-political landscape of the global context as we reflect upon the notion of the abyss, suffering, and the other. The abyss then would no longer be constrained to its narrow philosophical meaning such as the "void" lying beneath the matter (Zizek). Rather, we could extend its meaning and read the abyss as the groundlessness of being signifying the symptom of the loss of historical and politico-economic ground within the context of oppression, particularly, the (neo)colonial oppression. The question that arises, then, would be, how does the colonial subject who lives in the deadlock between the memory of the unspeakable trauma and the still-absurd present emerge from its all-pervading, all-sinking groundlessness

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[288] In commenting on Hegel's mastetr-slave dialectic, Kojeve also points out that the process of education and transformation by labor in which the worker surmounts the terror of death and rises up is long and painful. See, Kojeve, 53.

to a new ground? As I highlighted above, for Hegel too, crossing or passing through the abyss

lying in the dialectical journey is a painful moment of utter devastation; not an abstract notion

of suffering, but, as Hyppolite remarks, "it entails an actual despair that entails existence."[289]

The death of the old consciousness and the birth of a new subject or the Hegelian passage as I

would call it takes place at this crossroad in which the demarcation between finitude of the

self and the divine spirit is displaced: by reading Hegel with Butler and, the postcolonial

thinkers (as I will do it in the next chapter) we might able to take a deeper gaze at the

underdeveloped abyss of Hegel. In it, this groundlessness of being, we find not only the death

of an ontotheological God, but also the gaping wounds of the unmourned histories of

unrecognized lives and their sufferings.

From this perspective, I argue, contra Zizek, that Butler's performative

reconfiguration is neither optimistic nor pessimistic. Rather, Butler's reading of Hegel (along

with Freud and Foucault) hints at the possibility of theorizing suffering that is politicizing

both the crude reality and the repressed memory of suffering from the site of extreme

violence and oppression, from the site of socio-historical devastation and physical violence.

Certainly, this might not be a "radical act" of subversion as Zizek calls it. As such "radical

act" requires a socio-political ground for self-definition that many oppressed subjects of the

global world are dispossessed of. It is, however, radical in the sense that Butler's subject

politicizes and transforms pain by way of attaching to it "rather than not attach at all," in the

contexts where wretchedness and pain "are [the only] sites offered by the regulatory regimes

for attachment."[290] Butler clarifies this political gesture further by arguing that negation

contradicts "the rhetoric of withdrawal it purports to signify," as the gesture of negation

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[289] Hyppolite, *Genesis and Structure*, 13.
[290] Butler, *The Psychic Life*, 61.

signals a gesture of affirmation (of negation).[291] Therefore, she concludes, rejection/negation is "a site of presence and excitation and, hence, better than no object at all."[292] Perhaps, Butler's reading can be seen as "realistic" as her perspective is anchored in the context of the communities that are constantly exposed to vulnerability and physico-material violence.

As I have sketched out my account thus far, we can find in Hegel an intrinsic trace of the abyss structuring his entire philosophical system. While it does not make its presence explicit, the abyss nevertheless shadows the journey of becoming of the Hegelian subject. In both Hegel and his contemporary readers (Zizek and Butler), the abyss signals an ineluctable otherness constituting the (self-splitting) reality of the subject. The inherent inscrutability or otherness structuring the subject, however, inevitably places questions of ethics at the center of being. In Zizek, we find this expressed in the form of an ethics of the revolutionary political subject while for Butler the other is an invariably present, yet ungraspable source of ethical reflection and responsibility.

In either case, the subject is thrust into the movement of oscillation and the force behind the movement is what Hegel calls negation or the negative. Negation is the movement of traversing, crossing or passing through the abyss. Negation means first negating the self. Then it also signifies negating "negation," which points to the act of renunciation, acceptance of loss that would, paradoxically, defy loss and defeat as the perpetual condition of existence. My interest underlying the current project is this resilient act of passage through which the subject comes to embrace finitude/failure and eventually transform it into the ground of new possibility.

By reading Hegel, Zizek, and Butler, I have located the indelible and abyssal "trace of the other" at the threshold of the passage lying in the subject's journey of becoming. The

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[291] Ibid.
[292] Ibid.

question that arises, then, regards the possibility of such passage: the shift, act of traversal, transformation, and eventually, reconstruction. The answer to this question will result in varying modalities for thinking ethics and the subsequent political vision regarding the place of self, subject, the other, and so on. While the thinkers I have examined above may all maintain a positive perspective on such possibility, their answers as to *how* show significant differences. The answer to these questions will vary even more significantly and will present more complications if we extend this ethico-philosophical question to the broader context of the global south, particularly those sites shaped by the contestations of (neo)colonial violence and oppression. I turn to these postcolonial thinkers who strive to find a language for theorizing or politicizing the abyss, a notion which finds its resonances in their concrete experience of violence and suffering. The missing place of grief in Zizek's materialist dialectic and the lack of a viable constructive proposal for the reconstruction of the political subject in Butler are, perhaps, partly symptomatic of the fact that the abyss remains underdeveloped in Hegel's dialectic. Then, the questions about the place of the abyss and its ethico-political significance might, perhaps, meet an alternative vision in the writings of these postcolonial thinkers.

Chapter 4 – The Groundlessness of Being:
Fragmentation, Duration, and Re-collection

Nevertheless with all my strength
I refuse to accept that amputation.
I feel in myself a soul as immense as the world,
truly a soul as deep as the deepest of rivers,
my chest has the power to expand without limit.
I am a master and I am advised to adopt
the humility of the cripple.
Yesterday, awakening to the world,
I saw the sky turn upon itself utterly and wholly.
I wanted to rise, but the disemboweled silence
fell back upon me, its wings paralyzed.
Without responsibility, straddling nothingness and infinity,
I began to weep.

Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*

For history is not only absence for us. It is vertigo.
This time that was never ours, we must now possess.

Edouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourses*

The registers of the abyss shadowing the dialectical unfolding of this dissertation draw different routes of oscillation between multiple points that appear contradictory. One encounters, in this relentless movement of oscillation, a countless number of thresholds that rupture one's horizon and open up newly emerging prospects. Thresholds trouble the boundary between the end and beginning, between limits and possibilities, thus disrupting the linear trajectory that conditions the movements of crossing, of passage. As such, threshold testifies against any hopeful expectation of the irruption of a radically new reality from nothing. Rather, threshold designates the radical indeterminacy lurking in the space of the "between." Seen from the threshold, perhaps newness does not enter the world in the form of

a violent, radical rupture from the exterior. Rather, newness arises from the middle, the middle of the painful horizon of historical reality. The registers of possibility emerge directly from the immanent surface of history, the very site of agony and painful weight of our existence.

Many such encounters spring from unexpected moments and unlikely sites, and may plunge us into wonder. But the diverse array of thinkers I have examined thus far take us to the conclusion that the possibility of transformation and passage is the result not of awe—but of the arduous work of self-reflection and engagement with the bottomless depth of being. A more specific contour of abyss emerges, then, as the result or our reflection in the previous chapters to materialize these movements of self-reflection, becoming, and re-creation of the self. The abyss, in the writings of mystical thinkers, indicates the infinite plenitude and transcendence of God, which, paradoxically, intersects with the ontological finitude of human beings. The human soul agonizes over the limits of its being as its language fails to contain the full experience of the absolute Other. However, the very depth of unknowability persisting in both the nature and the relation between God and the human soul reveals itself to be the very threshold of yet another horizon in which the conception of both God and the self is wholly reconfigured. Most importantly, this moment of revelation or discovery does not indicate a free reward of time. Rather, the abyss becomes the grounding foundation only as the result of a long and persistent process of self-dispossession, that is, the submission to the "unknown."

In a similar way, the Hegelian dialectic presents a struggling subject whose trajectory of becoming is conditioned by an unrelenting movement of oscillation between the opposites. The abyss takes a more concrete form in Hegel as the intractable gap is opened up by not only a mystical/metaphysical category, but "the other" who exists in the form of the concrete flesh and consciousness. The path, therefore, towards the "crossing" or passage of the abyssal

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gap is mediated by the other who, in return, engraves a sense of ethical responsibility upon

the structure of being. With the Hegelian dialectic, then, we realize that while, on the one

hand, the abyss elicits the urgency of a political subjectivity in the dialectical engagement for

the journey of becoming and transformation, there lies, on the other hand, a sense of ethics

and responsibility which evokes the trace of the other lying at the threshold of the passage in

the subject's journey.

Meanwhile, that these tropes of abyss unfold around metaphysical categories is

perhaps indicative of the regrettable fact that the meaning of the theological/philosophical

abyss is shaped by its somewhat narrowly defined understanding. As I have mentioned

already in the first chapter, the mystical overtone that shapes the tropes of abyss has been,

over the course of tradition, generating an understanding of spirituality that is distant from the

political reality of human lives. This tendency resulted in the unfortunate gap between the

spiritual and the political in which the mystical abyss is exclusively associated with a self-

absorbed sense of spirituality, a form of spirituality conditioned by the individualized

obsession with the pursuit of the ground shared by God and the self. As a consequence, the

abyss as "ontological finitude" becomes *existential*, but disconnected from the *reality of*

existence.

Therefore, in this chapter, I attempt to extend the notion of the abyss by drawing on a

wider variety of literatures that endeavor to work through the devastating condition of human

reality conditioned by political and historical experience. Extending the meaning of abyss and

giving it a concrete shape might perhaps entail thinking "the other" not only in speculative

terms as but also as the "suffering other." In what ways does the "suffering other" alter the

texture of the mystical and philosophical abyss that I am exploring here? While previous

discussions of the abyss were centered around the experience of negativity and finitude, what

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is largely missing in those discussions, however, is the living socio-political fiber of actual human reality.

It is then, by turning to the work of postcolonial thinkers that I suggest a wider understanding of abyss. In particular, I examine the work of the Caribbean thinkers whose writings articulate the agonizing experience of their political/historical reality with a language that resembles that of mysticism. As the conversation around the affinity between the spiritual and the political unfolds, one notices a strange, yet surprising parallel between these two seemingly distant discourses. My intention before this unexpected affinity, is to explore the intersection between the existential chasm of the oppressed subjects whose whole existence is conditioned by the reality of suffering, on the one hand, and the mystical experience of groundlessness in the pursuit of God on the other. Within the matrix of the reconceptualized abyss, we might find, perhaps, the theological language alluding to the political gesture while the political vision emerges alongside the theological imagination.

The notion of the "suffering other" that I suggest along with the Caribbean thinkers, particularly, with Edouard Glissant, does not only indicate a notion reducible to the exclusive category of "the other." Rather, it designates the subject position of the self as well. In other words, what helps us to set the parameters of ethical responsibility and political imagination in this chapter is not only the notion of the suffering other, but also of the "suffering self." We witness in the writings of the Caribbean thinkers an extended notion of identity based on a relational ontology through which the story of the shattered other shapes the very contour of the collective history from which the traumatized self emerges. It is, then, in this very middle, the groundless site lying between the traumatizing past and the dumbfounded present, between fragmentation and reconstruction, and between suffering and redemption, that we begin to reflect upon the possibility of *passage*, that is, *beginning* after trauma.

Decolonizing the Abyss: A View from the Antilles

While the swirling convergence of multiple creative resonances within the current constructive dialogue has been leading us through numerous emerging thresholds across the different abysses, there is yet another crucial threshold to be explored, this one all too literal: that is, the shorelines marking the islands of the Antilles. The Caribbean islands, marked by their distinctive version of the history of the violence of mass-annihilation, transportation, slavery, and colonialism, reflect in many ways the global reality of the peripheral region determined by the geopolitical subjugation to the proliferating forces of neocolonialism. It is then not surprising that questions of resistance, national identity, and self-determination occupy a central place in the works of many Caribbean thinkers. For, the impasse consists not only of the socio-economic alienation shaping the local societies, but also of the impaired collective historical identity breached by the terrifying history of colonial violence. It is from this socio-historical context that Antonio Benitez-Rojo speaks of the "meta-archipelago," the trans-historical experience uniting the "repeating island" of the Caribbean archipelago. He writes, "beneath the turbulence of *árbol*, *arbre*, tree, etc., there is an island that repeats itself until transforming into a meta-archipelago and reaching the most widely separated transhistorical frontiers of the globe."[293]

Thus, the question that arises when reflecting from the site manifested by the contesting forces of (neo)colonial violence regards the possibility of passage, that is, the positive register of reconstructing the fragmented self and transforming the devastated ground into the horizon of new possibility. Let me answer this question provisionally in advance: the different interlocutors that I am engaging in this dissertation --including the Caribbean thinkers– do seem to subscribe to such possibility. However, their answers as to *how* to

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[293] Antonio Benitez-Rojo, *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 24.

approach such possibility vary significantly. The distance among these answers grow even more significantly when we take into account the social and the geopolitical difference marking the gap between these different contexts. This gap or difference cannot be articulated apart from the black hole of the long history of colonialism and the ongoing reproduction of its violent structure in the global world today. In other words, the abyssal gap between the different answers to the questions regarding the possibility of the passage from trauma to future, from negativity to positivity/possibility, is not one that just amounts to the methodological difference. Rather, this gap emerges out of colonial difference.

As I explained in chapter 1, colonial difference is derivative from the ongoing effects of coloniality; it points to the irreducible difference of the colonial configuration marked by the spatial articulation of power. In other words, colonial difference signifies the gap opened up by the colonization of the Americas, which, with its racist control of labor and resources, served as a steppingstone for Europe to consolidate its hegemony at the global level, becoming the axis, as Quijano remarked, "around which all forms of labor were articulated to satisfy the ends of the world market, configuring a new pattern of global control of labor, its resources, and products."[294]

It is on the basis of this control over the structure of production and labor that the universalization of Europe at both epistemic and cultural level took place. Under the widely established system of exploitation in America, local system of meaning making and knowledge production were expropriated, repressed, and excluded. It is in this sense, that John Drabinski claims, "the history of the Caribbean is immanent to the meaning of Europe."[295] In the same vein, Benitez-Rojo remarks, "the Atlantic is today the Atlantic (the navel of capitalism) because Europe, in its mercantilist laboratory, conceived the project of

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[294] Quijano, *Coloniality of Power*, 199.
[295] John Drabinski, *Levinas and the Postcolonial: Race, Nation, Other* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 20130), 161.

inseminating the Caribbean womb with the blood of Africa; the Atlantic is today the Atlantic (NATO, World Bank, New York Stock Exchange, European Economic Community, etc.) because it was the painfully delivered child of the Caribbean…."[296] This means that thinking Europe or thinking ethics based exclusively on the North Atlantic experience without considering the reality of its inseparable other, the global south, is not feasible in the age of globalization. This is not only because the global south is an indispensable part of the historical constitution of the European identity as I mentioned, but also because the current mode of global production and consumption, namely, capitalist globalization, makes the bind between the north Atlantic region and the global south tighter than what it has ever been before. I contend that the new global reality, along with the dark, haunting history of its Atlantic commercial circuit, calls for an ethical response that is accountable to the reality of the (formerly) colonized.

Decolonizing the abyss, or thinking the abyss in the politicized space shaped by the neocolonial globalization will eventually provide us with a wider or, better, deeper definition of abyss, reconceptualized upon the base of contextualized specificity. The multifaceted layers of complexity weaving the fabric of the Caribbean historical reality as we encounter it in the works of thinkers such as Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, and Edouard Glissant offer a powerful account of the abyss based on the specific reality of people, an account which extends across culture, economy, and politics. It is my observation that the notion of the abyss encountered in the writings of the post/decolonial Caribbean thinkers suggests an innovative framework for cultivating or re-creating a new theo-political imagination: one that is capable of discovering the reference of future and possibility in the harsh reality of suffering without failing to acknowledge the full depth and magnitude of suffering caused by the colonial violence; one that disentangles God from the white European sovereign, and

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[296] Benitez-Rojo, *Repeating Island*, 5.

therefore transforms the lives in the state of exception into the agents of a new community and new order.

Let me acknowledge, however, that the trope of abyss makes more frequent appearances in the writings of Glissant than Cesaire and Fanon. Nevertheless, central to both of the latter authors is the liminal, "in between" space of (post)colonial collective consciousness that is caught in the deadlock of history. At times described as an impasse, at other times as void, the historico-political context from Cesaire and Fanon think reflects the abyss very suitably. Indeed, mediating this seemingly irremediable gap *is* one of the main concerns of in Caribbean literature. As Benitez-Rojo affirms, one finds in the Caribbean literature "the desire to sublimate social violence" and to "communicate their own turbulence, their own clash, their own void, the swirling black hole of social violence produced by the *encomienda* and the plantation, that is, their otherness, their peripheral asymmetry with regard to the West."[297] In other words, the impasse of colonial difference from which the Caribbean collective consciousness arises may itself rightly be named the abyss, the groundlessness of being upon which the colonized subject constructs the meaning and the possibility of future.

It is from this perspective that, already as early as in the late 1930's, historical memory becomes recognized as a crucial political tool propelling the emerging *négritude* movement.[298] Aimé Césaire, one of the founders of the *négritude* movement, is perhaps one of the key thinkers whose work played a foundational role in mobilizing a tradition of existentialist decolonial thought tinted with the Marxist class analysis. His *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (Notebook of a Return to the Native Land), a celebrated poem influencing the subsequent generation of Caribbean thinkers, captures the excruciating dilemma of the

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[297] Benitez-Rojo. *Repeating Island*, 17, 27.
[298] Gary Wilder, "Race, Reason, Impasse: Césaire, Fanon, and the Legacy of Emancipation," *Radical History Review*, Issue 90, Fall 2004:33.

colonial subject whose ontological ground is sunk in the abyssal crack lying between the ruins of colonial oppression and the urgency of a collective self-determination.

We find already in the opening images of the French Caribbean islands in the poem an emerging contour of abyss, a colonial abyss, which, I suggest we use as a central framework and figure to read the ontological quandary of the colonial subject: "At the end of daybreak burgeoning with fail covers, the hungry Antilles… the Antilles dynamited by alcohol, stranded in the mud of this bay, in the dust of this town sinisterly stranded."[299] As such, the abyss in this chapter is read not only as a metaphysical and existential notion, but an all-pervading ontological groundlessness that involves the absence/loss of material and political ground. In other words, if the political rendering of abyss in the previous chapter defined abyss as a metaphysical void and loss conditioning the self, this chapter reads the abyss, with the help of Caribbean decolonial imagination, as a symptom of the loss of historical and politico-economic ground within the (colonial) context of oppression.

