
Toward a More Embodied Liberation: Theologically Integrating Racial Justice, Size Liberation, and Transgender Liberation

River Cook Needham

PhD Student

The Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago

Introduction

Often, movements for embodied justice and liberation, even theological movements, fail to account for bodies containing multiple marginalizations. This article uses transgender justice movements and fat liberation movements as guidestones. Through these guidestones, it looks at how these two embodied liberation movements have and have not engaged with each other and with movements for racial justice. Thinking critically with sociological and theological texts points out ways God's reign has not yet come on earth. Further, this analysis offers ways to bring about God's kingdom¹ through intentional racial justice, body justice, and trans justice work.

The intersectional embodied realities of human experience point out places where humans can grow toward God's reign. God's image in humankind provides a starting point of God's reign as a reality that humans can achieve. This paper argues that only through integrating racial justice work into the extant work on size or fat liberation and transgender liberation can embodiment theology be liberatory for all of God's people.

The image of God in process thought

In some explorations of systematic theology worldwide, the concept of *imago dei* opens conversations about Christian anthropology. Process thought offers a different explanation. Although never using the phrase "image of God," Mesle offers the following description of human existence:

You, after all, are part of everything that exists. As distinctively wonderful as you are, you are not totally unique or isolated from all the rest. You are an example of how the whole world is because you are part of the world, interwoven with everything that is, a thread in the fabric of the same system of natural laws and interconnecting causes as everything else.²

1. "Kindom" provides a less patriarchal term for the reign of God where all humans are family together.

2. C. Robert Mesle, *Process-Relational Philosophy: An Introduction to Alfred North Whitehead*, Kindle (West Conshohocken, Pennsylvania:

God's image in humankind provides a starting point of God's reign as a reality that humans can achieve. This paper argues that only through integrating racial justice work into the extant work on size or fat liberation and transgender liberation can embodiment theology be liberatory for all of God's people.

This particular understanding of human existence flies in the face of Descartes' mind-body dichotomy, which preserves the immortality of the soul and perhaps makes death seem somewhat less fearful at the cost of coherent, loving relationships with our bodies. Only in a psychosomatic unity can humans exist with kindness toward themselves as much as they have kindness toward others. Catherine Keller writes:

The core doctrine of Christianity, the incarnation, celebrates the embodiment of God in the world.[...] The fluidity of an emergent universe is the process of a becoming world. For a theology of becoming/genesis matter matters to the spirit. Spirit matters: it takes on flesh. It is not just a matter of the single incarnation, but of an enfleshment always and everywhere taking place, and always differently.³

Womanist process theologian Monica Coleman amplifies this point by stating "Womanist theology is known for its analysis of

Templeton Foundation Press, 2008), 20.

3. Catherine Keller, *On the Mystery: Discerning Divinity in Process*, Kindle (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 52.

religion and society in light of the triple oppression of racism, sexism, and classism that characterizes the experience of many black women.⁴ People experience racism, sexism, and classism in their bodies, and they are felt most acutely by black women. Intersectionality, a concept developed by black women to explain how racism and sexism overlap and multiply oppression in their specific experience, has expanded from the intersections of racism, sexism, and class to include sexual orientation, gender identity, and disability. However, womanist theologians' focus on God's image in each human person provides this paper's theological anchor.

Intersectionality and embodiment

This paper will focus on fat and transgender liberation, particularly as distinct from queer and feminist liberation. After developing these thoughts, this paper will place them in dialogue with each other and then with racial justice to create a more intersectional, liberating theological framework for embodied theologies.

Fat liberation developed from political lesbianism and lesbian separatism. It became its own movement in the United States with the National Association for the Advancement of Fat Acceptance in 1969 and the Fat Liberation Manifesto in 1973.⁵ More recent movements include the Health at Every Size (HAES) movement, NoLose, and the emergence of Fat Studies as an area of critical discourse.

One of the core arguments of fat liberation is that weight is not a fundamentally changeable characteristic. That is, one might gain or lose a few pounds, but when left alone, optimum human flourishing at a "set point" can exist. Said another way, intentional weight loss does not have empirical evidence supporting it, and after consulting and evaluating research, intentional weight loss becomes an untenable position to argue. According to Gaesser, research dating back to the late 1950s indicates that dieting and intentional weight loss has a 90-95% failure rate. When evaluating the National Weight Control Registry, Gaesser further asserts that to obtain a representative sample of those attempting intentional weight loss in the United States would take another 40,000 years.⁶

Transgender liberation emerged in recent years as a subset of queer theology focusing on gender. The heterosexual matrix holds that the designation of a binary sex designation at birth leads to the assumption that the assigned sex develops into a corresponding adult and experiences sexual attraction to the so-called opposite gender. This framework creates and reinforces dyadic,⁷ cisgender heterosexuality as the norm for society.⁸ Transgender liberation

Theologically, transgender liberation means that all humans, made in God's image, are worthy of dignity and respect—even, and perhaps significantly, those bodies that society discards because they fall outside of the heterosexual matrix.

destabilizes the second of these assumptions. The "Transfeminist Manifesto" reads:

[I]t is our belief that each individual has the right to define his or her own identity and to expect society to respect it. This also includes the right to express our gender without fear of discrimination or violence.⁹

Theologically, transgender liberation means that all humans, made in God's image, are worthy of dignity and respect—even, and perhaps significantly, those bodies that society discards because they fall outside of the heterosexual matrix.

