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**DE-IMPERIALIZING GOD-TALK:
TOWARDS A POSTCOLONIAL THEOPOETICS**

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The door is a place, real, imaginary and imagined. As islands and dark continents are. It is a place which exists or existed. The door out of which Africans were captured, loaded onto ships heading for the New World. It was the door of a million exits multiplied. It is a door many of us wish never existed. It is a door which makes the word door impossible and dangerous, cunning and disagreeable.¹

Dionne Brand

A Map to the Door of No Return

Introduction

Colonialism as the brutal subjugation of people for the purposes of exploitation and conquest is considered by many accounts to be over, while the exertion of power through economic and indirect political influence is clearly not.² The effects of Western imperialism has infiltrated just about every form of discourse and creative impulse, including the religious. Fernando Segovia points out that “the reality of empire, of imperialism and colonialism,

¹ Dionne Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2001), 3.

² Joerg Rieger, “Liberating God-talk: Postcolonialism and the Challenge of the Margins,” in *Postcolonial Theologies: Divinity and Empire*, ed. Catherine Keller, Michael Nausner, and Mayra Rivera (St. Louis: Chalice, 2004), 206.

constitutes an omnipresent, inescapable and overwhelming reality.”³ This reality makes it practically impossible to imagine an alternative. Theology attempts to makes sense of the human predicament “in relationship to its ultimate foundation, to the ultimate resource that sustains it, in short, to God,”⁴ as Gordon Kaufman has written. But when the imagination becomes absorbed into imperial consciousness and stripped of its ability to envisage alternate forms of existence, the sources that are brought to bear upon the theological task require interrogation and deep scrutiny.

Some would argue that theology is mostly anthropology. That is to say, before we begin to hypothesize about the divine we should first pay attention to our notions of the human. This perspective views our understanding of what it means to be human and our constructions of God as equally vital to the way we arrive at an understanding of both. Kaufman recognizes that the symbol “God,” which some interpret as a supreme and omniscient being who possesses masculine traits and intervenes upon the world, is entirely based on a specific worldview or cultural meaning system. Thus the theological task must take into account its indissoluble relationship to context if it is to genuinely honor the multiform of ways that humans live and experience the world.⁵ In other words, theology is conditioned by culture, history, and contemporary forms of thought.

³ Fernando F. Segovia, “Biblical Criticism and Postcolonial Studies: Toward a Postcolonial Optic,” in *The Postcolonial Bible*, ed. R.S. Sugirtharajah (Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 55-56.

⁴ Gordon D. Kaufman, “Theology as Imaginative Construction,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 50, no. 1 (March 1982): 73-79.

⁵ Kaufman, “Theology as Imaginative Construction,” 75.

What we consider God-talk, and everything that is associated with it (prayer, worship, ethics, doctrines), is shaped by specific worldviews, by a specific interpretation of human existence created by the imagination within one particular historical stream of human culture to offer orientation for those living in that culture.⁶ But when a single historical stream of culture colonizes the imagination and causes theology to become absolutized and literalized around metaphysical categories and mythic narratives, then theology becomes anemic, violent, and profoundly idolatrous: anemic because it lacks the vitality to respond to an ever new and changing world, violent because it only regards a single version of human subjectivity while excluding others, and idolatrous because it freezes theology into a single understanding. Theology is an open-ended process and not a fixed set of propositions. This is what Augustine meant when he said “*Si comprehendis, non est Deus*”—If you have understood, then what you have understood is not God.⁷ The word “God” is a symbol nuanced with a long and complicated history that will never fully contain what it is meant to express.

The Imperial Curse

Catherine Keller cautions that any theology, whether in the form of “scholastic sophistication or in popular religion, is perpetually tempted to mistake the infinite for the finite names and images in which we clothe it.”⁸ In doing so, she argues, we who do theology fall into the perennial problem of idolatry. From early on, the imperial mindset inserted itself into Christian thought. In fact, the *theo-logos* came to us courtesy of the Greeks. Key streams within

⁶ Kaufman, “Theology as Imaginative Construction,” 75.

⁷ Augustine, Sermon 52, c. 6, n. 16, quoted in Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 105.