The figure of the abyss that emerges in Césaire's poem points to a clear indication of the difference or gap that exists between the colonizer's culture and the colonized society. Having himself received his education in Europe and adopted the cultural value of the colonizer, Césaire's return to his native island of Martinique is marked by his encounter with the dire and impoverished landscape that cries out of its overwhelming sense of misery and death: "in this inert town, this desolate throng under the sun, not connected with anything that is expressed, asserted, released in broad earth daylight, its own."[300] One finds that what lies at the bottom of Césaire's dramatic narration is the traumatic memory of colonialism marked by slavery. Like many of his contemporary and subsequent generation of Caribbean writers, one of the main images that serves as the source of inspiration for Césaire's decolonial vision

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[299] Aime Cesaire, *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*, translated by Clayton Eshlemann (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2001), 1.
[300] Ibid,. 3.

is the haunting collective memory of the slave ship and the middle passage: "we, the vomit of slave ships, we the venery of Calabars… I hear coming up from the hold the enchained curses, the gasps of the dying, the noise of someone thrown into the sea… the baying of a woman in labor… the scrape of fingernails seeking throats… the flouts of the whip… the seething of the vermin amid the weariness…."[301]   Césaire's *Cahier* attempts to reconstruct a universal black identity by claiming affinity to the broader pan-African experience of displacement and colonial racism across the Atlantic.

Contrary to the assessment of some critical readers, the *Cahier* is not a simple and blind celebration of black nativism. Rather, as Nigel Gibson suggests, the *Cahier* is a complex work that engages multiple layered issues born with colonialism.[302] Similarly, Gary Wilder also notes that *Cahier* reads *négritude* "as a problematic series of attempts to engage" the impasse of the colonized subject.[303] From this perspective, Césaire's epic poem maintains a certain kind of tension between pessimism and optimism, between despair and hope, which creates the effect of dramatizing the magnitude of agony and anxiety that the colonial subject suffers. For the poet, the only way out, the only possible breakthrough seems to lie in poetry. His view of poetry, however, while infused with optimism, is enclosed within limitations. Césaire suggests madness over reason, as "an alternative modality of knowing," thus displacing "the very opposition between rationality and irrationality, knowledge and myth, on which colonial order was grounded."[304]

However, the dialectical tension grows as Césaire recognizes the irremediable abyss lying around the absurdity of claiming the nativist tradition that has been already defiled and devalued by colonial discourse. In other words, as Gary Wilder puts it, "affirmations of

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[301]   Ibid., 28.
[302]   Nigel Gibson, *Fanon: The Postcolonial Imagination* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003), Chapter 3.
[303]   Wilder, *Race*, 39.
[304]   Ibid., 40.

authentic Africanity risk confronting European stereotypes of natives."[305] The narrator is

therefore drawn into the deep existential impasse as he finds himself unable to confront the

colonial racism. His affirmations of African nativism are subsequently followed by his

pessimism and doubt, a move that eventually leads to a hopeless acceptance: "So be it. So be

it. I am of no nationality recognized by the chancelleries."[306] The pessimistic resignation

moves, however, from the tone of a resentful acceptance of defeat to a gesture of embrace,

that is, embracing the fissures of imperfection and fragmentation as the painful, yet

unavoidable/ineluctable texture of the colonial reality:

> Oh death your mush marsh! / I accept! / the world map made for my own use, not
>
> tinted with the arbitrary colors of scholars, but with the geometry of my spilled blood,
>
> I accept / and the determination of my biology… / and negritude, no longer a cephalic
>
> index, or plasma, or soma, but measured by the compass of suffering. / I accept, I
>
> accept it all.[307]

We see in this self-lacerating act of surrender and acceptance the movement of

dialectical negation or passage, which, similar to other interlocutors that I have engaged in

the previous chapters, results in the genesis of a new, transformed consciousness. As Césaire

writes, "suddenly now strength and life assail me like a bull and the water of life overwhelms

the papilla of the more…."[308] The change of tone and the transition of perspective that

happens here is, perhaps, much too radical, and the poet concludes his long reflection with an

affirmation of nativism. Suddenly speech acquires a mystified power and the speaker stands,

as Wilder observes, with an "unified consciousness and unmediated connection with the

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[305] Ibid., 41.
[306] Cesaire, *Notebook*, 29.
[307] Ibid., 42-43.
[308] Ibid., 43-44.

cosmos."[309] Césaire claims, "And the nigger scum is on its feet… / standing under the sun / standing in the blood / standing and free."[310]

The long drama of dialectical oscillation that unfolds in Césaire's poem points to the emergence of the new threshold which forms along the fuzzy lines drawing the shorelines of the repeating islands. The unreckonable wound of the colonial abyss then cracks open on the blurry horizon of the Caribbean shorelines where the sea is not just an indication of the limit of land and history. Rather, the decolonial imaginary of Caribbean philosophy conceives the sea as the continuation of land and its history. This is why Derek Walcott, in his famous poem claims, "the sea *is* history."[311]

The colonial abyss, therefore, when looked at from the Caribbean standpoint, bears a profound affinity with the figure of the shoreline. For it is the sea, the middle passage of the Atlantic ocean where the undying memory and the horrifying history of deaths and drowned names are engraved. The haunting memory of terrifying history seems indefinitely unfathomable and unending like the bottomless depth of the ocean, yet new history is to be born at the very point where its thin line of demarcation meets the land, the rugged soil of history, just as the end of the ocean marks the beginning of land. Likewise, neither the geography nor the identity of the Caribbean people can be determined by the cartographic confines that separate the islands from the sea, for, as Walcott writes, "there is a territory wider than this – wider than the limits made by the map of an island – which is the illimitable sea and what it remembers."[312]

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[309] "There still remains one sea to cross… that I may invent my lungs… the master of laughter?/ The master of ominous silence?/ The master of hope and despair?/ The master of laziness? Master of the dance?/ It is I!" Cesaire, *Notebook*, 83; Wilder, *Race*, 44.
[310] Cesaire, *Notebook*, 47-48.
[311] Walcott, "The Sea is History," in *The Poetry of Derek Walcott 1948-2013* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2014), 253-256.
[312] Walcott, *The Antilles*.

In this way, the surface of the colonial abyss that emerges along with the Caribbean decolonial thought exposes its complex layers of historicity tied into the most central questions regarding the possibility of dialectical passage, that is, the possibility of founding the ground upon the groundless horizon of the (post)colonial world. Moreover, their works show that this layered web is also entangled with the questions of geography (landscape), political economy, language, and memory.

It is in the work of another Martinican poet, novelist, and philosopher, Edouard Glissant that we find all of the above mentioned questions forming together a powerful and persisting body of thinking that projects a philosophical and literary imagination towards a decolonizing modality of being-in-the-world. However, before moving into an in-depth dialogue with the work of Glissant, it would be helpful to engage another figure who is Glissant's contemporary and whose work is crucial in contemporary discussions of (post)colonialism, critical race theory, and decolonial politics.

Living in the Zone of non-being: Fanon and the Coloniality of Being

Frantz Fanon's work in postcolonial criticism today is, without a doubt, indispensable. The importance of engaging Fanon for the current project is twofold. On the one hand, the existential reflection on the torment of living in the colonial impasse/abyss conceived in the work of Césaire is developed into a full-fledged account of a counter-colonial discourse in Fanon whose work delves with intensity into the depth of the psychic dimension of the racialized/colonized subject. Fanon's use of both psychoanalytic and phenomenological approaches enables him to scrutinize the embodied experience of living in a colonial order with a particular body. This allows him to further build a compelling account of how the colonial subject's consciousness is formulated through its interaction with the lived experience of the (black) body.

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On the other hand, Fanon's personal engagement in the Algerian independence movement and his advancement of decolonial political strategy provides a vitally important texture for the articulation of the counter-colonial mode of thinking and imagining that I am seeking in this chapter. These aspects, however, point to the foremost important reason why Fanon matters for the current conversation; that is, he elaborates one of the most candid and downright painful reflections on the lived experience of the "existence" of the colonized and racialized body. By drawing on the multiple different aspects of the colonial experience including not only the psychic and socio-cultural dimension but also the economic, and particularly, the political struggle of the colonial subject, Fanon dramatizes successfully the death-like experience of the being inhabiting the colonial abyss.

In many ways, Fanon's work can be viewed as a continuation of Césaire's project. This is because the beginning point of Fanon's intellectual trajectory is also *négritude*. To be clear, it is not the case that Fanon's critical inquiry begins with an uncritical celebration of *négritude*. Rather, it is Fanon's departure from *négritude* that marks the genesis of distinctively Fanonian thought. While his initial ideas were originally molded by *négritude*, Fanon keeps a critical distance from the central claims of *négritude* by unfolding a counter-colonial discourse that overcomes the limitations of *négritude*'s black essentialism and cultural nationalism. The problem that Fanon identifies in *négritude* is its "abstract and backward-looking" orientation and its almost exclusive focus on culture "at the expense of urgent social issues and radical political movement."[313]

Certainly, the problem of essentialism and the uncritical celebration of a transcendental nativism in the *négritude* movement has been pointed out by many scholars of postcolonial studies. Edward Said, for instance, speaking of another founding figure of *négritude* movement, Leopold Senghor, remarks that, "To leave the historical world for the

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[313] Wilder, *Race*, 36.

metaphysics of essences like negritude… is to abandon history for essentializations that have the power to turn human beings against each other."[314] Another big problem of *négritude* from the perspective of contemporary postcolonial theory is, as Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin put it jointly, "its structure is derivative and replicatory, asserting not its difference, as it would claim, but rather its dependence on the categories… of the colonising culture."[315] Valid as these criticisms remain, it is important to acknowledge the internal differences marking the heterogeneous movement labeled as *négritude*. Césaire's project certainly begs a distinction from Senghor's Black essentialism, who proposes the idea of "black soul." Fanon warns against such gesture of essentialism by saying, "the black soul is a white man's artifact."[316] The negro construed by such form of *négritude*, Fanon adds, is the one who "buries himself in the vast black abyss… this attitude, renounces the present and future in the name of a mystical past.[317]

While Fanon is widely known to challenge *négritude*, his argument is much too complex to be oversimplified merely as "critical." This is because, as Robert Bernasconi reminds us, while Fanon was critical of thinkers who focused on Black history/essentialism such as Cheikh Anta Diop and Leopold Senghor, he showed an ambivalent relation toward Césaire "on the grounds that he was an inspiration for a possible future, even if at times he remained locked in the past."[318] Indeed, Fanon credits Césaire for raising the Black consciousness now widespread among the blacks in the Antilles in a time in which "no Antillean found it possible to think of himself as a Negro."[319] The importance of Césairean

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[314] Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage, 1993), 228-229.
[315] Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (London: Routledge, 2004), 124.
[316] Fanon, *Black Skin*, 16.
[317] Ibid.
[318] Robert Bernasconi, "The Assumption of Negritude: Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, and the Vicious Circle of Racial Politics," *Parallax*, 2002, vol. 8, no. 2, 79.
[319] Fanon, *Black Skin*, 153.

thought to Fanon is further affirmed as Fanon challenges Alioune Diop, another key figure in *négritude* movement, whose main thesis is the restoration of black genius over everything else. Dismissing Diop's proposal by saying "a true culture cannot come to life under present conditions," and that the talk of the black genius can occur only "when the [black] man has regained his rightful place," Fanon turns to Césaire: "Once again I come back to Césaire; I wish that many black intellectuals would turn to him for their inspiration."[320] To synthesize, then, Fanon's major disagreement with *négritude* lies around temporality. The authors of *négritude* tend to encapsulate the black man in the past while Fanon holds on to the faint hope of a forward-looking future, a future to be unfolded dialectically through the resilient self who will make itself known, recognized.[321] Even when Césaire seems to make nostalgic gestures at times, he still remains as a central inspiration for Fanon. We see, somewhere in between these two Martinican writers of the twentieth century, a glimpse of the figure of abyss emerge upon the historical and ontological horizon of coloniality.

As such, the colonial abyss that Fanon gazes upon seems even more despairing than Césaire's abyss. For the whole notion of being and ontology fails in the colonial context where life, for the native and colonized other, "is already a living death."[322] What lies at the base of Fanon's critical reflections is perhaps the simple fact of living with a black body in a white world or in a world infused with the colonial ideology. The basic, fundamental desire, then, is that of recognition, a recognition of his humanity: "All I wanted was to be a man among other men."[323] This is because in the colonial reality, "the black man is not a man."[324] The existential impasse of the black person lies, for Fanon, in the very fact that his/her

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[320] Ibid., 187.
[321] "Since the other hesitates to recognize me, there remains only one solution: to make myself known." Fanon, *Black Skin*, 115.
[322] Nigel Gibson, *Fanon*, 14.
[323] Fanon, *Black Skin*, 112.
[324] Ibid.,, 8.

existence unfolds upon the "zone of nonbeing," a state of perpetual curse.[325] It points to the

fractured subject who cries for recognition, yet denied, fixed under the white gaze, and

"hated, despised, detested, not only by the neighbor across the street… but by an entire

race."[326]

The black person's self is structured by a double, or better, triple consciousness, as

self-consciousness is split into the consciousness or image of the self, mirrored through the

eyes of the other. The encounter with the colonial gaze is also the moment in which

inferiority is inscribed in the psyche and the body, the realization of him/herself as an object,

or rather, an *abject*. This encounter is famously captured in Fanon's own traumatic

experience of facing the racializing gaze on a train in France: "Look, a Negro!... Mama, see

the Negro I'm Frightened!"[327] Fanon describes this moment of encounter as an experience

where his "corporeal schema crumbled," for it is the racial, racializing schema that defines

and conditions his being and existence.

The unfathomable abyss molded by Fanon's work is brilliantly caught and explored in

Nelson Maldonado-Torres' constructive formulation of the notion of the "coloniality of

Being." In his comparative reading of both European (continental) and Latin American

decolonial thought, he discusses the meaning of death in Heidegger, for whom the encounter

with one's inescapable death is the only way to define the way to authenticity. Maldonado-

Torres remarks how the encounter with death is not an extraordinary affair, but a constitutive

feature of the reality of colonized subjects.[328] In the colonial context, adds Maldonado-

Torres, death is not so much an individual factor as it is the case with Heidegger's *Dasein*.

Rather, it lies on the horizon of collective experience of fear and trauma marked with the

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[325] Ibid.
[326] Ibid., 118.
[327] Ibid., 112.
[328] Nelson Maldonado Torres, "On the Coloniality of Being." *Cultural Studies* 21, no 2-3 2007: 251.

threat of death which surrounds the colonial subjects in their everyday life experience. For

people who already live with death and who are considered as non-beings, the way of

achieving authenticity is different:

> The encounter with death always comes too late, as it were, since death is already
>
> beside them. For this reason, decolonization, deracialization, and *des-generaccion* (in
>
> sum, decoloniality) emerge not only through an encounter with one's own mortality,
>
> but from a desire to evade death, one's own but even more fundamentally that of
>
> others.[329]

Decolonial thinking emerges from this trauma imprinted at the very edifice of being:

an unending coloniality ingrained at the deepest fabric of being and the encounter with the

omnipresent threat of death of not only one's own, but of other's. Such an existential reality

of the racialized/colonized subjects provides reference for what Maldonado-Torres calls,

following Dussel, the coloniality of Being. Coloniality of Being refers to the miserable

situation of a denied existence, the reality the colonized who "perceives life not as a

flowering or a development of an essential productiveness, but as a permanent struggle

against an omnipresent death."[330] What underlies the horizon of the coloniality of being is

"colonial difference," which is, according to Madonado-Torres, presupposed by both

Cartesian epistemology and Heideggerian ontology, yet never acknowledged by the

Eurocentric forms of thinking.[331] Given that beneath the logic of Cartesian epistemology,

cogito ergo sum (I think, therefore I exist) lies the implication of "others do not think," the

damne is for the European *dasein* the being who is 'not there.' Therefore, Maldonado-Torres

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[329] Ibid.

[330] Franz Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism* (New York: Grove Press, 1994), 128

[331] Maldonado-Torres, *On the Coloniality of Being*,   252.

concludes, a reflection on *dasein* and Being without the awareness of coloniality (colonial difference), "involves the erasure of the *damné* and the coloniality of Being."[332]

Theorizing Decolonial Resistance: From Despair to Counter-Colonial Politics

The question that arises with Fanon's colonial abyss is whether Fanon leaves us with any sort of hope regarding the possibility of finding a ground for transformation or passage. The contour of abyss that emerges along the body of Fanonian thought seems manifestly hopeless and irrevocable. Is then the colonial impasse in Fanon's thought closer to a deadly, irredeemable void rather than a mystical abyss? What hints of hope does one find in the devastating wound and trauma of colonial violence?

Nigel Gibson asks a similar question by reading Fanon's critical engagement with Hegel's Master-Slave dialectic. As I summarized in the previous chapter, the dialectic of recognition sketched out in Hegel's master-slave dialectic raises important critical questions when one reflects from the embodied experience of marginalization. It is Fanon who, among others, points out the impossibility or failure of mutual recognition in a relationship conditioned by absolute power asymmetry (master-slave/colonial context).

Hegel's idea of mutual recognition within the structure of the master-slave dynamic is, according to Fanon, a romanticized ideal. The master, more concretely, the colonial master does not seek recognition from the slave as it is the case for Hegel. Rather, all he expects from the slave is labor. Meanwhile, the black slave fails to negate the master through work or objectify the master as his unquenchable desire for recognition is insurmountable. For Fanon, then, Gibson writes, "dialectic becomes motionless."[333] How does the black slave or the colonial subject break free from the insuperable state of non-existence and non-recognition?

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[332] Ibid., 253.
[333] Gibson, *Fanon*, 33.

To find the answer to this question, Gibson turns to Fanon's last book, *The Wretched of the Earth*. Certainly, the accounts of *Black Skin* do not seem to hint at a clear and compelling conclusion. Fanon keeps a consistently pessimistic view of the colonial relation throughout the entire book. Yet, rather than concluding with a total pessimism, Gibson contends that Fanon draws us back to the enduring importance of critical engagement and freedom.

