Thesis: Your portrayal of God through positive categories and rational argumentation reduces God in an act of absolute violence to your own conceptions. Rather than respecting the ~~absolute transcendence~~ of God your act of fundamental linguistic violence forecloses on God.

Links:

1. You claim God exists, without predicating any qualification as to its existence being utterly unlike our own.
2. You claim to be able to prove its existence. This actively reduces the content of God to a conceptual formula, something that completes a logic puzzle as a contingent operator, claiming its nature is summed up in the existential predicate.
3. Anywhere they something positively true about God without positive qualification.
4. Ascribing to God particular wants or desires like a human would have.

Impacts: You foreclose on liberatory strategies. Only through apophatic theology in which God is beyond all human categories can we fracture violent assumptions and so understand God’s radical identification with the oppressed on their own terms rather than the terms bequeathed to them by oppressors. If we are made in God’s image but Gods image is summed up in categories, then queer bodies which do not fit within standard categories are absolutely excluded. **DANIELS**:[[1]](#footnote-1): While neither Foucault nor Butler address liberation theology directly**,** the implications of their scholarship on the disciplineis undeniable**.** In his book Beyond Ontological Blackness, Christian ethicist Victor Anderson relies on these insights to critiquehow **ontology has operated within liberationist discourse** to disconcerting ends. Anderson notes that, **functioning as “the cult of European genius… ontological blackness signifies the blackness that whiteness created**.”14 **Operating within these** ontological **categories**, Anderson’s analysis points out, **not only reflects** an **embededness within a European, modernist framework, but also distorts the conditions of** African American **life** and experience and keeps liberationist discourse trapped within a crisis of legitimation**.**15 Anderson interro gates how this has occurred within the scholarship of James Cone and other black liberation theologians.16 Anderson points out in this critique that …**black theology constructs its** new **being on the dialectical structures that categorical racism and white racial ideology bequeathed** to African American intellectuals (notwithstanding its claims for privileging black sources). However**, the new** being of **black theology remains** analienated being whose mode of existence is **determined by crisis,** struggle, resistance, and survival—**not** thriving, **flourishing,** or fulfill ment…. I suggest that **as long as black theology remains determined by ontological blackness, it remains not only a crisis theology but also a theology in a crisis of legitimation.**17 Anderson’s intention, “to alert critics of the linguistic dangers of reifying the categories that govern their discourses in such a way as to mimic, represent, and mirror the discourses they want to reject,” reflects and builds upon the concerns raised by poststructuralists, adding a theological dimension.18 These critiques have called for a response from liberation theology, which has, in turn, complied in multivariate and diverse ways. Some strands of liberation theology have retorted with compelling responses and critiques of poststructuralism and the broader philosophical frame of postmodernism in which it is situ ated.19 Others have ceded to postmodern critiques and suggested that liberation theology is a failed project.20 Many,however, have sought a way to ‘have their cake and eat it to,’ and have attempted to explore how poststructuralism and liberation theology can coexist not only peacefully but constructively. While rooted firmly in the liberationist paradigm, the contributors of Opting for the Margins: Postmodernity and Liberation in Christian Theology by and large seek to explore and excavate the rich resources possible through conversation with poststructural philosophy. In her essay “Liberation Theology in the Twenty-First Century,” Kwok Pui-Lan names this desire to listen to the insights of postmodernism while also attending to the risks it poses, and seeks instead for “neither a wholesale rejection or an indiscriminate embrace” of its claims.21 In his essay that concludes the volume, “Theology and the Power of the Margins in a Postmodern World,” Joerg Rieger, the editor of the volume, echoes Pui-Lan’s assertion. On the one hand, he acknowledges the poststructuralist theoretical and theological critiques of liberation theology, pointing out that “post modern thinkers have made us aware of a broader range of factors—many of them more hidden—that shape who we are. This critique of identity offers a major challenge to those in power.”22 Moreover, he acknowledges not only the critiques, but the constructive potential, noting that “**postmodern critiques** of identityand of the modern middle-class self, as well as a sustained concern for otherness and difference, **may be useful in developing** new and more effective **strategies of resistance**.” 