

# Pastoral Theopoetic Care in the Presence of Inscribed Bodies

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## Abstract

Pastoral theopoetics beckons caregivers to attend to bodies in a way that lets bodies themselves speak. Prejudice often precludes encountering another and letting the other be witnessed for her wholeness, even in the midst of brokenness. In urban settings, those who have housing and economic insufficiency are nonpersons in the gaze of the crowd. Urban violences of poverty, street violence, racism and sexism deface the fullness of the marginalized, when these are the very populations that the Gospels state we are to attend to and care for. Marginalized and subjugated bodies that have had violence done to them are sites for theopoetic resistance to the powers that cause violent inscriptions. Attending to these bodies is not a charitable caring for the least of these in a process that strips away agency and fosters victim mentality, but instead allows for the bodies to speak in ways that heal and reclaim dignity.

Pastoral theopoetics beckons caregivers to attend to bodies in a way that lets bodies themselves speak. Too often, presumptions and prejudices preclude encountering another and letting the other be witnessed for her wholeness, even in the midst of brokenness. In urban settings, those who have housing and economic insufficiency are nonpersons in the gaze of the crowd. Urban violences of poverty, prejudice against mental illness, street violence, racism and sexism deface the fullness of the marginalized, when these are the very populations that the Gospels state we are to attend to and care for. Pat-

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rick Reyes argued in his paper at the 2013 'Theopoetics Working Group that the marginalized and subjugated bodies that have had violence done to them are sites for theopoetic resistance to the powers that cause violent inscriptions.<sup>1</sup> Attending to these bodies is not a charitable caring for the least of these in a process that strips away agency and fosters victim mentality, but instead allows for the bodies to speak in ways that heal and reclaim dignity. Pastoral theopoetic care is not from above, but instead is presence in the midst. Pastoral theopoetic care attends to the healing power of human relationship inspired by faith. As such, pastoral theopoetic care is dependent upon the virtues of humility and hospitality.

A young man on crutches came to the street ministry of a church in downtown Boston on a cold spring evening in 2013. Several participants in this ministry had seen him before. In previous weeks, he accepted the food they had to offer, but would not engage in the street ministry to speak and pray with him. On this night he hungered for someone to be present with him and attend to his pain. During the devotional time after food and clothing are distributed, this man spoke up during prayer requests. He told his story how two weeks before that night, he was injured in the Boston Marathon bombings. He spent time in Mass General Hospital, where Mayor Tom Menino, Governor Deval Patrick, and reporters from several news stations visited with him. He was homeless, so when the hospital discharged him he returned to the streets with a full-length leg brace and a pair of crutches. As a homeless man, no one came to check on him anymore. He went from being a person who is cared for to again being a person invisible to the crowds that casually and routinely blind themselves to those living on the streets. In a very rapid manner he experienced once again how society willfully turns a blind eye to those in extreme poverty.

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<sup>1</sup> Specifically for Reyes, those of the Alisal community, and the power differential of Salinas over and above Alisal with economic and theological dominion. See: Patrick Reyes, "Alisal: Theopoetics and Emancipatory Politics," in *American Academy of Religion* (2013), 12.

This man's courage to speak gave a woman at the devotional the courage to speak. This woman also was homeless, primarily due to mental illness. She spoke of the young boy who was killed by the explosion, who was a relative of hers. Her family was grieving but she was not fully welcome with them due to her long struggles with mental illness and related homelessness. Only in seeing another sharing his deep pain could she speak her own. The ministry held sacred space that evening, attending to the holy these two brought to the devotional time, and attending to their deep inscription. The ministry did not solve their problems for them, but rather made space to let these two often silenced and often invisible people speak.

### **Violent Incriptions and Scandalous Faith**

According to the Lucan account, Jesus returned to Galilee after the temptation in the wilderness. Jesus entered the synagogue on the Sabbath, and read from Isaiah, announcing that the Spirit of the Lord was upon him, and anointed him to bring good news to the poor. Captives will be released, the blind will once again see, and the oppressed will be free. The members of the synagogue challenged him, and drove him out of town (Luke 4:14-30). Many contemporary churches mirror these behaviors, since the good news still comes as a scandal to religious communities. Pietism and holiness in personal moral conviction and implied social normativity offer up an authority that is in direct opposition to the good news which is for the poor, the blind, and the oppressed. Social normativity serves the interests of the dominant population, which in America and American churches are the interests of white, heterosexual, male Christians. When others whose interests are not in accord with the dominant population exhibit agency, they experience force and pun-

ishment to discipline their actions.<sup>2</sup> Normative forces assert themselves to maintain the control of the status quo and those who profit from it.

