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Reconfiguring Deep Time

Ecology and the Christian Philosophy of History

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Abstract

Deep time comes in many forms, including a range of temporal frames, and various approaches to more ethical engagement with the biosphere. In this paper, I explore the recent use and contestation of history, in light of its legacy as a Christian theological project (from Eusebius and Bede into more recent renderings) and a potent political tool. In particular I argue for a pluralising of deep time against forms of white supremacy, and point to work in Black philosophy of history, particularly Caribbean critical thought, which offer a reframing of history, and by extension a different sort of ethical engagement with deep time.

Keywords

deep time – philosophy of history – black eco-poetics – racism – christian theology

Deep time is more controversial than one might expect it to be. One of the earliest versions of a deep time culture war can be found in the seventh century when an English Benedictine monk in the North of England, now known as the Venerable Bede, wrote a tome to be titled “An Ecclesiastical History of the English People”. It was this major work, which earned Bede the title ‘father of English history’. Bede shows some sensitivity to the topic of deep time and also associates deep time with reflection on landscape. The climax of Bede’s history is the Synod of Whitby in 664 when the king of Northumbria declared that his kingdom would abandon Celtic practice and instead calculate the date of Easter and various monastic customs according to Rome. Like Eusebius before him, a key theme of Bede’s work is the portrayal of divine presence

and action in history. Bede tells history not just for the sake of preserving data, but in the service of a theological polemic, to show an instance of, as historian Walter Goffart puts it, “Providence-guided advance of a people.” (Goffart 1988:235).

We can find a contemporary version of history as the handmaid of polemic in a speech delivered by the former British prime minister Boris Johnson. The speech—which was delivered in 2020 over Twitter in response to activists destroying monuments devoted to British slaveholders and white supremacists—arose as Johnson felt a sense of a threat to his personal hero Winston Churchill. Here is what he typed on June 12, 2020:

The statue of Winston Churchill in Parliament Square is a permanent reminder of his achievement in saving this country—and the whole of Europe—from a fascist and racist tyranny. It is absurd and shameful that this national monument should today be at risk of attack by violent protestors. Yes, he sometimes expressed opinions that were and are unacceptable to us today, but he was a hero, and he fully deserves his memorial. We cannot now try to edit or censor our past. We cannot pretend to have a different history. The statues in our cities and towns were put up by previous generations. They had different perspectives, different understandings of right and wrong. But those statues teach us about our past, with all its faults. To tear them down would be to lie about our history, and impoverish the education of generations to come. As for the planned demonstrations, we all understand the legitimate feelings of outrage at what happened in Minnesota and the legitimate desire to protest against discrimination. Whatever progress this country has made in fighting racism—and it has been huge—we all recognise that there is much more work to do. But it is clear that the protests have been sadly hijacked by extremists intent on violence. The attacks on the police and indiscriminate acts of violence which we have witnessed over the last week are intolerable and they are abhorrent. The only responsible course of action is to stay away from these protests.

Twitter post, 12 June 2020

It is important to take note of Johnson’s tactical recharacterisation of peaceful Black protestors as violent, and appreciate how ironic this is given the fleet of violent white nationalists who descended on London shortly before he delivered this speech and shut down protests (van Hagen 2020). The key feature I want to draw attention to here in Johnson’s account is his use of singular nouns and pronouns. He speaks of “our past” and “our history” as if there is only

one. Here we find an account of temporality which is driven by the hegemonic but invisible phenomenon of white epistemology. As I will go on to argue, this kind of white temporality, sets up a single hegemonic past-narrative, which then facilitates the deligitimization and suppression of histories of oppression behind a faux monolith. The overall aspect we are left with is one of collective history without plurality which is fragile and requires defense.

