Black Lives Matter and Gospel Hermeneutics: Political Life and Social Death in the Gospel of Luke

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As I sit down to write about salvation in the Gospel of Luke, the news is flooded with what has come to be known as "the Starbucks incident." To recap: the manager of a coffee shop in Center City, Pennsylvania, called 911 and reported: "I have two gentlemen in my café that are refusing to make a purchase or leave. I am at the Starbucks at 18th and Spruce." The two men explained later that they were waiting for a friend and that one of them had been denied access to a restroom because he had not made any purchase. As the officers arrived, another customer videotaped the arrest, showing that the friend they were waiting for (a white male) arrived in time and questioned the agents about the cause of the arrest. The two African-American males remained compliant, apparently calm as the police officers handcuffed and lead them away. The reports and the video flooded the internet and social media, triggering a set of reactions that Starbucks sought to address by issuing an apology and planning an anti-racism training for the staff nationwide.

By the time you are reading this article, the news outrage will have dwindled and the public opinion has, with all certainty, moved to different, although probably related, concerns. The event itself may not be particularly significant—police kill African-Americans at higher rates, and the U.S. supermax prison complex feeds on the life of the black community—but it signals a crisis whereby police and whiteness place the bodies of racialized citizens under continuous surveillance in the public domain. Differently put, the event reveals once more the racially charged nature of presumptively neutral public spaces.

The Starbucks event ended with no fatal consequences. Both men were released and, one could argue, by making it into the news, the incident increased an awareness about the precarious condition of living as a black individual in the U.S. Related, the Black Lives Matter movement, despite its notable opposition from several groups, has gained both publicity and credibility through its drawing attention to these and other more fatal events, exposing a pattern of deeply embedded racialization in Anglo-Saxon American culture and the political domain. I understand here the word "political" in its broadest sense, as referring to the sphere of public relations and of people occupying public spaces, walking on the streets, assembling on the squares, getting on the subway, ordering a milkshake at the drive-through, buying groceries at the local market, taking the bus to the university, participating in a class discussion, inviting your coworker for a shared lunch, or talking to your friends at the coffee shop. Accordingly, the public sphere is the precondition to democracy, to the "demos" understood as the assembly of "we people" as we engage and disengage with each other in what, at first sight, seems to be a free space, a public domain for everyone to interact.

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Those citizens and non-citizens who, while being part of the demos, have been warned, interrupted, harassed, stopped, etc., experience the dangers of holding a naïve notion of public space, and therefore cannot live in public as if it were a value-free sphere. For some, daily routines such as driving a car, taking a nap in a public park, and talking on a cellular phone are not without risk. Our dwelling in communion with other bodies constitutes, at the most basic level, the fabric of the political, of the "polis" as a place "we" inhabit together, shaping in turn limits for our own body, where can it go, rest, talk, sleep, etc.

This space, it goes without saying, is not equally accessible to everyone, nor is it imaginarily present in the same ways to all of "us." We are living in a time and a place experiencing the undoing of the public democratic space, witnessing a collapse of previously available domains of public life that is shaping our identities and how we think of ourselves as dwelling with others in the *polis*.

The Black Lives Movement, among many other claims, throws into relief how police brutality, imprisonment, and daily harassment are symptoms of such a collapse. Accordingly, the Starbucks incident is not only an effect, one among many, of a long story of racial stereotyping. It also manifests how racialized bodies are experienced and imagined as a threat to a public domain that was never neutral. The incident, I further suggest, represents a crisis in the formation of our physical bodies in the public arena, a critical reminder of the vulnerability of the body when the world around us is hostile.

These introductory reflections seem to pose a misleading dichotomy between the body and the public. The body occupies a public space but it does so while the latter shapes the former. The potentially infinite encounters with other subjects shape who we are. The subject is in itself an accumulation of infinite encounters—with other humans, animals, with the Divine—who, in turn, mediate our interaction with them and our interaction with ourselves, defining our identity in the real and the imaginary world. In the case of two black men at a coffee shop, their blackness, probably along with their maleness, not only triggered a specific reaction in the mind of the denouncer, it conjured a set of assumptions, notions, prejudices that are just "there," part of a cultural imagination that conceives of blackness as deprived of the right to be "there."

