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THEOLOGY: BIOGRAPHICAL – CONTEXTUAL –
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A Rag Rug of ‘Petites Histoires’ Autobiography – Intersectionality – Theology

JUDITH GRUBER

Abstract

Die kritische Intersektionalitätsforschung untersucht die verkörperten Bedingungen von Identitätsbildung und Wissensproduktion und beschreibt, wie Identitätskategorien wie *race*, Geschlecht und Klasse diskursiv (re)produziert werden. Sie geht dabei nicht nur kritisch-deskriptiv vor, sondern nimmt auch eine ethische Haltung ein: Sie weist auf Machtasymmetrien und ungerechte Ressourcenverteilungen als entscheidende Knotenpunkte in Subjektivierungsprozessen hin, gerade um eine Transformation dieser Konstellationen zu bewirken. Im Versuch, Intersektionalität in der Theologie durch einen autobiographischen Ansatz zu rezipieren, ist eine der entscheidenden Fragen, ob eine selbstreflexive Beschreibung der materiell-diskursiven Bedingungen der eigenen Forschung automatisch zu diesem Ziel der Transformation beiträgt – insbesondere, wenn sie von Subjekten mit ökonomischen, sexuellen, rassistischen und anderen Privilegien durchgeführt wird.

Dieser Beitrag geht der Frage nach, wie wir einen biographischen und kontextuellen Bericht über uns selbst und unsere Forschungswege geben können, der tatsächlich transformative Auswirkungen hat. Zunächst werden mit Blick auf Literatur zur narrativen Identität theoretische Grundpositionen zu autobiographischen Selbstrepräsentationen skizziert, dann zwei verschiedene Arten der Darstellung von intersektionalen Identitäten sowie deren politische Auswirkungen näher betrachtet. Drittens wird gefragt, welche Lehren aus dieser politisch-ästhetischen Analyse intersektionaler Biographien für die theologische Praxis gezogen werden können. Es wird argumentiert, dass es entscheidende Überschneidungen zwischen einem theologischen und einem intersektionalen Ansatz gibt, die es ermöglichen, eine intersektionale Analyse als genuin theologische Methode zu begreifen. Sie gibt der Theologie neue Werkzeuge für ihre Aufgabe an die Hand, Zeichen der Gegenwart Gottes in der Welt zu erkennen. Gleichzeitig verliert die Theologie durch einen solchen interdisziplinären Ansatz aber auch die Deutungshoheit in diesem hermeneutischen Bemühen – ebenso wie die christliche Tradition nicht mehr länger selbstverständlich als der einzige und richtige Ort für die Erfahrung der befreienden Gegenwart Gottes erscheint.

Critical intersectionality research examines the embodied conditions of identity formation and knowledge production and describes how identity categories such as race, gender, or class are (re)produced discursively. It not only takes a critical and descriptive approach, but also adopts an ethical stance: It points to power asymmetries and inequitable distribution of resources as crucial nodes in subjectivation processes, precisely in order to bring about a transformation of these constellations. In the attempt to receive intersectionality in theology through an autobiographical approach, one of the crucial questions is whether a self-reflexive description of the material-discursive conditions of one's own research automatically contributes to this goal of transformation – especially when it is carried out by subjects with economic, sexual, racial, and other forms of privilege.

This chapter explores how we can provide a biographical and contextual account of ourselves and our research trajectories that is potentially transformative. First, it outlines basic theoretical positions on autobiographical self-representation, drawing on the literature on narrative identity. Then it considers two ways of representing intersectional identities and their political implications in more detail. Third, it asks what lessons can be drawn from this political-aesthetic analysis of intersectional biographies for theological practice. It is argued that there are decisive overlaps between a theological and an intersectional approach that make it possible to understand an intersectional analysis as a genuinely theological method. It provides theology with new tools for its task of discerning signs of God's presence in the world. At the same time, such an interdisciplinary approach also means that theology loses its interpretive sovereignty in this hermeneutical endeavour – just as the Christian tradition no longer appears to be the only and correct place to experience the liberating presence of God.