Embodied theology that takes seriously God's preferential option for the oppressed must engage with transgender liberation and size liberation to engage the fullness of embodied realities in the world. The intersectional analysis looks at both of these theological lenses and notices that they are lacking.

Complicating the conversation with process thought

Process theology holds that God, humankind, animals, plants, earth, and all beings are always giving and taking of persuasion and interaction that is continuously becoming. Catherine Keller said this another way,

Process [...] means becoming: it signifies the intuition that the universe itself is not most fundamentally a static being or the product of a static being—but an immeasurable becoming. Indeed the word genesis in Greek means "becoming." The God of a universe in process may in powerful ways turn out to be a God in process: that is, in open-ended interactivity with each of the gazillions of us creatures. For the divine process, if we can imagine it at all, is infinite and therefore inexhaustible.¹⁰

Columbia University Press, 2006), 1725–2352.

9. Emi Koyama, "The Transfeminist Manifesto," in *Catching A Wave: Reclaiming Feminism for the 21st Century* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2003), 245.

10. Keller, *On the Mystery*, sec. 157.

4. Monica A. Coleman, *Making a Way Out of No Way*, Kindle (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), sec. 181.

5. Judy Freespirit and Aldebaran, "Fat Liberation Manifesto," *Off Our Backs* 9, no. 4 (April 1979): 18.

6. Glenn Gaesser, "Is 'Permanent Weight Loss' an Oxymoron?" in *The Fat Studies Reader*, Kindle (New York City and London: New York University Press, 2008), 37–41.

7. That is, a relationship composed of two individuals.

8. Ken Stone, "The Garden of Eden and the Heterosexual Contract," in *Bodily Citations: Religion and Judith Butler*, Kindle, Gender, Theory and Religion (New York, Chichester, West Sussex:

When placed in dialogue with liberation theology, a Process Liberation theology seeks out ways to bring about liberation for those marginalized and oppressed. In her chapter on messing up, Ijeoma Oluo writes:

The question is: do you want to look like a better person, or do you want to be a better person? Because those who just want to look like a better person will have great difficulty with the introspection necessary to actually be a better person. In order to do better we must be willing to hold our darkness to the light, we must be willing to shatter our own veneer of “goodness.”¹¹

Process theology particularly invites humans, focused on those who benefit from privilege and oppress others, into being better. Process theology, with the persuasive power of God, invites humans into a more liberating reality—for people to name and claim their points of privilege and oppression and work to dismantle systems of privilege and oppression.¹² Continuing to become better even when the risk is uncomfortable, or when someone gives the gift of saying you did something harmful, becomes more critical.

Complicating the conversation with inter-movement dialogue

Placing these movements in conversation leads to the beginnings of intersectional analysis. Specifically, engaging fat and transgender liberation points to specific ways that fat transgender people experience oppression and how those oppressions make their ways known. According to “The Transfeminist Manifesto,” the oppression that trans women face often exists tied up in the patriarchal norms and expectations of the world.¹³ Similarly, the fat person’s social expectations that fat is bad and thin is good reify the subjected state of fatness. The “Fat Liberation Manifesto” reads: “4. W[e] demand equal rights for fat people in all aspects of life, as promised in the Constitution of the United States. We demand equal access to goods and services in the public domain, and an end to discrimination against us in the areas of employment, education, public facilities, and health services.”¹⁴ These manifestos speak of how conformity is required and expected, and that society should celebrate nonconformity.

