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**Toward a Reimagined Theological Anthropology:  
Freeing the Excluded and Re-envisioning Scenes of Instruction**

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**Introduction**

Theological-anthropological imagination is trapped by narratives (and scripts) that reduce the Divine, and consequently humans, to tropes. In Catholic contexts, *imago Dei* is understood as a factual statement that *all* humans are made in the image and likeness of God. But what does this often-cited phrase actually mean? Is the phrase so overused—abused—that those speaking it unconsciously gloss over any possible contradictions or limitations inherent in *imago Dei*? For example, is the image of God more a mirror reflection of humanity’s desire to share in God’s power (and actually be God) than an actual un-distilled image of the Divine, that unknowable and totally incomprehensible mystery that is the subject of apophatic theology?<sup>1</sup> Or worse still, does the *imago Dei* as a term and concept contain a dark and tragic—and perhaps even evil—history of hierarchy, subjugation, and domination of those outside the classic *imago Dei* parameters? Again, what God is imagined in *imago Dei*, and by extension, which human beings (notwithstanding the “all” rhetorical qualification described above)?

This essay envisions the prospects of a theological anthropology free from the constraints of traditional and even contemporary *imago Dei* talk. Its starting point is not the scholastic theological narratives of Thomas Aquinas, or Rahner’s ruminations, but rather the prospects of a *theopoetics of anthropology*,<sup>2</sup> to begin imagining what could have been added to theological

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<sup>1</sup> Michelle Voss Roberts, *Body Parts: A Theological Anthropology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017), 22.

<sup>2</sup> This is an extension of diasporic-borderlands hermeneutics.

anthropology from those excluded from theological thinking and writing by virtue of their subhuman status in practice. In essence, this essay relies on an epistemology of the South to begin imagining what could have been.<sup>3</sup> Imagining how the excluded could have expanded notions of theological anthropology requires what M. Shawn Copeland calls a “solidarity ... in *anamnesis*—the intentional remembering of the dead, exploited, despised victims of history.”<sup>4</sup> For such prospective—or imagined—theological anthropology to develop, it should be grounded in the memories of those individuals and communities for whom the eschaton has come. If one accepts the premise that Jesus of Nazareth served primarily the excluded of his context (time and place),<sup>5</sup> then should not a theological anthropology have the excluded (including the exploited dead) as its starting point and as its objective? Copeland again reminds us, “We owe all that we have to our exploitation and enslavement, removal and extermination of the despised others.”<sup>6</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr also writes that “all human life is involved in the sin of seeking security at the expense of other life.”<sup>7</sup>

An anthropology grounded in the “despised others,” in what Frantz Fanon called the “wretched of the earth,” should be a fluid anthropology, composed of several fragmentary

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<sup>3</sup> See Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *The End of the Cognitive Empire: The Coming of Age of Epistemologies of the South* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 100.

<sup>5</sup> For more on this thesis, see John P. Meier’s classic five-volume series, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus* (New York: Yale University Press, 1991, 1994, 2001, 2009, 2016).

<sup>6</sup> Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 100.

<sup>7</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation*, vol. 1, *Human Nature* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1964), 169.

narratives—with interspersed silence—that speak to the profoundly uncertain positionality of peoples on the underside, or on the outskirts, of dominant economic, cultural, religious, historical, sexual, and social paradigms. These people can be in one place one minute and gone the next. An anthropology that speaks to this constant flux cannot ignore context and positionality, that is, the scenes of instruction and the characters who inhabit and create those scenes.

This essay first discusses the epistemology and methodology guiding this project: an epistemology of the South that takes seriously the body as a political site, and the decolonial perspective that will critically assess the dominant theological-anthropological scripts as contextualized and limited conceptions that cannot function separately from their exclusivist interpretation and application. The next section explores who the excluded are, both in the present and in the past, using the analogy of scenes of instruction and missing characters. Finally, the essay proposes the prospects of a theo-poetical anthropology that is ultimately complex and perhaps even intentionally silent on God and what it means to be “human,” and one that skirts around the obsession with the body as a site for a comprehensive theological anthropology—not as an apolitical stance, but as a deeply political form of epistemological and theological resistance.

### **Epistemology from the South (or Below) and Decolonial Suspicions**

In the introduction to *Indecent Theology*, Marcella Althaus-Reid asks: “Should a woman keep her pants on in the streets or not? Shall she remove them, say, at the moment of going to church, for a more intimate reminder of sexuality in relation to God?” She continues: “The lemon vendor sitting in the street may be able to feel her sex; her musky smell may be confused

with that of her basket of lemons, in a metaphor that brings together sexuality and economics.”<sup>8</sup> Bodies produce scents; bodies sense, smell, taste, and desire. Yet legal, economic, religious, and cultural systems—through their narratives or scripts—regulate bodies and ways of being a “body.” Indeed, Althaus-Reid reminds us that the imagery of the women lemon vendors without underwear conjures a complicated history of patriarchy, the *conquista*, and Christian moral systems imposed on indigenous populations through Christian Grand Narratives of decency and virtue.<sup>9</sup> In a similar vein, the almost unquestioned assumption (in the West) that women should shave their body hair (specifically their armpits) is also metaphorical for a matrix of political-social-cultural patriarchal narratives that shape actions and even aesthetic values.<sup>10</sup>

