introduction

DEFINITIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS

But one day when I was sitting quiet and feeling like a motherless child, which I was, it come to me: that feeling of being part of everything, not separate at all. I knew that if I cut a tree, my arm would bleed.
—ALICE WALKER, *The Color Purple*

I no longer think of religion as a quest for complex subjectivity.[1] There is *something* underneath the quest for complex subjectivity that prompts particular patterns of thinking and doing. Hence, the quest for complex subjectivity is a second-order arrangement—that is, patterns of thinking and doing—but there is something behind it (prior to it) that constitutes religion proper.

Mindful of this, *I now understand religion as a technology* (or one might also reference it as a religious technology, although I prefer the former). In using this term, I am not appealing to the mechanics of scientific advancements marking life in the twenty-first century; I am not attempting to highlight new economic and social capacities that entail a new understanding of production and the human. Rather, in using the term *technology*, I mean to identify a method of interrogation and exposure, with an archaeological quality to it. Put differently, I am arguing that *religion is a technology; it is a method of interrogation and exposure*. *And this interrogation takes a variety of forms—such as exploration of places, presentation of the performance of activities, noting of the positioning and workings of bodies*. Religion *is* the exploration as opposed to being what one

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finds through the exploration of cultural production, for instance. Again, this is a push against a sense of religion as a "thing"—a set of beliefs, practices, and/or institutions.

On Religion and Technology, and Religion as Technology

I should clarify what I mean by religion and by religion as a technology, and it might be helpful to do so through contrast—by briefly discussing alternate framings of these two concepts.

A relationship between technology and religion is present in a variety of texts, including work by Susan George and Jacques Ellul.[2] For George, the primary concern is the "synergistic" relationship between religion and technology—that is, the manner in which religion is enhanced by technology and how technology is informed through exposure to a range of sociocultural considerations. Regarding the former, George has in mind the ways in which technology enhances (or transforms) how, for instance, the religious gather—such as virtual churches. Furthermore, regarding the latter, George repositions the conversation regarding the impact of technology on human life by arguing technology, such as artificial intelligence (AI), could benefit from theological considerations, theological frameworks by means of which AI is equipped to better understand the nature and meaning of the human identity and humanity—both of which are fundamental to the workings and intent of AI. And so, both facets considered—technology's influence on religion and religion's influence on technology—this synergistic relationship connotes for George a complex enhancement of the form and dynamics of life.[3] In presenting this argument, George suggests religion and technology are similar if for no other reason than both promote modalities of "transcendence"—or a push beyond current arrangements and circumstances.

While the terminology is the same—religion and technology—my meaning is significantly different.[4] George acknowledges that religion is difficult to define and tends, therefore, to speak more generally about religion as often considered to reflect "a social construction, as wish-fulfillment, and as alienation."[5] She highlights a concern for meaning and meaning making but implies a somewhat standard attention to religious traditions—for example, Christianity—and their vocabulary.[6] In this way, at least implicitly, religion is understood in terms of traditionally recognized markers such as doctrines and institutions. Its relationship to embodied beings connotes a standard mode of transformation and "transcendence" by means of ritualized perfor-

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mance. My aim is to challenge such perceptions of religion as pointing to a distinct material-spiritual reality arranged in time and space. Hence, I push for theorization of religion as a hermeneutic of sorts (a mode of interpretation or interrogation)—not a "substance" but rather an approach, a particular framing. And with respect to technology, George has in mind "applied knowledge that impacts daily life." This understanding is discussed in relationship to four possibilities. These are (1) "information and communication technology . . . providing the infrastructure upon which other technologies can sit, (2) AI—artificial intelligence" meant to act in the human world, (3) "ubiquitous computing and ambient intelligence" promoting flow of "information and communication between the human and computer world, and (4) virtual AI, enhancing internet ICT with intelligence and sophistication, merging with ubiquitous computing to make a world where the interface between the virtual and real are continually blurred."[7] Technology as discussed by George certainly has impact and importance, but what I mean by technology here is not tied to modalities of scientific engagement; rather, technology speaks to a more theoretical consideration. My aim, put another way, is not to apply the categories traditionally associated with the religious—for example, God, salvation, and sin—to a secularized and (technologically) enhanced world. Nor is my concern to bring to religiosity a clear and consistent engagement with scientific development. The theorization of religion and the framing of technology undergirding *Interplay of Things* does not involve either of these approaches.

Jacques Ellul has a more expansive sense of technique/technology by which he names more than machines, pointing instead to something that extends at this point in history well beyond mechanics.[8] For Ellul, technology better describes any means used to render "rationalized" and "deliberate" behavior once ill-defined and sporadic. In this way, it describes a formal concern with the development of greater effectiveness for any task, greater processes for achieving any task related to all areas and realms of life.[9] In his words, it "does not mean machines, technology, or this or that procedure for attaining an end. In our technological society, technique is the totality of methods rationally arrived at and having absolute efficiency (for a given state of development) in every field of human activity."[10] It is an intellectual posture or method, a framing, organizing particular processes; machines are more limited in scope in that they produce and depend on technique for refinement of their work. Conceived as such, then, propaganda serves as an example of a human technique; but also of concern here is organizational technique that has to do with the administration—in some sense containment—of life activities and

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circumstances.[11] Different names are used, but related methods are geared toward the same goal—efficiency.

