

Decoloniality and Liberating Hope at the Border: The Case of El Faro Border Church in Friendship Park, California, USA

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This paper is a practical theological inquiry into liturgical practice and popular visual art used in the trans-border ecclesial community known as the El Faro Border Church situated on the U.S.–Mexico border in California, whereby participants imagine and perform a decolonial counter-narrative, and resist false claims of the ‘imagined community’ known as the territorial nation-state, especially as imposed by life-diminishing border policies.

Introduction

Imagine that it is a typical Sunday morning in your life. After your usual routine, you head out to join your congregation for worship. After you have gotten seated and centered, you look over to the side and see something utterly confounding and incomprehensible—an eighteen-foot high fence, made of heavy steel mesh wire so closely knit you can barely make out images of fellow worshipers on the other side of it. As the service of worship proceeds—as you and the people read scripture, give testimony, preach, pray, meditate, move your bodies while singing, clap hands, lift up your arms, dwell on colorful visual images in the worship space, pass the peace, partake of bread and wine in communion—something mysterious and Divine happens that transfigures the space in a way that is completely different from, and runs counter to, the message and enactment of domination, division, and exclusion the looming fence is poised to deliver.

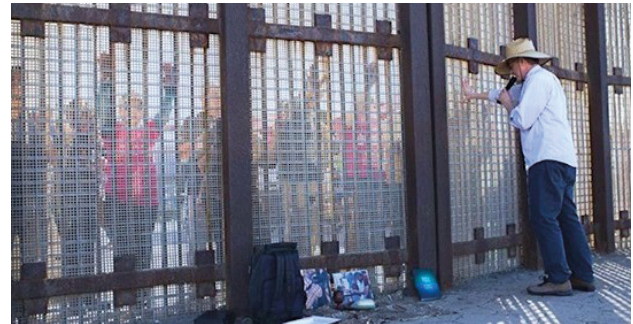
This is precisely the weekly experience of members of the El Faro Border Church, a binational ecclesial community which gathers early each Sunday afternoon for worship, fellowship, and outreach in the open-air plaza of Friendship Park, a half-acre area situated on the US-Mexico border between San

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Diego, California, and Tijuana, Mexico, immediately adjacent to the Atlantic Ocean. While there are multicultural, multiracial congregations across the U.S., including open-air street churches for persons experiencing homelessness, such as Church at the Square near my workplace in Dallas, Texas, what is unique and remarkable about this ecclesial community is that parallel border fences built and militarized by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) cut through the physical space of worship, dividing the worshiping community into a gathering of Christians: one group on the U.S. side, and another on the Mexico side.

The church’s beginnings trace back to June 1, 2008, when Reverend John Fanestil, a United Methodist pastor in San Diego, and Dr. Jaime Gates, Director of the Center for Justice and Reconciliation,





Point Loma Nazarene University in San Diego, led a cross-border prayer vigil and Love Feast at Friendship Park, with an ecumenical gathering on each side of the border fence (Gates 2010). This event evolved into a regular Sunday service of worship and communion. Today, several pastors on the U. S. side, including Rev. Fanestil, rotate the delivery of a homily and the leading of other parts of the liturgy. Liturgical and pastoral leadership is given on the Mexico side by a *capillan* (chaplain) appointed by the Iglesia Metodista de Mexico A. R. (IMMAR)—a position currently held by Guillermo Navarrete, who lives in Tijuana.

Going to the Other Side

Writers who explore goings-on in the El Faro Border Church mostly do so from the standpoint of participants on the U. S. side: persons who hold white privilege, male privilege, and geo-political privilege and power. I suggest that without immersing oneself in El Faro's ministry on the Mexico side, you cannot fully grasp the complexity and "messiness" of this community's life, especially given the diverse ways that racial, ethnic, and national identities intersect on each respective side—along with immigrant status, which may or may not afford freedom to cross back and forth.

