



**From an Idolatry of Identity
to a Planetization of Alterity:**

A Relational-Theological Approach to Hybridity, Sin, and Love

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This essay is co-written by two theologians: one trained in process theology and one in postmodern theology. Our aim is to show how the themes of alterity, love and sin might be addressed simultaneously in a way that might best be called a poststructural, relational theology. Guided by process theology and postcolonial theory, contemporary theologians such as Catherine Keller (US) and Namsoon Kang (Korea), for example,

each point toward a distinctively postcolonial way of understanding these themes.¹

Alterity can name the creative and relational singularity of each human being as he or she manages multiple roles and identities. The anthropologist Martin Sokefeld speaks of this creative and relational singularity as the “self” and insists that, while it is indeed individuated, it is not a Cartesian self cut off from social relations but instead the ongoing activity of negotiating those relations by assuming different identities – some assigned and some chosen – in different contexts.²

Thus understood, each person is an active and ongoing hybridization of felt relations: unique and not collapsible into abstractions or representations and yet essentially related to others. As Homi Bhabha points out, this process of hybridization – or hybridizing, as we prefer – can be conflicted or painful but it is always new: not unlike the way in which, in process theology, every moment of concrescence is a new moment. Alfred North Whitehead and Gilles Deleuze lend support to this point of view by showing how persons are not identical but different, and how repetition of the past constructs identity out of differences in a process of becoming. Informed by a process orientation of this sort, Deleuze critiques the philosophy of representation; and his critique, along with Whitehead’s point of view, has implications for ethics and politics.

1 See Nansoom Kang, “Who/What is Asian? A Postcolonial Theological Reading of Orientalism and Neo-Orientalism,” and Catherine Keller, “The Love of Postcolonialism: Theology in the Interstices of Empire,” in *Postcolonial Theologies: Divinity and Empire*, edited by Catherine Keller, Michael Nausner, and Mayra Rivera (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2004).

2 See Martin Sokefeld, M. Azam Chaudhary, Henk Driessen, Katherine Pratt Ewing, Martin Fuchs, David N. Gellner, Brian D. Haley, Jeannette Mageo, Mines Mattison, Nigel Rapport, G. Schlee, Martijn Van Beek, and Pnina Werbner, “Debating Self, Identity, and Culture in Anthropology [and Comments and Reply],” *Current Anthropology* 40, no. 4 (8).

From a Deleuzian and Whiteheadian perspective, the heart of responsible activity in the world lies in constructing our own subjectivities differently, moment by moment, in ways that are responsive to others who are likewise constructing their identities differently moment by moment. If others are to be loved, our love for them entails sensitivity to their hybridity and the fluidity of their own subjectivity, recognizing that the construction and production of subjectivity is also partially caught up in oppressive structures of domination, dehumanization and depersonalization. Our aim, then, is to develop some of these reflections further, with particular reference to the three themes of alterity, sin and love. The essay is divided into five sections: (1) Postcolonial Theologies and Ecology, (2) Cultural Globalization as Context for Hybridity, (3) Alterity, Sin and Love, (4) Poetics of Relation and the Politics of Love, and (5) the Manyness of God as Empathic Alterity.

I. Postcolonial Theologies and Ecology

Postcolonial theologies can be understood in various ways. While we do not wish to define such theologies in a rigid way, we do want to take note of some characteristics that many of them possess. These are characteristics of what we ourselves mean when we use the phrase postcolonial theologies.

First, as the very word *postcolonial* suggests, postcolonial theologies are interested in unveiling and critiquing dominant forms of western discourse, operative during the colonial period, which functioned to silence the voices of the marginalized. Of course colonialism still exists in many parts of the world, and even where it does not exist explicitly, colonial and neo-colonial economic situations and patterns of thought

persist. Thus “postcolonial” does not simply mean after the colonial but rather an alternative to the colonial. Wherever people are colonized by others, there is a need for postcolonial theology.

Second, and by implication, postcolonial theologies are interested in the possibility, not only that marginalized people might find their voices and take their place in the sun, but also that people in power might listen to their voices and be changed by what they hear. In the tradition of Martin Luther King Jr. they place their trust in the possibility of what process theologians such as John Cobb call the creative transformation of individuals and communities as people listen to one another in a spirit of mutual respect.