The contributions to this volume explore how an intersectional approach can be integrated into theology. Intersectionality aims to elucidate the embodied, material, fleshy, and economic conditions of identity formation and knowledge production, and it situates them in the longer discursive histories within which identity categories such as race, gender, class, and ability, etc. are produced, maintained, and contested. An intersectional approach, in other words, invites us to interrogate how larger material-discursive histories shape our particular ways of being in the world. It is, therefore, theoretically cogent that the volume editors tied our theological study of intersectionality to an autobiographical approach: in preparation for the conference, they invited the contributors to explore the extent to which categories of social difference have shaped our biographies, and whether these categories, in their specific intersectional entanglements within each of our biographies, had an impact on our respective understanding and practice of theology. Based on these accounts, the goal of the conference – and this volume – is to reflect together on what can be learned from these personal accounts about the relationship between theology and intersectionality, and what implications this relationship has for the respective practices of theology in the regional, political,

and social context in which each of us lives and theologizes. Thus, in response to these questions, I started my first draft for my conference presentation by attempting to give an account of myself as a white, female, Catholic theologian and a new mum working in a postcolonial society. Yet, as I was working on this draft, I became more and more aware that we not only have to focus on the contents of our autobiographical accounts, but we must also interrogate the form of these narratives about our subjective positions.

This has, as I explain further below, to do with the scope of an intersectional approach. Intersectional analysis not only proceeds critically and descriptively, it also takes an ethical stance, that is, it traces the asymmetries of power and inequitable distributions of resources as decisive nodes of subjectification *in order to* instigate transformation. Understanding itself as a justice-sensitive approach, it conceives of its analytical exposure to how categories of social difference intersect in subjectification discourses as a crucial step towards the formation of more equitable societies.¹ One of the crucial questions as we seek to embrace intersectionality in theology by way of an autobiographical approach, is whether such a self-reflexive scrutiny of the material-discursive conditions of our research trajectories automatically contributes to this goal of transformation, especially when they are performed by subjects – such as myself – with economic, sexual, racial, and other privileges.² Or can this stance of self-reflexivity, on the contrary, actually serve to reposition privileged subjects in a position of dominance? Specifically, I think, we have to explore whether there are pitfalls to the assumption that marking one's position has unambivalently liberating effects, especially when such self-reflexive marking is done from a hegemonic position. For this reason, I chose to use 'transformation' in order to capture the political effects of a critical

- 1 The ethical thrust towards transformation at the heart of the intersectional approach is brought to the fore, for example, in the mission statement of the Combahee River Collective, one of the foundational texts for intersectional analysis. Cf. Combahee River Collective (1982: 13): "We are a collective of Black feminists who have been meeting together since 1974. During that time we have been involved in the process of defining and clarifying our politics, while at the same time doing political work within our own group and in coalition with other progressive organizations and movements. The most general statement of our politics at the present time would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking."
- 2 As Mary-Jane Rubenstein (2018: 286) has pointed out, "we do not share the burden of [historical] trauma equally". Configuring "trauma as the universal condition of being-undone [does not] evacuate the specificity and unequal distribution of trauma" such that it would obliterate questions of guilt, complicity or complacency. This admonition must be paid heed to as we work on an intersectional analysis of how the traumatogenic histories of race and gender shape each of us, in irreducibly asymmetrical ways.

study of identity formation. Rather than claiming that the (self-reflective) critique of identity automatically leads to liberation, I believe it is important to highlight that the performance of identity, even in its self-reflective mode, does have political effects, yet these are never unambivalent and self-evidently liberating. At the same time, I made the choice to have 'transformation' indicate that work towards liberation always takes place within – and remains conditioned and shaped by – a dominant discourse of identification.

In order to address this problem, rather than focusing on the contents of my biography, I pursue the question of *how* we can give a biographical and contextual account of ourselves and our research trajectories that have genuinely transformative effects. I also ask which lessons we can draw from this for the ways we do theology as a justice-sensitive reflection of our manifold dependencies that we find ourselves in as created and creative beings. I proceed in three stages. First, I briefly turn to the literature on narrative identity for resources on understanding what is at stake in giving an autobiographical account of oneself. In the second stage, I look more closely at two different styles of accounting for our intersectional identities, as well as their political ramifications. Then in the third stage, I ask which lessons we can draw from this political-aesthetic analysis of intersectional biographies for our theological practices. I also ground these reflections in two observations I made as I was working on an autobiographical account of my research trajectory in my first draft for this presentation.