⁸ Catherine Keller, *On the Mystery: Discerning Divinity in Process* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008), 18.

the Western philosophical tradition contributed to what became the syncretism between a colonized Judaism and a colonizing Hellenism.⁹ Theology developed into arguments and persuasive propositional logic, advancing dogmatic systems of unchanging truth rather than acknowledging its fluidity within changing historical contexts. James Cone has written that “Christian theology cannot afford to be an abstract, dispassionate discourse on the nature of God in relation to humankind; such an analysis has no ethical implications for the contemporary form of oppression in our society.”¹⁰ Theology must avoid becoming too abstract and detached from concrete human experience and must resist becoming idolatrous, as it is when it makes our notions of God that are worked out in finite and creaturely language absolute and literal.

Concepts and theological constructions of God are not God. While all kinds of finite attributes can properly be assigned to God, in the end, God-talk will always fall short of fully revealing the plenitude of God. Furthermore, we must acknowledge that whatever we say about God is inevitably conditioned by the language we employ. This does not suggest that we abandon the theological task altogether and refuse to say anything more about that which draws us more into the depth of its mystery. Rather, the task calls for the most genuine humility and for recognition that we can never fully possess that which we endeavor to understand. Meister Eckhart prayed to God to rid him of God, to make him free of his delusions of God.¹¹ The God from whom Eckhart is praying to be freed is the God of our construction, a God that is cut to fit

⁹ Catherine Keller, “The Love of Postcolonialism: Theology in the Interstices of Empire,” in *Postcolonial Theologies: Divinity and Empire*, ed. Catherine Keller, Michael Nausner, and Mayra Rivera (St. Louis: Chalice, 2004), 222.

¹⁰ James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2017), 18.

¹¹ Meister Eckhart, *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense*, trans. Edmund Colledge and Bernard McGinn (New York: Paulist, 1981), 200.

the size and image of our own projections. Some projections have managed to assert themselves as infallible and universal. Western theology, for the most part, renders God as omnipotent, sovereign lord with a hypermasculinity that elevates men to a higher order than women. According to Averil Cameron, “Christian men talked and wrote themselves into a position where they spoke and wrote the rhetoric of empire.”¹² This is clearly seen in doctrinal pronouncements and in the solemn declarations of dogmas, which were entirely developed and sanctioned by men.

Regardless of the fact that Christianity originated in the Middle East and Northern Africa, imperial forces managed to whitewash—to white-wash— theology and to use it to oppress and terrorize those whose skin tone and culture did not align with the white European image. Hence Christianity became synonymous with whiteness. The only way to be Christian was to adopt or assimilate the customs and practices of the dominant culture. Christian theology would therefore become an effective tool to subjugate and colonize the non-Christian world. The Christian God represented a tyrannical and oppressive symbol that elevated white civilization, particularly men, to a privileged and normative status. The white-washing of Christianity was an attempt to bleach out all the shades and hues of human color and re-source the imagination so that it could only produce, project, dream, conceive, and envision through a Western European world perspective.

The white-washing of Christianity and the attendant hermeneutical hubris conveniently supported and justified imperial expansionism by inverting the communicative intentions of some of the primeval biblical narratives.¹³ The Genesis mandate to “subdue creation” as a reason

¹² Averil Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire: The Development of Christian Discourse* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 14.

¹³ Mark G. Brett, *Decolonizing God: The Bible in the Tides of Empire* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2009), 2.

for one privileged civilization to expand over the entire earth is one example of how the Bible was used to endorse the imperial agenda. This divine directive was never meant to exalt one particular culture above the rest of the human race. In fact, only a few chapters later we read about the human delusion of trying to grasp the cultural high ground by building a tower that would reach all the way up to the heavens.¹⁴ It would seem that generations of white men became intoxicated with ideas of superiority by manipulating biblical texts and theological interpretations to advance a false and deleterious narrative of divine predilection for a particular group of people.

Christianity is inextricably linked to empire. As a form of colonial discourse, Christian theology is deeply entrenched within the Western epistemic framework. The colonial matrix of power, a concept developed by Anibal Quijano, implicates Christian theology as one of the main sources of knowledge production:

The colonial matrix of power, put in place in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, was framed in and by Christian theology. Christian theology was the ultimate horizon of knowledge—since and after the Renaissance—that incorporated Greek rationality (through the monumental work of Saint Thomas Aquinas), invented the Middle Age as its own tradition, and placed Islam in its exteriority, disavowing Muslim contributions to Western civilization. Theology was then the ultimate and the supreme court of knowledge and understanding built on the foundation of Greek philosophy and biblical wisdom.¹⁵

¹⁴ Brett, *Decolonizing God*, 34.

