

## [Negativity, Pessimisms, and Sad Affect in the Study of Religion \(University of Toronto DSR Graduate Conference\)](#)

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African American History / Studies, Cultural History / Studies, Philosophy, Religious Studies and Theology, Sexuality Studies

### **Negativity, Pessimisms, and Sad Affects in the Study of Religion**

*University of Toronto*

*April 18-19, 2019*

*Keynote Speakers:*

*Rinaldo Walcott (Toronto), Anthony Paul Smith (La Salle)*

The Graduate Student Association at the University of Toronto's Department for the Study of Religion invites graduate students from all disciplines to participate in a symposium that explores the significance and relevance of forms of theoretical negativity for the study of religion. We invite contributions that consider negativity from a number of different angles.

First: a recurrent feature of materials and movements marked as 'religious' is negativity towards the present order of this world. White Evangelical conservatism, global Pentecostalism, and Islamic piety movements of various political stripes—to name just a few examples—are all marked, to vastly different ends, by antagonism toward 'worldly' powers and influences. Whether indexed by themes like hope and optimism in the face of the present, expectations of apocalypse, or forms of world-denial, postures and habits of negativity—of saying 'no' to the current order of things—can be found across politically, geographically, and historically disparate contexts.

Second: the 17<sup>th</sup>-century philosopher Benedict de Spinoza famously claimed that all negation was merely "imaginary:" a failure to grasp the real order and connection of ideas. In recent decades, this idea has undergone something of a renaissance. As a result, there has emerged a tendency to explain the habits of negativity and 'sad affects' scholars find in cases like those above in terms of their positive causes and effects. Theorists and philosophers have turned to concepts like 'process,' 'network,' 'assemblage,' 'affect,' 'action,' and 'becoming' in an attempt to build a conceptual grammar adequate to the ontological and epistemological critique of negation.

Finally: a number of significant but disparate developments across the humanities have again placed forms of negation and negativity at the center of theoretical concern, rather than simply locating negativity in the materials theorized. In queer theory, moves to recenter the negative are visible in

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turns toward antisociality and the refusal of futurity (Lauren Berlant, Leo Bersani, Lee Edelman). In critical race theory and black study, we find black feminist refusals of whitened figures of 'being' and 'the human' (Saidiya Hartman, Katherine McKittrick, Christina Sharpe, Hortense Spillers, Sylvia Wynter) and turns toward Afro-Pessimism and its call to 'end the world' (David Marriott, Jared Sexton, Calvin Warren, Frank Wilderson III). Elsewhere, projects exploring logics of 'no' or 'non,' including François Laruelle's non-philosophy, transform philosophy and theory themselves into objects of negation.

While turns to 'religious affect' and other affirmative frameworks have made quick inroads into religious studies, these latter forms of theoretical negativity have been slower to gain traction within the discipline. This conference aims to provide a forum in which to explore issues pertaining to the use of theoretical forms of negativity and pessimism for the study of religion, or to the significance of habits of negation and sad affects in religious materials.

**Participants are encouraged to submit proposals for papers that reflect on questions such as the following:**

- To what extent are postures of theoretical negativity (including but not limited to non-philosophy, Afro-Pessimism, antihumanisms, or antisociality) appropriate or applicable to the study of religion?
- To what extent do recent interventions (i.e. Fred Moten's 'black optimism,' Ashon Crawley's treatments of Blackpentecostalism, returns to Sylvia Wynter) trouble the opposition between theoretical negation and affirmation through affirmation or love for, e.g., blackness?
- What homologies exist between forms of negativity found in materials marked as 'religious' and those marked as 'philosophical' and 'theoretical'?
- What is the relationship between 'theoretical' and 'religious' calls for 'the end of the world'?
- What is the significance of recent right-wing religious and nationalist movements for negativity and pessimism in the humanities?
- What is the relationship between new orientations towards the 'post-critical' or the 'critique of critique' and forms of theoretical negativity and affirmation?
- How should we think about the forms of negativity and pessimism we encounter in ethnographic or textual materials? How should we consider ethnographic and textual encounters with apocalypse, resentment, depression, shame, etc.?
- What is the significance of 'sad affects' like repugnance, pessimism, and failure when they constitute the scholar's relation to her materials? To what extent are postures of negativity compatible with—or disruptive of—the ethnographic imagination?

**Guidelines for submissions:** Please submit a 250-word abstract outlining the topic and main arguments of the paper by January 20th, 2019. Proposals should include all contact information and institutional affiliation. Please send proposals, as well as any questions, to [dsrsymposium19@gmail.com](mailto:dsrsymposium19@gmail.com).

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