Theological anthropology (and theological) discourses fail to acknowledge the seemingly mundane (and natural) aspects of bodily existence. Rahner, for example, discusses seven theological “facts” in order to conclude that “the body is ... nothing other than the self-consummation of the spirit in space and time.” But he acknowledges that such self-consummation is an ambiguous process that takes place in real time.<sup>11</sup> His theological facts are broad and cosmic, starting from “the body is created by God,” to “the body is made out of the dust of the earth,” to “original sin is transmitted through procreation,” to “man is a unity made up

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<sup>8</sup> Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 1-2.

<sup>9</sup> Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, 12.

<sup>10</sup> Karin Lesnik-Oberstein argues that scholars fail to address the subject of women’s body hair because it is still perceived as taboo: “something not to be seen or mentioned; prohibited and circumscribed by rules of avoidance; surrounded by shame, disgust, and censure.” See the excellent anthology, *The Last Taboo: Women and Body Hair*, ed. Karin Lesnik-Oberstein (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2006).

<sup>11</sup> Karl Rahner, “The Body in the Order of Salvation,” *Theological Investigations* 17, trans. Margaret Kohl (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1981), 88.

of body and soul.” Yet Rahner, for instance, does not discuss how restrictions on women’s sexual desires or expressions mimic their exclusions in other realms, such as economic, academic, and political ones. Or, if the *imago Dei* is truly taken as a maxim, is it blasphemous to envision a God who menstruates and/or gives birth? It is as if theologians live in a realm where mundane bodily concerns and emotions are either too trivial or too taboo to consider.

This hesitancy to engage *en lo cotidiano*<sup>12</sup>—in the daily, seemingly trivial aspects of life of marginalized or excluded peoples—is the result of an epistemological outlook undergirding the western intellectual project broadly and the theological enterprise in particular. More specifically, a Eurocentric theological outlook tends to favor highly rational, abstract, systematic, and formulaic approaches to developing theological treaties that more resemble legal dicta than metaphysical speculations on things unseen and never fully understood.<sup>13</sup> Sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos argues that the “epistemologies of the North have great difficulty in embracing the body in all its emotional and affective density, without turning it into one more object of study.”<sup>14</sup> This points to another Western obsession, namely the urge to formulate answers to every conundrum—to the point where responses are often forced, like forcing puzzle pieces into incongruent voids. Cultural theorist Marcelo Diversi pleads with his readers: “Tell your Western-

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<sup>12</sup> Translated as “in the daily life” or “in the everyday.” Social ethicist Miguel A. De La Torre argues for an ethics *en lo cotidiano*, that is, an ethics attentive to the everyday lives and actions of marginal peoples and communities. Miguel A. De La Torre, *Latina/o Social Ethics: Moving Beyond Eurocentric Moral Thinking* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010), 70-72.

<sup>13</sup> De La Torre writes that a main critique by Latino/as “of the way Euroamericans do ethical analysis is that they tend to center the discourse on the abstract, if not the aesthetic.” De La Torre, *Latina/o Social Ethics*, 70.

<sup>14</sup> De Sousa Santos, *The End of the Cognitive Empire*, 88.

trained mind to stop looking for details or categories. You do not need them.”<sup>15</sup> Forced responses lead to dangerous myths that are then uncritically accepted as divine truth.<sup>16</sup> And this is where both an epistemology of the South and a decolonial suspicion can challenge neat, pseudo-scientific discourses on the Divine, human nature, and other eternal mysteries—all in an effort to open theological spaces to more humans, past, present and future.

Upenyu S. Majee and Susanne B. Röss define a decolonial methodology as one that “allows for the systematic interrogation of the global asymmetries that constituted imperial power by challenging longstanding Euro-American claims to a universal, neutral, objective, and disembodied epistemology.”<sup>17</sup> Central to a decolonial methodology is a hermeneutics of suspicion, that is, an interpretive lens that does not take for granted any proposals for meaning making, especially when such meaning making elevates some to the denigrating of others.

Epistemologies of the South are related to decolonial methodologies. According to De Sousa Santos, the “epistemologies of the South deal with knowledges present in or emerging from the resistance to and the struggle against oppression, knowledges that are ... embodied in concrete bodies, whether collective or individual.”<sup>18</sup> Epistemologies of the South take seriously embodied existence, not for its categorical use in an academic theological exercise that seeks to

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<sup>15</sup> Marcelo Diversi and Claudio Moreira, *Between Talk: Decolonizing Knowledge Production, Pedagogy, and Practice* (Walnut Creek, CA: Lest Coast Press, 2009), 59.

<sup>16</sup> Later the essay will discuss how Christian supremacy underwrote white supremacy and a related racial science based on myths and pure fantasies but that nonetheless masqueraded as “truth” to justify several atrocities, such as slavery, conquests of indigenous lands, subjugation of women and other minorities and even forced sterilization and eugenics.