While Fanon concludes the last chapter of *Black Skin* by rejecting the trope of mutual recognition in Hegelian dialectic, nevertheless, he does not give up the power and beauty lying in human beings' critical engagement with reality: "I said in my introduction that man is a *yes*. I will never stop reiterating that. *Yes* to life. *Yes* to love. *Yes* to generosity."[334] This is followed by the concluding remarks in the last few pages of the book, which can be read as an invitation, a call to radical self-reflection and critical engagement. Fanon claims his "self" to be the very foundation of his groundless existence. It does not indicate the self given by the system of social signification, but the transformed self that emerges with the long, arduous struggle for self-definition and self-discovery.

Therefore, going back to the previously posited question, Gibson observes that the only possible way out of the endless cycle of oppression and subjugation for Fanon, is, the "retreat to a mind of one's own," that is, radical self-reflection and to find "Black consciousness as a possible ground for mutual reciprocity."[335] This way, Gibson reads Fanon as quintessentially materializing the dialectic in both his thought and his political actions, that is, Gibson contends that the political thought Fanon formulates in *The Wretched of the Earth* is dialectical particularly when we consider the trajectory through which Fanon's life and thought unfolds.

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[334] Fanon, *Black Skin*, 222.
[335] Gibson, *Fanon*, 37.

As such, the master-slave dialectic, as depicted in *Black Skin* appears to signal a rupture in the dialectic: the reader is led to a Manichean conception of the world. However, Gibson writes, "consciousness is, in fact, forced back into self-certainty and the dialectic reappears in Black consciousness which becomes a basis for a new cognition."[336] In his last book, *The Wretched of the Earth,* Fanon goes on to advance a program of decolonial resistance deeply rooted in a firmly self-determined black consciousness. From this, Gibson suggests that Fanon turns to a radical self-reflection, a regress into his self-consciousness, which results in the birth of a newly acquired sense of self-determination, namely, black consciousness. Since mutual recognition is denied by the other encountered in the external world, Fanon turns to the otherness *within*. It is only the powerful act of retreating to the painful wound of his own that leads Fanon to a possible reconstruction of the shattered self.

This is how the colonial abyss from which Fanon's existential cry is born creates lines of semblance with both the abyss of neoplatonic mystics and the underdeveloped abyss of Hegelian dialectic: the very condition of groundlessness, becomes, paradoxically, the ground for self-reflection and self-creation. The dialectical subject is the one who is in the journey of continuous becoming guided by radical self-reflection or what Gibson calls "the method of internalization, or inwardization, [which] gives action its direction."[337]

What we see in *The Wretched of the Earth*, as a result is, in many ways, a further concretization or complexification of the contours of colonial abyss sketched out so far. The politico-economic condition of the (post)colonial context that draws us deeper into its inscrutable depth offers, at the same time, an innovative vision of a decolonial movement of resistance. In overall, *The Wretched* is framed with a geopolitical analysis of the decolonial struggle of young nation-states within the international landscape of the postcolonial, cold-

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[336] Ibid., 40.
[337] Ibid.

war atmosphere. Fanon shows us that the life and existence of people in the (post)colonial

society is marked by a Manichean reality: a society compartmentalized in two different

worlds.

> The colonized's sector, or at least the "native" quarters, the shanty town, the
>
> Medina, the reservation, is a disreputable place inhabited by disreputable people.
>
> You are born anywhere, anyhow. You die anywhere, from anything. It's a world
>
> with no space, people are piled one on top of the other, the shacks squeezed tightly
>
> together. The colonized's sector is a famished sector, hungry for bread, meat, shoes,
>
> coal, and light.[338]

The existential quandary of the colonized is attended by the political/economic

impasse, which conditions life in the colonial world. Fanon resonates with the Marxist

category of base/superstructure by giving it a twist with the claim, "in the colonies the

economic infrastructure is also a superstructure."[339] In other words, if the classical Marxist

debate of base/structure tends to build a clear binary by viewing one as conditioning the

other, Fanon argues that this distinction is invalid in the colonial society. For, in Fanon's

view, one's material/economic base is inseparably linked what species, what race one belongs

to. In a way, Fanon stands in the same tradition with Césaire in that he, like Césaire, relies

consistently on Marxist class analysis. Just as Césaire advocated the idea of liberation based

on proletarian revolution, Fanon understands liberation as the end of racism in which all

material means are put into people's hands.[340] And yet, above this Manichean reality which

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[338] Franz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*. Translated by Richard Philcox. (New York: Grove Press, 1968), 4.
[339] Ibid., 5.
[340] Gibson, *Rethinking Fanon: The Continuing Dialogue* (Amherst: Humanity Books, 1999), 11.

splits the colonial subject and devastates the colonial society, there is the reality of Europe

positing itself as the absolute subject upon the back of its dialectical other (the colonial

world). Here, Fanon points rightly at the problem that the young nations in the decolonial

struggle are facing. In most cases of postcolonial nation-states, their basic economic

structures are deeply dependent on the capital of the colonial countries so that they can never

become completely independent from them.

The only way out of the colonial impasse is, then, a dialectical affirmation or positing

of black consciousness, that is, national consciousness. However, Fanon's perspective differs

clearly from *Negritude*'s essentialism in that national (black) movement needs to merge

eventually to a broader consciousness of socio-political needs, namely, "humanism."[341] In

other words, Fanon's affirmation of national consciousness needs to be understood in light of

his notion of humanism, which entails, in Michael Azar's words, "a specific negation of the

Manichean order."[342] It is, therefore, an act of dialectical mediation, which hints at the

possibility of a true mutual recognition, "of the possibility of a national consciousness which

may give birth to an 'opening of oneself to the other on a personal level and, on a further

scale, to an 'international consciousness.'"[343]

The gesture of passage suggested by Fanon entails the achievement of the universal

through a dialectical unfolding of the particular, that is, the colonial subject. The conditions

of colonial existence is perhaps another name for the colonial abyss in which the

consciousness of the colonized is born.[344] The movement of passage through the colonial

abyss might be perhaps conceived only when the death-like abyss is re-discovered as the

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[341] Michael Azar, "In the Name of Algeria," in *Franz Fanon: Critical Perspectives,* edited by Anthony Alessandrini (London: Routledge, 1999), 30.
[342] Ibid., 31.
[343] Ibid.
[344] It is certainly not the case that Fanon ues the word (the abyss) often in his writings. What I see, however, is that his articulation of the colonial conditions of existence exemplifies or evokes the abyss in socio-political terms.

womb that gives birth to a new consciousness. It is in this constant dialectic of life and death, amidst life-in-death, that a liberating and revolutionary decolonial politics unfolds, thus moving from the individual self-consciousness to a collective consciousness, from national consciousness to a broader, pan-African solidarity.

Speaking the Unspeakable

It is the work of Edouard Glissant, another French Martinican poet, philosopher, and novelist, which offers a form of thinking that brings together the central topics and questions I have articulated through the course of this dissertation: a certain mystical spirituality, ethics, ontology, poetic imagination, political vision, and most importantly, colonial difference. However, what makes Glissant even more important and relevant for the current project is the fact that the trope of abyss occupies a central place in his thought. In many ways, Glissant's notion of the abyss is closely identical to the neoplatonic figure of the abyss. However, Glissant's abyss is not born out of a theological or/and metaphysical project. Rather, the figure of abyss in his writings emerges from the collective history of suffering and the despairing reality of colonial oppression.

While Glissant's thought stands intentionally distant from theological discourse, his writings disclose a strange marriage between the political and the spiritual as his long time interest lies in articulating the inappropriable power of the profound solidarity from which the thin or fragile name of the community is born. The paradoxical power of excess, emerging from the complex texture and the unfathomable profundity of the archipielago's history bears striking lines of resemblance with the axiom of the neoplatonic abyss. This is because what lies at the heart of Glissant's project is, like many other contemporary Caribbean writers' of his time, a desire to redeem the repressed historical reality of the archipelago not by avoiding it or creating a disconnection, but rather, by continuously engaging it. We find a powerful,

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apophatic resonance between the neoplatonists' uncontainable passion to name the unnamable name of God and the Caribbean writers' indomitable desire to name the unnamable trauma of history.

The endeavor of working through the historical reality entails the difficult task of theorizing the collective wound, that is, the affirmation of the impaired reality and the transformation of the open wound into the horizon of a new beginning. It is not strange then that this process of transformation or passage in Glissant's writings is characterized by an almost mystical element that bears strong resemblance with the theological ideas of mystical spirituality. To be clear, and again, Glissant's thoughts are not born out of theological questions nor do they address conventional theological topics. Rather, Glissant's writings are concerned with the questions of colonial history, collective identity, language, and the political future of the (post)colonial Antilles. Similarly, his notion of the abyss is conceived upon the ruptured horizon of the political impasse and the haunting historical memory that shapes the contours of the Caribbean collective consciousness.

Nevertheless, despite the absence of explicit allusions to the theological ideas in his writings, Glissant offers invaluable insights for the practice of our theological imaginations. Most importantly, Glissant provides a powerful account of reconstructing the self in the colonial abyss, thus hinting at the movement of passage through the abyss. His writing, which draws an almost mystic language of apophaticism and hints at the poetic reconstruction of a relational cosmos out of the despairing context of the colonial abyss, opens the possibilities of rethinking theology at the crossroad of the complex historical reality of the (post/neo)colonial global world. While it is not my intention to translate Glissant ideas into a theological language, I will read, in the next chapter, Glissant's poetics alongside the theopoetics of theologians and philosophers such as Amos Wilder, Richard Kearney, John

Caputo, and Catherine Keller, and explore the theological potential that such reading provides for thinking the relation between the spiritual and the political in the middle passage.

The primary material with which Glissant's thought begins is historical memory. The reason why history and memory is so central not only for Glissant but for many other Caribbean thinkers is because the socio-cultural reality of the Caribbean is inseparable from its unique history marked with traumatic violence and rupture. The dilemma that distresses the Caribbean intellectual is not, consequently, only making sense of the oblivious, repressed past, but also the present, namely, the reality of people and their collective identity which is nevertheless born or the time/life that *goes on* after trauma. In other words, the impasse of the Caribbean writer is that s/he is trapped in the double burden of having to come to terms with both the haunting memory of the traumatic past and the equally elusive present.

As such, the history of the Antilles is characterized, in Glissant's words, by "nonhistory." By this, Glissant is referring to a history of people whose very birth was given by a violent rupture, a traumatic experience of dislocation, deportation, and mass deaths. Glissant thus places the horror of the middle passage at the center of his poetic and philosophical imagination. The figurative and symbolic meaning of the middle passage serves as one of the central sources of inspiration guiding Glissant's thoughts. It is also in this middle passage where the figure of abyss is born. The abyss as its etymological root of "bottomlessness" indicates, represents the sense of "groundlessness" constituting the fabric of reality in the colonial world. Loss haunts the horizon of life just as in Glissant's parlance, the ocean is marked with balls and chains that were weighing down the slaves thrown into the water, which now have gone green.[345] This is why memory occupies a central place for Glissant.

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[345] Edouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, translated by Betsy Wing. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 6.

However, Glissant does not propose a regressive, melancholic project of mourning the past without bearing an accountable perspective toward the emerging future. Rather, he aims at articulating the paradoxical moment in which the experience of catastrophe and the middle passage gives birth to a people. Therefore, as Michael Dash writes, the central image for Glissant is neither the sea, nor the land, but "the mediating threshold."[346] In other words, Glissant is interested neither in retrieving the past as does Césaire nor breaking from it (Fanon).[347] Instead, Glissant's main concern lies in "beginning," that is, beginning after catastrophe or the middle passage, which entails the affirmation of both the fragmented past and the impaired present. One finds imprinted in the texture of Glissant's philosophy the dialectic of dissolution and reconstruction as, in Celia Britton's words, the unbearable pain of "transportation destroys the idealist conception of being as permanent essence. However, this perdition opens up the possibility of relation instead of essence."[348] Glissant finds in the gaping depth of the abyss an womb that gives birth to a new world, a new people whose modes of being find expression in relation and becoming, rather than the static terms of essence and being.

The question that arises, then, in the light of the general framework of the current dissertation, is, how does Glissant glance the seeds of new possibility in the abyss of painful history and the inflicting reality of the ongoing effects of (neo)colonialism? What are the socio-historical and the theoretical conditions that allow him to envision the "passage" through the middle passage? Glissant's appeal to the newly conceived postcolonial identity based on multiplicity, creolization, and relation creates important lines of resonance with the critical social theorists' advocacy of a postmodern and global identity for the age of post-

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[346] Michael Dash, *Edouard Glissant* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 35.
[347] John Drabinski, "Introduction," *Abyssal Beginnings*, unpublished manuscript.
[348] Celia Britton, *Edouard Glissant and Postcolonial Theory: Strategies of Language and Resistance* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1999), 15.

colonial, and post-humanist ethics. Glissant's heavy emphasis, particularly in his later works, on the non-essentialized identity or better, worldview based on multiplicity, fluidity, eco-poetics, errantry, and Relation draws strong affinity with the discourse of philosophical nomadism, which is primarily inspired by the philosophical ideas of Gilles Deleuze. Certainly, the impact of Deleuze's philosophy on Glissant is highly strong and important, and many of Glissant's philosophical ideas are strongly affiliated with Deleuze's key philosophical notions. Glissant found in Deleuze creative philosophical ideas that bore surprising affinity with his own philosophy of creolization, and he borrowed several Deleuzean concepts and developed them into important tools for advancing his own theoretical framework of counter-colonial poetics.

Among many commentators of the Glissant-Deleuze connection, the Italian feminist philosopher Rosi Braidotti's work raises very important questions regarding the dynamics configuring the philosophical dialogue that involves two similar, yet different forms of thinking emerging from radically contrasting geopolitical contexts. More concretely, Braidotti's work points simultaneously at both the brilliance of some of the most creative intellectual conversations on being, identity, and ethics in the postmodern age of globalization, *and* the shadows created by the problematic reading practice that such conversations exercise. My contention is that these forms of reading practices beg a careful re-examination of the subtle, yet persisting layers of colonial difference, which often go unnoticed in the dominant forms of intellectual dialogues. Thinking the dominant forms of European or Eurocentric discourse is crucially important since one way Europe's hegemony was able to maintain its status was by producing a universalizing, normative form of reason and subjectivity. It is in this note that John Drabinski writes, "thinking from a certain location

overturns or "de-links" the non-located measure of imperial reason."[349] It follows, then, that

while Glissant advocates a de-essentialized mode of being in the world and an unifying vision

based on Relation and becoming, one finds, at the bottom surface of his thinking, a relentless

effort to root such thinking in the specific context of the archipelago, a socio-historical milieu

breached with colonial difference, namely, "the community in its vertigo, the landscape in its

excess, [and] time in its uncertainty."[350] In what follows, I present Glissant's decolonial

poetics in conjunction with Braidotti's reading of Deleuze. With the end of both de-linking

the universalizing measure of the imperial reason and highlighting with clarity Glissant's

unique conception of the "groundless middle," I compare Glissant's errantry with

philosophical nomadism and suggest, eventually, points of telling dissonance that open

between Deleuze and Glissant.

The Groundless Middle

While the trope of the middle per se does not recurrently appear in the texts of

Deleuze, it signifies one of the central principles that structure his philosophy. Deleuze

espouses the logic of multiplicity and difference as opposed to what he believes to be the

essentialist tendency of the traditional Western metaphysics and the logic of One underlying

such metaphysical system.[351] Deleuze's problem with traditional metaphysics is that all basis

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[349] Drabinski, *Levinas*, 13.
[350] Edouard Glissant, *Poetic Intention*, translated by Nathalie Stephens. (Callicoon: Nightboat, 1997), 166.
[351] Deleuze's relation to the One and the many has been subject to controversy ever since Alain Badiou suggested that Deleuze, in fact, does not reverse Platonism, but instead promotes a "Platonism of the virtual." Badiou maintains that Deleuze is not a thinker of multiplicity since Deleuze relentlessly underscores that everything exists on One ontological level alone. However, Badiou's reading of Deleuze has become itself the subject of controversy as his interpretation of Spinoza's Univocity of Being can be seen as problematic and thus, the source of his misinterpretation of Deleuze. See Nathan Widder, "The Rights of Simulacra: Deleuze and the Univocity of Being." *Continental Philosophy Review* 34,

of the multiple is grounded in Oneness, the root or pivotal center, so that the "many" is multiplied and replicated from the One. What he calls the "rhizomatic multiplicity" is "not the One that becomes Two, or even directly three, four, five, etc"[352] This would make multiple a mere addition of the One to another One. Instead of a plurality based on a hierarchical or teleological lineage, which only represents quantitative differences, Deleuze argues for a notion of multiplicity that is ontologically non-dualistic, open, and fluid. By the same token, the notion of the middle, which has been traditionally repressed by the system of linearity, cancels out the teleological idea of a definite beginning and end. No trajectory reaches a teleological end according to Deleuzian logic of multiplicity. Rather, each trajectory of becoming consummates at the edge of another middle, which will then become another beginning point for an ever new process of beginning/becoming. This is, for Deleuze, the very axiomatic of his idea of multiplicity as he affirms that the rhizome, a critical metaphor for his logic of multiplicity, "has neither beginning nor end, but always a middle from which it grows and overspills."[353] Refusing the "arboreal" or "treelike" mode of thinking, a linear logic structured by "the alpha and omega, the roots and the pinnacle," he argues for the logic of rhizomatic multiplicity in which beginning takes place *in* and *through* the middle.[354]

Such logic entails an open-ended ontology as the configuration of both the subject and of the material reality in the crack of the middle is never self-enclosed, but infinitely mutating. When thinking from the middle, one does not *begin* from a timeless sense of origin, *ex nihilo*. In Deleuze's own words, "one never commences; one never has a tabula rasa."

2001:437-53; Todd May, "Badiou and Deleuze on the One and Many." In *Think Again: Alain Badiou and the Future of Philosophy*. Edited by Peter Hallward (London: Continuum, 2004).
[352] Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*. Translated by Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 21.
[353] Ibid., 23.
[354] Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, *Dialogues II* (London: Continuum, 1987), 39.