1. How to Write/Speak Autobiographically? Theoretical Approaches

My first observation is on the form of autobiography. As I attempted to respond to the conference organizers' questions about the biographical conditions of my research, the metaphor of a 'rag rug' came to my mind as a very fitting image for capturing the narrative I came up with. Looking back at my professional life and how it intersects with my private life, I was only able to discern particular trajectories in a very hazy way. I could scramble together a number of threadbare lines that, *in hindsight*, allowed me to weave together a story of how I got to where and who I am, as a researcher, a person, and a theologian. However, there was not a single red thread to the narrative of my life, instead, it appeared to be a texture of colourful threads, and as I tried to tell my story, I began to pick at single threads here and there knowing that I would not be able to tell the whole story all at once, and do justice to all the people who contributed to the rag rug of my life. I was also keenly aware that this story would probably look very different if I were to recount it in a different situation, to a different audience – indicating that authenticity is not a quality inherent to my person or story, but a performance (cf. Wortmann 2019: 208–226).

Theoretical approaches to autobiographical writing and speaking confirm and further explicate these experiences. We find one such relevant body of literature in methodological reflections on qualitative social empirical research that uses biographical interviews to produce data. Summarizing the state of the art in this field, Ramona Bullik (2021: 5) explains that this method is based on theoretical assumptions of identity as “the integration of all the important elements of the person we are in the world, from the most public to the mainly private”. It is further held that such integration is “achieved by telling one’s life story [which] serves to create coherence and continuity over the lifespan” (Bullik 2021: 5). In this research on narrative identity, biographical narration is conceived of as a communicative and reconstructive act: it needs a “counterpart or audience” (Bullik 2021: 6) and is always “occasioned [and] adapted to the respective context in which [it is] told” (Bullik 2021: 6), reconstructed “from the standpoint of the new problem of today” (Bullik 2021: 6) in a way that arranges “[s]ingle fragments of a narrative [...] in a special order that does not necessarily have to be chronological but may pay tribute to a certain dramaturgy or a striving for causality” (Bullik 2021: 6). Plus, even though it is acknowledged that “there is always an agenda (conscious or unconscious) in the way that people tell their stories, at the very least they wish to express something of importance for themselves and their worldview” (Bullik 2021: 6), it is assumed that “a certain authenticity can be expected” (Bullik 2021: 6).

In highlighting the reconstructive and performative character of narrative identity, these theoretical reflections speak to my own experiences as I was trying to weave my research biography from the disparate strands of my private-political history. It captures the processualism and inconclusiveness that I felt constituted my biographical account of myself. Yet, while I keenly felt that the fragmentariness of my biographical story was an irreducible feature of how I can give an account of myself, it seems to only appear in these theoretical reflections as an afterthought. For me, the gaps and fissures in my story brought a “constitutive lack of self-transparency and narratability” (Butler 2003: blurb text) to the fore. In this body of literature, in contrast, they seem to be seen as procedural shortcomings that can on principle, and ideally should, be overcome. Here, they are conceived of as a methodological problem to be fixed rather than an epistemological condition in the narration of biographies. While this understanding of narrative identity makes space for processualism in the narrative reconstruction of identity, authenticity appears as the ideal to be aimed for, and the orienting principle that guides the understanding and performance of autobiographical writing and speaking/writing is coherence. These assumptions about narrative identity style autobiographical writing/speaking in a particular way invite us to integrate disparate experiences into a narrative arch that strives for – and offers – both resolution and closure. In contrast, in what follows, I draw on resources that propose a different style for giving an account of ourselves – a style that does not consider

the processual character of narrative identity an afterthought but embraces it as its point of departure and construction.

