• *CTSA Proceedings* 78 (2024): 53–57 •

A RESPONSE TO VINCENT J. MILLER'S "SEEKING SOCIAL SALVATION IN A WORLD MADE FRICTIONLESS: COMMUNION, EXTRACTIVISM AND INTEGRAL ECOLOGY"

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HAUNTED BY FRICTIONLESSNESS: A THEOLOGICAL IMAGINATION MARKED BY FRICTION

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While reading Vince's work and sitting with it for the past month, I have found myself haunted by it. The idea of "salvation on the battleground, a place of no friction," keeps returning to me, asking the question of what exactly is friction?

Friction.

That very word says so much and so little. In this response, I would like to tug on the string of friction, and enter into some of the ways that friction can illuminate or disrupt our theological imaginations. Guided by a feminist methodology, I will look to a few specific contexts.

PART 1: FRICTION AND PLACE

We are gathering this week in Baltimore. Baltimore is a city which bears the marks of racism, both historical and contemporary expressions. This week, in particular, the overwhelming sounds of military jets in apparent acts of celebration fill our ears, as thousands of onlookers fill the harbor for Fleet Week. What is friction in a place like Baltimore?

I think of the water surrounding us. I am haunted by the way the water was turned into a site of unbelievable friction on the morning of March 26, 2024 when the Dali freighter crashed into the Francis Scott Key bridge.

Yes, this is literal friction, a crash of two entities—a ship and a bridge—that are intimately connected yet should never touch in such a way as they did on that early morning. This literal connection first and foremost resulted in the loss of lives of six men working in construction on the bridge—Carlos Hernández, Miguel Luna, Maynor Yassir Suazo Sandoval, Jose Mynor Lopez, Dorlian Castillo Cabrera, Alejandro Hernandez Fuentes—as well as the slowing down of the shipment economy, revealing

once again the global impact of local tragedies. This horrible incident may have commanded international attention for a few hours, yet the response is still ongoing. Fifty thousand tons of debris filled the Patapsco River, an ecological impact that will extend for generations to come.

Vince reminds us that we must hold friction in tension with extraction, a "confusing two-step." Extraction takes new meaning when looking at the ways that steel from the ship and bridge were intertwined, extracted only through a series of controlled explosions on May 13, 2024.

Remaining on board during these explosions were twenty-one crew members, who could not leave the Dali due to a complex entanglement of maritime laws and immigration systems. These twenty-one men from India and Sri Lanka remained on the ship, unable to set foot on dry land, and forced to stay at the scene of trauma and destruction, bound in close proximity to the explosions—explosions that were intended to free them—but only further revealing the remnant of extraction even when immediate pressure is relieved. Yes, steel was extracted, but so too was any semblance of solidarity or honoring the dignity of these men.

This month, a final section of the bridge wreckage was removed, and just this past Monday, June 10, the shipping channel was reopened entirely. This week, the Baltimore Harbor returned to a more frictionless flow of water, enabling the friction of international trade and awaiting the construction of a new bridge, likely to be built and maintained by immigrants who will risk their lives.

An economic analysis might look at the impact on global trade due to this catastrophe, and surely there were many. I reach beyond this material analysis alone. How might a theological project, a consideration of social salvation, respond to friction and extraction understood in this setting? How does our discussion of social salvation attend to the realities that the lives lost in this bridge crash were the lives of immigrants, relegated to jobs that the privileged deem too risky? Vince's plenary address calls us to think of how friction can hold us in relationship and where frictionlessness incorrectly absolves us from responsibility.

PART 2: THE FALSE PROMISE OF FRICTIONLESSNESS

If the Francis Scott Key bridge is an account of friction, I would like to look now at frictionlessness. I continue to be haunted by the images that Vince shared: of an anti-bussing riot, of a memorial for John Crawford III outside of a store, with customers going in and out, undisturbed in their shopping.