Rather, he adds, "one slips in, enters in the middle; one takes up or lays down rhythms."[355]

Inspired by Deleuze's endeavor, Rosi Braidotti has been ardently advancing her own brand of nomadic philosophy by bringing feminist theory, continental philosophy, postcolonial theory, and posthumanist discourse into a dialogue with Deleuzean philosophy. As she explains in details in her last monograph published in English, *Transpositions* (2006), what she envisions is a non-unitary subjectivity, a subject in transit with a "nomadic, dispersed and fragmented vision," which is nonetheless "coherent and accountable mostly because it is embedded and embodied."[356]

In addressing her main target, namely, the so-called white European/American readers, she urges them to mobilize a new form identity. Unavoidably, Braidotti claims, the process of detachment from the familiar and comfortable forms of identity creates negative emotions such as fear, anxiety, and nostalgia.[357] Certainly, the enriching and positive experience of constructing a new identity entails pain and a sense of loss. Migrants and diasporic subjects are at the center of reference here as they are the ones who bear the burden of the sense of loss and wound the most. The point for Braidotti is that one should not be sunk into the mournful landscape of nostalgic yearning, but to move further. One needs to transform such loss into the new material for constructing the ground for multiple belongings or "multilocality." She makes reference to Glissant as the great example who transformed "the pain of loss into the active production of multiple forms of belonging and complex allegiances."[358]

Despite the innovative nature and the radical political aim of her argument, and despite her acknowledgement of the conditions of postcoloniality, I find the direction she

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[355] Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1988),123.
[356] Rosi Braidotti, *Transpositions: On Nomadic Ethics*. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006), 4.
[357] Ibid., 83.
[358] Ibid., 84.

takes in order to advance the key principles of her philosophical nomadism, troubling. For many racialized/colonized subjects who have experienced slavery, displacement, and diasporization, the pain of loss is neither a mere set of negative feelings nor a historical memory that needs to be overcome or transcended. Rather, such feelings point to a much deeper sense of coloniality inscribed in the fabric of being: an ontological trauma. Likewise, the vision for the beginning of a new world, a new people in Glissant's reflections is born out of the "abyss" which parallels the multiply displaced reality of the Caribbean people. Glissant does not endeavor to traverse the bottomless depth of the middle passage with haste. His gestures are, therefore, not ambitious. Neither are they melancholic. Rather, he moves slowly through the path marked with a murmured silence, the solitude of the "mute man who stands in the stupor of what remains stupid and unjust, opaque and debilitating."[359]

Braidotti might be right in remarking that Glissant *transformed* the pain of loss into the active production of new and multiple forms of identity. However, I argue that her reference to Glissant is problematic as the simple description of "*overcoming* the sense of loss and fragmentation*" does not describe Glissant's agenda properly. Perhaps, to a certain degree, for Braidotti's European-American readers, loss might be perceived as a negative and transitional feeling. However, for Glissant, loss involves a different level of magnitude and intensity that derives from the "weight" of the colonial history and the devastated socio-economic reality created by it. Braidotti fails to do justice to Glissant by omitting these complex layers that constitute the "groundless horizon" out of which Glissant's decolonial poetics emerges when she continuously affirms that "Glissant captures the productive multiplicity, the resonance of the great vitality of human biodiversity."[360]

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[359] Avita Ronnell, endorsement of Glissant's *Poetics of Intention*.

[360] Braidotti, *Transpositions*, 68.

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Philosophical nomadism privileges "freedom" as the ultimate liberating state of the subject. Braidotti views freedom as the "capacity to express and explore the subject's ability to affect and be affected."[361] Freedom transcends all boundaries of the classic notion of subjectivity and creates connections, thus facilitating the joyful "lines of flight" of the nomadic subject who is able to embody multiple identities and inhabit multiple locations at the same time. The question that arises, then, is, should not the call for accountability and mourning for the loss and suffering of others precede the joyful celebration of freedom and nomadic ontology? Should not the question of the other be at the center of ethics rather than the preoccupation for one's endless becoming?

The ethical unaccountability of Braidotti's philosophical vision has been a target of criticism especially within the inner circle of feminist philosophy. Of particular problem have been notions of mobility since Braidotti fails to concretize it, as Julie Wuthnow has remarked, in its historic and contextual picture of colonialization.[362] In other words, Braidotti's affirmation of movement and her model of the all-transcending-and-unlocatable-subject raises questions of accountability to the socio-historic location of the subject as Braidotti's erasure of her own site of subject position, argues Wuthnow, means ignoring "her potential complicity in colonialist discourse."[363] Echoing Irene Gedalof, who problematizes Braidotti's omission of "location" in her discussion of identity construction, Wuthnow concludes that Braidotti's gesture results in solidifying a model of universal subjectivity inscribed with "important features of the unmarked western subject."[364] This way, Braidotti's model represents the ideal of the privileged Western subject who enjoys the freedom to

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[361] Ibid., 148.
[362] Julie Wuthnow, "Deleuze in the Postcolonial, On Nomads and Indigenous Politics," *Feminist Theory*, Vol 3, No 2, 2002:187
[363] Ibid., 190.
[364] Irene Gedalof, "Can Nomads Learn to Count to Four? Rosi Braidotti and the Space for Difference in Feminist Theory," *Women: A Cultural Review*, Vol 7, No 2, 1996:192; Wuthnow, *Deleuze in the Postcolonial*, 181.

"travel" and "transgress" borders without being marked by class or race. Given the global context of forced displacement and exile, the blind celebration of movement and transgression is a naïve romanticization of "rootlessness" for those who cannot afford the privilege of such mobility. As Gedalof has remarked, without a critical examination of its own social location, the nomadic model is "really only available to white western feminists, and only under conditions where our whiteness and our westernness continue to function as the invisible, unmarked norms that do not seem to fix our identity at all."[365]

Admittedly, Braidotti makes visible efforts to take into account the historical experience of slavery and colonialism out of which Glissant's *Poetics of Relation* emerges. Nevertheless, her efforts fall short as her reading of Glissant leaves out the complex layer of coloniality that gives birth to the constructive dimension of Glissant's work. Braidotti believes that the effects and the power of "transposition" lie in turning what is lost into "an increased desire to belong." She makes it clear that such gesture is not "the avoidance of pain, but rather about transcending the resignation and passivity that ensue from being hurt, lost, and dispossessed."[366] While this is a valid point and a legitimate reading of Glissant's project, my sense of uneasiness grows as Braidotti appropriates Glissant in order to advance her "politics of location," which presupposes a universalized vision of a freely moving, non-unitary subject. Following Wuthnow's and Gedalof's voices of warning against Braidotti's overcelebration of movement, I object to the unmarked facileness embedded in Braidotti's account of "transposing the loss" and of constructing a non-unitary subject. Especially, reflecting from Glissant's context, a social fabric characterized by the omnipresence of loss, discontinuity, and socio-ontological trauma, remembering the past is a crucial move that

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[365] Irene Gedalof, "Identity in Transit: Nomads, Cyborgs and Women," *European Journal of Women's Studies*, Vol 7, 2000:337–354, 343.

[366] Braidotti, *Transpositions*, 84.

enables people to come to terms with the present, even before any form of subject position takes place.

Glissant's poetic vision of relation and the possibility of a Caribbean identity emerges out of the shared memory (knowledge) of suffering and the impossibility of articulating the abyssal experience of coloniality. In the same way, "Relation," the key constructive notion of Glissant's decolonial poetics, is not an empty signifier devoid of any material root. Relation does not emerge from nothing. In Glissant's own words, Relation is "not made up of things that are foreign but of shared knowledge."[367] The generative power behind the poetics of Relation is not merely a memory spelled in past tense, but the memory of the abyss depicted in his poetic imageries of the slave boat, which carries the unbearable weight of the innumerable suffering bodies of African slaves.

> Imagine two hundred human beings crammed into a space barely capable of containing a third of them. Imagine vomit, naked flesh, swarming lice, the dead slumped, the dying crouched. Imagine, if you can, the swirling red of mounting to the deck, the ramp they climbed, the black sun on the horizon, vertigo, this dizzying sky plastered to the waves. Over the course of more than two centuries, twenty, thirty million people deported. Worn down, in a debasement more eternal than apocalypse.[368]

It is in this crack of the ontological edifice, the overwhelming abyss of suffering, and the terrifying time of the unknown where the enigmatic trope of Relation opens up, for, utters Glissant, "although you are alone in this suffering, you share in the unknown with others

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[367] Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 6.
[368] Ibid., 5-6.

whom you have yet to know."[369] The blurry past filled with fractured memories of shock and loss is also at the same time the very terrain whereby the mystery of Relation and the indomitable desire to build a ground out of groundlessness is born. This is why Glissant calls the abyss, the weight of the painful history, a "womb," a "womb abyss."[370] The collective memory of suffering is not a mere set of negative emotions that need be overcome and transposed. Rather, the silence of the dead and the cry of the suffering people never cease to haunt "the freeing knowledge of Relation."[371]

The enigmatic power of Relation emerges with the knowledge that survives the horror of the middle passage: a knowledge that is born out of the "womb abyss," a "knowledge of the Whole, greater for having been at the abyss and freeing knowledge of Relation within the Whole."[372] The middle passage, however traumatic, gives birth to people. Relation emerges out of this greater knowledge that survives the horrifying experience of terror, people who were borne by the painful abyss of the middle passage, born into the shore and "rose up on this unexpected, dumbfounded land."[373] Relation then constitutes the very abyssal middle, the groundless ground or soil upon which the future of the Caribbean identity waves faintly.

The trope of the abyss read in the neoplatonic and continental tradition acquires a wider meaning in Glissant's thought. However, Glissant develops his notion of the abyss out of the concrete historical experience of collective suffering which constitutes the socio-political texture of the Caribbean reality. In both the neoplatonic and Glissant's colonial contexts, the abyss indicates the experience of finitude, the limits of human existence. As I have expounded in chapter 2, it is only by submitting to the limits of human existence, to the inscrutable depth of the abyss that one comes to glance the traces of plenitude and possibility

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[369] Ibid., 6.
[370] Ibid.
[371] Ibid., 8.
[372] Ibid.
[373] Ibid., 7.

harbored in its ocean of bottomlessness. Yet, submitting to finitude does not signify

renunciation before the impossibility of speaking or naming the absolute Other, that is, the

"unnamable." Rather, naming the absolute other (neoplatonic mysticism) or the traumatic

event (Glissant) entails acknowledging or embracing one's limits. With apophatic theology,

we have learned that (un)speaking of God involves acknowledging our creaturely finitude

and the vulnerability of incompleteness ingrained in the edifice of being. Similarly, Glissant's

poetics of Relation, which emerges from the depth of the abyss of the middle passage, seeks

to embrace, and furthermore, to affirm the traumatic wound and the sense of groundlessness

conditioning the collective identity of the colonized beings. Nevertheless, speaking of the

political trauma demands a clear distinction from both the embrace of the self's finitude and

speech of God.

Submitting to finitude paves the way for the reconfiguration of the self and of the

world. In the same vein, namelessness unveils the abyssal ground for the constant re-naming

and re-constructing of both the self and the name of the Other, since the "impossibility" of

naming leads to the experience of "undoing" where all the previously known names and

essentialist categories representing the world and the self are dismantled. However, what

implication does the mystical or philosophical namelessness have in the historical context

where unspeakability and namelessness is not a mere spiritual and existential experience, but

the result of a historical and material experience of suffering and survival? Certainly, there

are striking similarities and resonances between the trope of abyss and the language of

mysticism employed in these two different contexts. What remains unnoticed or obscure,

however, is the complex difference brought about when the language and the trope of

theological/philosophical groundlessness are translated into the context conditioned by the

socio-political impasse. What are the lines of continuity and discontinuity, points of challenge

and insight, or problems and questions that surge when the tropes of mystical language is

translated from its theological context to the historico-political situation? What happens when namelessness extends beyond the boundary of theological or philosophical impasse and becomes the socio-political condition of one's existence?

Despite the significant similarity between these two apophatic discourses, there is an important difference marked around the nature of the unnamable. The unnamable in both contexts signals a dialectical transformation of the speaking subject; the former aims at empowerment and union with the unnamable while the latter aims at disentanglement (trauma) and empowerment despite (by way of transforming) it. Apopohatic language, therefore, bears a different kind of ethico-political responsibility in the political context in which unspeakability and namelessness constitute the conditions of social existence. The parallel of apophatic discourse in these two distant contexts testifies to the relevance of apophatic approach –and the theological seed implicated in it-- in political context while the manifest difference between the two speaks against the danger of naturalizing political trauma.

In his comparative reading of Glissant and Levinas, John Drabinski demonstrates how Glissant's thought discloses the colonial difference inherent in his decolonial poetics by offering an account of "beginning after total catastrophe," that is, from the devastating abyss of the middle passage which leaves no ruins and no names. Drabinski observes that Levinas also offers, in a way, an account of beginning after catastrophe. However, Drabinski writes, "what survives catastrophe, in the context of the Shoah, *is the name*." This is important because, "the fecundity of the (sur)name gives the future a meaning and continuity that survives loss."[374] However, for Glissant, one of the characteristics marking the abyss of the middle passage is that of the "drowning memory." The countless number of black bodies buried under the depth of the ocean, with balls and chains weighing them down, are the

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[374] Drabinski, *Levinas*, 135, 144.

invisible signposts reminding the present of drowned names, bodies, and the oblivious memory of the traumatic history: "then the sea, never seen from the depths of the ship's hold, punctuated by drowned bodies that sowed in its depths explosive seeds of absence."[375]

As Drabinski comments, "drown memory leaves no ruin," and therefore it "seals namelessness as a condition of beginning."[376] Unlike the optimistic accounts of philosophical nomadism or the Zizekian political subjectivity, the abyssal beginning for Glissant means that one "begins without the thin, fragile continuity of the name."[377] It is from this that one finds strange lines of resonance between Glissant's decolonial poetics and the theological work of neoplatonic mystics. In both cases, the writer aims at the "impossible possibility" of naming the unnamable. For the neoplatonic mystics, the unnamable refers to the radical transcendence of the deity while the unnamable in Glissant indicates the overwhelming memory of the political trauma and the impossibility of tracing a genealogy of the self. Here, Jacques Derrida, in his deconstructivist articulation of negative theology, might serve as a helpful interlocutor since his work on name(lessness) explores the fine line between negative theology and postmodern thought, between neoplatonic mysticism and the philosophical possibility of ethics. In exploring the *de*-ontotheological possibility of negative theology, Derrida finds an affinity between negative theology and his own deconstrutivist project: both aim at the (impossible) possibility of the impossible, that is, the relentless gesture to name the indestructible, inexhaustible name, which lies *beyond* the name. The name of God, then, remains as a reference without referents, as the sign of absolute alterity, that is, *namelessness*. For Glissant, on the other hand, namelessness *is* the very condition of beginning; beginning of a new people; beginning of a new future and of a new mode of being/becoming in the world. We might perhaps draw the theological connection here

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[375] Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 9.
[376] Drabinski, *Levinas*, 148.
[377] Ibid.

between "God as namelessness" and "namelessness as the condition of beginning" and thus decolonize the idea of God so that we no longer think of God as the promise of a full form or full presence, but as the abyss of namelessness from which we begin. Rather than privileging solid ground and form, we could perhaps envision groundlessness and ruin as the condition from which we build a new cosmopolitan future.

The notion of the other is of paramount importance here since it serves as the only, actual (yet, forever ungraspable) reference to the inexhaustible name. One stands alone in the referentless desert where the only thing s/he is left with is the unnamable, forever fleeting trace of the other, that is, *reference*. For Glissant, on the other hand, the trauma of the middle passage gives birth to "*people without reference.*"[378] The question of beginning, then, becomes a question of asserting oneself "without reference to what precedes."[379] The problem that Glissant is confronted with is that with the drowning memory/name, all reference, including the name itself, is lost. The other, then, signifies the faint reference to the drown names and drown bodies. Drabinski articulates the sense of failure (as well as the possibility that his failure opens) before such loss in strikingly apophatic language: "Originless, beginning begins again… narrative fails before it begins. The word, and so too the name, is first, wholly new, and always creolized."[380]

On the other hand, what makes survival and passage or transformation possible is the other. This is because the experience of survival in the abyss, the bottom of the ocean becomes knowledge *only when it is shared*. Therefore, there are dual sides of abyss in the other: On the one hand, the other is indicative of the inscrutable connection between the "suffering other" and the survival of the self. The body of the other, moaning and groaning

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[378] "What is referred to here as order is the terrifying nothingness in which a stained illiterate society attempts to maintain a people without reference.   Every poetics is a search for reference. Glissant, *Poetic Intention*, 176.
[379] Drabinski, *Levinas*, 153.
[380] Ibid., 154.

next to my own suffering body, the innumerable bodies of the others buried alive in the bottom of the sea upon which the boat sails, weaves the illimitable horizon of the beautiful, yet painful ocean. The other, in Glissant's colonial context is the reference for the precarious boundaries of knowledge and being, for the survival through the abyss of the middle passage reveals that the trace and the cry of the "suffering other" is an elusive otherness that constitutes and conditions the self: "for the poetics of relation assumes that to each is proposed the density (the opacity) of the other."[381]

Perhaps, Glissant's notion of opacity and the other finds a strong resonance in Judith Butler's work as she also affirms opacity as the symptom of the irreducible otherness constitutive of the self which indicates the self's implicatedness with the many unknown others. For Butler, "there is always a dimension of ourselves and our relation to others that we cannot know, and this non-knowing persists with us as a condition of our existence and, indeed, of survivability."[382] The unknown and opacity are privileged in this form of knowing as they represent both the limits or precarious nature of our finite knowledge and existence, *and* the inscrutable depth of our relation to the unknown others. For Glissant, the unknown, as many of his central notions do, carries a double meaning, thus bearing also a resemblance with the mystic notion of the unknown. As such, the unknown is one of the central characteristics of the abyss: it designates the dizzy, unfathomable density of the inscrutable gap within the texture of the self, which, paradoxically, reveals the horizon of newness that emerges from the depth of groundlessness. However, the existential finitude that Glissant encounters in the middle passage is more than an existential anxiety caused by the search for meaning and transcendence. The unknown, gazed from the middle passage is not a sign of ambiguity from which plenitude and meaning beckons. Rather, the unknown is another name

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[381] Glissant, *Poetic Intention*, 18.
[382] Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 15.

for the experience of the indefinite, horrifying terror, and this is why Glissant remarks, "what is terrifying partakes of the abyss, three times linked to the unknown."[383] Yet, at the same time, the unknown reveals the greater knowledge that emerges from the very shared experience of suffering, a knowledge that reveals one's entanglement in Relation which ties the self to the suffering others.

