

Take & read: New books in ethics

## **What does hope look like in the face of racism?**

selected by [Jonathan Tran](#) in the [May 23, 2018](#) issue



**In Review**

**GARY DORRIEN**

# **BREAKING WHITE SUPREMACY**

Martin Luther King Jr.  
and the Black Social Gospel

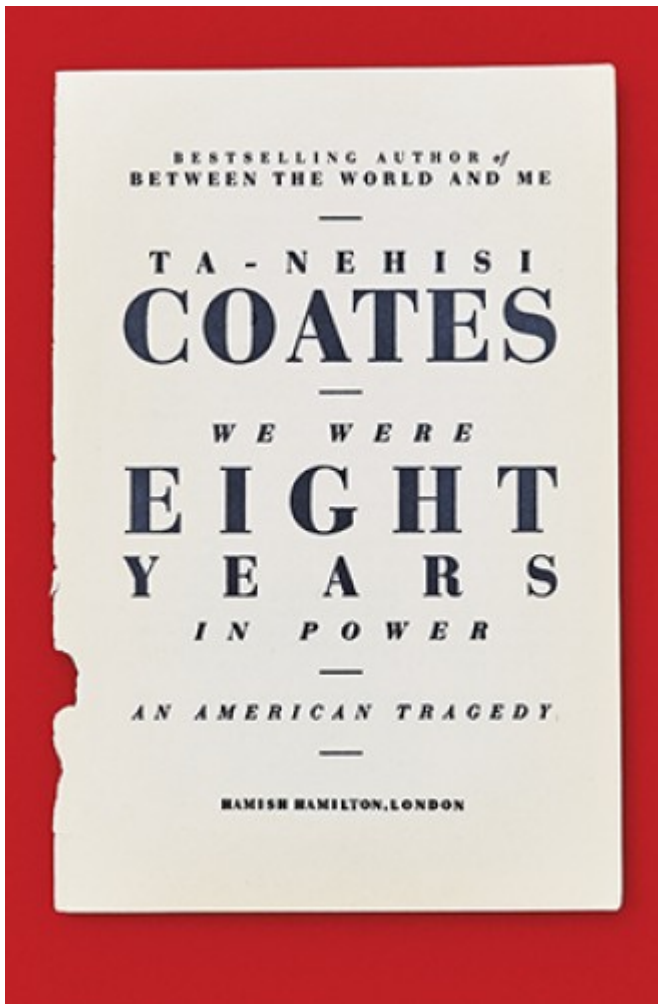


## **Breaking White Supremacy**

Martin Luther King Jr. and the Black Social Gospel

by Gary Dorrien

Yale University Press

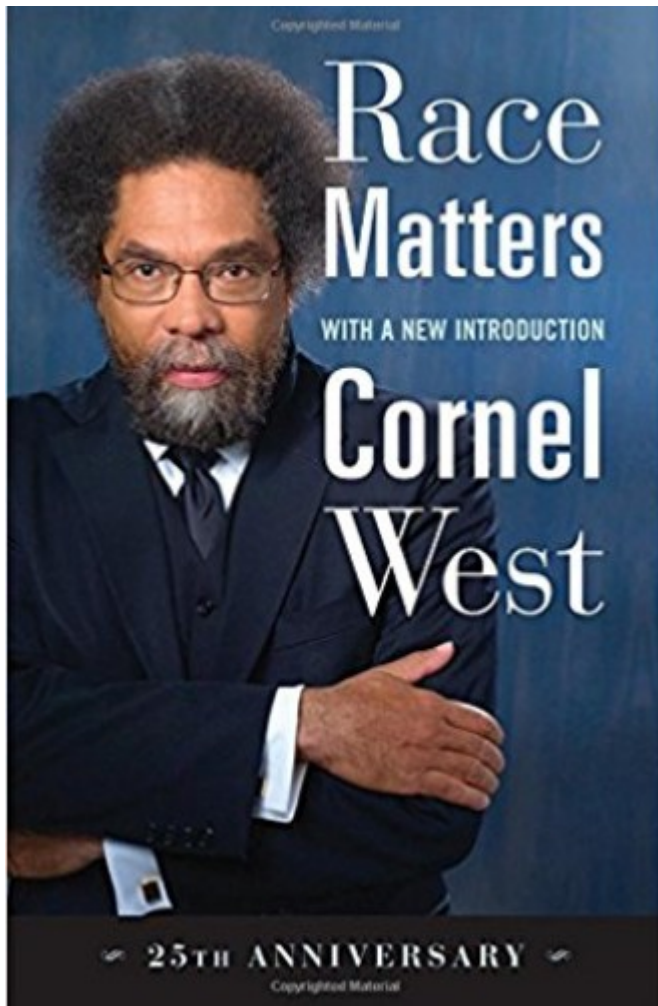


## **We Were Eight Years in Power**

An American Tragedy

Ta-Nehisi Coates

Random House

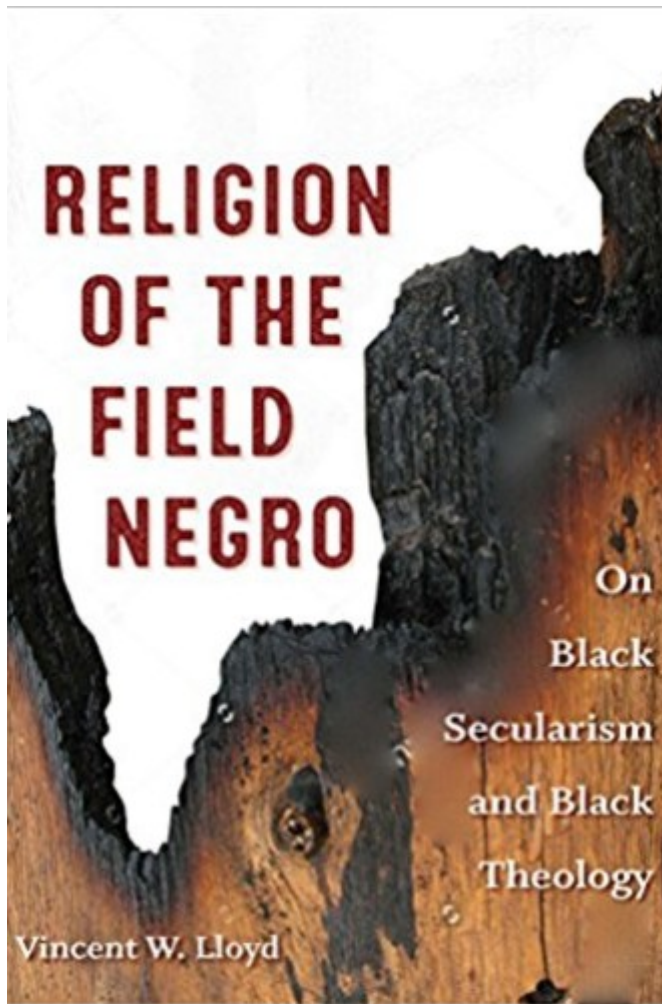


## **Race Matters**

25th Anniversary Edition

by Cornel West

Beacon

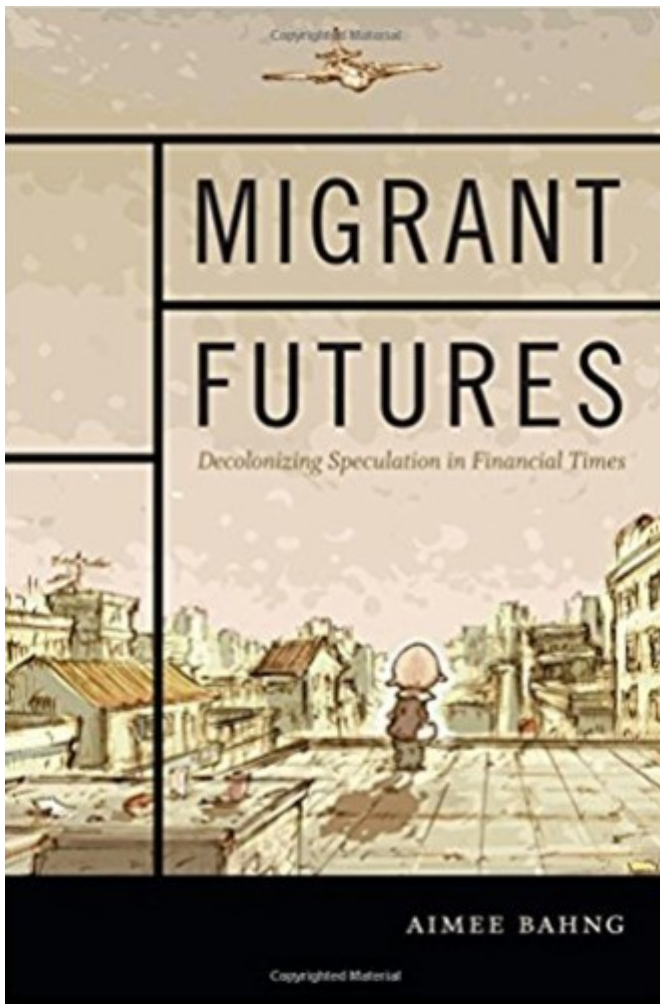


## **Religion of the Field Negro**

On Black Secularism and Black Theology

by Vincent Lloyd

Fordham University Press

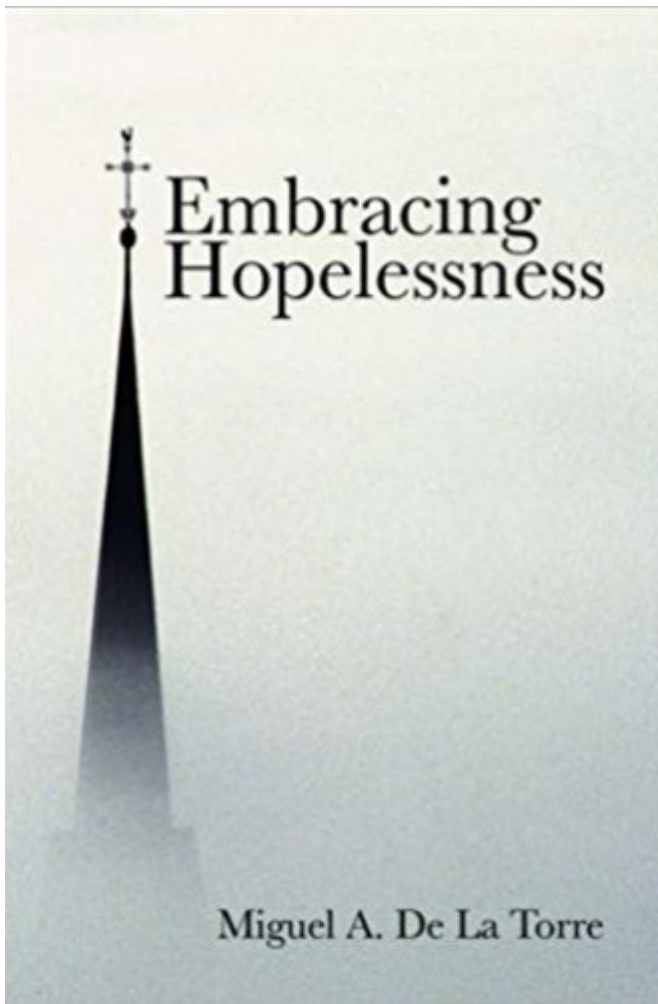


## **Migrant Futures**

Decolonizing Speculation in Financial Times

by Aimee Bahng  
Duke University Press





## **Embracing Hopelessness**

by Miguel De La Torre  
Fortress

