**Distribution Agreement**

In presenting this thesis or dissertation as a partial fulfillment of the requirements for an advanced degree from Emory University, I hereby grant to Emory University and its agents the non-exclusive license to archive, make accessible, and display my thesis or dissertation in whole or in part in all forms of media, now or hereafter known, including display on the world wide web. I understand that I may select some access restrictions as part of the online submission of this thesis or dissertation. I retain all ownership rights to the copyright of the thesis or dissertation. I also retain the right to use in future works (such as articles or books) all or part of this thesis or dissertation.

Signature:

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ September 4, 2015

Ashley Gay Date

God’s Absence is Not Nothing:

Thinking the Ab-solute Otherwise

By

Ashley Gay

Doctor of Philosophy

Graduate Division of Religion

Theological Studies

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Wendy Farley

Advisor

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Andrea White

Committee Member

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Jeffrey Bloechl

Committee Member

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Jill Robbins

Committee Member

Accepted:

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Lisa A. Tedesco, Ph.D.

Dean of the James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Date

God’s Absence is Not Nothing:

Thinking the Ab-solute Otherwise

By

Ashley Gay

M.A., Andover Newton Theological School, 2011

M.A.T.S., Austin Graduate School of Theology, 2009

B.A., Harding University, 2007

Advisor: Wendy Farley, phd

An abstract of

A dissertation submitted to the Faulty of the

James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies of Emory University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in Graduate Division of Religion

Theological Studies

2015

Abstract

God’s Absence is Not Nothing:

 Thinking the Ab-solute Otherwise

By Ashley Gay

The discourse of God’s absence alters both (1) the mission and manner of our thinking about God, and (2) our conceptions of holiness as separation. The holy as ‘set apart’ cannot be distinguished as an object present to possessive thinking, nor an object presented to others as absolute truth. Therefore, holiness—as conceived in discussions of God’s absence or absolution—does not legitimate separation as invulnerability. Correspondingly the designation of God as “absolute” must be read apophatically as “ab-solute” to mark what *ab-*sence does to theological thinking. In conversation with philosophers and theologians, this dissertation argues that the ab-soluteness of the holy critiques our claims of:

* Abstraction—as if God were an essence, accessed only in one’s rejection of mortality (Rosenzweig)
* Univocality—as if God were a calculation, universally accepted and adequate to our thinking (Heidegger)
* Ideology—as if God were an idea that could be digested, possessed, or forced, for our satisfaction (Weil)
* Totality—as if God were preserved by negating the transcendence of beings, or by evoking the neutrality of Being (Levinas)
* Purity—as if God were the basis for false dichotomies (Lacoste)
* Ultimacy—as if God’s unambiguous reality rendered us capable of unambiguously representing God (Tillich)

These are *illusory* modes for any thinking the holy. God’s holiness, as ab-solute, withdraws from these illusions; however, God’s *elusive* absence is not their negation, nor sheer nothingness. Because the holy’s ab-solution is neither reducible to God’s presence to thought, nor adequated to our thinking of absence, it forges another mode for thinking: the *allusive*. The allusive mode thinks the way in which God’s absence takes on a certain presence in our encounters with alterity. These encounters with alterity—whether poetic, aesthetic, ethical, liturgical, or symbolic—allude to the God that both eludes and refigures the desire for relationship. Holiness thus becomes the possibility to host what eludes thinking, even as this ab-solution entices thought into its most rigorous patience and humility. God’s absence is not nothing. It is rather the gift of an expansive evacuation that opens thought, not to security or satisfaction, but to love.

God’s Absence is Not Nothing:

Thinking the Ab-solute Otherwise

By

Ashley Gay

M.A.T.R., Andover Newton Theological School, 2011

M.A.T.S., Austin Graduate School of Theology, 2009

B.A., Harding University, 2007

Advisor: Wendy Farley, Phd

A dissertation submitted to the Faulty of the

James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies of Emory University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in Graduate Division of Religion

Theological Studies

2015

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

Among the many, humbling experiences wrought by writing a dissertation, the opportunity to thank my influences proves the most gratifying one.

I would like to first thank the poet, and unwitting theologian, Christian Wiman. We met on a few occasions at Andover Newton Theological School—more noteworthy to me than to him, no doubt. On a more recent occasion, I met him in *[His]* *Bright Abyss*. There he suggests that one’s “expressions of regret about [the] inability to rest in God” can have a “tinge of self-satisfaction, even self-exaltation to them.”[[1]](#footnote-1) He notices:

There is nothing more difficult to outgrow than anxieties that have become useful to us, whether as explanations for a life that never quite finds its true force or direction, or as fuel for ambition, or as a kind of reflexive secular religion that, paradoxically, unites us with others in a shared sense of complete isolation: you feel at home in the world only by never feeling at home in the world.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Thank you*,* to Christian Wiman, for reminding that dissatisfaction and restlessness do not, in themselves, allow thinking to become more like love. My mind often flexes at each opportunity to note a distinction, an exception, an exclusion, a contrary; but he has pointed me toward a possibility I had nearly forsaken: community without totality.

 To the community of the International Churches of Christ, who taught me—as a child—a love for scripture’s proclamation, if not inadvertently an awareness of its abuses.

 To the community of the Vista Ridge Church of Christ, who received my earliest theological questions with equal parts genuine concern and good humor.

