

2017

Salvation Through Community and Protest

Hannah K. Griggs

Augustana College, Rock Island Illinois

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Hannah Griggs

Salvation Through Community and Protest

RELG 391-01: Suffering, Death and Endurance

Dr. Jason Mahn

Winter 2016/2017

Short Analytical

Salvation through Community and Protest

Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo* serves as a primary text for understanding salvation, having a powerful impact on the imaginations of everyday Christians from the patristic period to today. According to Anselm, human sin infinitely offends the honor of God. Therefore, in order to restore God's honor, Jesus, as a representative for humanity, sacrifices himself to atone for the sins of humanity—sins that we are unable to pay. Anselm places utmost importance on the crucifixion event, while neglecting the soteriological importance of Jesus's resurrection. For Anselm, salvation exists outside of temporal history. Because of this, Anselm fails to account for structural injustice, instead, placing a premium on individual sin as the cause of suffering. By defining salvation as an otherworldly endeavor and by defining sin as an *individual* problem, Anselm fails to account for the ways that in-the-world systems of domination *collectively* cause sin and suffering (Pineda-Madrid 69-95).

Kyriarchy—interlocking systems of domination and power based on race, class, nationality, religion, gender, sexual orientation, and numerous other factors—can either intensify or lessen human experience of in-the-world suffering (Pineda-Madrid 16). This essay examines the perspectives Nancy Pineda-Madrid, Kelly Brown Douglas, and Dorothee Soelle to strategize ways to combat threats to marginalized communities. Based on the arguments made by these three feminist Christians, I argue that only a theodicy of protest succeeds in accounting for kyriarchal relationships between groups with asymmetrical access to power and resources; therefore, I call for a reimagining of salvation that focuses on alleviating this-worldly suffering in order to produce salvation through radical community, by “signifyin’”¹ to disrupt power, and using protest as a form of shared power.

¹ My use of the word “signifyin’” is borrowed from Kelly Brown Douglas, as I will discuss later in the essay.

Understanding Salvation and Suffering in Light of Kyriarchy

In *Suffering and Salvation in Ciudad Juárez*, Pineda-Madrid investigates the implicit social narratives that inform society's perception of legitimate and illegitimate suffering in Juárez, Mexico, arguing that: "[t]he structures that give rise to evil and thus social suffering are, in part, the product of the stories we tell ourselves about who we are and how we came to be" (46). She calls these stories the "social imaginary," a construct that does not explain how the world *should* be—nor how the world *is*—but rather, how society *imagines* the world. The stories we tell about the world we live in reveal the content of our social imaginaries. Economic, social, and political interests provide a framework for how societies deal with and imagines suffering by competing to name suffering. Kyriarchal interests affect our assumptions about who experiences suffering and why suffering exists.

Femicide, the widespread, brutal, and unchallenged murder of innocent, often very poor and exclusively women and girls, has plagued Juárez for decades. This gender-based violence is not an example of personal sin and suffering, but an example of societal sin and suffering. Pointing to systemic sins as the primary enemy of salvation, Pineda-Madrid examines the social imaginaries that attempt to legitimate femicide in Juárez, Mexico. She traces the history of two prominent female archetypes, Malinche or Guadalupe, which inform the social imagination of Mexico. The Malinche/Guadalupe binary constructs Mexican womanhood as either embodying the passive, self-sacrificial virgin, Mary, or the assertive, traitorous whore, Malinche. This false consciousness demonizes women who are sexually active, articulate, or self-sufficient, attempting to justify the murders of "impure" women. While, of course, the perpetrator is responsible for this sin, layers of privilege intersect to protect the perpetrator at the expense of women's lives, creating narratives that sustain marginalization and murder. Therefore, a

complete understanding of suffering must take into account the relationship between individual and societal suffering and sin.

Like in Juárez, I assert that dangerous narratives exist in the American social imaginary. *Stand Your Ground* by Kelly Brown Douglas examines what Pineda-Madrid might call the social imaginaries upon which America legitimates social suffering. Linking the myth of Anglo-Saxon superiority to white supremacy and American Exceptionalism, Douglas begins with a brief history of America's origins. The English considered themselves descendants of the Anglo-Saxons, the self-professed creators and guardians of the most perfect form of government. The English Reformation of the 18th century attempted to cleanse the English church from what they perceived as Norman contamination. Linking blood and Christianity to virtue, the Pilgrims and the Puritans believed that the divinely sanctioned superiority of the Anglo-Saxon race called them to build a government that espoused freedom, private property, and individual rights: "Morality and freedom flowed through the Anglo-Saxon veins. The instinct for liberty was essentially genetic" (21). Language and skin color became markers of the Anglo-Saxon right to property and individual rights, conflating whiteness with Anglo-Saxonism. Therefore, founding fathers like Jefferson and Franklin argued that preserving liberty and Anglo-Saxon exceptionalism—which is, in its modern form, American exceptionalism—required (to use the words of the founding fathers) "exterminating" those who did not possess Anglo-Saxon blood (Douglas 34).