Third, as a consequence of this interest in creative transformation, postcolonial theologies seek to alter conversations among academics in two ways: deconstructive and constructive. On the one hand they seek to clear intellectual space of problematic ways of thinking which neglect, obscure or appropriate subaltern voices; and, on the other, they seek to construct alternative intellectual spaces – tentative, inclusive and open-ended – which are conducive to the emergence of communities which are creative, compassionate, equitable, culturally diverse, and socially just, with no one left behind. Following King, let us speak of these communities as beloved communities.

Fourth, and as a consequence of this commitment to beloved communities, postcolonial theologies eschew theologies of sameness: that is, theologies which overemphasize unity at the expense of plurality, consensus at the expense of disagreement, unanimity at the expense of differences. When it comes to religion, then,

postcolonial theologies favor polydoxy over orthodoxy, religious pluralism over religious exclusivism. They recognize that diversity itself can be complementary rather than contradictory, and that complementary diversity adds richness to life and culture.

Fifth, and as a corollary to this delight in diversity, postcolonial theologies are distrustful of rigid categories of other-identification and self-identification, insofar as the categories themselves mask the creative subjectivity which lies within each “other” human being and also within the one who encounters that “other.” For postcolonial theologies the singularity of each human being is a creative and multiple singularity: that is, a singularity which is becoming new at every moment and partly constituted by felt relations with others.

Sixth, given the differences among people, sometimes complementary and sometimes competing, postcolonial theologies recognize that meaningful approximations of beloved community require, not only interests in the cultivation of character and personal virtue, but also a politics of love. A politics of love develops out of the idea that love itself is not simply a relationship between individual people but also a quality of concern that can inform groups of people as they interact with one another and have competing interests.

Seventh, and importantly, a politics of love requires the honest recognition that existing systems of governance and economic activity, including capitalism, require critique. Postcolonial theologies find value in Marxian and neo-Marxian modes of analysis which reveal the destructive aspects of capitalist social arrangement and thus help clear space for more positive approaches to social life.

These seven characteristics may or may not fit the image of postcolonial theologies which readers share, but they do indicate eight commonalities which we – the authors of this essay – share. To these seven characteristics we would add an *eighth*. It is that, in our time, postcolonial theologies need to have an ecological dimension.

Influenced by the ecological dimensions of process thought, we propose that a beloved community includes the more-than-human world within the horizons of its concern; and a politics of love rightly includes respect for the interests of other living beings, not just human beings. In the dominant forms of western discourse that prevailed in colonial times, and that prevail in many settings today, the voices of animals and plants, mountains and rivers, trees and stars were too often unheard. They were considered mere backdrop for the modern adventure of progress and industrialization: mere resources held in standing reserve, to use the language of Heidegger. A postcolonial theology for our time needs to be, in the words of Catherine Keller, a planet-sensitive or planetary theology. This does not mean that concerns for human well-being must be subordinated to ecological concerns, but rather that people in different parts of the world, and in different ways, can seek ways of creating communities that are ecologically wise as well as socially just. In pre-planetary or modernist thinking, these words and phrases will be understood in strictly humanistic ways: that is, as referring only to human beings. In the more planet-sensitive and postcolonial thinking of Catherine Keller, however, they will be understood more ecologically.³ Human creativity can be understood as an act of

³ See Keller, “The Love of Postcolonialism,” 239-40.

collaborating with a creativity that is also found in the natural world; human compassion includes the humane treatment of other animals; and the respect for diversity will include a respect for biological diversity. The hope of postcolonial theology is for meaningful approximations of beloved community to be ecologized.

Who, then, can develop postcolonial theologies? Perhaps it goes without saying that the most important developers among such theologies are those who speak out of the *experience of being colonized*, or out of *memories of such experience*, because they, more than others, understand clearly the kind of silencing that has so often been part of the dominant discourse. We cannot pretend that we are among the subaltern of the world. Our postcolonial theology is a second-order discipline. The best we can do, in an essay of this sort, is to undertake a bit of the deconstructive space clearing and alternative space making described above, hopeful that in some way that complement the space clearing and space making of those whose experience lies closer to the ground. This clearing of space involves a kind of de-colonization in its own right: namely the liberation of the theological imagination from certain assumptions which get in the way of hearing. Another way to put it, in the words of Deleuze and Guattari, is to say that our effort is to affirm postcolonial theology as “a minor intensive use of a major language.”⁴ That is, we strive to make what generally passes for a majoritarian theology in the heart of the West, at the American Academy of Religion, uttered by tenured white males, appear more minoritarian, more of a stumbling block. Such is our aim in this essay.