Whilst some commentators might want to interpret a speech like Johnson's as drawing on themes of solidarity or unity, there are good reasons to suspect the narrative's surface appearance of solidarity. As Paul Gilroy argues in *After Empire*, what Johnson actually achieves here is the deligitimization of other histories through re-narration (Gilroy 2004). The sins of racism are deprecated as past crimes relating to former generations. We must keep the monument, Johnson argues, because it will remind us of how enlightened the present white generation is through remembering how that wartime generation was a bit racist. The work of suppressing alternative histories which are perceived to be competing with the dominant narrative is achieved through the destruction of bodies and documentary evidence, as when white British Labour Party and Conservative Party officials facilitated the destruction of Windrush landing card records in 2009/10 which provided the basis for deportation of Black persons (and their descendants), who emigrated legally to Britain in response to the promise of citizenship in exchange for assistance in helping a depopulated post-war Britain to repair its economy. Johnson's rhetoric arises from a broad and well-honed tradition, which takes Bede and Eusebius' work as a kind of touchstone, and continues in the work of many contemporary Christian historians such as David Bebbington who sustain this epistemology of the master narrative, in some cases accidentally, and in others deliberately (Bebbington 1979: 187–188).¹

In her article for this special issue, Amanda Power provides a resonant account, arguing that though the modern discipline of history may seem to be resolutely secular, genealogy of the subject necessarily starts in Theology, and even in spite of attempts to disavow that heritage, modern history continues to make use of an epistemological structure which mirrors the Christian philosophy of history. For the sake of my argument in this article, I assume that these structural and political overlaps between church history and secular history enable a playful kind of political theological analysis which can complement both frames (Kidwell 2019). My approach to the subject assumes that a post-

1 See also, more recent reactions to this kind of work in Jay D. Green, *Christian Historiography: Five Rival Versions* (Baylor UP, 2015).

secular ethical narrative recommending a more valorous way of doing *history* necessarily carries normative implications (though I will leave these implicit for this brief article) for how we ought to do *theology*.

With several of the authors in this volume, I agree that we cannot simply flee the problems of history to some other imagined safe scholarly harbor. Power goes on to suggest that the social function of medieval history was fundamentally conservative, interpreting past events in light of “humanity’s redemptive drama” which in turn facilitated “the anthropocentric occupation of deep time and its uses as a governing, colonising and extracting tool” (Power 2022: 198–199). But the purpose of this account for Power is not to dismiss history, but rather as inspiration for historians to develop and “draw on new methodologies to contest more effectively the complacencies induced by our stories about humanity” (Power 2022: 206). In another article in this special issue, Catherine Rigby takes note of the ways that proposed scholarly alternatives have used the framing of “deep time” in an attempt to transcend the narrative limits of the story of the human species. In this way, discussions of deep time might be taken as an alternative to the anthropocentrism of history. However, as she goes on to argue, in engagement with James Hatley, this is no safe harbour and there are ethical reasons to prioritise the frame of human history over deep time (Rigby 2022: 250).

Taking these conclusions as a starting point, I want to draw attention to the ways that anti-ecological epistemologies and anti-Black racism also collude in the kind of historicism that is exemplified by Johnson and also endemic to many modern deployments of “historical” reasoning. Building on this critique, I will argue for an ethical focus on proximate histories as an ecological move. The methodological solution I will propose for modern philosophy of history is to pluralise history. This work of pluralising is especially important for eco-theology as a discipline because some of the more influential deployments of eco-theological history have tended to move in the opposite direction. Rather than revealing a variety of stories, projects such as the popular work by Thomas Berry and Brian Swimme in *The Universe Story* conveys an egalitarian, but nonetheless hegemonic sense of history which subsumes difference (e.g. alternative narratives such as Confucianism) in a grand narrative, which these two authors assume they are competent to synthesise for a general audience. Across these cases, we find the hegemonic assumption that past time is best represented as singular. As I will go on to suggest, we can find a quite different account which seeks to pluralise history in Black critical theory on the philosophy of history. It is no coincidence, I will argue, that we find interconnections between Black critical theory and environmental philosophy on the matter of history.

While I argued at the outset that this impulse to read proximate history as the narration of divine providence arises historically within Christian theology, Boris Johnson provides an example of the ways that this mindset has migrated into white secular political theologies. Furthermore, we can see the persistence of the underpinning myth of a single history which must be defended. In her contribution to this special issue, Simone Kotva also observes the central role that “mythic temporalities” have to play in generating and contesting the deployment of deep time in cosmopolitical discourse (Kotva 2022: 229). This highlights the need to attend, as Kotva argues, to the different kinds of mythologies and what they achieve in terms of helping us to navigate (or disregard) everyday life, and cosmopolitically democratic accounts of political agency.