There is with this definition—related to technique as a general method but more particularly with respect to organizational and human techniques—a sense of technology having impact on human engagement with the world, with other beings, and with structures. This means to enhance what Ellul categorizes as increased motivation for and attainment of "success" in our activities and ventures. And in a sense, all things related to or interacting with technique become machines—that is to say, primed for greater efficiency. In so doing, human life is altered, framed by distance or estrangement from anything that does not promote greater efficiency in general or success in particular. Technique serves to bring things together, or to harness all. In a word, while humans and machines might be distinguishable—of different substances—technique working on the intellectual level serves to link embodied humans with this general scheme of efficiency. In so doing, technique when considered within sociocultural and political realms might be said to organize existence, which is to say that technique coordinates activities and behaviors so as to make activities more efficient and rational. A consequence of this is the loss of distinctiveness—that is, recognition as valuable what cannot be easily cataloged as promoting the terms of a technological process.[12]

There is with Ellul's definition of technique a sense that the human is penetrated (or impacted), so to speak, by mechanisms meant to enhance and streamline processes of collective life. I share some of this concern; yet for Ellul, technique, which is related to science but distinguishable from it (as science is dependent upon technique), entails a refined and refining process of doing—an all-consuming quest for better ways of doing, a quest that takes on a transcendent quality based on its persistence and all-encompassing reach. My use of the concept of technology speaks not to doing but to examining—of exposing what is beneath and what informs processes of organization. As I intend to employ it, the concept of technology has little to do with naming increasingly effective ways of achieving tasks, but rather with interrogating the very nature of those tasks and arrangements and what they say about the relationship between things. The former understanding of technology, for example, has meaning in terms of politics in that technology perceived as the push for processes of excellence/efficiency seeks to rule out all that hampers such processes. However, my concern is with that which undergirds these moves and countermoves.

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Religion—by which Ellul means typical presentation of traditions marked by institutions, doctrines, rituals, and personalities—does not fall outside the reach of technique. Keep in mind that for Ellul, technique impacts all spheres of collective life. *The Technological Society* argues that during the fourth to the tenth centuries in the West there was a "breakdown of Roman technique in every area—on the level of organization as well as in the construction of cities, in industry, and in transport."[13] Christianity during the period held technique, as it related to "judicial and other technical activities" suspect—preaching and theologizing against it.[14] Yet, according to Ellul, after this period of technical decline it is also the case that religious traditions from the East served to revive particular modalities of technique. With shifts in the theological sensibilities and accompanying ethics of Christianity over time came a particular metaphysical framework—including a more accommodating theological anthropology—making possible appeal to technique framed in terms of a benevolent deity committed to the prosperity and well-being of the elect.[15]

This cautious encounter with technique was played out for the most part within the realm of mechanisms—think, for instance, in terms of oceanic exploration that transported European Christianity beyond its initial borders, or the printing press that altered the availability and reach of the Bible. Yet a sense of efficiency, or the larger framing of technique, would have to overcome a more transcendent concern with the will of God as measure of activity and a theological sensibility casting a shadow over rationalizations. In general, religion had little to offer. For Ellul, more "secular" movements and a general optimism served to spark a shift toward more technique.[16] The rigid codes for thinking and doing advanced through religious commitment did little to aid technique in its broad meaning. Moral sensibilities frowned upon any advancement, any change, that could not be accounted for through the arrangement of church doctrine and creeds.[17] In a word, "technique was held to be fundamentally sacrilegious."[18] It is only as these moral codes and theological suspicions give way to alternate modalities of religious thinking and living that the relationship between religion and technique is altered.

George speaks of a relationship between technology (by which she means for the most part machines and scientific advancements less expansive than in Ellul's meaning) and religion that involves mutual engagement and shared alteration. And this involves an understanding of religion and technology as separate realities engaging, which is not the sense of religion and technology I intend. Ellul shifts to an understanding of technique that is expansive and

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that deals more with attitudes and intellectual postures, but it is distinct from religion. In fact, it is hampered by religion—which has often served as an opponent for technique. Still, like George, Ellul has a sense in which religion is understood in traditional terms (e.g., institutions, doctrines, theological frameworks and rituals) and is brought into conversation concerning structuring or framing of production—either material or intellectual.

For Ellul, technique involves an all-encompassing method seeking advancement, a process for refining methods of life. I understand technology differently, as a hermeneutic—a tool rather than a process for/of refining life practices. Technology, as I understand it, observes intellectual and mechanical processes; it does not constitute a naming for these processes. *The Technological Society* claims, "Technique has taken over the whole of civilization."[19] My framing of technology might suggest that it shapes how we view and hence understand civilization but, mindful of this, Ellul and I could not mean the same thing if we were both to talk about technique/technology taking over civilization. *The Technology Society* reacts against technique and what it seeks to do to and through humans regardless of our assumed intent. Technique is supreme.[20] Even his reference to spiritual techniques entails a relationship to the structures of production, of life—a particular type of efficiency desired—that I do not mean to suggest. Ellul's concept of technique involves "something" that does more and perhaps means more than what I have in mind when discussing technology. In short, my aim in speaking of religion *as a* technology is not captured by discourse on religion *and* technology as represented, for instance, by George and Ellul.