⁴ See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 16.

II. Cultural Globalization as a Context for Hybridity

We best proceed by naming the larger context in which postcolonial thinking now emerges: cultural globalization.

By *cultural globalization* we mean the process amid which (1) ideas, images, attitudes, and practices originating in one geographical area, or in one transnational community such as religious community, are abstracted from their original contexts, such that they (2) circulate within and across many other lands and cultures by means of migrations, the internet, films, books, television, radio, and education, and (3) are then being replanted in other lands, where they are combined with cultural traditions with which they were previously dissociated. Anthropologists of globalization speak of the process of their abstraction from original settings as de-territorialization and their re-embodiment in other settings as re-territorialization, terms taken from Deleuze and Guattari as well as the French theorist Paul Virilio. When the ideas are combined in novel ways in other settings, whether in the lives of individuals or communities, a certain kind of *hybridity* emerges. By hybridity we mean the creative integration, or holding together, of ideas, images, attitudes and practices which come from diverse and previously dissociated settings.

From the perspective of Whitehead and Deleuze, there is an important sense in which human subjectivity within any given period of history has been an activity of developing hybrid identities, insofar as individuals and communities have constructed their subjectivities in response to multiple influences that have shaped their lives. This

means that hybridity within the context of cultural globalization in the 21st century is an expression of, not an exception to, a deeper hybridity that has been occurring within the lives and minds of people in all historical periods. Moreover, hybridity goes all the way down: it is an activity which lies within atoms and molecules, animals and plants, planets and stars – even as it also occurs within human beings. Still it is with *contemporary* expressions of hybridity that we are most concerned as we write this essay. One of the first to use the term as an analytic category was the literary theorist Homi Bhabha, who used it to name the conflicted forms of subjectivity that emerged among colonized peoples in India who internalized norms from British colonizers as well as their own inherited traditions.⁵ Bhabha was impressed with their creativity but he did not romanticize it as if it were happy or pleasant. Since Bhabha, the word has taken on a history of its own, in which it has been embraced, critiqued and reinterpreted. Our own use of the word in this essay is an example of such amplification. We think it important to distinguish different kinds of hybridity: conscious and unconscious, intended and imposed, conflicted and harmonious, healthy and unhealthy. Cultural hybridity is harmful when (1) it robs local traditions from their last vestiges of self-identity, when (2) it results in a false and shallow cosmopolitanism which is aloof from the poor and powerless of our world, and when (3) it results in people becoming too wide and porous in their own perspectives, but somehow losing a sense of personal moorings, as seen when people are open-minded but lack any kind of personal center for their lives.

Additionally and importantly, we want to emphasize that the very word “hybridity” is

⁵ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge), p.277.

misleading if it suggests the impure product of two formerly pure ingredients. All cultural traditions have emerged as combinations of insights and practices which were once separated but then combined.

Given these caveats, though, the word hybridity is helpful if it suggests a creative blending of ideas, images and practices from different cultural traditions in ways that are common in many parts of the world today. And the very idea of hybridity can even function as a normative ideal for people who might otherwise be enclosed, and perhaps even trapped, within rigid self-identities which lead them to create unnecessary boundaries between themselves and others. For people in this situation, hybridity is not simply descriptive it is also prescriptive. Hybridity is not simply a name for the way things are, it is also a name to talk about the way things ought to be.

Complementary to cultural globalization and its attendant hybridity, then, is the localization of globalization or, for short, *glocalization*. It is the process amid which people in local regions adopt and adapt global images, ideas, and practices from other settings into their local conditions, thus creating new kinds of localities that are a combinations of, for example, tradition and modernity. It is re-territorialization in action, and it is always improvisational. The particular ways in which people in local regions adopt and adapt global images, ideas, and practices are not entirely predictable, because the future is not-yet decided. Thus hybridity is always a local affair, it is always in process, and it is never subject to rigid categorization. It lies at the heart of what above we called the creative and multiple *singularity* of each individual. In the next section we explore the implications of this idea for alterity, sin and love.