The notion of hegemonic histories as an ideological battleground has been foregrounded well by environmental historians and eco-critics like William Cronon. However, much of the discussion in this scholarly discourse has pointed to the relative disconnection between the specific histories of human animals and the wider natural world in which they were situated. What has been less well remarked is the persistence here too of a tendency to seek after a master-narrative. To give one example, in his essay “A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative” Cronon observes the disjunction between narratives of natural and human history in 1930s America. The question he sets his essay with is, “where did these stories come from?” which by extension implies that there is an unappreciated master-narrative which lies behind the two more situated accounts (Cronon 1992). Throughout his account, history (in singular tense) is juxtaposed with stories or narratives and his concern remains “scientific” so that we might “acknowledge the immense power of narrative while still defending the past (and nature) as real things to which our storytelling must conform lest it cease being history altogether” (Cronon 1992: 1372). It is not surprising that he ends the essay with a critique of the dangers of postmodernism.

Though we might want to assume, as Cronon does, that physical science carries history in a more linear and easily aggregated way, we can find the same tensions between objective / singular and deconstructed / pluralised notions of history within environmental science and archaeology as well. In *The Dark Abyss of Time* Laurent Olivier plays on a juxtaposition between destruction and fleeting attempts at preservation that is latent in the archaeologists vocation (Olivier 2011). For Olivier, this leads not to an abandonment of archaeology as a form of historical practice, but a recasting of archaeology in Nietzschean terms, as a kind of tragic endeavour (Olivier 2011: xiv). The ultimate reality of past lives and artefacts is not in question for Olivier, rather his concern is that the ruminations of the present render the “past” more fragile:

The more we add the present onto the past, the more the past itself becomes matter for conjecture and hypothesis. Who are these people in the pictures? What is this thing? When does it date from? As the intrinsic history generated by the collection of objects emerges, the harder it becomes to consider time a succession of distinct eras, which is the notion of time conventionally associated with history. With objects stripped of their original meaning, it is no longer possible for me to know exactly what period they belonged to. They have all been tossed together, jumbled and entwined. The sense of time through which we conceive history has been thoroughly undone. No longer is it sequential and linear, as the chronological continuity that serves as the thread of history would have it. Henceforth, for vestiges, the sense of time is floating, pluritemporal.

OLIVIER, 2022: 8

One can find a similar conviction hidden in the reconstructive forms of ecosystem science often referred to as natural history. In spite of the best attempt, the traces of the past which come forward to us in rock strata, the persistence of genetic material, patterns of erosion, etc. do not always conform to linear models of time progression, either in pace or sequence. As I have argued elsewhere, this also carries implications for our orientation towards the future and leads to a discomfort with ecological surprise and novelty (Kidwell 2023). My point here is not to discount the reality of past time, or the valorousness of attempting to see it clearly. Rather, I am concerned with a certain kind of myth of a singular deep time which pervades all these enterprises, particularly in light of the ways that this myth has underwritten white epistemologies in the modern period. As long as it is unchallenged, this myth will distort or impair our attempts to engage with deep / ecological time(s). And I want to take the rest of this essay to point to some ways that Black counter-historiographies offer some insights and alternatives.

This question is particularly important for European scholars to consider because awareness of racism is often far more suppressed and invisible in Europe than it is in the USA. In a commentary that resonates with contemporary Black Lives Matter protests just as much as it did with the demonstrations after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., the poet and essayist James Baldwin offers an important rejoinder to Boris Johnson's historiography. In an interview given a half century ago, Baldwin reacts to the Esquire interviewer's question, "Can we cool it?":

It's a very serious question in my mind whether or not the people of this country, the bulk of population of this country, have enough sense of what

is really happening to their black co-citizens to understand why they're in the streets. I know of this moment they maybe don't know it, and this is proved by the reaction to the civil disorders ... All that can save you now is your confrontation with your own history ... which is not your past, but your present. Nobody cares what happened in the past. One can't afford to care what happened in the past. But your history has led you to this moment, and you can only begin to change yourself by looking at what you are doing in the name of your history, in the name of your gods, in the name of your language.