Homelessness, mental illness, and physical harm marked the flesh of the two people who shared their experience of the Boston Marathon bombings, and its after effects. Violence, not only physical violence, but also social, emotional and spiritual violence, inscribed these two people. While their bodies appeared unkempt, their interactions with members of the street ministry showed guarded suspicion and social estrangement. The young man's flesh was marked by the injury of the blast with his leg wrapped in a large brace and crutches supporting his body, but his flesh was also marked by facial expressions and body language indicating distance and estrangement. The woman who shared about the young boy who died in the bombing spoke with her arms crossed on her chest and her body moving side to side in a manner that indicated separation and anxiety. Social stigma about homelessness, especially homelessness stemming from mental illness, makes homeless people into invisible nonpersons. We are trained to look away, to divert our eyes, and to ignore such people who bear the marks of being among the least of these. We avert our gaze from the suffering of those who society makes into nonpersons, which includes the homeless but which also includes the bodies of other marginalized communities.

Inscriptions marked the flesh of the two who spoke of their pain and suffering that came from the bombings, and their flesh itself spoke. Rubem Alves describes inscriptions of the flesh as palimpsests.

To speak about my body is to speak about the stories that make up its soul. The secret of my flesh is a hidden, forgotten text, which is written in it. We are palimpsests. In bygone times, when writing was done on leath-

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<sup>2</sup> Carter Heyward, *Touching Our Strength: The Erotic as Power and the Love of God* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), 97.

er, old texts were scraped off and on top of the apparently clean surface, new ones were written, text upon text... But the marks of the old stories could never be erased... [This is] a good metaphor for what our bodies are..., stories that are written, scraped off, forgotten, one after the other. But even the old ones we believe dead remain alive, and once in a while they puncture the smooth surface of our official stories, as dreams, art, as incomprehensible signs/sighs in the flesh, as madness.<sup>3</sup>

Flesh comes to speak, where silence and experience of being silenced yields to the irresistible force of truthful storytelling. Alves well realizes that these cries often are dismissed as madness. The real bodies of those inscribed with suffering and pain are invisible, and even when they cry out they are made into invisible voices as eyes and ears are trained to dismiss their presence.

Society writ large silences the words and renders the flesh of marginalized bodies invisible. Ironically, and perhaps tragically so, Ralph Ellison outlines the idea of marginalized, specifically African-American, flesh and invisibility in his novel, *Invisible Man*. The novel, published in 1952, offers social critique of the way society's gaze dehumanizes the actual bodies of the marginalized. Ellison begins the prologue with a statement from the narrator about his invisibility.

I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids – and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of

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<sup>3</sup> Rubem A. Alves, "Theopoetics: Longing for Liberation," in *Struggles for Solidarity: Liberation Theologies in Tension*, ed. Lorine M; Costa Getz, Ruy O.(Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 161.

hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination – indeed, everything and anything except me.<sup>4</sup>

Depictions of racial minority bodies in the media during in recent history repeatedly offer stories of how marginalized bodies are not visible for what they actually are, and their voices are frequently silenced.

Churches often are complicit with such silencing, participating in the ways of the world against gospel teachings. Melanie May described her experience with her own denomination's willful rejection of the gospel and participation with the powers and principalities of the world that violently inscribed and silenced bodies. "I swiftly became aware that abuse is never satisfied until it has snared all who are anywhere around. I was not spared. And so my eyes were opened to ancient patterns of abuse – my collaboration with confinement and my consequent death in life."<sup>5</sup> Churches and their hierarchies that perpetuate abuse and dominion have a legacy reaching back to Christianity's embrace of empire. Constantine's formation of Christendom in 313 perhaps serves as the grandest example of the Church marrying itself with earthly dominion, but Christians participated in dominion and hierarchy well before then. Paul strongly chastised the community at Corinth about its table practice, where the wealthy would eat and drink to excess while the poor went hungry in the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 11:17-22). At the dawn of Christian communities injustice and power over others flourished as social norms even in the face of the gospel message that explicitly speaks of God's preference for the least of these.

Faithful communities offer an alternative for silenced and invisible bodies. While the history of Church participated in oppression, dominion, em-

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<sup>4</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Random House, 1995), 3.