<sup>17</sup> Upenyu S. Majee and Susanne B. Röss, “Colonial Legacies in Internationalization of Higher Education: Racial Justice and Geopolitical Redress in South Africa and Brazil,” *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education* (2018): 4.

<sup>18</sup> De Sousa Santos, *The End of the Cognitive Empire*, 87.

formulate principles, but as crucial precisely because bodies exist in a particular place and time while other bodies have been killed and forgotten and disposed as meaningless shells of marginal humans. Epistemologies of the South accordingly focus on “nonexistent knowledges, deemed as such either because they are not produced according to accepted or even intelligible methodologies or because they are produced by absent subjects, subjects deemed incapable of producing valid knowledge due to their subhuman condition or nature.”<sup>19</sup> Thus, as in Copeland’s call for a “solidarity in anamnesis,” for a remembrance of the exploited dead, epistemologies of the South proceed from a “sociology of absences,” namely “turning absent subjects into present subjects as the foremost condition for identifying and validating knowledge that may reinvent social emancipation and liberation.”<sup>20</sup> In doing so, epistemologies of the South redeem—and perhaps resurrect—those forgotten due to their artificial (but often “divinely” sanctioned) absence from dominant modes of being and knowing. These epistemologies, then, begin with a recognition of the excluded, the absent, the marginalized—past and present—before attempting to conceive of any rational agenda toward change.<sup>21</sup>

Epistemologies of the South refuse a simplistic split between rational and irrational. While claiming that epistemologies of the North are grounded in hyperrational subjects, epistemologies of the South see emotions and feelings as drivers of rational thought. Reason and emotions are interdependent. Yet reason does not mean the mythical eternal, clean, formulaic, systematic reasoning ability fetishized by Western and Northern epistemologies; rather, reason—or the capacity to think and propose ideas—is constantly evolving and changing depending on its

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<sup>19</sup> De Sousa Santos, *The End of the Cognitive Empire*, 2.

<sup>20</sup> De Sousa Santos, *The End of the Cognitive Empire*, 2.

<sup>21</sup> De Sousa Santos, *The End of the Cognitive Empire*, 3.



positionality in time and space. One's ability to reason (and the conclusions proposed by such reasoning) is always in flux, just like the body: here one minute, in a different place the next, and maybe gone the next. De Sousa Santos eloquently describes bodies as “the product of complex bricolages in which reasoning and arguments mix with emotions, sorrows and joys, loves and hatreds, festivity and mourning.”<sup>22</sup> Bodies, in other words, are assemblages of various fragments, including known and unknown genetic flows inherited from generations of wide-ranging ancestors, many of whom will remain forever lost.<sup>23</sup> The narratives (scripts) that suggest and inform how bodies view and live in the world are also fragmentary, even the ones that purport to be Grand or meta-narratives, like Christianity.

Indeed, epistemologies of the South, like their decolonial relatives, are “concerned with the criticism and deconstruction of dominant knowledges.”<sup>24</sup> Both epistemologies of the South and decolonial frameworks acknowledge all knowledges (all epistemology) and their interpretations (hermeneutics) as contextual and as value-laden. *A priori* “truths” and other claims to universality are met with hermeneutics of deep suspicion. One of the first questions these methodologies raise is who is doing the enunciating—that is, who is doing the thinking, speaking, and writing? This matters for at least three reasons: 1) providing flesh (context) to the

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<sup>22</sup> De Sousa Santos, *The End of the Cognitive Empire*, 89.

<sup>23</sup> Commenting on the complexity of human genomes, Terrence Keel writes, “We might say that all humans are mongrel, in the sense that it may be impossible to recover the many different early and more recent human ancestors who contributed to our genetic inheritance. In biological terms, mongrels are not merely organisms with a mixed heritage. They are beings in which only part of their ancestry is known or recoverable. To say that we are all mongrel, therefore, is to acknowledge that our ancestry will never be fully knowable.” Terrence Keel, *Divine Variations: How Christian Thought Became Racial Science* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018), 135.

<sup>24</sup> De Sousa Santos, *End of Cognitive Empire*, 119.

ideas; 2) interrogating the purpose behind the ideas; and 3) asking whose voices are excluded from the conversation and why. Collectively, these questions allow audiences to see who is excluded, as both knowledge producers and knowledge consumers, and how that exclusion underwrites hierarchical structures (or ranking systems or scales) that legitimize several forms of subjugation.

In her often-cited essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Gayatri Spivak reminds readers that it is crucial to know who is theorizing about whom.<sup>25</sup> This positionality reveals that epistemologies, no matter how orderly they seem, are contextual (subject to time and space). Scholars and thinkers develop knowledge from within a particular socioeconomic-sexual-religious matrix that is itself contained within a particular time and place. Discourse and linguistic scholar Teun A. van Dijk writes that “what in one period or culture is called, used or presupposed as knowledge, may be seen as mere opinion, prejudice or superstition in another time or culture.”<sup>26</sup> Knowledge is thus “relative to the members and the criteria of different epistemic communities.”<sup>27</sup> Knowledge, like bodies, is constantly in flux, in response to contexts and in light of new scientific and historical discoveries. Thus, knowledge can never be complete, since such effort would require speaking in a universal and eternal way on behalf of all peoples who have come before, live in the present, and will exist in the future. Epistemologies of the South and decolonial thought underscore the arrogance of Western totalizing projects—and of Christianity—to dictate the parameters of time and space across all contexts, for all bodies, and

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<sup>25</sup> See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (London: Macmillan, 1988).