An excess of friction can be destructive, to be sure, but an absence of friction can characterize a world in which we view others as means to an end, merely a step in a supply chain. Pure frictionlessness is a myth. Our preference for a lack of friction still causes friction; it displaces friction to a different area, often felt more by those who are historically and intentionally marginalized. Yet frictionless can be a helpful framework, especially theologically, for it looks to where and how relationships, tensions, stresses, and solidarity are displaced, minimized, or transformed.

To me, frictionlessness is illustrated by the COVID-19 pandemic. I remember during 2020, being isolated in my home with a newborn baby, perplexed by the ever-growing numbers of deaths. Communities, homes, families, churches, webs of

relationships forever altered. And the magnitude of this loss kept haunting me. How would we collectively mourn this massive loss of life?

The answer? *We didn't.*

As a society, there was no collective mourning. Any attempts were isolated moments or co-opted by a polarized political system. On the eve of President Biden's 2021 inauguration, the soon-to-be First and Second Families held a vigil on the empty Washington Mall by lighting four hundred lights in honor of the 400,000 deaths in the United States at that point.[1] This was a moving experience for me, but watching four people hold a vigil on my television hardly amounted to collective mourning. It was a poignant moment, but poignant moments consumed on televisions exemplifies frictionlessness, minimizing the thickness of relationships in favor of extraction.

The frictionlessness with which the COVID pandemic was addressed rang even more pronounced to me during the class of 2024's university commencement activities at Georgetown University. As I sat in my academic regalia on a stage while literally rubbing shoulders with people I just met in the humid DC air— a far cry from the social distancing of the past several years— I was struck by how this global health pandemic was discussed. Speakers mourned their missed high school proms and graduation ceremonies four years earlier. They recounted their first year of studies on Zoom, often occurring from homes across the country. What was missing was a collective mourning. Again, we failed to look at the friction, preferring instead the distance of frictionlessness. But whether we admit this or not, the realities of lives lost or permanently altered continue to impact us, perhaps in a way that hardens us more than anything else. What can we say about social salvation when the absence of rites of passage are mourned more than the lives lost?

Our collective preference for frictionlessness continues with the untold suffering in Gaza. Our academic and ecclesial systems prefer business as usual, undisturbed action that is not impacted by the horrors across the world, to say nothing of the violence in our local communities.

We need only look at college campuses and students' 2024 springtime activism to glimpse what happens when people or systems that are thought to be frictionless choose friction instead, when we do not attend to "the thickness of relationships and encounter," to use Vince's phrase.

Now, frictionlessness seems to be a far cry from the police response to student occupation of campuses, which images of police in riot gear storming buildings at Columbia University depict.[2] Yet I think that frictionlessness can be a framework for how many of our systems prefer a certain type of relationship or exchange, and resort to extremes, such as violence, when those relationships take different forms or present a type of friction that feels undesirable to those in power.

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[1] Alana Wise, "'We Must Remember': Biden, Harris Memorialize COVID-19 Victims," *NPR*, January 19, 2021, sec. Biden Transition Updates, https://www.npr.org/sections/biden-transition-updates/2021/01/19/958548751/we-must-remember-biden-harris-memorialize-covid-19-victims.

[2] Eryn Davis et al., "Police Clear Building at Columbia and Arrest Dozens of Protesters," *The New York Times*, April 30, 2024, sec. New York, https://www.nytimes.com/live/2024/05/01/nyregion/columbia-university-protests.

During Georgetown University's commencement events, I attended a ceremony for Catholic student leaders. One by one, Catholic students were called up to take a picture with the university president and director of campus ministry. This proceeded in a business-as usual-format, with graduates and proud families politely applauding in an orderly fashion. A standard frictionless affair, complete with mimosas. That is, until Harper Cartwright was called up. Harper, respectfully, read the following statement:

> I cannot sit here and celebrate our Catholic faith without feeling like that faith forces us to be horrified and confront what is unfolding in Palestine. We should be even more horrified that our tuition dollars are funding the bombs and tanks they have used to kill 15,000 children, to kill hospital patients, to kill students like us…. St Teresa of Avila says "Christ has no hands now but yours." And Georgetown's hands are dirty.