III. Alterity, Sin and Love

The fact of hybridity means that we are not simply ourselves in any simple, immediate or identical way. The point is not that we lack any identity, but that identity is hybrid and multiple; it is created in and as difference: a *difference* from who we have been in the past, from who we will be in the future, from others who are different from us. Our hybridity is our alterity; and so it is for the hybridity of others, too. The idea that alterity is *creative* hybridity, and that this hybridity is never contained by pre-existing forms, has implications for how we think about sin and love.

Following Catherine Keller, sin can be understood as the act of making idols of identities: that is, clinging to identities as if they defined a person, such that relational differentiation is replaced by artificial isolation or suffocating sameness. In *The Face of the Deep*, Keller asks: “Is *blockage* the problem—rather than a shame-and-blame model of sin?”⁶ This understanding of sin as blockage or blocking of identities is consonant with Deleuze’s critique of a philosophy of identity and emphasis upon difference in repetition. In *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze distinguishes two forms of repetition: “The first repetition is repetition of the Same, explained by the identity of the concept or representation; the second includes difference, and includes itself in the alterity of the Idea.”⁷ Strikingly, Deleuze calls the first kind of repetition “a bare, material repetition,”

6 Catherine Keller, *The Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (London: Routledge, 2003), 139 (emphasis in original).

7 Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 24.

while the second kind of repetition is a spiritual repetition that occurs hidden inside the first.⁸ Deleuze develops an understanding of repetition as repetition of difference that is based upon alterity and generates singular becomings.

Furthermore, following Marjorie Suchocki, original sin can be interpreted as the way in which people inherit tendencies for “identity idolatry” from the social and symbolic systems in which we live, some of which are interpreted as what seem like transparent “norms.”⁹ Of course what applies at the individual level can and should apply at a social and political level as well. Not only individuals, but also groups and classes of people, can be sinned against, and these sins can be committed by other groups and classes. In many ways, these idolatries continue to function pervasively because they function invisibly and transparently. This is particularly important for privileged persons and classes: economic, political, cultural, and sexual. There is a need to repent, or turn around from the ways in which these groups support and reinforce identity idolatry.

Following Charles Long, repentance can be understood as involving a rendering opaque – that is, visible and questionable – of those norms so that they can be questioned and transformed. In an essay dealing with the “theologies of color,” primarily in the work of James Cone and Vine Deloria, Long introduces the phrase “opaque theologies.” Writing theology, religion, and identity in colors renders some of the process of mystification and degradation more visible. Long asks, “What is one to make of these

⁸ Ibid., 21.

⁹ Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, *The Fall to Violence: Original Sin in Relational Theology* (New York: Continuum, 1995).

theologies of redness, blackness, and blueness of deity and being?”¹⁰ According to Long, we have to keep in mind that all discourses, including theological discourses, are about power and the hegemony of power, and our neutral image of theology in a traditional sense is compromised with a European masculinity and whiteness. In wrestling with the opportunities and challenges of globalization, then, we need to be aware of the danger of the false transparency of processes of globalization and identity-formation. Long argues that opaque theologies “must become deconstructive theologies—that is to say, theologies that undertake the deconstruction of theology as a powerful mode of discourse.”¹¹ The hardness of life experienced by oppressed peoples can be encapsulated in opaque theologies, and this experience of opacity can become a lever with which to intervene within larger arenas of practice and discourse, deconstructively.

Long claims that in the case of oppressed peoples, “their experiences were rooted in the absurd meanings of their bodies, and it was for these bodies that they were regarded not only as valuable works but also as the locus of the ideologies that justified their enslavement.”¹² We need to work through and beyond this opacity of suffering bodies, but we cannot simply overcome or forget it. We still “see through a glass darkly,” and we hope to see the other face to face, but so much of our contemporary experience is mediated by apparatuses of communication and information that are controlled by

10 Charles H. Long, “Freedom, Otherness, and Religion: Theologies Opaque,” in *Significations: Signs, Images and Symbols in the Interpretation of Religion* (Aurora, CO: Davies Group, Publishers, 1995), 208.

