

POLITICAL GRACE: THE GIFT OF RESISTANCE

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DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

Philosophy and theology have increasingly turned to the problem of the rising numbers of people who live in extremely severe and abasing conditions of oppression, people who are surplus to global economic and political orders which the oppressed define as "neoliberal" and "neocolonial." The dissertation, *Political Grace: The Gift of Resistance*, is part of that turning, through conversations with those currently living under oppressive conditions, especially in Central America and Mexico, and through conversations with phenomenology, feminist theology, feminist jurisprudence, ethics, and liberation theology.

There is an assertion that divine grace, and the autochthonous organization of the "lifeworld" which phenomenologists discuss, act in concert to seek to enable and empower the flourishing of all things, including humans, who have the reflective capacity to understand, conceptualize, imagine, produce and judge. The actions of grace and the autochthonous are in a sense the same as they move to privilege places and spaces where flourishing is impeded, to help mediate opportunities for flourishing. What frequently occurs when people living under oppressive conditions seek to become aware of, or change their circumstances is a backlash by those who control political and economic conditions. This backlash results in resistance. Grace, thus, is the gift of resistance, political and economic, and for the author, nonviolent.

There is also an assertion that there is emerging within creation a more intimate and deeper understanding of the connections within which humans thrive together and with the planet, a fragile emergence. To characterize this emergence the author has employed the neologisms "transintuitivity," "transsubjectivity" and "transreflexivity," each described phenomenologically and theologically.

Also asserted is a theology in which the divine is described as emptying itself entirely into creation, empowering through grace and its own risk, through flourishing, through enhancing connections, including those that are considered intuitive, subject-to-subject, and reflexive. These connections, especially present in such sites of resistance as Christian base communities throughout Latin America, can be seen in the daily lives of people who theologize about their circumstances as they seek to discover

equitable means of survival within a global economy that has left them surplus.

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INTRODUCTION

THE SUBJECT OF LIBERATION

Everybody knew what she was called, but nobody anywhere knew her name. Disremembered and unaccounted for, she cannot be lost because no one is looking for her, and even if they were, how can they call her if they don't know her name?

-- Toni Morrison, *Beloved*

It is difficult to talk about a "subject." The word stretches out and touches everything. Everything and anything can be a "subject." Everything and anything can be "subjected" to language, shifting the "subject" to position of "object" when it is observed as the "subject" of observation, as the "object" to be observed as subject. Even anonymity can be a "subject," paradoxical because in naming it one names its invisibility as both subject and object. "How can they call her if they don't know her name?" Toni Morrison asks. Yet she is called in our yearning to know her. Who is she? A mere object of inquiry? A subject we know in ourselves, especially, intimate with us, lost to us just the same? Is nothing "something" when it is "subject" or "object"?

What the following essay seeks to speak of is the "subject" of abasing oppression, the hundreds of millions of humans who cannot subsist today but instead suffer from a deprivation of resources, a deprivation that is unjust, leaving those without resources to die in suffering. The essay seeks to speak of these radically oppressed persons not as a statistical totality though statistics will be cited, but as individual "subjects" who subsist in community but are subjected to a tyranny of injustice that excludes them from the natural and produced goods that are gleaned from the earth. The essay seeks to speak of this "subject" from the perspective of liberation theology and philosophy, with some alterations that are the viewpoints of this author, viewpoints themselves that are gleaned and derived from the resources of liberation theology.

But to translate lives of people who suffer into text is to make objects of lives that are indeed subjects to those who live them. It is to make a person abstract, to overvalue the text but overlook the content of the

person, to "disremember" the person as subject, or the community in which the person lives, or the relationship of that person to the ecology of life; to "disremember" and not know how to "call" the person nor the life-circumstances of that person. They as persons, as subjects, become lost to other humans in the anonymity of statistics and their reproductions as objects in text; they are intimate as subjects, yet lost just the same. To speak in text of these "subjects" who especially live and have lived under the tyranny of oppression is to speak of a contradiction that can't be resolved in language alone, to affirm the contradiction of abasing oppression in the midst of the abundance of life that leaves meaning contingent, "subject" to interpretation, an interpretation that can't be made from the reading of a text alone but that must be tested in the risk of action against the conditions of the subjugation of humans to understand their subjectivity.

In the following essay will be stories of real persons in an effort to "remember" them, to account for them as "subjects." But it is also to make these who are specifically named metonyms for those who aren't, paradoxically continuing the effacing of those who aren't named, who still are lost in this remembering. More will be said on this question of "subject," especially in Chapter 2 of the essay.