Moreover, members of the El Faro community on respective sides of the border are affected in divergent ways by the historical legacy of colonialism, and occupy contradictory positionings vis a vis this history. Colonialism (direct control over one nation by another) has ended, but not *coloniality*—i. e. the enduring effects of colonialism, maintained by and through patterns of domination and subjugation in intersubjective relations between racial and ethnic groups; assignment of inferiority based on racial classification; knowledge production and criteria of

what does and does not count; self-images and aspirations; mechanisms of economic globalization; and much more. In a way, "we breathe coloniality all the time and every day," (Maldonado-Torres 2007, 243).

Because the lived experience of coloniality is different on each side of the border community, without immersion on both sides it is difficult to see the full scope of the inscrutable hurt and harm inflicted on brown migrant bodies and families ripped apart by sinful nationalistic-driven immigration policies and neocolonialist practices of the U. S. empire. This is especially the case given that many worshipers on the Tijuana side are deportees who now live in isolation not only from their family network back in the U. S. but also from family members living in scattered parts of Mexico or Central America. Every day, Tijuana receives scores of new deportees from the U. S.—and most of them end up jobless, penniless, homeless, hopeless, and often in the grip of addiction to substances used to narcotize and numb their pain.

We in the dominant church in North America can learn from the way in which members of the El Faro Border Church interact with geo-political realities of the border and the U. S. empire through the practices of their ecclesial and liturgical life: a bundle of actions, arts, artifacts, architecture, all in a gestalt of dynamic interaction, what Don Saliers calls a "performative matrix" (Saliers 2014, 4). In this work, I accept Salier's premise that worship itself is an art, similar to, yet distinct from other forms of art. Liturgy as a distinctive art, he suggests, "is best understood as the art of receiving God's future for the world—that is, an eschatological art" (Saliers 1994, 25). Thus, worship does not simply *use* art—it *is* art. All artistic effort in the service of worship, he suggests, is participatory in God's own creativity (Saliers 1994, 215).

Coming to Terms: The Performative Turn

This essay is influenced by notions undergirding the broad field of Performance Studies (PS), an approach that proffers a broad-spectrum interdisciplinary lens. PS scholars posit an underlying *performativity* to all actions and artifacts, whether verbal, written, or physical—and see all of social reality as constructed by ‘doings’—actions, behaviors, and events (Komitee, 2). Performance is construed as a “broad spectrum” or “continuum” of human actions, and PS scholars tend to agree that there is virtually no fixable limit to what is or is not ‘performance.’

Richard Schechner, one of the leading shapers of the PS field, notes that “artistic practice is a big part of the performance studies project” (Schechner 2013, 1). As he explains, “When texts, architecture, visual arts, or anything else are looked at, they are studied ‘as’ performances...that is, they are regarded as practices, events, and behaviors, not as ‘objects’ or ‘things’” (Schechner 2013, 2). At El Faro, the genres of visual art painted on the border fence can thus be seen as performances, as can the very fence (‘wall’) itself.

Further, Schechner says that “To treat any object, work or product ‘as’ performance—a painting, a novel, a shoe, or anything at all—means to investigate what the object does, how it *interacts* with other objects or beings, and how it *relates* to other objects or beings. Performances exist only as actions, interactions and relationships” (Schechner 2013, 30).

Because performances are basic building blocks that structure our reality, say PS scholars, we must work to understand how they function—that is, to explain what any given performance does, and how it is doing it. Among other questions, we can ask: “What circumstances helped create this performance? How is it structured? What relationships does it enable? What effect does it have in a society, and has that function changed over time?” (Komitee, 4). This essay addresses these basic queries.

The World in a Wafer: Worship, Eucharist, and Resistance

The El Faro Border Church is a microcosm of a global community on the border, gathered together through worship around the Lord’s Table. In a seminal article, “The World in a Wafer: A Geography of the Eucharist as Resistance to Globalization,” William Cavanaugh points out that while some groups

use the metaphor of the “global village” as a way to evoke sentiments of the world’s peoples being brought into communion with each other across borders—this image often actually operates to mask forms of division, domination, and exploitation produced through mechanisms of economic globalization (Cavanaugh 1999, 186). Globalization does different things to different peoples; “globalizing sovereignty” produces multiple inequalities and multiple exclusions (Fernandez 2011, 66). One major thing being produced is an underclass of people permanently confined to lives of marginality who, for the most part, are racially marked. “Marginals,” Iris Young contends, are left-overs that the dominant system has no use for; either they were of no economic use in the first place, or are no longer so (Young 2011, 59). They become disposable after being squeezed by the system. Take, for example, undocumented veterans ripped from their families and deported from the U. S., often for minor infractions.