A coffee shop is, after all, a codified space particularly welcoming to specific personal traits and potentially hostile to many bodies. One needs to think no further than the prices of the beverages, the requirement to have a cell phone to pay, the binary demarcation of the restrooms, the requirement to purchase in order just to "be" or to use the bathroom (many establishments have coded pads)—the ability and competency to behave in a certain way so as to fit in. If you are an immigrant, it will take you a while to get used to the protocols of simply ordering coffee. It is important to notice here that the dialectical process of inhabiting any public space shapes identity, transforms it, creates a subject. From a different perspective, Judith Butler words this process beautifully:

> It is not as if an "I" exists independently over here and then simply loses a "you" over there, especially if the attachment to "you" is part of what composes who "I" am. If I lose you, under these conditions, then I not only mourn the loss, but I become inscrutable to myself. Who "am" I, without you? When we lose some of these ties by which we are constituted, we do not know who we are or what to do. On one level, I think I have lost "you" only to discover that "I" have gone missing as well. At another level, perhaps what I have lost "in" you, that for which I have no ready vocabulary, is a relationality that is composed neither exclusively of myself nor you, but is to be conceived as the tie by which those terms are differentiated and related.[1]

1. Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2006), 22.

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By now the reader is surely wondering how these surface-level considerations about our contemporary identity formation in the public space are related to the Gospel of Luke. Indeed, any exploration of postmodern subjectivity is, to the professional and the common interpreter alike, far removed from traditional theological considerations of the Gospel. Indictments of "eisegesis" notwithstanding, contemporary biblical scholarship however can, in my view, benefit from exploring the points of connection between subject formation and public space in the past and in the present. One needs to look no further than what biblical scholars from within the approaches of social sciences have long pointed out at the collective essence of the subject. For instance, Bruce Malina notices that "instead of individualism, what we find in the first-century Mediterranean world is what might be called collectivism. Persons always considered themselves in terms of the group(s) in which they experienced."[2] Philip Esler further warns against conjuring up the *bête noire* of traditional biblical scholarship—anachronism—when he argues that nowhere are its dangers more "evident than in the predilection of European and US critics to discuss first-century texts in terms of individualism when that is a feature of modern Western culture largely absent from the period under discussion."[3]

Esler's warnings, among many others, about the historical gaps in the understanding of subject formation helpfully keep anachronistic readings at bay while, simultaneously, work to rhetorically occlude ways in which "we" moderns understand who we are. Differently put, by posing collective subjectivity as an exclusive feature of the past, we fail to understand how our contemporary identity

2. Bruce J. Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 62.

3. Philip F. Esler, *The First Christians in their Social Worlds: Social Scientific Approaches to New Testament Interpretation* (London: Routledge, 1994), 24.

is also collective, despite our efforts to insist on individuality and independence. Let me further explore such connections through the notion of social death, a concept that will help us in establishing a continuum between different narratives in the Gospel of Luke (particularly chapters 7 and 8) and the experiences of being pushed to spaces of social death in the present. In what follows, social death—broadly defined as the political severance of social ties—undergirds an analysis of how Jesus interacts publicly with other characters. By focusing on three narratives—the Centurion's slave (Luke 7:1–10), the Widow from Nain (Luke 7:11–17), and the Demon-possessed man from Gerasa (8:26–39)—I show that salvation is made possible by a network of public relations that are frequently on the verge of collapse.