23 On the other hand however, Rieger, like Pui-Lan, questions the efficacy of a postmodern emphasis on difference and remains at least somewhat wary of how criticisms of “identity” can negatively impact attention to those on the margins. As both a critique and an invocation, Rieger asks, “does this postmodern revolution ever reach the margins?”24 Pui-Lan, Rieger, and the other contributors in Opting for the Margins all seek to take seriously the critiques and correctives proffered by poststructuralism while remaining, to varying degrees, skeptical about what post structuralism can offer in response to the material, embodied suffering of those on the margins. Part 2: Agency and Liberation? Materiality beyond Identity **What might it mean to take** seriously, on the one hand, poststructural criticisms of liberation theology, and, on the other hand, the material and psychic realities of the marginalized?While acknowledging the critiques raised by Rieger and others, in this section Isuggest thatpoststructuralism, while assuredly sus ceptible to the aforementioned critiques, also has resources for responding to these concerns and offering a space for attending to the material and psychic well-being of marginalized people seriously—that , specificallyas it is taken up by queer theory, poststructuralismcan function as/in the service ofliberation theology. Whereas the contributors of Opting for the Margins critique poststructuralism for what it perhaps does not attend to, it is my argument that **it is precisely what is left unsaid that provides a framework to speak to**, for, **and with those on the margins. The apophaticism** in and **of queer theology is central to** its **liberative potential,** and this section will begin to explore this claim through an analysis of Butler’s essay “Gender is Burning.” In Gender Trouble, Butler acknowledges these critiques of poststructuralist skepticisms of subjectivity. She explains that “it is no longer clear that feminist theory ought to try to settle the questions of primary identity in order to get on with the task of politics.”25 Instead, situating her analysis within a recognition of the potentially pernicious power of categories of identity, she seeks to ask, “what political possibilities are the consequence of a radical critique of the categories of identity.”26 In the preface to the 10th anniversary edition of the text, she emphasizes that the deconstructive and denaturalizing thrust of the text is in fact motivated by the political, that it “was done from a desire to live, to make life possible, and to rethink the possible as such.”27 Moreover, as I examined in the first section of this essay, it is precisely Butler’s point that **it is only from within** the **structures** themselves **that the margins can be reached.** While this is evidenced in the epigraph at the beginning of this essay, it is perhaps most clear in Butler’s work Bodies that Matter, a text that attends specifically to the significance of materiality in poststructuralist discourse and its political ramifications. In “Gender is Burning,” Butler extrapolates on the space (and contingency) of subversion through an analysis of Paris is Burning, the 1990 documentary that chronicles the culture surrounding drag ball competitions in New York City in the mid-80’s and the gay and transgender, as well as predominately African American and Latino, communities that were involved in the “balls.” Here, Butler raises questions about the totalizing critiques by bell hooks and Marilyn Frye of drag as misogynistic—that “there is nothing in the identification that is respectful or elevating.”28 While Butler acknowledges that, “there is no necessary relation between drag and subversion,” she argues that this ambivalence is precisely the space of resistance and resignification. “It is this constitutive failure of the performative, “ she explains, “this slippage between discursive command and its appropriated effect, which provides the linguistic occasion and index for a consequential disobedience.”29 Relying on the psychoanalytic theory of Jacques Lacan, she [Butler] notes that this ambivalence, this “relation of misrecognition,” offers space for rupture— that “Paris is Burning documents neither an efficacious insurrection nor a painful resubordination, but an unstable existence of both,” and thus functions as “an appropriation that seeks to make over the terms of domination, a making over which is itself a kind of agency…”30 Through the explication of the film, Butler expands on the claims of Gender Trouble and calls traditional feminist accounts of agency into question. Building again on Foucault, Butler points out that: There is no subject prior to its constructions, and neither is the subject determined by those constructions; it is always the nexus, the non-space of cultural collision, in which the demand to resignify or repeat the very terms which constitute the “we” cannot be summarily refused, but neither can they be followed in strict obedience.31 This, she suggests, is evidenced in as well as exposed through drag—evidenced in the narrative arch of the film itself, as well as in the actual events of drag balls and the lived realities of two key characters, Venus Xtravaganza