¹⁵ Walter Mignolo, “Decolonizing Western Epistemologies/Building Decolonial Epistemologies,” in *Decolonizing Epistemologies: Latina/o Theology and Philosophy*, ed. Ada María Isasi-Díaz and Eduardo Mendieta (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 27-28.

To de-imperialize theology demands more than merely overriding the oppressive Western epistemic tradition, but instead a more holistic approach that undermines the dominant role assigned to the mind over the body. In other words, theology must seek ways to “construct paths and praxis towards an otherwise of thinking, sensing, believing, doing, and living.”¹⁶ This involves subverting the dominant narrative of the Western world imaginary and its knowledge regime by interrogating the cultural conditionings and paradigms of thought that fund our imaginative resources.

Truth and the Unfettered Imagination

The imagination is the distinctive human feature from which new worlds emerge and old ones disappear. The phenomenological approach views the imagination as

an intentional act of consciousness which both intuits and constitutes essential meaning.

It wagers that the imagination is the very precondition of human freedom—arguing that to be free means to be able to surpass the empirical world as it is given here and now in order to project new possibilities for existence.¹⁷

The imagination is generally associated with the romantic, the abstract, the fictive, and the non-logical. Modernity sought to establish a once and for all solution to the ever nagging epistemological dilemma by making method central to the pursuit of truth. In so doing, it delegitimized the imagination and subordinated it to the world of the scientific. Hans-Georg Gadamer’s seminal work, *Truth and Method*, rightly critiques this scientific purism:

¹⁶ Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine Walsh, *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 4.

¹⁷ Richard Kearney, *Poetics of Imagining: Modern to Post-modern* (New York: Fordham University Press), 1998.

Is there to be no knowledge in art? Does not the experience of art contain a claim to truth which is certainly different from that of science, but just as certainly is not inferior to it? And is not the task of aesthetics precisely to ground the fact that the experience of art is a mode of knowledge of a unique kind, certainly different from that sensory knowledge which provides science with the ultimate data from which it constructs the knowledge of nature, and certainly different from all moral rational knowledge, and indeed from all conceptual knowledge but still knowledge, i.e., conveying truth?¹⁸

The imagination is not beholden to any one form of human discourse; it is not exclusive to the realm of the arts and fiction, but to all forms of human inquiry concerned with “truth.” Truth, according to modernists, must enjoy universal approval and irrefutable proof. In order for a postulation to rise to the level of a truth claim it must survive debate and doubt and achieve verifiable results. For modernists who view truth as only attainable through rigid scientific processes, there are absolutely no exceptions to the rules, no other way to ascertain the truth. While the Greeks understood wisdom as the “love of the highest things, all of them, the true, the good and the beautiful,”¹⁹ modernists, on the other hand, correlate the truth with what is established through pure reason.

Modernity longs for an ordered world beholden to undisputable claims, pure objectivity, methodical precision, and absolute certitudes. The contributions of the Enlightenment, however, should not be overlooked nor rejected. In fact, the Enlightenment dismantled the hegemony of the church and the absolute power of the monarchy and replaced them with emancipatory

¹⁸ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 2003), 97-98.

¹⁹ John D. Caputo, *Truth: The Search for Wisdom in the Postmodern Age* (London: Penguin, 2016), 21.

thinking and civil liberties. But while the Enlightenment emerged as a beacon of light to illuminate the human condition and energize people to think for themselves, it installed its own reign of terror by absolutizing reason. While the achievement of a free mode of thinking was one of the salutary effects of the Enlightenment, it also provided a narrow view of the truth.²⁰ We may therefore ask, can anything other than logical assertions and propositional thinking generate truth?

There are multiple and competing interpretations of the world. “Truth claims,” according to John Caputo, “come flying at us from all direction –science, ethics, politics, art and religion.”²¹ Not only do we have competing truth claims shooting at us from all directions and fields of study, but we live in an age defined by plurality, an excess of competing if not disparate voices that claim to possess the truth. Whereas the tendency to capitalize the T in truth is a long-cherished practice within the Western philosophical tradition, ambitiously assigning it universal value, today we affirm difference as the measure for universality. So rather than privilege ahistorical and overarching truth with a capital T that reigns supreme above all other truth claims, we acknowledge the multiplicity of interpretations.