11 Ibid., 210.

12 Ibid., 211.

corporations for profit. We live in an increasingly interconnected world, but in the name of globalization and democracy we are witnessing an incredible “polarization of wealth.” According to the liberation theologian and former president of Haiti, Jean-Bertrand Aristide, there is an ever-widening gulf between financial markets and the needs of human beings. “Globalization, the integration of world markets, has promised ‘to lift all boats’ ...[and] it seems the world is brought closer together,” but in fact the gap between the richest and poorest of the world’s population has only gotten larger.¹³ Aristide says that if democracy today “is to be more than a façade, nice in theory, but irrelevant in the face of global economic relationships, our concept and practice of democracy must make a giant leap forward. We must democratize democracy.”¹⁴

At worst, the false transparency of globalization hides the impoverishment of billions of suffering people behind attractive buzzwords.¹⁵ The political process at its best, on the other hand, should be understood as an ongoing process of making opaque what was formerly invisible, and being open to new forms of social life which are more just and sustainable, which is an ongoing effort of love that is a work of love instead of a papering over of differences. Here love means the affirmation of difference, or the process of eternal return as understood by Deleuze, which means the return of difference as difference by means of repetition. Deleuze reads Nietzsche’s idea of the eternal return

13 Jean-Bertrand Aristide, *Eyes of the Heart: Seeking a Path for the Poor in the Age of Globalization* (Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press, 2000), 10-11.

14 *Ibid.*, 36.

15 For empirical verification of this claim, see Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums* (London: Verso, 2006).

not as the perpetual return of the same, but rather as the “becoming-identical of becoming itself.”¹⁶ It is not a prior identity that returns; it is only what becomes or becomes different that returns, according of Deleuze. To affirm this process of becoming different is an affirmative activity of love, whereas the attempt to restrain or deny this becoming is a reactive force that is at bottom a denial of life and the world.¹⁷ Love opens us up beyond identity-representation, which is concretized as sin, and exposes us to the profound interrelatedness of all things.

This deep relationality is not a bland sameness, but a dynamic play of differences that produces novelty by means of an asymmetrical synthesis between call and response. Love has two sides: On the one hand, love involves listening for hybridity in the other, with a willingness to be creative transformed by singular hybridity of the other person. This creative transformation can best occur through empathy: perspective taking, active concern, and also "feeling the feelings" of others. But it also requires a conscious bracketing or "negative prehending" of existing stereotypes: an active forgetting which has an apophatic quality of its own. This can be called relational unknowing or compassionate forgetting. On the other hand, love also involves responding to the other, learning to speak in ways, as Gayatri Spivak makes clear, that make sense to the other

¹⁶ Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 41.

¹⁷ See Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 54.

person, and not simply to the person speaking.¹⁸ This response requires openness to novelty on the part of the person who loves. The respondent need not speak on behalf of the other, but can speak from a perspective shaped by relational unknowing. A poststructural relational approach will simultaneously emphasize, along with Whitehead and Deleuze, that self and other are themselves connected in and by their differences – or relationally differentiated – through shared feeling, and that this sharing of feeling is part of a larger web of life.

IV. Poetics of Relation and Politics of Love

Constructively, we are calling for both a “Poetics of Relation,” based on the work of French-Caribbean writer Édouard Glissant and a “Politics of Love,” based on the work of the Italian philosopher Antonio Negri. Glissant is a post-colonial writer influenced by Deleuze, and his thought is marked by an emphasis upon opacity, alterity and relation. Glissant writes about the uprooting of Africans in their “experience of deportation to the Americas,” and he composes a poetics of Relation that speaks to this experience.¹⁹ As opposed to a simply political or geographical expansion across the globe, Glissant sees a counter-movement of poetry in figures such as Victor Segalen, Cheik Anta Diop and Léon Gontran Damas, in which “poetry’s circulation and its action no longer conjecture a

18 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1988).