<sup>26</sup> Teun A. van Dijk, *Discourse and Knowledge: A Sociocognitive Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 5.

<sup>27</sup> Van Dijk, *Discourse and Knowledge*, 5.

even for the cosmos (through, for example, the cosmic salvation of Christ for the entire universe).

Hence a more intellectually honest and humble approach would be to acknowledge knowledge as inherently incomplete, constantly changing, and so better accessed through fragments. Catholic theologian David Tracy, in a recent interview with *Commonweal*, recognizes knowledge's fragmentary nature. Tracy defends fragments "as a way to break totalities, to fragment all totality systems and open them to infinity ... In my opinion, all our traditions are in fragments."<sup>28</sup> Self-contained systems that are inflexible or unwilling to adapt to new knowledges—especially from those formerly excluded from knowledge production—cannot lead to new possibilities, new imaginations, to the creation of new characters who inhabit increasingly complex and shifting scenes of instruction and formation.<sup>29</sup> Though some characters are fixed by exhibiting fixed patterns, Mark Jordan notes that "there can be no scene of instruction unless at least one character can change. A scene of instruction is an occasion for bringing new meanings into action, for binding new words into bodies."<sup>30</sup> To bring new meanings, to free the imagination,<sup>31</sup> requires a fundamental rethinking of all scripts, even scripts with seemingly positive and justice-oriented objectives. *Imago Dei*, for instance, has been used by liberation theologians to hold that all peoples have inherent dignity, and Jon Sobrino and others have used

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<sup>28</sup> David Tracy, "In Praise of Fragments," interview by Kenneth L. Woodward, *Commonweal*, October 2019, 54.

<sup>29</sup> See Mark Jordan, *Teaching Bodies: Moral Formation in the Summa of Thomas Aquinas* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017).

<sup>30</sup> Jordan, *Teaching Bodies*, 69.

<sup>31</sup> De Sousa Santos writes that "imagination of the end is being corrupted by the end of imagination." De Sousa Santos, *The End of the Cognitive Empire*, ix.

narratives of the liberator Jesus in efforts to fight for freedom from oppression.<sup>32</sup> But these same narratives can be used against the poor and the “oppressed” in the cognitive arena, as some have argued that liberation theologians ontologized the poor as a romanticized and fictionalized group wherein every person has similar aspirations, struggles, and desires.

Epistemologies of the South and a decolonial approach to theology can perhaps suggest a new direction for the theological anthropological imagination. Perhaps a return to bodies is best, but not in a theoretical or romantic sense. Bodies, while carrying divine energy within, are nonetheless mundane, and it is in this *quotidiano* nature (in this ordinariness) that the Divine can come forth to break free from systematic constraints of imagination. In a way, this repurposing or reorienting of theological anthropology toward the mundane nature of the body and of existence can constitute a powerful resistance to centuries of discursive constructions that ascribe to God the human qualities desired in particular contexts by particular thinkers and writers. Indeed, this repurposing can result in the death of God—a God built on idolatrous inclinations toward power, wealth, and violence against anyone or anything inhabiting identities outside the given conception of God. As Jaci Maraschin puts it, “today the death of God means the death of a God imprisoned in our systematic theology, in our dogmatics, in our immoral immorality and in our idolatrous worship.”<sup>33</sup> The death of God will also result in the death (or at least the lessening of influence) of exclusivist theological scripts of humans, which in turn could allow greater cognitive diversity in the ongoing human quest to attempt to understand (through

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<sup>32</sup> Jon Sobrino, Paul Burns, and Francis McDonagh, *Jesus the Liberator: A Historical-Theological Reading of Jesus of Nazareth* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994).

<sup>33</sup> Jaci Maraschin, “Worship and the Excluded,” in *Liberation Theology and Sexuality*, ed. Marcella Althaus-Reid (London: SCM, 2009), 173.

fragments) the Divine and the human as being in particular times and spaces. But for this, an exploration of the excluded—and the scenes that make this exclusion possible—is necessary.

### **The Excluded (the Missing) from Theological Scenes of Meaning Making**

*I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allen Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fibers and liquids—and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. Like bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imaginations—indeed, everything and anything except me.<sup>34</sup>*

-Ralph Ellison

The above quote from Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* exhibits a great deal of angst—angst and frustration at one's invisibility amid constructed perceptions of visibility. People cannot see the invisible man without distorted perceptions of that man's essence. Contrary to epistemologies of the South, where presence (one's existence) precedes cognition, theological anthropologies first theorize about the nature of humans in relation to the Divine instead of just acknowledging that humans simply—and mundanely—exist. Theorizing on the Divine and on humans' nature in relation to the Divine is based on Christian metanarratives (grand scripts and tropes)—such as the *imago Dei*, Jesus' universal salvation for all humans, and Christian supremacy vis-à-vis other faith traditions—that have led to hundreds if not thousands of years of exclusion, subjugation, and even colonization. Just as “being researched is synonymous with being colonized,”<sup>35</sup> so is sculpting the Divine into something resembling the sculptor's own image and synonymous with deep epistemic and ontological violence to those not in the sculptor's image. This violence is

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<sup>34</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995).