This is why the other marks the sign of survival and the possibility of (the beginning of) a community after the traumatic catastrophe. This means, in other words, that the other *is* the sign of the persistence of time, which carries life on, and which nonetheless gives birth to people, *after trauma*, just as the drown names (and bodies) mark the "site of multiple converging paths" of connection and relation across the abyss of the dark Atlantic.[384] Therefore, going back to the comparative reading of Glissant and Derrida's engagement with apophaticism, namelessness is both the condition of beginning *and* the goal or the beyond to which both thinkers are moving. Yet, despite the obvious resonances between Derrida's deconstructionist approach to the name(lessness) and Glissant's idea of Relation and becoming, there are conspicuous differences that mark the distance between them. While Derrida's name is an eternal call or promise always invoking an ethical response/decision, relation is the historically "accumulated" element of exchange or sharing, which one embodies, engages, and lives out in community. In both cases, however, there is a passion for name(lessness). For Derrida, the passion for name(lessness) indicates the passion for the impossible, passion for the unnamable name of God which lies beyond all names, while for

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[383] The first abyss of middle passage is that of being thrown into the belly of the boat with hundreds of other suffering bodies. The second abyss refers to the depth of the ocean, haunted by the bodies buried at its bottom. The third abyss is linked with the world and everything that had been left behind. See, *Poetics of Relation*, 6-7.
[384] Edouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essay*, translated by Michael Dash (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1989), 66.

Glissant namelessness can be translated as rootlessness, groundlessness or exile:[385] "… for exile did not arise yesterday: it began with the departure of first caravel. It is not a state, but a passion."[386] And this is where the powerful paradox of Glissant's decolonial philosophy of creolization lies: passion for rootlessness, groundlessness or solitude, driven by an even greater passion for a deeper sense of rootedness grounded in Relation. He cites the French poet Paul Claudel's words: "from the steps of exile, he manages a solitude more populated than any empire's land."[387]

This, perhaps, is the moment where the movement of *passage* takes place in the middle passage. What we witness in Glissant's decolonial vision is a twisted account of the alternative *passage* born in the middle passage. He shows us how the passage takes place in the abyss of middle passage in which the experience of trauma is transformed into a newly conceived identity rooted in Relation. It is in this way that the middle passage challenges the somewhat optimistic ideas of agency harboring in the accounts of passage elaborated by the different narratives of (theo)political subjectivity that I have examined in the previous chapters. Glissant's philosophy of creolization also questions the idea of an individualized political subjectivity implied in these forms of thinking. For, in the middle passage, the possibility of a new beginning and passage happens, rather, through the vision of Relation, which emerges out of the unknown, the unfathomable middle of the traumatic ruins.

The notion of the middle opened up by Glissant offers important insights for rethinking the advancement of the postmodern politics of "mobility" and "in-between" as the conceptual tool of empowerment for the marginalized communities. Many recent works of

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[385] Again, there are important differences between Derrida's namelessness and namelessness in Glissant. Derrida's is utterly negative, alluding to the impossible, and constantly deferred while Glissant locates namelessness/rootlessness in the material reality of creolized life. Both thinkers, however, evoke the passion for that which constantly disavows the myth of being/presence, that which deconstructs the metaphysical illusion from *within*.
[386] Glissant, *Poetic Intention*, 106.
[387] Ibid., 108.

critical theorists of gender and race demonstrate their effort to reinvent the traditionally neglected or degraded notions of movement, rootlessness, and fragmentary identity into a positive ground for the recreation of new meanings based on the philosophical principles of multiplicity, hybridity, and becoming. As Braidotti's work on "nomadic subjectivity," Kathy Ferguson's notion of "mobile subjectivity," and Chela Sandoval's idea of the "third space" (and her use of Roland Barthes' notion of the "third meaning" and Hayden White's notion of "the middle voice") show, the notion of the middle remains as the site of pure potential and possibility that disrupts the dominant system of signification.

Similarly, as I mentioned already briefly, for Deleuze, the middle is the critical site for his philosophy of multiplicity and becoming, just as the plateau, "is always in the middle, not at the beginning or the end" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 24). The importance of the middle for Deleuze lies in the fact that the middle never ceases to open new doors to an occasion for an ever-new becoming. This means that the "event" does not consist of a teleological end or a final result of the becoming, but the singular *act* of becoming. In other words, it is the *act* of becoming itself that is privileged by the Deleuzean middle, rather than the *result* of becoming. In this way, the middle always signals the point of a new beginning at the moment where the previous process of becoming seems to have concluded. This is why, for Deleuze, the middle is not an average, but a site in which intensities are negotiated and accumulated. It is not a localizable point. Rather, it is a "perpendicular direction, a transversal movement that sweeps one and the other away, *a stream without beginning or end that undermines its banks and picks up speed in the middle*" (28).

This powerful image of the middle illustrated by Deleuze, finds, in my reading, a striking parallel, and with an even more striking twist, in Glissant's imagery of the middle passage, which might help us to bracket and refuse the deep-seated ontological privileges presupposed in certain forms of universalized subjectivity. Glissant opens the first chapter of

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his *Poetics of Relation* with the image of the slave boat in order to evoke the collective memory of the spectral past haunting the present quandary of the Martinican/Caribbean socio-political situation. The murky vision of the slave boat is filled with the horrifying images of vomit, naked flesh, and death; the voyage is characterized by the abyss of the unknown. The gape of the abyss opens as the bodies of people are thrown into the boat, and as the boat is dragged into the ocean, into the middle of its depths. The middle, in Glissant's poetic vision, is another name for the "petrifying face of the abyss [which] lies far ahead of the slave ship's bow."[388] In the abyssal middle, future does not come in the name of the new. Rather, it comes in the name of the unknown: "a pale murmur; you do not know if it is a storm cloud, rain or drizzle, or smoke from a comforting fire." As the boat keeps sailing into the ocean, murmurs Glissant, "*the banks of the river have vanished on both sides of the boat. What kind of river, then, has no middle*?"[389]   This stunning line strikes the readers of Deleuzean philosophy with its remarkably disparate view on the middle. If for Deleuze, the middle is where the creative flow of the stream picks up its speed, thus finally undermining its banks, for Glissant, the middle is the terrifying abyss of the unknown from which all you can do is to watch the landscape of the familiar land, the banks of the river, *vanish*.

From the middle of the colonial groundlessness, Glissant teaches us perhaps an alternative mode of thinking collective identity, ethics, political subjectivity, and future, *after trauma*. I contend, therefore, that Braidotti's notion of "transposing" is not the best term to describe Glissant's project properly. Transposing conveys a sense of reversing and altering the position/form. It implies an active employment of agency to transform the undermined ground into a fertile horizon of becoming. Such movement of passage is far from viable in the middle passage, the groundless middle of the colonial abyss. Alternatively, Drabinski's

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[388] Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 6.
[389] Ibid., 6-7.

reading of Glissant proposes a more suitable account of Glissant's project that does justice to the complexity embedded in the soil of the Caribbean history. In order to describe Glissant's poetics, Drabinski employs the figurative image of "standing at the Caribbean shoreline and speaking the impossible," that is, affirming at one and the same time the tragic sadness and the beauty that the Caribbean landscape embodies.[390] Before the devastating experience of the colonial reality, which is overwhelming and paralyzing, Glissant shows us, in Drabinski's parlance, "how to say yes to ghosts and hauntings, and so how to welcome the memory of terror because it is the constant, if often mute or muted, companion to the excessiveness and profundity of creolized life."[391] Before the sweeping hail of loss, the means of transformation is not sought in assured terms as if one possessed the power and control over the reality. Rather, with Glissant, we see a humble, yet unyielding gesture to name and welcome the weight of the past in order to rise up and begin again.

Glissant begins from the ruins. It is not a glamorous beginning. As Michael Dash remarks, beginnings for Glissant are "lowly, paradoxical, and unspectacular."[392] Beginning here has none of the aura of the romantic and blithe experience as certain philosophical ideas of Western subjectivity suggest. Without the privileged milieu (middle) of time and "without the help of those plateaus in time from which the West has benefited," yet, which remain unacknowledged in Western mode of universal subjectivity, Glissant *begins* from the groundless middle in order to build a *ground* that is a "groundless ground." The middle, therefore, is a groundless alluvium for becoming haunted by the unspeakable past and the unknown future, the "painful notion of time and its full projection forward into the future."[393]

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[390] John Drabinski, "Shorelines: In Memory of Edouard Glissant," *Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy*, Vol 19, No 1, 2011:6.
[391] Ibid.
[392] Glissant, *Caribbean Discourses*, vii.
[393] Ibid., 63-64.

Fragmentation, Duration, and Re-Collection

The middle passage, in many ways, is the womb from which the decolonial, poetic imagination of the Antilles is conceived. This means, in other words, that the middle passage epitomizes the colonial impasse or colonial abyss of the Caribbean historical reality. From the ruins of the colonial trauma, one of the most urgent political imperatives emerging onto the surface of the fuzzy present is that of political subjectivity, or more specifically, collective identity. As Michael Dash comments in his introduction to Glissant's *Caribbean Discourses*, finding the language for the collective "We" and coming to terms with the collective history is crucial in the Martinican context where history is marked with oblivion and denial.[394] It is far from difficult to imagine that the questions regarding the possibility of passage or crossing in such situation takes a different form. The colonial subject, as Cesaire, Fanon, and Glissant show us, is the one who is dispossessed of the socio-political ground from which to envision the "radical act" (*a la* Zizek) of crossing. Before any act of self-determination and bold movement of crossing takes place, the colonial subject needs to be able to come to terms with, and re-assemble his/her shattered, fragmented self.

The trope of the abyss lurking in the thought of Hegel and his contemporary readers (Zizek and Butler) shapes their accounts of dialectical subject in different ways. Most importantly, however, the abyss explores the possibility of mediating the position of the subject in the moment of his/her encounter with the other. The other, here, lends itself to dual meaning: it signifies, on the one hand, the limit, barrier or finitude of the self; on the other hand, it designates the possibility of the new, reconciled subject. More specifically, as I have defined already, the otherness confronting the Hegelian subject could be translated as the *passage* from one side to the other, an act of crossing through the seemingly irreconcilable gap. I have examined in the previous chapter how this dialectical movement of reconciliation

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[394] Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, "Introduction."

in Hegel fails to do justice to the very unfathomable depth of the abyss with which he has himself structured his system of dialectic. Hegel does not fully let his subject immerse into the bottomless, mystic abyss, which he recognizes early in the beginning of the *Phenomenology*. Rather, the infinitely resilient subject of the Hegelian dialectic is able to re-assemble him/herself no matter how many times s/he is crushed.

Meanwhile, Zizek also rushes through the valley of the abyss that he has himself emphasized so much in his own works. Not only does Zizek misidentify the abyss with void or nothing(ness), but, following Hegel, his theory of political subjectivity hints at a sense of optimism in which the vertiginous, devastating abyss of the negative is covered by the infinitely self-replenishing subject. Zizek's Hegelian-Lacanian construction of the "subject", in this sense, shares a similar, problematic theoretical base with the Deleuzean conception of the "nomadic subject" proposed by contemporary critical theorists in that they both presuppose a certain sense of a "middle ground" which facilitates the radical movement of crossing.[395]

Perhaps, it is Butler who provides the philosophical possibility of a subject more accountable to the fragility of human social existence, the global reality of the marginalized others, and the overlooked power of the residual socio-cultural affects that condition the structure of the self. Butler's philosophical positioning, which takes loss and grief as the fundamental condition that prefigures the genesis of the subject, opens the possibility for theorizing the reality of suffering and trauma with the end of constructing a theo-political imagination rooted in those "resources." The possibility of the passage through the abyss, and

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[395] Clearly, the Hegelian-Zizekian account of the subject does not make reference to the notion of a "middle ground" as it is the case with Deleuze-Braidotti. However, there seems to be an unmarked, latent ground, an originary synthesis in the interval between death and life, absence and presence within the structure of the dialectic especially when remembering Butler's insightful remarks, that often, "suffering simply erode[s] whatever ground there is," instead of "prompt[ing] the reconstruction of a world on yet firmer ground." See, *Subjects of Desire*, 22.

the subsequent question of *how* such possibility is realized, takes a crucially significant

divergence as she suggests that the seed of transformation is found in *our* vulnerability,

which is revealed by loss. In other words, agency, for Butler, emerges from the very paradox

that my own being is conditioned by the socially constituted web of relations which will

always remain opaque and partly unknown to myself. Butler's idea of the self, subjectivity,

and the political possibility of an ethical community paves, in my reading, the path for the

passage from the Hegelian dialectic to Caribbean decolonial thought. Her work not only

extends the ethico-political possibility of dialectical thought, but also provides an alternative

model of thinking in which psychoanalysis, theories of emotion, and the theory of ethics are

kneaded into the poetic articulation of philosophical reasoning. Furthermore, the fact that

what underlies her philosophical ideas is the *almost* mystical tone of negative theology makes

Butler's work more important for the current conversation.

Indeed, one can find in Butler's work multiple lines of resonance with Glissant's

decolonial poetics. Her questions directed at the devastating effects of suffering and her

reservation on the unremittingly resilient subject of the Hegelian dialectic draws substantially

significant lines of intersection with the central questions that I am raising in this dissertation.

Butler adopts the gesture of resignation before the conditions of finitude constituting human

social existence. Yet, she affirms that her gestures of negation are not geared towards an

actual resignation of the political possibility of the subject. Rather, these signs of

vulnerability and relationality of the self with the many unknown others *is* the very condition

of existence and survivability.[396] Her trope of the unknown resonates with the mystical

utterance of negative theology to which both Derrida and Glissant appeal as she evokes the

unknown and affirms it as a term of possibility: "we are to an extent driven by what we do

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[396] Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 15.

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not know."[397] The humble gesture derived from the recognition of the self's limit and the absolute alterity (inscrutability) of the other – which in return, is projected back to the opaque structure of the self – renders the unknown a crucial element that capacitates the existence of the self. If the other first inscribes signs of limit, despair, and resignation to the texture of our selves, it opens us, at the same time, to the unknown. Subsequently, the act of mourning for loss implicated in the unknown helps us examine "the relational ties that have implications for theorizing fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility."[398]

Nevertheless, despite these junctures of creative resonances, there lies, in Glissant's Caribbean context, an immediate historical urgency to affirm the collective identity which has been largely absent throughout history. The imperative of breaking from the all-destructive dominion of colonial violence necessitates a political vision or imagination capable of constructing a more engaging and context-oriented model of subjecthood. While Butler offers profoundly insightful ideas on the groundlessness of the self and ethics, the lack of a constructive model developed in her thoughts leads us to reconsider the politics of passage that she suggests. Perhaps the difference between the Butlerian politics of mourning and Glissantian decolonial poetics is derivative of the difference of the language framing each one of these thinkers' works: Buter's philosophical terms are framed by the language of loss, which refers to what LaCapra calls a "structural trauma," a transhistorical and metaphysical notion of absence working as a sort of an originary melancholy structuring the subject.[399] On the other hand, Glissant's writings address the problem of historical loss and trauma deriving from the atrocious and frightening events of violence, which leaves the self dumbfounded, speechless, completely fragmented, and *without a name*. Yet, the imperative to "name the unnamable" and taking over the impossible task of re-*collect*ing the collective

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[397] Ibid.
[398] Butler, *Precarious Life*, 22.
[399] LaCapra, *Trauma*, 715-718.

identity is even more pressing in the complete ruins since the abyss of suffering, the horror of the tramatic middle passage gestates, nonetheless, *a future*. As Drabinski writes, "Glissant sees the opening of the future as a break from catastrophe – not as redemption, but rather, and simply, *as the persistence of time*.[400]   Before the irrevocable gap lying between namelessness and the urgency to name the unnamable, between the haunting past and the impossible future, Glissant turns to the notion of persistence, the indestructible continuity of time, that is, *duration*. Drabinski adds: "it is not just that descendants survive. Descendants become a people." This is because "memory of pain persists, without ruin, as drown memory, but so too does future."[401] The abyss, the middle passage, therefore, inaugurates a future, a future sealed with namelessness, yet which still carries life on: "that womb which bequeaths no name, yet *still bequeaths time*."[402]

Duration refers to the persistence of time, the endurance of life that survives death and goes on after catastrophe. Duration does not connote any sign of ambition or hope. Yet, as its literal meaning indicates, duration is that which endures and persists. This is one of the reasons why the tragically sad landscape of the Caribbean islands and the history that accompanies it remains, at the same time, beautiful. Despite pain, life marked with fragmentation endures, survives, and *inaugurates* future, melancholic or otherwise. Nevertheless, while the enigmatic power of relation is that which emerges in the groundless middle, beyond one's control and knowledge, the freeing knowledge of the greater Whole, that is Relation, is not something that can be grasped *freely*. Rather, future and Relation emerge only in the relentless effort to name the unnamable, that is, in the poetics and the politics based in the decolonial vision; in the collective work of taking upon oneself the weight of the unbearable past and naming the unspeakable present. Duration, in this sense,

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[400] Drabinski, *Levinas*, 153 (emphasis mine).
[401] Ibid., 160.
[402] Ibid., 153 (emphasis mine).

must contain or hint at the gestures of recollection. Fragmentation, duration, and recollection are, then, part of the whole process of decolonial poetics/politics. Derek Walcott's Nobel address expresses these ideas magnificently as he writes:

> Break a vase, and the love that reassembles the fragments is stronger than that love which took its symmetry for granted when it was whole. The glue that fits the pieces is the sealing of its original shape. It is such a love that reassembles our African and Asiatic fragments, the cracked heirlooms whose restoration shows its white scars. This gathering of broken pieces is the care and pain of the Antilles, and if the pieces are disparate, ill-fitting, they contain more pain than their original sculpture, those icons and sacred vessels taken for granted in their ancestral places. Antillean art is this restoration of our shattered histories, our shards of vocabulary, our archipelago becoming a synonym for pieces broken off from the original continent.

The key to survival and the possibility for re-gathering the shattered collective identity, Glissant shows us, lies in duration. Subsequently, the "freeing knowledge of Relation within the Whole" also arises from it, for, duration is neither an individual experience nor an apolitical notion. Rather, Glissant writes, "Duration is share. It is the house of the We…"[403] Duration opens the door to relation, and it is only when the self is submitted to the power of Relation that the possibility of future beckons. Glisant's notion of multiplicity arises out of this topographical matrix composed of relations: the bottomless middle where finitude and vulnerability bear the soil for new relations and new beginnings. The underdeveloped trope of relation in Deleuze (Braidotti) and Hegel (Zizek) becomes, in

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[403] Glissant, *Poetic Intention*, 201.

