



Racial Justice Now: Possibility in the Face of Trauma

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Maurice Stevens uses words such as *catastrophe* as shorthand for the larger phenomenon of trauma, but defines trauma in a way that creates room for possibility.¹ The recent global pandemic has made us all acutely aware that the world is full of catastrophe, both great and small. One way or another, catastrophe manifests itself on and in our bodies, and it becomes a part of us in such a way that either we are forced to perform in the world in ways that reinforce the catastrophe or we perform in a way that provides some remedy to it. The global pandemic has made us acutely aware of existing hierarchical stratifications in the world. For instance, COVID-19 has a greater mortality rate among black and poor populations. This is not because black and poor people are deviant in some way but because there are direct correlations to access to care and resources, as well as their often having to work essential jobs that expose them to the virus.² Systemic break-

¹ Maurice E. Stevens, "Trauma Is as Trauma Does: The Politics of Affect in Catastrophic Times," in *Critical Trauma Studies: Understanding Violence, Conflict and Memory in Everyday Life*, eds. Monica J. Casper and Eric Wertheimer (New York: New York University Press, 2016).

² Jamelle Bouie, "Why Coronavirus Is Killing African-Americans More Than Others," *New York Times*, April 14, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/14/opinion/sunday/coronavirus-racism-african-americans.html>.

Racial injustice visits trauma upon the bodies of people of color. By refusing to turn away from the scars of the neighbor, the church can be reoriented toward practices of justice.

downs, where some have and others do not, have existed for centuries in America, long affecting human bodies, particularly bodies that are black and brown. The issues that surround inability to get the same treatment or seat at the table ultimately lead the body that is scorned to ask, “What worth do I have in the midst of trauma?” “What worth do I have at all?” “Am I a product of my surroundings, shaped and molded to the will of trauma, or *am I the master of my fate?*”³ “How do I break the pattern of living *out of* catastrophe, and go to thriving *despite* catastrophe?” Structural inequalities and various “isms” have wreaked havoc on bodies, and in the midst of it all, perhaps *in spite of* catastrophe, marginalized people must still find ways of *being*. I will argue that despite ever-encroaching trauma, there is a way forward, in terms of fighting for equality, changing our church practices in light of broken bodies, and leaning into possibility. I will use Stevens’s work and other conversation partners to situate a definition of trauma and its effects on black bodies. Then I will discuss how the rupture of the traumatic moment can open a window into fighting per the theme of this issue, for “radical justice now.”

Maurice Stevens, in his article titled “Trauma Is as Trauma Does: The Politics of Affect in Catastrophic Times,” centers his work in “critical trauma theory,” which takes into account perspectives from “critical race theory, gender studies, studies of visual culture, and critical psychoanalytic studies.”⁴ Stevens is clear that his definition of trauma is not something describing overwhelming events; it is not a category “holding” people undone by traumatic events, but it is instead a cultural *object* producing different kinds of subjects.⁵ When he speaks of catastrophe, he is ultimately interested not in the event *itself*, but in the resultant *subject*.⁶ Stevens asserts that “a number of theorists have long been concerned with how individuals and communities of people come to understand, represent, and perform themselves as actors, as agents in history.”⁷ Trauma, for Stevens, becomes a foray by which he is able to observe *how* catastrophe causes subjects to “be” in the world.

As a cultural object, Stevens believes that trauma disrupts and emaciates language, and even has deleterious effects on the body. In addition to this, “‘traumatic’ events explode discourse and materiality,” and they “overflow easy distinctions between and among notions of ‘individual agency’ and institutional practices.”⁸

These assertions seem like a reasonable depiction of how one would usually view trauma, but then Stevens takes an interesting turn when he suggests that trauma can be both a source of positivity *and* negativity:

Indeed, it is the trauma, the crisis, and/or the emergent sense of urgency that enlivens state capacities to act. Thus, on one hand the trauma, the catastrophe, the crisis, the urgency of questions like “What shall we do?