My use of technology entails a loose borrowing from, but not strict adherence to, Michel Foucault's conceptual framework.[21] I mean it as a pattern of practices related to examination—a "technique" by means of which humans interrogate experience and knowledge of experience.[22] While using his conceptual framework, I alter it a bit—highlighting, for example, interaction between contemporary and multiple things, and doing so in ways that challenge assumptions concerning the "solid" and "sealed" nature of things. I privilege a triadic and interrelated structuring of technology over against his four-pronged structure. In relationship to the four types of technology addressed by Foucault—"production," "sign systems," "power," and "self"[23]—what I propose most strongly resembles a synergistic relationship between the impetus of production, sign systems, and self. The omitted technology of power better relates—although the others can certainly bend in this direction—to what I reference in this book as the psycho-ethical impulse to the extent that

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it involves application on bodies for sociopolitical and economic ends related to confinement in certain forms.[24]

More on that later, but for now it is important to offer a point of clarification: Religion as a technology involves a "technique" of observation, but it is not synonymous with the manner in which the technology of power uses surveillance to control and justify the rendering docile of problematic bodies. Religion as a technology's observation is more consistent with exposure without the political discursive tactics and intents of the technology of power. However, like technologies of production, religion as a technology involves interaction (creation, placement, use) of things. Like the technology of sign systems, religion as a technology relies on structures of recognition and naming (what Foucault might call "signs, meanings, symbols, or significations"). Finally, like technologies of the self that "permit individuals to effect their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves," by its very nature religion as a technology focuses on the flexibility and porous nature of things in (inter)action.[25]

In depicting the mechanics of various technologies, my concern is less in a strict sense with the surface content of interaction and more with what interaction or interplay between things tells us about the nature (i.e., openness) of things. Although highlighting different connotations and contexts of expression, my sense of technology does maintain something of Foucault's sense that technologies are tied to methods of "modification," *I here argue that religion as a technology—in its hermeneutical function—exposes and further amplifies the openness, porousness and interaction of things*.[26] Furthermore, my application of religion as a technology is not interested in, as a primary move, the manner in which interaction improves or diminishes a subject—for example, makes us better people. I am most intrigued by challenges to "habitual" (to borrow another word from Foucault) assumptions of wholeness and integrated selves exposed by the observational activity of this particular technology. Yet I do not intend a large-scale understanding of social dynamics and power relations, nor a type of embodied structuring of cultural forms and skills discussed by figures such as Pierre Bourdieu through the category of "habitus." Religion as technology does not entail content—for example, "cultural capital"—rather, it provides a means by which to view these dimensions of life in various forms and manifestations. By extension, what I reference as this technology does not entail what Bourdieu might label a "feel" for the circumstances shaping life. In and of itself, this hermeneutic offers less in

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that how it is used might be influenced by sensibilities developed over time, but this technology does not connote those sensibilities. In this sense, religion as technology does not entail a type of "know how" enabling one to maneuver through the world, but rather it is simply an external mechanism for isolating and examining the world—not an internal set of acquired competencies.[27] Furthermore, my interest in interaction points in the direction of concern with understanding openness, the gap, and not in how one might configure the whole—or things together. In this way what I aim to describe is not "assemblage"—an ontological mapped, chaotic arrangement or relationship of things constituting an oddly functioning collective.[28] The very ability to influence and affect expressed in Foucault's presentation of the technology of the self, for instance, surfaces the concern for me: the openness—porousness and penetrated—nature of things. *And this openness is the "disclosure," so to speak, offered by means of religion as a technology.*[29] In this way, religion as technology pushes underneath patterns of thinking and doing. This, however, is without metaphysical claims emerging as a consequence and outside a process of meaning formation.[30] The idea here is that religion is a human technology, that is to say it is a mechanism, a technique—or range of operative strategies—for interrogating human experience.

By way of this shift I want to highlight the inclusive nature of this interrogation and also privilege the manner in which religion simply serves as a "mechanism" for inquisition into the cartographies of life. Yet more than this, I needed to name this theory of religion through focused attention to what it, as a technology of interrogation, reveals. In other words, *interrogation of interplay between things can be a religious matter*. And so rather than attempting to show the presence of the religious in cultural production, this book uses religion as a technology to interrogate cultural production and thereby say something concerning the nature and meaning of those "things" making up our cultural worlds.

While my defining of religion as a technology, a type of hermeneutic, escapes certain problems associated with the presentation of religion as "special" with privileged elements such as rituals and doctrines, I understand that my thinking comes with its own set of issues—for example, the implication that certain sociocultural developments have greater importance than others. True, in isolating particular dimensions of human experience for investigation, one could suggest it encourages, or privileges, attention to certain historical moments and constructions—and makes something unique of what is encountered. However, I mean to simply say that this selection process connected to religion as technology is a matter of circumstantial context

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and social location without any necessarily "deeper" meaning. Other applications of this technology within other sociocultural contexts will yield a different set of materials. What holds together the elements of experience targeted by this technology is their existence as human, as dimensions of a network of "relationships," lodged within human history. Furthermore, I want to position the last several chapters of this book as an effort to trouble reification of experiences as having increased value and by extension increasing the importance of particular "things" associated with those experiences.[31]