In this text also will be thoughts of still other persons who have special names that designate them as icons of human enlightenment, who have thus become "subjects" of philosophy and theology, who claim or are given claim to a special fix on knowledge, including knowledge of the source of all that humans subsist in, the creation that humans share on this planet. I am making a small claim to a piece of this knowledge, but it is a contingent claim, as it must be because of human limits. The authority I seek to speak from is the authority of the "site of resistance" against the oppression which causes people to suffer so, an oppression named here as economic and political, as "neocolonial" and "neoliberal," so that it is less anonymous. More will be said about these terms, as well.

My claim also is a shared claim that the divine, God, gendered neutral, male and female in metaphor, has a special concern for the impoverished suffering human, particularly the human who suffers from the injustice and indifference of other humans and their institutions. But again, speaking of the divine: "How can we call her if we don't know her name?" Yet we may call to her, or him, or it, or all three in metaphor, in our yearning to know her, to understand her in the context of our lives as "subjects" in creation. Still, something of the divine itself remains anonymous too, "disremembered."

The weakness of my text is my own weakness in seeking to communicate what words try to signify. I don't trust language to communicate clearly. I have misinterpreted too many times things others

have said or written. Nor am I clear when I hope to be. But, still the attempt to be clear must be made because we rely on shared meanings, at least the illusion of them. Further, the lack of clarity isn't the only thing that makes this text potentially inaccessible: the text itself is exclusionary. The written word is privileged here, itself untranslatable by millions upon millions of "subjects" who can't read but who can think and reflect and offer extraordinary insights, though unwritten by them. What is it to be illiterate? I don't remember, in one sense, and I only barely understand in another sense when I look at words of a language alien to me, words that alienate me from their meanings. Still, I can write about my confusion, a writing that an illiterate person can't share.

One word we share in understanding, in whatever language, however we express it, is "suffering," even in the howls and cries of other species of this planet. We particularly understand human suffering, or at least may think we do in a general way. That fact that humans suffer because of what other humans do or don't do is critical to this essay. I seek to come to some terms with the human role in radical human suffering. What "liberation" then signifies in the Preface's title -- "The Subject of Liberation" -- is liberation from the conditions of radical suffering caused by human injustice and indifference.

In coming to terms, terms will be used that I hope will offer a perspective to be shared with others as we humans try to figure out what it is that causes others and ourselves to suffer so, and what responsibilities humans have in both the causes of radical suffering and in the adjustments needed to transform causes of radical suffering into things which amplify human flourishing in balance with creation itself, particularly now the planet. To help to come to terms, I will provide a brief "glossary" of some of the more obscure terms I'm employing. This follows now:

Site of Resistance: A site of resistance can be either an oppressed person or a community gathered to reflect on the conditions of radical suffering and to take actions to resist the conditions of radical suffering, or the abasing suffering that results from human action or indifference.

Transintuitivity: Transintuitivity signifies a common ground of intuition shared by human subjects among themselves, with the rest of creation and with the divine, God. This intuitive concourse is not bounded by the constraints of space and time but is interpreted within these constraints as the direct apprehension of the concourse itself as it appears in individuals and community. It can also be understood as the bond of love.

Transsubjectivity: Transsubjectivity is the shared relationships of subjects. It is also the transferral of their material-spiritual instantiations as subjects within the field of relationships that are part of the

ecophenomena of creation, as in the breathing of each other's exhalations in a room, the molecules in our bodies as ancient as the planet and the universe, migrating and becoming us, leaving us to become others; as in the applause of shared joy. To have a relationship or to be in relationship is to be a subject. By using the term "material-spiritual" I mean no real distinction between the two but want to suggest that they are as matched or mated as wave and particle are in quantum physics, two aspects of the same phenomenon. The fullness of a relationship can be understood as the sharing of love.

Transreflexivity: Transreflexivity is the shared sense of identity and thought humans share in community, especially understood as a presentation of themselves together as reflective thinking subjects. It has an "emergent" quality prefigured by the Pentecost of the New Testament, in which there is a sense of a common identity which presents itself collectively as "Hineni," "Heme Aquí," or "Here I Am," which is the presentation of the subject as a subject of history sharing an identity with the divine, or God, shared in community. Transreflexivity can also be understood as the awareness and realization of love's identity.