³ Cf. William Ernest Henley, “Invictus,” in *A Book of Verses* (London: David Nutt, 1888), 56.

⁴ Stevens, “Trauma Is as Trauma Does,” 19.

⁵ Stevens, “Trauma Is as Trauma Does,” 19.

⁶ Stevens, “Trauma Is as Trauma Does,” 19.

⁷ Stevens, “Trauma Is as Trauma Does,” 20.

⁸ Stevens, “Trauma Is as Trauma Does,” 25.

How can we help? How do we achieve social justice?” all serve to cohere affect. They are the strings to our sweet crystalline rock candy, sites of condensation, circuits of pathways or ecologies, that in meeting the conditions of affect’s representability, promise a sense of community, promise a sense of meaningful embodiment, promise the assertion of agency or safety, while also being the site of all the things that undermine these promises and turn them into lies.⁹

Trauma is negative, in that there is an event that causes deleterious effects on bodies. It is disruptive; confounding; of “daemonic power” which unmakes worlds.¹⁰ Trauma disorients time and space. Trauma is a “rupture.”¹¹

Despite all this, trauma has positive effects in the act of “let’s solve this problem.” Stevens is careful to admit, however, that there would be no need for solving the problem if the catastrophe had never happened.¹² Elsewhere, Stevens goes even further to move beyond the poles of good or bad and describes trauma as “superficial upheaval”:

With the proper application of technique and the perseverance of survivors, their resilience, integration, orientation, and ordered sociality will return. This vision of trauma—our popular and clinical imagining of the concept—is a heroic narrative. At the same time that overwhelming events split the past off from the present by unmaking rituals of the familiar that promise timelessness, the concept of “trauma” and its theorizations suggest a futurity, and in doing so, put history back on track. Bringing always the undoing, and always the promise, the daemon “trauma” names is neither evil nor beneficent, but simply a force of superficial upheaval. Our conventional understandings of trauma promise to bring the overwhelming, the numinous, the maddening, and the ruining under control and into management by providing a narrative of/for understanding.¹³

Stevens is suggesting that trauma is neither good nor bad, but a neutral force that upends everything. Trauma serves as a vehicle for creating new pathways, gesturing toward “new directions of inquiry and new terrains of reflection.”¹⁴ Trauma creates subjects, and it does so without regard to previous demographic barriers, and even links otherwise disparate people groups together.¹⁵

If Stevens is suggesting that he is interested in the resultant subject who has experienced the aforementioned “upheaval,” then the site of this evaluation is on

⁹ Stevens, “Trauma Is as Trauma Does,” 28.

¹⁰ Stevens, “Trauma Is as Trauma Does,” 30.

¹¹ Stevens, “Trauma Is as Trauma Does,” 24, 30.

¹² Stevens, “Trauma Is as Trauma Does,” 28–30.

¹³ Stevens, “Trauma Is as Trauma Does,” 30.

¹⁴ Stevens, “Trauma Is as Trauma Does,” 28.

¹⁵ We can cite the current global pandemic as evidence of this.

their *bodies*.¹⁶ Bodies become important for Stevens in the discussion of trauma because they are the location on which trauma occurs, and also the place where the scars are recorded. One can trace trauma on the body:

Indeed, beginning with “marks” like the bloodied body, the ruptured mind, the incomplete narrative, or the riddled archive, the idea of trauma provides explanatory narratives that, by offering one telling of how the subject achieved its ruination, support fantasies of an originary time before the fall; a time of whole, coherent, innocent selfhood, and uncorrupted, clean, and proper subjectivity.¹⁷

Stevens goes on to decry the attempts of the society to create a myth of recovery from trauma by using bodies that are “whole,” bodies not having faced trauma at all.¹⁸ Stevens rightly asserts that using these “whole” bodies short-circuits healing, in that it does not truly reckon with whatever injury was incurred.¹⁹ The lens of trauma on bodies that have *actually* undergone catastrophe, the bodies that have faced the “sacrificial horrors of disintegration,” holds “out the promise of our own ritual healing, our own recuperative imagining, our own admission to the global community of the healed, the cured, and the normative.”²⁰ In short, efforts to move toward healing must first deal with the realities that injury actually took place. Stevens goes on to say as much.²¹ If people, for instance, are saying, “I’ve been injured by this catastrophic institutional structure,” the remedy is not to compare them to someone who has not. The remedy is to look at the bodies of the *injured* for the scars.