My definition seeks to point out the very historical and socially specific nature of religion—the manner in which religion as a technology points out connection to cultural-historical circumstances and understands the "work" done by religion tied as a type of "precondition" to the vocabulary and grammar of these cultural-historical circumstances.[32] Religion points out and focuses on by highlighting. And so rather than producing meaning, religion, as I understand it, involves the uncovering of such assumptions—or interrogation of such assumptions' historical arrangement, thereby exposing the frameworks that undergird them. It is important to keep in mind that this pointing out emphasizes concern for particular developments or activities. But this does not require a next step of assuming that what is uncovered is all there is. Again, religion as a technology works within particular sociocultural contexts and by means of particular historical circumstances. What, then, is highlighted is conditioned yet informative. Furthermore, something about religion as a technology suggests concern with language and social sensibilities. Yet I am not arguing that religion is first an arrangement of "practice, language, and sensibility set in social relationships rather than as systems of meaning."[33] And so religion is not a matter of "what and how people live," but rather what people view and what moments of experience they isolate for consideration and importance. How they "live" in light of this process, for me, is beyond the category of religion as such and instead involves a system of affective and ethical responses.

Religion as a technology offers no particular set of commitments or responses to what it uncovers; that is left to moral and ethical interventions extending beyond this hermeneutical work. In this way, religion is not the things observed, but rather the very process of observation defines it. My concern is to recognize this sense of the religious and to interrogate the "things" observed.[34] In this manner it can be applied to any modality of human experience (here I privilege historical-cultural experience). This is not to say these areas are religious, but rather that they can be interrogated using the methodological tool of religion as human technology.[35] This is not

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a special technology, but rather a particular technology—one that exposes contextualized concerns and patterns embedded in the workings of the social world, not unique "domains" or worlds.

So understood, it is only useful in a localized manner to think about religion as connected with particular doctrines, creeds, and ritualization associated with world-recognized (and those not so noted) traditions. In certain ways, these traditions represent what remains—as a type of epistemological residue—when religion as a technology is no longer applied. This is the same way snow is not the blizzard but rather constitutes what remains once the blizzard has done its work. Religion in this manner is not a system of promises related to the human condition, but rather it is a means of categorization and interrogation that promises and assumes nothing in particular regarding the human condition other than offering acknowledgment that tools exist for interrogating the history of these individual and collective experiences.[36] By exposing the nature of things, religion as a technology pushes below the surface of activities, to the things involved in that interaction. Here, then, I am concerned to explore the elements, the "principles," so to speak, at work in what religion as a technology presents.

My objective is to discuss various modalities of the arts so as to highlight the things exposed through religion as a technology. To put it another way, while much of the existing scholarship on religion and the arts involves uncovering religion within popular culture through the presence of symbols (e.g., the cross), figures (e.g., Jesus), or the expression of doctrines and creeds,[37] this book is concerned with the application of religion as a technology to art so as to expose what art says about the nature of "things" and their interaction.[38] And so the point is not that cultural production expresses human concerns using the vocabulary and grammar of Christianity and other traditions, but rather that examining cultural production using religion as a technology tells us something about the nature of the embodied human's interaction with other things.[39]

Things Underneath

To highlight my basic point: I am concerned with the importance and interplay of things exposed through application of religion as a technology. But to further interrogate their placement in time and space as well as their "activity" within time and space highlighted by religion as a technology, I have renamed, or better yet, reconceptualized them.

This rethinking allows me to enhance the nature of bodies, for example, and it does so by pushing beyond the assumption of clear distinctions and

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"integrity" the concept of a body can easily assume. In a word, through conversation with thing theory and grotesque realism among other theoretical frameworks, I want to understand bodies as *things*.

For the sake of clarity, it is important to say that this is not to reduce them to objects and in this way to accept certain forms of disregard I have spent decades arguing against. Rather, they are things, but things understood as vital and vibrant—impactful. And while I use religion here as a way to think through the nature of humans and other forms, the primary contribution of religion so conceived is not a reframing of the human in relationship to other forms of life so as to disrupt a hierarchy of being. What I offer does not qualify as a sustained interest in or wrestling with—a type of intervention into—what Rosi Braidotti calls "the basic unit of common reference for our species, our polity and our relationship to the other inhabitants of this planet."[40] While what I have in mind pushes against a "nature-cultural" binary that calls into question the distinctive nature of the human, I am less concerned with an intervention into thinking about the structure of living beings.[41] Instead, I am more interested in the interaction between forms—for example, not with the Anthropocene but rather a more general interrogation of openness/boundaries not limited to any particular actors. Furthermore, although not existing in opposition to such concerns if for no other reason than my context as a racialized being, *Interplay of Things* does not engage in debate over humanism, and my primary motivation is not a posthumanist concern with "elaborating alternative ways of conceptualizing the human subject."[42] Subjectivity certainly comes up in the following pages, but mapping out alternate modalities of subjectivity is not the first concern here. This is in part the case because I want to shy away from the implicit assumption within posthumanism that the human can speak for and about all other things. This epistemological orientation, I argue, is held over from Enlightenment humanism; but rather than its concern being the positioning of the human over against others, it is within posthumanism a positioning of other beings in relationship to humans. The naming may blur lines, but the linguistic and epistemological assumptions betray continuity with humanistic thought.