The narrative of American exceptionalism defines whiteness as having possession of one's own body, having an instinct for liberty and Christian morality, and having guardianship over free space. Conversely, this narrative defines blackness as lacking possession of one's own body—living as chattel without agency—lacking the disposition for liberty and morality, and

trespassing “cherished white property.” Essentially, this narrative produces a binary where white bodies occupy free space while black bodies occupy “unfree space.” Douglas explains how these narratives have legitimated slavery, lynching, segregation, and the deaths of black men like Trayvon Martin and Jordan Davis. Stand-your-ground, a law that allows those who feel threatened to attack before retreating, is the modern manifestation of American Exceptionalism, which is sustained by white supremacy. This law protects white people who attack black people. Under the guise of self-defense, this law legalizes the “extermination” of those who lack Anglo-Saxon blood.

As Nancy Pineda-Madrid and Kelly Brown Douglas demonstrate, the social imagination can have deadly power to rationalize suffering. In the social imaginary, gender, religion, race, class, and sexual orientation intersect in ways that privilege the existence of certain identities over other identities. Therefore, when we discuss degrees of suffering, we must take into account the kyriarchal power structures that privilege maleness, Christianity, whiteness, wealth, and heterosexuality. Although we must take responsibility for the ways that we personally affect the suffering of others, we must also recognize the systemic nature of suffering.

Prevailing patristic theologian Anselm imagines suffering and salvation as other-worldly transactions between God and Jesus. Jesus’s suffering atones for the sins of humanity, granting salvation. Critiquing the prevalent Anselmian narrative of salvation, Pineda-Madrid emphasizes the importance of salvation as a temporal release from in-the-world suffering. Governmental, secular, and Christian narratives of patriarchy, classism, and white supremacy have rationalized the suffering of women in Juárez and in the black community in the United States, saying that salvation is a heavenly reality rather than a this-worldly endeavor: “Salvation, as Gustavo Gutiérrez states plainly, ‘is a cure for sin in this life’ ...if sin is not simply an otherworldly

concept, but rather is that which impacts the quality and condition of one's historical life, then salvation must not refer simply to an otherworldly state" (Douglas 195). Douglas argues that rather than coming to terms with suffering, salvation means release from suffering. Therefore, if suffering is caused in the context of in-the-world power dynamics and complex structures of community, salvation must also be considered in the context of kyriarchy.

Like Pineda-Madrid and Douglas who argue that salvation and in-the-world community are irrevocably linked, Dorothee Soelle calls for radical community—or solidarity—as a means of salvation. Soelle reimagines God's power as the human "capacity to love" (55). For Soelle, love is shared power. While some theodiscists argue that God's power surpasses his love, Soelle argues that God's "*only*² power is love," for "power which isn't shared—which, in other words, isn't transformed into love—is pure domination and oppression" (Soelle 48 and 52). This radically relational God does not ask obedience from human beings; instead, Soelle argues that God calls humans to be active participants in producing in-the-world salvation. As Soelle notes, Christ does not rise "for" us; he is the first among us to rise (53). According to Soelle's interpretation of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, facilitating in-the-world salvation through active solidarity with all those who suffer is a sacred calling.

Like Soelle, Douglas also focuses on the resurrection as proof of God's call for humans to live in solidarity with all who suffer. In order to explain the significance of the resurrection, Douglas asserts that readers must take into account Jesus's whole ministry, for it is this ministry that aligns Jesus with "the 'crucified' class of his day" (174). Douglas retells the story of Jesus and a Samaritan woman at a well, framing the story in the context of first century Roman stand-your-ground culture. This Samaritan woman occupies a space of intersecting oppressions. Her ethnicity, gender, and class compound to construct her as licentious and ritually unclean—a

² Emphasis added

resident of the “crucified class.” Conversely, ancient Jewish men occupy a space of intersecting privileges. Jesus’s Jewishness and maleness grant him a protected space. Therefore, Douglas explains, by entering into the demonized space of the Samaritan woman, Jesus—as the incarnate God—affirms her sacred value. Rejecting the social imaginaries that grant him privilege, Jesus gives up his protected space to enter into this-worldly solidarity with the oppressed. In the crucifixion moment, “Jesus fully strips himself of all pretensions to power, privilege, and exceptionalism, even as the incarnate revelation of God. What is clear is Jesus’ free and steadfast identification with crucified bodies” (177). Reclaiming the narrative of the cross, Douglas argues that the resurrection of Jesus represents God’s condemnation and overcoming of all crucifying violence—especially the crucifixion of black men like Trayvon Martin.