19 Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 5.

given people but the evolution of the planet Earth.”²⁰ Building on the creolization of the Caribbean and other areas of the world, Glissant contrasts an identity based on roots, rooted in a homeland or territory, with an identity based on relation.²¹ The Creole Caribbean experience in its positive form provides a vision for “a politics of ecology,” an “ecological vision of Relation.”²² Glissant’s global vision offers an aesthetics of the earth that is not grounded in identity as we normally perceive it, but in “disruption and intrusion,” in “rupture and connection” to an opaque Other.²³

Glissant claims that the relation to an Other is not an assimilation of a transparent other to oneself, but a relation grounded in the opacity of the Other as other. He claims that “the right to opacity would not establish autism; it would be the real foundation of Relation, in freedoms.”²⁴ The opaque is not the obscure or the hidden, although often that is how we approach what Glissant calls opacity. Rather, “it is that which cannot be reduced, which is the most perennial guarantee of participation and confluence.”²⁵ Relation is grounded in the irreducibility of alterity, a concrete foundation of freedom that multiplies across histories, peoples and their communities and inter-actions. According to Glissant, “opacity is also the force that drives every community: the thing that would

20 Ibid., 32.

21 Ibid., 143-44.

22 Ibid., 146.

23 Ibid., 151.

24 Ibid., 190.

25 Ibid., 191.

bring us together forever and make us permanently distinctive.”²⁶ The only way to truly achieve our humanity is to recognize and affirm our opacity and others’, rather than to try to resolve it into a false transparency. Relation for Glissant is a form of repetition in Deleuze’s sense, it is a kind of doing of love. “Thus, at every moment Relation becomes complete but also is destroyed in its generality by exactly what we put into action at a particular time and place.”²⁷ Relation is also the destruction of Relation, the destruction of Relation in general in order to create a singular Relation in a particular place and with a particular people.

Glissant’s poetics of relation concords with Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s call for a politics based on love. Negri is an Italian Marxist, but he has substantially updated Marx’s thought, and his constructive political articulated with Hardt is one of the most impressive political visions to emerge in the last couple decades. Hardt and Negri have co-authored four sweeping books, including *Empire*, *Multitude*, and most recently, *Commonwealth*. According to their analysis, we live in a global empire of capitalism, and this empire sustains a near-constant state of civil war to perpetuate the rule of money and capital. As we have already seen, in our contemporary globalized world, the discrepancy between the rich and the poor has grown rather than shrunk. The corporate capitalist Empire replaces the previously sovereign nation-states, despite the attempts of the United States to act unilaterally in Iraq and Afghanistan.

²⁶ Ibid., 194.

²⁷ Ibid., 203.

Rather than a sovereign subject who is modeled on the identity of a sovereign nation-state (which in turn is modeled on a traditional notion of an absolutely sovereign God), Hardt and Negri appeal to a new form of subjectivity that they call multitude, following Spinoza. The multitude is usually viewed with suspicion as a seething and barbarous mass, but in their book *Multitude*, Hardt and Negri explain that the multitude “is not fragmented, anarchical [or] incoherent.” Whereas the notion of the People is founded on a unity, an identity, “the multitude is composed of a set of *singularities*.”²⁸ We suggest that the concept of multitude is compatible with Glissant’s idea of an opacity that functions as an alterity that grounds Relation, and both Glissant as well as Hardt and Negri are influenced by Deleuze’s thinking about repetition. Hardt and Negri put it in more conventional political (and Marxist) terms, such that the multitude is the subject of living labor, which is the source of meaning and value for a person which is exploited by capitalism. A multitude is a subject that is grounded in opacity, because there is no simple identity to hold it together; rather, it is composed of its singular relations with (its) others.

According to Hardt and Negri, most political forms are grounded in sovereignty, which is a form of the One. They claim that “the concept of sovereignty dominates the tradition of political philosophy and serves as the foundation of all that is political precisely because it requires that one must always rule and decide.”²⁹ Someone must rule and decide, and that someone is the sovereign. But “the multitude cannot be reduced to a

28 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: Penguin, 2004), 99 (emphasis in original).

29 *Ibid.*, 329.

unity and does not submit to the rule of one. The multitude cannot be sovereign.”³⁰ Here Hardt and Negri oppose sovereignty, based on the unity of a one who decides, with democracy, which is composed of multiple singular relations of opacity and alterity. How do we achieve democracy in our country and in our world, dominated as it is to such an extent by greed, money, force, power, racism, ignorance, and xenophobia?