Within the following chapters, some attention is given to the manner in which social coding such as race impacts openness. Yet what I propose offers little advice on how humans and other things might better interact, in a general sense, but rather focuses on the mere existence of that interaction as always and already—despite curious efforts to state otherwise. My concern here is not isolation of the psychological dimensions of human experience, or the discursive grid or imaginative structuring of humanized experiences, and so

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I make only limited appeal to the work of figures such as Julia Kristeva. When employing her thought it is to clarify some of my language. And in this vein, I want to mention a particular concept as a way of highlighting something of what I have in mind regarding the human as a thing. One might think of the body—to borrow from Kristeva—as a "naming" thing (a play on her notion of the "speaking being").[43] I use this as one of the characteristics of the (human) body as thing, but rather than simply speaking—as other animals speak—I highlight the human as a bodied naming-thing (a type of "more" thing) thereby again turning to the importance of naming as it relates to religion as a technology.[44] I amplify not only the manner in which the human speaks but also the ways in which speaking involves connection to and interaction with other things. I am concerned with how religion as a technology exposes the bodied naming-thing's interactions with other bodied naming-things as well as non-naming-things or what I here call *thing-things*. In this way I seek to give some attention to the manner in which bodied naming-things create and/or shape other things as well as how bodied naming-things are shaped and altered. This interplay, in turn, points out bodied naming-things as open, porous, engaged, and flooded by other things.

This bodied naming-thing is not meant to suggest a sense of the human "as the measure of all things"—as some humanists have defined the grand subjectivity of the human—so as to point out a robust valuation of humanity over against other modalities of life.[45] In distinguishing the (human) bodied naming-thing for investigation, I am not implying a ranking of naming-things. I am not providing this renaming so as to suggest a particular metaphysical quality of being. Rather, I use it simply to point out the "thingliness" of the human—the porous and open quality of embodiment without pronounced attentiveness toward how this has come to be or what this means regarding any transcendental framings of human knowing and being. To be a bodied naming-thing is a shared arrangement, or put differently, it entails moments of not quite amalgamation—but rather short-circuiting the pretense of boundaries. The so-called individual is give and take, so to speak, a micro- and macro-confluence of presences.[46] I want to highlight the significance, primarily through description, nestled in openness and porousness. By openness and porousness, I mean to point out more than an emotional and aesthetic sense of openness, as an acceptance of the value of this touch. But rather, I mean openness in a more expansive manner that is affective and material in nature.

In making these claims, there remains a distinction: I do speak of naming-things and other things, and in this way this project does not wipe out

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difference, or what might be called various modes of activity associated with things. Instead, it neutralizes it (e.g., no advocated hierarchy of importance with respect to interaction) to some degree by amplifying the manner in which difference does not serve as a firm boundary and does not, therefore, suspend interaction. And the ability to name is not all that "matters."[47] On one level, for instance, what I propose here maintains difference between humans and other animals—although both are things, and this situation continues with regard to "other" things with which humans and other animals are in relationship (i.e., interaction or exchange).[48] And so one might argue that binaries remain here, and there is something to this, but these are not stable distinctions when one considers there is already and always interaction, exchange, and influence between things.

These things are active, impinging, informing in significant ways. Such is not the case only for naming-things, although the geography of this interaction is described and presented from the vantage point of these naming-things. In a word, I have no interest in parsing out types of things along the lines of what Jane Bennett describes as the "habit of configuring the world of things into dull matter (it, things) and vibrant life (us, being)." Of more interest is what Bennett calls "vital materiality"—recognition of a world filled with "animate things rather than passive objects." My sense of interplay bears similarity to Bennett's animation by which she means the "capacity of things—edibles, commodities, storms, metals—not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own."[49] I would not disagree with her assertion that there is something to be said regarding the manner in which the "human being and thinghood overlap" and "slip-slide into each other," and so "we are also nonhuman and that things, too, are vital players in the world."[50] Yet while sharing this conceptual element, my motivation is primarily to recognize, document, and describe using art as the nature of this interplay.

Attention to race and gender at the end of the book suggests a concern with ways in which interplay is problematized, but, unlike Bennett, I frame the conversation in terms of a rethinking of religion and offer little attention to how this descriptive project might lend itself (through attention to this interplay) to the politics of new ways of living—such as consumption and conservation.[51] In addition, whereas new materialism can be seen to suggest rethinking the condition of certain things—such as despised populations—through an interrogation of subject-object thinking producing a greater sense of mutuality and collective well-being,[52] my position (in light of my turn to

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W. E. B. Du Bois and Albert Camus) troubles any assumption concerning the ability to fundamentally change the positioning of the despised.[53] And so my goals are more modest: presentation and examination of openness—the point of convergence between no thing and multiple things—exposed through the interplay of things.