Stevens helps to lay a foundation of what trauma is, and how it affects bodies. For the sake of this paper, his focus on racialized bodies, particularly marginalized ones, is helpful because it illuminates the plight of the black person in American society. Eddie S. Glaude Jr. writes:

For much of our national history we have struggled mightily with the issue of race. The evil of slavery shadowed the birth of this country. Precious ideas like “all men are created equal” were congenitally deformed by the idea that some men and women are valued less than others because of the color of their skin. The value gap was baked into one of the foundational principles of this country. That struggle, at least since 1876 (when the nation turned its back on the possibility of a multiracial democracy with the end of Reconstruction), has been a part of who we are as a nation. We wrestle, like Jacob, with the lived

¹⁶ Stevens, “Trauma Is as Trauma Does,” 29.

¹⁷ Stevens, “Trauma Is as Trauma Does,” 29.

¹⁸ Stevens, “Trauma Is as Trauma Does,” 29.

¹⁹ Stevens, “Trauma Is as Trauma Does,” 29.

²⁰ Stevens, “Trauma Is as Trauma Does,” 29.

²¹ Stevens, “Trauma Is as Trauma Does,” 30.

contradiction—not between beliefs and practices, but between and within beliefs themselves.²²

The concept of race in America harms and corrupts the larger societal institution in such a way that it trickles down and not only renders black and brown people as second-class citizens, but also renders one invisible. In his book *Nobody*, Marc Lamont Hill writes: “To be nobody is to be vulnerable. In the most basic sense, all of us are vulnerable; to be human is to be susceptible to misfortune, violence, illness, and death. . . . Unfortunately, for many citizens—particularly those marked as poor, black, brown, immigrant, queer, or trans—state power has only increased their vulnerability, making their lives more rather than less unsafe.”²³

This trauma brings about abnormalities within the subject, because instead of viewing themselves as individuals with agency and coherence, they come to exist in a bifurcated, disrupted state, which forces them to perform for and to the gaze of others. W. E. B. Du Bois further fleshes this out in his description of “double consciousness”:

The Negro is sort of a seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.²⁴

This is a traumatic rendering of the black body in such a way that it lines up with Stevens’s assumptions about the subject. He asserts that the subject, or “self,” is a rationalistic being with agency: the subject can be held accountable; the subject can both *be* coherent and *make* coherence. But most importantly for our discussion, the subject can be *broken*, because there was once a time when it was not.²⁵ Trauma ultimately destabilizes the subject’s “sense” and “being.”²⁶

In taking up the theme of radical justice it behooves us first to realize that whole bodies are not the archetype by which the injured define themselves, because most often, whole bodies are ones that have been predisposed to be privileged ones—that is, white, male, heteronormative, etc. If traumatized bodies are

²² Eddie S. Glaude Jr., *Democracy in Black: How Race Still Enslaves the American Soul* (New York: Crown, 2016), 9.

²³ Marc Lamont Hill, *Nobody: Casualties of America’s War on the Vulnerable, from Ferguson to Flint and Beyond* (New York: Atria, 2016), XIX.

²⁴ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Dover, 1994), 2.

²⁵ Stevens, “Trauma Is as Trauma Does,” 25.

²⁶ Stevens, “Trauma Is as Trauma Does,” 25.

constantly measuring themselves in relation to bodies that have never suffered, they can never see the beauty of the possibility of their own worth and being in the world. It is also difficult to assess that something has really taken place on a traumatized body if we are defining ourselves in relation to whole bodies. We must know that our worth as black bodies *as they are* is as valuable as those of our other human siblings.