Racism's pervasiveness and persistence has left the world horribly off-kilter. Hope in the context of racism subsists mostly as a question: How much hope can one afford? Some of the best recent books in ethics take up this question.

During Holy Week, I read through Gary Dorrien's magnificent two-volume series, completed earlier this year, about a movement he calls "the black social gospel." The series relates the amazing confluence of mind and spirit that began (it goes on still) during the hundred-year period between Reconstruction and the civil rights era. The first volume, *The New Abolition: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Black Social Gospel* (Yale University Press), brings to life those reformers whose work commenced after American slavery officially ended and the enterprise of re-creating slavery in new

form was beginning. My Maundy Thursday started off with reading about those who mobilized against a massive lynching campaign perpetrated to enforce racial oppression. My Good Friday entailed sitting at the feet of the giants who wrestled with the future of black life under these impossible conditions.

The second volume, *Breaking White Supremacy: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Black Social Gospel* (Yale University Press), interweaves histories of families and institutions, of the black church and its storied presence, of African Americans in Africa and America, of ideas like nonviolence and socialism and uplift, and of the painfully varied ability of American Christianity to produce both a Howard University (or a Martin Luther King Jr.) and the need for them. [Read John Fea's review of *Breaking White Supremacy* [here](#).]

By Holy Saturday, I got to Dorrien's account of King's murder and the deep pattern that connects white supremacy, colonization, paternalism, terror, capitalist exploitation, education, militarization, misogyny, and segregation with politics, whiteness, Montgomery, Chicago, Vietnam, and Christianity. One can feel King's exhaustion, the sense that had James Earl Ray not killed him, the already deadly weight of it all would have. Dorrien relates how, at King's funeral, Ralph Abernathy "poignantly invoked the Joseph story in Genesis: 'Let us slay the dreamer, and see what shall become of his dream.'" Holy Saturday never felt so holy.