<sup>5</sup> Melanie A. May, *A Body Knows : A Theopoetics of Death and Resurrection* (New York: Continuum, 1995), 38.

pire, and social harm is extensive, there are some churches that participate in Christ's resurrected body. May, who experienced such violence in her own denominational setting, recognizes communities that participated in Church as risen Christ.

Still, I see signs of Christ's risen body – what I name new ecclesial realities – all around the world. Among these signs, these realities, are base communities throughout Latin America and in the Philippines, African independent churches, house churches or small groups in the United States, women's communities throughout Asia, Women-Church communities among Protestant as well as Roman Catholic women across the United States, etc. Christ is risen, indeed!<sup>6</sup>

Small gatherings of faithful people live into the foolish wisdom of the gospel, and willfully unlearn the wisdom of the world. Such gatherings of people are incarnations of Church. May explains how these communities are characterized by two marks. The first is the commitment of these communities to restoring the connection between word and flesh. These communities do not reduce faith to theological speculation or personal piety, but rather recognize that justice and worship must be linked. Faithful living requires public witness to the politics revealed in Jesus. The second mark of these faithful communities is the lived reality that the people are the church. Church is not hierarchy, institution, or building. Church is the community of faithful people who gather to live witness.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 39-40.

## Unlearning and Healing

When people gather to be church, that is to live into the union of word and flesh where their whole selves inhabit the gospel message, they enter into communities of care. Care shaped in faithful communities bears the marks of hospitality, and humility. During that cold spring evening in 2013, a small group of people went to a church basement to prepare a hot meal, fill carts with socks and underwear, and individually bag scores of sandwiches. After stocking the food carts, these people gathered for a time of devotion before going out to minister to those in the streets around their church. With hearts filled with hospitality, they went out of that church basement to serve those on the streets. Their mission statement explicitly guided their practice:

We serve by offering Christ-centered hope, spiritual encouragement and material support to people on the streets in our neighborhood. We seek to welcome others to this community by developing relationships and building bridges to God's love in the Body of Christ.<sup>8</sup>

This mission statement articulated the ethos of hospitality of the ministry. Invitation and welcome guided their ministry. Community and relationship were necessary characteristics of their ministry.

Many of these people came after work or their university classes for the day, living in the quotidian reality of modern life. Work life shapes us to be effective. Contemporary American efforts are judged by performance evaluations, grades, and reports. When ministries of care for the poor are overly optimistic, they fall into the social gospel trap of believing that the social change of a group of often-privileged reformers can reform social inequity

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<sup>8</sup> This mission statement is formalized, and revisited within the ministry to maintain their sense of purpose. On several occasions during participant observation of the ministry, I observed them reading and discussing the mission statement.



for the marginalized. Such activism is a form of political atheism. As Hauerwas and Willimon explained in *Resident Aliens*, this “social activism is formed on the presumption that God is superfluous to the formation of a world of peace with justice. Fortunately, we are a powerful people who, because we live in a democracy, are free to use our power.”<sup>9</sup> This form of activism trumpets human agency and power over systems and people. While it may well be noble and serve virtuous beliefs, it lacks the humility of waiting on the presence of the holy and attending to the ongoing activity of God’s healing already present in human community.

Humility as a Christian virtue embodies and enacts peaceful Christian refusal to seek or hold dominion over the world. Humility as a virtue cultivates Christians who attend to the guest, the stranger, and those with need first as people instead of problems to be solved. Unlike the Christianity of Christendom, which blessed *pax imperia* so it might have control over the social order, Christian humility is a disposition of waiting on the presence of the holy and attending to God’s redemptive activity within creation. Humility challenges the narrative of progress and the histories of the victors by unlearning dominion and acceptance of divine sovereignty instead of human control.

Cultivating humility as a disposition requires unlearning of dominion and power over others. Where the privileged have been taught dominion, there is necessary unlearning. Reyes develops the necessity of unlearning for theopoetics. “Only after one has unlearned the history of the winners can one begin to learn the poetry of the subjugated voices.”<sup>10</sup> For theopoetic care, communities must unlearn dominion. Unlearning dominion opens space for invitation and opens space for retellings of stories from other voices. May addresses the necessity of unlearning especially in the context of privilege. She explains that letting go of power and privilege is part of the task of *poesis*.

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<sup>9</sup> Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens : Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 36.

<sup>10</sup> Reyes, 14.