Social death and political life

Orlando Patterson's *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study,*[4] inaugurating the notion of "social death," investigated the impact of sixty-six slaveholding cultures on sociality. One of Patterson's great insights is the importance of shifting the study of slavery from an abstract phenomenon to a crisis in personal relationships. Slavery is defined here as "the permanent, violent domination of natally alienated and generally dishonored persons,"[5] offering a groundbreaking and sustained analysis of the conditions of subject formation under slavery in the context of political systems. Slavery equals social death because it undoes, eliminates, and distorts the basic conditions of relationality that generate human life. More recent scholarship has taken up this challenge by expanding the analysis of the socially dead beyond the historical reality of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. It has also provided a conceptual framework to analyze how extreme conditions of livability—Nazi camps, migratory movements, sexual exploitation, total confinement, etc.—distort, undo, unhinge, unglue subjectivity through the deprivation of intersubjectivity. The "social non-person,"[6] that is "the socially dead," is deprived of meaningful interpersonal connections, forced to rethink their relationship to temporality (to a proper sense of their past, present, and the future) and spaciality (coerced out of a familiar geopolitical location), and so turns into a desubjectified subject.

The contemporary U.S. supermax prison system perpetuates slavery's social dynamics and its effects on subject formation. Solitary confinement—the enforced penitentiary regime whereby inmates experience extreme isolation, deprivation of inter-personal contact, confinement within the walls of minuscule cells, ban from the social, political, cultural, and biological world—relegates thousands of racialized humans to social death. In the wake of Trans-Atlantic slavery, the supermax industrial system, with its rooted racialized history and its capitalist embeddedness, deprives the subject of the basic conditions of inter-relationality, endangers the stability of the structures holding the subject together, and

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throws into relief the annihilation of a subjectivity that has been deprived of the condition of its possibility (relationality) and of a body that has been stripped of its political status.

This extreme side of the equation of social death does not happen in a vacuum; it does not rely exclusively on a racist juridical and political system, but it thrives on the thousands of interactions of quotidian life: social death starts, at least partially, with social life, with a public life whereby certain groups of people are policed, surveyed, gazed at, etc. Although it would be irresponsible to associate social death under the extenuating circumstances of slavery or solitary confinement with the Starbucks incident, both events share the understanding that the political space, the public domain, the place of the polis, is exclusive to certain parts of the population (in this instance, Anglo-Saxon whites).

The political space in Luke

The Gospel of Luke is particularly concerned with the dwelling of different bodies in the political space, the space of the *polis*. The Gospel contains almost forty instances of the word *polis* (city) and twelve of the word *kōmē* (village/town). Both concepts describe the background of Jesus' public ministry with his disciples: "He went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him" (Luke 8:1). Furthermore, Jesus' racialized body in the public sphere is persistent throughout the Gospel (see below), and it models how, when, and where the racialized bodies of his disciples will shape the formation of the church and its expansion in Acts.

Scholars have traditionally considered the synagogue episode of Luke 4:16–30 as a programmatic instance where the character of Jesus arises as a public figure announcing his public mission and where Luke the theologian anticipates the structure of the Gospel: i.e., he emphasizes prophecy's fulfillment (4:21), summarizes the Gospel's Christology (4:18–19), and advances the ethical commitments of a gospel known for its emphasis on the poor (4:18, 25).

4. Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).
5. Ibid., 13.
6. Ibid., 5.

From the perspective of this essay, the pericope portrays Jesus as a main character in the midst of a public time and place, locating his actions within a structure of conflict based on his occupation of a public space that is deeply and consistently racialized. The scene comes immediately after Jesus returns to Galilee and "a report about him spread throughout all the surrounding country" (4:14). The passage further links Jesus' teaching with the recognition he is getting in the public arena. Accordingly, the episode constitutes an instance where the placement of Jesus in a public space is contested in terms of his ethnic origins (4:24). Parallel to the portrayal of his return to Galilee in 4:14, the synagogue pericope is followed up with a brief account of his travel to the *polis* of Capernaum in order to teach and gain authority (4:31–44).