There is not a simple answer, but Hardt and Negri call for a politics of love, based on an understanding of love that is not individualistic and romantic, but rather practical and universal. Furthermore, this notion of a politics of love draws on and contains religious resonances, even though Hardt and Negri understand it in a more secular sense. We will quote a long passage from *Multitude* because it is so striking and powerful:

People today seem unable to understand love as a political concept, but a concept of love is just what we need to grasp the constituent power of the multitude. The modern concept of love is almost exclusively limited to the bourgeois couple and the claustrophobic confines of the nuclear family. Love has become a strictly private affair. We need a more generous and more unrestrained conception of love. We need to recuperate the public and political conception of love common to premodern traditions. Christianity and Judaism, for example, both conceive love as a political act that constructs the multitude. Love means precisely that our expansive encounters and continuous collaborations bring us joy. There is really nothing metaphysical about the Christian and Judaic love of God: both God’s love of humanity and humanity’s love of God are expressed and incarnated in the common material political projection of the

³⁰ Ibid., 330.

multitude. We need to recover today this material and political sense of a love as strong as death....Without this love, we are nothing.³¹

It's not that we have to reject any metaphysical or spiritual implications of love, much less romantic ones, but we are missing this material and political aspect of love, which as Hardt and Negri affirm, is as strong as death. If love is as strong as death, then it can be a force for democracy, and a power to heal the ongoing wounds of colonialism and post- or neo-colonialism. What Hardt and Negri call love here is what Glissant understands by Relation, and it is this Relation that brings us together in all of our singular opacity and separation.

V. The Manyness of God As Empathic Alterity

We can also think of God in ways that reach beyond suffocating identity, sameness and self-serving sovereignty. Toward this end, religiously minded people can appeal to alternative concepts of God for support, concepts that are manifested in less traditionally orthodox theologies. In terms of postmodern theology, following the work of Derrida and Levinas in addition to Deleuze, religious believers can understand the influence of God in the world as a kind of messianic calling, the event that is astir in the name, as in the weak theology of John D. Caputo.³² Alternately, but in a similar spirit as Derrida and Levinas, Deleuze and Caputo, religious believers can draw from the theistic

³¹ Ibid., 351-52.

³² See John D. Caputo, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006).

traditions of process theology, keeping in mind that there are also nontheistic versions of process theology. In our time there are at least two postmodern traditions: postmodern process theology and postmodern continental theology.

It may seem odd to speak of postmodern process theology, but in fact, as Aaron Simmons makes clear in a recent article co-written with Jay McDaniel, there are three distinct kinds of process postmodernism: (1) cosmological postmodernism of the kind developed by David Ray Griffin; (2) poststructural postmodernism of the kind developed by Catherine Keller; and what he calls (3) phenomenological postmodernism, which includes a combination of Levinasian and Whiteheadian outlooks on life.³³ Simmons and McDaniel are working on the development of the latter form.

Process Christian theologians have leaned largely toward the cosmological and poststructural variety, as exemplified, for example, in the works of Griffin and Keller. Both theologians use the word “God” to name a cosmic love which, in their view, lies within and beyond the hearts and minds of each human being and the surrounding world. Keller’s writings are especially helpful in recognizing that this love need not be conceived in reified terms. Her writings bear witness to a gap between the word “God” and the experience of the event which the word can evoke; hence her use of many ways of speaking, absent the word “God” itself, to name a love at the heart of the universe. From our perspective, one of the great advantages of her writings is that they are deconstructive and constructive at the same time; that is, they clear the air of reified

33 Jay McDaniel and Aaron Simmons, “Levinas and Whitehead: Notes Toward a Conversation to Come,” *Process Studies* (forthcoming, 2011).

concepts of the divine which reduce divinity to a focal object in the imagination and simultaneously point in the direction of alternate ways of thinking which evoke a sense of what we, following Diana Eck, call the Manyness of God. By “the Manyness of God” we mean the fact that the reality of the divine life, however understood, includes the Manyness of the world within its own constitution.