The above, brief discussion points to the manner in which this book shares some sensibilities with new materialism while departing from some of its generally assumed concerns (e.g., grounding in a posthumanist or antihumanist philosophy as replacement for humanism and, in some cases, a more biological focus, as well as broad geopolitical mappings).[54] I am mindful of materiality, and *Interplay of Things* centers on the dynamics and significance of materiality. Yet I am less concerned with exploring materiality so as to challenge the assumptions, for example, concerning language and subjectivity and in this way champion the significance of materialization.[55] On the level of social realities, I am a member of a group, African Americans, who have not had the luxury of forgetting their materiality. In this case, to be a racialized "other" at work in the world is to be a materialist of a kind. And so whereas some materialists are concerned rightly to point out that the agency of matter beyond the human is significant and complex, for some groups the idea that they have agency is still a fight to be fought. With this said, as a matter of contextualization, my implicit concern involves attention to the relationship between things so as to point out the absence—the points of openness—and what recognition of those points of no-thing and things at the same time has generated with respect to social difference.

Put another way, my concern involves an effort to wrestle with the nature and meaning of openness by way of the "art" of things. My name for this interplay between things—*presence together*—is drawn from Camus. Expressed more fully, he writes, "the absurd is essentially a divorce. It lies in neither of the elements compared; it is born of their confrontation. In this particular case and on the plane of intelligence, I can therefore say that the Absurd is not in man (if such a metaphor could have a meaning) nor in the world, but in their presence together."[56] He uses this phrase as a way to present relationship between the human and the nonresponsive world. I broaden it out as a way of "naming" the interplay—without resolution or production of wholeness—between the naming-thing and other things (of which the world is a particular constitution). And I argue in relationship to this investigation that interplay between things is presented by religion as the basic structuring of life. Hence, it is to this interplay that all strategies—social, cultural, political,

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and so forth—respond.[57] Religion strictly as a technology offers nothing beyond interrogation—no "liberation," no "freedom," no "transformation," no exaltation—and no teleological sense of encounter and exchange.[58]

After Religion: Psycho-Ethical Impulse

What I have elsewhere described as rituals of reference attempts to endorse closure of certain bodies, to end the porous or open nature of these bodies.[59] This is because awareness of openness can foster discomfort as it brings into question all that social networks assume (or consume?) concerning subjectivity—that is, boundaries, integrity, and distinctiveness: subjects of history, not objects of history. In other words, interplay is often perceived as a problem—a network of relationships that various systems of knowledge (e.g., capitalism and democracy) would rather keep hidden. A strategic and common response to openness is to attempt the filling of gaps, to work to (discursively and materially) close off bodies. Within the context of certain social settings, this can entail inscribing social codes such as race, gender, and class that safeguard those who control the means of placement and display. Openness, as I hope will become clear over the course of this book, is the reality that sociopolitical coding, for instance, is meant to deny or to close off for the sake of existing arrangements of life. I frame this openness as a matter of Mikhail Bakhtin's grotesque realism.[60] This is not to dismiss as viable other approaches. Rather, for the purposes of this project, in turning to Bakhtin I gain a sense of the irreverence marking presentation of openness that lends itself to an understanding of the artists I engage. In addition, Bakhtin's theorization of encounter also points in the direction of sociocultural and political context in a way that helps shed light on the consequences of openness as I attempt to present them late in the book.

My aim is to suggest a general theoretical framework marking out the naming of the moment of interplay. Only then do I see it as feasible or useful to sketch the psycho-ethical sequence or modality of response. I say this because the response is contextualized in that in practice not all these naming-things are the same—understood as constituted and placed in the same manner and with the same sociocultural, political, and economic connotations. And while there are numerous ways in which openness/restriction play out in significant ways depending on the coding attached to particular naming-things, I am concerned here with the manner in which openness and closure are informed and influenced by the combination of gender and class in connection to race.

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It is only as a consequence of this particular framing of restriction that attention is given to how whiteness as a source of both openness and restriction informs and impacts those naming-things configured as white.

African Americans—and the same would hold for bodies bounded by other modes of coding—struggle against this closing off at least in socioeconomic and political terms. Some naming-things reject closing off with respect to race, gender, and class, for instance; but this is not to say they struggle to remain open. They simply do not want that closing off to limit full engagement—or, in other words, to limit how, when, and where they interplay with thing-things and other naming-things. They resist restrictions on how they are closed and for what purpose they are closed. Yet this resistance is still modeled on boundaries; marginalized bodied naming-things simply resist particular types of restrictions—such as those that deny them certain markers of status. This is certainly one way to explain homophobia, for example, within African American communities, or sexism exhibited by marginalized men. Openness, while I understand it as a positive (and as I will demonstrate in these pages), is resisted.[61] This is not to say there are no instances in which boundaries are of benefit. But my concern is not with boundaries in a general sense; rather, again, as will become evident through most of this book, I am interested in the function of race (often connected to gender and class) as a type of boundary against openness as well as the ways in which certain naming-things respond to this mode of restriction.