Divinity: Divinity is the source of creation and that which is fully invested and fully given of itself in "kenosis" -- in its full emptying -- into creation. Thus divinity is as fully at risk as creation is itself. Divinity's definition is plural, that is, its definition shares local meanings as well as universal ones. The Christian divinity, God as Christ and the Holy Spirit as well God in the Trinity, is one interpretation among many. The Christian divinity is the tradition of the understanding of the divine with which I work from my own tradition as a Christian, but for me, divinity is manifest in other traditions as well. Critical in this essay is divine risk, that is, the notion that the divine risks itself completely in the creation of life, thus is fully and completely invested in history and its outcome. Humans are part of that history, obviously, so the divine is invested in the human who makes and reflects on history and who can alter history or even destroy the human part in it. Most of all for me, the divine is altruistic love, a complete givingness that humans share in their complete giving of themselves. To completely give of one's self is to join the divine in kenosis, that is, to share divinity with the divine and with others. Still there is the qualification that when speaking of the divine one is speaking of something which eludes language, which has no "house" in language, to which language refers only metaphorically.ⁱⁱ So, to say the divine is completely at risk is as much metaphor as it is to say that the divine is absolutely "other" to the human -- it is to use language to name the anonymous which I hold is fully present to us despite, as Sallie McFague notes, the deconstructionist critique of such a "nostalgia for Presence" as childish.ⁱⁱⁱ

Political grace: Grace, the gift of divine which is ever present and offered freely in its givingness, is political when it "favors" people under abasing domination to reflect on their condition politically and to seek a political solution to their subjugation and oppression. Grace is a relationship with the divine, which, when accepted and acknowledged, transforms a human and human relationships. It is also considered in the Christian context a gift of the Spirit, which I also interpret as a sabbath clearing. This sabbath clearing can occur within the sense of wild risk that one may experience at a site of resistance, or can be considered an opening into a dimension which humans can't describe but know as something beyond their faculty to reproduce without help from beyond, a beyond that seems to be beyond the horizon of life but with which humans identify and of which they may feel a part.

Base community: Much will be said of base communities in this essay. Briefly here, a base community, or *comunidad de base*, is a gathering of people who have been oppressed, into a communal and cooperative social, ecclesial, economic and political formation for survival and growth.

The essay moves through four chapters, and in a sense, carries the "subject" of oppression, subjugation, domination and suffering through these chapters as a common ground. The "subject" may wear different names but nevertheless is the thread that brings pieces of the quilt of texts that I've woven into one cloth. If one can imagine oneself in the position of the oppressed as one reads, one may be able to situate oneself within that common ground. If one can imagine oneself in active embodied solidarity with the oppressed, one can also situate oneself at the site of resistance.

Chapter 1 locates the problem of oppression in the social-political-economic enterprise which has been given the names "neoliberalism" and "neocolonialism" by those who reflect on their oppression. The sites of oppression, which in turn become sites of resistance, span the planet, but also are particular to the western hemisphere. Liberation theology is prominent as well as a mode of reflection in the midst of oppressive practices in this hemisphere. Within this chapter is a brief history and catalog of this theology, particularly in Nicaragua, where ecclesial base communities emerged as part of the resistance against the United States-supported Somoza regime as well as against the U.S.-backed low intensity war carried on by the Contras from southern Honduras. Also within the chapter is mention of the Zapatista uprising in southern México and its perspective on neocolonial and neoliberal domination of indigenous and mestizo populations in that country. There is, as well, an introduction to the particular "take" I have on liberation theology, which includes what I ascertain to be the divine's risk in creation as well as the preferential option for the poor that characterizes both liberation theology and Roman Catholic

social justice teachings. There is also a brief discussion of the critical perspectives of persons such as Gayatri Spivak, Michel Foucault and Ranajit Guha, which are further developed later in the essay.

Chapter 2 is autobiographical. It locates the author as a "subject" of oppression during my childhood and adolescent years when I lived in a "working poor" household characterized by alcoholism and violent abuse. The chapter also speaks of a group of people not often associated with the oppressed during these times, poor whites, of which there are 19 million in the United States today, certainly no small number. The chapter offers the beginning of theological reflection on the circumstances of poor whites, situates the author within that population, and describes, from the author's site, some marks of resistance and theological reflection. It also speaks to the debilitating affects of marginalization, socially and psychologically. From a philosophical point of view, the terms transintuitivity, transsubjectivity and transreflexivity are examined phenomenologically, drawing particularly on the thoughts of Hegel, Husserl and Merleau-Ponty but disfiguring their thoughts as well in my own elaboration and interpretation. Also discussed is the Nietzschean view of the "plebe" and the plebe's "ressentiment," which I see as a disfiguring of the "subject" of oppression in favor of the emergence of Nietzsche's "noble" in its will to power. Discussed as well is a "phenomenology of justice," which is characterized as an autochthonous relationality which seeks to see that the resources needed for human flourishing are equitably distributed. This effort of equitable distribution yields a preferential option for the poor, the "subject" of the oppression of maldistribution and privileged accumulation.