Some poststructural theologians might reject this phrase, because it assumes a knowledge of God. Their focus is on what Mayra Rivera calls the “touch of transcendence” in human life, of which there are many forms, none of which require any final determination of who or what does the touching.³⁴ Poststructural theologians of this kind is that they do not lead the reader’s imagination to speculate on a higher power whose properties are to be objectified in the mind’s eye, as is characteristic of onto-theology, but instead incline the reader toward this very world, in all its plurality and differences, as precisely the place where transcendence is found: the face of the other, the particularity of felt relations, the moving of the waves, or, in Caputo’s words, the blowing of the spirit across the epochs of creation. They stay very close to the phenomenological realities of immediate human experience.

Speculative theology, whether process or postmodern, need not be theistic, and it might at times need to be queer or indecent, as in the work of Marcella Althaus-Reid, or perverse and monstrous, as in the thought of Slavoj Žižek. For Althaus-Reid, in order to approach Latina women’s phenomenal experience, official theologians cannot simply

34 Mayra Rivera, *A Touch of Transcendence: a Postcolonial Theology of God* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007).

ignore the sexual complexity of the people it speaks for. She claims that “the theologian must recognize that sometimes people do theology without underwear.”³⁵ And if sometimes people do theology without underwear, what about God? Žižek argues that the perverse core of Christianity means that God really dies with the Crucifixion. He says that “we are one with God only when God is no longer one with Himself, but abandons Himself, ‘internalizes’ the radical distance which separates us from Him.”³⁶ We resemble God insofar as we are not equal to ourselves, and this is a radical separation but also an incredible opportunity because it is the precondition for love.

We close this essay by mentioning a speculative possibility which is available to postcolonial theologians, but which leans a bit more in the direction of the cosmologically oriented process thinkers. We speak of this as a possibility because, in fact, we believe that there is and ought to be no single way of imagining a love at the heart of creation, and that this love can be imagined theistically, panentheistically, and non-theistically. Nevertheless there remains within process theism itself a unique opportunity to recognize what we are calling the Manyness of God or, alternatively, the multiplicity of divine Alterity.

Above we noted that notions of alterity are often connected with the notion of singularity. The very word singularity refers, not to the number one, but rather to that

35 Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics* (London: Routledge, 2000), 43.

36 Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity* (Cambridge, MA: Verso, 2003), 91. See also Slavoj Žižek and John Milbank, *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?*, ed. by Creston Davis (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009).

reality to which words such as “a” and “an” refer. It is commonplace to think that words like “a” and “an” ultimately refer to entities devoid of multiplicity: entities that are somehow self-enclosed and trapped within their own being. However, a unique feature of Whitehead’s thought, and of the thought of Deleuze as well, is that entities are not conceived this way at all. Instead they are conceived as activities which take into account and are partly composed of the others whom they take into account. In the language of Whitehead, actual entities are acts of concrescence. This means that the singularity of an actual entity is itself multiple even as it is singular: it is composed of felt relations with other and the others themselves even as it is unique to itself. It is relational.

From the perspective of process theists such as Thomas Oord, the relational alterity of the divine life is like this, too.³⁷ The love of God consists, not only of a kenotic self-emptying of its love into the world, but of a kenotic reception of the Manyness of the universe into itself. The very God to whom an evangelical Christian might pray – the God of Abraham and Sarah and Hagar, of Mary and Joseph and Jesus – is one God to be sure, but the oneness of this God is also the Manyness of the world itself as empathically felt by God. This does not mean that everything that happens unfolds according to divine will, but it does mean that everything that occurs happens within and to God. The more receptive side of love can then be understood as the way in which the divine life itself is made more beautiful – or glorified – by the sheer multiplicity of the world, which is the means by which divine life avoids sameness. Thus, from a postcolonial and process perspective, the divine life can itself be seen as an ongoing act

37 See Thomas Jay Oord, *The Nature of Love: A Theology* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2010).

of hybridity enriched by difference. It can also be recognized that the subjects of our world include not only human beings but other animals who are subjects of their own lives and not simply objects for others: with creative alterity of their own. This follows Keller's idea, informed by Gayatri Spivak, that what is most needed in our time is a planetization of alterity that accords with what Glissant calls a poetics of relation and what Hardt and Negri call for as a politics of love. In this effort, process, postmodern, and postcolonial ways of thinking can resonate with and enrich one another. A process postcolonialism, in which alterity is celebrated in its multiplicity, its planetarity, and its divinity becomes one imaginative possibility among others, available to people who seek a liberation of the imagination for the sake of beloved community.