The Gospel not only situates Jesus' teaching in public spaces as an event that is both a source of legitimation and contestation, but by doing so constructs Jesus as a character with a subjectivity whose identity is intrinsically attached to a network of connections and disconnections across different narratives. It is not surprising that what follows is a set of interactions with characters whose relationality has been severed: both the demon-possessed (4:33–37) and Simon's mother-in-law (4:38–39) are restored to a relationality with the public space in which they interact that restores who they are. Although Simon's mother-in-law is situated in the *oikia* (home)—whose relation with the *polis* will be analyzed further down—the reception of Jesus and the people with him throws into relief the close connections between public and domestic spaces.

The public space, the space of the *polis,* is more than the physical space where characters interact. More than an empty chamber where characters are located, the public defines who they are both in terms of character study (8:1) and theological commitments (9:5; 10:1, 12). The appointment of the twelve where Jesus sends his disciples in pairs to every town (*polis*) and place (*topos*) shows that such a mission (to heal the sick in the town and proclaim the good news of the arrival of the kingdom of God) is destined to encounter the hostility of the political: the disciples are subject to be expelled (10:10), despite the fact that the kingdom has arrived (10:11). The contrast between their reception and rejection signals the always tenuous nature of the political, the vulnerability of body amid the public. It is from this perspective that one could argue that Luke traces a political arch that takes the reader from Galilee to the rest of the world. The Lukan drive toward universalization, a feature that many scholars have analyzed, is however built on the tenuous consolidation of the political, of the ability of the body to inhabit the common space. The salvific impetus toward the *oikoumenē* (inhabited world) meets the fragility of the political, since the advancement of salvation is continuously threatened by and rescued through political interactions. Briefly put, the kingdom of God erupts in the shades of social death. Let me briefly explore this dimension in three instances where salvation happens through or is made possible by relations in the political domain. While the first two (the Centurion and the widow of Nain) offer instances where the social and political threads of political life have not been severed, the last one (the Gerasene episode) represents what happens when we are cut off from political life.

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The Centurion's slave (Luke 7:1–10)

In order to explore this dimension of the political in Luke and how Jesus performs salvation in such a context, I will be looking at chapter 7 where two iconic healings occur. The first one is the famous healing of the slave of the Centurion. Scholars have long pointed out the highly politicized dimensions of the pericope, among the figures of the Centurion, the slave, the elders of the Jews, and the friends of the Centurion. It is undoubtedly such a conflation of political dimensions that has partly garnered attention from a variety of perspectives, postcolonial and queer included. From the political perspective of this essay, it stands out that the life of the slave seems to hang on a thread of political relations.

The episode starts by signaling Jesus' public ministry and placing him in the *polis* (7:1; see also 4:31). The portrayal of the Centurion as "valued highly" (7:2) fits the model of an authority who has acquired honor and recognition though his patronage: not only is he a man of military authority (7:8), he is praised by comparatively honorable Jewish elders (7:3) for loving their nation (*ethnos*) and having built a synagogue (7:5). The episode contributes to Luke's interest in portraying some gentiles as God-fearers who are particularly known for bridging the cultural gap between the Jews and the Romans through their political action, more specifically through their contributions to material prosperity. For instance, Cornelius in Acts 10:1–2, the first gentile to be baptized, shares with the Centurion his support to the community (he gave the people many alms, Acts 10:2). Luke skips the condemnatory tone that in the Matthean version Jesus applies to the Jews (Matt 8:10–12), resulting in a more positive view of the public connections between the religious and political powers. By not including the controversial remarks about "the heirs of the kingdom being thrown into the outer darkness" (Matt 8:12), Luke puts forth a vision of the political domain less conflictual and, in this case,

conducive to the restoration of the life that is about to be lost (Luke 8:13).