It is not the case that religion as a technology is the only technology to expose the openness of things. From the biological sciences to philosophy and psychology, other technologies suggest the same.[62] However, there is some distinction at least in terms of the psycho-ethical response prompted by religion as a technology. For instance, while the "natural" sciences maintain openness of the body, and philosophy typically articulates it, many psycho-ethical responses understood within theological contexts propose deep (and at times eschatological) punishment for efforts to challenge the legitimacy—if not necessity—of this closer. For example, in theological terms, Adam and Eve and the "apple" can be read as suggesting this interplay between things as problematic. The goal of Genesis's angry God is to prevent a particular type of lucidity, to prevent a certain type of engagement between naming-things and other things. Of course, this requires a reading that is not popular in all circles. And so the study of religion has pushed away from more explicit denouncements of the "natural" body and in fact has given rise to embodied approaches to the study of religion—for example, body theologies. Nonetheless, something remains of this negative impulse or reversion against

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"things" and the interplay between things to the extent the theological body is typically without body functions and capacities. It is, for the most part, a thought body—one free of the more disturbing (disgusting?) markers of life-death.[63] Or perhaps it is even a corpse, a body that does not consume or expel. I intend to privilege, and center, theorization of religion around this seldom approached body (i.e., naming-thing)—the one marked by abuses born (and living) between urine and feces, as one church father put it.[64]

For the sake of clarity, in discussing theology in this context, I am not implying that theology alone attempts to push toward wholeness, or even that all modalities of theology push toward closure.[65] This desire for closure, for containment, is a feature of numerous discourses and structures of thinking and doing. It is not alone in fostering ways to desire closure or in the presentation of rewards for closure. Political discourses—for example, certain modalities of nationalism—do this as well, and the list goes on. Rather, I mention theology here to provide an example, not an isolated indictment. In a more general sense, I reference theology at points in the book because theology—particularly within racialized contexts—is a dominant vocabulary and grammar for discussing the nature and meaning of naming-things. And making my argument at times requires attention to how theological discourse has worked in this regard.

My goal, by extension, is to detangle the study of religion—a sense of the body's place in theorization of religion—from the shadow of restrictions by means of which interplay is held suspect. Furthermore, I mean to contribute to the study of religion in general and the study of African American religion in particular a way to think about key issues of embodiment and justice that go deeper—to a more fundamental arrangement—than sociopolitical and economic markers of injustice typically highlight. In this way, for example, my attention to religion as technology and restriction/openness offers African American religious thought a sense of embodied bodies occupying time and space outside their presence in political discourse marked by arguments concerning civil rights. Instead, I want to raise questions concerning what religion tells us about the activities and anxieties undergirding these political considerations. In addition, this project pushes against the manner in which African American religious thought and ethics is typically restricted to an understanding of "other" things (nonhuman things) as objects of utility, and in this way reinforces restrictive notions of agency, solidarity, praxis, and so on.

Religion as a technology does not relieve the trauma resulting from acknowledgment of openness. Much of religious studies—particularly

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so-called progressive and liberation-minded theological discourses—has been preoccupied either with subject/subject relations by means of which they seek to advocate for the full recognition of a particular group as fully human couched in language of the cosmic Other, or with a matter of the subject articulated through the language of stability—such as economic and political equality, or liberation. I am not interested in this framing. Instead, I am concerned with the general receptive nature of this interaction—most notably as presented by artistic expression.

Rather than reading art through religion, as is often done, my aim is to interrogate interplay of things (exposed by the religion as a technology) through various modalities of artistic production. In this way, I mean to isolate the frameworks through which religion as a technology engages human experience—that is, bodied naming-things and other things. Artistic work lends itself to an examination of the performance of interaction between naming-things and other things as a type of material-mancy. This is not simply ritualization—a repeating of what has been before.[66] No, in a significant way it is the articulation of arrangements, a fostering of connection and the implications of connection that is new each time. The naming-thing and other things relate to and inform each other.

Unpacking Things

The first two chapters constituting the first section of this book attend to the nature of things, and they do so with respect to three categories: thing-things, naming-things, and the "art" of things. The goal of these two chapters is to present and explain the context in which the technology of religion is applied—for example, the subjects of interrogation. Each of these chapters benefits from my conversation with thing theory and grotesque realism as well as absurdist moralism. My concern in the first chapter is to unpack and theorize what is meant and constituted by "thing" and to highlight the manner in which life in a general sense organizes interplay between things. The second chapter outlines the ways in which religion as a technology explores art as "arrangement" by means of which openness is made apparent and named. Agreeing with theorists such as Mikhail Bakhtin, I note that some of the "content" and "form" of this interplay is best expressed through the language, vocabulary, and grammar of artistic production—visual, literary and performed (or lived) art.[67]

The second section moves from the "naming" of things to examination of the interplay between things through modalities of visual presentation. The

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first of three chapters examines the visual art of Angelbert Metoyer. A Houston- and Rotterdam-based artist, Metoyer understands his work to employ created and found things (the waste of life), arranged and presented together in such a way as to urge a rethinking of the nature of those materials.[68] This rethinking pushes viewers to understand materials (and themselves) as transitional. Through this motion viewers uncover something about the nature and meaning of the human condition.

The next chapter explores the interplay between things but gives greater attention to things connected to/with the naming-thing—for example, blood. The open nature of the naming-thing is heightened through performance artists who penetrate the bodied naming-thing or in other ways traumatize the bodied naming-thing through graphic penetration. Through attention to figures such as Ron Athey and Clifford Owens, the open nature of things is amplified as readers are introduced to both naming-things and thing-things altered, shifted, and changed through aggressive contact. Hence, the line between naming-things and thing-things is blurred, and the naming-thing is left exposed or altered through sign/symbol and physical transformation, for example, scars produced by a thing-thing (knife). The "look" of the naming-thing is altered in a lasting manner, and thereby distinction is troubled. What is more, the style or custom by which some performance artists make use of body fluids points out the consistent and persistent relationship of the bodied naming-things to (other) things. Put differently, these artists force a question: Is blood (i.e., a thing) external to the bodied naming-thing, or still of it?