Our human siblings must see our intrinsic value and worth—and in the midst of the destabilization of our being that trauma brings, we must remind them (and be reminded) that God has called us, claimed us, and chosen us *all*. Any words or actions to the contrary must be opposed and protested, in both the church and the public square, with vigor and persistence. Racial justice now demands protest for our black and brown siblings: putting our bodies “on the line” for the sake of other bodies.

One cannot say for certain when there was a time when the black body was not broken in American society, but it is clear that it is currently in a state of brokenness brought on by trauma. The traumatic double-consciousness of which Du Bois speaks runs rampant in the black body and is a direct result of the way that American societal systems constantly bear down upon it. This is a systemic, long-term trauma that exacerbates other acute traumatic moments, such as the current COVID-19 crisis. How can the church begin to examine the scars of the afflicted for the sake of leaning into a helpful way forward?

First Corinthians 11:17–33 serves as generative for this discussion, in terms of discerning the bodies of those who have been scarred by life’s circumstances. Some interpretations of this pericope focus on the idea of discernment of the body as meaning that “only the perfectly righteous can partake of the Lord’s Supper, and the call for self-examination in verse 28 has been heard as a call for intense introspection.”²⁷ This, according to leading Pauline scholar Richard Hays, is a “grave misreading”:

The more affluent Corinthians are consuming their own food and shaming the poorer members (vv. 20–22). In this context, to eat the meal unworthily means to eat it in a way that provokes divisions (v. 18), with contemptuous disregard for the needs of others in the community. Paul’s call to self-scrutiny (v. 28) must therefore be understood not as an invitation for the Corinthians to probe the inner recesses of their consciences but as a straightforward call to consider how their actions at the supper are affecting brothers and sisters in the church, the body of Christ.²⁸

There were probably three groups at this Corinthian Lord’s Supper. This probably took place in the house of one of the richer members, because it was large enough to hold more people. The rich had their table, the “average” people

²⁷ Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians*, Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox, 1997), 200.

²⁸ Hays, *First Corinthians*, 200.

had their table, and the poor had theirs. The rich people would eat sumptuously. They would feast on their own food. The “average” members got enough to eat. The poor, however, were not only shamed, but got nothing.²⁹

The church was engaging in the theological practice of “doing this for the remembrance of Christ” but had not worked out the “kinks” among themselves. Paul is admonishing the Corinthian church not to go through the motions of theological enterprise without properly “discerning the body,” or without looking around at their fellow members. As we are thinking about the theme racial justice now, we must ask whether or not we have discerned the Lord’s body among us.

We have already discussed the long-term traumas that the black person in America faces, and that these embedded hierarchical inequalities exacerbate acute traumatic occurrences. While COVID-19 has affected all of the American population in some way, it disproportionately affects many more of us because of our respective places in society. Because of faulty societal systems, more black and brown people are dying and getting sick in droves. For black people, especially, this pandemic has been exacerbated by the senseless killing of unarmed black people by police.

Theologian John McClure says that we can see the “glory of the infinite,” that we can see the “glory of God” through the face of the other. He goes on to suggest that that can only come when we submit ourselves to “self-erasure.”³⁰ This means that all the things that bind us, such as tradition, mores, theological understandings, ways of being—all of that has to be put on the table in order to see the glory of the infinite. Everything must change! We want to go back to normal, but we can only see the glory of the infinite in the faces and bodies of our suffering neighbors.

This business of seeing the glory of God through the face (and body) of the other makes sense. When I see, for instance, George Floyd’s body choking to death on the ground, pinned there by a police officer, I get a glimpse of Jesus, whom I call the Asphyxiated One, who choked to death on a cross. When I see more than 600,000 COVID-19 victims whose lungs have filled with fluid, I also get a glimpse of Jesus.