This suggestion arises from a second observation I made as I attempted to give an account of my research biography: my own story is a story of many. I can't speak about myself without speaking about uncountable other people – people I am intimately familiar with, as well as people I have never met and will never encounter in person: in the past, present, and future. In a nutshell, and with recourse to Hannah Arendt's (1967: 16) short definition of the political, my life is – I am – “*inter homines esse*”. I am, of course, not the only or first one to observe that the personal is political. From the gamut of theoretical reflections that help us see the subject as multiply entangled into cultural histories of ideas, economic networks of goods and resources and embodied ties of fleshy relatedness, I can only gesture to a few that address aspects of these discursive-material dependencies. Ulrich Brand and Markus Wissen (2017) have coined the term “imperial lifestyle” to highlight ongoing colonial dependencies in the global distribution of resources. Judith Butler's work on the post-sovereign subject has us interrogate the social, discursive conditions under which the “I” emerges, and draws our attention to the normative violence (cf. Chambers/Carver 2008) that thereby underpins the constitution of the subject. Much, much earlier, the Christian theological tradition of original sin also developed ways of speaking to our irresolvable entanglements into the lives of those who come before and after us. Furthermore, it can be argued that intersectionality – in situating the subject at the crossroads of multiple lines of discursive-material histories – resonates with core insights of many of these different approaches to the subject as a political being.

As a theory of the ‘social I’, autobiographical writing (not unlike intersectional analysis) is bound to take an ethical turn. Tracing the multiple dependencies that make up the subject, it embeds the subject in histories of indebtedness and, thus, brings culpability to the fore as a focal point for how we speak about ourselves. Challenging us to account for the ways in which we owe each other, always in asymmetrical ways, autobiography is, consequently, never a purely descriptive task but raises an ethical-political³ question: How do we *rightly* position ourselves within these histories? Indeed, it is at this point that we must return to an interrogation of the autobiographical form. Above, I have identified two different ways of organizing autobiographies: we can either subject an account of our identity to a narrative that is governed by coherence and the search for authenticity or we can embrace the performative character of autobiography as a constitutive feature

3 In “Giving an Account of Oneself”, Butler (2005) takes the reverse starting point and shows that the ethical question requires an account of the social conditions under which I emerge. The ethical quest for the moral subject is thus always already a political question – ethics, therefore, needs social theory.

that inscribes our account of ourselves with an irreducible lack of full narratability and displays this in narrative gaps and fissures. Following Rosi Braidotti's (1994: 16) argument that the "question of style is inseparable from the making of political choices", I aim to take a closer look at which of these two styles of autobiographical writing can truly reckon with the histories of indebtedness as sites from which our ways of being and acting in the world are forged.

2. Autobiographical styles and their political effects

To address this question, I draw on insights that Robyn Westcott developed in a literary analysis of statements of positionality in the works of scholars of critical whiteness. These self-declarations of whiteness are performed to account for the writers' situatedness in a violent history of racialization that has distributed resources and power in an inequitable way. They are considered crucial to the anti-racist thrust of this scholarly movement via a recognition of the writer's privileged racial position, but, as Westcott shows, may not actually perform the desired transformation. In a nutshell, her argument is that these purportedly self-reflexive enunciations of whiteness rely on specific genres (such as "testimony" and "confession") that consider the writer/speaker a sovereign subject in possession of full knowledge of themselves and how they relate to the world. Deeply informed by, and reinscribing, interlocking Western liberal assumptions about truth as an absolute and the subject as autonomous, these autobiographical articulations of whiteness sustain the white subject's claims to epistemic and moral authority. As Westcott (2004: 14) puts it: "The personal – be it the adoption of a scholarly persona in the first person, the offering of empathic connection to a white audience through the deployment of 'representative anecdotes' or the intimacies of biographical revelation – has come to sustain the conceptual inferences of white race talk. Writing 'I' is alluring. It suggests the revelation of deep structures, of things at their essence, of the subject conveyed as *noumenon*."

Styled as confessions, the self-reflexive enunciations of whiteness may thus undercut the transformative motivation of statements of positionality. Following a "codifiable sequence of events" (Westcott 2004: 30) that ultimately leads to atonement, enunciations of whiteness in the genre of confession allow the "testifying voice of moral culpability" (Westcott 2004: 12) to subject its autobiographical account of whiteness to a narrative arch in which confession grants absolution and is thus "cathartic and restitutive" (Westcott 2004: 18). Enacting the narrative principles of integration and coherence (that have been deemed as a constitutive principle of identity in the literature on narrative identity cited above), the style of confession thus achieves both, "the pleasurable closure of narrative resolution [and] spiritual restitution" (Westcott 2004: 18) that "reorganize[s] the white

body, reconstitute[s] it, consolidate[s] its power, sanction[s] and sanctifie[s] it” (Westcott 2004: 22). In this way, Westcott shows that self-reflexive enunciations of whiteness in anti-racist writing indeed have political effects. However, they do not necessarily bring about the envisioned transformation of a racialized social order, and instead, may further entrench the White claim to supremacy.