BALDWIN 1968

There are two features of Baldwin's account that are salient to my analysis. First is his recognition of the collusion between history and theism—the defense of white history is often intertwined with the defense of white religion, which many contemporary adherents call (without an awareness of the irony involved) “Christianity”. We find a similar kind of collusion between the notion of “tradition” and its intertwining with white history. The second crucial feature of Baldwin's account is the emphasis on histories as plural. In his view, our different “histories,” just like our different social experiences, can vary quite widely in their constitution, and this works out on personal and collective levels. Afro-Caribbean history, he observes, is not linear in the way that white history tends to present itself—it is a “history characterised by ruptures” (Baldwin 1968). As I read it, Baldwin mobilises the same sensibility that Olivier later refers to as pluritemporality.

It is important to note how the philosophy of history and temporalities studies has been part of Black and Afro-Caribbean scholarship from early on and have been a feature of both scholarship and activism.² Early anti-colonial critical frameworks which seek to re-construct history, pluralise, and/or deconstruct historicism can be found in the early 20th century through primary source work such as W.E.B. du Bois' *Black Reconstruction* (1935) as well as in C.L.R. James' writing on the 1791 slave revolution, *Black Jacobins* (1963), and in his work as part of Johnson Forest Tendency collective, with notable contributions by Grace Lee and Raya Dunayevskaya. Another key influence on contemporary scholars re-framing temporality for history such as Verene A. Shepherd and Achille Mbembe is the anti-historicist work of Franz Fanon which can be found in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) and *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961).

² I am indebted to Anthony Reddie for highlighting the work of Fannon, James, Rodney, and Shepherd in this context.

Even outside academia, as Anthony Reddie noted, “Rastafari saw this in their popularising of the term ‘his-(s)tory’, which gained some popularity amongst Black communities and activists.”

This attempt to pluralise history is worked out with particular force in a seminal late-20th century debate between the French Caribbean writer, poet, philosopher, and literary critic, Édouard Glissant, and fellow Caribbean scholar Edward Baugh. The scene is set when Baugh suggests, quoting Derek Walcott, that “In the Caribbean history is irrelevant, not because it is not being created, or because it was sordid; but because it has never mattered. What has mattered is the loss of history, the amnesia of the races, what has become necessary is imagination, imagination as necessity, as invention” (Walcott 1974). This argument is itself a rejoinder—as Baugh goes on to observe—to the colonial argument that the history of the West Indies was “only brutality and futility” (Baugh 2012: 64). If one were to assume (like Boris Johnson) that history was a matter of “achievement” and “visible monuments” then, as Baugh observes, “we are also without a past because the ancestral gods of the uprooted peoples died or were forgotten in the sea-crossing, and the people have found no satisfactory substitutes.” (Baugh 2012: 64) One reaction to this situation, as Baugh notes, is to reconfigure history to be (more transparently) a tool of ideology, or counter-ideology. Given the overarching concern of my essay, we should note well that the achievement of this rejoinder, particularly in the work of Walcott, is an interweaving of natural and human histories—both recognised as subjects of violence and the displacement of history. So here history is no longer a matter of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s “lengthened shadow of one [great] man” which is “made ‘visible’ in monuments, great architecture, and world-shaping events” (Baugh 2012: 71). Instead, ancient unnamed “ancestors cast into the future, the spirit of the ancestors, their capacity to endure, is history” (Baugh 2012: 71).

Baugh calls this a “point beyond history” and argues that Walcott’s sense of “transcending history” is the result of a “personal, anguished confrontation with history.” In this way of thinking, “the idea of getting beyond history” is achieved “by working backward through history” (Baugh 2012: 73). Whilst working in some agreement with Baugh’s (and Walcott’s: 6) account Édouard Glissant also looks to the experience of Afro-Caribbean descendants of enslaved persons and the disruptive effects of murder and trauma that haunts them. However, Glissant proposes a different approach. In contrast to Baugh, he suggests that “If it is ridiculous to claim that a people ‘has no history’ ... because the lived circumstances of this daily reality do not form part of a continuum, which means that its relation with its surroundings (what we would call its nature) is in a discontinuous relation to its accumulation of experiences (what we would call its culture)” (Glissant 1989, n.p.). Glissant proposes that what we

often find scholars calling history suffers from “from a serious epistemological deficiency.” The trouble here is that we allow the agenda (of representing the achievements of a few “great” white men) to define the content of the practice of “history”, it will be unable to produce more generalisable accounts for all persons which can “clarify the reality lived by this people.” So it is not a matter of Afro-Caribbean people having no history, but rather a deficiency in the concept of history which produces this analysis.