In the midst of a ceremony that felt frictionless, this graduate chose friction; she chose relationship.

The image of frictionlessness permeates our church, our universities, our lives; yet none of these things are truly frictionless. In fact, if we peel back even the tiniest of layers, we can see that where we presumed frictionlessness, friction reigns. Perhaps it is displaced, absolving a primary relationship in favor of a marginalized one. Yet displaced consequences are still felt, and our theology must attend to this reality.

PART 3: A THEOLOGICAL IMAGINATION OF FRICTION

Over the past month, I have been haunted by Vince's account of frictionlessness. Nothing is ever truly frictionless, but this imagery captures the ways that we turn relationships into a means to an end, relegating people and places into raw materials to aid in our consumption.

As I have been haunted by frictionlessness, I am reminded of a different kind of haunting. One of my favorite accounts of haunting and theology comes from Jessica Coblentz, who wrote,

> Sometimes, I imagine feminist scholar Mary Daly as a banshee who haunts the halls of the Boston College theology department where I study. Her groans echo in the classrooms where I took my first doctoral seminars; during my first semester of doctoral studies, I was the only woman in half of my systematics classes. She hovers in the corners of offices where well-meaning professors warned me that my interest in gender and sexuality could ostracize me on the job market.[3]

[3] Jessica Coblentz, "Ghosts in the Office: The Ecclesiological and Soteriological Implications of Stereotype Threat among Women in Catholic Theology," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 33, no. 1 (2017): 127.

This haunting is not a negative occurrence. Haunting can help make present that which is actively silenced or marginalized. Coblentz continues, concluding:

> In my daydreams, Mary Daly is my Angelous Novus, my angel of history. Amid a whirlwind of well-meaning anecdotes about Catholic women's progress in theology, she wails. Her dismay about the ongoing perils of patriarchy is a comforting presence among the other ghosts that haunt us: the demons that hover over our keyboards and follow us to class; the specters who whisper while we speak from podiums; those that fill our heads as we read and clasp our throats when our voices quiver.[4]

Who and what are we allowing ourselves to be haunted by? How will we let this impact our theological project? How will our theological imaginations be stretched, impacted, reoriented, or haunted by those we are in relationship with, or those whom we turn into a frictionless wasteland?

As Vince asked us, "Who is missing from our unity?" And, I would add, why are they missing, and what are we willing—or not willing—to do to upend the system toward their inclusion? What practices and theological approaches might deepen our unity to be a true unity? And how—crucially—might unity be approached not through a lens of colonialism, settler mentality, and extraction?

A unity that is marked by white supremacy culture,[5] patriarchy, or ableism, is not a true unity. Shallow expressions of such a unity harm the church. I fear that our ecclesial preferences for the "normal," for the frictionless, for the white, male, ableist standard masquerading as neutral[6] has relegated unity in our ecclesial imagination to a shallow trope.

In a church where ordination is limited by gender, despite subpar theological grounding; where parishes are segregated and the hierarchy is silent on issues of racism; where disabled people are looked to as infantile inspiration, based on deeply flawed redemptive suffering and ableist rhetoric;[7] where laws are being passed across the country that limit the freedoms of transgender people, yet our churches fail to respond, these questions are not abstract.

In a world where it is easier to feign frictionlessness, who are we going to allow ourselves to be haunted by? What demands will they make on us? And crucially—are we willing to listen and respond?

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[4] Coblentz, 135.

[5] Here, I am referencing Tema Okun's explanation of the system of white supremacy culture, as outlined at Tema Okun, "White Supremacy Culture," WHITE SUPREMACY CULTURE, accessed May 29, 2024, https://www.whitesupremacyculture.info/characteristics.html.

[6] For an in depth examination of the need to turn the theological subject, as well as the history of a specific type of subject masquerading as neutral, see: M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being*, second edition (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2023.

[7] For a fuller examination of ableism and justice in the church, see Amy Kenny, *My Body Is Not a Prayer Request: Disability Justice in the Church* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2022).