An autobiographical articulation of one’s intersectional positionality is, thus, not automatically transformative. Rather, because “knowledge as a product [does not] fail to bear the mark of its producers or of the processes of its production” (Westcott 2004: 13, quoting Code 1991: 106), such self-declarations are prone to further engraining the hegemonic order of things, epistemically and politically, even if they are driven by the “desire to perform transformation” (Westcott 2004: 6). Therefore, while “the ‘discomfort’ engendered by the confronting genre of the personal has proved politically productive in academic work that has sought to trouble the status quo *from a non-dominant position*” (Westcott 2004: 11, emphasis J.G.), such self-reflexive autobiography cannot easily be co-opted as a politically effective style *from a hegemonic position* without running the risk of confirming, rather than unsettling, the established distribution of power and resources. So, then, how can we give a biographical and contextual account of ourselves and our research trajectories that has genuine transformative effects? Westcott (2004: 7) closes her analysis by calling for a style of the autobiographical that makes the impossibility of full narratability transparent and so may serve to “disorganis[e] the white subject”. Thus, allowing for a “complication of the position from which to speak” (Westcott 2004: 2), such autobiographical positioning may allow us to refrain from reinscribing hegemonic Whiteness and instead, as Westcott (2004: 21) argues in line with Butler, opens the necessary pathways for a “thoroughgoing analysis of race or racialization”.

3. Theological Reflections

This interrogation of autobiographical styles and their political effects has profound implications for how we conceive of and practice theology. Our work as theologians, after all, is to “give an account of the hope that is in us” (1 Petr 3:15). Our task, in other words, is to develop a self-reflexive narrative of (our) Christian identity with the goal of placing ourselves correctly within God’s history with and in the world. To do theology is, as it were, to write an autobiography of Christian tradition. In addition, theologians do not commonly understand this task in purely descriptive ways but proceed normatively, framing theology as a justice-sensitive endeavor driven by the desire to transform situations and structures of individual-and-social brokenness. In other words, the question that I have identified above as crucial for an autobiographical analysis of our intersectional

subject positions is also at the core of our theological work: How do we give an account of ourselves that has a transformative effect? If, as we have seen above, it is true that the “question of style is inseparable from the making of political choices” (Braidotti 1994: 2), we have to take a closer look at the narrative patterns and modes of representation we choose to perform our task of (self-)reflecting on our Christian identity.

This task becomes all the more pressing in view of more recent re-readings of the Christian tradition through the lens of cultural studies (cf. Gruber 2020: 244–245). Studying the political, cultural, social, intellectual and economic milieus in the midst of which the Church has consolidated itself, they do not approach the agents of the church as representatives of a distinct tradition, but as individuals immersed in the diverse cultures of their day. Consequently, rather than presuming the existence of a pre-given normative and authentic Christian identity, they study how a discourse of orthodoxy has emerged out of the contested negotiation about what counts as normative. This has led to a critical interrogation of the traditional Eusebian mode of church history in which orthodoxy represents a pure and original Christianity, with heresy as its later corruption (cf. Bauer 1934), and replaces it with studies that identify orthodoxy and heresy as twinned discursive constructions (cf. Royalty 2013). The power-critical approach of cultural studies not only, and simply, contextualizes the authority of magisterial definitions of Christian identity but questions, more profoundly, the coherence and integrity of ecclesial tradition as the representation of God’s presence in the world. It unsettles historical constructions and theological models that imagine tradition as a given, clearly bounded, originally and/or ultimately unambiguous entity vis-à-vis the world and, instead, traces multiple performances of Christian identity that are irreducibly entangled into symbolic-material networks of cultural productions of meaning. Thus, cultural studies of Christian identity reveal that the ongoing negotiations of what it means to be Christian intersect with histories of race, gender, and class and, thereby, have both liberating as well as oppressive political effects.⁴ Through the lens of cultural studies, Christian identity appears as a rag rug of disparate storylines that resist integration into a coherent narrative.