Glissant, the very material with which he transposes the void of loss, the painful middle of the fragmented history.

One important question that remains at the end of this chapter is directed at ethics (in relation to the other) and theology. The relation of the other to the self in Glissant's thought reveals the complexity that defies the simple dynamic of relation or the disruption of the self-other binary. On the one hand, the other is the constitutive element of the self and provides, through the web of relation it co-creates with the self, the possibility of the self's survival. The other evokes an endless passion in the self: a passion for the impossible; passion for alterity; passion for the creolized life and for the landscape in excess; passion for name or, perhaps, for God. On the other hand, passion for the other is not indicative of a desire to fully understand the other. Neither does it signify a mere lack of hope (to understand the other). Beyond its given appearance, the other signals an alterity that eludes our totalitarian attempt to grasp him/her while invoking an unending passion (for the other) in us at the same time. Here, name and relation evoked passionately in Glissant's writings signal at the point where the theological endeavor of naming God and the ethical quest for the other intersect. While the other marks the precarity of self in Glissant's thought, it is not an absolute exteriority in the Levinasian or Derridean sense.[404] The other in Glissant does not always signify the outside nor does it serve as the mere limit of the self. Rather, the other is indicative of the very conditions of possibility, the sign of the self's survival, and, of future. The self, submerged into the groundless middle, finds in it, the other *within*. Might not this Glissantian notion of the other attest to something like the neoplatonic idea of the abyss, the porous

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[404] Glissant's philosophy of creolization is an ethical call that makes us to gravitate towards "being oneself to be the other, forever and without hope." One opens toward the other not by giving up herself, but by fully becoming herself. Thus, being oneself is equated with being "for the other." On the other hand, the contradicting juxtaposition of "forever" and "without hope" might be understood as evoking passion (forever) for the evanescent truth that disappears at the moment one grasps it (without hope). See, *Poetic Intention*, 201.

boundary lying at the threshold between God and creation in which one finds himself/herself only as entangled with the other? Furthermore, in what way does the other as "the suffering other" reconfigure the texture of the self and the fabric of this self's ethical responsibility? What are the ethical questions that the suffering other raise in the theological space of the mystical abyss?

The political potential Glissant's poetics provides needs a full examination, which I will offer in the next chapter. For now, suffice it to say that he makes crucial contributions to the politicizing of memory and trauma. Glissant suggests a mode of thinking, being, and resisting that is rooted in and instigated by the very abyssal wound of the historical reality. What the decolonized abyss reveals at the bottomless bottom of its depth is not a void that needs to be avoided. Rather, the abyss reveals the fleeting, yet corporeal traces of the other – and so of relation-- which make survival and passage possible. As such, the movement of passage through the abyss then is not solely dependent on the self's radical act and decision, but also on the other, and so on the ties of relation and solidarity which survived the terrifying depth of the traumatic middle. It is in this groundless of horizon of the middle where the intersection between Glissant's decolonial poetics and theopoetics emerges.

Chapter 5. Reconstructing the Groundless Ground

For every poet it is always morning in the world.
History a forgotten, insomniac night;
History and elemental awe are always our early beginning,
because the fate of poetry is to fall in love with the world,
in spite of History.

Derek Walcott, *The Antilles*

With the help of Caribbean decolonial imagination, we are thus able to read the abyss as the space in which spiritual and political experiences converge. The figure of the abyss, thus reconceptualized by the (post)*negritude* thinkers, particularly by Glissant, points to some crucial points that we need to consider for thinking theologically about the self, political urgency, and the possibility of passage. Reflecting theologically about such questions, then, leads to re-thinking God at the crossroad of the neocolonial, capitalist globalization.

First, the abyss becomes the critical site for the gathering or reconstruction of the self and for thinking about the future. The abyss is certainly a crucial constituent in the metaphysical tradition of both negative theology and Hegelian scholarship. However, the trope of the abyss in the colonial world exceeds the metaphysical contour that molds its figurative shape. The abyss, as it is viewed from the middle passage, takes on the shape of the historical continuum. The primary material weaving of its physical texture is altered by the lived experiences and the reality of the community. The urgent, pressing needs for the political reconfiguration of the socio-cultural order are welded of its open and haunting historical wound. This groundlessness grounds the new consciousness, the newly-born self. It is a groundless ground, a groundless middle, which, in Glissant's decolonial poetic, is what we might inscribe in his spirit as the unde(te)rmined ground. This reality leads to the second

point, that the groundless ground, the abyssal middle is constituted by relation. The notion of "passage," as the political possibility offered to the undetermined self, takes, from Glissant's writings, the form of duration; that is, the collective endeavor of enduring, surviving, and becoming by transforming loss and pain into the womb of possibility and a future.

The question that arises then is how to reconstruct the groundless ground that has been undermined and obliterated.[405] Reconstructing the new ground is more than reconstructing the self. It is about reinventing a new idiom for rethinking the very framework that conditions one's form of thinking and inhabiting the world. It amounts to what Glissant calls –drawing upon the marine imagery of an island perspective-- the "submarine roots: floating free, not fixed in one position in some primordial spot."[406] Rather, it emerges as an envisioning of a new mode of inhabiting the creolized landscape passionately, in infinite solitude and unlimited solidarity, at the same time.

This chapter explores the possibilities of reconstructing the groundless ground by the way of what Glissant calls poetics. The reason why poetics occupies a central place in the works of Glissant is not just because the poetic is the only way to resist and reconstruct the collective identity, but also because poetics *is* the very mode of being in the world. In this chapter, I present a comparative reading of contemporary theologians and continental philosophers' "theopoetics" and Glissant's notion of "counterpoetics." While the tradition of contemporary theopoetics developed by American theologians and philosophers of religion evokes the passion for the traces of the divine in the poetic re-articulation of the world, Glissant's counterpoetics seeks for a new root and a center of gravity in the poetic re-construction of the world. There is, in both cases, a commonly shared passion: passion for the

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[405] It needs to be clarified that what has been undermined is the "ground," while its "other," the "groundless" is never fully obliterated or eliminated.

[406] Edouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essay*, translated by Michael Dash (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1989), 66.

ground amidst groundlessness. Nevertheless, despite the shared goal between the trajectories of theopoetics and counterpoetics, the colonial difference from which Glissant's decolonial counterpoetic emerges opens a wider horizon of meaning for poetics in which the spiritual potential immanent to poetics leads one to liberation and solidarity. This is followed by my reading Glisant's counter-poetics in juxtaposition to feminist theologian Catherine Keller's theopoetics, whose *tehomic* theology of becoming and relationality draws an intriguing parallel with Glissant's poetics. Keller's endeavor of divinizing beginning, as an act of decision that is born *ex profundis*, that is, out of the mystical depths provides key language with which to build a theology of the middle (passage), a theology of beginning after loss.

Finally, I examine the theopoetic narratives on the grounds of political theology. As I argued in chapter 1 and throughout this dissertation, political theology in the age of capitalist, neocolonial globalization needs to take the decolonial direction, thus assuming a critical-cosmopolitan agenda. This will allow us to explore both the theological vision and the political potential that (theo)poetics offers for the decolonial, critical-cosmopolitan project emerging from the groundless middle.

Theopoetics: Passion for God

For the philosophical theologians and Glissant, the poetic is the only, if not the best way to set Truth free from its metaphysical and ontological curbs. The poetic deconstructs the dogmatic shell enfolding the event of truth. It indicates the impossibility of signifying the full name of truth. However, such an impossibility is not conducive to resignation but it provides the capacity for the passion for truth. Both the name of God and the excess or the profound intensity of creolized existence repudiates the notion of certainty framing the traditional metaphysical mode of knowledge and representation. Yet, the unspeakable nature of these

events renders poetics, grounded in the mystery of everyday reality and the potential for imagination, a crucial instrument for recreating and reconstructing the self and notion of God.

While the claims of negative theology point to the impossibility of containing the divine name in the limited capacity of human language and logic, it evokes, at the same time, a burning passion for (the name of) God. Theopoetics begins at this juncture of impossibility, as a theological movement that arises from the abyss of the death of God. That is, it was first born in reaction to the death of God theology of the 60's. For this reason, both Stanley Hopper and David Miller suggest that the first step of theopoetics is a "step back," which, subsequently, prompts a "step down."[407] The darkness experienced in the bottom, "and its concomitant bottomlessness" Miller explains, "is requisite to and requires a third step, one which Hopper called step through."[408] He goes on to add that the step through is "a repoeticizing of existence," an act that begs distinction from reading poetry since it refers to "reading everything in life and work poetically."[409]

As the way to begin and rise up from the abyss, theopoetics aims at restoring the missing power of imagination and affect in theo-logic. Amos Wilder affirms that the works of great theologians were instigated by imagination, filled with "plastic and dynamic elements in their thought."[410] It is important to note, however, the fact that the recourse to imagination does not mean walking away from the reality of human experience. Rather, it is about engaging life deeply, by repossessing the mystery of everyday experience. Wilder writes, **"It**

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[407] David Miller, "Theopoiesis: A Perspective of the Work of Stanley Romaine Hopper," in Stanley Romaine Hopper, *Why Persimmons and Other Poems* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987), 4.
[408]Ibid.
[409] Ibid., 4.
[410] Amos Wilder, *Theopoetic: Theology and the Religious Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 25.

is a question rather of heightened sensitivity for which the ordinary transactions of life are

shot through with meaning, with moving charities, and with providence….”[411]

In resonance to the early proponents of theopoetics, the philosopher John Caputo, who

joins the tradition of theopoetics several decades after Amos Wilder and Stanley Hopper,

presents his theopoetic of the “weakness of God” by reinterpreting Derrida’s deconstructive

reading of negative theology. By following Derrida’s rejection of the “metaphysics of

presence,” Caputo’s main aim is to set the “event” (of God) free from the name of God. In

other words, Caputo contends that the name of God does not contain truth (or the event) in

the form of an immutable essence. Rather, he proposes that the uncontainable event is

harbored in the name of God in the form of “a promise to be kept, a call or solicitation to be

responded to, a prayer to be answered, a hope to be fulfilled.”[412] Theology, then, is not the

search for a certain *logos*, a logic that contains the full presence of the eternal God. Rather,

theology is about the passion and prayer for the “event to come,” for the event that solicits,

promises, and calls us to the unknown future.[413] Caputo insists on the significance of poetics

by juxtaposing logic with poetics, side by side, in a contrasting manner. While logic

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[411] Ibid., 106.

[412] John Caputo, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 5.

[413] Caputo’s theological claim is grounded in the philosophical ideas of Jacques Derrida, for whom the “event” of “truth” (if there is such a thing), is not an essence, but always a future and a promise to come. Derrida’s idea of the “messianic,” for instance, differs from historical “messianism” in the sense that the messianic is an absolute future and indeterminate which elides and defers any claim that absolutizes the present form of messianism. “The messianic future is not a future-present and is not sparked by a determinate Messiah; it is not future simply in the sense that it has not as a matter of fact shown up yet, but futural in the sense of the very structure of the future. The messianic future is an absolute future, the very structure of the to-come that cannot in principle come about, the very open-endedness of the present that makes it impossible for the present to draw itself into a circle, to close in and gather around itself,” See John Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997), 162.

interprets the world based on the real occurrences, "a poetic addresses the event of being addressed, not by what actually is but by what is promising."[414] Caputo writes further,

> Poetics interrupts the workings of the real by evoking another possibility, the possibility of the event. In the logic of impossibility, the impossible is something that cannot be, whereas in a poetics, we are hailing an event that is otherwise than being. Poetics is a discourse with a heart, supplying the heart of a heartless world, a discourse with passion and desire (passion ignited by the impossible).[415]

The other pillar that sustains the ontotheological God of metaphysics, besides logic, is the obsessive notion of power married with the idea of God in western metaphysics. Over against the omnipotent God of the traditional religion, Caputo follows the footstep of contemporary theologians and philosophers of religion by proposing the idea of God as a weak force. At the unfathomable edge of our ephemeral language and powerlessness, theopoetics is perhaps an attempt to insist on the "impossible possibility:" an evocation emerging from the darkness of the abyss.[416]

In his more recent work, Caputo develops his theopoetics further, by extending the definition of theopoetics into the wider discourse of radical theology. He argues that as radical theology uproots classical theology, the *logos* of old theology is pulled up and replaced by poetics.[417] If what matters for classical theology and metaphysics is what

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[414] Caputo, *Weakness*, 103.

[415] Ibid.

[416] For Derrida, the "impossible" is not an antithetical concept of possibility, but an "impossible possibility," an impossibility which always "continues to haunt the possibility." See, Jacques Derrida, "A Certain Impossible Possibility of Saying the Event," in W. J. Mitchell and Arnold I. Davidson, eds., *The Late Derrida*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 234.

[417] John Caputo, *The Insistence of God: A Theology of Perhaps* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 63.

something *is*, what matters for Caputo is what it *promises*. In this sense, theopoetics evokes the name of God who is a *call* and a *promise* rather than a God who *is*. It is then passion and desire that keeps the theopoetic hope alive.

Caputo suggests the constructive theological notion of "perhaps." Perhaps refers neither to a guaranteed hope nor to resignation. In this sense, "perhaps" is a groundless ground. It does not *do* anything. "Perhaps" "does not pray or weep; it does not desire anything."[418] Rather, it is "what makes it possible for what exists to take place – or to lose its place."[419] As the groundless ground, "perhaps" exposes the brokenness and the contingency of our existence. Yet, instead of leading us into despair and resignation, "it calls for what is coming, strange and unforeseen though it be."[420] Caputo's notion of perhaps is based on the understanding of the self as emerging from the bottomless abyss. In a way, Caputo's theopoetics bears a significant line of resemblance to Glissant as what Caputo envisages is a poetic response to an "impossible future" from the groundless ground. The strength of Caputo's argument lies in the fact that he strives to "insist" on the seemingly impossible project of saying yes to the future without disregarding the uncertainty and contingency surrounding our lives.

Nevertheless, Caputo's tendency to place the event as an absolutely irreducible alterity beyond name and image risks certain danger of fostering a transcendence perhaps all too familiar to traditional theology and metaphysics. On this point, Catherine Keller questions the event's capacity for reciprocity and relationality: "Does he [Caputo] want the event, as with Moltmann and Levinas, of a transcendent coming that trumps any *emergent* becoming;

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[418] Ibid., 260.
[419] Ibid.
[420] Ibid., 261.

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what comes from an exterior, a sheer alterity."[421] Certainly, Caputo's event is abrupt in its nature as it is completely unpredictable and it shatters the horizon of our expectation. He writes: "Metanoetic time is more discontinuous and abrupt, more shocking and surprising… one that is continually disturbed by the shock of the impossible…"[422] He then adds, "To wait for the event is to be completely surprised and overtaken, that which you are not prepared to."[423]   Again, to move further with Keller's questions, might not this event be a bit too powerful (rather than weak, as Caputo suggests), too unilateral to account to the web of relations constituting both the fabric of the event itself and the horizon of our messy creaturely existence?

Nonetheless, a striking line of comparison is born at this juncture between Caputo and Glissant as the colonial abyss from which Glissant writes is comprised of the very elements that constitute Caputo's event, namely, shock, surprise beyond the expectation, abruptness, and discontinuity. While I turn to Glissant's decolonial poetic later, I conclude, at this juncture, by asserting that Caputo's theopoetics is highly significant for the inquiry that I am pursing here. Caputo's theopoetics shows us very well not only how poetics always arises out of the abyss, but how poetics is a powerful – if not the only -- way of constructing the future, of waving to the impossible, *ex profundis*. It is important to note, however, that Caputo's root in the "depth," is indebted to his reading of Catherine Keller, whose *Face of the Deep* provides a crucial theological (and theopoetic) structure for Caputo's *Weakness of God*.

Theopoetics, for Caputo, is the prayer for help, a prayer born in the bottomless depth. Therefore, prayer as the work of theology, the act of evoking the name of God (and being called by God) does not suggest an appealing step marked with excitement and promise.

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[421] Catherine Keller, "Book Review of John Caputo, The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event," *Cross Currents*, Winter, 2007, 138.
[422] Caputo, *Weakness*, 150.
[423] Ibid., 110.

Rather, for Caputo, the impossibility of prayer is the very condition of prayer. Thus, prayer or

theology arises out of the abyss, as he writes, "I'm praying where it is impossible to pray…

being left without a prayer is the true beginning of prayer."[424] Yet, Caputo's compelling

theopoetic prayer does not seem to succeed to fully break from its somewhat unilateral,

privatizing orientation. Despite his frequent reference to the Other, justice, and love, the

actual form of prayer practiced by Caputo – at least in his writing – rarely makes any

reference to a collective and relational form of practice.

Another important figure in the continental philosophy of religion, Richard Kearney,

working in close dialogue with Derrida and Caputo, also alludes to theopoetics by appealing

somewhat more explicitly to transcendence. Against the traditional theological understanding

that views God only in terms of actuality, Kearney suggests God as *posse*, a possibility. God

is a possible God, a God who may be. The theology that Kearney suggests cannot be

accommodated by ontotheology. Similar to that of Caputo, being yields its place to becoming

in the work of Kearney, while essence loses its privilege over possibility. God contains a

meaning bigger than a mere spiritual significance as Kearney contends that God, as a

possibility and promise, "remains powerless until and unless we respond to it."[425] Kearney's

theopoetics, therefore, renders theology and God an ethical call to action and responsibility. It

is the passion of our desire, response, and action that makes God possible. Thus, the human

pursuit of God is, in a way, a theopoetic of the possible.