Walter Wink uses the phrase “the Domination System” to critique a set of realities operating globally to produce “unjust economic relations, oppressive political relations, biased race relations, patriarchal gender relations, hierarchical power relations, and the use of violence to maintain them all” (Wink 1998, 39–40). Eleazar Fernandez (Fernandez 2011, 53) uses phrases such as “global hegemonic power” and “the network of Powers,” while Walter Mignolo employs the phrase “colonial matrix of power (CMP)” (Mignolo and Walsh 2018, 111) to refer to essentially the same nexus of realities. Along with these writers, I have argued that globalized neoliberal capitalism is but one among a host of interlocking, mutually reinforcing social imaginaries of our day—most particularly, white nationalism, imperialism, and militarism (handmaiden to multinational corporations)—that function to (mis)shape the moral and political imagination of U. S. citizens (including Christians), and to underwrite the American Empire and perpetuate coloniality (Johnson 2013, 108).

In a similar vein, James K. A. Smith talks about competing *liturgies*. “What I call liturgies are not just churchy, institutional religious things,” he says. “I’m broadening the term. Liturgies are love-shaping practices; they are communal social rhythms, routines, and rituals that we immerse ourselves in, that we give ourselves over to, that aren’t just something that we do, but they’re doing something to us. They’re forging in us an orientation to the good life.



They're inscribing in us a conception of what we think flourishing is. And because there are competing versions, so there are rival liturgies" (Smith and Summers 2018).

Daily, we are caught up and enmeshed in contradictory social imaginaries and liturgies, and thus as Smith asserts, "we need to tend to our liturgies in order to see what kind of political vision we are absorbing, and whether or not that is eroding or contributing to solidarity" (Smith and Summers 2018). Cavanaugh notes, "once the imaginations underlying modern political processes have been exposed as false theologies [false liturgies, false social imaginaries], we can begin to recover true theological imaginings of space and time around which to enact communities of solidarity and resistance" (Cavanaugh 2013, 4). To be in solidarity, as Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz explains, is not simply to have an inner disposition of sympathy for oppressed people. It is, rather, embodied participation in ongoing praxis toward liberation, in a context of relations and practices of mutuality and friendship with the oppressed--a process through which Christians appropriate and enact in concrete human history God's gratuitous gift of "kin-dom" (Isasi-Diaz 1996, 89).

Walter Mignolo, along with certain other Latin American decolonial thinkers, insists that exposing false social imaginaries which subjugate Third World migrants and racialized others exploited by the ongoing 'imperial/colonial matrix of power' is the work of decoloniality and border epistemology. Decolonial thinkers, Mignolo insists, must delink from dominant Western imaginaries and Eurocentric epistemologies, and become "epistemically disobedient," which is a call to knowing, thinking, doing, and being decolonially (Mignolo 2011, 277), and to "dwelling and thinking in the borders of local histories confronting global designs" (Mignolo 2011, 277), all of which, I suggest, is precisely what is

happening in the El Faro Border Church, as disclosed in *testimonios* I have gathered, and the way worshipers actively draw on dimensions of their liturgical life--their music, Eucharist, prayers, and art--to resist the false claims of the 'imagined community' known as the U. S. Empire, and other players in the global matrix of power.

As Cavanaugh posits, for Christians it is pre-eminent the Eucharist that resists and refutes the *mythos* of the nation-state in several ways, and that shapes and forms in worshipers what he calls a 'theopolitical imagination,' a term that helps us avoid splitting and compartmentalizing what is religious and theological from social, economic, and political spheres and concerns. To begin with, Cavanaugh says, the Eucharistic liturgy can be understood as a 'spatial story' that performs certain operations on places--in this case by God, with human cooperation--and that produces a different kind of space. "The preeminent 'spatial story,'" he suggests, "is that of the formation of the Body of Christ in the Eucharist." Just as eating and drinking together do not merely symbolize a family, he says, but help to constitute a family, so eating and drinking together at the Table transforms the partakers into a body with a public, theopolitical dimension (Cavanaugh 2013, 93).

