

EMBODIMENT, TRAUMA, AND ILLNESS – INTEREST GROUP

- Topic: Embodiment, Trauma, and Illness
 Conveners: Jessica Coblentz, Saint Mary's College (Notre Dame, Indiana)
 Elizabeth Antus, Georgetown University
 Moderator: Victoria Basug Slabinski, University of Virginia
 Presenter: Emma McDonald Kennedy, Villanova University
 Ashley Theuring, Xavier University
 Respondent: Flora x. Tang, University of Notre Dame

The papers featured in the inaugural session for the interest group utilized interview-based research methods to examine and theologize the communal and structural dimensions of trauma and suffering. Emma McDonald Kennedy's "Trauma and Reproductive Loss in Fertility Clinics Contexts: How Social Forces Frame Reproductive Futures" focused on Catholic women's decision-making about preimplantation genetic testing for aneuploidy (PGT-A). From Kennedy's interviews with women experiencing infertility, she learned how fertility clinics frequently framed PGT-A as a means of avoiding, first, the suffering and trauma that results from experiences of reproductive loss and, second, experiences of having a child with a disability. According to Kennedy, theological and ethical examinations of PGT-A should appreciate how the loss of a developing embryo or fetus can be a source of suffering, even trauma, that such technologies may help to mitigate while also interrogating how clinical narratives present PGT-A as a "solution" to the "problem" of giving birth to a disabled child. The latter assumption reflects structural and cultural biases against disabled embodiment and experience, such as the wrongful belief that disabilities, including conditions such as down syndrome, always occasion profound and unbearable suffering for children and parents. Kennedy proposed trauma-informed healthcare policies to better support people during long, often challenging, infertility journeys that frequently involve suffering and trauma. She also called for broader cultural and structural reforms that decouple disability from suffering and instead envision disabilities as expressions of the finitude and contingency that define all human life.

Ashley Theuring's "Clergy Sexual Abuse: Reimagining Forgiveness in a Compromised Church" drew from interviews with three demographics—survivors of clergy sexual abuse, diocesan employees, and Catholic university students—to illuminate the collective effects of clergy sexual abuse. Theuring's interviews revealed how the church's position as both an agent of harm and a source of salvation engendered "moral confusion" among the faithful, resulting in moral injury to survivors and other church members. Prevailing individualist conceptions of sin and forgiveness contributed to this moral injury, prompting reconsiderations of these theological categories. The moral injury incurred by church members challenges its prevailing focus on personal sin, which fails to address the social and systemic complexities of rape culture and the pervasiveness of sexual abuse. Likewise, individualistic approaches to forgiveness burden survivors with the expectation that they owe forgiveness to their abusers regardless of other factors such as transparency, confession, and accountability on the part of the wider community. In addition to

critiquing these notions of sin and forgiveness, Theuring followed trauma theorist Judith Herman in identifying collective practices of acknowledgment, apology, and accountability as avenues for reducing the trauma and moral injury experienced by the church community.

Flora x. Tang responded to these papers by posing questions to their respective arguments and by highlighting some of their overlapping themes, especially as they pertain to the interest group's focus on embodiment, trauma, and illness. Tang connected Pope Francis's critiques of techno-futurism in *Fratelli Tutti* and *Laudato Si'* to Kennedy's warnings against the false promise that PGT-A can eradicate reproductive suffering altogether. How do we appreciate the potential moral good of alleviating women's suffering through reproductive technologies while rejecting techno-futurism's denial of human finitude? And relatedly, how do we mitigate the suffering of infertility and reproductive loss while also developing a post-traumatic theology that attends to the unavoidable persistence of some forms of this suffering? Responding to Theuring, Tang suggested the concept of "hermeneutical injustice" as another apt label for the "moral confusion" that arose for interviewees when the evils of sexual abuse came into tension with inherited conceptions of salvation, sin, and forgiveness. In view of Theuring's focus on the communal dimensions of trauma, Tang invited her to respond to those who argue that discussions of a communally "traumatized church" elides how Christians are differently traumatized and may gloss over the moral failure of those church members who are apathetic toward clergy sexual abuse and/or lack empathy for survivors. Concluding with questions pertaining to both papers, Tang asked about how theologians should engage the language of "trauma" in view of concerns about overly broadened uses of this language in both the academy and popular culture. Noting how both papers link healing and justice, she also invited further clarification of the overlap and differentiation of these terms and processes. This response prompted replies from our presenters and initiated lively discussion among those present.

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