This question and its ramifications for understanding the open nature of things are pushed in the final chapter of this section. That chapter addresses performance art's articulation of openness through the use of shit. As I explain in that chapter, like its employment by Dominique Laporte and others, my use of this term is not a crude pronouncement—although discomfort (and a bit of playfulness) resulting from its use is part of the desired mode of engagement and thereby lends itself to the social connotations of the substance.[69] Still, as some in waste studies have noted, terms such as "waste" are inadequate in that they are too inclusive. My concern here is to explore the manner in which a particular mode of waste—shit—highlights openness but also speaks to the way in which the bodied naming-thing remains in relationship to that which it expels.

The final section explores the psycho-ethical impulse through the example of racialization used to close off naming-things so as to safeguard social and cultural codes of belonging. In other words, as Judith Butler has noted, some marginalized groups are transformed into shit. In saying this and as a

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basic positioning of my intent in these final chapters, it is important to note that my attention to restriction late in the book and my framing of this in relationship to racialized naming-things is not to imply that there is a universal notion of the human against which this restriction works. Openness is always challenged, and porousness is limited. While I give some attention to a sense of restriction in earlier chapters, I reserve a much fuller discussion until the end in order to situate the discussion within a larger set of assertions regarding the nature of things and the practice of art, and also to highlight the manner in which those considerations move from theorization of religion and openness to what I argue is an ethical response. I aim to provide a sense of two sides of restriction—the effort to trouble closure (chapters 3–5) and then to trouble openness (chapters 6–8). Through this arrangement, I work to make apparent situations in which I believe power relations (always present) between naming and being named are most graphic.

Chapters 6 and 7 present the work of Romare Bearden and Jean-Michel Basquiat for what they offer concerning response to the attempted fixing and sealing off of racialized naming-things. Both say something about the relationship between naming-things and thing-things in ways that point out the manner in which both are "penetrated" by the other: in/between. What is most graphic about their work is the relationship of naming-things placing thing-things in time and space and what this says indirectly about naming-things. There remains a space of separation between the two despite their creative impulse relationship—for example, the ability of naming-things to promote new awareness through the manipulation and presentation of thing-things. Yet both artists promote a different sensitivity to naming-things and thing-things, highlighting their flexibility and fluidity of movement, but this does not require a shift concerning the hierarchy of cultural action: naming-things using thing-things made. Naming-things act on and alter thing-things, and in the process perception and "placement" of naming-things is also affected. Thing-things—for example, Bearden's pieces of material used to make collages or Basquiat's taming of language and signs through application on alternate surfaces of display/communication—are left altered, but naming-things are "touched" also through a shifting of signs and symbols of presentation and representation, or more physically through muscle memory that leaves a shadow of the movement needed to make the work. The same could be said of Metoyer, whose work with the layering and presentation of altered thing-things, while having its own integrity and intent, is akin to that of artists such as Basquiat. With Bearden or Basquiat, the relationship

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between naming-thing and thing-thing highlights awareness through utility and manipulation of thing-things.

The final chapter rethinks and repositions W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk*. I want to avoid any assumption that my turn to this particular text is meant to suggest that Du Bois's substantive work ends with this popular volume, or that his thinking does not change.[70] I am aware of his other significant contributions to theorization and description of race within the United States. However, I see in *The Souls of Black Folk* a framing of racialization in relationship to issues of thing-ness (e.g., his question "How does it feel to be a problem?") that helps to clarify the ways in which naming-things struggle against restriction. In this way, attention to *The Souls of Black Folk* offers an intriguing way to present the psycho-ethical impact of effort to close off and thereby to foster boundaries against certain bodied naming-things.[71] This is done by arguing that his underexplored question—How does it feel to be a problem?—lends itself to a mode of interrogation concerned with the effort to fix blackened naming-things and in the process to render them things of a different sort. That is to say, like Camus, Du Bois offers a way of speaking about the limitations to openness—for example, in light of the racialization and impoverishment of certain naming-things. Both Du Bois and Camus provide a way to think about the power relationships entailed in naming and being named, and the final few chapters of the book speak to such issues in both implicit and explicit ways. Mindful of Butler, Du Bois's question could be rephrased: How does it feel to be cast a different thing, to be made shit?

The book ends with an epilogue meant to do two things. First, it offers readers, who might be interested in context for this book, a way to connect presence together to my earlier thinking on the nature and meaning of religion. Second, it explores the psycho-ethical impulse presented in section 3, and it does so using Camus, Nella Larsen, Richard Wright, and Orlando Patterson to argue for the benefits in guarding openness as the proper positioning of things.[72] My concern is to read openness through absurdist moralism and in this way to push against boundaries and fixity as a mode of "unity," which ties bodied naming-things to delusion and disregard.[73] As these authors reflect, the compelling psycho-ethical response is a position that seeks no ungrounded certainties and assurances but simply struggles to maintain openness to and with the world.

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