

Review of Philip Butler, *Black Transhuman Liberation Theology* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020).

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There are two crises at the centre of the present monograph. Firstly, the crisis of race. The fact that Philip Butler's work was published in 2020, the year in which the movement for Black Lives galvanised protests and brought culture-wide reckoning with systemic racism, speaks poignantly to the crisis that Black folks (this is Butler's preferred terminology) experience. Secondly, the technological crisis facing humanity. Of course, technology is transforming every aspect of modern life. Transhumanism is a philosophical and technological movement that embraces this transformation by advocating for the development and adoption of technologies that are designed to upgrade humanity by improving health and lifespans, intellectual and physical capacities, and increasing control over the human body, mind, and emotions. These technologies include genetic engineering, information technology, and anticipated future technologies such as machine-phase nanotechnology and general artificial intelligence. Transhumanists, such as the University of Oxford philosophy Professor Nick Bostrom, welcome these changes to humanity and argue that such enhancements signal the dawn of "post-humanity". I suggest that the transhumanist agenda presents a crisis to contemporary society and theology, not in the modern parlance of "a time of intense difficulty", but in the older sense of, "the decisive moment" or "turning point."<sup>1</sup> The innovative move that Butler presents in this monograph is to bring these two crises together in an attempt to use one crisis as the antidote for the other.

Butler is an advocate of transhumanism. From the outset he accepts, firstly, the anthropological claim that all humanity is already and has always been transhuman. This is the claim that, because

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<sup>1</sup> *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, 2016), "Crisis," <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/crisis>.



humanity has always extended itself through technologies—think of cave dwellers using tools in the creation of fire and art and the development of hunting and cooking tools—humanity has always been more than human (i.e., transhuman). Secondly, Butler accepts transhumanism’s eschatological hope that, “barring some global reformation toward agrarian preindustrial minimalism, transhumanism will become the means by which society operates” (2). Butler goes on to say he believes that the “shifting landscape” in which we currently find ourselves “requires a complete acceptance” of technology, “especially theologically” (14). Butler hopes that “a further look into the transhumanist posthuman, through a Black transhuman liberation theology lens, will allow for a move towards the acceptance of directed evolution” (19).

Butler’s work is broken into four central chapters with an introduction and conclusion. In chapter one, “Thinking of Black Transhumanism: Non-Humanity, Moving Away from Transhumanism’s Roots”, Butler reflects on the relationship between non-humanity and Blackness. In dialogue with the post-colonial work of Frantz Fanon, Butler states that Black folks are not, and have never been, *human* because *human* as a concept is part of an epistemically colonial system that rejects Blackness and which Black folks should therefore reject. Accepting this “non-human” positioning of Black folks opens the door for transhumanism. Butler argues that “if Black folks are not human, Black folks are also no longer bound to the theological claims which uphold the sanctity, or need for preservation, of the ‘human’ form” (20). For Butler, the deconstruction and reconstruction of the concept of humanity found in transhumanism provides a level playing field for black and womanist theologians representing communities whose humanity has already been deconstructed by a colonial and white supremacist society. Because the humanity of Black folks has already been deconstructed by a society that privileges whiteness, transhumanism offers hope for a new kind of humanity, so Butler asserts that “Black folks are already transhumanist” (23). In the second half of this chapter Butler examines the racist shortcomings of transhumanism, noting its eurocentrism and Enlightenment roots that inevitably result in proto-normative white supremacy. Butler notes that “transhumanists admit that transhumanism is built upon Enlightenment humanism’s epistemological edifice to support notions of societal progress” (38). This is the same epistemologically colonial system that rendered Black folks as non-human.

Having critiqued both transhumanist and euro-centrist conceptions of humanity, in chapter two, “Foundations of a Black Transhumanism: Blackness as the Biotechnologically Mediated Experience of Black Vitality”, Butler reimagines the Black body as technology. To do this he must develop a Black transhumanism that rejects the mind-body dualism which is central to euro-centrist transhumanism. Butler suggests that Black bodies are a technology that acts as a conduit for *vitalist panpsychic animism* which Butler later defines as God, saying, “in the case of the body, vitality gives life to the body and simultaneously the body gives vitality the chance to experience life. [...] African vitality’s greatest manifestation of life force is God. [...] [T]here is no gradation of God, or that which is beyond the self” (53).