The answer, Glissant suggests, should be found in a bottom-up approach in which the very definition of history arises from the everyday experience of those persons whose lives it claims to interpret. So we begin from an acceptance that, as Glissant suggests, “The French Caribbean is the site of a history characterised by ruptures and that began with a brutal dislocation, the slave trade.” The consequence of this is not that one should offer an apologia for the apparent absence of history in such traumatic circumstances, but that history should be redefined. As he goes on to suggest, “Our historical consciousness could not be deposited gradually and continuously like sediment, as it were, as happened with those peoples who have frequently produced a totalitarian philosophy of history, for instance, European peoples, but came together in the context of shock, contraction, painful negation and explosive forces.” For Glissant, this painful “dislocation of the continuum, and the inability of the collective consciousness to absorb it all, characterise what I call a nonhistory.”

Given the undercurrent of polemic against post-modern approaches as incoherent or individualistic, it is important to appreciate the historicist dialectic that Glissant is arguing for, echoing W.E.B. DuBois—between pluralism and cosmopolitanism, which arises from what DuBois called “double consciousness” in reference to the state of “unreconciled strivings” between black nationalism and various globalisms, including Black pan-Africanism (cf. Cooppan 2005). The practice of history, in this configuration, is constituted by the everyday experiences of individual people, and results in a kind of “restorative and creative work of collective memory”. This kind of history has more of an activist emphasis as well. Given the ways that the past has an affective inflection and can carry and activate trauma for contemporary persons, the work of “history” should not seek to be neutral. Instead, as Glissant argues, it ought to seek to be restorative. As Verene A. Shepherd suggests, this kind of restorative project can be found across a range of reconstruction projects arising from Caribbean scholars (Shepherd 2007). However, as she goes on to suggest, this is not just a matter of improving a single linear history, but about transforming the way we understand and configure knowledge production.

In this brief paper, space permits me only to make some tentative proposals towards how we might want to approach “deep time”. So, for now, I’d like

to conclude and consolidate my argument in two ways. First, I want to affirm that the Black philosophy of history that I am sketching out here has much to offer, alongside feminist work in time studies, towards re-temporalising the biosphere. If we are to re-imagine the intersection of our various temporalities with those of other-than-human creatures, we might as well begin by identifying the connections between our hegemonic faux-histories and the violence they have underwritten. Here I also note a resonance with Kotva's suggestion, drawing on the work of James W. Perkinson, that while mysticism and ecstatic experiences have often been characterised as flight from the biosphere and bodily realities, in different configurations they *can* help us to attune to "lifeways that belong to subalterity". It seems appropriate, to me, to suggest that this insight might extend into environmental history, which is precisely the point that James H. Cone makes in his essay "Whose Earth is it Anyway?" (2000).

Following this work of repentance and epistemological clearing, the next step is to pursue the kind of creative re-synthesis that Glissant commends. Can we do history in a way that is collective and co-creative? Pre-empting Gregory Bateson, who argued in 1970 that we need a rehabilitation on the level of epistemology, by pursuing "patterns that connect", Martin Luther King Jr. argued for the idea of a beloved community. In his 1967 Christmas sermon, King suggested, "It really boils down to this: that all life is interrelated. We are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied into a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly".

I'm nowhere near offering a conclusive answer to the questions that I raised at the outset—but there are some hints strewn along the way. I wonder whether we might continue to hold that there is some merit to what Gadamer called, following Husserl, the fusion of our ever-receding narrative horizons. The mode of this work is more complex and more dynamic than either Husserl or Gadamer anticipated, as each of those horizons are swarming with temporalities. We need a rehabilitation of history like the one that Glissant and Shepherd imagined on the level of epistemology—and I think this can occur in the seeking of mutuality amidst plural and entangled "histories". This work is embodied and affective, and focusses in on the network and not the nodes—on the ways that the excavation and telling of histories can connect us in the context of modes of care and shared responsibility.

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