What Does Active Solidarity Look Like?

If, as Nancy Pineda-Madrid, Kelly Brown Douglas, and Dorothee Soelle argue, Jesus calls Christians to active solidarity with the oppressed, what does in-the-world salvation look like? How do we begin to break down engrained social narratives that dangerously capture our collective imaginations, sometimes producing deadly consequences? Soelle, Douglas, and Pineda-Madrid answer: we protest. According to Soelle, salvation means that humanity lives in a community of oneness, love, and justice: “Being-at-one...realizes itself in the ways of resistance” (67). Love is shared power; shared power is enacted through protest; protest is a form of community; community is a condition of salvation. Protest leads us into a community for salvation.

Douglas names “signifyin’” as a particularly powerful method of protest. Signifyin’ is a way of resistance within the black community that subverts social narratives: “[signifyin’] has come in the form of double talk or coded language, as seen in the spirituals and the blues.

Sometimes it is simply ‘repetition with a difference.’ In the main, signifyin’ is one of the ways in which black people have spoken truth about and to power” (208). Deconstructing King’s “Dream” speech at the Lincoln Memorial, Douglas shows how King signified on America’s narrative of exceptionalism: “King drew upon America’s belief that it was God’s city on a hill to call it to task for its treatment of its black citizens” (214). Through signifyin’, King subverts America’s narrative of exceptionalism and calls for a reimagined grand American narrative. Douglas also demonstrates how Frederick Douglass, Mary Church Terrell, Ida B. Wells, and Benjamin Banneker harnessed the power of signifyin’ to undermine America’s narrative of exceptionalism and cherished white property, manifest in stand-your-ground culture. Through this form of protest, the black community reshapes America’s imagined sense of self.

To borrow the language that Douglas uses, by signifyin’, activists work to change narratives that socially legitimate violence against women. Pineda-Madrid shows how signifyin’ social narratives gives protestors a shared history, paving the way for community building. Instead of succumbing to a preconceived social imaginary that perpetuates a link between womanhood and suffering, these activists forge a new social imaginary by retelling stories from the past in order to claim their significance in the present. Signifyin’ on the resurrection of Jesus, activists in Juárez *publically* link femicide with Jesus’s crucifixion. After the brutal killings of women, networks of protestors have claimed public space to remember the lives of the murdered women. In order to change the social imaginary, these events must take place in public. By bringing the private experiences of women into the public sphere, protestors begin to re-envision the social imaginary. Protestors challenge the social imaginary created by kyriarchy, replacing it with their own stories.

Marching on International Women's Day, International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, and Valentine's Day, protestors carry pink-painted crosses and paint telephone poles pink. In 2002, *Ni Una Más*, an activist organization, led a 230-mile march where women dressed in black dresses and pink hats, publically mourning the deaths of women. At a bridge on the border of Texas and Mexico, marchers began installing a large wooden cross, marked with the names of victims. However, the crucifixion imagery harnessed by protestors does more than equate feminicide with the death of Jesus; it links women with the resurrection of Jesus. As the activist group *Ni Una Más* proclaims, "not one more," the suffering, killing, and dying must end—just as Jesus rose from the dead.

What is noteworthy about both the black community in the United States and the resistance in Juárez is that they practice salvific resistance even in the midst of suffering. How do they continue to claim salvation when the suffering continues? As both Douglas and Pineda-Madrid argue, suffering in and of itself does not produce salvation: "Suffering is not to be glorified. Neither are suffering and death to be legitimated with claims of their redemptive value" (Douglas 187). Yet, both women claim that just as suffering happens in the world, so too must salvation take place in the world. For Pineda-Madrid, the practices of resistance produce salvation through building community. For Douglas, salvation is known because God, in his transcendent freedom, shows his desire for historical, temporal, human liberty: "The resurrection is God's definitive response to the crucifying realities. It clarifies the essential character of God's power—a power that values life" (187). Just as Jesus's life is not defined by his death, neither are the innocent lives lost to the systemic evils present in stand-your-ground culture or feminicide.