The idea of competing truths presupposes the function of interpretation. Caputo writes that “the need for interpretation is a function of being situated in a particular time and place, and therefore of having certain inherited presuppositions.”²² In other words, whenever we grapple with matters of truth we are operating hermeneutically, that is to say, interpreting out of the particular world in which we find ourselves. This means inherited culture and native language,

²⁰ Caputo, *Truth*, 33.

²¹ Caputo, *Truth*, 16.

²² Caputo, *Truth*, 14.

from a particular body, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic level, and historical period. Rather than reduce truth to rational assertions, restricting it to a single way in which to attain the “real” correspondence between the object we apprehend and the structures of consciousness, we must acknowledge that “truth moves about in a multiplicity of contexts and conditions without being confined to a single method or monitored by a single overarching Truth.”²³ There is collusion between the truth with a Capital T and the violence espoused by hegemonic forces that endeavor to cast out anything and everything that does not fit neatly within their fixed categories.

Instead of asking how we arrive at the truth, it would seem better to ask: Whose truth are we seeking out? Or under whose imaginative world do we operate? It is impossible for any critic to distance themselves completely from the social pathologies any liberation project aims to redress.²⁴ Any theory or approach that attempts to critique systems and relations is already embedded within a network of motivations that give rise to a particular point of view. It is the task of anyone who seeks to challenge any form of ideology to become mindful of the “values, convictions, and beliefs rooted in the symbolic systems through which we express our position.”²⁵ There are no critical theories or emancipatory projects that are value neutral. Robert Schreiter, for example, makes the case that “the approach of church tradition in the development of local theologies means understanding not only how the questions and the content that are in the tradition receive their shape, but also the cultural conditioning of the very paradigms of

²³ Caputo, *Truth*, 47.

²⁴ Roger W. H. Savage, “Judgment, Imagination and the Search for Justice,” *Etudes Ricoeuriennes/Ricoeur Studies* 6, no. 2 (2016), 50.

²⁵ Savage, “Judgment, Imagination and the Search for Justice,” 50.

thought themselves.”²⁶ In other words, theology itself is not value neutral, but rather shaped and conditioned by paradigms of thought and the resources that fund the imagination.

What we access and employ from our “imaginary funds” determines the world we create. Walter Brueggemann explains that “the task is to *fund* – to provide the pieces, materials, and resources out of which a new world can be imagined. Our responsibility, then, is not a grand scheme or coherent system, but the voicing of a lot of little pieces out of which people can put life together in fresh configurations.”²⁷ Instead of privileging an all-encompassing narrative that attempts to consolidate everything into one totalizing account for all human experiences, elevating the particular and the different to the normative level offers an alternative to help us conceive ways of being-in-the-world. Rubem Alves has written that “the control of the imagination is much more effective than the use of violence.”²⁸ If the imagination is forced to submit to the will of the dominant culture, then the ability to imagine otherwise, to envision an alternative, to draw from the reservoirs of creativity will yield nothing but excessive reiterations of the same.

The imagination becomes virtually atrophied and unable to conjure up anything outside the conditions of the symbolic system in which it finds itself, incapable of venturing beyond the limits of the dominant reality.²⁹ This makes the human person entirely “functional” with no ability to dream or envisage the world differently. Alves believes that the dominant system of

²⁶ Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1986), 77.

²⁷ Walter Brueggemann, *Texts under Negotiation: The Bible and Postmodern Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 20.

²⁸ Rubem Alves, *Tomorrow's Child: Imagination, Creativity, and the Rebirth of Culture* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 24.

²⁹ Alves, *Tomorrow's Child*, 25.

production and consumption (capitalism) paralyzes the imagination to the degree that it restricts it from projecting anything beyond the current system.³⁰ Breaking out of this imaginative prison is not simple; it demands that hope be directed towards the unforeseeable future with fresh and new possibilities, unrestrained by the present order and detached from imperial arrangements. Walter Brueggemann reminds us that we are children of the “royal consciousness,” which means “a program of achievable satiation that has redefined our notions of humanness.”³¹ He juxtaposes royal consciousness with the prophetic imagination, the latter being the counter mindset to the former, to which Brueggemann believes we all, in one way or another, have deep commitments. Brueggemann highlights examples of royal consciousness from the biblical world and manages to draw clear parallels to the present day empire.