In chapter three, “The Neurophysiology of Spiritual Experience” Butler offers a biological breakdown of spiritual experience into four “realms”: physiological, psychological, neurological, and somatic. This chapter details scientific and neurological analyses of Black spiritual practices including ancestor veneration, dancing, which “has the potential to decrease activation in the PFC [prefrontal cortex] while increasing activation in the parietal regions” (92), and mimicry, which activates mirror neurons “found in the premotor/supplemental motor area” (96). Butler’s intention in offering an “understanding of the neurophysiological underpinning of spiritual experience” is to empower Black folks to not be “emotionally disrupted with every form of technologically mediated trauma” (102). However, he also repaints the spiritual practices of Black communities as techniques; the implicit assumption of this chapter is that the practices of Black communities are technologies of spirituality.

This leads to chapter four, “Black Transhuman Liberation Theology”, in which Butler provides a sketch of the spiritually augmented possibilities of pairing Black biotechnology and Black spirituality. Butler argues that “technology is the key to Black revolution and liberation” (105), a liberation that is economic and cultural, in line with the broader aims of liberation theology. The question is, can the development of new technology, which currently takes place as the result of capitalist market forces, be the source of that revolution and liberation? Butler concedes that the development of new technology will inevitably lead to greater inequality and worsening economic prospects for Black communities, yet Butler’s solution to this is to encourage Black communities to harness the technological and accept their posthuman future. Ethicists such as Katie Cannon have argued that Black communities often must make choices between “bad” and “worse” rather than the “bad/good” choices available to people in positions of privilege.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps Butler is advocating that Black folks make a pragmatic choice that, as a white man, this reviewer cannot appreciate. Yet, given his advocacy of transhumanism, Butler does not appear to be presenting the technification of Black folks as a “better than worse” choice but rather as the best choice.

The culmination of the book, chapter five, is titled “Black Transhumanism as Revolt Spirituality” and explores the revolutionary spirituality, the enhanced life, and the shifting power dynamics that result from Black Transhumanism. Butler cautions his readers that “God is not coming to liberate” (140); instead, the revolutionary spirituality that he advocates must come from a blending of Black vitality and technology.

Throughout his monograph, Butler embraces a paradoxical logic. He argues that colonialism has de-humanised Blackness and yet finds the solution to this crisis in transhumanism, which, as he notes, is inherently white and Eurocentric. He decries digitally mediated institutions and e-government, virtual spaces, and “technological advancements packaged in various consumer-based modalities” (5) as some of the numerous vehicles for Black oppression in the modern political

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<sup>2</sup> Katie G. Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988).

system that people of colour find themselves in today. And yet, despite his extensive critique of an impending technocracy, Butler continues to advocate for Transhumanism as the hope of Black liberation. One of the hallmarks of Butler's project is a novel combination of a Marxist critique of markets (a critique that is a core component of both Black and Liberation theologies) with transhumanist philosophy, which tends towards the pro-market stance of neo-liberal capitalism. It is the case that transhumanism espouses a revolutionary eschatology, and it would be interesting to see a comparison of the Marxist revolution of Liberation theology with the technological revolution of transhumanism. However, Butler simply splices these two ideas, arguing that it is through combining liberation theology with the immersion of oneself into the technological world that "one can actually embody a constructed theology that subverts technocratic attempts to control the human body and mind" (14-5).

Butler's work may well represent the first book-length attempt at a transhumanist theology that takes a positive approach towards transhumanism. This is in contrast with most of the theological academic writing on the subject which tends to be adversarial towards, or at least in critical dialogue with, transhumanism. It is concerning that Butler's bibliography suggests he has not engaged with the critical contemporary theological work of Ted Peters, Michel S. Burdett, Brent Waters, or Ronald Cole-Turner, the classic historical critique from Jacques Ellul, or even the theological techno-optimism of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin.

This monograph offers a bold attempt at developing a black transhumanist liberation theology. The work contains much creativity, offering an inter-disciplinary approach to the challenges presented by crises we face as a culture today. It is yet to be seen if the ideas contained can successfully be held together in the configuration that Butler presents.