Those of us who are relatively possessed of – or by – power and privilege need to practice letting go in order to participate in the revelatory presence from which genuine authority derives. The witness we bear in our bodies will be credible only as we repent and relinquish pride of place among all people. It is too easy for any and all of us to vie for eternal victimhood... The responsibility attendant to authentication, and therefore to authority, is participation in the task for which we were created in God’s image. This is the task of *poesis*, mutually making and remaking who we are and are becoming, making and remaking the world in which we live, confident that creation is not completed.<sup>11</sup>

Shedding our attachment to power and privilege, and learning new ways of attending to one another is an act of humility. Humility attends to the guest, the stranger, and those with need first as people instead of problems to be solved. The ministry on that cold spring night opened to the people on the streets, and invited participation while humbly offering food and clothing. Humble offerings and dispositions of hospitality invited those who were wounded to speak. Sacred space created the setting for inscribed bodies to speak and be heard. Unlearning dominion gifted those in the street ministry the opportunity of learning what traditionally invisible and silenced bodies had to share. Instead of liberation theological categories of “the poor” or “the oppressed” where scholars reduce humans to concepts devoid of context and humanity, humility and invitation recognizes innate dignity through faithful practice of hospitality.

Hospitality as a Christian virtue provides the disposition of invitation that creates space for welcoming strangers into the midst of Christian communities. Luke Bretherton describes hospitality as a Christian virtue of special im-

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<sup>11</sup> May, 74.

portance to Christian understandings of how to interact with non-Christian publics. Christianity comes into contact with strangers, and Christians are called to treat strangers in the manner outlined in the parable of the Good Samaritan. Outsiders present themselves as strangers, but Christians through empathy have the capacity to understand the proximity of their suffering and respond accordingly.<sup>12</sup> Only by empathic understanding of another's plight can a Christian call another neighbor, and respond accordingly. Since Christians are called to love their neighbors as themselves, they develop empathy and compassion for the suffering of their neighbors, and such interpersonal, relational ethics are core to the Christian communities. When the poor present themselves to Christian communities, Christians respond with care to the specific sufferings of poverty. Bretherton builds upon this contextual and embodied understanding of virtue with his work on Christian hospitality by explaining that hospitality as a virtue "is not used here to denote an abstract ideal, principle, or middle axiom; rather, the term 'hospitality' arises out of the witness of scripture and social practices and doctrines of the Christian tradition."<sup>13</sup>

Understanding another's suffering is not an act of problem solving or fixing a situation, but rather setting space for listening and coming to know another. Empathy happens when hospitality invites and beckons outsiders to participate, speak, and be heard. Communities of hospitality are communities that cultivate listening and seeing others, specifically the others whose voices are silenced and whose bodies are rendered invisible by society. Returning to Ellison's *Invisible Man*, the narrator experiences the many ways society sees something other than him when gazing upon him, acting in ways that are

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<sup>12</sup> Bretherton proposes Alastair MacIntyre's use of *miser cordia* for empathy, that is "the capacity for grief or sorrow over someone else's distress just insofar as one understands the other's distress as one's own." See Luke Bretherton, *Hospitality as Holiness: Christian Witness Amid Moral Diversity* (Aldershot, England ; Burlington, VT: Ashgate Pub., 2006), 127.

<sup>13</sup> Bretherton, 128.

monstrous and inhumane. Those in power exert violence and coercion upon him, because they lack the empathy to experience an understanding of his pain. Present American society continues to live in a manner that makes the bodies of the marginalized invisible, and the gaze of society projects on those bodies distorted forms, often with moral judgment about the character of the marginalized deserving their plight. Humility recognizes that such projections are not accurate, and that we do not know another before we genuinely come to know her plight. Hospitality invites her to come and share that the community might come to know her.

Churches are faithful in their practices of care by living out virtues of hospitality and humility. Theopoetics recognizes the initial indecipherability of bodies and stark differences in our inscribed flesh. Truth is veiled and foreign. Divine presence continually reveals itself and veils itself. Theopoetics offers pastoral care the insights of strange disruptions and unlearning as a corrective to a tradition marked by adaptation of psychotherapeutic technologies and social activism bent towards certain progress. Communal theopoetic pastoral care makes space that welcomes the silenced and ignored. Such faithful communities make space to witness and let silenced flesh speak in a way that can be heard. This sacred space invites the holy and offers the healing of bridge building between word and flesh, where scandalous flesh and disquieting words beckon to the strange call of the gospel message. These communities form church by participating in the resurrection of the body by offering new life to bodies taught to be invisible, marginalized, and mad. Such communities shepherd their members and their guests toward the holiness of their word and flesh. The care is necessarily pastoral, walking along the journey toward healing through presence with, instead of dominion over that renders flesh invisible and word silent.

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