<sup>35</sup> Linda Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London: Zed, 2012), 102.

present for two major reasons: 1) a singular perspective (or tradition) is shaping the image of God; and 2) this contextualized image masquerades as divinely decontextualized to the detriment and exclusion of those unable to shape the image in the first place.

But who are those excluded from and by dominant Christian theological anthropologies? While it is beyond this essay's scope to delve into the long and tortured history of those considered less human by the historical Christian imagination, a renewed theological anthropology—with a basis in epistemologies of the South and decolonial thought—should briefly acknowledge the various categorical exclusions through the millennia. So here is a roll call: heretics, women, pagans, indigenous peoples from all over the world, those suffering from plague, gays, lesbians, witches, sorcerers, the irrational, the mad, black slaves, non-Christians (such as Muslims and even Jews), heathens, sinners, the indecent, savages, barbarians, Satanists, voodoo practitioners, freethinkers, the poor, and several other groups lost to historical memory. Even black cats have suffered from faulty Christian theological “anthropology.”<sup>36</sup> Basically, the excluded are any group barred by Christian gatekeepers from contributing to Christianity's theological anthropology and dogmatic development by virtue of their subhuman status—due to their “sinful” behavior, epistemological refusal to accept Christian doctrines and dogmas, or simply “difference” in particular contexts.

Since the list of the excluded is far too long, perhaps it would be best to envision the excluded as characters missing from scenes of instruction and formation. Scenes of instruction can provide powerful imaginary landscapes within which characters act and interact. Thus,

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<sup>36</sup> According to one scholar, admirers of St. John the Baptist burned cats on John's feast day throughout Europe in an effort to eradicate witchcraft often associated with cats, especially black cats. See Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York: Basic Books, 1984).

scriptwriters (especially those formerly excluded from writing) can expand scenes and characters in order to reimagine a fresh theological anthropology. Exploring different modes of being human does not mean presenting the best “logical” argument for what it means to be human in relation to God, but rather envisioning and exploring complex and fragmentary scenarios that could have several potential outcomes and consequences for the characters involved; it is not a sum-zero, one singular outcome scenario.<sup>37</sup>

Traditionally, Christian anthropological scenes of instruction have presented characters as dualistically simplistic, like caricatures, either exemplary or non-exemplary. Consider, for example, the Valladolid Debates of 1550-1551, during which two European Christian males debated whether the Native peoples of the “New World” were fully human, i.e. with souls and the ability to reason. In his infamous *Democrates secundus*, which was not published until 1892, Theologian Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda argues that the Spaniards, as the embodiment of the great Romans before them, have the right to subdue those “whose natural condition is such that they ought to obey others.”<sup>38</sup> He also cites the natives’ alleged “vices” of cannibalism, devil worship, and human sacrifice as evidence of their savagery and barbarism.<sup>39</sup> His main argument is that “the New World natives were inferior to the Spaniards ‘as are children to adults, women to men, the cruel and inhuman to the very gentle, the prodigiously intemperate to the self-controlled and finally’—in a climax erased in the most complete manuscript—‘I would almost say monkeys to

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<sup>37</sup> Jordan writes that “writing ethics is not so much confecting arguments as presenting scenes.” Jordan, *Teaching Bodies*, 68.

<sup>38</sup> Cited in David A. Lupher, *Romans in the New World: Classical Models in Sixteenth-Century Spanish America* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), 113.

<sup>39</sup> Lupher, *Romans in the New World*, 113.

men’.”<sup>40</sup> Sepúlveda rehearsed the tropes of savage/civilized, full of vice/virtuous, imperfect/perfect, violent/temperate, irrational/rational, and animal/human. These dichotomies, staged to represent the absolute and unquestioned superiority of one group over the other, find roots in Christian hermeneutics that universalize the rational God as the ultimate expression of the Divine in the cosmos.

Christians made in the image of God, and especially Christians “faithful” to the dictates of centuries of doctrines developed at imperial behest and under imperial guise, likewise hold a privileged place.<sup>41</sup> How could they not? They wrote the scripts for the scene, they invented the characters, and finally they camouflaged their biases to make the logic appear divinely ordered (a natural law). As David Carrasco points out, “Lodged within this argument [or narrative] of Aristotelian logic is a destructive, grandiose conception of European superiority, perfection, and virtue.”<sup>42</sup> The savage Indians, along with all their vices and ontological inferiority to Europeans, are stylized as undesirable bodies to inhabit, undesirable characters to emulate.<sup>43</sup> These us/other tropes have found expression in Catholic speeches on homosexuality, Christian superiority to

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<sup>40</sup> Lupher, *Romans in the New World*, 117.