For Cavanaugh, "the Eucharist does not simply tell the story of a united human race, but brings to light barriers where they actually exist" (Cavanaugh 1999, 193). Cavanaugh reminds us, for example, that the apostle Paul discovered the Corinthians were unworthily partaking of the Lord's Supper because the rich were humiliating the poor. Here we see that the Eucharist can be falsely or too facilely described as that which unites Christians around the globe while in fact many Christians live exploitatively off the hunger and hopelessness of others, as when Christians in the U. S. benefit from extracting cheap

labor from migrants, and from allowing the flow of goods across the border, but not the bodies of those whose labor produced those goods in the first place. Further, in that the Eucharist, normatively seen, creates a body and community in solidarity with poor people, widows, orphans, and immigrants, it implies a stance against indiscriminate deportation policies that produce virtual widows and orphans, and that immiserate people in poverty. In the U.S., too many Eucharistic celebrations are colonized by global sentimentality on the one hand, and by covert white nationalism on the other. When the inclusive Body of Christ is not properly practiced, Christ is betrayed, and the Eucharist performs as an eschatological sign of prophetic judgment on the celebrants.

The People's Art: The People's Practical Theology

In remaining sections, I explore one way, among various ways in which members of the El Faro community express their Eucharistic, theopolitical imagination and perform the Christian Story—namely, through images and murals painted along many miles of the border fence. These belong to a genre known as street art, which I call ‘the people’s art’ (liturgy itself is ‘the people’s art’) “that does not participate in ‘high’ or ‘institutionalized’ art of museums or galleries and their often-narrow construal of what counts as art” (O’Connell 2012, 74). In this respect, it is ‘epistemically disobedient’ and subversive-, pointing towards a theological aesthetics and practical theology done ‘from below,’ within the borderlands.

Through the lens of Performance Studies, we see that the border fence cutting through the middle of El Faro’s worship space is much more than an inert object getting in the way. Reece Jones contends that the construction of a physical barrier on a border simultaneously legitimizes and intensifies exclusionary practices of a nation-state—bringing the claim of territorial and other forms of difference into being. Once the boundary is marked and ‘the container’ of the state takes form, “the perception of difference between the two places becomes stronger” (Jones 2012, 174). By performing this, the state reifies authority in defining the limits of people who do and do not belong. “These perceived differences then fuel more passionate feelings of belonging to the in-group and distinction from the other on the

outside” (Jones 2012, 174). Border walls not only represent the organization of political, economic, and cultural space, they also shape identities. As Vallet notes, “The objective of an armored or fortified border is to cut off and exclude...It fuels the feeling that the *other* is a threat and that militarization, policing and walling are the panacea” (Vallet 2017). Thus, borders are not simply confined to an inert external and physical boundary; border walls become internalized as individual and collective identities, and as emotionally-laden values, including idolatrous forms of patriotism.

The border wall is one way the ‘imagined community’ known as the territorial nation-state, the U.S. Empire, performs its own distinctive liturgy—interlacing themes of ethnocentric and white nationalist idolatries, domination, exclusion, and hyper-individualism. The wall and its false liturgy operate on people pre-reflectively and viscerally to construct and reinforce myths and stereotypes of the racialized other, and to structure relations of domination, subjugation and exclusion. Under the guise of a narrative framework of border safety and security, it appeals to white nationalism and racism precisely in order to create, exclude, and exploit a pool of cheap labor for the benefit of U.S. corporations and citizens. It is a symbolic expression of a national narrative of economic and geo-political dominance, militarism, and cultural violence.