Most people are unaware that they are held imaginatively captive under certain conditions that encroach upon their existence. Hannah Arendt asserts that the human condition is constitutive of everything that human beings encounter. She maintains that everything with which we come into contact turns immediately into a condition of our existence.³² Not only the natural surroundings in which we make our abode, but anything that enters into a sustained relationship takes on the character of a condition of human existence. Humans invariably come into contact with a number of realities that condition for better or worse the way they live, work, make choices, and ultimately exist in the world. To be alive and conscious is to be permanently entangled in a complex web of relationships which condition life and the way we act upon the

³⁰ Alves, *Tomorrow's Child*, 26-27.

³¹ Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 37.

³² Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 9.

world.³³ Whatever enters our complex world of sustained human relationships, to use Arendt's phrase, encroaches on our imaginative potential by demarcating the limits of our reach.

Zetta Elliot, a writer and educator, writes from the experience of being a black woman who immigrated to a British colony when she was a little girl. She recounts how she grew up reading fairy tale stories about magical wardrobes and secret gardens, and how very early on she learned that “only white children had wonderful adventures in distant lands; only white children were magically transported through time and space; only white children found the buried key that unlocked their own private Eden.”³⁴ What Elliot experienced was a borrowed imagination, a world of possibilities she could not claim as her own. This, in her own words, did not serve as “much of a mirror for my young black female self.”³⁵ In her engagement with these images and texts, she experienced a profound disconnection, an existential dissonance between her world and the world that came through in the stories she read.

Elliot's imagination was colonized and forced to submit to the prevailing white narratives that filled the books she read as a child. She was unable to find herself within the fairy tales and unable to even draw hope from them. These fictional narratives utilized mythological symbols and ideas intimately tied to Anglo-Saxon ascendancy. Elliot writes that the one major benefit of being so completely excluded from the literary realm was that she had to develop the capacity to

³³ Facticity involves the intractable conditions of our existence: physical and psychological as well as social facts, history, and character traits. Heidegger explains facticity as the unsolicited thrownness into existence. The qualities of which disclose themselves through what Heidegger calls moods. It would seem that while some of these conditions are non-negotiable and inalienable assets of existence, some others, however, do not possess such determining influence and are subject to change.

³⁴ Zetta Elliot, “Decolonizing the Imagination,” *The Horn Book Magazine*, March 2, 2010, 16-20.

³⁵ Elliot, “Decolonizing the Imagination,” 16-20.

dream herself into existence. “Dreaming oneself into existence” best captures the idea of freeing one’s imagination and allowing it to dream beyond the limits of colonial influence. For a long time Elliot thought of herself as an Anglophile in training, rejecting what she considered her blackness because of her love for European literature. She later realized that she did not have to abandon her love for the books she grew up with, but that instead, as a writer and educator, she could make it her goal to always engage the tropes of captivity, migration, oppression, racial identity, and transformation in narratives that were thrilling, evocative, and always revealing.³⁶ As an educator and fiction writer, Elliot believes that she can “open a doorway to places that would help meet the needs left unfulfilled by an unjust reality.”³⁷ There can be portals into imaginative spaces where those who find themselves outside the white-male-European imaginary can reclaim their human subjectivity and imagine a different way to exist in the world.

Theopoetics as Liberated God-Talk

When our ability to imagine is thwarted by a colonizing force that prevent it from going beyond the boundaries of the dominant system, we are robbed of our most fundamental human ability to dream otherwise, to envision alternative possibilities, and to act upon the world in ways that transform and affect our own reality. This keeps our consciousness at bay by making it seem as if this is all there is, nothing more. It fosters what Paulo Freire calls a naïve consciousness, a way that understands “causality as a static, established fact, and thus is deceived in its perception.”³⁸ This is how the imperial mindset inserts itself into education, for example, cultivating a passive and gullible attitude incapable of transcending its own situation. The

³⁶ Elliot, “Decolonizing the Imagination,” 16-20.

³⁷ Elliot, “Decolonizing the Imagination,” 16-20.