It is these networks of relationships that keep death at bay. As Jesus accompanies the Jewish leaders (Luke 7:6), it is the Centurion's friends who approach Jesus to share the crucial information that the slave has been healed. The theological consequences of a healing that happens "remotely" have been extensively explored in Lukan scholarship. It is particularly enlightening here that distance between the healer (Jesus) and the healed (the slave) is only physical, not social. Their common space is inhabited by a set of complicated political relations that not only make the healing possible: they are the condition that allow Jesus to proclaim the Centurion as a model of faith (7:9). On the one hand, there is a social gap between Jesus and the Centurion, and on the other hand, the narrative shows how relationships in the public domain breach such gaps: the Centurion asks Jewish elders (7:3) to approach Jesus, for he knows they can intercede on his behalf. And once the relationship has been established, he also sends his friends who account for his indelible faith (7:6). It is hardly surprising that the role of friendship is particularly important in Luke (see 7:6; 7:34; 11:5, 8; 12:4; 14:10, 12; 15:6, 9, 29; 16:9; 21:16; 23:12), defining both positive and negative spaces but always strengthening public relations.

Nain's widow daughter (Luke 7:11–17)

Soon afterward, Jesus visits the *polis* of Nain, accompanied by his disciples and a large crowd (7:11). Luke insists throughout his Gospel that Jesus is always in the company of others (5:19; 7:19; 8:4; 9:11; 14:25; 18:25), until he enters Jerusalem. From the perspective of social death, this discrepancy signals that Jesus is not socially dead until he is close to being physically dead. Jesus experiences no social death until real death is close: then he will experience both. Here in 7:11–17, the narrative is even more straightforward: the healer encounters the funeral procession on the way to the burial scene and brings the person back to life. Luke shapes here Jesus' actions after the revivification of the son of the widow of Zarephath (v.15c, cf. 1 Kings 17:23b).

Although the other Gospels do not include this episode, the narrative resembles other contemporary healing narratives (Philostratus, life of Apollonius, 4.45). The subject position of the widow of Nain could hardly be more different that the one occupied by the Centurion. In terms of gender, political status, economic standing, relationships, etc., the Centurion and the widow stand on opposite sides of the social spectrum. Unlike the figure of the Centurion, the widow is a biblical topos. In the Hebrew Bible there are numerous examples where the widow figures as model of piety. The role of the widow in the political space is not without ambiguity. Her status as a woman no longer married signals a series of cultural problems: as a woman without a man, she is the potential seductress of other women's husbands and a particularly easy target for deviant groups seeking to destabilize and contest the political sphere. 1 Tim 5:13 mentions this specific concern and restricts the role of widows to the domestic space, not the public one. The accusation that they went from house-to-house shows that the author viewed their occupation of the public space as highly problematic. The widow, in the words of Juvenal "rushes boldly about the entire city" (*Satires* 6.398–399, also 224–26), and thus it is a figure that calls for restraint and surveillance.

Whereas both the slave and the widow are in a precarious situation, they only have a taste of what it means to be socially dead. In contrast, the Gerasene man embodies social death as the extreme example of being severed from the world of the political.

Luke situates the event at the gates of Nain (7:12), the most crowded space in town (together with the square). Jesus shows immediate compassion for her (7:13), not only because she is burying a loved one but because her son is, it seems, one of the few threads of communication with the social world (the only son of the mother who also was a widow). Therefore, Jesus returns him to her (7:15). Although the details about the dialogue are scarce and the narrative focuses on Jesus' increasing success and reputation as a prophet (7:16–17), the episode underscores not only the political domain as the place of interaction among all the characters involved, but its role as the condition of the possibility for the salvific experience: it is the space where God has come to God's people (7:16).

Both narratives (Luke 7:1–10 and 11–17) are pendants that fulfill Luke 2:32 ("a light for revelation to the Gentiles"). These examples represent instances where political life, defined as life in the *polis,* keeps at bay physical death: because there is no social death, there is no literal death. There is a passage in Luke, however, where social death, although not leading to literal death, shows in its most grueling cruelty to the point where its subject seems to lose his humanity. In the following I present the episode of the Gerasene as an extreme instance of social death that, unlike in the case of the Centurion's slave or the widow of Nain, exposes what happens when the social and political links are totally severed. Whereas both the slave and the widow are in a precarious situation, they only have a taste of what it means to be socially dead. In contrast, the Gerasene man embodies social death as the extreme example of being severed from the world of the political.

