

Biko Mandela Gray. *Black Life Matter: Blackness, Religion, and the Subject*. Duke University Press, 2022. 176 pages. \$24.95.

Gray's *Black Life Matter: Blackness, Religion, and the Subject* provides a treatment of the discourse on Black Lives Matter that, while solemnly attentive to the historical concreteness of black lives that have been the objects of the lethality of anti-black violence, seeks to explicate the intellectual and religious structures that sustain the constancy of threats to black life. While some will read Gray's work as an anti-police treatise, this conclusion is inaccurate as his work is grounded in a love for black life and not a hatred of the police. Gray does aver that police forces need to be abolished and views the police as "proxies for a structure of subject-hood that is compelled to enact cognitive, symbolic, religious, and philosophical violence when it is confronted with the indeterminate movement and presence of blackness" (4-5). However, his aspiration for this work is to provide an ethical consideration, from the perspective of philosophy of religion, that can clear the philosophical ground of police abolition discourses.

To accomplish this, Gray offers the normative subject as the focus of his attention. While the normative subject is untethered from gender, class, or nationality distinctives so common to these discourses, it is the primacy of this subject-hood that sustains the violence toward black life that the subject experiences as a threat to the construction of their reality and existence. To counter the deadly influence of the subject, Gray advances the theological response of not being captive to the violence of the normative subject or its proxies but disrupting the violence by "sitting-with" black lives can speak from the grave. Sitting-with is a mode of critical philosophical thinking that defines what Gray refers to as paraphenomenology that allows for the attending to and care for those black lives lost. This sitting-with disrupts the instincts of phenomenological analysis and challenges the assumptive privileging of the subject's perspective for understanding the possibilities so inherent to black life. This allows for an attentiveness to black lives that elevates understandings of why black lives matter and what is at stake in anti-black violence. This attentiveness also exposes the violence of abstraction, another manifestation of privileging the normative subject's perspective.

Care of black lives lost (or philosophical eulogies) occur through engagement with the detailed stories of black lives that retain vital philosophical and ethical importance. Our attentiveness to these lives provides a critique of religious logic long complicit in the subject's violence. Gray explains this in chapter 1 through the treatment of evil as "a modality of instrumental reason." In chapter 2, he argues that police identity is given meaning by black flesh in a way that drives the "enactment of deonto(theo)logical duty." In chapter 3, Gray avers the relationship between blackness and experiences of terrifying sacredness that inform and sustain the subject's "enactments of black death and anti-black violence."

Gray's consideration of the sacred can be read as asserting the contradictory nature of religious experience that produces the tendency within the subject to respond to that which does not conform to the subject's understanding and creates a fear which must then be rationalized in a manner that sustains the primacy of the subject when confronted with black life. Ignoring the sacredness of black life, the subject reduces black life and justifies the violence directed toward these lives through theodicean logic. Religious experience can and will sustain violence, but it also affords the opportunity for life when grounded in the testimony of black life which offers the critical space for sitting-with lives that exceed our logics. "Religion can and does offer life and death and often offers both simultaneously." (27)

Gray's work could be considered temporally bounded, having little meaning beyond the tragic black deaths he so ferociously sits-with. To this critique, Gray offers a powerful rejoinder. "The brutally, undeniable, long-standing, and enduring reality is that black lives have been, and will continue to be sacrificed on the altar of American religion" (114) gives timeless power and purpose to black lives to resist the forces of religion and subjectivity that Gray understands as fundamentally anti-black. Gray's work, through the attentive comfort and defense of those who are "already dead, those dying, and those living lives consigned to the possibility of always imminent death," will remain ever relevant (5).

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