<sup>41</sup> On this point see, Karen Bollerman, Thomas M. Izbicki, and Cary J. Nederman, “Introduction,” in *Religion, Power, and Resistance from the Eleventh to the Sixteenth Centuries: Playing the Heresy Card*, ed. Karen Bollerman, Thomas M. Izbicki, and Cary J. Nederman (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

<sup>42</sup> David Carrasco, *Religions of Mesoamerica: Cosmopolitanism and Ceremonial Centers* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 1990), 8.

<sup>43</sup> David M. Solodkoff, “The Rhetoric of War and Justice in the Conquest of the Americas: Ethnography, Law, and Humanism in Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda and Bartolomé de Las Casas,” in *Coloniality, Religion, and the Law in the Early Iberian World*, ed. Santa Arias and Raul Marrero-Fente (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2014), 196.



other religions, and even the current political-cultural wars among US Catholics (“real Catholics” versus “cafeteria Catholics”), to name just a few examples.

Effective scenes of theological anthropology will thus require more complex, fragmented, and constantly evolving characters. Enigmatic characters—characters at once whole and broken, sinners and saints, ascetics and whores, heretics and orthodox—better represent the human condition as flawed and contradictory creatures. Indeed, even the tropes of oppressor and oppressed are inadequate, for depending on the situation, one can be both an oppressor and oppressed, or the roles can switch. Think, for instance, of intersectionality. White women might be in a position of less power in comparison to white men, but these white women might inhabit spaces of more privilege in relation to Black or Latina women. Interactions change the dynamics of characters and of the scene. Thus, stale characters—characters representing a trope—are inadequate for a fresh theological anthropology that seeks to shed its problematic and exclusivist history.

But what happens when the scriptwriters make characters slightly more complex in an effort to still convey some theological-anthropological supremacy that benefits the scriptwriters and their patrons? Returning to the Valladolid Debates, Bartolomé de Las Casas challenged Sepúlveda’s claims, but still within the same scenes of instruction (an exclusively Christian landscape) and using the same sources (Aquinas, Church Fathers, scriptural passages).<sup>44</sup> While liberation theologians have praised Las Casas as a champion of the natives, he still resorted to

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<sup>44</sup> For a solid and easily accessible background on the common sources used by both Sepúlveda and Las Casas, see Agustin Parise, “The Valladolid Controversy Revisited: Looking Back at the Sixteenth-Century Debate on Native Americans While Facing the Current Status of Human Embryos,” *Journal of Civil Law Studies* 1 (2008): 108-138.

considering them barbarians, but more noble barbarians.<sup>45</sup> Within the matrix of different “barbarisms,” Las Casas assigned the New World Natives a more benign designation because they simply lacked the skills of a refined European. The natives “lacked a literary expression, discipline, and training in letters.”<sup>46</sup> They also lacked complex urban social, economic, and political organization and so could learn from the advanced Europeans. Yet Las Casas pointed to a redemptive factor: “The indigenous population was naturally predisposed to healthy and moderate customs and was therefore ready to receive the Word of God.”<sup>47</sup> Of course, Christendom and European mores were the reference points to gauge the moderateness of native customs. Thus, for Las Casas, natives were humans because they had the “potential” to be Christians, meaning to understand and accept Jesus. This potentiality argument is still rehearsed in *imago Dei* statements, e.g. the human potential to reason and to be self-aware. In another exclusivist epistemological move, Las Casas states that natives are passive infidels compared to the much worse active infidels (Moors and Turks) who know the “true Doctrine” and still refuse to accept it.<sup>48</sup> Las Casas relies on a sliding scale script by which some humans are assigned more worth than others, with one type of human (European Christian) inhabiting the pinnacle of humanity, to the exclusion and silencing of those farther from that pinnacle.

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<sup>45</sup> Solodkow, “The Rhetoric of War and Justice in the Conquest of the Americas.”

<sup>46</sup> Solodkow, “The Rhetoric of War and Justice in the Conquest of the Americas,” 190.

<sup>47</sup> Solodkow, “The Rhetoric of War and Justice in the Conquest of the Americas,” 191.

<sup>48</sup> Solodkow, “The Rhetoric of War and Justice in the Conquest of the Americas,” 191.

This sliding scale argument reappeared in America through Christian supremacy language that has in turn underwritten White supremacy.<sup>49</sup> It is yet another example of an exclusivist theological-anthropological scene of instruction. Jeannine Hill Fletcher does not mince words when writing that the “history of the United States has been that of a White Christian nation in which the dominant racial project has been to create the category of White, sort some people into it, and assign material benefits on the basis of it to the exclusion of non-White others.”<sup>50</sup> She cites the “field of faith formation” as the conduit for passing on a totalizing Christian theology—created by trained theologians with a proclivity for law and order, colonialism, and Christendom—that resulted in the ideological justifications allowing Christian nation builders to benefit from slave and indigenous labor when constructing the fabled city on a hill, that high point of Christian civilization in the New World.<sup>51</sup> Asserting that there is no salvation outside Jesus Christ and the church, Catholic and other Christian narratives conjured a “theo-logic of the singularity of humanity tending toward the perfection of Christ expressed in Western culture and civilization [that] allows for a judgment of some among humanity as falling short of the intended ideal and being deficient as a result.”<sup>52</sup>

As the scene of instruction shifted to the frontier lands of America, the character exemplar shifted from an abstract God to Jesus Christ who, through his sacrifice, saved all

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<sup>49</sup> This is the thesis of Jeannine Hill Fletcher’s book *The Sin of White Supremacy: Christianity, Racism, and Religious Diversity in America* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2017).