In order to counter ontotheology theologically, Kearney suggests an eschatological

approach. Kearney gives God a more concrete contour by locating the kingdom at the

forefront of his theopoetics. Theopoetics, then, is the human response that makes the

possibility of kingdom happen in the world: "the kingdom is possible but we may decide not

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[424] Ibid., 286.
[425] Richard Kearney, *The God who May Be: A Hermeneutics of Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), 4.

to accept the invitation."[426] That is, Kearney's theopoetic is a response to a God who calls us beyond our present, to a promise, a future of possibility. Like Caputo, part of Kearney's agenda is to deconstruct the duality separating the sacred and the mundane, the immanence of everyday experience and the transcendence of revelation. He accomplishes this by arguing that the realizing of kingdom happens by way of participating and being transfigured by the power of God's transcendence.[427] Yet, this is not an appeal to a form of transcendence as an escapist move, a move that leads one away from the embodied experience of our existence. Rather, Kearney shares the same ground with other proponents of theopoetics in that he views the goal of theopoetics as restoring the sacred embedded in the mystery of the mundane experience. If the ontotheological dialectics of the theo-*logic* has enclosed the theo-*logos* into the meta-physical (disembodied) discourse of language and representation, theo-poetics, Kearney argues, humbly surrenders the *logic* of *logos* to the unrepresentable presence of the divine surrounding the embodied experience of the mundane life, the "epiphanies of the everyday."[428]

Despite his shared concern with Derrida and Caputo about rejecting the ontotheological God of Being and seeking a notion of divine that lies beyond image and words, he ultimately disagrees with Derrida-Caputo's deconstructionist direction.[429] The radically transcendent idea of God beyond God, beyond any form, or name without name (desire beyond desire or religion without religion) espoused by Derrida and Caputo possibly suggests some problematic directions in the eyes of Kearney. In a way, I share with Kearney

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[426] Ibid., 110.

[427] Ibid., 5.

[428] Richard Kearney, "Epiphanies of the Everyday: Toward a Micro-Eschatology," in John Panteleimon Manoussakes, edited., *After God: Richard Kearney and the Religious Turn in Continental Philosophy* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006).

[429] While Kearney's critique targets the deconstructionist foundations laid out by Derrida, his major voice of disagreement is directed to Caputo. This is because Derrida acknowledges in many other instances the danger harboring in the radical "undecidability" of the event to come. See, Kearney, *The God who May Be*, 75-77.

a similar ground in my critique of Caputo in that Kearny is also uneasy with the radically abrupt and transcendently indeterminate nature of deconstructionism –or of what (the openness to whatever) "comes" in deconstruction.

The problem for Kearney is that such a gesture takes the risk of indiscrimination. He writes, "if every other is wholly other [as Derrida claims], does it still *matter* who or what exactly the other is?"[430] With his famous claim "*tout autre est tout autre*" (every other is wholly other), Derrida has made a significant turn to ethics and politics. The exclusive nature of the absolute alterity attributed to God or *différance*, in Derrida's parlance, is now extended to the broader horizon: a transition from wholly *other* to *every* other. For Kearney, the problem is that we need to be able to distinguish God from the monster, the good from evil: "God needs to be *recognized* for us to be able to say that it is indeed God we desire."[431] A faith that says yes to the coming event without recognizing what it actually is, might turn into a blind faith that loses "something of the God of love who takes on very definite names, shapes, and actions at specific points in time...."[432]

However, my contention is, to follow Keller's warnings, that the deconstructionist event might lead us into a too transcendent and unilateral direction. Caputo's event or God might, indeed, be the God who solicits us, yet the absolute transcendence of this alterity seems to be little concerned with the myriad web of relations and collective work that precedes and enables our response (prayer). In this regard, Kearney does not present a solid view of relation either. To ask for some clarity and to express concern about the asbolutely "undecidable" and abrupt nature of the event is certainly necessary. It suggests a rather humble gesture distinct from the one suggested by Caputo's Derrideanism. Yet, Kearney's proposal – the poetic of the possible – is constructed upon a rather optimistic affirmation of

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[430] Kearney, *The God who May Be*, 73.
[431] Ibid., 75.
[432] Ibid., 74

the possibility of realizing God's kingdom. He urges us to the ethical responsibility of responding to God that is co-creating the world with God. What is missing is the discussion of *how* to "say yes" to the call in the ruins of despair and devastation. While his insistence on a hearty faith signals an ethical gesture, there is no deep register of negativity in Kearney's theopoetics. Might we not be concerned about the horrendous reality of human experience that impedes us from saying "yes" to the call and making the *posse* (possibility) of God a reality? Distinct from Caputo, the abyss does not figure in Kearney's (theo)poetic of the possible.

Just as both Caputo and Kearney are well aware that one of the primary principles of theopoetics is to be rooted in the actual reality of our embodied existence, Amos Wilder, the early proponent of theopoetics, already suggests that theopoetics be grounded in "creaturehood, [and] embodied humanness."[433] Wilder warns us that theopoetics is neither an escape from the experience of corporeal existence nor a recourse to imagination for its own sake, "the cult of imagination for itself alone; vision, phantasy, ecstasy for their own sakes; creativity, spontaneity on their own, without roots, without tradition, without discipline."[434] Rather, theopoetics emerges out of the struggles of creaturely existence, from the abyss opening between the finitude and the potential witnessed in solitude, "solidarity, and involvement in life-struggles."[435] Rubem Alves, another key figure who shaped the tradition of theopoetics, also adds that theopoetics has its roots in absence, rather than presence. Poetics, then, is the "desperate attempt to say what cannot be said."[436] Thus, theopoetics is the language of abyss. It refers to the desperate "words uttered out of and before void."[437]

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[433] Wilder, *Theopoetic*, 19.
[434] Ibid., 57.
[435] Ibid., 29.
[436] Rubem Alves, *The Poet, The Warrior, The Prophet* (London: SMC Press, 1990) 26.
[437] Ibid., 99.

The Cry of Poetry: Forced/Counter-Poetics

> *The other is not others but my consenting difference.*
>
> *Others are but of morality;*
>
> *in the Other everything is a poetics*

Edouard Glissant, *Poetics of Intention*

What would a poetics arising from the abyss, particularly from the ruins of the colonial abyss, look like? In what ways can poetics materialize a form of existence that aims at solidarity, resistance, and transformation of the wound of the community living in despair and devastation? If theopoetics shows that poetics can offer one –if not the only– compelling way of speaking about God and the future from the abyss of our indeterminate existence, Edouard Glissant's decolonial poetics shows how the poetic, in the colonial abyss, is both a new mode of "inhabiting" the creolized landscape --and a way of opening a creolized future-- and a way of resistance. In Glissant's decolonial poetics, the unreckonable wound of the colonial abyss cracks open on the blurry horizon of the Caribbean shoreline where the sea is not just an indication of the limits of land and history. Rather, the decolonial imaginary of Caribbean thought conceives the sea as the continuation of land and its history. The impasse and the solitude of inhabiting the abyssal shoreline between lack (of language) and excess (of the landscape), between the traumatizing past and the dumbfounded present, between fragmentation and reconstruction, and between suffering and redemption, marks the entire trajectory of Glissant's writings.

More concretely, there are two critical layers of significance weaving Glissant's poetics. First, Glissant's poetics can be understood as an attempt to rebuild the aesthetic of

the Caribbean. The creolized aesthetic, however, begs a further explanation as it signifies more than mere beauty. Rebuilding the creolized aesthetic signifies the search of or the reconstruction of a landscape to fit the newly conceptualized being, namely, the being in *relation* – in relation with others, the larger whole, comprised of history, memory, political vision, spirituality, and cultural identity. Poetics, in Glissant's vision, is neither a choice nor a practice constrained to the linguistic and epistemological realm. Rather, poetics in the Caribbean is the very act of gathering the shards of the fragmented cultural heritage, the exploration of the landscape in excess, the weaving or creating of an entire cosmos for the community in vertigo. The poetic comes before resistance, before any act of agency takes place.

In other words, poetics is the very mode of being in the world. At the same time, poetics reveals the self's relation to the Other as the primordial condition of existence, "for the poetics of relation assumes that to each is proposed the density (the opacity) of the other."[438] What its multiply branching root reveals are the scars holding together the broken pieces of the Caribbean cultural history, the failure of language and of being articulated in terms of essence.   This is, perhaps, why the Glissantian passage of the colonial abyss bears an oddly surprising similarity with the Hegelian passage of the dialectical abyss, for what lies at the center of both of these accounts of passage is the place of the other and its implication for the self.

Second, however, poetics is also resistance. As explored in the previous chapter, Glissant's poetics is born at the intersection of the complexities of colonial history and the on-going reality of (neo)coloniality shaping the present of the Caribbean. The abyss of the middle passage and the slave ship, the central historical symbol framing Glissant's

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[438] Edouard Glissant, *Poetic Intention*, translated by Nathalie Stephens. (Callicoon: Nightboat, 1997), 18.

philosophical imagination, is not only the site of trauma and loss, but the generative matrix or womb that inaugurates the future. Time persists despite loss, just as people who survived the middle passage continue to inhabit the creolized landscape. His primary concern, therefore, involves articulating the paradoxical possibility of identifying the future and its beauty in the groundless middle while constantly remembering and honoring the terrifying memory of the haunting past.

The trope of the abyss, in Glissant's writing, bears multifaceted characters as it is the very groundless ground in which his poetic imagination is rooted. In the figurative image of the slave ship and the middle passage depicted in *Poetics of Relation*, the abyss is linked three times to the unknown. The first one, generated by being thrown into the belly of the boat: "a boat has no belly; a boat does not swallow up, does not devour; a boat is steered by open skies. Yet, the belly of this boat dissolves you, precipitates you into a nonworld from which you cry out."[439] The next abyss surges from the depths of the sea, the unfathomable depth of the ocean marked with the balls and chains tied to the bodies thrown into the water. The third and the last face of the abyss lies in the fading memory, "of all that had been left behind… in the blue savannas of memory and imagination."[440]

These powerful figurative characteristics of the abyss are supplemented by a more comprehensive and concrete account of the abyss presented in the *Caribbean Discourse*. The trope of the abyss carries an extended meaning as it is linked to the questions of history, political reality, language, and cultural identity. Therefore, first and the foremost important question he is grappling with concerns collective identity. The major obstacle is, on the one hand, oblivion. Glissant calls the Martinican history a non-history, for it is characterized by

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[439] Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 6.
[440] Ibid., 7.

radical rupture and discontinuity, while the collective consciousness refuses to remember its history.[441]

> French Caribbean's history is characterized by ruptures and *began with brutal*
>
> *dislocation* (A history, genesis that began with traumatic violence). Our historical
>
> consciousness could not be deposited gradually and continuously like sediment as the
>
> Europeans, but came together in the context of shock, contraction, painful negation,
>
> and explosive forces. This dislocation of the continuum, and the inability of the
>
> collective consciousness to absorb it all, characterize what I call a nonhistory.[442]

However, the question becomes further complicated as the Martinican community lacks the language to speak from its own collective consciousness. This is because, on the one hand, the complexity and the intensity of the traumatic historical reality of the Caribbean (Martinique) cannot find its expression in language; while on the other hand, not only is French a contaminated means of communication from the Martinican perspective, but also because Creole is equally debased. With the reduction of production in Martinique, Creole is no longer, as Michael Dash comments, "the language of responsibility nor of production."[443] Here, Glissant's analysis is extended into the socio-economic structure since a part of the reason for the lack of language is attributed by economy (production).[444]

Nevertheless, Creole represents the potential for resistance. Creole works as a form of poetics, what Glissant calls a "forced poetics" or "counter-poetics," in a situation where "a need for expression confronts an inability to achieve expression."[445] He contrasts forced

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[441] Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, Xxxii.
[442] Ibid., 62.
[443] Ibid., xxii.
[444] Ibid., 173.
[445] Ibid., 120.

poetics with what he calls the "free or natural poetics," a collective yearning for expression that is not opposed either in its content (what they wish) or in its language (means of expression). Forced poetics (Counter-poetics), on the other hand, is the "collective desire for expression that, when it manifests itself, is negated at the same time because of the deficiency that stifles it…."[446] While all poetics emerge, to a certain extent, from the abyss and strive to speak the unspeakable, forced poetics is born in the very concrete abyss of coloniality in which the political, the cultural, and the spiritual dimensions converge. The sense of failure is not only constrained to language and being. Rather, it is the collective consciousness that fails, the socio-cultural reality of the community that is "marked by a kind of impotence, a sense of futility."[447] With forced poetics, Glissant warns us against the optimism that glamorizes poetics. Forced poetics, as represented in Creole folktales, "leaves no room for quiet rest. No time to gaze at things… it hardly concerns itself with appreciating the world… the world is ravaged, entire peoples die of famine or are exterminated."[448] Poetics, in this context, is an inevitable means of resistance and survival. And this is the everyday reality with which the counter-poetics, emerging from the colonial abyss, struggles.

In forced/counter-poetics, the recourse to opacity and relation is key to survival. Glissant claims opacity to be the site of resistance, the right of people born amidst suffering. As such, the unknown is the central characteristic of the abyss as I remarked earlier. The unknown, in Glissant's colonial context, is not merely a mystical site filled with plenitude and surprises. To open the room for a cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary comparison, both Caputo and Glissant share a similar ground in that they evoke a poetic response that insists on the "impossible" or the unspeakable, from the depth. Caputo's "theopoetic event" belongs to the realm of absolute surprise, beyond name, being discontinuous, abrupt, and shocking. Such

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[446] Ibid, 120.
[447] Ibid, 121.
[448] Ibid, 131, 254.

attributes of Caputo's event resemble the "historical event" of the middle passage. In other words, the poetic response Caputo reinvents from the abyss bears striking lines of resemblance with the abyssal trauma with which Glissant is struggling. For the colonial subject standing at the shoreline of the Archipielago, newness comes neither in a glamorous nor an abrupt way. Beginning, for Glissant, is not glamorous or pure. Rather, beginning is lowly, slow, and relational. As noted in chapter 4, the unknown and opaque are constitutive of the new form of knowing or counter-poetics since they expose both the limit of the precarious finitude of human existence and the inscrutable depth of one's entanglement with the unknown others.[449]

In this sense, relation, nurtured by opacity, and born in the groundless middle (passage), is the matrix of being/becoming in the Caribbean. The site of loss becomes the womb for the genesis of new being and metamorphosis, as Celia Britton writes: "The transportation (or middle passage) destroys the idealist conception of being as permanent essence. However, this perdition opens up the possibility of relation instead of essence."[450] The insularity of the island, in this context, carries another meaning, as Glissant puts it, "Ordinarily, insularity is isolation. In the Caribbean, each island embodies openness. The dialectic between inside and outside is reflected in the relationship of land and sea.[451]

To go back to Kearney's question regarding the indeterminate nature of Caputo's event, perhaps, the event that Kearney yearns to be able to distinguish might take the burden of discernability off our shoulders, not through a more recognizable face, but through our ties

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[449] Another important aspect of Glissant's opacity derives from the lack of hinterland in Martinique. Literally speaking, there is no hinterland in Martinique where slaves who fled from the plantation could hide. Historically, there is no local, indigenous culture to which the fugitives can retreat. In other words, there is no cultural hinterland that provides protection for the colonized. See, Celia Britton, *Edouard Glissant and Postcolonial Theory: Strategies of Language and Resistance* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1999), 25.
[450] Britton, *Edouard Glissant*,15.
[451] Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 139.

of relation and solidarity with the suffering of many nameless others. Perhaps, the "ethical handrail" for which Kearney is searching --before saying yes to the event-- finds a hint in Glissant's suggestion: "for the poetic of abyss, the depths are not only the abyss of neurosis but primarily the site of multiple converging paths."[452]

Tehomic Reverberations

In many ways, reconstructing the groundless ground amounts to reconstructing the notion of the divine as the trope of abyss bears theological implications. However, the theological connection inscribed in the inter-textual reading between theopoetics and Glissant's counter-poetics remains yet obscure. Then, what kind of theological implications can be drawn from Glissant's counter-poetics? How do we draw the connection between the secular form of mystical philosophy, entangled with the complex knot of historical reality and the theological (re)construction of abyss?

Glissant's poetics finds, in my reading, a surprising parallel and resonance in Catherine Keller's theopoetics. Drawing on the Hebrew word *tehom*, the depth or the primordial water of creation in Genesis 1.2, Keller presents in *Face of the Deep* a constructive theology of creation that redefines creation as becoming in the multiplicity of beginning. She traces not only the theological tradition but also the Western literary and philosophical traditions that have fostered a strong abomination of depth (*tehom*ophobia) and its associated image of darkness. The theological consequence of this, according to Keller, is the edification of the unquestionable doctrine, the Truth that "everything is created not from

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[452] Ibid., 66.

some formless and bottomless something (abyss) but from nothing: an omnipotent God could have created the world only *ex nihilo*."[453]

Keller's tehomic theology of becoming suggests the abyssal "Deep" beneath the water of creation as the womb or "the site of becoming as *genesis*."[454] In other words, the abyss, for Keller, is the very womb and the matrix on which each and every new act of becoming takes place (begins) in/with God. By deconstructing the linear notion of origin that inscribes a cosmology with a clear beginning and end, Keller proposes the idea of beginning as the new imagery of creation. Therefore --and this is where the line of similarity between Glissant and Keller opens up-- every beginning is abyssal: "*Tehom* is inscribed… not before the beginning, but *in* it."[455] Common to both authors is the metaphor of the depth of the sea as it denotes the abyss, which, for both authors, signifies the middle space of becoming: the womb that gives life to a new beginning/becoming which, at the same time, is the horizon haunted by the innumerable number of deaths (Glissant) or "missed possibilities" (Keller). Creation – of the cosmos including the creation of a new (creolized) race and of the self— in this sense, refuses to belong to a pure timeless origin of "before." Rather, creation belongs to the time-relation bound flow of ever new beginnings.