What kind of theological account can we give of this messy rag rug of Christian identity, and its irreducible entanglement into powerful histories of subject positionings along axes such as gender, race, and class? Zooming in on post-World War II Holocaust theologies that seek to reckon with the Christian complicity in centuries of Antijudaism, Sarah Pinnock points to a tendency in theological reflections to subject the histories of Christianity, and their ambiguous political

4 In describing the intersectional analysis of histories of racialization, genderization, classification, etc., as the core task of cultural studies, I follow newer approaches in the field of cultural studies, cf., for example Guimarães Corrêa 2020.

effects, to a narrative of authenticity. She offers a succinct description of this theological approach:

“Despite unflinching criticism of many aspects of the tradition, established Holocaust theologians seek to make Christian faith credible by retrieving the ‘authentic’ core of faith that does not crack under the weight of post-Holocaust interrogations. Such faith is defined as authentic in two aspects: moral and historical. It must not exhibit moral failings, such as prejudice toward Jews or indifference toward genocidal violence. Moreover, such faith must have deep roots in Christian history, although critical of certain aspects of the tradition. Indeed, the earliest period in Christian origins provides material for such authentic faith. The Jewish figure of Jesus functions as the center point for authentic Christian faith free of anti-Judaism [...] With this authentic core established, Christian exclusion and persecution of Jews can be seen as a distortion of Jesus’s teachings, rather than evidence that Christianity is essentially morally tainted.” (Pinnock 2007: 504)

Pinnock’s analysis focuses particularly on Christian Holocaust Theologies, but her findings apply more widely to theological approaches that seek to tackle the messiness of Christian traditions with their entanglements into histories of oppression. In a recent contribution to a volume on conflict in Christian traditions, John Caputo (2023: 29), for example, advocates for the recognition of the historical becoming of Christian identity and calls for a radical historicization of tradition that allows us to

“write a meticulous history of how it was constructed in the first place. Then what was thought to have dropped from the sky is seen to issue from a confluence of shifting circumstances down here on earth; what was thought an essence gradually achieving existence is something accidental that could have turned out differently; and what was thought to be inevitable historical progression was in large part happenstance, fortuitous developments, creative imagination, opportunistic decisions, contingent occurrences, if not just plain violence.”

Christianity, in short “does not have an essence, it has a history” (Caputo 2023: 29). Caputo sharply juxtaposes such a radical historicization of Christian tradition with representations of Christianity that violently suppress its historical messiness by subjecting it to a narrative of essence, through which they impose (their) unity where there was multiplicity, and (their) coherence where there was fluidity. Each of these modes of telling the history of Christianity has political effects, Caputo (2023: 36) holds that to “valorize the unity, silence, and timeless stillness of essence is to deal in death, to collect mummified forms, to content oneself with the inscriptions on tombstones instead of living beings”; a radical historicization, in contrast, is a deconstructive practice that opens pathways for

transformation. Ultimately, therefore, a radical historization is an ethical demand that allows us “to keep the future open” (Caputo 2023: 39).

Calling for a radical historicization of the Christian tradition, Caputo's approach offers instruments for giving an account of Christian identity that allows us to reckon with its messy histories and mixed political effects. Yet, in transitioning from historical critique to theological construction, he makes an argumentative move that we recognize from Pinnock's critique of Holocaust theologies. Namely, by resorting to a narrative of authenticity, he argues that such a radical historical approach has transformative, counter-hegemonic power – and he identifies it as an authentic Christian practice that he considers warranted given the Kingdom-of-God practices of the historical Jesus.