 To the remarkably hospitable communities of the University Avenue Church of Christ and the Brookline Church of Christ, who afforded an experience of church reminiscent of Galatians 3:28. Among many beloved congregants, I am especially grateful to Hugh and Elaine Gainey, Jack and Ruth Wright, Eddie and Annette Sharp, James and Marla Walters, and Bob Randolph.

 To the community of Austin Graduate School of Theology, for sharpening my love of scripture into the demands of careful exegesis, and for encouraging my path as it shifted from evangelism to education.

 To the community of minds afforded through the Boston Theological Institute—scholars at Andover Newton, Boston College, Boston University, and Harvard Divinity School, who alluded to a holiness more akin to desire than certainty. I remain especially indebted to: the ethical pulse of M.T. Davila, the poetic approach of Mark Burrows, the theological creativity of Shelly Rambo, the kind nuance of Bryan Stone, the subversive aesthetics of Roberto Goizueta, and the gentle acuity of Robert Imbelli. I am also grateful to the burgeoning scholar, Marvin Lance Wiser and his wife Yuliana, for not only driving me on ice-pocked roads to attend class with Richard Kearney, but also for practicing the kind of hospitality that cannot be confined to classroom, nor book.

 To the Bible Department at Abilene Christian University, for providing me both opportunities to teach and the students who, in turn, taught me.

 To the Graduate Division of Religion and Emory University’s Laney Graduate School, for granting me the generous resources to pursue my question—in its classrooms, in its well-cultivated libraries, and in domestic and international conferences.

 It has been my hope to honor, as much as I question, the people and circumstances that have shaped my research. In this hope, I could be no better equipped than to have the readership and critical suggestions of my dissertation committee. I am especially grateful to my committee chair, Wendy Farley, who encouraged me to hone my interests, and my voice, according to a fundamental concern. Her approach to theological studies—both in her books and in her advising—inspired a way forward when theology, for me, seemed cluttered by its abuses and restrictions. I also thank Jill Robbins for her scholarly example, and the ways in which our conversations pressed my precision. Profound thanks must also go to Andrea White, whose abundant knowledge is matched only by her graciousness. Further, I maintain deep gratitude for Jeff Bloechl, whose prudent pedagogy first introduced me to the thinkers featured in my dissertation, and whose lucid writings continue to direct my thought.

Finally, I thank my family. To my grandparents—Donald and Myrtle Gay, Charles and Marilyn Merrick—who modeled the generosity of love. To my father, Donald Gay, who has proven the gifts of a love unaccompanied by understanding. To my mother, Melissa Gay, for her most consistent support, and for the beautiful burden of a questioning spirit. To my sisters, Jennie and Lauren, for enduring my questions in times when silence might have been more loving. To my husband, John, who led me to a love cultivated by letting go, and tended (primarily) by laughter.

**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

INTRODUCTION

I. THE TRUTH: THE WAY, AWAY……………………………………………..1

II. THE ABSOLUTE: OUR ABSTRACTIONS, GOD’S ABSENCE…………....22

CHAPTER ONE

ILLUSION: LIMITATIONS OF THE ABSOLUTE

INRODUCTION…………………………………………………………………...28

I. Martin Heidegger:

 THE ILLUSION OF CALCULATIVE THINKING………………………..…34

II. Simone Weil:

 THE ILLUSION OF Attachment.……………………………………..…60

III. EMMANUEL LEVINAS:

 THE ILLUSION OF TOTALITY…………………………..…………………74

IV. JEAN YVES-LACOSTE:

 THE ILLUSION OF PURITY…………………………………………...…….89

V. Paul Tillich:

 The Illusion of the Demonic...……………………………………..102

CHAPTER TWO

ALLUSION: THRESHOLD OF THE INSOLUBLE

INRODUCTION……………………………………………………………….…115

I. Martin Heidegger:

 THE ALLUSIVE STRUCTURE OF POETICS…...………………………...122

II. Simone Weil:

 THE ALLUSIVE STRUCTURE OF METAXU…......………………………140

III. EMMANUEL LEVINAS:

 THE ALLUSIVE STRUCTURE OF ETHICS……………………………….154

IV. JEAN YVES-LACOSTE:

 THE ALLUSIVE STRUCTURE OF LITURGY…………………………….172

V. Paul Tillich:

 THE ALLUSIVE STRUCTURE OF SYMBOLS...………………………….189

CHAPTER THREE

ELUSION: DISTANCE OF THE AB-SOLUTE

INRODUCTION………………………………………………………………….204

I. Martin Heidegger:

 THE ELUSION OF THE LAST GOD…..……..…………………………….212

II. Simone Weil:

 THE ELUSION OF THE GO(o)D..………………………………………….232

III. EMMANUEL LEVINAS:

 THE ELUSION OF THE INFINITE...…………………………………….....245

IV. JEAN YVES-LACOSTE:

 THE ELUSION OF THE ESCHATON..…………………………………….259

V. Paul Tillich:

 The ELUSION OF THE ABYSS.…………………………………………...276

CONCLUSION…………………………………………………………...293

BIBLIOGRAPHY.………………………………………………………..307

1. Christian Wiman, *My Bright Abyss: Meditation of a Modern Believer* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2014), 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid., 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)