However, just as every beginning is haunted by irretrievable loss for Glissant, for Keller too, each beginning "is a beginning that is always haunted by a cloud of missed possibilities."[456] This is because any beginning, every actualization of possibility entails decision/choice, therefore, a sense of loss. In other words, at the moment of beginning/creating/becoming in which certain possibilities are chosen, there are other

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[453] Catherine Keller, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (London: Routledge, 2003), xvi.
[454] Ibid., 12.
[455] Ibid., 158.
[456] Ibid., 160.

possibilities that are excluded and missed. *Tehom* is the depth, the difference that enfolds and unfolds those possibilities. She writes,

> A cloud of missed possibilities envelops every beginning: it is always *this* beginning, *this* universe and *not* some other. Decision lacks innocence. Around its narrations gather histories of grievance: what possibilities were excluded? The darkness over the deep precedes the beginning. The cries of loss –*de profundis*—disrupt the confidence of total origin in a secure end. A wound to the text, *vulnus*, *vulva* of the text, gapes open, *ginan*, at the beginning of the canon.[457]

Keller's tehomic theopoetics emerges, as any other (theo)poetics, from the abyss preceding creation/beginning. Like Caputo and Kearney, she too, in a way, insists on the impossible, the seemingly impossible task of speaking of that which surpasses image and speech, of setting the divine free from the metaphysical constraints of *logos*. However, Keller's theopoetics goes beyond the appeal to decisions for ethical actions or the linguistic practice of poetics/prayer. Rather, she seeks the trace of the divine in the grace of "relations" that emerge, endure, and survive each loss, thus leading us to ever new beginnings at the site where previous acts of becoming ended. The burden of impossibility alleviates, and so thus the gap between human and divine as the abyss enclosing each act of new beginning/creation, reveals "this self-organizing relation" to be the very possibility of God. Even this abyss (*tehom*) can not be identified with "God nor with the All." She writes: "It signifies rather their relation: the *topos* of Creation."[458]   *Tehom*, therefore, "remains neither God nor not-God, but the depth of God."[459] For both Keller and Glissant, relation is self-organizational

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[457] Ibid.
[458] Ibid, 227.
[459] Ibid.

and born in the abyss, the depth of the ocean. Relation is the very sign and the means of survival in the bottomless ocean of "the middle." In its mystery of the unknown, we transform the unfathomable bottom of the ocean filled with loss into the womb of possibility, and of new beginnings.

Beginning… and the Theology from the Middle

The tehomic theopoetic, while iconoclastic in its deconstruction of ontotheology, does not turn to a radically transcendent and abrupt event to come or an optimistic prospect of "the possible." Rather, tehomic theopoetics turns to the surface of immanence, to the myriad web of relations constituting the known and the unknown, what precedes, what is there, and what is to come. Nevertheless, the self-organizing matrix of relation necessitates "decision." Theopoetics *is* decision. As Keller writes, becoming requires the political act of decision: "any form of actualization takes the form of a decision."[460] While acknowledging that the womb and the matrix of our becoming emerges from the web of relations, she claims that the difference, the possibility of salvation out of the ceaseless continuation of becoming –which may end up in meaningless death—lies in *decision*.[461]

Likewise, for Glissant, beginning is an act of decision, a political act of searching for a new center of gravity and founding a new ground (groundless ground) -- for the new world to emerge. Commenting on Glissant's poetics of relation, Stanka Radovic also asserts, "To begin is an act of gravity and an act of responsibility, especially if a new world is about to begin."[462] Poetics, in this sense, is an act of politics. This is even more so if this poetics is a forced-poetic emerging from the context of political struggle. Therefore, all (ethno)poetics,

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[460] Ibid., 226.
[461] Keller, 227.
[462] Stanka Radovic, "The Birthplace of Relation in Edouard Glissant's Poetique de la Relation," *Callaloo*, vol 30, number 2, Spring 2007, 475.

Glissant argues, "must face up to the political situation."[463] For a poetics born as a response

to the urgent experience of collective struggle, it is not enough to set "saving language" as its

only goal. Rather, "it will be necessary to transform the *conditions of production* and release

thereby the potential for total, technical control by the Martinican of his country, so that the

language may truly develop."[464] A counter-poetic means more than transforming language

and symbol. Its transformative imagination is rooted in and geared towards the concrete

material conditions that determine the survival of the community.

The poetics of/about God, theopoetics finds its theological possibility at this juncture.

Its horizon is the abyss; its first step always takes place from the ruins, from the innumerable

losses haunting the new possibility; its goal is beginning, beginning in the groundless middle.

Beginning is an ethical act and a political move. Beginning is the founding of the new

ground, (re)constructing the groundless ground as the soil of a new mode of being, in which

both God and creation, *become*. Perhaps, to take one step further, with the theopoetic

imagination, we might be able to envision the notion of the divine itself differently. Keller

provides the key insight here as she brings Derrida's reading of the medieval mystic Angelus

Silesius into conjunction with the Jewish mystical tradition. She intertwines Silesius' claim

that "the place is the word," and "the place and the word is one,"[465] with the Jewish

mysticism that views God as place. According to Keller, the medieval Rabbi Jacob ben

Sheshet associates the Hebrew word *bet* of *bereshit*, (beginning) the opening of the verse of

Genesis 1.1, with "house" (*bayit*):

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[463] Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 133.
[464] Ibid. (Emphasis mine).
[465] Keller, *Faced of the Deep*, 167. Originally cited in Jacques Derrida, *On the Name*
(Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 104.

The Holy One, blessed be He, is the abode of the universe, and the universe is not His

abode. Do not read [the letter bet], but rather "house," as is said "With Wisdom the

house will be built." (Proverbs 24.3)[466]

In this way, Keller builds the metonymic connection among the three

seemingly different notions: God is not only revealed as place and house, but also

beginning. In other words, beginning is an act of founding the place/house, an act of

grounding, which is, at the same time, *divine*. Certainly, as David Miller reminds us,

the ancient root of theopoetics, poeticizing of the divinity, comes from *theopoiesis*, "a

term meaning 'deification,' 'making God,' 'making Divine.'"[467] Might we not, then,

say that the inaugurating of the ground, the place/house for the newly born-relational

self from the colonial abyss, is divine in itself?

The various thinkers examined in this chapter point out that poetics might be

one way of carrying the impossible task of reconstructing the self in the abyss. Seen

from the colonial abyss, poetics is the very mode of being in the world, a mode of

inhabiting the land(scape) and time differently, which, in return, opens a creolized

future. In the colonial abyss, every poetics is a forced-poetics, a counter-poetics, one

that binds the spiritual and the political, history and future, the divine and the

mundane. The middle passage bears the invisible presence of the drowned bodies. Not

only bodies, but memories, and names too are drowned in the depth of the ocean, and

so does the name of God: the ontotheological deity of metaphysics. Beginning,

therefore, takes namelessness "as a condition of beginning."[468]

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[466] Jacob ben Sheshet of Gerona, "The Books of Faith and Reliance," in *The Early Kabbalah*, 126. Cited in Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 167.
[467] Miller, *Theopoiesis*, 8.
[468] Drabinski, *Levinas and the Postcolonial,*148.

The bottomless depth of this terrifying ocean, is, however, a "womb abyss" that gives birth to people, to the life that goes on and persists, after catastrophe. The trauma of the middle passage gives birth to people without reference. However, and paradoxically, this suffering, the suffering self and his/her shared experience with the "suffering other" hints at the possibility of survival and transformation. And it is poetics that makes one realize his/her entanglement with others by opening oneself to the other, by revealing "that this [illimitable] sea exists within us with its weights of now revealed islands."[469] The insularity of the island reveals one's separation from others, yet, just as each island embodies an openness, this insularity shows one's unbreakable connection with others. In this way, poetics capacitates the "passage," from loss to life, from death to womb. It discovers in the ties of relation and solidarity the potential for transforming the unde(te)rmined middle into a root of new possibility: "the creativity and solidarity   that will make rootlessness more tolerable, make the present void   more negotiable."[470]   Might this poetics of the abyss and the opening of the door to relation and solidarity help us take on a cosmopolitan political project or a cosmopolitical account in which we might, perhaps, envision a theology where both the name of God and the name of the shattered self or the dismantled community find their future in each other? In what ways might the poetics from the ruins of the abyss inform our cosmopolitical consciousness in the age of neocolonial globalization?

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[469] Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 139.
[470] Ibid., 112.

Towards a Decolonial, (Cosmo)Political Theology

As I outlined in chapter 1, cosmopolitanism is a social/political idea based on the Stoic notion of the "citizen of the world." To this is added the Kantian idea of "hospitality," thus making cosmopolitanism one of the most important political discourses for advocating the equal rights of transnational/dislocated subjects in the age of globalization.

Situating cosmopolitanism within the ongoing socio-political processes of globalization, Ulrich Beck contends that the question to be asked in an age where the traditional notion of nation-state is no longer able to give definition to the global order, "is not how to revive solidarity, but how solidarity with strangers, among non-equals can be made possible."[471] Beck provides a helpful definition of political cosmopolitanism which defies the traditional political framework of nation-state for thinking about the ethical questions of human rights, migration, and ethnicity. Lying behind his investment in political cosmopolitanism is the philosophical and ethical concern for the "otherness" of the other. The discourse of cosmopolitanism arises, Beck writes, out of the question of "how to handle otherness and boundaries during the present crisis of global interdependency"[472] Beck rightly points out the tension present in the idea of cosmopolitanism with regard to universalism and relativism, that is, setting up a universal principle of respect for others might lead to the erasure of particularity/difference. Therefore, the main question lies on how to find the fine balance of founding a universal principle of equality while not falling into the trap of imperialism/colonialism.

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[471] Ulrich Beck, "The Cosmopolitical Perspective: Sociology of the Second Age of Modernity," *British Journal of Sociology* Vol 1, Issue 1 (January/March 2000), 92.
[472] Urich Beck, "The Truth of Others: A Cosmopolitan Approach," *Common Knowledge*, Vol 10, Issue 3, Fall 2004:430.

Cosmopolitanism or what he calls realistic cosmopolitanism defies, Beck contends, the either/or proposition, which is a false set of alternatives.[473] Rather, cosmopolitanism seeks a contextualized universalism. What are these basic universal norms that transcend the complex boundaries of contextual/cultural difference? Beck gives us a concrete list of what such principle looks like by telling us what cosmopolitanism rejects: "dictatorial standardization, violation of human dignity, and of course, crimes against humanity such as genocide, slavery, and torture."[474] Beck's influential work on cosmopolitanism, however, does not address the crucially important question of coloniality underlying modernity and contemporary phenomenon of globalization. As I emphasized in chapter 1, following the warning of Mignolo, critical cosmopolitanism must by necessity take a decolonial direction. In other words, cosmopolitan conviviality and solidarity cannot be envisioned without addressing the deep-seated structure of violence configuring the global order of Euro-American hegemony and capitalist dominion: violence practiced by the history of colonialism and the on-going reality of neocolonialism; violence effectuated by the ever-spreading force of capitalist globalization. Put differently, as it is the case with many other contemporary discussions of cosmopolitanism, it is not clear whether Beck's cosmopolitanism takes a critical stance toward the "cosmopolitanism of capitalism."[475] It is worth to remember David Harvey's point –already discussed in chapter 1—that sometimes, it is not clear whether cosmopolitanism is a counter-narrative against globalization or a mere reflection of it. We might also benefit from reiterating Mignolo's point regarding cosmopolitanism that modern (Kantian)

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[473] Ibid., 438.
[474] Ibid., 439.
[475] Paul Gilroy, "Planetarity and Cosmopolitics," *The British Journal of Sociology* 2010, Vol 61, Issue 3, 622.

discourse of cosmopolitanism stands in continuation with the age-old western

Christian agenda of *Orbis Christianus* (the Christian cosmos), which dates back to the

ancient Roman Empire. This means, in other words, without seriously engaging

coloniality, cosmopolitanism can easily fall into the trap of imperialism and

triumphalism which extends the rationally advanced ideal of equality and to the

"inferior" others.[476]

In the final chapter of this dissertation, after having articulated the abyss from

the standpoint of coloniality and the immeasurable suffering caused by political

trauma and violence, we might, perhaps, take a different approach to political

theology in light of cosmopolitanism, and decolonial poetics. With the insights drawn

from the neoplatonic mystics, Hegel, Butler, Fanon, Glissant, and Keller, among

many others, we witness a decolonial (cosmo)political theology emerge from the

(theo)poetics of the abyss.

Cosmopolitics begs a distinction from the kind of cosmopolitanism that

naively assumes "one cosmos" as something that already exists out there and as

something that serves as the ground of conviviality. Cosmopolitics grounds itself on

the understanding that the common world is not something to be "discovered," as

something to be taken for granted. It refuses, therefore, to be a mere description of the

cosmopolitan state of the globalized capital or/and the elitist ideal of transnationalism

accompanying it. Rather, as Bruno Latour suggests, commenting on Beck's

cosmopolitanism, cosmopolitics seeks to build the common world from below, "from

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[476] Similarly, Sheldon Pollock, Homi Bhabha, Carol Breckenridge, and Dipesh Chakrabarty also warn against this danger as they write, in their introduction to the special issue on "cosmopolitanisms" in *Public Culture* that cosmopolitanism needs to draw a clear line of distinction from "other more triumphalistic notions of cosmopolitan existence" because "modernity has never fallen short of making universalist claims to world citizenship." See, Sheldon Pollock, Homi Bhabha, Carol Breckenridge, and Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Introduction: Cosmopolitanisms," *Public Culture*, Vol 12, Number 3, Fall 2000:581.

scratch."[477] Just as counter-poetics begins in the middle of the abyss, cosmopolitics emerging from the colonial abyss, begins from the ruin, from below, by co-creating the world of cosmopolitan justice and solidarity with others. Cosmopolitical theology as a counter-colonial narrative would refuse any utopic understanding of the "common cosmos" as a given, realized, and finalized notion. The process of its construction is perennially accompanied by deconstruction. Its making is also its unmaking in that it is an open project, always in process, always becoming. Cosmopolitical theology affirms the power of both the cosmos to resist reduction and the people who, however fractured, fragmented, traumatized, or displaced, gather themselves and begin, and thus (re)build the cosmos from the ruin. Within this cosmopolitical scheme, the name of God cannot be limited to the realm of the unnamable divorced from the political struggle of the community. Rather, the unnamable name of the divine might signal the very condition, the abyssal ruin from which we construct a new cosmopolitan future and a new, decolonized name/image of God.

Every beginning is an act of *theopoiesis*, a divine act. This is because every beginning is a new beginning and it c*reates* the self and founds the ground, constructing the groundless middle as the site of a new beginning yet to emerge. This is not, however, divine in the traditional theological sense. The divine that I propose here along with the contemporary theopoets and Glissant is divorced from the sovereign, omnipotent divine agency. Rather, the divine in the colonial abyss takes a relational, self-organizational, and collective form.

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[477] Bruno Latour, "Whose Cosmos, Which Cosmopolitics: Comments on the Peace Terms of Ulrich Beck," *Common Knowledge* 10:3, 2004:462.

Life or the self is born in this middle: a groundless horizon of becoming in which the hope of new life or new becoming is conceived right where the previous act of becoming ended. Each loss is irredeemable. Death and suffering might seem to prevail. Nevertheless, the irreparability of loss need not effect the resignation to justice and of the possibility of restoring the self. Rather, the abyssal middle is also the womb in which the shared experience of suffering gives rise to a sense of collective identity pregnant with a futural vision of relationality. The "event" of God might then be glimpsed upon this groundless horizon of the fragmented self. There it is that we may envision the cosmopolitical possibility of reconstructing or re-*collect*-ing the self in the *collect*ive work of bearing the weight of the unbearable past and gazing upon the unknown future.

Conclusion

In Beyond *Good and Evil*, Friedrich Nietzsche writes, "when you stare for a long time into an abyss, the abyss stares back into you."[478] The journey that I have taken in this dissertation can be read, perhaps, as an act of staring into the abyss. Perhaps, to be more accurate, the trajectory that my inquiry has taken through the chapters of this dissertation might be better described as "plunging into" the abyss, rather than just gazing on it. As I have been consistently arguing, the abyss, after all, cannot be restrained to matters of epistemology. Rather, it signals an ontological question. What does, then, the abyss that stares back at us look like? What happens to us as we gaze upon the abyss and as it gazes back upon us?

My answer, to echo the central argument in this dissertation, is that the self is transformed, born anew as s/he goes through the unfathomable valley of the abyss. This is not, as I hope has become evident, some refreshed version of the all-too-familiar story of a triumphalistic theology. Rather, this reading of the abyss has pointed to the ceaseless movement of the dialectical tension lurking at the heart of the indeterminacy structuring the self. This implies, first, that the self and its world are not constituted by an immutable, prefigured substance, but an open-ended process made of the relentless unfolding of a dialectical oscillation. The self emerges through the process of becoming, always in relation to the other. Second, the *dialectical* movement does not indicate a resignation or passive surrender to the unknown. Rather, it points to the arduous labor of the self to take on the movement of passage, the passage from the negative to the positive, from limit to possibility,

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[478] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, ed. Rolf Peter and Judith Norman Horstmann, trans. Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 69.

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from death to life. It is to this resilience of the self and his/her act of the passage that the accounts of the abyss in both the neoplatonic/medieval mysticism and the Hegelian dialectic testify.

Nevertheless, the question that is somewhat overlooked in these accounts is what happens when the self is not just a metaphysical notion of a disembodied self, but a contextualized self, a racialized and sexualized self? Do the modes and forms of the passage take the same shape or trajectory for the different selves entangled and conditioned by various forms of power relations infused with violence and foreclosure? Is the passage or the reconstruction of the self even possible at all for certain subjects?

These questions become crucial for thinking about theology in the era of capitalist, neocolonial globalization. It is then by staring at the abyss of the traumatic historical womb of modernity, that is, the middle passage, that I am proposing the possibility of a decolonial cosmopolitical theology conceived upon the horizon of the colonial difference. The long journey of conversation with multiple intersecting voices in this dissertation leaves us with a complex idea of the self, the subject, and God, through which our previous understanding of the self and of the world is undone.

The theological and political potential of the overlooked figure of the abyss has then been lurking all along in the theological thought of the mystics in which ontotheology yields to a relational understanding of God, just as the apophatic gesture of mystical theology hints at the failure of ontology. The neoplatonic abyss, a constitutive element structuring the self and its relation to God, becomes, in the Hegelian dialectic, the ethical threshold that opens and mediates the self's place in relation to its exteriority ingrained at the heart of itself, namely, the other. If the ethico-political significance of the passage in the abyss is highlighted by Hegel, the Caribbean decolonial thought has shown us that the actual possibility of such passage for the contextualized self is only possible as a collective act, through the persistent

force of Relation that survives the unfathomable depth of the middle passage. Thus reconceived, the theological possibility of the relational self inaugurated in the middle passage lies in its act of beginning, that is, constructing the groundless middle as the ground for a new future. As we stare at the abyss and as the abyss stares back at us, perhaps, we lose ourselves for a creolized self yet to be created on the ever-unfolding horizon of the groundless middle. It is perhaps here where the boundary between the human and the divine dissolves, at this juncture of exile in the groundless middle, between the absolute solitude and the inexhaustible ties of our solidarity with the suffering other.

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