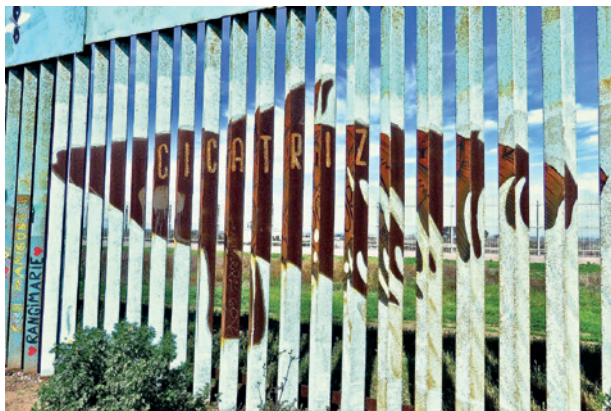
Similar to the two-fold task of the prophetic imagination set forth by Walter Brueggemann (Brueggemann 2001), the Eucharistic theopolitical imagination iterated by Cavanaugh engages the people in *criticizing* the ‘liturgy’ enacted by the border fence, and the dominant globalized culture of Empire, and in *energizing* an alternative community toward enacting a new future. Like practical theology, Eucharistic theopolitics must seek to render visible not only pain and suffering, but also Spirit-breathed hope and love, and creative resistance against violence and oppression. One way that members of the El Faro Border Church are enacting these two tasks is through their subversive use of the border fence as a vast canvas for art, expressive of a liturgical counter-narrative to what the wall and its liturgy propose.

Art as Visual Lament

In doing prophetic, theopolitical critique in worshipping communities where members are exploited

and subjugated in their daily lives, there must be a way for the people to name, expose, and voice the pain and suffering inflicted on them. The liturgy must provide people with a way not only to name but also to mourn, grieve, and weep together about their experience of loss, pain, and injustice. In other words, the people must be able to engage in the scriptural practice of *lament*. In this regard, various images on the border fence perform liturgically as *visual laments*.

For the people of El Faro, the image of la cicatriz laments, for example, the scar on the body politic and the body of Christ, and on individual bodies of migrants broken by the trauma of deportation, and the ensuing immiseration in poverty, homelessness, and a sense of abandonment. Walter Mignolo would describe la cicatriz as an image of the ‘racialized colonial wound’ (Mignolo 2005, 386). It is a visual outcry against U. S. immigration policies and practices that undercut the wellbeing and flourishing of Hispanics and Latino/as, and even maim and kill. “As our people constantly remind us,” says Miguel A. De La Torre, “this is not a border that separates the U. S. from Latin America; it is a bleeding scar caused by the Third World rubbing up against the empire” (De La Torre 2010, 120).



In her book *Lamentation and the Tears of the World*, biblical scholar Kathleen O’Connor captures the spiritual and theopolitical power of lament and its connection to justice-making. She holds that “laments announce aloud and publicly what is wrong right now. Laments create room within the individual and the community not only for grief and loss but also for seeing and naming injustice. Laments name the warping and fracturing of relationships—personal, political, domestic, ecclesial, national, and global. The point of lamenting is...to name injustice, hurt, and anger...When people live

in conditions that deprive them of dignity, of control of their bodies, of what they need to eat and clothe themselves, or of what they need to flourish in mind and spirit, they need to lament” (O’Connor 2002, 128).

As Maureen O’Connell suggests, outcries of lament and pain in a liturgical setting actually “are public expressions of profound faith, prophetic in context and content” (O’Connell 2012, 189). They call attention to the stark contrast between the way things are, and the way things could be, and should be. They are an embodied performance, she says, that give collective “eyes to see and to weep,” borrowing on the language of Paul Ricoeur (O’Connell 2012, 190). Walter Brueggemann argues that banning lament from the liturgy—as many North American congregations habitually do—does not square with reality, “and is finally a practice of denial, cover-up, and pretense, which sanctions social control” (Brueggemann 1986, 60). When lament is absent, he says, “justice questions cannot be asked and eventually become invisible and illegitimate” (Brueggemann 1986, 63). Theologically, lament makes an assertion about God: that God is available, and that God matters in, and cares about, every dimension of life.

Art as Resistance and Subversion

If O’Connell is right in her assertion that lamenting “is an important form of moral agency, particularly for people who have been oppressed or dehumanized by circumstances of injustice” (O’Connell 2012, 189), then resisting exploitation and all forms of oppression and injustice—and false liturgies that underwrite these—is likewise a form of such agency. Similarly, O’Conner asserts that “by urging truth-telling before the powerful, and providing language, form, and practice of defiance, Lamentation encourages resistance and promotes human agency” (O’Conner 2002, 131). Bruggemann calls these “tears-to-power” (O’Connell 2012, 339).