This search for authenticity thwarts Caputo's goal to describe Christianity as a history rather than an essence, and ultimately, it does not allow him to reckon with the ambivalent political effects of Christian theology: The paradigm of authenticity, as I have argued above, glosses over the constitutive inconclusiveness and ambiguity of identity and, instead, subjects them to a narrative of cohesion and closure – with distinct political effects. As we saw with Westcott, autobiographies that are styled by these narrative principles of cohesion and closure offer a spiritual and political catharsis that reconstitutes the hegemonic subject as innocent. Thus, the narrative closure offered by the paradigm of authenticity also offers political closure – it allows for the construction of a narrative about Christian identity that portrays hegemonic forms of Christianity as deformations of the tradition “proper” – and indeed, Caputo (2023: 31) proceeds to frame the histories of hegemonic Christianities as a history of decline that distorts the original meaning of the Christian tradition when he writes,

“Under the shock and awe of the Empire, which supplied the military, and of Neoplatonism, which supplied the metaphysics, Yeshua, the Galilean healer, exorcist and prophet who announced the coming rule of God, still detectable in the synoptic gospels, was eclipsed, all but lost in the cloud of history, and along with him the polymorphic Jesus peoples of the first two centuries. Everything had changed. The background assumption of the early communities – how to live under the heel of Rome – shifted. They became the heel.”

The upshot of framing Christianity as authentically counter-hegemonic, then, is that we lack the critical tools necessary to account, theologically speaking, for the perpetrator theologies that have sanctioned historical and contemporary Christian alliances with empire. More profoundly, it does not provide those who find themselves in hegemonic positions with the tools to acknowledge and manage their power. Instead, it provides a mould of Christian identity that may well predispose those in power to misrecognize themselves as victims (cf. Luehrmann). Memorably, Erna Kim Hackett (2017) has termed this theological misrecognition

“Disney Princess theology”: “As each individual reads Scripture, they see themselves as the princess in every story. [...] They are Peter, but never Judas. [...] They are the Jews escaping slavery, never Egypt.” In other words, a thorough historicization of Christian traditions could offer a rich tableau for narrating the complex ambiguities of Christian traditions and provide narrative figures to account for both marginalized and hegemonic Christian practices. If, however, we subject Christian identity to a narrative of authenticity, we gloss over its constitutive ambiguity and prevent those of us who hold power and social influence from placing ourselves rightly in the history of God with the world.

In order to fully reckon with the complex ambiguity of Christian identity, we have to make other stylistic-political choices that do not thwart the effort to fully historicize Christianity. Rather than aiming to build an overarching narrative of authentic Christian identity, we have to shift to speaking of Christianity through a rag rug of *petites histoires* that explores how Christians have claimed and performed Christian identity in intersection with the histories of gender, race, class, etc. Our goal, then, is no longer to find an authentic form of Christianity beyond its ambiguous practices in concrete, gendered, and racialized discourses. Instead, we explore who does theology in which way, with which interests, and with which political effects. In other words, in order to give an account of Christian identity that allows us to place ourselves correctly within its complex histories, we have to practice theology as cultural studies.

Such a reconfiguration of theology as a radical historicization of Christian traditions is not a call to abandon its normative orientation. On the contrary, it raises the ethical stakes of giving a self-reflexive account of Christian identity: we can no longer limit ourselves to searching for an authentic Christianity from which can assume that it is unambiguously salvific. Instead, our task becomes more radically hermeneutical. By way of a critical analysis of intersectional identity negotiations, we seek to identify those transformations that we have traditionally called salvation in the midst of messy histories and interpret them theologically, as the liberating presence of God. In fact, as Caputo has proposed, in line with the argument developed above with Westcott, it is precisely such a thorough reckoning of the messiness of Christian traditions, a reckoning that does not give in to the desire for coherence and closure, that has the potential for transformative effects. With this ethical thrust at its heart, a radical historization of Christian identity meets the core aim of intersectional analysis, which also conceives of its critical description of subject positionings as ethically engaged and socially relevant (cf. Bachmann-Medick 2016: 54).

Thus, I argue that there is a decisive overlap between the theological and intersectional approaches that may allow us to embrace an intersectional analysis as a truly theological method. It provides theology with new tools for its crucial task of identifying signs of God's presence in the world. At the same time, however, by

embracing such an interdisciplinary approach, theology also loses sovereignty of interpretation in this hermeneutical endeavour – just as Christian tradition will no longer, self-evidently, appear as the sole and proper site for experiencing God's liberating presence. A theological reception of intersectionality, thus, affects the central premises of our God-talk: ultimately, it challenges us to reconsider our understanding of the relationship between God and the world and calls us to a reconfiguration of the concept of revelation, the modes of its salvific presence in the world, and its mediation in the space of the Church.

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