and Octavia St. Laurent. Xtravaganza and St. Laurent, in their very bodies, point to this am bivalence. While Xtravaganza’s performance undeniably hyperbolizes heterosexual gender norms, this reiteration of norms in her particular body is also undeniably subversive—as it results in her murder—and elucidates and enacts through embodied performance Butler’s point that the “replication of heterosexual constructs in non-heterosexual frames brings into relief the utterly constructed status of the so-called heterosexual original. Thus, gay is to straight not as copy is to original, but rather, as copy is to copy.”32 Again, while Butler cedes that there is a level of appropriation of the norms of a masculinist, heterosexist economy, it is precisely this appropriation that elucidates and enables subversion because the truth of the norm, a “constant and repeated effort to imitate its own idealizations, ” is exposed—or, as she later puts it, the drag ball “contest (which we might read as a ‘contesting of realness’) involves the phantasmatic attempt to approximate realness, but it also exposes the norms of regular realness as themselves phantasmatically instituted and sustained.”33 Or again, when she explains that “the subject is the incoherent and mobilized imbrica tion of identifications; it is constituted in and through the iterability of its perfor mance, a repetition which works at once to legitimate and delegitimate the realness norms by which it is produced.”34 In short, through an analysis of Paris is Burning, Butler suggests that agency is exercised in and through the consolidation of norms, within particular bodies and contexts—that it is ambivalent, and contingent, and because of those things, it is potentially complicit, but it is also potentially subvert sive. The materiality of the body and the space of political agency are enabled, as opposed to foreclosed, within Butler’s poststructuralist frame. Part 3: A Potential Point of Convergence: Queer Theory and Apophati cism Systematic theology is a difficult enterprise to describe. Van A. Harvey, whose A Handbook of Theological Terms appears on many a seminary syllabi, especially on introductory courses in theological studies, writes that “systematic theology is, as the name suggests, the systematic organization and discussion of the problems that arise in Christian faith.”35 Liberation theology has,historically, both situated itself within systematic theological discourse, as well as pushed back against many of its attendant methodological and theoretical presuppositions— drawing attention to the contexts in which we construct meanings and seeking to ground theological reflection both in and from the place of the marginalized, of the poor.36 In this essay, I have highlighted the value of liberation theology to the discipline, but have also sought to ask how it might be more faithful to its aims in light of a poststructuralist critique. Using Butler, I have tried to demonstrate how **poststructuralism might provide resources wherein one can envision liberative aims without reifying problematic ontological and epistemological regimes of knowledge-power.** In this final section, then, I want to explore how another component of the theological tradition—that of apophaticism, of negative theol ogy—might serve as a rich resource for doing theology that is simultaneously poststructuralist and liberationist. Apophatic theology, Via Negativa, is deeply embedded within the theology cal tradition, associated with the Cappadocian Fathers of the 4th century, Pseudo Dionysius, and Thomas Aquinas. **This tradition of “theology by way of negation**” **stresses** the ineffability of God, **the inadequacy of human language and concepts to describe Divinity.**37 As Mary Jane Rubenstein points out, “apophasis does not oppose cataphasis”—**negation is not opposed to** the organization and **discussion** of Christian faith, **but** rather, perhaps **like liberation theology, provides a** sort of **epistemological frame** through which to theologize.38 **This** epistemological emphasis on the inadequacy of human knowledge and language to describe God **shapes also how we speak about ourselves, the human** that is **made in the imago dei.** Thus, one can begin to see howa queer theoretical position is an apophatic one, through its deconstruction and eschewal of categorization and assertion of incoherent sub jectivity. Butler’s account of subversion through an explication of Paris is Burning offers one example of political agency that is enabled by a poststructuralist account of power-knowledge discourse. **If knowledge**, as Foucault and Butler claim, **is key to control and domination**, through a production of subjectivity bound to particular categories— **then it is perhaps through an unknowing,** a silence, **that** space for **political transformation can be envisioned.