When placed together, fat and transgender liberation were discussed by Vade and Solovay in their article *No Apology: Shared Struggles in Fat and Transgender Law*. They wrote about two cases involving white fat and white transgender people. One of the defendants was proud of being fat and took pride in her body. The other was apologetic about his fat and won a settlement of over one million dollars. Fat people could only be free of discrimination if they seek thinness and repudiate fatness. When looking at

Placing these movements in conversation leads to the beginnings of intersectional analysis. Specifically, engaging fat and transgender liberation points to specific ways that fat transgender people experience oppression and how those oppressions make their ways known.

ways to protect fat people from anti-fat discrimination, there are often very few options: using disability law, using geographically limited fat-specific statutes, or relying on case law. These same options emerge when dealing with anti-transgender bias. These two movements inform each other because they must follow the same kinds of legal maneuvering to attempt similar outcomes in the United States legal system. Even as they dialogue, this article does not even begin to approximate an intersectional analysis because there is no engagement of oppressions’ overlapping nature.¹⁵ Even in the “Fat Liberation Manifesto,” other oppressions are listed as parallel and allied rather than intersecting. That said, the “Fat Liberation Manifesto” predated the coining of the words “womanist” or “intersectionality” by a decade.¹⁶

When viewed through racial justice, fat liberation looks very white at the academic level. The theological works found are all by white people and those whose first language is English. In contrast, the author of the “Transfeminist Manifesto” describes herself as “[...]a multi-issue social justice activist and writer synthesizing feminist, Asian, survivor, dyke, queer, sex worker, intersex, genderqueer, and crip politics, as these factors, while not a complete descriptor of who she is, all impacted her life.”¹⁷ In a later response, she acknowledges a lack of intersectional analysis, focusing only on how oppression and discrimination against transgender people, particularly transfeminine people, intersect and ignoring how class, race, and other social locations interact with each other too. These are all essential elements of understanding the intersectional ways that oppressions interlock and hold each other down.¹⁸

11. Ijeoma Oluo, *So You Want to Talk About Race*, First, Kindle (New York: Seal Press, 2018), 219.

12. Keller, *On the Mystery*, 73.

13. Koyama, “Transfeminist Manifesto,” 245.

14. Freespirit and Aldebaran, “Fat Liberation Manifesto.”

15. Dylan Vade and Sondra Solovay, “No Apology: Shared Struggles in Fat and Transgender Law,” in *The Fat Studies Reader*, Kindle (New York City and London: New York University Press, 2008), 167–175.

16. Freespirit and Aldebaran, “Fat Liberation Manifesto.”

17. Koyama, Emi, “Eminism.Org FAQ: Basic Information,” Personal Blog, Eminism.org, February 20, 2020, <https://eminism.org/faq/basic.html>.

18. Koyama, “Transfeminist Manifesto,” 258.

Engaging racial justice

In the book *Fat Shame: Stigma and the Fat Body in American Culture*, Amy Farrell argues that body size became a racialized and distinguishing feature during the middle of the nineteenth century.¹⁹ From these earliest days of the current anti-fat medical establishment, society tied body weight with distance from “civilized” whiteness; that is—civilization decreased as body size increased. For black people and other people of color, body size justified white supremacy in denigrating weight gain as a lack of self-control and thus of “civilization.”²⁰

Transgender work with racial justice often focuses on how race intersects with gender identity oppression. For example, the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey engaged with racial justice by doing racial breakout reports. The specific ways that race and transgender status interact, multiply, and create other oppressions—such as reliance on sex work for economic security and other underground economies.²¹

Fat and Transgender liberation is inherently tied with racism, and specifically anti-blackness. As Paul wrote, “For freedom, Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.”²² Similarly, the Combahee River Collective Statement reads:

[i]f Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression.²³ Until and unless the tripartite system of racism, sexism, and anti-queer-oppression²⁴ has been dismantled, Black women, and thus humankind, are not fully free.

Looking at the resources published by fat theologians can be liberating. J. Nicole Morgan writes: “The story of Exodus tells us that God is on the side of the oppressed and desires that they be free from bondage and the oppressive rule of others.”²⁵ For some:

[...]the bondage is a fat body, and the promised land is

19. Amy Erdman Farrell, *Fat Shame: Stigma and the Fat Body in American Culture*, Kindle (New York City and London: New York University Press, 2011), 57–60.

20. Farrell, *Fat Shame*, 67–69.

21. James S. E. et al., “The Report of the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey” (National Center for Transgender Equality, December 7, 2016), [, issued: {“date-parts”: \[“2016”, 12, 7\]\]}, schema: “https://github.com/citation-style-language/schema/raw/master/csl-citation.json”](http://www.transequality.org/sites/default/files/docs/USTS-Full-Report-FINAL.PDF.12,7)

22. Galatians 5:1.

23. Combahee River Collective, “The Combahee River Collective Statement,” 1977, <http://historyisaweapon.com/defcon1/combrivercoll.html>.

24. This paper uses “anti-queer-oppression” instead of “homophobia” to be inclusive of the ways that transgender people experience anti-queer oppression while recognizing that transgender people can be straight.

25. J. Nicole Morgan, *Fat and Faithful: Learning to Love Our Bodies, Our Neighbors, and Ourselves*, Kindle (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2018), 144.