Holy Week involves us in a story in which some things are resurrected but not everything. Dorrien tells us that "the crowd at King's funeral could not bring itself to actually sing 'We Shall Overcome.'" Dorrien leaves the future of hope ambiguous. If it survives, it will do so by living on in the courageous lives of ordinary people trying to follow the arc of justice. If it doesn't, people will come to believe that the world is ordered by chaos—not that the life of this world is necessarily determined by injustice, but simply that justice has nothing to do with it.

My Holy Week deep dive into Dorrien's black social gospel was prompted by a recent debate involving Ta-Nehisi Coates and Cornel West. Through a series of *Atlantic* articles collected last year in *We Were Eight Years in Power: An American Tragedy* (One World) Coates has established himself as one of our most astute cultural observers. West, a towering academic and public intellectual, has long been famous and recently saw the 25th anniversary edition of his iconic *Race Matters* (Beacon).



The debate between West and Coates—between *Race Matters* and *We Were Eight Years in Power*—is about hope under the conditions of racism. Whiteness might be so relentlessly destructive that the best one can hope for is that it be called out, though never fully dismantled. In this fraught context, perhaps hope looks like a father telling his African American son how to survive its ravages, where survival at least affords the chance to lay hold of the world's beauty, something worth fighting for. Dismissing this as insufficiently hopeful misses how deadly is the phenomenon of white racism, how heavy was King's burden when murderous racists finally got to him. But West wants more, believing that the very existence of America demands more and that Christianity enables more. For West, those who hope in the democratic experiment cannot afford to stop short, as if mere survival were the point of the black social gospel.

The nature of this question, according to theological ethicist Vincent Lloyd, requires that Christian theology play a role, even if history serves up plenty of reasons to leave Christianity behind. In *Religion of the Field Negro: On Black Secularism and Black Theology* (Fordham University Press), Lloyd acknowledges that the disastrously intimate relationship between Christian theology and white racism just might cancel anything theology has to say. He understands that Christian racism tempts us to construe hope in a way that avoids the problem. But succumbing to that temptation, Lloyd believes, is a grievous error. He claims that theology enables us to see both how much racism troubles the world and what it means to live into the hope that God has overcome the world.

Which returns us to Dorrien's story about the black social gospel. How are we to read its triumphant and frustrated history, especially since for Christians in America—including those of us who are neither black nor white—this is a story we participate in? Is there cause for hope? How is one to feel about Dorrien's wondrous chronicle and its engrossing continuities with the present? I suspect that Dorrien himself doesn't always know.

At minimum, the problem of racism requires a thicker account of hope. In *Migrant Futures: Decolonizing Speculation in Financial Times* (Duke University Press), literary theorist Aimee Bahng talks about hope bound up with care, or what Christians might describe as love:

Even amid severe conditions, friends enliven worlds of possibility in everyday practices of care. They help each other relocate, pool resources and hatch plans to make money [relative to unjust systems] in unsanctioned ways, and perhaps most significantly, they speculate together: pondering alternative histories and dreaming themselves into imaginative worlds that look, smell, and feel different from their immediate surroundings.

Bahng talks about “utopian visions” that “unfurl across the daily exploits and mundane, communal acts of these unlikely heroes of the future.”

A hope bound up in love and care approaches what Christian ethicist Miguel De La Torre is after in discarding future-focused accounts of hope for something that places the weight of its desire in the present. In *Embracing Hopelessness* (Fortress), he explains, “I’m not necessarily rejecting some afterlife, it’s that I simply don’t care. This present age has too much oppression to be distracted by visions of kingdoms not yet seen.” De La Torre extols a hope against hope: “Because we cannot discern the future with any accuracy, and because the future is not determined, we can only and boldly engage in liberative praxis within the now—and hope for the best.” [Read Kyle Rader's review of *Embracing Hopelessness* [here](#).]

Dorrien concludes his story with the civil rights feminist theorist and activist Pauli Murray. He recognizes that ending with Murray and her emphasis on reconciliation as a hope-driven concept can have the effect of renewing a term that has lately gone out of favor in discussions of racism. Murray expresses her complex hope in the poem “Prophecy”:

I sing of a new American  
Separate from all others,  
Yet enlarged and diminished by all others.  
I am the child of kings and serfs, freemen and slaves,  
Having neither superiors nor inferiors,  
Progeny of all colors, all cultures, all systems, all beliefs.  
I have been enslaved, yet my spirit is unbound.  
I have been cast aside, but I sparkle in the darkness.  
I have been slain but live on in the rivers of history.  
I seek no conquest, no wealth, no power, no revenge;

I seek only discovery

Of the illimitable heights and depths of my own being.

The hope of salvation tied to liberation from domination is what Dorrien means by the black social gospel. It is a picture of Christianity that powerfully illuminates the drama of the Easter season—and the drama of America.