By signifyin' on the death of Trayvon Martin and the lives lost to femicide, Douglas and Pineda-Madrid testify to the resurrecting power of God, which is salvation. Douglas expects the black community to resurrect Trayvon by keeping his memory alive. The testimonies of Pineda-Madrid and Douglas show that God calls human beings to resurrecting community. Taking into account relationships between groups with disproportionate access to power and resources, Pineda-Madrid, Douglas, and Soelle call for a community easing suffering by signifyin' to disrupt kyriarchal power, re-envisioning social imaginaries, and using protest as a form of shared power.

Concluding Thoughts: A Feminist Christian's Fears For America's Future

As a feminist Christian and an interfaith leader, I argue that Donald Trump's presidency presents a profound threat to religious liberty, marginalized groups, and women's rights. By propagating hatred of Muslims, emboldening racism through his endorsement of American exceptionalism, and normalizing sexual assault, Trump has caused—and will continue to cause—immense suffering, especially for already marginalized communities. Within the first week of his presidency, Trump signed an executive order banning immigrants from seven Muslim countries and all refugees from entering the United States. Trump elevated religious and racial tensions throughout his campaign by threatening to register Muslims, calling Mexicans racists and rapists, and earning the support of prominent KKK leader, David Duke (Burns; Berenson). During the first week of his presidency, he signed an executive order calling for a wall on the border between the United States and Mexico. Furthermore, his campaign slogan, "Make America Great Again," harkens back to the narrative of American exceptionalism that Douglas condemns. According to Trump, by taking American jobs, Mexicans and refugees

encroach on “cherished white property.” Donald Trump’s policy decisions are another iteration of stand-your-ground culture.

In order to preserve America’s chosen-ness, Trump is attempting to purify American soil by “exterminating” anyone he perceives as a threat to white, Christian America—whether that threat comes in the form of Muslim or Mexican (un)documented immigrants or black people living in the inner cities. During his first presidential debate with Hillary Clinton, Trump called for “law and order” for our “inner cities.” He boasted the endorsement of the nation’s largest police union during a time in which tensions between Black Lives Matter protestors and police officers were particularly high. In light of the Black Codes, Jim Crow laws, lynching, and the “law and order” mandates of the post-civil rights era, Trump’s call for “law and order” demonstrates his adherence to stand-your-ground culture, his threat to black lives, and the lives of all those who represent the “crucified class.”

As Americans, Christians, and intersectional feminists grapple with rising Islamophobia, revitalized racism, and the normalization of sexual assault, we must look for collective responses to combat social suffering. I think we are *beginning* to do this work. The Women’s March on Washington and immigration ban protests are examples of people signifyin’ in public to change American social imaginaries. For example, only a month before the election, the *Washington Post* published a conversation between Donald Trump and Billy Bush in which Trump described his propensity for sexual assault and disregard for consent: “You know I’m automatically attracted to beautiful — I just start kissing them. It’s like a magnet. Just kiss. I don’t even wait... Grab them by the pussy. You can do anything” (Farenthold). Wearing cat-shaped hats—“pussy hats”—women were signifyin’³. Furthermore, by displaying the hats in public at the women’s

³ Nevertheless, this is not to say that we shouldn’t be critical of this signifyin’. As Transactivists and women of color have rightly pointed out, not all women have vaginas and not all vaginas are pink. The pussy hats were an important

march, women began changing social imaginaries about the role of women. The protestors of the executive order to build the border wall and enact the immigration ban signified on the narrative of American exceptionalism. Despite the fact that the founding father tried to “exterminate” threats to their perceived Anglo-Saxon purity, they declared, “We are a nation of immigrants.”⁴

As a feminist Christian, this call to act is especially important to me. Jesus tells us that the most important of all God’s commandments is to love your neighbor. The time for active solidarity is now! We must resist, even if our practices of resistance are imperfect or unsuccessful. Important criticisms have been raised about both of the instances of signifyin’ discussed in the paragraph above, but “the ultimate criterion for taking part in actions of resistance and solidarity cannot be success because that would mean to go on dancing to the tunes of the bosses of this world” (Soelle 74). By failing to protest, we are complicit in systems of oppression. Fear of critique should not stifle our action. As Soelle asserts, protest enables us to show love through shared power. By sharing power, we can begin to transform kyriarchal oppression into love. As feminist Christians, we are called to act in a community of solidarity with all who suffer—the “crucified class.”

act of resistance that have sparked some much needed conversations about intersectionality within the feminist movement(s).

⁴ However, this signifyin’ is also problematic. Saying that we are a nation of immigrants glosses over the fact that we are a nation of colonizers and ignores the genocide committed to conquer America.

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