Chapter 3 begins with a discussion of text, particularly texts of protest against oppression which fail to situate the writer of a text in embodied solidarity with the oppressed "subject" but instead involve little risk either of the writer's body or the writer's resources. Oftentimes the writer of protest seems to be the "subject" of protest and the oppressed the object. Nevertheless, there is a need for those who may not consider themselves as oppressed to be in solidarity with the oppressed, to respond to the moral claim made from the oppressed, and a need for those who *do* stand in solidarity to "bear witness." In a sense, the "subject" of the chapter weaves from the oppressed, to those who bear witness, but also speaks of the divine and that which mediates the divine, considered from the perspective of "witness" as well. Such named witnesses "among the cloud of witnesses" include Diotima in Plato, and Eros, and Elegguá in Santería tradition, figures who are mediator, trickster and witness. Mediation itself is linked to the mediation of the oppressed as embodied witness of the divine's preferential option for them in their suffering and for the healing of that suffering, the call for healing from the oppressed to those with the capacity to heal. Finally, this chapter touches upon the God of Christianity as an ontological conception, as ultimate being, from the so-called Athens and Jerusalem perspectives, with the Jerusalem side favored to yield a divinity that is relational within life and history and is also theurgic -- God changes God's mind; God can change.

Chapter 4 begins with a return to Nicaragua, to the story of life and death within one base community and its own struggle to survive in Nicaragua's parched northwestern hills after the ushering in of a government more to the liking of the U.S. in the early 1990s. The focus of this story, and of a subsequent excursus into feminist liberation theology and feminist jurisprudence, is "positionality," the position of the subject as oppressed or subjugated within a system of domination. Positionality requires recognition of the subject as it defines itself, not as a "regime" may define it, whether it be a "regime of truth" or a regime which irrigates its power through a dominant system of rules that are masked as "neutral." Of particular focus are systems of dominance ruled by men. Further examination in the chapter includes a closer look at the "mystification" of dominance, the "fragmentation" of the subject into a commodified object for consumption, and the "alienation" of the subject to itself as it buys into its representation as a commodified object, thus buying into its own alienation. It is contended, theologically, that liberation praxis offers a mode of reflection, with help from political grace, to limn this "fetishization" of the subject and to devise strategies within the practices of "conscientization" -- that is the practices of reflection and action and reflection again -- to buy out of alienation. Finally, there is a return to the category of suffering,

radical suffering. With this is a return to the phenomenological and spiritual call for "direct service" to those who radically suffer under oppression as well as for "justice," which interpreted here is a call to transform unjust institutions that oppress, which is in effect a call to revolutionary transformation. Theologically, there is also an assertion that such revolutionary transformation is part of the sacramental change known as "transsubstantiation," interpreted here as incarnating structural transformation within the "flesh of the world" so that all humans may flourish equitably within the ecological limits of our planet.

CHAPTER 1

THE HOLOCAUST OF NECRO-ECONOMICS, THE STRUGGLE FOR HOPE

Estos vientos que soplan llenos de una larga historia de lucha de nuestro pueblo hoy son vientos nuevos movimientos de esperanza largamente cosechada tras el triunfo de la vida sobre este proyecto de muerte, Neoliberalismo. Son estos vientos los que nos vuelven a unir. Porque creemos en la vida, seguimos adelante ... Más, nos sentiremos fuertes para seguir luchando porque este proyecto de muerte impuesto por el Fondo Monetario Internacional a los países más pobre del mundo, no siga creando más desocupación de mano de obra, hambre y miseria no solo económica sino en valores fundamental como: la justicia, la verdad, la libertad, la democracia, el amor, etc...

-- Letter from Mexican base communities⁴

Along rural dirt roads, along urban streets throughout the Western Hemisphere, the poor struggle to find a way to survive through an informal economy that also struggles. Most often impoverished and jobless, millions of these poor try to market meager goods, including themselves, in order to supplement or garner insufficient incomes. In Nicaragua, thin illiterate street children run in front of vehicles on Managua streets, hawking chewing gum, candy. In Mexico, fragile roadstands are set up along desert highways, ragged cloth protecting campesinos from prevailing sierra winds that cut through the high plateaus. In cities throughout the Americas, women and men sell sex and drugs, their bodies objects of a treacherous consumption. "First World," or "Third World," there is no exception.

Most of those who vend in this informal economy are "surplus" people, "outcasts" in the theological sense, extrinsic to formal economic systems now dominated by neoliberalism, the global free-market enterprise which has been touted by those who benefit as the salvation of the world, the "new world order."⁵ This is an enterprise ruled over by European, North American and Asian international powers and transnational corporate