The demon-possessed man from Gerasa (8:26–39)

The Gerasene man shares with the Centurion and the slave, as well as the widow of Nain and her son, anonymity. Characterized as a certain man (8:27), he lives in total isolation and is separated from the world of the *polis*: he has no city, no home, and no

clothes (8:27–28). Such dislocation is social but also economical, especially when we consider that the *oikos* (home) is the basic economic unit and the place where the *paterfamilias* (head of the household) exercises his authority. The Gerasene man is devoid of human ties: with no family in sight, he is deprived of a relationship with his ascendancy, progeny, and extended bonds, and—again, unlike both the slave and the widow—the Gerasene man has no participation in the workforce. The demon-possessed man is socially dead, for, on the one hand, he dwells on the side of literal death where dead bodies are buried, and, on the other hand, the place where no living human dwells.

The Gerasene man's nakedness (8:27) and prisoner-status (8:29) reveal his precarity but they are also symptoms of a subjectivity that is being undone by the lack of relationality. Accordingly, the Gerasene man represents what happens to "us" when we are severed from the political: the personal collapses when severed from the political. Notice, for instance, that the narrative pictures his interactions as particularly abrupt (he yells, falls to the ground, queries with strident voice, 8:28).

It is remarkable that the Gerasene man in the beginning has no *logos* (speech), only voice. Since Aristotle, *logos* is what differentiates the human from the animal (*Pol.* 1253a 9–18). Humans share with other animals the power of voice, but only humans have speech which, Aristotle further argues, makes possible the constitution of the household and the city. This "animal with logos" is further depicted, during the Roman Imperium, by associating the human with "ratio (reason) and oratio (speech)" as the foundation of *naturalis societas* (Cicero, *Leg*. 1.22). Although these distinctions do not appear clearly in the Lukan characterization of the Gerasene man, the narrative shows that the Gerasene's social death is resolved through his ability to speak, to narrate (*diēgēsis* in 8:39), a process that parallels his inclusion into the political realm. The transition from the apolitical to the political, from voice to speech, from social death to social life, occurs through the reacquisition of *ratio* (reason), for the Gerasene man recovers "his right mind" (8:35). The Gerasene's first words 8:28 (lit. "what between you and me?"), from the perspective of the political, represent here the initiation of a relationship between the Gerasene's self and the other (Jesus) that eventually will rescue him from fully collapsing under the weight of being isolated from the *polis* and its dwellers.

Concluding comments

Despite their "happy endings," the healing stories of the Centurion's slave, the widow from Nain, and the demon-possessed Gerasene man evince the fragility of life and the importance of the public domain as a network of relationships to keep the precarity of our life from turning into death. These narratives, many interprets insist, emphasize both Jesus' salvific actions and the believers' faithful dispositions. These interactions, however, do not happen in a vacuum: they are part of a wider set of political relations that, from the start, shape the characters' identities. Luke's stories remind us of our essential inter-relationality, of the death that is around the corner when we neglect the political domain (here the Gerasene man's social death is a particularly poignant example), and they warn us against a naïve notion of salvation that is oblivious to our political essence.

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The political domain is, among other things, a tenuous network of human relationships, always at risk of collapsing. The Starbucks incident, similar to many other instances of racialized violence made visible by Black Lives Matter, evinces the vulnerability of certain bodies under the heavy weight of political surveillance. The Centurion's slave, the widow of Nain, and the demon-possessed man from Gerasa are all on the verge of some death (political, social, biological) that is kept at bay though a restitution of the political. Luke insists that Jesus is the savior and redeemer and, almost as an under-text, that theological salvation rests on political relations. The Starbucks incident shows that the political is always on the verge of collapsing with fatal consequences for those subjects who occupy the public domain. Similarly, examples from the Gospels show, to different degrees, that the networks that keep us together, that shape who we are as subjects, are tenuous and it is through the thin veil of relationships that death does not rip who we are apart.