Any work that the church engages *must* look at the scars of the people who are the most vulnerable. While there is a propensity to look away from the difficult things, it is more important to directly engage issues that not only keep the church and its practices immediately relevant, but also keep the ELCA aligned with the mission it claims to champion: “God’s work. Our hands.” This alignment forces us to ask different questions about our church practices and how they are informed by the people around us who are suffering. Where are we in relation to those who suffer? What is our call to people who are suffering? Where can we see (sense, discern) Christ in this awful moment, and how will that discernment affect our

²⁹ Prathia Hall, “Broken by the Blessed,” sermon at Howard University, Washington, DC, 1997.

³⁰ John S. McClure, *Other-Wise Preaching: A Postmodern Ethic for Homiletics* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001).

corresponding action? Racial justice now demands that we adjust our gaze and see those of color who suffer among us.

For clarification, there is a lot of talk about the redeeming nature of trauma, and how it “makes” a person what they are. I would push against this assertion, because it often revictimizes people who are already suffering, in that it makes suffering a charitable exercise: “Oh, look how they bear their burdens.” It creates an exemplar out of a body that really never should have suffered in the first place.³¹ Over 600,000 people are dead of COVID-19. George Floyd and countless other black people have been killed by law enforcement. We do not make them exemplars for the sake of our own learning, but we learn how to live *differently* after looking at the scars of our neighbors. When we make exemplars out of people who have suffered, it becomes just another way of viewing that body in relation to its (lack of) whole-body-ness, which ultimately short-circuits that body’s intrinsic worth on its own terms. When we are forced to look at traumatized bodies, this is a way of retooling and adjusting our own practices in relation to those bodies who have been marginalized, and times like these demand such real and lasting change.

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What most interests me in Stevens’s study is his idea of upheaval. Stevens describes trauma through occurrences he has experienced, citing that he is drawn to the possibility found in traumatic rupture. Stevens claims:

When I justify my persistence, I do so by imagining that it is because these settings of rupture represent moments in which the “fixing”—of which Fanon spoke with such impact in *Black Skins, White Masks*—actually begins to fail, and the dye loses its hold, and coherent narratives lose information, clear pictures become blurry, and above all, dominant logics are dethroned. Indeed, countless philosophers, researchers, theorists, and performers have commented on the ways in which this “fix” has come into appearance for them. And have we not all felt a sense of the multiscalar resonance of our constitution in the social: the cellular, the neurological, the corporeal, the mnemonic, the emotional, the ideational, the familial, the societal, the national, the global, the ecological, and so on? These moments possess tremendous potential energy and are nearly infinite in their possible lines of flight.³²

³¹ Delores Williams talks about this extensively in her work, particularly discussing ways in which substitutionary atonement is often imposed upon marginalized bodies to exemplify suffering. See Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993).

³² Stevens, “Trauma Is as Trauma Does,” 24–25.

If racial justice now is about fighting for equality, changing our practices in light of broken bodies, it also must be about possibility. This section is expressly for people whose bodies have been broken by the trauma that racial inequity has brought, and keeps bringing. As a black man in America, I am well aware of the traumas that black people in America face. Racial justice now demands that we continue to realize that while we would never wish for the trauma of being black in a pandemic, we are still here to make a difference and to lean into this space to create an impactful future for ourselves—on our own terms. While our bodies have been bifurcated by the trauma of the moment, we must look to our scars not as liabilities, but as marks of survival and places of potentiality. The places of our woundedness make us just the experts a suffering society needs to help to reorient it toward a better future. We do not become exemplified sufferers and victims, but *ambassadors of a suffering Christ*.

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I do not seek to glorify the trauma that we are currently experiencing. It is *terrible*. But I would like to suggest that if *anyone* knows what it is like to hold up possibility in times of trauma, it is people who have been marginalized—who have been given scars. Over the years, in *spite* of trauma, black and brown people have continued to dream of possibility, to chart a way forward, because to give up hope in the midst of the worst time imaginable is to give up living, and that is out of the question. ⊕

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