³⁸ Paulo Freire, *Education for Critical Consciousness* (New York: Continuum, 1992), 44.

unfettered imagination offers a passage way out of this deception and imprisoned state. Or as Stacey Gibson reminds us that “imaging is an act of liberatory adventure since it feels borderless, boundary less, and free of the constructs that bind. To imagine is to transcend.”³⁹ Contrary to a naïve consciousness that feeds off a paralyzed imagination, conditioned to understand and read reality in a manner that neglects to interrogate it and subject it to rigorous scrutiny; a free imagination, on the other hand, enables a healthy skepticism.⁴⁰ Freeing the imagination means that what has been stolen and held captive, namely, the authentic imagination, the unfettered and boundless human faculty that naturally generates a picture of the entire context within which human life is lived, can be reclaimed and consciously empowered to transcend the conditions of inertia and conformity.

In the case of theology, which has been reduced to scientific knowledge to appease Enlightenment standards and survive the cut of discarded disciplines that fail to meet methodological fealty, the question then becomes: How should we move forward with God-talk? A simple theological reversal, in which God is now on the side of the colonized rather than the colonizer, is counter intuitive, according to Joerg Rieger.⁴¹ Claiming God’s favor unequivocally would result in a relapse back to an imperial mindset and to what Franz Fanon identified as a Manichean dualism, where people and things are placed in oppositional categories of good and evil.⁴² Instead, we must reclaim the energizing and transformative power of the imagination—in

³⁹ Stacey A. Gibson, “Sourcing the Imagination: Ta-Nehisi Coates’s Work as a Praxis of Decolonization,” *Schools* 14, no. 2 (2017): 266-275.

⁴⁰ Gibson, “Sourcing the Imagination,” 266-275.

⁴¹ Joerg Rieger, “Liberating God-Talk,” 219.

⁴² Franz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove, 1968), 41.

other words, move towards a more poetic understanding of the divine rather than a prosaic one.⁴³

This calls for a radical revision of the way we think, of de-linking from the dominant epistemologies that reduce knowing to propositional thinking and find alternative ways that explore the nature of meaning-making. It requires a fresh imaginative construction by way of poetic sensibilities in God-language that digs deep into the Christian imagination instead of holding tight to ossified doctrinal formulations. Amos Wilder says it best:

Imagination is a necessary component of all profound knowing and celebration; all remembering, realizing, and anticipating; all faith, hope, and love. When imagination fails doctrines become ossified, witness and proclamation wooden, doxologies and liturgies empty, consolations hollow, and ethics legalistic . . . When this happens doctrine becomes a caricature of itself. Then that which once gave life begins to lull and finally suffocate us.⁴⁴

Wilder is correct to point out that the imagination is essential to our ability to think and know in the deepest forms. Even though the imagination has been subverted by methodological precision and mathematical reasoning, it never ceased to be functional under imperial domination, but rather was hijacked and stripped of its capacity to envision otherwise. In other words, empire colonized the imaginary funds that determines the world of our existence.

The work of theopoetics overcomes the modern epistemic reign of positivism while also defying the privileged role assigned to method. This is what Callid Keefe-Perry refers to as a “methodological movement away from abstraction toward experience, from mathematical

⁴³ Callid Keefe-Perry, *Way to Water: A Theopoetics Primer* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2014), 26.

⁴⁴ Amos Wilder, *Theopoetic: Theology and the Religious Imagination* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1976, 2014), 2.

propositionalizing to artistic expression, from cold universal statements to profound and personal ones that hold open the space for mystery and unknowing. From theo-logic to theo-poetic.”⁴⁵ Our imaginative impulse must become untangled from the web of imperialism, it must free itself from the symbols and metaphors that suffocate it. The ability to move beyond the “givenness” of this world opens up alternate possibilities, an otherwise way of being, and the space necessary to anticipate the things that could be. In order to accomplish this, particularly as it relates to the religious imagination, we must seek a form of God-talk that engages our life experiences in the most meaningful way, one that involves unlearning rather than learning, a pedagogical paradox whereby in order to learn how to think, we must first unlearn everything we have been traditionally taught about thinking.⁴⁶ We must undergo a total epistemic and imaginative overhaul in which we unlearn the dominant symbolic forms and activate new archetypal images that offer fresh and life-giving sources for God-talk.