In the art on the border fence in El Faro, one of the most dramatic expressions of agency and resistance is, perhaps, the image of an upside-down U. S. flag, painted with crosses rather than stars—intended as a visual critique of death-dealing immigration and border patrol policies of the U. S. Empire. When the U. S. started militarizing the nearly 2,000-mile U.S.-Mexico border through deterrence projects, such as Operation Gatekeeper in San Diego, the of-

ficial strategy was to deliberately force undocumented migrants to risk their very lives in efforts to cross the border, by forcing them into the most remote, dangerous terrain of mountainous and desert regions of the four states forming the border. Out of economic desperation to feed, clothe, and house their families, and to flee from death-dealing drug cartels and gangs, migrants cross anyway. The treacherous journeys all too often end up with migrants dying in the desert from fatal dehydration, and from hypothermia or hyperthermia; or drowning in the Rio Grande River; suffocating in overcrowded cargo transports; losing limbs or losing their lives from mishaps in jumping on and off moving trains or falling off the back of insecure pickup trucks. Thousands of migrants have died on the U. S. side of the border, and there are makeshift memorials scattered across the desert. Research reveals a strong correlation between higher annual averages of deaths and heightened border patrol. The International Federation for Human Rights has ruled that these deaths constitute compelling evidence that the U.S. is violating human rights with death-dealing deterrence strategies (Bernard 2008).



In 2013, members of the Veterans Mural Project, an activist group of deported U. S. military veterans, worked together painting the image of the flag with the crosses not only to signal solidarity with migrants who died during efforts to cross the border, but also to protest the deportation of veterans who risked their lives serving in U. S. armed forces and were honorably discharged, but now face inexorable hardship after being separated from their families in the U. S., and exiled to a country they barely know. They themselves experience a form of death—loss of a sense of self, of purpose in life, and of self-esteem and human dignity. The Veterans Mural Project was founded by Amos Gregory, a disabled

U. S. Navy veteran and visual artist, in order to encourage the therapeutic power and healing benefits of art for veterans, especially in painting public murals.

Another image which El Faro members describe in testimonios as intensely meaningful to them is of community members sharing food and fellowship around a long table, symbolizing Eucharistic fellowship and solidarity. But the table has a barrier running down the middle. Yet, rather than a depiction of the barrier as militarized, broken lines depict a border made porous and permeable by Eucharistic fellowship, and the deep sense of *la familia* and *comunidad* created by communion around the Lord's Table. The image of the table where people celebrate community and diversity, and make sure that all have a seat and that all are fed, is an alternative to the societal pyramid of power and privilege where migrants, the poor, and racialized people are consigned to the lowest ranks and exploited for the benefit of elites at the top.



Collectively, the images that El Faro members paint on the border fence are part of a larger endeavor to create what is envisioned as the world's largest and longest outdoor mural, *Mural de la Hermandad*. The initiative is led by Enrique Chiu, a widely respected Mexican artist and community muralist. The goal is to paint some 600 miles of the border fence. To date, the mural project has engaged nearly 3,000 people, including university students, community activists, faith-based groups, and persons with family members separated by deportation. The images comprising the vast mural aim to communicate messages of solidarity and hope to people crossing the border by car or on foot; to register protest against the existing border, as well as a redundant wall proposed by the U. S. empire as an election campaign strategy.



Conclusion

Neither the visual artists, nor those who engage with their art, view the images and murals on the border fence as merely a way to add window dressing, or to make a hideous structure somehow look pretty. Rather, the art is intended to unmask, expose, and disrupt a dominant narrative that exploits and oppresses, and instead to depict the victims this false narrative creates, and the injustice and suffering it inflicts. Yet, in their communal endeavors, the artists communicate not only what they stand *against*, but also offer a positive vision of what they stand *for*. The art both critiques the way things are, and envisions and proposes the way things could be and should be—a truly just and equitable world where there is mutual, interdependent flourishing among creatures and the created order, where power and other resources are shared and not hoarded by elites, and where borders are porous, and diversity is seen as a divine gift.

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