Theology, fatphobia, transphobia, racism; each demands a theological response. They demand embodied theological responses, and they demand liberation.

thinness. The real bondage here is the fear of and shame about our bodies instilled in us by a society that profits from this fear and shame. When the fear and shame go uncritiqued within the church and the church signs on to promoting a body ideal, then the church becomes complicit and makes a mockery of the liberating message of Jesus by adding religious weight to the cultural message of shame.²⁶

Theologically, by participating in fat oppression and thin privilege, the church participates in sin. In these same ways, the church participates in racism and white supremacy and participates in social sins.

Although Isherwood ignores the realities of fat men and ties fatness and fat liberation intricately with misogyny and sexism, she writes powerfully:

Fat is indeed, as Orbach says, a ‘screw you’ to the world of prescribed social roles and it seems to me that the Fat Jesus calls us all to obscenely declare ‘screw you’ to the myriad manifestations of patriarchal conformity that enslave us and narrow the glory of our abundant life and our liberative praxis.²⁷

An individual or collective can resist and reject social sins like thinness by refusing to conform to society’s wants and needs. Likewise, one can analyze thinness intersectionally and tie it to misogyny and antiblackness.

Until people who benefit from systems of oppression work to dismantle them, they are prevented from fully experiencing the reign of God. Ijeoma Oluo writes:

If you are white, remember that White Supremacy is a system you benefit from and that your privilege has helped to uphold. Your efforts to dismantle White Supremacy are expected of decent people who believe in justice.²⁸

As a person of faith who believes in an embodied reality and in a relational means of being and becoming the world, talking and acting about race is essential. Keller says, “[theology] takes material form in our embodied, terribly touchable, existence—and

26. Morgan, *Fat and Faithful*, 144.

27. Lisa Isherwood, *The Fat Jesus: Christianity and Body Image*, Kindle (New York: Seabury Books, 2008), sec. 2403.

28. Oluo, *So You Want to Talk About Race*, 210.

demands a theological response.”²⁹ Theology, fatphobia, transphobia, racism; each demands a theological response. They demand embodied theological responses, and they demand liberation.

Process theology offers a resource, particularly for white people, to modulate risk tolerance in intersectional anti-oppression work. To be clear: Process theology as a means of encouraging risk-taking and modulating discomfort for white people neither provides an excuse for avoidance nor an opportunity to push some aspirational action off into some as of yet unknown future. Process theology invites humans into relationality with themselves, the universe, God, and each other. Suchocki writes:

Process thinking holds that God is the most relational reality of all. If God relates to all the world, then human choices to damage others—be it humans, animals, or the environment—are felt by God. God feels everything that happens in just the way that it happens—God feels victims and violators.³⁰

God is present in the harm that oppression causes, and God is harmed by that oppression. Process theology, as with liberation theology, holds God’s immanence close while also holding human responsibility close as well.

Process theology offers a framework for aspiring antiracist white people. This framework allows them to engage in and continue to make antiracist stands, statements, and actions to fulfill the church’s responsibility to society. As white people engaging in the important, embodied, intersectional liberation work, it is essential to note how whiteness as a concept has created the construct of race and enforces its supremacy upon society’s whole. For white people focusing on how they participate in whiteness and thinness and transphobic systems, interrupting that participation begins our work to destabilize and dismantle white supremacy and all the systems that rely upon it to keep people oppressed. Until society dismantles the whole system at once, dismantling will not be successful. Until white people engage with whiteness and work on bringing healing to it, the whole of society cannot heal. Whiteness is an illness. Healing is not possible until it stops destroying.

The system of race underpins the systems of fat oppression and cissexism. Only when these movements engage in intersectional analysis, response, and praxis can the entire system get dismantled. White people have a role in dismantling racism, fatphobia, and cissexism, as they have created these social systems. Moreover, the church has a responsibility as the bearer of Christian freedom to engage with social ills and to dismantle these social ills so that all may be free.

Taking the first step, making the first choice, doing something, no matter how faltering or problematic, opens the door to new

The church has a responsibility as the bearer of Christian freedom to engage with social ills and to dismantle these social ills so that all may be free.

ways of being. This is the core of Process theology and its message of relationality and becoming—there are always new options and new ways of being open. God’s persuasive power toward the liberation of the oppressed pulls humanity toward new, freer ways of being with each other and with God.

Finally, Liberation. The goal of all of this work is freedom from intersectional oppression, specifically racism, fatphobia, and transphobia. A world where body size does not correlate to the availability of healthcare. A world where cisgender status is not assumed or expected: where humans have the right to gender self-determination. A world free of subjugation and oppression for people of color.

29. Keller, *On the Mystery: Discerning Divinity in Process*, 12.

30. Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, “What Is Process Theology: A Conversation with Marjorie” (Process & Faith, 2003), 12, <https://processandfaith.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/what-is-process-theology.pdf>.