** Boesel and Keller, in their edited volume Apophatic Bodies: Negative Theology, Incarnation, and Relationality, echo Butler’s claim about epistemological imperialism and point out its theological inflections in their assertion that “mastery over divine mystery routinely results in a body count.”39 What might political agency, liberation, and transformation look like when envisioned through an apophatic register? Butler emphasizes this apophatic dimension of her approach to gendered bod ies in greater detail in a later text, aptly titled Undoing Gender. Here, Butler points out that it is precisely this notion of an autonomous identity that poststructuralism resists (a notion, I might add, that is shared by liberation theology) that is reflected in the body itself. The body does not reify autonomy but evidences its failure. It does not assume independence, but rather signifies dependence. She explains: Let’s face it. We’re undone by each other. And if we’re not, we’re miss ing something. If this seems so clearly the case with grief, it is only because it was already the case with desire. One does not always stay intact. It may be that one wants to, or does, but it may also be that despite one’s best efforts, one is undone, in the face of the other, by the touch, by the scent, by the feel, by the prospect of the touch, by the memory of the feel. And so when we speak about my sexuality or my gender, as we do (and as we must), we mean something complicated by it. Neither of these is precisely a possession, but both are to be understood as modes of being dispossessed, ways of being for another, or, indeed, by virtue of another.40 Butler demonstrates that the body evidences and speaks to an apophasis, an unknowing, a dispossession. Rather than being the place where liberative aims are abandoned, however, they evidence themselves to be the place where resistance and subversion, and thus liberation, are most accessible. Butler thus provides “an unsaying of the body in the name of the body.”41 In this way, a queer, apophatic account of the embodied self provided by post structuralism provides a liberative space that resists the mastery and control that pervades an Enlightenment ethos. This is a theme that Chris Boesel and Catherine Keller take up in depth. “Apophaticism,” Boesel and Keller explain, “does not ne gate bodies as such. Rather it targets our false knowledge, the idols formed in our confusion of the finite with the infinite.”42 What Butler’s oeuvre both implicitly and explicitly elucidates is how one can recognize and affirm the lived, material, embodied existence of the marginalized and pursue the political aims of justice and liberation without falling prey to the claims of knowledge and mastery that are bound up with modernist epistemologies. **This does not,** however, **negate** or resist the aims of **liberation theology—rather, it offers a space in which they can be more fully realized.**

The alternative is to endorse a picture of apophatic theology. This NEEDS to be positively said. No one can be perfectly apophatic, but we need to be constantly striving to do so. Rejecting the utilization of divine categories in a systematizing of the Christian tradition within a monolithic government obligation is critical to reform. It is in silence about God and negation that one can move forward. **JACOBS:**[[2]](#footnote-2)Claims of apophatic or mystical theology are deeply entrenched in the Christian tradition. They are mostly ignored in the contemporary landscape, save for some work by philosophers with a continental perspective. It seems to me they are ignored by analytic philosophers of religion out of embarrassment. (At any rate, that’s certainly a self-diagnosis.) They can’t possibly be right, the thought is. They’re so not right as to be almost laughable. But, I’ve argued, they are not laughable. They are consistent and coherent. They are, I think, substantive claims about how we can and can’t represent God. And the claims have significant implications for how we conceive of philosophical theology. On the view I’ve defended as consistent and coherent, we should not put to ourselves the task of describing how God is fundamentally. For that task cannot be completed. It cannot be begun. For, if the Ineffability Thesis is correct, and I’ve argued that it might be, we cannot speak in fundamental ways about God. And whereof we cannot speak, thereof we must remain silent.12

This means that the best way to account for God’s existence is to remain radically silent on all issues of their existence and default to the NC framework. This is because reducing God to human categories justifies oppression. If God is transcendent and infinitely powerful, then the distance between them and the most powerful oppressor is infinite, which is the same distance between them and the most oppressed. This allows true valuation of the marginalized as equal in the eyes of God, but if God is rendered human then the effect is the opposite.

1. Brandy Daniels. *A Poststructuralist Liberation Theology? Queer Theory & Apophaticism.* Union Seminary Quarterly Review. Volume 64: 2 & 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Jonathan D. Jacobs. *The Ineffable, Inconceivable, and Incomprehensible God: Fundamentality and Apophatic Theology*. Forthcoming in Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion.. <http://www.marcsandersfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/Jacobs-Phil-Fundamentality-and-Apophatic-Theology.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)