<sup>50</sup> Fletcher, *The Sin of White Supremacy*, 3.

<sup>51</sup> Fletcher writes, “It was in the academic spaces of theological training that ideas of Christian supremacy were manufactured as knowledge, to be put to the project of conquest, colonization, and conversion as they made their way from lecture hall to pulpit to legislative assemblies.” Fletcher, *The Sin of White Supremacy*, 9.

<sup>52</sup> Fletcher, *The Sin of White Supremacy*, 15.

humanity. In this universal and singular *telos* for all humanity, heathens, non-Whites, and non-Christians had no choice but to accept Jesus and Christian doctrine or suffer the designation of lesser person according to a mytho-racial theological scale (with the biblically derived “Curse of Ham” front and center in theological ideas circulating in America from the seventeenth well into the twentieth century). As the natural religion of Europe, so the script goes, Christianity’s supremacy in the New World is simply a logical manifestation of God’s singular plan for all humanity. Through evangelization, then, non-White persons “could be made noble and respectable.”<sup>53</sup> The Valladolid scene of instruction merges with the American expansionist project, with the White Jesus guiding the entire scene toward an eschatological point for all peoples, across all time and space.

Once again, God-talk developed by a self-serving strain of theological imagination excluded, and thus opened the door to ill treatment of, peoples not identifying with a White, imperialistic Jesus. And supposing that some did in fact accept Jesus and Christianity as divine, either through coercion or willingly, their non-European, non-White status still prevented them from accessing full humanity within the singular totalizing universe created through a mytho-theological scene of instruction. Rosemary Radford Ruether reminds readers that a “fundamental tenet of Christian faith has been the universality of Christ.”<sup>54</sup> But Ruether then notes that, despite the supposed universality of Christ, “much of Western Christian tradition has said that [women] cannot represent Christ as priests.”<sup>55</sup> Responsible for this view is a Thomistic anthropology that

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<sup>53</sup> Fletcher, *The Sin of White Supremacy*, 27.

<sup>54</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Is Christ White? Racism and Christology,” in *Christology and Whiteness: What Would Jesus Do?*, ed. George Yancy (London: Routledge, 2012), 101.

<sup>55</sup> Ruether, “Is Christ White?,” 101.

ascribes to women a lesser rational nature than men. Women are, in this view, defective compared to men, and as such, they cannot access Jesus in the same manner as men. Ruether then underscores how the global prevailing images of Jesus have depicted him as a white Western European male. Images of the resurrection present him as whiter still, almost luminous.<sup>56</sup>

This provincial representation of Jesus has far-reaching consequences for non-White peoples, such as the internationalization of white as pure and beautiful, while non-White is devalued as dirty, defective, and ugly (un-Godlike). On a social level, a White god—a white and rational *imago Dei*—has led and continues to lead to the ontological elevation of one bodily typology over others. Scenes of instructions, and the characters who inhabit them, have powerful psychological, social, political, cultural, and economic repercussions on those formed by them either freely or by force. Thus it is imperative to invite historically excluded scriptwriters to imagine new scenes of instruction with far more complicated characters.

### **Conclusion: Toward Silent Scenes of Instruction**

As this essay has argued, narratives (or scripts) that guide scenes of instructions can cause exclusions: one form is exclusion of characters unable to inhabit those scenes on par with other characters, and the other is exclusion of characters from the creation of scripts from which the scenes of instruction flow. Tropes like the *imago Dei* and characters like the virtuous, godly European and the eternal White Christ present stale and unimaginative scripts that exclude a majority of humans from meaning-making. Rather than proposing another neat, unified theological anthropology, perhaps a theopoetical anthropological approach can dislodge the

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<sup>56</sup> Ruether, “Is Christ White?,” 102.

constraints preventing theological-anthropological imagination from envisioning other forms to represent human beings and to discuss the Divine. “How we articulate our experiences of the Divine can alter our experiences of the Divine,” writes L. Callid Keefe Perry.<sup>57</sup> How we articulate our experiences of the Divine can, as we have seen, also alter how individuals and societies treat people. Words matter. Scripts matter. Narratives matter. And scenes of instructions and the characters they present matter. As Judith Lieu writes:

Texts construct a world; they do this out of multiple worlds, including textual ones, that they and their others and readers already inhabit and experience as “reality”; that new world itself becomes part of subsequent “reality” within and out of which new constructions may be made. Yet this is not a self-generating system: constructions and worlds interact and clash with others, whether they are seen as congenial or alien.<sup>58</sup>

Christian doctrines of *imago Dei* and the universality of Jesus and Christianity have informed, and continue to inform, the imagination of countless theologians and non-theologians. The result of this formation: tomes upon tomes of thinking about human nature and humanity’s relation to the Divine, always with exclusions. Yet these tomes have followed a rather uniform script, namely, Christian supremacy, with its unified promise of salvation for all human across time and space. Christianity itself, however, is a bricolage of fragmentary sources. Gabriel Vahanian points out that “not even the Gospels can be harmonized into one. There are at least as many christologies as there are gospels, even books of the New Testament.”<sup>59</sup> Karen King also

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<sup>57</sup> L. Callid Keefe-Perry, *Way to Water: A Theopoetics Primer* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2014), 12.