Theopoetics embodies the human ability to make (*poiesis*) a world in which we dwell poetically and meaningfully, a way in which we not only talk about the nature of God but also capture experiences of the presence of God. The work of theopoetics is fundamentally concerned with the way theology can be re-constructed, re-imagined, de-imperialized or decolonized. Callid Keefe-Perry describes it as the “re-enfleshment” of theological discourse. Theopoetics unleashes a radical freedom where onto-theological constructions and imperialized forms of God-talk that support patriarchal and Eurocentric images are overcome by the power of poetic truth. “The speedy death of metaphysics,” according to Silas Krabbe, “tears down metaphysical idols that have delineated the parameters of acceptable discourse, and this death has had the resurrectional

⁴⁵ Keefe-Perry, *Way to Water*, 26.

⁴⁶ Keefe-Perry, *Way to Water*, 27.

ramification of opening wide doors to the truth arena.”⁴⁷ Therefore, theo-poetics constitutes a different form of God-talk that offers hope to the bleak and paralyzing dreamscape of our imaginative world and liberates it to dream beyond the confines of the established order.

The turn to theo-poetics has captured the interest of theologians who acknowledge their work not as mastering the object of their reflection (God), nor as the hulking body of theological truth-claims, but more about evoking some sense of the spirit. “As a form of revelation,” Roberto Goizueta writes, “theo-poetics always points beyond itself; by definition, theo-poetics points beyond mere aesthetics to a God who is made manifest in life itself.”⁴⁸ Goizueta affirms the inextricable relationship between the imagination, reason, and ethics as the unifying source for human praxis. He explains:

All three—imagination, reason, and ethics—have a single common and unifying ground: human praxis. More precisely, the affective, aesthetic imagination, the rational intellect, and ethical-political commitment are all intrinsic dimensions of human praxis. (Too often, praxis has been simply reduced to ethics, with the inevitable consequence that praxis has been divorced from both theory, or critical reflection, and aesthetics, or affective, imaginative cognition. I am suggesting that praxis grounds aesthetics, theory, and ethics.) Therefore, praxis is inherently aesthetic, involving an affective engagement with another, and ethical-political action, oriented toward the liberation of the other qua other, without which there can be no genuine relationship or community. Praxis is

⁴⁷ Silas C. Krabbe, *A Beautiful Bricolage: Theo-poetics as God-Talk for our Time* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2016), 25.

⁴⁸ Roberto Goizueta, “U.S. Hispanic Popular Catholicism as Theo-poetics,” in *Hispanic/Latino Theology: Challenge and Promise*, ed. Ada María Isasi-Díaz and Fernando F. Segovia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 226.

nothing other than human intersubjective action—that is, the relationship among whole human persons in community—as an end in itself.⁴⁹

While it is unclear what method or philosophical system Goizueta draws from in order to substantiate this claim, it would seem, however, that the integral relationship he assigns to all three (imagination, reason, and ethics) as constitutive of human praxis challenges the modern tendency of keeping them neatly apart and in separate categories. Rather than identify the imagination as just another human feature that operates alongside others within consciousness, we could say that the imagination operates in and through the different faculties of human cognition. In *Poetics of Imagining*, Richard Kearney outlines the ways in which the imagination relates to the different branches of philosophical inquiry: to truth (epistemology), to being (ontology), and to the other (ethics).⁵⁰ For example, who can deny the poetry in mathematics? Is mathematics not a language that describes the physical world with symbols, variables, Greek letters, and characters? Is not the poetic nature of mathematics what enabled modern thinking about the universe and the physical phenomena within it?

Whereas the theo-logos is always ready to offer explanations of God, a theo-poiesis is about experience, transformation, and movement with God.⁵¹ A new and creative God discourse is called for, therefore, not only to break up the theological complicity with the subordination of women, non-whites, and creation, but to relate the Christian experience to the sensibility of the time. In the arts, media, and various subcultures we encounter not only iconoclasm and revolt,

⁴⁹ Goizueta, “U.S. Hispanic Popular Catholicism as Theopoetics,” 264.

⁵⁰ Kearney, *Poetics of Imagining*, 9-10.

⁵¹ Krabbe, *A Beautiful Bricolage*, 18.

but the structures of the unfettered imagination taking shape with incredible new energy.⁵² Some metaphors and symbols have been used throughout the Christian tradition to explicate certain truths about the nature of God. Transcendence, for example, is theologically constructed as “that which is beyond normal physical experience, apart, above, unlimited by materiality.”⁵³ Mayra Rivera points out that some of these associations have served as tools for patriarchy and imperial self-legitimation. She also writes that images of a separate and immaterial God conspire with the subordination of women and the devastation of creation.⁵⁴ While Rivera’s project seeks to redirect the notion of transcendence from the irreducible and unattainable God to a relational transcendence between creatures and creation, making it about human relationships and the ethical import in theology, her methodology is most importantly a reversal of the disembodied and de-materialized conception of transcendence that support hierarchical and binary arrangements. Rivera, like many other contemporary theologians, insist on the primacy of materiality and embodiedness, which recalibrates the theological endeavor by shifting it from a scientific mechanicalism to an organic and embodied form of God-talk.