<sup>58</sup> Judith Lieu, *Christian Identity in the Jewish and Graeco-Roman World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 61.

<sup>59</sup> Gabriel Vahanian, *Theopoetics of the Word: A New Beginning of Word and World* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 106.

describes the various forms of “the way” in existence before councils established official doctrinal narratives.<sup>60</sup> And, just as with the uncertainty surrounding the human gene pool, there are several unofficial Christian narratives lost in time—many of which will never be known.

Interestingly, the concept of linear time—in the form of the eschaton—serves as a powerful unifying and organizing tool for the official Christian script. But what of peoples outside the European-Christian time frames, such as indigenous and non-Western peoples? Settler time imposes a common time frame on all, but such a project is obviously colonial.<sup>61</sup> So we return to fragments, to the constantly shifting and evolving scenes of instruction. Theopoetics, while hard to define, can be “understood as an embodied way of thinking, speaking, writing, and experiencing ... a way of being-in-the-world.”<sup>62</sup> So we also return to the epistemologies of the South’s focus on bodies, especially excluded bodies, going about their daily functions. Should not these bodies and their functions figure into theological body-talk? Should not the woman lemon vendor without underwear write theology and speak of God? A theopoetics should ultimately lead to a cognitive breakthrough by opening up “a space for unanticipated dreaming in which the past, present, and future are re-shaped as we reorganize and even re-create our own stories and our relationships with others, the world, and the Divine.”<sup>63</sup>

For such freeing of the imagination to occur, however, there needs to be a collective theological process of letting go, of emptying of language that for too long as tried to unify an

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<sup>60</sup> Karen King, *What Is Gnosticism?* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press, 2004).

<sup>61</sup> See Mark Rifkin, *Beyond Settler Time: Temporal Sovereignty and Indigenous Self-Determination* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 25.

<sup>62</sup> Silas C. Krabbe, *A Beautiful Bricolage: Theopoetics as God-Talk for Our Time* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock 2016), 14.

<sup>63</sup> Krabbe, *A Beautiful Bricolage*, 15.

entire species under exclusivist assumptions. Pieces. Fragments. This is the way forward and backwards in an attempt to script new scenes of instruction with complex and enigmatic characters. Theological anthropologies stem from the same “authorized” narratives of the Western tradition. So alternative anthropologies should come from “unauthorized sources,” or as Althaus-Reid calls them, “indecent” sources.<sup>64</sup> The scenes themselves must shift: theological learning and knowledge production usually emanate from the hallowed halls of academia, the classrooms, church settings, or conference spaces. But what about talking about the Divine and human nature while in other spaces, such as streets filled with the scents of the homeless, prostitutes, drug addicts, and women lemon vendors with no underwear, or the bars where some seek respite from the world’s harshness through inebriation and promiscuous, one-time encounters, or the bedrooms where we perform our sexual selves? “The dislocation of the theological discourse from the naturalized locus produces several other dislocations,” writes Althaus-Reid.<sup>65</sup> One such dislocation can be freeing the mind from narratives (scripts) that have constrained imaginations of the Divine and of human existence through stale characters and the scenes they inhabit.

Or perhaps another suggestion: scenes of silence. Here the missing characters, the excluded throughout time and space, can be felt through a loud silence—a silence that is deafening to anyone who is honest and humble enough to admit that previous scenes of instructions and characters within were too simplistic. These simplistic scenes and characters led to caricatures that resulted in physical harm and death to many. Perhaps the best God-talk is no God-talk. It seems that God needs a rest from prideful (yet feeble) human attempts at

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<sup>64</sup> Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*.

<sup>65</sup> Marcella Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 29.



classification. Fewer words, and more attention to bodies and their daily needs, could lead to freeing the imagination from a theological regime that requires reason and words for legitimization. Recognition of the excluded precedes theorizing, being precedes thinking about being, and the imagination of what could have been had countless bodies not been silenced and forgotten precedes any future “hopeful” attempts to capture once again what is ultimately elusive and enigmatic. True love of the Divine and of others requires letting go of attempts to capture their essences through rational classification or romanticizing of their bodies as sites for new theories. “Love means to let the other be the other, commemorating together the revelation of differences.”<sup>66</sup> Love is letting the other simply be-in-the-world without much talk.

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<sup>66</sup> Frederico Pieper Pires, “Liberation Theology, Modernity, and Sexual Difference,” in *Liberation Theology and Sexuality*, ed. Marcella Althaus-Reid (London: SCM Press, 2009), 120.