Theopoetics constitutes an emancipatory form of God-talk by removing the absolutes from metaphors and allowing them to generate a surplus of meaning. Or as Roland Faber writes:

Theology becomes poetry precisely when we take the absolute out of the metaphors of God-language! Divine poetry is infinite, the patient and fragile embodiment of the

⁵² Wilder, *Theopoetic*, 7.

⁵³ Mayra Rivera, *The Touch of Transcendence: A Postcolonial Theology of God* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 2007), 1.

⁵⁴ Rivera, *The Touch of Transcendence*, 1.

infinite wealth of unfolding and refolding beginning and endings. The “poet” is the God of an ever-becoming world in which there is nothing but becoming.⁵⁵

Freezing God-language into fixed constructions of unchanging truths is the work of empire, which endeavors to use Christian symbols and narratives to sustain the status quo and prevent dissenting voices from having their say. The authentic renewal of Christian discourse demands more than mere reconceptualization, but rather enabling it to become a source engendering a social movement that eschews the imperial doctrine of complacency in favor of a liberating ethic of action.⁵⁶ Theopoetics breaks with fixed and rigid theological abstractions that function as instruments for oppressive and imperialistic powers and offers a way to engage God-talk that is non-coercive and emancipatory. Ultimately, it is an expansive de-imperializing form of God-talk that offers a new lyricism and unprecedented structure of language drawing from a multiplicity of sources to help us see, taste, hear, and touch what cannot be grasped by rigid theological rationalities.

Conclusion

Advancing a postcolonial theopoetics does not eliminate the potential for empire to reinsert itself into God-talk. Empire has a tendency to reappear in different shapes and forms, metabolizing and voraciously absorbing anything with which it comes into contact. Attention to rootedness, creaturehood, and embodied humanness makes any form of God language inseparable from the suffering, joy, hope, despair, failures and successes of a human community. Rather than containing the symbolic in a science and reducing the mystery to knowledge,

⁵⁵ Roland Faber, “Process Theology as Theopoetics.” Lecture, Kresge Chapel, Claremont School of Theology, February 7, 2006.

⁵⁶ Keefe-Perry, *Way to Water*, 38.

assigning greater weight to the poetic makes theology more inventive and creative. As a consequence, it releases God-talk from imperial domination and allows it to generate new insights and creative articulations. There can be no doubt that poetic intuition is at work in a variety of human activities and disciplines, all of which in one way or another respond to the beauty and mystery of the world.

Any God-talk that stresses the poetic dimension recognizes that we participate as co-creators with God, which means a divine-human interplay of making the divine human and the human divine.⁵⁷ Theopoetics articulates the concept of the divine (*theos*) as manifesting itself in the making (*poiesis*). This of course does not sit well with the imperial mindset, which prefers to keep a tight grip on anything that would threaten to destabilize and overturn its fixed arrangements. Ernesto Cardenal, in his renowned *Cosmic Canticle*, refers to creation as a poem, which carries with it the implicit claim that any creative act calls for a second creative act (creation and re-creation). The image depicting the creative act in perpetuity speaks to the collaborative relationship between the human and the divine in the coming of the Kingdom.

⁵⁷ Richard Kearney's essay looks at the phenomenon of theopoetic art and the history of the term theopoetics as finding its ancestral roots in theopoiesis. The making human of the divine and the divine of the human is a concept that dates back to Athanasius in the fourth century: "God became human so that the human can become divine." Kearney also quotes the poet-scholar Ephrem of Syria, who wrote: "He gave us divinity, we gave Him humanity." Kearney traces the development of the concept of "God making" from Jewish and Christian literature to contemporary debates about the relationship between the secular and the sacred. See Richard Kearney, "God Making: An Essay in Theopoetic Imagination," *Journal of Aesthetics and Phenomenology* 4, no. 1 (2017).